

## 2. The Servant whose Death destroys Death: He challenges our prejudices

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now, in our Bibles, we are turning once again to page 613 and to the Song of the Servant. Now, we're going to read the whole of that song once again, although today we're going to be looking at the second part, which is chapter 53, 1-3.

As I pointed out last week, the chapter divisions are not inspired, and this chapter ought really to begin at 52, 13. So we're going to read from there to the end of chapter 53.

And it is the Lord God himself who is speaking. Behold, my servant shall act wisely. He shall be high and lifted up and shall be exalted.

As many were astonished at you, his appearance was so marred beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind.

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.

[ 1 : 08 ] Who has believed what they heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

And as one from whom men hid their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 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. All we, like sheep, have gone astray.

[ 2 : 10 ] We have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 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.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?

And they made his grave with the wicked, with a rich man in his death. Although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him. He has put him to grief. When his soul makes an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring.

[ 3 : 07 ] He shall prolong his days. The will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. 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. 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 made intercession for the transgressors.

That is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us, and open it to our hearts and minds. As I said last week, the title for this little series is The Servant Whose Death Destroys Death.

There is a paradox at the heart of the message of the gospel, at the heart of Easter, that from death comes life, from suffering comes glory.

[ 4 : 13 ] And last week we looked at these early verses, 52, 13 to 15, under the heading, He confounds our expectations. Now this week we are going to look at how the servant challenges our prejudices.

This figure through whom the purposes of God are going to be carried out. Someone who is God himself, and yet separate from God, only fulfilled in Jesus Christ himself, who challenges our prejudices.

Are we prejudiced? No one is going to say yes to that question. But I suspect if we think more deeply, we probably are.

I think back some, oh it's almost 30 years ago now, to a school assembly hall, where the sixth form were gathered to hear a lecture on sex education.

And to their astonishment, and not a little to their amusement, the lady who strode onto the stage was a formidable battle axe of a woman, dressed in an old-fashioned tweed suit, hair drawn back in a tight, unfashionable bun.

[ 5 : 26 ] And it was all the headmaster could do to stop the youngsters bursting out in laughter, until she got up to speak. And her first words were, I know what you're thinking.

You're wondering what a dried-out old stick like me has to teach you about sex education. Immediately, their prejudices were dispelled.

And they were meat in her hands until she finished the lecture. I think of getting on for three years ago, my wife and I went to Heathrow Airport to welcome back our son, who was returning from a gap year in Bolivia.

We hadn't seen him for a year. We'd had plenty emails, plenty phone calls, even photographs. When he had gone, he looked a clean, well-shaven young man.

And for a second, as we saw this tall youth bearing down upon us, with hair that hadn't been cut for eight months, in need of a shave, and probably a bath, for a second or two, we didn't realise who he was.

[ 6 : 37 ] In other words, we were simply prejudiced. We had seen this guy who looked as if he might be some kind of terrorist with his long hair, dirty anorak, and huge bag.

Then we realised this was our own dear son himself. Now, that, I think, is the kind of way in which many people approach the message of the Gospel, the message of Easter.

Because we know exactly what God ought to look like when he comes into the world, don't we? We know that he is going to be a conquering hero.

We know he is going to look impressive. We know he is going to do powerful things. We know that everyone is going to fall at his feet. That everyone is going to obey him.

And that exactly is what didn't happen. Because this servant challenges our prejudices. Look at verse, chapter 53, verse 1.

[ 7 : 35 ] Who has believed what they heard from us? Who is going to believe that the servant of God, when he comes into the world, is going to be like this? The life and death of Christ is not one of the world's great success stories, is it?

It's often been pointed out that he lived most of his life in total obscurity. In a village, in a backwater, no one had heard of him.

He never travelled beyond the little country the size of Wales. Unless, of course, William Blake is right and those feet in ancient times did tread upon England's mountains green.

Well, that's probably just romantic fantasizing. He was executed with no one to defend him and he was executed between two criminals. That does not sound like how God would become man, is it?

That's not what we'd expect to happen. Our prejudices expect something different. And yet, look what the prophet says. To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

[ 8 : 45 ] When the Bible talks about the arm of the Lord, it means the power of the Lord, the way he does things, the way he effectively does them. And what Isaiah is saying, look at that unimpressive figure, Jesus of Nazareth, and what you're seeing is not just another prophet, not just another visitor.

What you are seeing is God himself and the power of God. God was man in Palestine, the poet Betjeman says. So let me mention briefly now three areas in which this servant challenges our prejudices which come out of these verses we've read.

First of all, this servant brings life out of death. Look at verse 2. Like a root out of a dry ground. Dry ground is dead ground.

Dry ground is unfertile ground. Roots that are going to grow need water. They need nourishment. And yet, this root is going to grow out of a dried ground.

Now you see what that means? That this root has life in itself. It doesn't need to draw life from anything else. It doesn't need to draw from its environment. It's got life in itself.

[ 10 : 01 ] So he comes from Bethlehem, from the dry ground of Bethlehem, from the backwater of Nazareth, ministering most of his time in Galilee. After all, you'd have expected God would have gone to the great centers of population.

Why did he bypass Rome and Alexandria, the great centers of the time, and come to Bethlehem? The reason for that is because this servant has life in himself.

See, after all, God created out of nothing at the beginning. When God said, let there be light, there wasn't some pre-existent substance out of which he made light. He, by his creating word, made that light by which we see everything else.

And so it was that when the servant was growing up in the barren ground, in the dry lands of ancient Israel, he was coming to bring the very life of God.

But more than that, not only does he have life in himself, he gives life. I am come, he said, that you might have life, that you might have it in all its fullness.

[ 11 : 09 ] And as people listen to his word, as people bow at his cross, as people respond, they discover that here is a servant whose death destroys death because he gives life.

As George MacDonald, one of the, a Christian writer in the early part of the 20th century, a great influence on C.S. Lewis, once said, he had so much life in himself that he had to borrow death from his creatures.

And by dying, he brings life to us. So that's the first thing. The first prejudice he challenges is that he brings life out of death.

Secondly, he doesn't look the part. This is not what we expect God revealed in the flesh to look like. Look at verse 2 again, second part of verse 2.

He had no form or majesty that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him. Have you ever wondered what Jesus of Nazareth, the man Jesus looked like?

[ 12 : 20 ] Because we're given no description in the Bible, are we? We're not told how tall he was. We're not told what colour his hair was. We're not told what his accent sounded like.

Probably Galilean unless he was more fortunate than Peter. In other words, he probably, there was probably nothing of these kind of things that would impress people. He didn't look like a conqueror.

But that's not all when we say that he didn't look the part. What he calls us to is risk. He calls us to follow him.

You see, a lot of people like a gospel that says, come and you'll fulfil your potential. Come and you'll be successful. Come and you'll have plenty money in the bank and you'll have several cars in the drive and everything will work out beautifully.

You have a wonderful home, a wonderful family. Not that any of these things are wrong or bad in themselves, but that's not what Jesus is offering. Jesus says, follow me.

[ 13 : 23 ] And when he says follow me, he doesn't say come and fulfil your potential. He says something very different. He says, whoever saves his life will lose it.

But whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. So you see, he doesn't look the part. And what he offers doesn't look the part either.

Not the kind of package deal that we would like or we would hope for. He calls us not to comfort but to struggle. He calls us not to security but to risk.

And he is an apparent failure. It doesn't make sense. He's despised and rejected. Now think of it. Isn't it very strange that the cross is at the very heart of Christianity?

How would you feel if someone who had lost loved ones in the Holocaust were to carry around their neck a model of a gas chamber?

[ 14 : 28 ] Something which had caused horrific suffering and death. And yet at the very heart of the message of Easter, not only does this servant not look the part, what he does doesn't appear to follow any of the canons of successful behaviour.

But this is the message of Easter, the message of the cross. And that's the message that conquered the Roman world. You see, when the early Christians went around the Roman world preaching the gospel of the cross, when Paul says I'm determined to do nothing among you except Christ and him crucified, that made the Roman world tremble in its shoes.

What did Caesar, what did the Roman power depend on? It depended on pomp, on circumstance, on authority, on people being stronger than other people, holding them in fear, holding them in terror.

Here's another gospel of another kind of power. When the early church preached in the great words of Paul that Christ Jesus, who was in the form of God, took the form of a servant, and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.

That made the, first of all, when the great ones of the earth heard it, they laughed, they mocked, it was ridiculed. When they heard something that was even worse, that that one who took the lowest place, that one who died on the cross, is one day going to be acknowledged as Lord throughout heaven, earth, and hell.

[ 16 : 06 ] That really made them tremble in their shoes. In other words, it was saying the power of the cross was what was going to rule, was what was going to have the last word.

So the servant challenges our prejudices, challenges our prejudices by bringing life out of death, he challenges our prejudices by not looking the part, and not calling us to the kind of part we would like to play.

But thirdly, he challenges our prejudices by being actively rejected. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Not only was he not idolized, not only was he not made the object of great adulation, and so on, he was actively despised, actively rejected, and eventually killed.

Right at the very beginning of his life, King Herod tried to kill him. You read about that in Matthew chapter 2. Pilate did kill him, but that death was to bring consequences that Pilate couldn't have begun to imagine.

[ 17 : 21 ] He is described here as a man of sorrows. Now the fact that this is plural, the word sorrows, probably suggests every kind of human suffering imaginable.

It's not just one type, it's not just one type of suffering, not just one type of problem, but that by dying this servant takes into him the whole human predicament.

There is no experience however awful, no problem however great, no difficulty however insurmountable it appears that this servant hasn't taken upon himself.

and acquainted, acquainted is probably a rather weak word, well it means something much more like he knows grief very well and call him a man of sorrows, does not suggest his own sorrows but our sorrows, he takes our sorrows and he carries them to the cross.

As one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not. In other words, what are we going to do about all this? Now our prejudices, our natural inclination would be to hide our faces not to esteem him and that has been the experience of all of us in our lives I'm sure at various times.

[ 18 : 43 ] We have indeed said oh this is not for me, this is not the kind of message that I want, this is not the kind of way I want to live my life. I think the Lord Jesus Christ himself realised that because he is to say during his earthly life whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this world I will be ashamed of him when I come in the glory of my father.

In other words, how we treat him now, how we receive him now, will depend on how we are received by him then. Because he is calling us to the same kind of life as himself.

He's calling us to the pathway of rejection, he's calling us to the pathway that is not at all glamorous. And because of this we hide our faces from him.

So what must we do? We mustn't say in the first place we can be indifferent. We can't be indifferent. Being indifferent is actually making a decision already to have nothing to do with him.

There's really only two things we can do. We can either reject him, we can say no, he's not for me, that's not the kind of life I want, or we can gladly accept him.

[ 20 : 07 ] We can crown him as Lord. We can do what the indifferent crowd did. We read about this in the Gospels, the story of the cross. we're told that many people just simply stood there looking and then went away.

And that's what many people do with the servant, even at Easter. We learn that others rejected him. But then we learn also that the centurion said at the end, truly, this man was the son of God.

My prayer is that as we study this passage together, indeed as we go to other Easter services, that our response will be the response of that centurion.

In spite of all appearances, in spite of all our prejudice, truly, this man is the son of God. Amen. Let's pray. Man of sorrows, what a name for the son of God who came ruined sinners to reclaim.

Father, we pray that each of us may from the depths of our hearts continue that verse and say with deep meaning and with deep conviction, Hallelujah.

[ 21 : 20 ] What a Savior. Amen.