

Isaiah 42:1-4

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/isa/isa-42/isaiah-421-4/>

This is the first of Isaiah's four "Servant Songs" prophesying about the Messiah to come, and emphasizing that the coming Messiah will not only be a king, but also a servant. The song declares that the LORD's Servant will be commissioned by God to bring forth justice to the nations. It also says that as He accomplishes His mission, He will not be boastful or quarrelsome. The LORD's Servant will be extremely gentle and kind.

This commentary is a continuation of Isaiah's first Servant Song and covers Isaiah 42:1b-4. To see the commentary for the opening lines of this song please see the previous section ([Commentary on Isaiah 42:1](#)).

After the LORD describes *My Servant* and declares that His Spirit will be upon Him (Isaiah 42:1a), the LORD then concludes this Servant Song by foretelling what His *Servant will* do and what *He will not* do.

He will bring forth justice (v 1).

He will not cry out or raise His voice (v 2)—He will not be boastful or belligerent.

Three times the song sings of the *justice* the LORD's *Servant will bring forth* and establish.

1. *He will bring forth justice to the nations* (v 1)
2. *He will faithfully bring forth justice* (v 3)
3. *Until He has established justice in the earth* (v 4)

These three refrains of justice interweave two thought-couplets describing the *Servant's* humility.

4. *He will not cry out or raise His voice,*

Nor make His voice heard in the street (v 2)

5. *A bruised reed He will not break*

And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; (v 3)

Justice and humility are the main themes of this prophetic song about the Messiah's accomplishments and character. The *Servant will establish justice in the earth*; and the Messiah *will* be remarkably humble.

The LORD's Servant Will Establish Justice

The final line of verse 1 introduces the theme of *justice*.

It predicts that the Messiah *will bring forth justice to the nations*.

The term that is translated as *nations* in Hebrew is the word, גוֹי (H1471 – pronounced: “go’-ee). When “go-ee” is plural it refers to the Gentiles who are *the nations* other than Israel. It is plural in this instance. Therefore, this prophecy says the Messiah *will bring justice to the Gentiles*.

The term that is translated as *justice* throughout this *Servant Song* is מִשְׁפָּט (H8199 – pronounced: “mish-pawt”). It typically refers to fair judgement or a sentence that sets things right. The “mishpawt” the *Servant will bring forth to the Gentiles* will set things right and restore goodness and order.

This could mean that the LORD's *chosen one will bring* judgment and wrath against them for their wickedness. And it can mean *He will bring* them into harmony with God and the nation of Israel. The *justice He will bring forth* could be either punitive or life-giving or both. But whether the “mishpawt”/*justice* will be wrathful or harmonizing it will be right and good.

Jesus did both for the Gentiles. *He* took on the sins of the entire world, taking the wrath of the world upon Himself (Colossians 2:14). Through *His* death, now all who believe can be justified in Him, and be declared righteous in the sight of God (John 3:14-15; Romans 5:8-11). Also, through the resurrection power of Jesus that comes to dwell in all who believe, Gentiles now have the power to walk in the Spirit, and avoid the adverse consequences of walking in the flesh (Galatians 5:13-15). Of course for those who do not believe, they will not avoid Christ's judgement (Matthew 25:31-32).

Jesus the Messiah *will bring forth justice* (both in a punitive sense and in a liberating sense). *His* message of hope, love, and mercy and service was one of harmony and righteousness (which are Biblical synonyms for justice. (See [“What is Righteousness?”](#))). This message rapidly spread throughout the Gentile *nations* after *His* ascension into Heaven, thus fulfilling the liberating sense of this prophecy.

The first time Jesus came, *He* came to *bring forth justice* by reconciling and saving the world (John 3:17). The next time *He* comes *He will bring forth justice* by judging it (Matthew 25:31-33). Depending on how each person is judged, this will fulfill the punitive and liberating sense of the prophecy.

When Matthew cites this *Servant Song* from Isaiah 42 in Matthew 12:18-21, he interprets the *justice He will bring forth to the Gentiles* as life-giving and harmonious rather than wrathful. “And in His name the Gentiles will hope” (Matthew 12:21).

Verse 3 echoes this sentiment: *He will faithfully bring forth justice*.

There are many similarities this line shares with the justice refrain from verse 1: *He will bring forth justice to the nations*. But there are two obvious differences between them.

The first difference is that this line adds the word *faithfully*. To be faithful means to remain loyal and true to someone or to a cause in the face of obstacles or opposition, often over an extended period of time. This addition suggests that the LORD's *Servant* will encounter temptation or endure trials in *His* efforts to *bring forth justice*, and that *He will* overcome these temptations and trials *faithfully*. That Jesus overcame such obstacles is held out as an example to all who follow Him; Jesus offers a great reward to all who overcome, as He overcame (Revelation 3:21).

The second difference between this second refrain of *justice* from the first, is that it drops the expression *to the nations*. Isaiah may have dropped this to make it more poetic and less redundant, or he may have dropped this to make a prophetic point. (He may have dropped it for both poetic and prophetic reasons).

The prophetic point Isaiah may have been making by dropping this expression is that the LORD's *Servant will bring forth justice*, not just *to the* Gentiles but *to everyone*—including Israel (Romans 11:26).

The third refrain about *justice* is found in the final verse of the *Servant* Song.

He will not be disheartened or crushed

Until He has established justice in the earth;

And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law (v 4).

This closing line predicts that the Messiah, the LORD's *Servant will not* become so *disheartened* by the trials or *crushed* by the temptations that *He* fails to establish *justice in the earth*.

The mention of *disheartened* and *crushed* indicates that the trials and temptations the Messiah *will* endure will be discouraging, demanding, and difficult (Matthew 26:38). But *He will* overcome all of them in *His* quest to *bring forth justice* (Revelation 3:21). The LORD's *Servant will* triumph.

The final line of the Song is a bit enigmatic. It reads: *And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law*.

The term, *coastlands* may refer to the farthest edges of *the earth*. In other words, *the nations* and Gentiles whom the people of Israel in Isaiah's day had only heard or thought about who live on the other side of the world.

It says that these peoples *will wait expectantly for* the Messiah's *law to bring justice to* them.

But if the people of Israel did not know about them, how could they know about the Messiah? And if they did not know about the Messiah, how could they *expectantly wait for His law to bring them justice?*

It was a mystery how this prophecy could be fulfilled until Jesus, the Messiah, appeared and commissioned *His* disciples to go “and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:18-20) “even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

His disciples obeyed this command, and have taken the good news of *His* message to the farthest edges of *the earth*. The Gospel of Jesus, the Messiah, is one of hope and harmony (righteousness). And when applied it *brings forth* restorative *justice*. A *justice* that is not based on the ever-changing and often corrupt *law* of man, but a *justice* that aligns the realities of earth with God’s design. When all is aligned with God’s good design, all works in harmony. All works according to the eternally good *law* of God.

The principles of the Servant’s law were explained most fully in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). These principles of *His law* include:

6. Mercy and Forgiveness (Matthew 5:7; 6:12; 6:14-15; 7:1-5; 7:12)
7. Graciously Loving One’s Enemies (Matthew 5:38-42; 5:43-48)
8. Trusting God in all circumstances (Matthew 5:10-12; 6:25-34)
9. Having a Pure Heart of Integrity (Matthew 5:8; 5:21-37; 7:21, 24-27)

The LORD’s Servant will be Humble.

As mentioned earlier, the very term *Servant* is one that evokes the theme of humility. Verses 2 and 3 describe this song’s second theme. But whereas the *justice* refrains described what the LORD’s *Servant will do*, these two thought couplets about the *chosen one*’s humility describe what the LORD’s *Servant will not* do.

The first couplet is:

He will not cry out or raise His voice,

Nor make His voice heard in the street (v2)

The LORD’s *chosen one will not* be proud or boastful. *He will not* draw extra attention to Himself through making noise or insisting on being the center of attention. The attention He gets will be due to His service.

He will not raise His voice and demand to be *heard* or listened to *in the street*. The LORD’s *Servant will not* make a big scene boasting about Who *He* is. *He will not* quarrel or attempt to prove Himself to others by arguing with them. *He will not cry out nor* complain when the people

do *not* recognize *His* identity as the *chosen* Messiah. In fact, Jesus often commanded people not to tell others His true identity (Matthew 8:4, 16:20, 17:9).

Instead of being boastful and argumentative, *He will* act like the *Servant He* is, who performs *His* duties as quietly as possible. *He will* reveal Himself humbly.

Humility can be thought of as the willingness to see reality as it is. Jesus did not pretend He was someone He was not. He did not try to “spin” stories to make things seem like they were something they were not. Jesus spoke truthfully (John 8:40). Jesus also fulfilled the role His Father asked Him to fulfill (Hebrews 10:7; Luke 22:42).

Jesus the Messiah did not demand to be *heard* and respected, like many of the Rabbis and religious leaders of *His* day demanded (Matthew 23:5-6). He did not draw special attention to Himself, through showy prayers or displays of righteousness (Matthew 6:1; 2-4; 5-6; 16-18).

As the LORD’s *Servant*, Jesus exemplified and taught *His* disciples that: “...the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (Matthew 23:11-12).

The second couplet is:

A bruised reed He will not break

And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish (v 3)

This thought couplet describes two pictures about how gently the LORD’s *Servant will* behave. *He will be* so mild in His manners and message, that *He will not break a bruised reed*. The term *bruised reed* refers to a partially broken or bent *reed* stalk. The slightest twist would cause the *reed* to snap or break in two. The LORD’s *chosen one* will be so delicate with *a bruised reed* that no harm will come to it.

Bruised reed may be a metaphor for an emotionally wounded or damaged person. The line that says *a bruised reed He will not break* can be read as a metaphor for the Messiah’s gentleness among the weak and lowly people who the world system has ground down and/or sinners who the religious establishment have cast aside.

Jesus the Messiah, spent much of His ministry uplifting and healing emotionally-wounded people—tax collectors, prostitutes, and other outcasts. Some examples follow:

- Jesus’s interactions with the Samaritan woman at the well who had five husbands (John 4:7-30),
- His protection and pardoning of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11),
- His praise of the woman who anointed His feet with her tears and hair (Luke 7:36-50).

These are three examples, out of many, where He was gentle with “*bruised reeds*.” Jesus did not come to condemn sinners, but to save them (John 3:17; Matthew 28:20).

Isaiah continues: *He will be* so gentle in His actions, that *He will not extinguish a dimly burning candle wick*, which can be put out by the faintest breath or movement. In other words, the Messiah will not be quarrelsome, hot-tempered, or argumentative.

Matthew quotes the substance of Isaiah's first *Servant Song* and demonstrates how Jesus, the Messiah, fulfilled its prophecy after *He* healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath and was confronted by the Pharisees for doing so (Matthew 12:9-17).

Here is Matthew's citation of this *Servant Song*:

"This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet:

'Behold, My Servant whom I have chosen;
My Beloved in whom My soul is well-pleased;
I will put My Spirit upon Him,
And He shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
'He will not quarrel, nor cry out;
Nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets.
'A battered reed He will not break off,
And a smoldering wick He will not put out,
Until He leads justice to victory.
'And in His name the Gentiles will hope.'"
(Matthew 12:17-21)

When Jesus, God's *Servant*, came to earth *He did not* make a big scene about Who *He* was. *He did not* quarrel or attempt to prove Himself to others by arguing with them. *He did not* demand or insist that others recognize *His* true identity. *He did not raise His voice or cry out* that *He* was the Messiah.

People did not hear *His voice in the streets* promoting *His* name as the Christ. *He* revealed Himself humbly. *He* revealed Himself so gently that *He did not break a bruised reed*. *His* voice was so quiet that *He did not extinguish a dimly burning candle wick*.

Instead of loudly announcing Himself as the Messiah, Jesus let *His* miracles, *His* character, *His* moral teachings, and prophecies (such as this one) proclaim *His* identity for *Him* (John 15:24). This gave people the opportunity to accept and love *Him* for themselves. By faith.

Had Jesus fully unveiled Himself and *His* identity, then people would have been compelled to acknowledge Him. No one would have had a free choice to come to *Him* by faith. Everyone would have been overwhelmed by *His* presence and the inescapable terror that *He* was God, and would have been compelled to acknowledge *Him*.

In the future, at *His* second coming, Jesus will unveil *His* glory and compel all to acknowledge Him as King (Romans 14:11, Philippians 2:10-11). But during Jesus' first advent, *He* came as a *Servant*. People had a free choice whether or not to believe. And in coming as a *Servant*, *He* gave

more than enough evidence to plainly demonstrate *His* identity, while leaving enough space for people to accept or reject *Him* as they chose.

This is similar to how God has worked throughout history. What is known of God, His character and divine nature, is abundantly apparent for all who desire to see (Romans 1:19-20, 10:18). But it is sufficiently veiled so that all who desire not to see are not compelled to do so (Romans 1:18).

The LORD concludes the first *Servant* Song of Isaiah with a prophetic promise about the Messiah.

He will not be disheartened or crushed

Until He has established justice in the earth;

And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law (v 4).

The LORD is promising that *His Servant will* be victorious.

The line that says *He will not be disheartened* means the Messiah *will not* become so discouraged that *He will* give up or quit on His mission. Neither *will he* be *crushed* or defeated.

We see this in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus, the LORD's *Servant*, does not give up, even though He is "grieved and distressed" (Matthew 26:37). As the hour where He will be tortured, humiliated, rejected, and crucified approaches, Jesus confides to His disciples: "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death" (Matthew 26:38). But even still, *He* stays faithful to His Father's plan. After asking His Father if there was another way to accomplish His task, Jesus prayed: "Yet not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39). *He did not* become disheartened. *He* stuck with it.

The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus persevered because of the great reward that was set before Him, to share the authority of *His* Father's throne, as a human (Hebrews 12:1-2; Philippians 2:5-10). He chose to do *His* Father's will, trusting that it would be for *His* best. As a result, *His* name was exalted above all other names, and the earth was given to Him as *His* reward (Matthew 28:18).

Because of this perspective or mindset Jesus chose, when the abandonment, abuse, rejection, ridicule, torture, and death came *He* was *not* defeated or *crushed* by the temptation to save Himself (Matthew 27:42; Philippians 2:5). *He* did not strike back, or protest that no one recognized *Him* for who *He* was. *He* trusted God (Hebrews 12:2), loved *His* enemies (Luke 22:34) and fulfilled *His* mission (John 19:30).

The author of Hebrews encourages us to emulate the attitude of Jesus, the LORD's *Servant*,

“For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”
(Hebrew 12:3)

New Testament believers are exhorted to adopt the same mindset as Jesus, and promises that if we follow *His* example, *He* will share *His* great rewards with us (Philippians 2:5; Revelation 3:21).

The closing lines of this *Servant* Song read:

*Until He has established justice in the earth;
And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law.*

This means Jesus the Messiah *will establish justice in all the earth*. God’s plan is to redeem the world and bring it back into harmony with *Him*. The LORD’s *Servant* is the *one chosen* to accomplish this task.

Jesus the Messiah has accomplished the first part of this mission. He has defeated sin and reconciles everyone who believes in Him to God (John 1:12-13; John 3:16; Colossians 2:13-14).

Having accomplished the first part of His mission, Jesus then commissions us, His followers, to act in His authority to proclaim the good news to others (Matthew 28:18-20). We are to make disciples of all *nations* teaching them to observe all that *He* has commanded us. And we are to do this “even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The LORD seems to be saying something similar about the Gospel’s reach here in Isaiah when *He* says: *And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law* (vs 4).

Moreover, the fact that *the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law* suggests that everyone, everywhere, from one side of the world to the other, ultimately longs for true *justice*. This is like the prophet Habakkuk who empathizes with the “nations [who] grow weary” of injustice (Habakkuk 2:13). It is also like how the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans speaks of “the anxious longing of creation [which] waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God” (Romans 8:19). Even in our fallen state, we desire to be made right.

The problem for us is that we as humans are all sinners and are unjust (Psalm 14:3). We have all sinned and made ourselves enemies of the LORD, who is perfectly just (Romans 3:23). But the LORD is also merciful and sent *His Servant* to perfectly keep the *law* and to pardon all who believe in Him (John 3:16; Romans 5:8). God mercifully attributes His righteousness to all who believe (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3).

Jesus, the LORD’s *Servant*, *will bring forth this justice*. *Justice* can only be found in Christ.

Every person on earth will either seek refuge in Christ, the LORD’s *Servant*, and be declared righteous and be justified, or they will remain *His* enemy. Each of us will decide to be made just by *His justice*, or we will be judged by *His justice*.

This is the unavoidable decision we all must make.

As Jesus told Nicodemus, all that is required to escape God's wrath, and receive His righteousness is to have sufficient faith to look upon Jesus, hoping to be delivered from the poisonous venom of sin (John 3:14-15).

Biblical Text

**“Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;
My chosen one in whom My soul delights.
I have put My Spirit upon Him;
He will bring forth justice to the nations.
² “He will not cry out or raise His voice,
Nor make His voice heard in the street.
³ “A bruised reed He will not break
And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish;
He will faithfully bring forth justice.
⁴ “He will not be disheartened or crushed
Until He has established justice in the earth;
And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law.”**