

The Promised Servant

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[0 : 00] Thanks very much, Joel. Okay, as we said, we're in Isaiah again this week. We're thinking again about the promised Christmas, how the first Christmas didn't just come from nowhere.

It was something that was promised. It was anticipated. It was longed for. Last week, we thought about how Jesus came as that promised king, about how he came to win victory, to bring freedom and peace and joy, that he came to rule over all things with justice and righteousness.

If we'd had like a theme tune for last week's sermon, which we never do and we never will, but if we did, it would have been something upbeat, wouldn't it? I was thinking of like the Rocky theme tune, and I could have come through a smoke machine as we spoke about the power and the authority of the promised king.

As we said, something better is coming because someone better has come. Well, this week, we're going to see how Isaiah shows us a different aspect of that promised Christmas and of the promised one to come.

The promised one who is, of course, Jesus himself, who, as we've just been speaking about, came that first Christmas. All of these passages are here to help us learn about Jesus, to grow in our understanding of who he is and what he's done.

[1 : 25] But if we were to have a theme tune for this week, you might have noticed that as Jill was reading our passage there this morning, it would have been something more somber.

It would be something beginning, I suppose, in a minor key because the emphasis this week doesn't fall on Jesus' rule and authority, but it falls primarily on his suffering and his sorrow.

And not this week a promised king, but this week a promised servant. And yet, we'll see that through all this, there is still this glorious ending to come.

We will finish in this kind of major key as actually we see the triumph and the glory of the promised servant who came that first Christmas. The incredible truth that actually the two things that we're looking at this week and last week tie right together, that the promised servant is the promised king.

And that is what Christmas is all about. So let's have a look. Maybe the idea of the suffering servant, as this passage is often called, isn't really what we think of around Christmas time.

[2 : 31] But certainly, in the Bible's presentation of Christmas, it is such a key reason why Jesus came. It is such a key reason why Christmas matters, that to get to grips with Christmas, we have to get to grips with what we're looking at this morning.

And again, I hope that we'll go away this morning knowing that because of this, Christmas really is good news, really does bring joy, not because of all the accessories and all the fun that goes on around this time of year, as great as those things are, but because, again, of what Jesus came to do and has done.

And that in response to that, we'd want to live for him and we'd want to worship him with all of our lives. So let's have a look at these verses together. The end of chapter 52, where we read from, really kind of sets the scene, sets things up for what we're going to be looking at this morning.

Verse 13 introduces this servant. It says that God's promised servant will come. And it says he will act wisely. And that word wisely there also carries the idea of having success.

The servant will come and through his actions, he'll achieve what he needs to achieve. And yet verse 14 shows that in that, he will suffer hugely, that it won't be success as people expect.

[3 : 48] Actually, it says the people will be astonished. They'll be horrified at what they see. The depth of suffering he'll go through will be such that he's no longer recognizable as human even.

His appearance was so marred beyond human semblance, it says. And yet verse 15, somehow through this, people will recognize, even the most important people, kings shall shut their mouths, it says.

People will recognize that something of incredible significance is going on. That with the promised servant, that suffering and success come hand in hand.

How does that work? How could this suffering achieve anything positive? Well, that's what chapter 53 opens up and explains to us. And we're going to look at that in three stages.

And the first one is this, that Jesus came to suffer like us. Jesus came to suffer like us. Verses 1 to 3 of chapter 53.

[4 : 49] The emphasis here is that in so many ways, certainly how things appeared, that there was nothing special about Jesus when he came. Verse 2, For he grew up before him like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground.

You know, he's talking there, the picture of just a normal little kind of weed or plant growing up. He had no form or majesty that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him.

Let's think about this for a moment. This incredible truth that we celebrate, that at Christmas, God himself came to earth in the person of Jesus. Just take a moment.

If you didn't already know the Christmas story, if you hadn't seen the Christmas cards or the nativity sets, what would you imagine that to be like? God coming down.

Surely you would imagine he would be someone incredibly kind of impressive in various ways. You know, God among men. Surely you could spot him a mile off. A couple of months ago, I unknowingly found myself in a sauna with the New Zealand National Rugby League team.

[5 : 56] It was a strange turn of events. I tried to just blend in, but let's be honest, that was never going to happen, was it? These guys were enormous. At first, I thought I'd shrunk.

I'd been in there too long until I found out who they actually were. You know, these were guys who would really stand out in a crowd. And you just think, well, if that's just a rugby team, well, how much more would we expect God himself, if he came to earth, to have something about him that we would just look and say, wow, that he would just be on a different level to your average person.

And yet this passage says no. And actually that the story of Christmas confirms it, doesn't it? Jesus' birth was an incredibly humble birth, incredibly humble parents, an incredibly humble childhood, incredibly humble growing up.

The emphasis that in his humanity, Jesus was just like us, in some ways this unremarkable, no form or majesty that we should look at him, no beauty that we should desire him, not a kind of a bronze statuesque figure, an ordinary looking man.

But it goes on to say, it's not just that he looked like us, but that he suffered like us. Verse three, he was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

[7 : 22] The point is that in no way did Jesus just kind of cruise through life, but that in every way we can imagine he suffered. This was not Superman kind of unaffected by the things that humans go through.

It's not that God came down to earth, but in some ways he just kind of skimmed over the surface. No, Jesus was fully human and plunged and fully submerged into everything that means, all the difficulty that comes with that.

Jesus was like us and he suffered like us and that makes a huge difference to us. That means that Christmas shows us that we have a God who understands.

Now we spoke last week how it's important to remember Christmas and actually we always want to be aware of the fact that life is not a bed of roses. We can't get away from that fact. We saw the last couple of months, we went through the book of Job and we saw how suffering is the normal condition in our fallen world.

That's what humans go through. And the point here is that well, God knows what that is like because Jesus came to suffer like us. Whatever kind of suffering we go through, whether it is pain and sickness, Jesus knows that fully as he went to the cross and suffered there the most agonizing death that can ever be conceived of.

[8 : 52] And whether it is sadness and despair that we face. We read here that Jesus was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. We see in the Gospels how Jesus wept in response to the sadness of our world.

Whether it is loneliness or isolation or hostility or people letting us down. Well, we know and we see here that Jesus was despised and rejected.

He was betrayed ultimately even to his own death where he was abandoned by those closest to him. Because of Christmas, because the servant came, Jesus to suffer like us.

Whatever struggles we have, whether they are short-term things that pop up unexpected or whether they are battles that we have had for as long as we can remember.

We can know that Jesus suffered like us and so whatever we are going through he does understand. As we have said a number of times before, Christianity, the Gospel, trusting in Jesus, it does not promise us a way out of suffering.

[10 : 00] It is not a shortcut to an easy life. But God does promise that he will be there with us through suffering. And again, here we see not simply as a kind of an interested observer looking on at these strange humans with their weaknesses and their struggles, not really able to grasp what that must be like.

But no, as someone who has been there who understands and has suffered like us. And we've seen that happen in real history. Jesus came to earth, this earth, at that first Christmas.

He got his hands dirty. He fully experienced our fallen world. And so at Christmas, we remember, we don't have a distant God but one who suffered like us, who understands us.

And through that, can offer comfort even in the hardest of times. Even when holding on to the joy that we speak about seems especially hard work.

And it says, we know that. That means we can come back to him time and time again, whatever we're going through. We don't need to put on a brave face. When we come to God, we don't need to sort of sort ourselves out first, sort out our problems and then see if he'll have us, see if he'll listen.

[11 : 13] We don't need to think, oh, well, God wouldn't care about this or that or the other. He'll think I'm being pathetic. No, instead we come back to God time and time again knowing that he will not be disappointed or disapproving but that he understands us because Jesus, the promised servant, suffered like us.

So there's our first point. The first point Isaiah is making here. Jesus suffered like us and that makes a real difference. And yet this passage goes on to say there is something even more significant, something even more important about this servant's suffering and it's this, that not only did he suffer like us, but more than that, he suffered for us.

Jesus came to suffer for us. Let's secondly have a look at that. Having been told he was a man of sorrow, he was acquainted with grief, verse four goes straight on to say, surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.

Verse five, he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. And the point is that we don't look at Jesus' suffering and say, we certainly don't say, oh, well, he probably had it coming to him.

He didn't. He was the perfect man. Nor do we say, well, yeah, you know, that kind of thing, that just happens to everyone because actually that didn't have to happen to Jesus. Jesus didn't have to go through all that.

[12 : 39] But Jesus came down that first Christmas and he suffered for us. So much in this kind of middle section of this chapter here, it's such a rich passage of the Bible, an incredible picture of the work of Jesus, the promised servant who came at Christmas.

But really the heart of it is this, that Jesus came, yes, to identify with us, to suffer like us. He understands us. But ultimately, the fact is that all of that would be meaningless if he hadn't come to suffer for us.

If Jesus hadn't come to take the suffering, the punishment we deserve, to be our substitute in that. And perhaps verse six sums that up best. We all, 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 message of the Bible is that there is a perfect creator God who made us, who made everything we see, who deserves our allegiance, our obedience.

And yet all of us, everyone, as Isaiah says, has gone astray. We have turned our own way. And that is not a neutral thing.

[13 : 57] It's not like, you know, we just happen to have the kind of the map upside down, so we accidentally wandered that way instead of this way. No, it's a rebellious thing that we have rejected the rule of a good and perfect creator.

And we've all thought that we know best. We've all put ourselves first. We have turned, it says. It's something we've actively done. And the results of that have been horrific.

That is, that the fallen world we live in because humanity, collectively, we've turned our back on God. That's what the Bible calls sin or the word iniquity is used in these verses.

Perhaps not very kind of fashionable words that we hear much nowadays, but really all of those words mean is simply just turning away from God, living without reference, to God, thinking that we can do best by ourselves, that we have the answer to our problem.

And the Bible says there are consequences to that, that punishment is ultimately due for that. The kind of tension that runs throughout the Bible is that God loves his people so much that he wants to forgive sin, but that in order for there to be justice and righteousness and a perfect kingdom as we were speaking about last week, God can't just ignore sin.

[15 : 18] To forgive is a costly thing, isn't it? It's often said now how we forgive for our own good, it's good to let go of things, to forgive is healthy and I'm sure that's true, that we don't want to be holding on to stuff and yet there is always going to be a cost to forgiving.

There is always going to be a cost to be paid to put right what has been done wrong. You can think of that in a really kind of simple picture like this, if one of my kids takes a hammer to our TV and breaks it and that's not a huge leap for the imagination for at least one of them, maybe two, they cannot make that right, can they?

They can't sort out that problem, they don't have the money to get a new one, they certainly don't have the skills to fix it and yet still I would want to forgive them. If they come and say sorry, well of course I'm going to forgive them but in order for that forgiveness to happen, I need to take on myself the cost of that TV.

I pay the price, either the price of not having a TV or the price of buying a new one, that is the only way things can be restored, that's the only way I can truly forgive if I put it right.

If I make them pay, I'm not really forgiving, they're just sorting it out themselves. For me to forgive, I need to pay. And that's the same for all the times when we need to forgive other people who have done us wrong but even more when God needs to forgive us.

[16 : 47] We've not just broken a TV, as we said, we have rebelled against our Creator. The price to put that right is something we cannot pay, we do not have the ability to fix things.

The prices are our very lives and so Jesus, God himself comes as Jesus and pays that for us. Jesus takes what we deserve.

Jesus, the only perfect person ever who lived without sin, comes and suffers for sin. Jesus suffers for us. That is a key part of Christmas.

It's why Jesus had to come in the first place. If we just leave that out of Christmas and kind of brush that to one side, we end up with Christmas as something very nice and warm and fuzzy and sentimental but ultimately a pointless event and yet the truth is it is not pointless.

It is a time for rejoicing and joy because Jesus goes to the cross for us. Verse 8, he was cut off from the land of the living. Verse 9, they made his grave with the wicked that there was no level of suffering which Jesus wouldn't go through here.

[17 : 58] He gave everything. Incredibly, we also see here he did that willingly. Verse 7, he was oppressed and he was afflicted yet he opened not his mouth.

This was not something imposed on him that Jesus was dragged to kicking and screaming. He did it willingly because this is what he came to do.

I think the thing for us to see to remember this morning as we look at this passage from Isaiah written hundreds of years before the first Christmas remember but explaining the work of Jesus, Jesus our substitute in such detail.

The thing for us to remember is that this was all in place, this was all planned from the very beginning. It's not that Christmas kind of happened and everything was great, it was all going to plan with shepherds and angels and wise men and then things went a bit off track and Jesus ended up suffering.

Jesus ended up on the cross, Jesus ended up dying. No, that was the plan and that was the role of the promised servant right from the beginning because that's the only way people's sin could be dealt with and they could be forgiven.

[19 : 08] That was the only resolution to that tension we talked about, a God who is desperate to forgive sin and yet cannot just ignore sin. That Jesus came, God himself, to pay the price for sin.

That's how great God's love is for his people, that there is nothing that he wouldn't do for them. Jesus came to suffer for us and through that he brought us peace, it says in verse 5.

Through his wounds we are healed, that restoration which is all about a restored relationship with God through the forgiveness made possible by Jesus as he suffered for us, as he suffered in our place, as he suffered as our substitute.

Jesus came to suffer like us, Jesus came to suffer for us and yet finally we see, and really this takes us full circle back to those opening verses, this is where we see that major key finale that we spoke about.

This passage finishes by showing us that through his suffering Jesus is now glorified. Let's look at that. Finally, through his suffering Jesus is now glorified.

[20 : 21] The last three verses of chapter 53 are all about the success, the achievement of Jesus' suffering and how because of that, because of what he's been through, because of what he's done, he is now glorified.

If you've got a Bible handy, just walk through verse 10 with me that summarizes all of this so well. It begins by saying, yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him.

He has put him to grief. That's what we were just speaking about. This is the divine plan from the beginning. That verse continues, when his soul makes an offering for guilt, i.e. when Jesus suffers for us, when Jesus pays our penalty, when Jesus' life is given as the payment for sin, that verse continues, then he shall see his offspring.

He shall prolong his days. The will of the Lord shall prosper his hand. The result of this is that the servant having suffered for us now sees all those who he has rescued, that they're gathered in as his offspring, as his family, it says.

And that death isn't the end, but that he, that that's God, shall prolong his, that's the servant's days. That his suffering, his death is not the end.

[21 : 46] Now, the point is that because of his suffering, because through that, as verse 11 says, he's made many to be counted righteous, he's borne their iniquities, because he's succeeded, he's won, he's carried out God's plan, he's rescued many, well, now that the servant is glorified, and we see that in the gospel of Jesus Christ, that Jesus suffered, he died, and yet rose again, and now is seated at the right hand of God in heaven.

And that final verse, there, verse 13, 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.

Because of what Jesus has done, he has this great inheritance, given by God. Apparently, a slightly closer translation of that verse is not that Jesus takes a portion with, or among the many, but rather is given this inheritance of the many, that his people are his great reward, his offspring, because he suffered in order to rescue them, in order to bring lost and wandering people back to God.

And it's the answer to that question posed in the opening verses, isn't it? How can this servant be exalted? How can this astonishing, dehumanizing suffering, how can that stop the mouths of kings, and bring about something of ultimate, and eternal value?

Well, it's because through his suffering, Jesus fulfilled God's purposes, he rescued many, and so now is given the glory he deserves. Again, Isaiah here is looking forward to the promised Christmas of what is to come, and yet we're also able to look in the New Testament, the part of the Bible written after Jesus had come, to see that it has been completed, to see that what Isaiah promised, or what God promised through Isaiah, has been confirmed.

[23 : 58] In the book of Hebrews, we read that we see Jesus crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death for us. The work promised in Isaiah is fulfilled, that through his suffering, Jesus is now glorified because he suffered death for us.

I suppose the challenge then for us this morning is, does this picture, does this work of Jesus, does this suffering servant, does he have a place in our Christmas?

Does he have a place in your Christmas? It's great that we can celebrate Christmas every year, but are we celebrating one who came to suffer for us so that we could be forgiven, and the one who now through that is glorified, crowned with glory and honor.

In our Christmas, does Jesus make it past being a little baby? Do we appreciate what he came to do and accept what he came to do for us?

Do we accept our need of Christmas not just as a break and a nice holiday and a time to do stuff that you're not really able to do the rest of the year? But do we accept our need of Christmas because we all like sheep have gone astray but Jesus suffered for us so that if we trust in him we can have peace with God and eternal relationship with God.

[25 : 25] This Christmas the most important thing of all is that we would accept that, that we would ask for that forgiveness, that costly forgiveness that Jesus makes freely available to us and through that enjoy the peace and the joy and the security of being right with God, of being his offspring, of being his family and in response to all of that that we would be people having if we have accepted that, that they worship God, that praise Jesus.

We said at the beginning our goal in these verses this morning was to grasp more, was to appreciate more just what Christmas is all about, just what Jesus came to do and worship him for that and so will we worship Jesus for all he's done.

We worship Jesus because of the depth of suffering he went through because of the cross where he died for us but we also worship him because through that he is raised up raised up through the resurrection through his ascension and seated with God in glory that he deserves our worship and so this Christmas and throughout this year throughout our lives we want to live trusting in him trusting in his suffering the suffering servant who came the promised servant and yet also glorifying him the risen savior the promised king the incredible truth as we said about Christmas is that Jesus the promised king is also the promised servant that those people are one and the same the king laid down his life for us and it is through his suffering that he is glorified and it is in response to that that we live for his glory let's pray together Heavenly Father we thank you that when we think of the promised servant of Jesus who came to suffer like us but most importantly came to suffer for us that we see the depth of your love for us that we see once again a love that we don't deserve a love that we can't earn from a lot to the