

The Suffering Servant

*⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.
(Ephesians 1:7-10. ESV)*

Advent

The Suffering Servant

December 21, 2014

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Pastor Evan Webster

Introduction

Open your bibles to Isaiah 52:13-53:12. These few services leading up to Christmas Day, we are tracing out some threads of anticipation as we celebrate the coming of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ into this world. We saw last week the prophecy of the great Shepherd and King who Ezekiel said was coming to rule with great power and authority. His reign was to be perfect and his care for us unending. Jesus will come, the prophet says, he will rescue us from the terrible problem caused by both our inability to lead and to follow. So let me ask you a question...when people started figuring out that Jesus was the Coming King – why did Jesus run away? If you're tracking with us in our Bible reading plan, then you saw that this Tuesday in John 6.

Jesus had finished feeding the five thousand and upon this sign the people said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world!" Astonishingly the next verse reads, "So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone." Did you stop to think why he did that? If his sole purpose was to be king and rescue them from the oppression of Rome then wouldn't he have told them what kind of crown looked best on him and what kind of grapes he preferred to be fed? Rather he escaped to be alone.

The people weren't all wrong, they just didn't see ENOUGH! They saw the king but they didn't see the brokenness of their own hearts. They didn't understand that a good leader ruling

over bad people would still be hell on earth. The people in Jesus' day NEEDED MORE THAN A KING – they had a sin problem they didn't fully understand. They needed help with that. There was something they needed BEFORE they could enjoy living under the reign of the coming king. They didn't understand yet that they needed someone to save them from their sins. They needed a Saviour – just as much – maybe even more than they needed a King.

This is a complicated text and I know that this text was exegeted in some detail a few years ago on Good Friday so I'm not going to try and repeat that. Instead I intend just to read the text so that you can hear the prophet describe the Suffering Servant that is coming into the world. Many of the prophets described the King that was coming – Isaiah describes the Saviour. Of course, what the disciples were slow to realize was that Jesus was both! Jesus is the King AND the Saviour. That's why Jesus hid in John 6 – he didn't want to be either until people understood their need for both. That's where I want to park this morning. I just want to reflect upon this text and ask, and by God's grace answer three important questions:

1. Why do we need a Savior?
2. What did Jesus do to atone for our sins?
3. How does the Saviour help us to live as children of the King?

Let's talk first about :

1. Why do we need a Saviour?

Isaiah helps us with that. Look at chapter 53 verse 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.”

You can't read the Old Testament and not come to the conclusion that the problem with God's people ran way deeper than the character of their kings. Make no mistake that was a problem, but even when Israel had good kings they still had bad people. Josiah was a good king, but it doesn't seem like he had much success in reforming his people. Their hearts had gone after other things and he could not bring them back.

Even in the New Testament we can hear the faint words of Isaiah in the New Testament book of Romans 3:23-26,

“²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness,

because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

The problem is NOT that most of us are ‘pretty good’ but every once in a while we do something we know we shouldn’t do. That’s not what Isaiah says. He says that regardless of who you are (make sure you underline the ‘All we’ and ‘every one’ in that passage) we have abandoned the way of our shepherd and we’ve turned to a way that seems right to US. This started with Adam, the first man and humanity’s representative. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, although more than enough was given for an abundant life, chose to abandon the one commandment of God and go their own way. Being our representative, we ALL now have a nature that desires to rebel against the Shepherd and blaze our own path.

Inevitably our bent toward evil leads us to act according to our nature. We abandon the provision, direction, and care of our Great High Shepherd because we want to be our own God. So we do our own thing and end up completely missing the moral mark that we need to hit. And further, what we fail to see is that the trajectory we’ve chosen is full of pain and destruction that leads to death. Even though the Old Testament reminds us time and again: bloody sacrifice after bloody sacrifice, corrupt king after corrupt king, destruction prophecy after destruction prophecy—we do not see that our prideful disobedience, our sin, only leads to death, failure, and ruin.

And although it’s is right in front of us, we refuse to see it! I love that God’s Word answers our deepest, most pressing questions, those that philosophy and sociology seek to find in long round-about ways. There are these things we want to know like ‘what is wrong with us? Why are we never satisfied? Why are we prone to addiction? Why are we prone to anger, lust, homosexuality, or laziness?’ I majored in psychology in college and you can read paper after paper arguing about different environmental, chemical, or neurological factors that play a part. I found you can even participate in some awkward experiments and get paid for it. Those factors may have some play but you know what the Bible says is the answer?

Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way that seems right to man, but in the end it leads to death.” That’s is the problem that Isaiah is speaking about in chapter 53. We are our worst enemies and have betrayed our self at every attempt to try to be our own Messiah. When we try to climb out of our pit of sin and shame, we find that we only claw further into deeper failure. We are completely incapable of saving ourselves from the consequences of the sin that we’ve run to. It has to come from somewhere outside of us. That’s why we need a Saviour.

And the radically terrifying aspect of our condition is that God did not have to do a thing about it. He would have been completely just in letting us wallow in our sin. However, it was his great love and mercy that prompted him to see our helplessness and drag us out. He watched the first move of Adam away from his divine will and knew that like sheep we would follow one after another in the same direction and in deeper degrees. And because the Shepherd knew it was a condition of the heart, relented from using the rod to beat the sheep into slavish submission but instead enacted a way that would change their course back to Him. Something more than a good king would be required to make this work. God's people were going to need new hearts and God was going to need to bring it about. Of course that is the climactic promise of the Old Testament. In Ezekiel 36 we read God saying:

²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezekiel 36:25–27 ESV)

That sounds like exactly what we need! We need new hearts, we need God's Spirit living inside of us, we need God's help to love his ways and to walk faithfully within them – that's EXACTLY what we need! Now will we get that? Or better still, how will God GIVE that? The answer is in what Jesus did to atone for our sins.

2. What did Jesus do to atone for our sins?

Look at 52:13,

“Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.”

So we're told to look at this Servant of God is going to behave according to what is right and good. Then near the end we read in 53:11:

*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.*

The first and last thing in this passage that Isaiah shows what the servant Jesus does to atone for our sins is by being completely and perfectly obedient to the Father. That sin and wayward heart that so easily drew us away from the fellowship with God disqualified and disabled us from ever being able to make atonement for ourselves. However, God being born as a man, the incarnate Son of God, was able not only to fulfil every mark of the law but was able to be obedient even to the point of taking the sins of the world on the cross. Theologians often speak of these two ways of which Jesus was obedient as active and passive. By active obedience they mean that Jesus although tempted never knew sin and did everything that was willed by the Father for him to do. While we were born in iniquity and sinned with every step, Jesus was born of the Spirit and lived in righteousness at every step. By his passive obedience they do not intend to mean that he was not actively involved because he was rather intimately doing the work. John 10:16 says that no one took his life, he laid it down himself. However, this refers to the obedience of Jesus in taking the guilt and curse of our sins on the cross. While Isaiah bookends these truths, Paul in Philippians 2:7 encapsulates the suitability of Jesus by saying, “⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

Therefore, for the first time since we fell into the bondage of sin with the first man, Adam, there is hope that we can be rescued by the obedience of this ‘last Adam’, Jesus. He did for us for what we could not do for ourselves in both his life and his death. The penalty of death and the wrath of a just God upon sin is more than any human could take. Isaiah presents his suffering in such vivid terms of the whole spectrum of brutality, even showing that people would look in wonder that he is even human. In 52:14-15 we read,

*“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.”*

Such would be expected when considering that all the sins, even those that were passed over from the beginning of time, and every sin afterward would pour out upon Him until God was satisfied. The book of Hebrews knew that no ordinary sacrifice would do. It says in chapter 10:4, “For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins.” It needed to be more, it needed to be the God-Man Jesus. He is the only one who could fulfil all the expectations for both the priestly office and the priestly sacrifice so that there could be a one-time

payment for the sins of the people. Once for all, through the cross, he made a way for His people to be brought back to God as a spotless and unblemished lamb! The punishment that we fully deserved was turned away from us and placed upon the one who had done no wrong. Our sins have been nailed to the cross and cast as far as from the east is from the west, and His righteous, perfect obedience has been credited to us!

Don't be quick to think this is for others, this loving act of redemption is for YOU—a sacrifice is needed because of YOUR sin, Jesus is given in YOUR place, and he desires to save YOUR soul. This brings glory to God and is great news! And this purchase for your soul to be reconciled to the Father is why we call Jesus our Redeemer. We are bought with a price, the steep price of life, so that no longer is there separation or animosity between us and God. Rather, Isaiah tells us in chapter 53:4-5 that it is this price that has brought us true peace and healing, that we may have right relationship with God and one another:

“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.”

The peace that we sing about and proclaim during Christmas comes with a price. It's the steep price we could never pay but was freely given through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of the baby we see in the manger. If we don't see the cross when we see the manger then we miss the whole point. We can only have true peace with God and with each other through the priestly suffering servant. But through the atonement of Jesus we have the eternal blessing of a clean conscience and the right of access to the presence of God. Because He has become our perfect High Priest and brought the perfect sacrifice, we can now enter into the holiness of God with boldness knowing that we are justified in His sight.

Jesus did the work of the atonement over 2000 year ago! He exclaimed as he hung on Calvary, “It is finished!” The loving gift of sacrifice has been made once and for all for us, the requirement for our salvation has been met, and we appropriate these things by grace through faith. But this still begs our last question about the Suffering Servant:

3. How does the Saviour help us to live as children of the King?

We also see in this passage that Jesus was not just called to die for us but also to be resurrected to live for us so that we too might be able to truly live. Let's read Isaiah 53:10-12

*¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul make 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.***

After all of this, after knowing us for who we really are, suffering and dying for all the sins past, present, and future that we have done, we see that there's more. The Lord says that the Suffering Servant who would be made a sacrificial offering would be prolonged in days! The Lord will prosper in the continued work of the Suffering Servant. The work does not stop at the cross! The one who has tasted death for us conquered it by being resurrected.

The priests of the Old Testament not only offered sacrifices but also had another vital role on behalf of the people. They also were the one that constantly brought them near to God, represented the people, and made petitions to God for them.

Not only has the sacrifice been made but Christ has also ascended to the very face of God where he is an advocate FOR US! Hebrews 9:24 presents this wonderful truth saying, "For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, **now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.**" He stands before the blinding holiness of God so that we can enter the presence of God unscathed and in confidence with full assurance of faith. Because of Him, the veil that separated us from God has torn and we he leads us into His presence.

Seated at the right hand of the Father, Jesus functions as a constant reminder before God of the paid sacrifice. Like a lawyer who defends his client, we have Jesus who continually defends us and brings our petitions of mercy before the Sovereign God. Jesus says to God every time you sin, every time the enemy seeks to condemn you: "See my hands and my feet and my side. He is forgiven. He's been paid for. He's part of the family" That's exactly what Paul says in Romans 8:33-34, "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." Who else would you want in your corner?

I'm more than content with that but do you know what also comforts me about Jesus standing before God—He's filled with empathy as he pleads for me. He prays for me, knowing exactly how it feels to go through all my struggles, hurts, and betrayals. Do you have some crazy family members that don't get along with you? Jesus did. Anyone have a close friend throw them under a bus? Jesus did. There is nothing that you can look to in your life and say, "He cannot

possibly understand my pain.” A mere man would be insufficient in hearing all the needs of the world and faithfully bringing them before the mercy seat of God. Yet our Suffering Servant is infinitely capable of handling all your requests and also has experienced everything common to us, so empathizing with our condition. That’s what we see in chapter 53:4 when Isaiah says “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.” So without need to sleep, he lives to say, knowing our pain and sometimes perhaps weeping for us, saying things just as he did for us in John 17, “Father, keep them in your name”, “keep them from the evil one”, “sanctify them in the truth”, “draw them with the Holy Spirit”.

And the Father is pleased to hear the plea of His Son and sends the Holy Spirit to illuminate the power poured on in the work of the cross. He fulfils the promise given in Ezekiel 36 to regenerate our hearts to be ones that beat for His will and long for him to be glorified. We can’t truly encounter the beauty in the blood of Christ and not be moved to fruitful obedience. The One that we once wandered away from we now are strangely and irresistibly drawn toward.

When we grasp onto the cross we gain victory but we also gain the victor who continues to fight for us. And if he has done such a wondrous work through His death even while we were enemies, how much more can we expect because we are now reconciled and he stands as the living, exalted, and victorious redeemer who intercedes for us?

Rejoice for hope has come!

The message of Christmas is that Jesus is better than we thought. He is the true gift that satisfies the true longing cry of our heart. All other gifts, even the good ones, pale in comparisons, will ultimately disappoint you, and leave you longing for more. Remember that this Christmas when you hear your children on Christmas morning say, “Is this it?” Tell them there’s much more than they can imagine in the humble baby born on that morning. Yes he is a King; PRAISE GOD! But he is better than that. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is our empathetic Great High Priest who ever lives before the Father to make intercession for us. This is Jesus and this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.