

## Isaiah 42: Law, Light and Liberty

The lens of our eyes is normally transparent and, I am told, is made up of approximately 35% protein and 65% water. Our eyes become more cloudy from about the age of 40 onwards, as cataracts develop due to changes taking place in proteins, water content, enzymes and other chemicals. We become less and less able to see properly and may become totally blind.

That's a very rough explanation as to how our physical sight deteriorates. These are external factors beyond our control and there are limits to what we can do to limit the deterioration of our physical sight. But spiritual sight does not depend on proteins, water, enzymes and chemicals. The deterioration of our spiritual sight and our spiritual hearing are not caused by external factors beyond our control. Spiritual sight operates on a different principle. The principle is quite simply "use or lose".

Isaiah 42 closes with a section that addresses those who had become spiritually deaf and spiritually blind:

Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see! Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the LORD? (vv18-19)

How is it that they have become so spiritually blind and spiritually deaf? The next verse (v20) answers the question:

You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing.

God has revealed himself and his will in a great and glorious way to his chosen people. However, they have been inattentive. They have not absorbed the significance of what God has shown them, nor have they digested the importance and meaning of what God has told them. How are your spiritual attention levels?

I guess we are all now familiar with ADD, Attention Deficit Disorder. We usually think of hyperactive kids with a short attention span, who don't perform well in class. If untreated ADD may lead to serious consequences. There is evidence indicating that ADD can not only lead to major job instability, but even double a person's chances of being arrested and being divorced. The spiritual equivalent is SADD - Spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder - and it really is *sad*, very sad indeed! Look at verses 23-24:

Which of you will listen to this or pay close attention in time to come? Who handed Jacob over to become loot, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned? For they would not follow his ways; they did not obey his law. So he poured out on them his burning anger, the violence of war. It enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand; it consumed them, but they did not take it to heart.

In the past God's people have suffered from SADD and the chances of being arrested and suffering serious relational problems are not merely doubled. SADD *always* leads to spiritual bondage and a breakdown in the most important relationship of all, the marriage relationship between God and his people. The inevitability that SADD will lead to such dire consequences is due to the fact that it is not merely based on our own inability to cope with what life throws at us, but on the operation of God's judgment and discipline in our lives. If you have SADD then you are indeed in a very *sad* state, in big, big trouble.

It is a tragic thing when we as the Lord's people have SADD. Not merely because of the consequences we reap in our own lives, but also because we fail our Lord. Look at verse 19 again: "Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send?" We have been called to serve God and he has sent us, as his servant, to deliver a message. As the very next chapter will point out God sends us into the world to be his witnesses. Our message to the world is one of telling them what God has shown us and told us.

There are some witnesses a legal defence team can do without. Like the girl - I'll let you decide on the colour of her hair - who appeared as a witness in a lawsuit. As she sat in the witness stand the prosecutor opened his questioning with, "Where were you the night of June 21<sup>st</sup>?"

"Objection!" said the defence attorney. "Irrelevant!"

"Oh, that's okay," said the girl from the witness stand. "I don't mind answering the question."

"I object!" the defence said again.

"No, really," said the girl. "I'll answer."

The judge ruled: "If the witness insists on answering, there is no reason for the defence to object."

So the prosecutor repeated the question: "Where were you the night of June 21<sup>st</sup>?"

The girl replied brightly, "I don't know."

*"Which of you will listen to this or pay close attention in time to come?"* asks the Lord. Does the Lord have your attention? Witnesses are pretty useless if they can't remember what happened, what they saw and heard. Let me ask you: What has the Lord been showing you this last week? What is the Lord saying to you at this point in your life? Are you paying attention? Are your eyes wide open and your ears attuned to his voice? Can you tell non-Christians what the Lord has revealed to you?

Our SADD is tragic because it leads to our own deprivation and because it makes us useless servants, dumb witnesses. It is also tragic for another reason, that stated in verse 21, one of the key statements in Isaiah 42: *"It pleased the LORD for the sake of his righteousness to make his law great and glorious."* The Lord always acts rightly and that is why he has so exalted his law or literally Torah, that is, his "instruction", his "guidance", his "revelation". To put it another way: God has made his revealed Word great and glorious in order that he might do what is right for his people; in order that he might fulfil his wonderful purposes for his people.

Have you noticed that the word "law" or Torah is arguably the most important word in Isaiah 42? It is not only stressed that God has exalted his revealed Word, but also that the unnecessary catastrophe experienced by his people was due to the fact that they did not pay attention to his Word. So verse 24: *"Who handed Jacob over to become loot, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned? For they would not follow his ways; they did not obey his law [Torah]."*

God wants us to treat his Torah, his revealed Word with utmost respect and to bend our wills to it, because it is precisely this Word which is the hope of all peoples on the face of the globe. So at the end of verse 4 we read: *"In his law the islands will put their hope."*

Note it says "his law." It is the law of God's Servant - the Servant described in verses 1-4. This Servant delivers true justice and the basis of this justice is "his Torah." It is

guidance and instruction provided by this Servant, representing God himself, that provides solid hope for "the islands", that is, for peoples who live in the remote places of the earth. These "islands" have been referred to in Chapter 41. There God summons all the nations into his courtroom. He announces something startling he is about to do. At that time God's people are still held captive by Babylon, the world's greatest super-power. Humanly speaking, there does not seem to be any other power that can supplant Babylon. So there seems to be no prospect of the Israelites returning to their land. But, in Isaiah 41, God declares that he is about to raise up another world conqueror, someone who would conquer all nations that stood in his path, someone whose sweep of power would be felt on such a massive scale that, as Isaiah 41:5 expresses it: "The islands have seen it and fear; the ends of the earth tremble."

Contrast this world conqueror, identified in 45:1 as the Persian ruler, Cyrus, with the Servant of Isaiah 42:1-4. The rise of Cyrus, who doesn't pose a massive threat at the time Isaiah speaks, will in fact cause even remote peoples, the islands, to fear and tremble. By contrast, the rise of the Servant of God described in 42:1-4 will provide the basis of hope for the islands, even the remote peoples of the earth.

The figure of 42:1-4 is identical with the Davidic ruler portrayed earlier in the book of Isaiah at 9:1-7 and 11:1-5. Both of these earlier prophecies promised that the time would come when God would raise up a descendant of David, who would do what all ancient kings were expected to do, though often failed to do, namely, deliver justice. Just as God's Spirit came upon David so according to 11:1-2 the same Spirit of God would come upon this ultimate king. This is now repeated in 42:1. Just as this ultimate monarch would deliver true justice, according to the depictions in Chapters 9 and 11, so 42:1-4 stresses that this Servant-King will be the champion of justice. So 42:1 states: "he will bring justice to the nations". 42:3 promises: "In faithfulness he will bring forth justice." And 42:4 says "he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth." Clearly, this ultimate Servant-King will not merely reign over a tiny nation. His rule will bring justice to the entire world.

One website argues that this servant achieves God's purposes without making public speeches - hence "he will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets" - and without using force - hence "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out." So the website concludes that Isaiah was predicting the Internet since God can use this to achieve his purposes in a private, non-violent manner.

We know, of course, from Matthew 12:15-21 that Jesus is this promised Servant-King. We also know that Jesus certainly gave many public addresses to large crowds. However, when Isaiah 42:2 states that this king will not clamour for attention the point concerns how this king will go about delivering justice. Jesus did not demand to be recognized as God's Servant-King and, therefore, as the champion of justice. Indeed, in John 6:15 we read: "*Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.*" Jesus never paraded himself as God's ultimate ruler, though he certainly knew himself to be precisely that. Jesus understood that true justice would not be served by self-promotion.

Similarly, keep in mind Jesus as the king of justice when you read: "*A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.*" That's why it is immediately added, "*In faithfulness he will bring forth justice.*" Put these two

expressions together. Remember God's people have had the stuffing knocked out of them. There's not much left of them, numerically or morale-wise. They have a label stuck on them: "Fragile. Handle with care." It wouldn't take much to completely shatter these people. It wouldn't take much to snuff out the candle once and for all. But delivering justice requires that King Jesus act "*in faithfulness*", that is, in faithfulness to God's righteous, unfailing commitment to his people. God will not desert his people. So he raises up his perfect representative, King Jesus, to ensure that his people yet again become powerful and blaze with a strong, clear light.

Isaiah 42 is concerned with two servants of God: King Jesus and the Servant-People of God. God's plan for the world is doomed if it depends on the performance of God's people. If God's plan *depends* on us or on the church it's time to abandon ship. Swim for your lives! But God's plan will reach its port, because it depends not on us, not on the church, but on King Jesus. Our own deliverance from SADD, from our spiritual blindness and deafness and spiritual bondage, is effected by Jesus. In some parts of the world the church is in a poor and pathetic state. But Jesus will always ensure that there is a strong and vibrant people, because, as Isaiah 42:6 explains, God has made Jesus "a covenant for the people". That is, God's relationship with Jesus ensures the security of his relationship with his people. However, Jesus is also, we are informed, "a light for the Gentiles", that is, to use New Testament wording, "the light of the world." Jesus does not merely open the blind eyes of God's people and deliver God's captive people from prison, releasing them from the darkness in which the tragedy of the past has placed them. No, as John's Gospel makes apparent "light of the world", quite literally means "the world", that is, the entire human race. That's why even the remotest peoples on the face of the globe have grounds for certain hope, because this king brings the light of Torah, the light of justice to all people. Clearly, then, the delivery of true justice entails the creation of a completely new world order.

Charles Dickens' books, as you know, expose major social injustices in the world in which he lived. He once quipped, "Charity begins at home, and justice begins next door." This was a dig, meaning that people don't feel an obligation to love people outside the home and that justice is not our business. The justice Jesus brings ushers in a new world order. As those called to share in the Servant Mission of King Jesus we must distance ourselves from the mentality that "justice begins next door." Justice must begin at home. Our families and our own church home must model "the new world order", a world in which Jesus reigns.

We haven't considered other key perspectives presented in Isaiah 42. But the point we must now take to heart is that as our Lord and King Jesus wants us to deliver us from spiritual blindness and spiritual bondage. The Lord wants us to be faithful servants whom he can send into the world as his effective witnesses. We need to make sure that our eyes and ears are wide open. Treasure Torah. Absorb God's word until it seeps out of the very pores of your skin. But in particular, do this with intent, with the intent to discover what God is saying to you as an individual and to us as a church community. In particular I would ask: *Do we as a church community have a corporate understanding and conviction about the direction God wants this church to go in and what he expects from us?* Lord, deliver us from SADD at both the individual and church community levels. Amen.