

Wounded for Our Transgressions: Isaiah 52:13 – 53:6
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Next week we'll celebrate Easter, Resurrection Sunday. Just before that we will commemorate Good Friday, remembering the day of the week on which Jesus died. These two events, Jesus' death and resurrection, are the most important realities in the universe. As Christians, these are realities that define who we are. As a church, this is why we exist, and it is the message we have to proclaim to the dark and dying world around us.

Jesus Christ died on a cross. And Jesus Christ rose from the dead. If you grew up going to church you've heard these statements over and over again. These are familiar truths. But we must never let ourselves perceive them as dull simply because they're familiar. The truth that $2+2=4$ is very familiar, and therefore dull. Not many of us get very excited over the fact that $2+2=4$. It's a simple fact. We understand it. We accept it. And we never give any thought to it. But, oh, how different is the truth that Jesus died and rose again. It is familiar. It is simple in some respects, although very complex in other ways. We understand it, at least to some extent. We accept it. But we must NEVER ignore it or move past it or think it's not glorious.

Consider another truth claim. This one is hypothetical. But imagine that you found out, and there is plenty of evidence to back it up, that in 15 years you will receive a \$25 million gift from some benefactor. That's a pretty simple truth, isn't it? Kind of like $2+2=4$. It's simple. You understand it and accept the truth of it. And over the next 15 years it becomes a very familiar truth. But do you think it would ever get dull? Do you think a day would go by that you didn't think about that \$25 million?

Let me tell you, friends, that Jesus' death and resurrection is infinitely more valuable than \$25 million. And therefore we have tremendous reason to cherish this familiar truth. Never to lay it aside and move on to more interesting things, but to hold up this precious reality that Jesus Christ came to earth and suffered and bled and died on that cross, and then came back to life on the third day. Does that excite you? Is that something that you think about every day, the way you would think about \$25 million if it was coming to you? We certainly ought to think about it that way, with that kind of excitement and intensity and delight. This is the best news imaginable, and it's true! It's true!!

So as we approach Good Friday and Easter, I want us to spend some time meditating on the cross, on Jesus' suffering, on His sacrificial and substitutionary death for us, and His resurrection from the dead. These are familiar truths. They're things we talk about all the time here at Grace Church. This is what defines us. This is what we gather to celebrate EVERY Sunday of the year. And it is good that we have this yearly tradition of considering the events of Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. May these things never become dull to us! Familiar, yes! But never dull. Never routine. Never boring.

The truth is, of course, that the Gospel is NOT dull or boring. But our slow and stubborn hearts will perceive it as boring if there is not constant revival and renewal taking place through Bible reading and prayer and fellowship with other believers. So, brothers and sisters, let's use this Easter season as a time to pray for that revival and

renewal in our own hearts and in our church. Let's center our attention on the Gospel, on the cross, on Jesus' death and resurrection. And let's cry out to God for the grace to see the wonder of the Gospel. May we live cross-centered lives, Gospel-centered lives, to the glory of God.

The passage I would like for us to look at together is in the Old Testament. It was written over 700 years before Jesus even came to earth. It may seem odd to choose an Old Testament passage in order to meditate on Christ's death and resurrection. We would think it more profitable to meditate on a passage of Scripture from the New Testament that reflects on the cross after the fact. But this passage in the Old Testament is a reminder to us that the Bible is a supernatural book. It is not simply an historical record of ancient events. It is God's miraculous Word which tells of God's miraculous deeds. And one of the miracles of this Word is that it bears witness to God's mighty acts even before they happen. This is what we'll see in our passage which we'll look at this morning and next week. The passage is Isaiah 53, one of the most famous chapters in the Old Testament. One scholar writes, "No other passage from the Old Testament was as important to the Church as Isaiah 53" (J. Jeremias, *Eucharistic Words*, pg. 228; quoted in John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, pg. 145).

The section we're going to look at starts in 52:13 and goes to the end of chapter 53 (pg. 613 in pew Bibles). I want to read the whole section for us, all 5 stanzas. It's known as a "Servant Song," and it's the last of 4 Servant Songs that we find in Isaiah 42-53. And this song contains 5 stanzas. Each is 3 verses long. This morning we'll focus on the first 3 stanzas, which is 52:13-53:6.

There is no mistaking the fact that this passage is all about Jesus Christ. Some try to avoid this plain truth, but you can't get around it. These words, written 700 years before Jesus came to earth, are precisely fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus, Himself, taught this. In Luke 22:37 He says, "For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors' (Isaiah 53:12). For what is written about me has its fulfillment."

Another reference to Isaiah 53 is found in Acts 8, where Philip shares the Gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch. This Ethiopian man was sitting in his chariot reading his Bible, but he couldn't understand it. Do you remember the passage of Scripture the man was reading? He was reading Isaiah 53. Specifically, verses 7-8 are quoted: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." And then the Ethiopian man asked Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" And the next verse says: "Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). This is what I hope to do in these sermons: to begin with Isaiah 53 and proclaim the good news about Jesus, because this Servant Song is clearly all about Jesus Christ.

There are many other places in the New Testament where Isaiah 53 shows up. In some places it is quoted explicitly. In other places it is alluded to. John Stott points out that if we take into account both the quotations and the allusions to Isaiah 53, "then every verse of the chapter except verse 2 ('he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him') is applied to Jesus in the New Testament, some verses several times" (*The Cross of Christ*, 145-6). I just want you to be in awe of God's plans and in awe of God's Word. These

events were planned from before the foundation of the world, and God chose to reveal many of the details long before they happened.

HIGH AND LIFTED UP

Let's begin walking our way through these verses, and I'll begin with the heading "High and Lifted Up."

The first stanza of this song, in 52:13-15, begins with the exaltation of the Servant. "Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted" (v. 13). This note is sounded again at the end of the song, in 53:12: "Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong." These statements of the Servant's exaltation are important, because everything in the middle speaks of His humiliation. Paul's hymn in Philippians 2 likely has this Servant Song as its backdrop. Paul writes: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (vv. 6-11). Christ's humiliation, His suffering, the scorn He endured, this is His glory. He is highly exalted because He subjected Himself to such humiliation in order to save His people. And through His suffering He triumphed. He is the victor. He died, and then He rose again and is exalted on high. Thus His humiliation leads to exaltation.

The verb translated "act wisely" in 52:13 is hard to capture in one phrase. In the NASB it is translated "will prosper." But it's not simply saying that the Servant will be wise or wealthy. It's saying the Servant will be successful in His mission. He will accomplish what He has been sent to do. And as a result of His success He will be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. The song begins with this strong statement of the Servant's exaltation, and then focuses on His humiliation.

SPRINKLE MANY NATIONS

Next I want to look at the fact that this Servant will sprinkle many nations. This is in verse 15. This verse refers to the worldwide scope of the Servant's sacrifice. He sprinkles, or purifies, many nations. Paul quotes this verse in Romans 15, where he talks about his desire to preach the gospel not where Christ has already been named, "as it is written, 'Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.'" Paul understood that this prophecy from Isaiah 53 was being fulfilled in his ministry to the Gentiles. He understood that the gospel would extend to all the people groups of the world.

This should be a reminder to us to be praying for the spread of the Gospel to all peoples. We should be looking for ways to take the gospel to other people groups even right here in our city. That's one of the unique and exciting opportunities in urban ministry. The nations are coming to the cities. We should also be supporting missionaries overseas. And we should be going ourselves, on short term trips and some of us picking up and moving to another part of the world to reach those who have never heard of Jesus Christ. And we can go with the confidence that God has chosen for

himself individuals in every tribe and language and people and nation, and those individuals *will* see and understand.

A HOLY COMPLAINT

The next stanza of the song, in 53:1-3, begins with a “holy complaint,” as John Calvin calls it. “Who has believed what they heard from us?” The prophet voices his disappointment that the message is met with such unbelief. Why aren’t they believing? The answer comes in the following question, “And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” The arm of the Lord refers to God’s salvation. Look back to 52:9-10, “Break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” So in 53:1 the holy complaint is that so few have believed, and the reason for the unbelief is that it has not been revealed. John quotes this verse in John 12:38. He is commenting on Jesus’ ministry and says, “Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’” Then the next verse says, “Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, [and here he quotes from Isaiah 6:10] ‘He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.’” God must reveal Himself in order for a person to believe. That’s what we see in Isaiah 53:1 and what John saw also in Jesus’ ministry. There are many who do not believe, and it’s because the truth has not been revealed to them. God is sovereign over who believes and who does not believe, because no one believes unless God reveals Himself to them.

It is also true that those who do not believe are held responsible for their unbelief. And we, as Christians, are responsible to share this message and seek to bring unbelievers to faith. Let me warn us, Grace Church, of taking a verse like this, and taking our understanding of God’s sovereignty, and using it to become lax in evangelism and missions. Yes, God is sovereign. That’s why we can share the Gospel with power and confidence, because God will save His elect. But we are also responsible to obey the Great Commission. And we need to constantly be changing and growing and thinking about how to do things differently in order to reach more people with this message, praying that God will work through us in mighty ways. We believe in God’s sovereignty, and we also believe in our responsibility. We need to be pushing ourselves out of our comfort zones. We need to move away from comfort and toward need, away from the status quo and toward radical obedience. May we share with Isaiah this holy complaint. “Who has believed what they heard from us?” May we plead with God to reveal Himself and to draw more and more people to Himself.

DESPISED AND REJECTED

Going back to chapter 52, 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—” Augustine wrote about this passage, “Christ’s deformity is what gives form to you. If he had been unwilling to be deformed, you would never have got back the form you lost. So he hung on the cross, deformed; but his deformity was our beauty.” (Sermon 27.6, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Isaiah 40-66*, pg. 160). If you watch *The Passion of the Christ* or some other movie depicting Jesus’

suffering on the cross, or if you simply meditate on the brutal torture He received, that marring and disfigurement is our beauty. That deformity had to be endured by Him in order for us to be formed anew.

In chapter 53, verse 2-3 also talk about His humiliation. Here we're shown some of the reasons why He was despised and rejected, some of the reasons why few believed the message. The surprising reality that is literally unbelievable to the natural mind, is that this great deliverer came without any pomp and circumstance. He wasn't flashy, attractive. There wasn't anything about his physical appearance or his position in society or his financial status, that would make people think He was the great deliverer. He was not a great Redwood that people look up at with open jaw, but rather a young plant, a little root. He didn't have any form or majesty that drew attention. He didn't have an outward beauty that we would find especially attractive. Instead, in verse 3, he was despised and rejected by men. He was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. He was as one from whom men hide their faces. In other words, all of these metaphors point to the Servant's utter lack of natural appeal. There's nothing in Him that the natural man would be drawn to. Just the opposite is the case: everything about Him repels the natural man.

And then notice the pronoun in the last line of verse 3. "he was despised, and we esteemed him not." Isaiah is referring to himself along with the people of Israel, and we must include ourselves in this.. We did not esteem him. We have not esteemed this Servant. We have not honored Him or praised Him as we ought. Instead, we have despised and rejected Him.

This is what we have all done in our sinfulness. We hide our faces from Him. We're ashamed of Him. We turn away from His glory and esteem other things. This is a convicting truth that we each need to deal with in our own hearts. In what ways are we despising this Suffering Servant who is also our triumphant Savior? Are you despising Him? Are you failing to esteem Him? Maybe you are not a believer, and you're trying to figure out who this Jesus is. Maybe you want to see Him as a respectable religious figure, but just one among many. Friend, that is equal to despising Him. We must esteem Him and honor Him for who He is: the One, true Savior! All of us have failed, and continue to fail, in our delightful duty to esteem Jesus Christ above everyone and everything else. So let's repent of esteeming Him not and give Him the glory and honor He deserves.

WOUNDED FOR OUR TRANSGRESSIONS

The next stanza is glorious beyond words, and I'm going to talk about it in closing this morning and then talk about it more in our Good Friday service as we continue our way through this passage. Notice the amazing transition from the end of verse 3 to the beginning of verse 4. Verse 3 ends with the statement that he was despised, and we esteemed him not. And what does He do in return? He bears our griefs and carries our sorrows. In verse 3 He is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as the second half of verse 4 says, "we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted." Because of His suffering, it seemed as though He had done something wrong. Surely, He must have offended God to deserve such a horrible punishment. But what these verses reveal is that this sorrow and grief was ours. He bore *our* griefs. He carried *our* sorrows. He

did not deserve the punishment He received. God was not punishing Him for sins He had committed.

We are the ones who have gone astray like sheep (v. 6). We've turned to our own way. And all of those offenses were laid on this Servant for Him to bear the penalty. He was wounded for our transgressions (v. 5). Or "pierced" for our transgressions. One scholar says that this is the "strongest term for violent and excruciating death" in the Hebrew language. And when we think of Jesus' excruciating death, both physically and emotionally, it should be a reminder that our sin is infinitely offensive to God. It is so offensive that the only way it can be dealt with justly is 1) if the offender is punished in hell forever, or 2) if the God-Man Jesus Christ bears the punishment in the place of the offender. This is what we see here, that the Suffering Servant, the Messiah, was wounded for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities.

I want to close with a quote from John Oswalt, from his commentary on Isaiah. And I want you to consider whether you are the offender who continues to despise this Servant, and therefore God will punish *you* for your sins. Or are you the offender who embraces this Substitute, the One who took our penalty upon Himself so that we can have peace and be healed.

This is what John Oswalt wrote about the Servant being wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities: "This effect in the Servant is the measure of how seriously God takes our rebellion and crookedness. We typically wish to make light of our 'shortcomings,' to explain away our 'mistakes.' But God will have none of it. The refusal of humanity to bow to the Creator's rule, and our insistence on drawing up our own moral codes that pander to our lusts, are not shortcomings or mistakes. They are the stuff of death and corruption, and unless someone can be found to stand in our place, they will see us impaled on the swords of our own making and broken on the racks of our own design. But someone has been found. Someone has taken on himself the results of our rebelliousness, and we have been given the keys of the kingdom" (*Isaiah 40-66*, pg. 387).

Don't minimize your sin. Don't try to explain it away as mere shortcomings or mistakes. See the gravity of how you have offended God by disobeying Him, dishonoring Him, despising Him. And then repent of that sin, turn away from your sin, and put your hope in Jesus Christ, who was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities.