

In the Presence of Paradox, Peace

Isaiah 52:13-15

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My name is John Song. I'm the Pastor of Youth Ministries here and I want to welcome you as we open up God's Word to the book of Isaiah, Isaiah 52:13-15. I want to thank Randy, Pastor Randy, and Pastor P.D. for giving me the opportunity to kick off a short sermon series that we'll be doing in the book of Isaiah, Chapter 52 and 53, focusing on the suffering servant prophecy in the Old Testament as we get ready for Advent next week.

Now as we're turning to this passage one may ask the question as to why we would spend the next couple of weeks on this particular passage on the suffering servant, rather than, let's say, a traditional Christmas passage or a prophecy in Isaiah dealing with the birth of Jesus Christ. Now there are many reasons why, but here are a few. First, the Isaiah prophecy is not so much designed to speak on the birth of the Emmanuel, but rather what the Emmanuel will accomplish. Likewise Christmas is not just the marking of the celebration of a birth, but rather also a celebration of the exaltation of Christ and his finished work on the cross. So by studying this passage what we're doing is we're preventing us from focusing on the cultural wars that inevitably appear during the Christmas season, where people talk about Christians losing the meaning of Christmas, when in reality the meaning of Christmas cannot be separated as just simply a birth narrative, but a fulfillment of the prophecy that Israel and us have long waited for. So in other words, Advent season is a waiting, just as Israel was waiting, just as we are waiting, for the Messiah.

So with all those qualifications let's go ahead and read Isaiah 52:13-15. Isaiah 52:13-15.

¹³Behold, my servant shall act wisely;
he shall be high and lifted up,
and shall be exalted.

¹⁴As many were astonished at you—
his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—

¹⁵so shall he sprinkle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which has not been told them they see,
and that which they have not heard they understand. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.) Let's pray together. Father, as we are nearing closer and closer to Christmas, the celebration of your Son's birth and his work, may we see the prophecy of Isaiah not just as the rejoicing of a coming of a Son, but a suffering servant that leaves us in wonder and in awe. May your Holy Spirit lead us now. Challenge us, cause us to worship this Jesus. And it is in his name that we pray these things. Amen.

So, you know, it's early in the morning and I know that some of you are still working off the food coma from last Thursday. But I do want to give you some little intellectual stimulation here

today. So we'll start off easy with some sort of quick math that you can sort of do in your head. You don't need to call out the answers if you know them, but you can go ahead and feel free to participate along. So if I were to give you just a simple math problem—for example, what is 8 divided by 2, you would say 4, right? What about 220 divided by 2? That would be 110, right. Some of you are quicker than others. That's great. Fantastic. What about 560? 280. OK, good, all right.

Now let's go a little bit. . . That's too easy. Why don't we get theoretical here, all right? What about if we divided the number infinity by 2. What number would we get? Infinity, right? I see some of you are right there with me. That's great. For those of you who love math you know the answer to infinity divided by 2 is actually infinity. That's seems weird; that's abstract. The infinite chain of numbers that you get when you divide a number like infinity by 2 actually gives you the original thing that you divided it from. In other words, infinity doesn't care what you do to it. You can subtract from infinity and it will still be infinity. You can add to infinity and it would still be infinity. You can multiply any finite number times infinity and it would still be infinity. That's a strange paradox.

This has led to something now that's on the modern cusp of mathematics and geometry, something called the Banoch-Tarski Paradox. There will not be homework on this, so don't worry about that, all right? But the Banoch-Tarski Paradox, where they're trying to take now this concept in math and trying to figure out how you can take an infinite number of small molecules from, let's say, you know, like a chocolate sphere, and turn it into another chocolate sphere while still keeping the same number of infinite molecules. So sort of like duplicating chocolate spheres over and over again. Now that sounds delicious, but it's also perplexing. Our minds become blown. I mean how could such a thing be possible? How can you take an infinite set of molecules from something to create something that is structurally infinitely the same?

That's a great paradox. And paradoxes are everywhere when we know where to look for them. I mean even in Scripture there are paradoxes. If you look at Titus 1:12, for example. Paul in that particular verse of Scripture uses a paradox where he states the fact that Cretans—from the island of Crete off of the Greek Islands—that Cretans are always liars. Now what's interesting about that phrase is Epimenides, a Greek philosopher, said that, and guess what nation he was from? Crete. So a Cretan is saying the phrase, "Cretans are always liars." Now that's an interesting paradox, right? If Epimenides is right then the statement that all Cretans are liars, yet he's a Cretan, does that mean that he's telling the truth? And if he's telling the truth then isn't he lying about what he is saying that all Cretans are liars? Again, mind blown, right? This is what's called the liar's paradox. We see this even in Scripture.

But that's what all good paradoxes challenge us to see. They challenge our sensibilities. They challenge what is obviously right before us. They make us examine our own preconceptions and knowledge and force us to move towards deeper thinking—but even the simplest of narratives, thought processes—and gives us new light into what they actually mean. Paradoxes force us—not necessarily to a definitive answer, but rather [to] an appreciation of all of the different perspectives surrounding the truth, and challenge us to look deeper.

Today's text, folks, is a paradoxical text, one that would challenge the Israelites that would read it—and even those today—to search deeper and deeper into the meaning of what a Messiah really is and what a Messiah is supposed to be. And so in order to understand why this text is paradoxical, we've got to do a little bit of background work first. You see, in order to really

understand even the whole book of Isaiah, which is just a *magnum opus* of prophecy—it's a wonderful, gorgeous book—you need to understand that the structure of Isaiah is largely built around three figures, that it's all pointing to the coming Messiah. Chapters 1-37 speak about this messianic king, the messianic king who would rule and reign and restore Israel to its final perfect glory. Over on the ending Chapters 56-66 talk about the Messiah being an anointed conqueror—that the promised deliverer of Israel would bring about the Sabbath rest that the people of Israel were longing to find in the Promised Land, yet could not because of their idolatry. So, so far, so good. These two pictures. We have a king and a conqueror. What you'd expect out of a Messiah. Easy. This is 8 divided by 2. There's easy logic here for those who would read it.

But you see in that middle section of Isaiah, from Chapters 38 to 55, we hear about a Messiah being pictured as the servant. Now this would seem like a very difficult text for those who are reading this prophecy. This would be sort of a liar's paradox to those who are keen to the understanding of a Messiah for Israel. Four times through Chapter 38-55 we find a description of the servant Messiah, but each time the servant is described in a tone that gets much worse in nature and tone.

A servant Messiah, it seems like, would be contradictory in nature to those who are reading. As uncommon as endless chocolate spheres. It would be a paradox that's as uncommon as a liar's paradox. A noble thief. Youthful wisdom. These are all paradoxes, right, that challenge us and yet somehow all exist. For the people of Israel the statement that all Messiahs are servants would be paradoxical to them. Why would someone who is coming as an anointed conqueror, as a Messiah who is coming as a king, also be considered a servant? Who would want to take a lowly position in a lowly state to confirm their ability to lead the nation of Israel to the promised land? This challenges us. This is a paradoxical text.

So Isaiah 52 is the first one of these servant songs. God introduces and identifies a servant as the one who belongs to God. The servant belongs to God and serves him alone. In Isaiah 49:1-7 the servant is mentioned as the one who would successfully complete the mission that the master has sent him to, gaining salvation not just for the nation of Israel, but for all the nations. And in Chapter 50:4-10, this is where the turn starts to happen. It shows the great difficulties of that servant's work and some of the opposition that he will face. The people that will spit on him, reject his message; the people who will stand in opposition to him. And so finally here in Isaiah 52, verses 13 and onward, we get finally to the fourth servant song, which talks about the Messiah figure, what the Messiah figure will do for the people of Israel. And you will see that paradox is seeped into this passage in a way that will leave its readers in awe and expectation of the coming Messiah. It causes them to wonder. Because his character and nature is unlike anything that Israel or the world has ever seen before. And this is the picture of a **Paradoxical Servant**, a **Paradoxical Appearance**, and a **Paradoxical Response**.

So let's dive right into this **Paradoxical Servant**. This is verse 13: "Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted." Now again, there is some deep wonder that happens in a verse like this. When we first hear the word 'servant'—and we have to be careful here—we must differentiate the way that the word servant was used back then versus the way that we kind of think about the word 'servant' or 'slave' today. We see today that that word has extremely negative connotations. But here we are not talking about the [American] slaves or servants—(in fact, the Old Testament would never refer to slaves and servants in the way that we commonly associate slavery with in American history)—thinking

that the Israelites treated slaves with the same kind of contempt and sinful behavior that categorize much of America's evil history when it comes to slave trade. But rather servants in the Old Testament were to be treated with respect, scripturally. They were able to celebrate Sabbath. They were actually released every six years. Israelite servants were, in fact, so well taken care of, that some chose, after the six years of wanting to be released, [to] stay with their masters, because their masters were treating them well. They had a job; there was a way for them to get out of poverty. Israelites often chose servanthood as a way of being able to take care of the lower classes. And in this way, masters were then held accountable and responsible for the way that they were treating their servants.

So it's not quite as negative as a picture as we would associate it with, but nevertheless servanthood is still an odd choice for Isaiah to speak about. A servant is going to redeem the whole world. That doesn't seem strong to us. It seems like a paradox. How could one who is ultimately subservient have the power to be what this verse is saying: high, exalted, lifted up. Why wouldn't you use 'the master' here to describe what will happen? Why choose the analogy of a servant to carry the picture of the one that would be raised? But if we dive into the wonder of the complexity of this, you see that Isaiah chooses the servant and chooses three postures of the servant to help us to see something beautiful here.

Look at this. High, lifted up, and exalted. One commentator suggests this. Some expositors see in these three clauses—high, lifted up, and exalted—the three well known stages in our Lord Jesus Christ's historic rise. First, his resurrection, then his ascension, and finally enthronement on high. At least it may be said that there were these three steps in his rise, and this may be a veiled reference to them. In the larger aspect the passage means that before the full results of the work of Christ are accomplished, they shall issue in the exaltation of Christ to such immeasurable height that words fail to describe it. In other words, if you see here, before we even talk about what the suffering servant will endure, Isaiah wants to make us to be sure of the ending of the story for the servant. That in all the Messiah will accomplish it will leave us hanging in anticipation for how he will get out of this situation that will come in these next verses. This servant will be risen. The servant will be king and victorious. The servant will be ascended on high. That's the encouragement. Like a great novel or any story that starts with the ending, verse 13 is letting us know that everything is going to be OK, despite all that is to fall that might seem bleak and dark and failing. In other words, in this servant's service, whatever darkness may come to him, he will be victorious.

And that becomes necessary for us to hear, because this next section in verse 14 goes into **The Paradoxical Appearance**. The story here takes a much, much darker turn. Verse 14: "As many were astonished at you—his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—" Now you've got to understand something about servants. You see, servants back in the day in Israel weren't just working for their masters. In many cases the appearance of the servant determined the worth of the master that they served. Servants were often marked physically in the features, whether it being marking of their ears for those Israelite slaves who chose to stay with their masters, or the clothes that they wore, or the positions of how they were marked. It told a story to the people around them about what the master is whom they served.

But this is true today, right, of any organization. You often look at the uniforms of a company to determine the company's values or determine what they want to project. You associate Target, for example, with the color red and Walmart with the color blue. You think of any sort of

reputable concierge service and you would expect that all of the people, the bellhops, would be wearing suits, would be wearing something that would make you feel like this person is trustworthy to give my keys to my car, to, right? And that's what we would do. We expect a certain logo or branding to carry across positive values. Which is why many times we have protests in this country against companies or against organizations that send the wrong symbols. Right? From sports teams to Hollywood, we value the appearance of those whom we come in contact with, just like the people of God did back in the time of Isaiah.

But the paradox in verse 14 points to a completely different picture, doesn't it. [What] this servant of God will look like and what will happen to him—this servant of God's figure is marred, disfigured. He ~~hardly~~ carries a look that [hardly] would look human at all. We see that his form and figure are so distorted that it doesn't even look like he would be born of a woman. It says that he doesn't have a form of the children of mankind. The effect is something to the degree of saying, How can we even at look at this servant? How can this servant be the one that represents Almighty God? How can this servant bring us any hope of salvation? How can this servant represent us? This is horrific. This is what is left [to] our imagination in this verse.

Well, we're so privileged and blessed to be on this side of redemptive history, to know the answer to this question, don't we. We know who this person is. We see Jesus Christ while he heads to the cross to be the Messiah, the servant, for our sins. We see that in order to fulfill his mission that he was tortured, pierced, crucified, spit on, disfigured to a point where no one could recognize him. He didn't even look human at all. Someone who looks so different, an alien, that he was left on a cross to die while others could mock from a distance. Jesus was stripped of all of his humanity for the sake of our salvation, for the sins of you and [me]. In other words, the effect of Isaiah's prophecy here is worse than any movie that could be portrayed about Jesus suffering.

One medical doctor, by the name of Dr. Keith Maxwell from Asheville, North Carolina, sought to actually paint a medical diagnosis picture of the true suffering of Christ and what that would look like. His diagnosis was based upon several scriptural accounts, also from other historical sources that what Jesus suffered from. And this is what he writes about, if we had to give a medical diagnosis of what was happening on the cross. These are the kinds of things that Jesus would have suffered from, to include: Sleep deprivation of beyond thirty six hours. Hematohidrosis, which is a condition of stress and anxiety that causes victims to sweat blood by bursting of the sweat glands to bleed through the small capillaries of the body. Scourging of his back thirty nine times, exposing the small ribbons of muscles in the back, and in some cases having skin hanging from the back exposed, the medical equivalent of a cut so deep that it would require over two thousand stitches to close. Eyes swollen shut due to the blows placed on his head by three to four hundred puncture wounds on the crown of his head, due to the crown of thorns. Spikes driven through the transverse carpal ligament of his hands from the nails, to be able to hold his weight—avoiding, actually, the major arteries that would cause Jesus to bleed out. Feet being driven through [by] the spike that would have been placed through the first and second metatarsal bones. And breathing issues caused by the position of hanging, with [the victim's own body weight preventing his lungs from receiving air]. Naked. Disfigured. Barely human.

How can this be? How can this represent us on the cross? How can this be done for people as sinful as us? How can this be done to the Messiah? We have no equivalent of some sort of physical torment like this today. In fact, even our movie portrayals, movies like "The Passion of

the Christ,” they don't even begin to compare in which the physical appearance of Christ would look. But maybe, perhaps, there is an equivalent that we can relate to today. Maybe not outward, but emotionally inward. Maybe physical torment we haven't experienced, but all of us in this room, I would dare to say, have been disfigured by the effects of sins that still wound, distort, and change us on the inside, doesn't it. This is to anyone who has been betrayed by someone that they loved. Anyone who is walking around scared and anxious, living in fear about how others see them, perceive them. To anyone who has ever felt the sting and the pain of death of a lost loved one, wondering how can life ever be the same again. To anyone here who has dealt with a physical condition that has caused emotional harm by those who treat you as an inconvenience or a nuisance. To anyone who has felt the pain of systematic or personal racism, who has ever felt like the color of their skin makes them a target of mockery, ridicule, oppression, and marginalization. For anyone here—particularly our sisters in Christ here in this room—who has ever had to face abuse of any kind. Who has ever uttered the words, “Me too,” that has been going around on the Internet. Who has ever been taken advantage of in the worst of ways, that no man or no person should have ever done. Anyone who has felt [that] their humanity [has] been stripped by the sins of others.

Christ stands with you. We have a great hope for you today. Christ stands with you. He is not a far, distant God who cannot relate to how you feel. He is a Savior who condescends to become man so that he can come to you and let you know that he's been there. Disgraced, ashamed, broken. And he invites you to see that just as he will be high and risen and exalted and lifted up, so you, too, in your union with Christ will find redemption in your soul and life again. As Christ's body, this church, this group of believers wants to embrace you and let you know that we've been there, too. That you are not alone. And by going through what you've gone through in this life, you are perhaps nearer to being Christ-like in your sufferings and understanding God's great love for you. But where we were unwilling, Christ willingly goes to the suffering. When we were helpless, Christ becomes victorious for the sake of you and [me]. When we were in this life defeated and disfigured on the inside, Christ resurrects with a glorified body, and invites us to receive the same. You see, the suffering isn't the end of the story for Christ. And because of that, the suffering here in verse 14 is not over for you, and it's not over for me. This is the joy of the Christian life that we hold onto.

And because he has done this, this leads us to verse 15, **The Paradoxical Response**. Our stanza in this poem—which is a five stanza poem of three verses each—ends. This stanza ends with the result of what this paradoxical appearance does to the nations that surround and gaze upon this suffering servant. Now some translations suggest that the action of the suffering leads for the servant to startle the nations. In fact, if you look very closely in your ESV Bibles, you will see that the word 'sprinkle' can be translated or 'startle.' However, I do believe that your [ESV] Bible is correctly translated, that 'sprinkle' is what we should consider in the context of this text here.

You see, sprinkling back then brought purification. In the sprinkling of blood around sacrifices in in the nation of Israel they were trying to show a visible sign of one that was to come. That through this person's perfect shed blood sprinkled it would clean all the people of God in ethnic Israel, which was at that time considered to be the people of God. But if you notice Isaiah's trajectory here in verse 15, the sprinkling of the suffering servant would lead the nations to come to redemption. This goes beyond Israel's borders. It includes Gentiles, pagans, into the people of God. This is the formulation of a new Israel, one that would receive all of the benefits of the servant in the here and now, one that seeks to create a new nation, a new people of

God. That would silence all the surrounding kings as they understand the gravity of the Gospel good news that is set before them. They will understand the very things that the Israelites could not, in the tormenting of our Lord.

I mean, isn't that what we experience in our studies in the book of Mark. That the Syro-Phoenician woman, the Roman centurion, and others. . . The paradox is that the Messiah would arrive and yet the Gentile kings of other nations would not only be included, but would be in a posture of awe and reverence and silence because of his arrival. Isn't that the beauty of the Gospel? It reaches all of us. That we, represented in this room filled with many nations in this room, that we who come from all different kinds of backgrounds and statuses—we join in the worship of someone that we cannot see, but know that is real. Something that we cannot feel tangibly, but feel with all of our heart. Something that we know to be true, and yet call it faith. All those paradoxes are found in the person and worth of Jesus Christ.

This is why the Apostle Paul in the book of Romans, Chapter 15:18-21—Romans 15:18-21—writes this. He writes these words. “For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have filled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written...” and what does Paul quote here? He quotes Isaiah 52:15. ““Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.””

You see, Paul believes his gospel mission to the nations—our drive to evangelism—is fueled by the suffering servant. Not just to be the true meaning of Christmas, in other words, but the true mission of Christmas. That's what all great paradoxes do. They simply don't remain in the abstract, but they rather tangibly become real and make the unbelievable believable. The Cretan liar can tell the truth, because it's Scripture. The text can say both what seems impossible and necessary. The lowly servant can be high and exalted and be one with the Lord. The one disfigured in his suffering—to not even look human—can be fully man and human to represent us. The localized Israelite who had proclaimed a truth in his death and resurrection would actually be a message that spread to all nations.

These are the great paradoxes and mysteries of our faith. That causes us to worship and wonder, and we can do that for all of eternity. The broken healed. The blind see. The leper clean. US restored. This is the majesty of the God that we worship today. He is the great paradox that is worthy of all of our praise.

Let's pray together. Father, when we think of the things of you—even when we think about your suffering, what you did for us on the cross for our sins—we cannot help but to fall into wonder and mystery and thinking how can this be, how is this possible. And Lord, as we reflect on these infinite truths, we are left to just one thing that we can do: just sing out to you, praise you, give you glory for all that your Son has done. Father, thank you for this word. We thank you for an opportunity to study this servant, as he is revealed to us. And we thank you for our time together. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.