

1. The Servant whose Death destroys Death: The Servant of God

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[0 : 00] Now, if you would turn, please, to page 613 in the Bibles, and we're going to read this great chapter, Isaiah 53. Now, as you will know, the chapter divisions in the Bible are not inspired, and very clearly this chapter ought to begin at 52.13 rather than 53.1, so that's where we're going to begin.

Today we're going to be looking at the first section, which is 52.13-15. We're going to read the whole chapter, the song of the servant, beginning then at verse 13.

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.

Who has believed what they have 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 a dry ground.

[1 : 27] 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 hide 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. 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.

[2 : 38] By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And as for his generation, who consider that he was cut out of the land of the living, stricken from the transgression of my people, and they made his grave with the wicked, and 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, he shall prolong his days, and 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. May God bless to our hearts and our minds this wonderful passage from his word.

[4 : 01] I'm calling this series, The Servant Whose Death Destroys Death. There is a paradox at the very heart of this chapter. I'm sure you'll agree that we live in a celebrity culture, particularly sports personalities, TV personalities, showbiz people, even politicians, and forgive us, even preachers in certain circles, are regarded as celebrities.

We know about people being, as our text says, lifted up and exalted. We don't use these words very often, but we do use words like riding high.

We do use words like well-known and famous. The idea is everywhere. We love celebrities, and we love seeing celebrities.

But we talk about celebrities, don't we, when they are riding high. For example, in the American presidential elections at the moment, and I'm not making a political point at all.

A few weeks ago, when Hillary Clinton was falling behind Barack Obama, people did not say, oh, Hillary is exalted and lifted high. They said she's losing it.

[5 : 19] They said she's going down. Similarly, my own football team, whose name I'm not going to mention, which is struggling desperately at the moment to avoid relegation.

It's not Gretna. It's south of the border. And no one is saying at the moment, Kevin Keegan's team is riding high. What they are saying is, they are desperate.

They are struggling. They are almost at the relegation zone. So there's a paradox here. How is it that this servant, who is said to be high up, lifted up, exalted, is also someone whose appearance is marred beyond human semblance and his form beyond that of the children of mankind?

That's the problem we face in this chapter. That's why I've called this particular study at the moment, he confounds our expectations. This servant does not behave, does not appear to be what we would expect.

Now, Isaiah the prophet is prophesying to people some 700 years before the birth of Christ. And yet he brings us straight, face to face, with Christ himself.

[6 : 34] Back in chapter 9, he's talked about the child who is to be born. Here in this chapter, he's almost as if we are standing at the foot of the cross with the prophet, looking at this servant, who is being humiliated for undying for our sake.

He's writing at a time of great difficulty in the nation's history. They are threatened by Assyria. They are safe from that. But Isaiah warns them that they are going to go into exile in Babylon.

That they cannot take God for granted. And yet, from chapter 40 onwards, he's saying, God is going to bring you back. God is going to restore you.

And in chapter 52, he said in verse 9, break forth together into singing, you waste places of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people.

He has redeemed Jerusalem. He has bared his holy arm. And now, in this servant's song, he's going to tell us through whom this is going to happen.

[7 : 40] This reversal of fortunes is going to happen. Who is he going to do it by? And we're introduced here to the servant. Behold, my servant.

This word behold means basically pause. Look, here is my servant. And he's the one who is going to do this. Now, in the Acts of the Apostles, in chapter 8, you may know the story of the high-placed Ethiopian official who was returning to Ethiopia, having gone up to Jerusalem, having not found there what he wanted, having not found his spiritual hunger satisfied.

And we're told he was reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. And this is the very chapter he was reading. And the Lord tells Philip, the evangelist, to go and join him.

And the Ethiopian says, who of whom is the prophet speaking? That's the question we're asking as well. Who is this the prophet is speaking about? And we're told that Philip began from Isaiah 53, and he preached Jesus to him.

That's what the Ethiopian heard about. He heard about Jesus, God's servant. Now, we're going to look at verse 13. We're told he shall be high and lifted up and shall be exalted.

[8 : 59] Now, back in chapter 6, Isaiah had a tremendous vision of God in the temple. An overwhelming, overpowering vision that marked him for life. And the prophet tells us, I saw the Lord high and lifted up.

So, when these words are used of the servant, we have another paradox. This is someone who is separate from God, and yet, he is equal with God.

Now, only when the Lord Jesus Christ comes, who is not only the servant sent by God, but is one with God, is he equal with God, do we see this paradox beginning to be fulfilled?

So, right at the heart of this chapter is paradox. He's high and exalted, and yet, he dies in suffering, in sorrow, and in humiliation.

And in this first section, these few verses, 52, 13 to 15, there are two paradoxes, if you like. First of all, there is the reaction of astonishment in verse 14 and the first part of verse 15.

[10 : 12] 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.

In other words, how can this servant, who is not only sent by God, but who is God himself, how can he look like this? How can he so confound our expectations?

Now, in one sense, the full meaning of this is only realized in Jesus' death on the cross, in his suffering, which disfigured him and made him look hardly human.

This is not what we would expect God's servant to look like. We were, as many, were astonished. Now, astonished is a weak translation. We better use a word like shattered.

We were absolutely shattered when we saw him. We were appalled. So humiliated and ill-treated was he that he looked scarcely human. That's what the prophet is saying.

[11 : 15] But it's more than that. It's not just physical suffering, but it's his true human emotions and true human personality. Jesus was not shielded in his earthly life.

He didn't live a life like the queen. It must be wonderful being the queen, never having to stand in a queue, never having to buy a ticket, and so on. It must be awful in other ways, but Jesus' earthly life was not like that.

Jesus suffered as we do. Jesus was weary as we are. Jesus knew our human emotions without sin. That's why the author of Hebrews says, consider him who endured such opposition, such hostility against himself.

Now, we like the slick, we like the beautiful, we like the attractive, we don't like the self-giving of this servant. So, there is this reaction of being shattered, of being appalled, of being astonished, and the result of this, in the beginning of verse 15, is to sprinkle many nations.

What does that mean? Now, the word can also mean startle, as you'll see from the footnote of your Bibles, but the word normally means sprinkle elsewhere in the Old Testament.

[12 : 39] And sprinkle makes good sense, actually, because it is by his blood, by the shedding of his blood, and the washing of sinners by his blood, that he is going to redeem them.

So, it seems to me you should keep the word sprinkle. He is going to wash away people's sins. A hymn by the missionary hymn writer James Montgomery uses this passage, baptize the nations far and wide, the triumphs of the cross record.

He is obviously drawing from this passage. This servant is not just going to astonish, he is going to sprinkle, it is going to be effective. So, that is the first paradoxical reaction.

There is the reaction of being shattered of being astonished. But there is a second reaction, there is the reaction of submission. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him, for that which has not been told them they see, that which they have not heard they understand.

Now, these two reactions would be understandable enough if they were totally separate. If it was simply the reaction of being shattered, we could understand that. If it were simply the reaction of being submissive, we could also understand that.

[13 : 58] It's how the two of them belong together. So, we're going to explore in the other weeks, but in a sense, these few verses summarize the whole song. Because, it is not that on the one hand, people are shattered by the humility and self-giving of the servant, and then on the other hand, nevertheless, they submit to him.

It's that the two belong together. Without the being shattered, without the suffering of the servant, there could be no submission. So, he confounds expectations in that way again.

The kings shall shut their mouths. In other words, it's not just, if you like, the common punters, the leaders of the nations, those who have probably come to power in a very, very different way than through humility and self-giving.

They're going to be silent, because they cannot understand this. This is a paradox. And that's what people could not understand in the early Christian church.

Caesar and his empire could understand people who came to power through violence, through manipulation, through crushing everyone in their own way.

[15 : 12] What terrified them then, and what terrifies Caesar now and his equivalent, is people who proclaim there is another kind of power, a power that does not rest in self-glory, a power that does not depend on conquest, but a power that centers on self-giving, on sacrifice.

That's what Paul says in his great hymn in the letter to the Philippians, Christ Jesus in the form of God took the form of a servant and became obedient to death, even death on the cross.

And that is what ultimately destroyed the empire of the Caesars, the fact there is another kind of power, someone whose power depends on self-giving and on humility.

But because this is a unique event, this requires revelation. When you read the stories of the cross in the New Testament, you'll find that everyone saw the same events, they saw the flogging, the crucifying, they heard the cries from the cross, the darkness falling, but they didn't all react in the same way, because the cross, without the word of God, to unfold it and say what it was about, is an event which can be interpreted in different ways.

That which has not been told them, they see, and that which they have not heard, they understand. See, the unique humiliation and the unique exaltation is the gospel to the nations.

[16 : 46] That is the gospel that converted people. That is the gospel that still converts people. That is the gospel that opens people's eyes to the truth of God.

That which has not been told them, they see. And that's what happened to the Roman centurion. When looking at this dying man on the central cross, he said, truly, this man was the Son of God.

That was an example of someone seeing what he had not been told. but by the Spirit of God having his eyes opened. And not only that, opening minds to the same truth.

That which he had not heard, they understood. Now, Easter has become commercialized, of course, as Christmas has. Perhaps not as much as Christmas because it's more difficult to sentimentalize Easter.

It's very easy to sentimentalize Christmas and talk nonsense about little Lord Jesus and no crying he makes, which distances him from the real world, the world of suffering, the world of humanity.

[17 : 49] It's not very easy to sentimentalize Easter. But this little introduction tells us what is Easter about? What is it we are celebrating in a few weeks' time? What we are celebrating is a revelation of the whole nature of God himself.

A God who made heaven and earth, the God who has bared his holy arm, as verse 10 says, before the eyes of all the nations, the Lord who comforts his people and redeems Jerusalem, that God is not some kind of remote tyrant.

That God came down in human flesh and blood and gave himself at Calvary. And in that very self-giving, in that very humiliation, he opened the kingdom of heaven to all who will believe.

And what Isaiah is talking about is first and foremost that first coming to Jerusalem, where he suffered under Pontius Pilate, and by being lifted up on the cross, showed the heart of God.

But he is pointing forward. The redeeming of Jerusalem is not just the freeing of God's ancient people. The redeeming of Jerusalem is the world to come, which is brought about by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[19 : 05] My prayer is, as we go through these verses in the next weeks, that we will indeed be like those in verse 15. We will see, we will look at the cross, and we will realize, as the old spiritual says, that we actually were there when they crucified my Lord.

Our sins put him there. Our mockery joined with the mockery of those who humiliated him. Our wandering away from God needed his self-giving.

And also that we will understand. not just understand intellectually, but understand in the sense that this will drive us out into the world with a gospel to proclaim, a gospel of a servant whose humiliation and dying brings us life.

That is what this great chapter is about. Let's pray. Thank God our Father we have read words and considered words that are so paradoxical, that are so unlike anything that we think of as celebrity.

So far removed from the spin-doctoring and the slick and the glamorous which fills our screens and which fills our minds so often. We pray Lord that as we stand before the cross, that we may indeed stand with the centurion.

[20 : 31] We not stand with those who mocked. like the dying criminal we may indeed see that this is the king coming in his kingdom. Like the centurion we see that this is truly the son of God.

We ask this in his name. Amen.