

The Suffering Servant

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Ross. And it'd be worth keeping that passage open in your Bibles if you have them there in front of you. As Ross mentioned, we're continuing our series in the book of Isaiah this morning.

We're well into the second half of the book now. And this passage that we're just looking at today, that we've just had read for us, is perhaps one of the high points of Isaiah, perhaps one of the high points of the whole of the Old Testament, that part of the Bible written before Jesus.

Maybe, as Ross read those words, they were familiar to you. Maybe not. But we're going to see this morning how it so clearly promises and outlines the rescue that God will bring about for his people.

And so we'll see how it is a high point of the Old Testament, as it so clearly points us to Jesus who arrives in the New Testament, and so clearly shows us what it is that he has done for us.

So a brilliant passage, a great one for us to look at. Also good to remember the kind of the wider sweep of Isaiah that we've been making our way through. That throughout this book, Isaiah has been warning God's people that they are far from him.

[1 : 1 3] That judgment is coming because of their rejection of him. And throughout Isaiah, we've seen time and time again, this is a serious situation. And that God is not messing around here.

But he's also been promising hope. And especially last week, as Daniel looked at chapter 40 with us, we saw that declaration from God through Isaiah.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. That promise that rescue will come. That God is merciful.

And this week, really, we kind of zoom in to see how that rescue is going to happen and what that mercy looks like in practice. And so really, we are here at the very heart of the message of the Bible.

How can people like us, people who have wandered far from God, turned our back on him? How can we be brought home to him? Perhaps that's a question you've thought about a lot.

[2 : 1 6] Perhaps it's not really a question that crosses your mind much. But the amazing message of the Bible is that it is possible and that God has made it possible, a relationship with the perfect, holy, creator God that we've been seeing throughout Isaiah.

The relationship that we were designed for. And again, this passage shows us or perhaps reminds us afresh, helps us to appreciate even more deeply just how that is possible and just how incredible that is.

So a few details to help us as we look at these verses before we dig into the specifics. This is the fourth and final and climactic of what are called the servant songs in this section of Isaiah, which is speaking consistently all about this figure called the servant that we'll see in this passage.

So the servant song. So really this is a poem that we're looking at here. And it is a poem with five kind of stanzas or sections, each of which have three verses in our Bibles.

And I don't want to get too kind of technical here. But as is not uncommon in Hebrew poems, they're kind of the last and the first, or the first and the last sections go together.

[3 : 36] And then the second and the fourth sections correspond. And that leaves the third sort of central stanza, verses four to six is the central focus and the key that the heart of the message.

It's a bit like a kind of an arrow shape. Our plan is to start at the point of the arrow, that key focus, and then spread out from there as we look at this figure of the servant, the servant who suffers, the servant who is the subject of this whole passage.

And as we've said already, the servant who is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus. And so Isaiah is written 400 years before Jesus. And yet is God giving this preview, both of what is needed, but also what is promised to bring people back to him.

So as we look at this work of the servant, we're looking at the work of Jesus himself. And I think we'll see that really clearly as we work through this passage together. And so the first thing that we're going to see is the servant who is a substitute.

The servant who is a substitute. Remember, we're starting with that central focus of the poem, the heart of the matter, verses 4 to 6 of chapter 53. Let me read those great verses again.

[4 : 56] Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 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. All we like sheep have gone astray.

We have turned everyone to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. At the very heart of the gospel, of the Bible's message, is the fact that Jesus came as our substitute.

You hear throughout that passage, He was crushed for our iniquities, for our wrongdoings. The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.

God, through Isaiah, is speaking here about the cross. What is happening at the cross? Well, it is that substitution. Jesus is taking the penalty for our sin.

[6 : 05] He is pierced for our transgressions, just as we read in this passage. All the punishment, all God's righteous anger at sin, that judgment that we deserve as people who've rebelled against him and that we've been being warned about in the book of Isaiah, that judgment falls on Jesus as he dies in our place.

The substitute, at the very heart of it, the Christian message is pretty simple. And verse 6 would be a great summary. We all, like sheep, have gone astray.

I don't know if anyone here knows many sheep or spends much time with sheep or have had that thing where you get stuck behind a sheep on the road and rather than just step to the side, they kind of trot along at an annoyingly slow speed in front of you.

The point is, being compared to a sheep in the Bible is not a compliment. Sheep are fairly dull and stubborn creatures.

Added to that idea here in Isaiah is a kind of a willful disobedience. We have turned our own way. There's this culpability to it. That actually we can't just say, well, I didn't really know what I was doing.

[7 : 22] There is this conscious turning our backs on God, that actually we don't need him. Actually, we don't want him in our lives. Thank you very much. And that this isn't just the case for a few.

You know, we can't just sit here and say, oh, can you believe that some people would be like that? Some people would think like that. No, this is all of us. This is the universal human condition. All we like sheep.

We have turned everyone to his own way. The Christian message is this incredible humbler. That means that the church, that means that Christians should never be kind of puffed up, thinking we're people who've got it all sorted, that we're kind of up here looking down on others.

No, this is the situation for all of us. All we like sheep have gone astray. We're all part of the problem. But the message of the gospel is that God has provided the solution.

And the Lord has laid upon him, on the servant, on Jesus, the iniquity of us all. Verse five, Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace.

[8 : 29] And with his wounds, we are healed. That the Christian message is that we can have that peace with God through the work of Jesus as our substitute. And it's only through the work of Jesus.

It's worth noting here what Isaiah doesn't say. This chapter doesn't say, We all like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way. So sort your act out and get yourself back to what you're supposed to be doing.

It doesn't say also, Here are five kind of religious steps or rituals you can perform that will earn your way back home. Or it doesn't say, Well, you've done these things wrong, so now you better start doing some things really good.

And we'll hope that in the end, the scales kind of even out and you'll be okay. No, it's only through that iniquity being laid on Jesus, this passage says, that peace with God is possible.

The ways that we have ignored God in the world that he created. The way that we have hurt other people. The way that we've not been bothered about the pain around us or been indifferent and turned a blind eye to suffering.

[9 : 40] Those things are true for all of us. And yet all of that is put on Jesus' shoulders at the cross. And again, the equation is simple.

Because of that rebellion against God, there is a punishment due. There is debt to be paid. A debt that we could never pay. But Jesus, through his death, has been our substitute, has paid that debt for us.

Justice is satisfied. And we can have that objective certainty that what was needed to be done has been done at the cross. All that is left for us is to accept that and to claim that great exchange for ourselves.

Christ taking our sin and us receiving his perfect righteousness. The servant who is a substitute. That's the heart of this poem here in Isaiah.

That's the heart of the gospel, the heart of the Bible. The writer John Stott sums it up brilliantly saying this, the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God.

[10 : 42] While the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. And that is what we're seeing here. That is why the comfort of chapter 40, that the hope promised in Isaiah is possible for all of us if and when we turn to Jesus.

Because he has made peace by his blood on the cross as the servant who is the substitute. So there's that key, kind of central aspect that we want to hold on to.

See everything really in this passage through that lens. Let's zoom out a little bit then to the verses that surround that. As we said, verses kind of one to three and seven to nine of chapter 53 form a bit of a pair.

And what we see in these verses kind of together is we see here that the servant who humbled himself, the servant who humbled himself, we get this incredible picture here of just how low, of just how far, of the depths that Jesus had to go to and incredibly was willing to go to for us.

So the week before last, I was at the Free Church General Assembly. That's kind of the annual central meeting for the denomination that we're a part of.

[11 : 59] And one thing that happens every year for various historical reasons is the visit of the Lord High Commissioner, basically a representative of the king, of the sovereign. This year it was Prince Edward, the king's brother.

And as he arrived, there was like a police escort. There was tons of police motorbikes arrayed about. There were royal guards with swords who came. Everyone had to stand up as the Lord High Commissioner entered.

I had to wear a suit and a tie. So it was a kind of no expense spared kind of thing. You know, there was no doubt here that there was someone significant stepping onto the scene.

And yet how different these passages in Isaiah. Incredibly here, as this servant comes, who will bring about the promised restoration that the whole world is needing, there is no pomp and ceremony.

There is no wow factor. There is no police escort. This passage says, really, he just seems like a bit of a nobody. Verse 2, he had no form or majesty that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him.

[13 : 12] He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we've already spoken about Jesus' ultimate sacrifice, ultimate suffering at the cross.

But actually, the whole of Jesus' life and ministry on earth was one of humility and humiliation. From the moment that he is born in a dirty stable with the animals, throughout his life, as he grows up in a poor family, through his ministry, where he says he has nowhere to lay his head, no home to call his own, facing opposition, hostility, rejection from the authorities, and then ultimately put to death.

And that death, the cross, the ultimate, not only in pain, but also in injustice, in being wronged. Could there have been any life and death less suited to the God of all creation coming to earth to save his people?

Could there be any greater contrast than the eternal son in the perfection of heaven, enjoying perfect relationship with his father, and the life of sorrow, of pain, of injustice, experiencing the full weight of living in a fallen world, being mocked and ultimately crucified?

There has never been, there could never be a greater change in situation than from where Jesus was to where he came to in order to rescue his people. And yet we see in this section, and particularly emphasized in verses 7, 8, and 9, we see Jesus' willingness to go through this for the sake of his people.

[15 : 06] In verse 7, he was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth. 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.

And in all the horror of what Jesus went through, the Bible is so clear time and time again to make sure that we know that Jesus is not simply an unfortunate victim, but that he willingly went through this, willingly went through this humiliation.

He stood silent at his trial. He remained upon the cross when he could have called all the angels of heaven to his rescue and to his complete vindication.

And yet he willingly took on, accepted his humiliation, his death, to carry out the role that God had given him for the sake of his people. And I think really what we see here, what I want us to grasp here, is perhaps the other side of the coin from that substitution that we looked at earlier.

That substitution shows the objective reality, the price is paid, the transaction has happened, our sin dealt with, justice satisfied. But what we see here is the heart behind that, the heart that surrounds that.

[16 : 27] We see the depth of the love of Jesus for us. That he willingly went through this suffering and misery. That salvation is not simply an exchange.

Salvation is not simply a logical transaction. But it is the most incredible act of love in all of history. All of us are often from time to time tempted to think, who really cares about me?

Who is really bothered about what is happening in my life? Particularly when we think of God, is God really interested in what is going on in my day to day? I am just one person. And when we are tempted to think that, we need to remember Jesus and that willing sacrifice.

Jesus did not simply come to earth, go to the cross to kind of settle some score as if we were just a number on a ledger somewhere. He went to the very depths of hell in order that we might be brought back to God in a loving relationship with him.

His love for us is so great, so real, that nothing would stop him from carrying out that terrifying task. And as a servant who humbled himself, we see his willingness and his love for us.

[17 : 47] and we see as well a God who understands us in our pain and our suffering. And when we speak about the love of God, this isn't a love which is kind of a bit distant and could never really understand.

This isn't a love that just kind of sends its best wishes from afar. Actually, this is a love that has plumbed the depths of sorrow, that has experienced more pain than we could ever conceive of and yet wouldn't give up.

but because of his incredible love for us went through that. And it says we know that, it says we remember that, what Jesus has done for us in the past, that we can know, that we can be certain that he will never leave us or let us down in the present or in the future.

No matter how hard things get, no matter what difficulties we face, we can know that Jesus will continue to stand with us in our suffering, in our pain.

We can be certain that he understands that, but also that we can be certain that he will be with us through that because of the magnitude, the scale, the depth of the love that he has shown us as he willingly humbled himself for us.

[19 : 07] And so the servant is the substitute, the work is done that is needed for our forgiveness, our peace with God as Jesus dies in our place. The servant humbles himself, Jesus lays aside the glory of heaven and willingly goes to the very depths of suffering, rejection, injustice because of his incredible love for us, a love that we never need to doubt.

Finally, we see here in the two kind of outer sections, outer stanzas of this poem, we see that the servant who is victorious. Verses 13 to 15 of chapter 52 kind of open this poem really with a kind of a question, they open with a bit of an enigma really.

I wonder if when Ross started reading those verses you sort of thought what's going on here, what's happening with this servant? He's at one time kind of high and lifted up, exalted, there's real power there and yet also there's real suffering, pain, his appearance, it says, so marred that he doesn't even look human anymore, he's unrecognisable and yet somehow through that verse 15 kings will shut their mouths because of him, there's this kind of idea of victory, of authority, of kind of revelation to the world even over its leaders, this big mix of kind of contrasting ideas, really kind of complicated, confusing in some ways, opening to the poem and so the real questions raised which are then answered I think, I hope as we've looked through the poem but are then particularly dealt with in these final three verses, verses 9 to 12 of chapter 53 corresponding to those opening verses at the beginning of the poem where we see this servant who is victorious because this is

God's plan and purpose which is being worked out through him, this is God's plan and purpose which is willingly being worked out through the servant, let me read again verse 10 and listen how it moves from God's plan that the servant would suffer to God's plan to raise him up again, it says this, 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 his hands, that journey there but with God in control at every stage and now let me read from the book of Acts in the New Testament written after Jesus but really describing the very same process, this is the apostle Peter who says, this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men,

God raised him up loosing the pangs of death because it was not possible for him to be held by it, the suffering of the servant is not the end of the story, the cross is not the end of the story but God raised him up, he shall prolong his days through the work of the one that the servant of Jesus himself we read that the many are accounted righteous, each one of us here, each one of us around the world, each one of us throughout history who has put their trust in Jesus, the work of the one making righteous the many and Jesus is glorified through that, high and lifted up and exalted because he is the servant who is victorious as he completes God's plan for our rescue and really I think that brings us back to one of the big themes that Isaiah has hopefully been kind of hammering home to us throughout this book the glorious majesty of the holy God that even in this section where we're reading about a suffering servant and where we see incredible humiliation and pain and injustice that Jesus went through that even when and even though it might not look like it, still here we are seeing the work of the sovereign

[23 : 20] God and here's something that is so important for us to remember that actually we don't judge God's control of the situation by how smoothly things seem to be going or whether God's people are winning in a successful looking kind of way which for us so often involves ease comfort respect things working out just as we'd hoped it's so easy for us to slip into that being our criteria for whether God is at work and in control or not and yet if that is the case we'd have to assume that God is not in control when we see the suffering servant if that is the case we'd have to assume that God is not in control as Jesus hangs on the cross as many people didn't it looked like weakness and failure if that is the case we'd have to assume that God is not in control when we go through difficult times or when our friends our loved ones whether inside or outside of the church are rejected or afflicted or are suffering but actually

Isaiah here and the gospel as a whole tells us something very different yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him that actually we judge God's control by what he has said and what he has promised and he has promised and has been promising throughout this book of Isaiah that he will rescue his people and he's done that through his servant through Jesus in the gospel he's made a way for the many for us in our wandering our rejection of him and our sin to be brought home and have peace with him he's the God who made his plan before the foundations of the earth who has carried out this plan in history through Jesus the victorious servant because he's the God of complete power and control over all things even when they look at their very worst that still God is at work for his glory and it's because of that that

Jesus is glorified verse 12 he has given a portion with the many he shall divide the spoil with the strong it's that language of victory victory in battle that through his suffering for us Jesus is high and lifted up and exalted the name above all other names that we worship him because of all he's done and it's as we do that that we are able to be the people we were designed to be again that big concern of the book of Isaiah how are these people who are supposed to be God's people actually going to live it out well it says they come to recognize the rescue that God does for them that through his work they can be a people at peace with God a people representing him well a light to the nations and that we too can carry out that role as we live for him and declare the wonders of all that he's done for us in Christ Jesus is the servant who humbled himself who suffered as our substitute who died in our place yet was raised again and this week and every week we can be encouraged by his great love for us and transformed by that love to live our lives as his people because of all that he's done let's join together in prayer let's pray relax