

*The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 52:13 – 53:6*  
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Last week I read an insightful article about flattery. Andrée Sue Peterson, in *WORLD* magazine, had this article entitled “Compliments as Currency: Why Should Flattery Get Us Anywhere?”<sup>1</sup> She cited a definition of flattery as “excessive and insincere praise, especially that given to further one’s own interests.” She referred to TV journalists who will kiss up to the individual they’re interviewing. But, of course, it happens in so many situations. An employee flattering the boss. A student to a teacher. Amongst co-workers, amongst neighbors, amongst acquaintances. Many of us are so prone to doing this. We’ve become accustomed to doling out insincere compliments in order to make someone like us, or maybe in order to get them to do something for us.

In the article Andrée referenced a refreshing exception to this pattern. She remembered hearing a radio interview with Temple Grandin, an autistic woman who is an accomplished professor of animal science and a prominent autism spokesperson. She was being interviewed on National Public Radio, and the “interviewer doled out the usual compliments.” But, as Andrée describes it, Grandin “didn’t pick up on it” and therefore didn’t return “the volley with the customary self-deprecation.” The interviewer was caught off guard by this, due to Grandin being “impervious to flattery.”

Then Andrée speaks of Jesus Christ as another individual unaffected by flattery. And we think about this on Palm Sunday, remembering the applause He received just days before His crucifixion. The crowds come, and the crowds go. The crowds applaud, and the crowds accuse. But Jesus stays the course. His determination to do the will of the Father is not affected by his ratings in the polls. He’s on a mission, and there’s no flattery or foe that will sway Him one way or the other from that mission.

We should find great comfort in this. Jesus Christ, the Suffering Servant, came to this earth on a mission to save sinners. And He accomplished that mission.

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. And to do so we’re going to skip forward in our study of Isaiah. At the start of this study of Isaiah, I anticipated

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<sup>1</sup> *WORLD*, March 2016

covering larger sections of the book in each sermon and thought that maybe I'd get to chapter 53 by now. Instead, we've made it through chapter 12. So we'll jump forward to chapter 53 for today and Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. And then we'll rewind and pick it up where we left off.

The amazing thing to consider is that this passage in Isaiah 52 and 53 that we're going to begin studying this morning was written over 700 years before Jesus even came to earth. And yet it's all about Jesus! And so 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.

It's known as a "Servant Song," beginning in 52:13 and going through the end of chapter 53. 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? Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:34-35). 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.

### **The Servant's Exaltation**

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. 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. Or it could be 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.

### **The Servant's Humiliation**

The very next verse, verse 14, says: "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 meditate on the brutal torture Jesus Christ received, that marring and disfigurement is our beauty. That deformity had to be endured by Him in order for us to be formed anew, to be re-formed as we ought to be.

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 is that this great deliverer came without any pomp and circumstance.

This is Palm Sunday, so we think of the attention and applause Jesus received as He entered Jerusalem. But think about how short-lived that was. Those people didn't really believe in Him. They vanished as quickly as they appeared. They wanted a political savior. But they were faithless and fickle. Jesus was, indeed, despised and rejected.

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.

Most of you know that Stacy and I were in the Middle East for the past week. We got home last night. We were teaching, and I was preaching, in various settings there. One of the groups I preached to just on Friday had requested that I preach on John 10, about the Good Shepherd and also specifically the part about the thief who comes to steal and kill and destroy. One of the things I talked about in that sermon was false teachers and their desire to sneak in to churches to wreak havoc, and how the elders of the church, the undershepherds who serve under the leadership of the Good Shepherd, must protect the flock from those thieves and wolves.

Thinking about Isaiah 53, we observe something about Jesus that is exactly the opposite of how false teachers present themselves. Jesus did not appeal to the natural man. False teachers do appeal to the natural man, in one way or another. False teachers can be very winsome and convincing and appealing. They can make you feel good about yourself by condoning your sin. Or they can appeal to your natural pride by giving you a list of rules to keep, and then puff you up when you do a decent job of obeying the rules. It can happen in various ways, but false teachers will not be despised and rejected by men in the way that Jesus was. False teachers will have an audience of attentive followers, because they appeal to the natural man and give people what they want to hear.

“For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” (2 Timothy 4:3–4, ESV)

So beware of teachers who seem to be catering to the itching ears of unregenerate people. That’s not the way Jesus ministered. Jesus was despised and rejected. And then He laid down His life for His enemies. Another thing I shared in that sermon on Friday is that the thief or the wolf will not lay down his life for you. But the Good Shepherd has done that. So stay close to Him. Trust in Him!

Next 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 as well. 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. Let’s give Him the glory and honor He deserves. Think about this the next time you have an opportunity to talk to someone about Jesus, but you hesitate because you feel ashamed . . . you worry what that person will think of you. Don’t despise Jesus by being afraid to talk about Him.

### **The Servant’s Worldwide Impact**

Next I want to look at the fact that this Servant will sprinkle many nations. This is in verse 52:15. 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.

Stacy and I had such an exciting experience of this last week in the Middle East. We were in a country that has a very large ex-pat community. A large percentage of the population consists of folks from all over the world who have come there to work . . . many of them in the oil and gas industry, and many others in education and other fields, and then many others who have come to work as maids and nannies and drivers and construction workers. There's quite a stark contrast between the haves and the have-nots. You can see it in the way people are dressed. You see wealthy Arab women who are totally covered in black Abiyas—many of them, even their face is covered—but you notice the symbols of wealth in the high heels protruding from beneath the robe and the fancy purse over their shoulder. The working class is apparent in their simple garb or their working uniform. You also see it in the kind of vehicle people are in. You see a Lamborghini speeding by, and then you see a dilapidated mini-bus filled with construction workers. There's also the ethnic diversity that is seen in the various shades of skin color as well as heard in the many different languages that are spoken.

Stacy and I were there to do some teaching, and for me to do some preaching, in connection with an international church. We did this trip about 3 and a half years ago as well. And both times it has been such an encouragement to my faith to see the nations represented. To see believers from so many different parts of the world, gathered together singing praises to King Jesus. It reminds me (and I want it to be a reminder to you also) that this is not an American religion. This is not a Western ideology. My allegiance to Christ is not just something my parents handed down to me. No, it's a real and powerful message of what Christ has done . . . what He has done to redeem a people for Himself from all the nations.

One evening I got to preach at a Sri Lankan church. As I listened to these guys sing, I couldn't understand anything except the word, "Hallelujah." I eagerly sang out whenever we got to those parts. When it was time for me to preach, I realized that my sermon was going to be translated into, not one, but two languages. I would say a sentence. And then one guy translated into Tamil, and another guy translated into Sinhalese (2 main languages in Sri Lanka). A bit laborious, but worth it to spend time in the Word with brothers in Christ from another part of the world. I told them I look forward to singing together with them in heaven someday when we'll understand each other.

But what an encouragement it is, even now when there are these language barriers, to know that the Gospel is not limited by language or culture or social status. I learned that almost all of these men at the Sri Lankan fellowship (and it was only men at this service) were in the country without their families due to a law that says you have to make a certain amount of money before you can bring your wife and kids into the country with you. So these guys are caught between a rock a hard place. They can't find a decent job in Sri Lanka, so they feel forced to look elsewhere. But then to go elsewhere means they have to be separated from their family for long periods of time. It's really heart-breaking. We should pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are enduring trials like that.

But through so many different means, and through many trials and heartaches, the Gospel is spreading from people group to people group, from language to language, to the rich and poor throughout the world. And we, as believers and as a church, get to participate in this! We get to pray for the spread of the Gospel. We get to share the Gospel with those who do not know Christ. We get to assist those who are taking the Gospel to places in Papua, New Guinea, or places in the Middle East and other parts of the world where there is little to no Gospel witness whatsoever. We think of those who are laboring in language training so they can build relationships with those in other cultures who do not know Christ. The Suffering Servant WILL be known among the nations. He came and suffered for those in every nation, every language. And we can watch and wonder at this amazing phenomenon as it happens before our very eyes. I encourage you to open your eyes to watch it happening. Read the newsletters from missionaries we support. Listen to the things your brothers and sisters in this congregation are involved in. Pray for those in Nairobi and South Africa and Romania, as well as those in the Middle East. Pray for believers in certain parts of the world who are severely persecuted for their faith. And let's listen and watch as God answers those prayers and eventually fulfills the Great Commission through His people.

### **A Holy Complaint**

The next stanza of the song, in 53:1-3 (which we already talked about partly), 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 God’s salvation has not been revealed to them. 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 in John 12 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. No one believes unless God reveals Himself to them.

This shows how serious the condition is of those who are apart from Christ. There is spiritual blindness that keeps them from seeing and believing. But this also shows us the power of God working in the Gospel message. God has the power to remove those blinders and draw people to Himself, granting them repentance of sin and faith in Christ. So if you are repenting and believing today, you owe all the credit and all the glory to God for your salvation. He has opened the eyes of your heart to see Him for who He is—as a gracious and merciful Savior.

And as we share the Gospel with others, we do so praying that God will open the spiritual eyes of others to see how Good the Good News is. I pray that is happening even this morning for some of you. I pray that the blinders will fall off and you will see your need for a Savior and see that Jesus Christ is the Savior you need.

I also, again, think of those who are under the dark veil of a false religion. It’s easy to think that there’s no escaping that prison, that there’s no way they’ll ever get free from that captivity. But God is able to do it! I heard some amazing stories last week of how God is drawing people to Himself in situations that seem impossible. From a human perspective, it seems that everything is against it happening. The persecution that will come if they convert. The lack of knowledge and lack of opportunity to learn about Christ. And yet, God is doing it. He is opening the eyes of the blind.



### The Servant's Suffering

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, [then these sins] 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 confess that sin to Him and put your hope in Jesus Christ, who was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities.