

The Suffering and Glory of the Servant

Songs of the Servant

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Bible Text: Isaiah 52:13-53:12
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This afternoon, we come to the fourth in a series of talks that we've had on the theme of the servant songs or servant poems that we find in the second half of the prophecy of Isaiah. And the passage today, wonderfully appropriate way for us to end another year, as it were, of our gatherings, this is, I think for those of us who speak, this is one of our favorite times in the week to be able to speak about Christ and we are grateful to you for the encouragement that you give to us by coming and listening to us speak.

So you'll find the Scripture passages in the inside of the little program today and many of you will probably know these words off by heart.

13 Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. 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-- 15 so 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.

1 Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--every one--to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off

out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? 9 And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. 10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. 11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

If you have ever read through the Acts of the apostles in the New Testament and have come to the section in Acts where Philip, the evangelist, has been preaching in Samaria and there has been an extraordinary revival of religion, the kind of thing of which we read about in the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century in the United States, and also in the nineteenth century both in the United States and throughout the Western world, and Philip saw many people come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and then all of a sudden, the Holy Spirit took him from that situation of extraordinary fruitfulness and sent him into the desert. And there as presumably he was wondering why God had brought him into the desert, a chariot came past with in the chariot the treasurer of a queen from possibly Ethiopia or perhaps the Sudan. And this man, the Ethiopian eunuch as we usually call him, we have no idea what his name was, he was sitting in his chariot reading this very passage that we have read. Most people don't know this but the idea of reading into yourself is a relatively modern idea and in antiquity, nobody read into themselves. If you were reading, you read out loud and so Philip presumably was able to hear the man reading the Hebrew text of Isaiah 52 and 53.

And he said to the man a kind of obvious question, really, "Do you understand what you're reading?" Actually, just as a sidebar, if you ever see anyone with a Bible or a New Testament or a passage of Scripture and you're kind of shy, you don't know how to begin conversations, that's a pretty good way to begin the conversation, isn't it? "Do you understand what you're reading?" And as the man was reading this passage, he said, "Well, how can I possibly understand this?" Now, he was in many senses quite right to say that because if you had said to Isaiah after he had written this, "Do you understand what you have written?" I think he would have given the answer, "How can I possibly understand this unless somebody explains it to me? I do not know about whom I have been writing here." And that was exactly the question the Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip and we have this beautiful little moment where Philip, I don't know whether he was a southern gentleman and said, "Would you mind if I sat down in your chariot with you?" or whether, you know, he was from elsewhere and he just walked into the chariot, plunked himself down and said to him, "I'll tell you what this means."

But in any case, we are told that Philip sat down and interestingly, because the Acts of the apostles was written by Luke who also wrote Luke's Gospel, Philip did exactly with the Ethiopian eunuch what Jesus had done with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus on the day of his resurrection. Perhaps Jesus actually had used this passage. I'm pretty sure he did. And we are told in Acts 8 that Philip preached Jesus to him from this passage. And if you know the New Testament fairly well, you will immediately think of many passages where there are allusions to this chapter or whether a specific reference is to this chapter that shows very clearly that when the early Christians read this passage, and behind that when the Lord Jesus read this passage, they understood that this was, indeed, a prophecy about the Lord Jesus.

And it comes at the end as we have noted, of a series of poems or songs about the servant of the Lord, and we have had little hints in our talks before in Isaiah 42, 49, 50, that somehow or another woven into the life of this servant is a certain amount of suffering, but there has been nothing in the previous three chapters that has really prepared us for what we find in Isaiah 52 and 53, and this brings us onto a new plane of prophecy, a new depth of promise of what the Savior would do and what he would go through and how people would respond to him. And you might notice that Isaiah 52 and 53 actually form five stanzas. The first in verses 13 to 15 of chapter 52, and then as you'll see, the reading is set out 53:1-3, 4-6, 7-9 and 10-12. But my guess is most Christians know this passage in Scripture as though it began in Isaiah 53:1. If you were ever taught to memorize this passage, it's almost certain that your memorization began at Isaiah 53:1, "Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" as it is translated in the King James version from which I was forced to memorize it in elementary school with no one to explain to me what it meant. But actually the poem, as you will see very obviously, begins in chapter 52, verse 13, because you remember how the first of those poems began with the words, "Behold, my servant," and now like a bookend, the last of the poems begins with the words, "Behold, my servant." And it takes us through five stages, by accident, one for each finger in your hand. It takes us through five stages of the inner experience of the servant of the Lord as Isaiah looks forward to, but doesn't fully understand, that this is actually a reference to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Chapter 52, verses 13 to 15, tells us right at the beginning about his completely unexpected triumph. His completely unexpected triumph. "Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high, he shall be lifted up, and he shall be exalted." Three different ways of saying exactly the same thing: high, lifted up, and exalted. But he wants to make very clear at the beginning that this exaltation of the servant is altogether unexpected. Altogether unexpected.

It's unexpected, you'll notice, first of all, in terms of his appearance. "His appearance," verse 14, "was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind." So there is something immediately astonishing, surprising about this as verse 14 says at the beginning, "As many were astonished at you," stunned, shattered. Why? Because the one Isaiah says is going to be high and lifted up and exalted is one who suffers from appalling disfigurement. He is marred beyond human semblance. As one of the scholars says, people are not asking the question, "Who is this?" people are

asking the question, "Is this human?" He is marred beyond human semblance and he is so, apparently, by an unnatural act of violence. This is not how he is by nature, this is how he becomes; this is something that happens to him, this unnatural marring of his person.

So it's very unexpected in terms of the appearance of the servant and it's also something that leads to a very unexpected conclusion: marred beyond human semblance, "so shall he sprinkle many nations." Now, if you were reading or hearing this in Isaiah's day, that word "sprinkle" would stand out to you. There would be something in your life that you always associated with the idea of sprinkling and that, of course, would be the sprinkling of sacrificial blood either over people or over objects as an expression of the way in which, through a sacrifice, the sins of the people would be forgiven or the pollution of the object would be cleansed. So that "sprinkle" is a verb that always associates in the minds of the first hearers of this, "This is happening as a result of sacrifice taking place; of life being given over in death."

You notice there is no explanation of the connection between these two things. There is a description of the servant who is going to be disfigured, who is going to be broken, and somehow or another as a result of this, the servant is going to sprinkle many nations, not just the Jewish people but something is going to take place internationally as a result of the exaltation of the servant. In other words, somehow or another, there is a connection between his sufferings and his exaltation, and somehow or another through his sufferings, his exaltation is going to become an international event, and an international event that is actually going to do something to people in all the nations of the world.

So he begins by speaking about his unexpected triumph and then, as a good poet would do, he just sets that aside. He just sets that aside and then he says, "Let's focus our attention now on the suffering and then I'll come back to the exaltation." And he does that, of course, in the fifth stanza. He begins with the exaltation, although it's very puzzling, he ends with the exaltation again, but by the time he has brought us back to the exaltation, we are now beginning to be able to make sense of the relationship between the sufferings and the glory of the servant. And so what follows is of huge significance. He begins with his unexpected triumph and then in the second stanza, verses 1 through 3, he describes his misunderstood humiliation.

Look at the question, beginning of verse 1, "Who has believed what he has heard from us?" Who has believed? And he's really saying, "We are going to think here about the humiliation. Who would believe what the results of the humiliation would be?" because he says, "Look at the inauspicious beginnings of the servant of this Lord, "He grew up before the Lord like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground." Now, I am no horticulturalist but I think I understand that a root that is in dry ground does not have much future. It is not likely to bear fruit, and the vision of the prophet is that whoever this servant of the Lord is, he has the most inauspicious beginnings.

And he goes on with that, he says, "There is no pedigree here and there is no form or impressiveness, majesty," the word is translated here. "There is no form or

impressiveness that we should look at him, and there is no handsome qualities that would make us desire him." And there is an ordinariness here. There is a passing in the street but not notice him here. There is a kind of, "Well, how would we recognize this person here?" He seems to be like everybody else-ness here. But then you notice he takes it a stage further. He says, "Yes, there is an inauspicious beginning but that inauspicious beginning leads to a lifetime of suffering." Look at the words, "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."

Now, you notice he's given us a little hint right at the beginning that there is something here in this person that we might fail to notice. Notice the way he asks the question, "Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" Now, the arm of the Lord, of course, is the Bible's way of speaking about the power and strength of God. So he's saying there is something else going on here but most people aren't going to see it. There is something going on here that is an expression of the arm of the Lord in his power and saving grace, but actually people aren't going to see it because they will be taken up merely with external things. Of course, we read this as people who know the New Testament and we say, "Well, that's quite impossible. Quite impossible. How could that possibly be true of Jesus, that people wouldn't understand him?" Do I really need to ask that question? Don't most people in the United States know the name of Jesus and dare I say, most people in the United States have really no idea who Jesus is and by and large would pass him in the street and actually functionally they both despise him and reject him. How can I say they despise him? Well, they despise him by regarding themselves as more important than he is; by imagining that he, at very best, would have an incidental place in their lives; by saying there are more important things in the world than what you believe about Jesus. That's actually to despise him.

And so he's speaking here about a reality that took place in the days of the New Testament. He's speaking here about a reality that is always true. The unexpected triumph takes place despite the misunderstood humiliation. But then in the third stanza, verses 4 through 6, we are taken even further down. From triumph to humiliation, now to his profound sufferings. Do you see that? We look at him and he says we can draw only one conclusion, verse 4b, "we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted." Actually, that is exactly right. That is exactly right. But, you see, he's saying people don't even see the significance of Jesus when they get it exactly right and this is how people thought about Jesus in the first century. Jesus is accursed. Didn't they say that in the first century? "Jesus is accursed. Look what happened to him." And the Apostle Paul agrees, doesn't he? Galatians 3:13, "Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree."

So at one level, they were absolutely right. They looked at Jesus and they said, "Jesus has been cursed. Jesus is under the judgment of God. That's why he is rejected, because he is accursed." And yet there is also something here that doesn't make sense. Actually, I think it's only when people realize that there is something here that doesn't make sense that there is any hope whatsoever of them grasping what the heart of the Christian Gospel is. He is accursed. He is accursed by God. He recognized it himself. Remember his cry on

the cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" Answer, "Because you are under the curse. You are under the judgment. That's why you feel forsaken."

And there is something here that doesn't seem to make sense, really, because "he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." And then in verse 5 we get to the heart of it, don't we? He was pierced. He was crushed. He was chastised and he was wounded. But apparently not because of himself. And that's what we need to see. We look at the cross, we look at the suffering, we look at the humiliation, we are not meant to see, "This is very sad and it moves me deeply to tears," what we are meant to see is the arm of the Lord and that the way in which God is showing his power to bring forgiveness and salvation is by taking our sins and laying them on Jesus; by taking our guilt and laying it on Jesus; by taking our alienation from God and laying it on Jesus.

And that's what brings him to stanza number four. He begins with his unexpected triumph, he moves to his misunderstood humiliation, he teaches about his profound sufferings, and in the middle of it he says something about Jesus' perfect submission, verses 7 through 9. "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted," and he was, wasn't he? It's almost unbearable to read those parts of the Gospel, people spitting on him, people making fun of him, despising him. "He was oppressed and he was afflicted and yet he opened not his mouth. He was like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth." It's actually one of the most impressive things about the Gospels in the way in which these words are fulfilled in the Gospels. There is no point in Jesus' trials, either religious or Roman, in which he issues a single protest about the injustice of what is happening to him, and the lack of due process of law.

Now, why does he not protest? Because he understands that actually what is happening here in his crucifixion is the due process of law. It is the due process of the law of God against anyone who comes into his presence bearing sin. And what is happening here, wonder of wonders, is that Jesus, who has no sin of his own, is coming into the presence of God having gathered up our sins, bringing our sins into the presence of God understanding that he is the one who is going to undergo due process of law in our place so that the Scriptures teach us that even though this was God's only Son coming into his presence bearing armloads of our sin, then due process of law would be effected, yes, also and indeed especially in the case of his Son. And so he would be stricken and smitten by God and afflicted. Now, you might say to yourself, "But surely Jesus didn't understand it this way." This was exactly how Jesus understood it. Do you remember how he quoted the prophecy of Zechariah and said, "This is the night when the prophecy of Zechariah will be fulfilled in which God says, 'I will smite the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.'"

This is exactly his understanding of what was happening to him in his humiliation, his suffering, his rejection, and finally his crucifixion. And as some of you have heard us say before, the striking thing about Jesus' trial is that he is accused of two crimes: one, the religious crime of blasphemy; and two, the political crime of treason. And he accepts those charges because those are God's charges against us, that we have blasphemed his

name rather than worship him with heart and soul and strength, and we have made ourselves the center of our universe rather than yielding to his Lordship as the center of our lives. And he takes these charges, this is why he has nothing to say, he is actually pleading guilty in your place and in my place in order that we might be pronounced guiltless before the throne of God.

It's because of this Isaiah sees how little he understood of this but how much he must have wanted to be in the chariot with Philip saying to him, "I can tell you how all this was fulfilled." And it is in verses 10 through 12 in the servant's glorious exaltation, and here's the explanation of it: "it was the will of the LORD to crush him." This wasn't a tragedy, this was a plan being fulfilled. "He has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand." That's why we're here if we are Christians, because the will of the Lord has prospered in his hand. "Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous because he bears their iniquities." And so his victory brings riches. "I will divide him a portion with the many, he will divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors."

You know, that Ethiopian eunuch with whom we began, I don't know how he got on in Jerusalem. The chances are because he was a eunuch, he was not actually welcome. Because he was an Ethiopian, he was doubly not welcome. And I wonder if as Philip explained this passage to him, it dawned on him. I think it did dawn on him, don't you? Because then he said, "Look, Philip, there is water. Will you baptize me? Is there anything to prevent me belonging to the people of God? I'm a eunuch, I'm an Ethiopian, I feel myself to be an outsider. I feel as though I have never been welcomed home by God. Is there any hope for me, Philip?" And Philip says, "Stop the chariot. I'll baptize you here and now into the name of the Lord Jesus."

The suffering servant. I learned this by heart by human accident, really. I was in one class in elementary school, and when I was seven, I think, somebody came into the room and said, "Ferguson, out here. You're moving into another class." You don't need to know the details or the reasons for me being moved in class, but I went into that class, Mrs. Woods' class, and there were two passages that the children in that class recited on alternate days to Mrs. Woods: one was the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, and the other was the opening of Isaiah 53. And when they started chanting the Sermon on the Mount, "Jesus went up into a high mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came unto him and he opened his mouth and taught them saying," I thought, "Well, I know who Jesus is but where on earth in the Bible is that passage?" But when they started chanting this passage from Isaiah 53, "Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" I found myself asking the question, "Who knows anything about what this means? Who knows anything about what this means?"

Well, do you know anything about what this means? I mean, for yourself? To be able to say, "He was wounded for my transgressions. He was bruised for my iniquities. The

chastisement that brings me peace, all upon him, and with his stripes my life can be healed." A child can understand this, I think, actually. It's not rocket science. It's not for some particular kind of person. It's for those who look at this and they see the arm of the Lord being revealed and they say, "Oh, now I see it. I've never seen it like this before. The reason he was wounded was because of me. He took my sin, my guilt, my shame, my sin, and he wants to give to me his peace, his grace, his righteousness, his relationship with his loving heavenly Father." Do you see that? Because if you see that, then the arm of the Lord has been revealed to you.

Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the way in which your word, even these passages in the Old Testament Scriptures when Isaiah who first wrote them must have puzzled so much about just exactly what they meant, we thank you that you have given us understanding. We thank you that we live in a time when Jesus has fulfilled these prophecies. We pray that more than live in the time when these prophecies are fulfilled, we each one of us may trust fully in the Jesus who fulfills these prophecies. And in the midst of sometimes the chaos and confusion and darkness of life, we pray that we may be able to say, "There is one thing I know, once I was blind but now I see the arm of the Lord revealed in my Savior and King and friend, the Lord Jesus." So we look to you for ourselves and for one another and for your saving grace. We thank you for all our Savior has done for us and we pray in his name. Amen.