

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

April 11, 2010 The Suffering Servant (3)—Our Substitute

No. 3510

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Dear Radio Friends,

What did the death of Jesus Christ on the cross do? Why was the death of Christ necessary? Those are the questions that we hope to answer today from Isaiah 53:4-6. Please read those verses.

These verses are central to Scripture. They are God's commentary on the central event of history: the cross of Christ. They tell us what Jesus accomplished on the cross. They tell us why He had to suffer on the cross. They teach the wonderful truth of the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ, that is, that in His death, Jesus died in the place of sinners. That truth is the center of the Bible. It is central to the gospel and to our salvation.

To bring home its importance, Isaiah, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, uses the literary device of repetition. These verses are like a treasure chest. Seven times in these three verses Isaiah speaks of Christ as our substitute. 1) He bore our griefs. 2) He carried our sorrows. 3) He was wounded for our transgressions. 4) He was bruised for our iniquities. 5) The chastisement of our peace was upon Him. 6) With His stripes we are healed. 7) The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Concerning this great truth, a great Calvinistic preacher of the past said: "In one word, the great fact on which the Christian's hope rests is substitution. The vicarious sacrifice of Christ for the sinner, Christ suffering for the sinner, Christ being made sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him, Christ offering up a true and proper substitutionary sacrifice in the place of as many as the Father gave Him who are recognized by their trusting in Him—this is the cardinal fact of the gospel."

How important is this truth to you? As you read and study the Bible, what truths grab your attention? What do you look for, what do you find edifying and encouraging for yourself as a believer? I dare say that we are not as thrilled as we should be by this truth. We often look for something practical, something that is related to our life as Christians. We look for something encouraging, something that will lift us up. We look for something hidden or mysterious. We are interested in subjects that have to do with the future and the end of the world, with heaven and what that will be like for us. And, too lightly, we pass over the great, plain, central truth of the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.

Today I want to begin by pressing home to you the importance of this truth. And there is no other way for me to do that than to preach to you the truth of your sinful depravity described here in these verses. In these three verses, there are as many descriptions of man's sinfulness as there are of Christ's substitution. Isaiah pulls together as many descriptions of sin as he can. And what it shows is that we are going to appreciate the truth of Christ as our substitute only when we first fully understand our sins.

Isaiah first uses the words "griefs" and "sorrows" to describe sin. Do you know the griefs and the sorrows of sin? With these words Isaiah looks at the result of sin, what sin produces. Our world, yours too, is filled with griefs and sorrows. In the book of Job, chapter 14:1, Job says, "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble." In Ecclesiastes 2:23 Solomon writes, "For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night." A hospital; a nursing home; a funeral; a cemetery; a war-torn country; refugees without clothes or shoes; the homeless without food or shelter; a broken relationship; bankruptcy; crimes of theft and murder; daily life with all its physical troubles of sickness and disease, with its internal anguishes of fear and anxiety and hurt and depression—these are all the griefs and sorrows of man's life in this world. And they are all the result of sin.

Then there is the grief and the sorrow of suffering in hell that awaits all those who die in their sin and that we all, by nature, deserve. The Bible describes hell as a place of continual burning. In hell, a person is always dying, always on the verge of death, and always wanting to die but cannot. It is perpetual suffering, described as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

These are the griefs and the sorrows that sin bring and that show our need of Christ.

Isaiah continues to describe our sin with the words transgressions and iniquities. The word "transgression" refers to sin as an act of rebellion. It describes us as rebels. God says one thing, and man does another. God says, Do this, and man does the exact opposite. We think of the garden of Eden and the command to Adam and Eve. They rebelled. They transgressed the word of God. The word "iniquities" refers to the guilt of sin. Our sin makes us liable to the judgment of God. Our sin earns something for us. It earns the wrath of God and makes us worthy of eternal punishment in hell. Jesus teaches us to think of our sin as "debt"—something that puts us under obligation to God so that we have to pay.

And then verse 6 puts all this together in the form of a personal confession: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." We are like strange sheep. You remember Jesus' parable of the lost sheep. The man had a hundred sheep. And one of them went astray and got lost. By nature, that is who we are. We are all like the straying sheep.

Now, to be compared to sheep is not flattering. On their own, sheep are helpless. On their own, they are weak and vulnerable. They need the warmth and the protection of the flock. They need the guidance and care of the shepherd. Left to themselves, sheep cannot find their own pasture or water. In a storm or a blizzard, they will not seek shelter, even though it is just twenty feet away. And yet sheep want to be independent. They need the flock, they need the shepherd, but they think that they do not. And so they will wander off into harm and destruction.

We are foolish like sheep. We have turned every one to his own way. Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.” In our own heart and mind we have our own way. We want to be independent. What is that way? It is the way of our own lust. The human heart turns away from God to follow its own desires. James says: “Every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust and enticed.” Sin is natural to us, it is inherent. We are born with desires and opinions and inclinations that are contrary to God, and by nature we follow them.

Notice in verse 6 that this is the universal evaluation of man: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.” The Bible’s evaluation of every human being is this: That all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). The truth about you, whoever you are, wherever you listen today, is this: that by yourself you are a sinner wandering far from God. Is this your confession? Do you see that your heart is against God and His word; that your sinful deeds are acts of rebellion against God; that the griefs and the sorrows of your life are the result of sin?

Where does this leave us? Isaiah speaks here of our need of healing: With His stripes we are healed. He speaks of our need of peace with God: The chastisement of our peace was upon Him. The idea is that we need to be healed of our sinfulness if we are to have peace with God. By nature, we are the enemies of God. Our sins and sinfulness put us in opposition to God. And there is nothing that we can do to change it.

So we see here the absolute necessity of a substitute. For we ourselves would bear God’s wrath against sin eternally in hell. That is what we deserve. And this is the beauty of what Isaiah says in these verses. He presents Christ as our substitute, as the One who takes the place of sinners before God. This is what happened at the cross. This is what Christ did when He suffered and died.

Verses 4 and 6 describe Christ shouldering the burden of our sin. In verse 4, Isaiah begins: “Surely.” Surely this is true. This is the explanation for His marred visage. This is the explanation for His lowly origin and His death. “Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.” He took the results and the cause of our sin on Himself. He shouldered them. He made them His own burden. In verse 6: “The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity [or the guilt] of us all.” He took responsibility for our debt before God. And He paid it in full.

This was vividly illustrated every year in the Old Testament on the great Day of Atonement. Leviticus 16 tells us about this. Listen to verses 21 and 22: “And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sin, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness.”

That is what happened at the cross. All our iniquities were put on Christ. This is the great exchange. Our worst is placed upon the Lord Jesus Christ. And the best about Jesus Christ, His righteousness, is given to us. All our sins are given to Him. And the result is that He suffers and

dies.

Verse 5 here describes His suffering. It is one of those very detailed Old Testament descriptions of the suffering and the cross of Jesus Christ. He was wounded. Literally, He was pierced through for our transgressions. It makes us think of the piercing of His hands, as the nails were driven into the cross, and the piercing of His side with the spear. He was bruised for our iniquities. It makes us think of how He was beaten and bruised. With His stripes we are healed. It brings to mind the lashing that He received. More than seven hundred years before His death, before the Roman beatings and crucifixion were even invented, Isaiah tells us exactly how it will be. This shows the inspiration and the unity of the Scriptures.

This is what happened at the cross. His suffering was for us and our sins. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him. That means that the price that had to be paid to make peace between us and God, to reconcile us to God, He made. He bore the chastisement of our peace.

And, as I said, this is the central truth of the Scriptures. Let me give you some other references to show that. In I Peter 2:24 Peter writes: "Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness; by whose stripes ye were healed." Christ paid for sins in His death. No one else can bear our sins, but Christ. No one else can die in the place of sinners, but Jesus Christ. I Peter 3:18: "For Christ also hath once suffered for sin, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God." In I Corinthians 15:3 Paul says, "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures." Paul is saying, this was of primary importance in my ministry; this was the first thing that I preached: Jesus Christ died for sinners. In Galatians 1:4: "Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us." There is the summary of the gospel. In Romans 4:25: "Who was delivered for our offences." Jesus did not die as an example. He did not die simply to show His commitment to what He believed. He did not die as a martyr. He died for sinners. He took our place. The wrath and the justice of God He faced, He took, and He removed for us.

Surely, surely, He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows! Jesus says in Matthew 20:28 that He came to lay down His life a ransom for many.

And the result for us is that we are healed. We are brought into a relationship of peace with God. That we are healed means that all the sin that causes grief and sorrow is removed from our account. All the guilt of our sin is paid. All the bitter results of sin are taken away. We are given life and friendship with God and joy in this life. And, eventually, eternally we are spared hell and we are brought into the presence of God free from all sin, to live with Him perfectly there.

Revelation 21 tells us that then there will be no more sorrow or sighing, no more grief. All things will be made new. All sin, gone forever.

And it is all, only, because Jesus Christ came as our substitute.

But now, as we close, we must ask one more question: For whom did He become a substitute? Was it for all men? Does He carry the guilt of every human being? Is that what Isaiah means when he says, "The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all"? Or maybe the question should be asked this way: Can it mean that? Can it mean that Jesus died as a substitute for all men, for every human being that ever lives? Asking the question gives us the answer. If He died as a substitute for all, then we cannot say with Isaiah, "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows." If He died for all, there is nothing sure about His substitution. If He died for all, and then some of those "all" end up in hell because of some weakness on their part, then Christ did not surely bear our griefs and carry our sorrows.

No, the death of Christ was like this: He came to pay a definite price for sin, the price that was needed to redeem all God's chosen people, to ransom them. He paid that price, down to the last penny. And by paying that price, He secured salvation for every one of His own. He says Himself: I lay down my life for my sheep; and no one is able to pluck them out of my Father's hands. He means, every one of those for whom He dies will be saved and brought to heaven.

That is a wonderfully comforting truth for us. As we believe in Jesus, we do not need to be torn by doubt concerning our salvation or fear of the judgment of God. No, all those who believe in Jesus are those for whom He died. So we can be sure that the payment has been made for our sins. Surely, surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. Do you not hear the confidence of the prophet?

So this text leaves you with the command: Look to Christ and believe in Him and His substitutionary death. This is the only way of salvation. The last part of verse 4 describes man's natural response to the dying Christ: "We did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." Again, it is very vivid, describing how the Jews of Jesus' day responded to His crucifixion. He had this coming, they said. He deserved this. He was smitten of God. His own deeds brought this on Him.

Today, how do you view the death and the suffering of Jesus Christ? Do you see your sins as the absolute necessity of the substitute of Jesus Christ? May God give us to see it.

What a glorious truth: Christ, our substitute!

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for the gift of Thy Son. We thank Thee for the sufficiency of His sacrifice in our place as sinners. We thank Thee for opening our eyes to see our need of Him. We pray, Lord, that we may ever live humbly, confessing our sin and trusting in Christ alone for forgiveness. Amen.