

3. The Servant whose Death destroys Death: He stands in for us

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Date: 26 March 2008

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[0 : 00] Well, we are continuing with our chapter, Isaiah 53, which begins, as you know, now in Isaiah 52, verse 13. So we're going to read this chapter once again, and today the part of the chapter we're going to look at is 53, 4 to 9.

But we'll read the whole thing. Chapter 52, 13. Behold, my servant shall act wisely. He shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.

As many as 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 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.

[1 : 25] 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. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And as for his generation, who considers that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?

[2 : 34] 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. 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. Now before we look at verses 4 to 9, let's have a word of prayer together.

[3 : 36] Amen. And God our Father, how we praise you for the gospel. The gospel of the servant who descended from glory to the lowest depth, even death on the cross.

And that servant who is now exalted. That servant who one day will be acknowledged and accepted by all of creation as the Lord.

As we travel through this great chapter, we ask indeed that something of its power, something of its wonder, may grip our hearts. We realize that only through the words of the gospel can we begin to glimpse something of the reality.

So much here is strange. So much is puzzling. We don't expect the servant of the Lord to be like this. We do not expect him to have to suffer death.

We do not expect him to be rejected and forsaken and despised. And yet we know that only because of this can we come back to you.

[4 : 44] Can we have our sins forgiven. Can we be with you in eternity. And we pray that as we look into this great chapter again, that you will truly open our eyes.

You will open our minds and our hearts. And that indeed we may go from here rejoicing in the greatness and wonder of our salvation. In Jesus name.

Amen. The servant stands in for us.

That's our subject today in verses 4 to 9 of this great chapter. Now the idea of standing in, of substitution, is a very common one.

And we know it in other fields. For example, on the football field, when one player substitutes for another, that's exactly what he does. He doesn't represent the other player.

[5 : 43] He actually goes in and takes that other player's place. He is there instead of him. It happens in the theatre world, in the film world.

For many years, the late Peter Hustinov played the part of Agatha Christie's Herkel Poirot. And David Sushi, who I think is far better in the part, that's an opinion, he took Hustinov's place.

He's not representing him. He is standing in for him. And that's exactly what these verses, verses 4 to 9, are saying. That the servant of God, Jesus Christ, actually stands in for us.

He doesn't just simply represent us. He doesn't simply go to God and say, Oh, I've got things to say in favour of these people. He actually takes our place. Now, if you've been here already, you'll know that this servant is one who confounds our expectations, who challenges our prejudices.

This is not what we expect God would have been like. This is not how we would have expected him to come. This is certainly not the death we would have expected him to die.

[6 : 55] But we know that it is true because the song begins, and as next week we'll see the song ends, with him being exalted, returning from where he had come, God accepting his sacrifice.

So what we're going to look at now is, what does it mean to say that he stands in for us? Because in verses 4 to 9, the prophet is going on to explain what it meant for the servant to stand in for us.

And you'll notice if you look particularly at verses 4 and 6, there is the contrast between he, that is the servant, surely he has borne our griefs, and we, we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God.

Then in verse 6, all we, like sheep, has gone astray, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. And this word surely emphasizes the unexpectedness of it.

What I'm going to do now for a few moments is to look at this contrast. First of all, we, and then he who takes our place. Who are we whose place needs to be taken?

[8 : 07] Why do we need him to take our place? Why doesn't God just wave his hand and forgive our sins? After all, he loves us, doesn't he?

And we would expect then that he would simply forgive us. As the old proverb says, the good God will forgive me. That's his job.

And that's how many people think of God. It's God's job to forgive. And we think that largely because we don't take God seriously.

We regard him not so much as our father in heaven, but as our grandfather in heaven, who wants us all to have a good time, wants to make sure the children have fun, and therefore we don't take his love seriously.

If after all it's simply his job to love, why on earth should we praise him for loving us? Because we think of love as soft and as sentimental.

[9 : 05] Why do we need him to take our place? Well, first of all, because we are in comprehensive need of remaking. We don't just need a few adjustments here and there.

Look at verse 4. He has borne our griefs. In other words, inside we are all mixed up. Inside, if you like, our mental landscape, our emotional landscape is a mess.

It's chaotic. Our inward feelings are all wrong. But it's not just our inward feelings carried our sorrows. In other words, our outward behavior is all wrong.

Sorrows not just in the sense of things that cause us sorrow, but the things that cause other people sorrow. The things that we do which cause the stress. Now, that's why we need someone to stand in for us.

Now, when you think of it for a moment, people are quite happy nowadays to talk about emotional healing, about emotional wholeness. You go down to Borders or Waterstone and look at the mind, body and spirit section.

[10 : 18] You'll find book after book on healing your emotional traumas. You'll find books about mental inner health and inner peace. Now, of course, in one sense, that's good.

We don't want our emotions all screwed up. We don't want to be full of distress and full of despair. But the trouble is, all these are looking in the wrong place. These books, on the whole, are telling us that we can remake ourselves.

There are certain techniques we can use, certain exercises we can follow, certain patterns of behavior that will make us better. We're looking in the wrong place.

And that brings us on to verse 5. Why are we like that? Why are we emotionally mixed up? Why do we have so much sorrow and cause so much grief to others? It's because we are sinful.

And until we deal with that, or until someone else deals with that, then we're going to have no emotional health. We're going to have no inner healing. He was wounded.

[11 : 18] The servant was wounded for our transgressions. Now, the word transgressions means our willful sins. Now, all sins are willful to some extent. But you know there are things we often do, and we often say, I don't know what came over me when I behaved in that way.

On the other hand, there are things we deliberately do, knowing them to be wrong. And what's worse, we enjoy doing them. We know that, don't we? Whereas iniquities is the kind of inner nature that makes us do these things.

It's not just the things we do, in other words. It's the people we are. We need inner health. We need healing. But most of all, we need our sins forgiven.

Because it's from our sinfulness and fallenness that these other things flow. And notice in verse 6, two things. First of all, it's a collective thing.

All we, like sheep, have gone astray. This is something that afflicts the whole of humanity. The craziness that sometimes grips whole communities or whole nations.

[12 : 25] Kind of collective madness that you see sometimes in crowd behavior. Where people behave in ways they'd never dream of behaving as individuals. Yet a kind of collective madness grips us.

And the herd instinct. But notice, we have turned everyone to his own way. We can't just say, it's really everybody's fault. We're all like that. We are all wrong, but each of us is responsible.

So we are comprehensively in need of remaking. That's why we need not just somebody to represent us, but somebody to take our place. Somebody who will stand in for us.

Take all these sins. Take all these transgressions. Take all that inner mess that really is what our hearts and emotions are and stand in for us.

And we need this because we are under God's judgment. Not just that we are sinful, but that God has to judge us. Isaiah's favorite term for God is the Holy One of Israel.

[13 : 27] That term is used more times about God in Isaiah than it is in the rest of the Old Testament put together. Isaiah's most common name for God shows he is someone who is holy and we are sinful.

We need someone to stand in for us. You see, I need a savior who is not me because I can't save myself. I can't present my case to God.

But I also need a savior who is me. Not me personally, of course, but me as a human being. We need a savior, in other words, who is both God and human.

A savior who comes from God and is one with God, but who also takes our nature. And that's why only the servant, only Jesus Christ, can stand in for us.

That's what we are. Screwed up, sinful, messed up, and we need someone to take our place. So secondly, who is the one who takes our place and how does he do this?

[14 : 32] Verse 5 is very emphatic. He was wounded. It could be something like, he and no one else was wounded for our transgression.

Not just any he. This is the servant himself. And this servant comes in between us and God's judgment. Look back at verse 4. He was smitten by God.

In other words, his sufferings weren't just a series of ghastly accidents. It wasn't just another case of a good man crushed by the evil of the world. This servant actually stood between us and the anger of God.

And verse 6, the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isn't this vindictive on the part of God, punishing someone else?

That's only when we don't realize who the servant is. Back at the beginning of the chapter, verse 1, The servant is the arm of the Lord.

[15 : 37] The servant is the Lord himself. The servant is Jesus Christ, in other words, who is both one with God and one of us. It's not God punishing, as it were, a third party.

God is taking into himself, in the person of the servant, all the sin, all the death, all the judgment that belongs to you and me. So he comes between us and God's judgment.

He reconciles us to God. Verse, this is verse 5, Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace.

Now peace doesn't just mean inner peace. It doesn't just mean tranquility, although that's one of its consequences. Peace means peace between us and God. We are reconciled to God.

God turns away his anger from us and between us there is no longer a state of war. And thirdly, he dies on our behalf.

[16 : 39] Verse 6 again, We all, like sheep, have gone astray. And notice how the image of the sheep is used again in verse 7.

He was oppressed and he was afflicted like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent. Like us, he takes, as it were, the persona of a sheep.

But in our case, we are sheep because we stray, because we rebel. He is like a sheep in that he is submissive, in that he is willing, in that he takes it upon himself.

Now, right through the Old Testament, God had to be approached by sacrifice. When people sinned at the gates of Eden when Adam and Eve were expelled was the flaming sword that showed there was no way back.

And God called his people to him, first through Abraham, then through Moses. And Moses gave them, on behalf of the Lord, this great series of visual aids of how God was to be approached through animal sacrifices.

[17 : 52] Day by day, month by month, year by year, animals were sacrificed. And when the animals were sacrificed, read in the book of Leviticus on the great day of atonement, the high priest laid his hands on the head of the animal.

And that meant that the sins of the people were transferred to the animal and that God accepted that sacrifice. But there was one fatal weakness in that whole system, which could mean that animal sacrifice could never be more than a picture.

Because only someone who voluntarily stands in for us with God, only that person can be our saviour.

In other words, it needs a human being to atone for the sins of humanity. And the animals, therefore, could only be pictures. Just imagine the animal there.

Goat, do you know why you're here? Of course not. Goat, do you want to be here? Of course not. Animals could only be a picture of someone standing in for us.

[19 : 03] And here now, we have this one who is both God and us. And we know that this one, this one is accepted by God.

And this one goes the whole way for us. Look at verse 8. As by oppression and judgment he was taken away. And as for his generation, who considered? In other words, no one spoke up for him.

No one realised what was happening. He was cut off out of the land of the living, made his grave with the wicked, with a rich man in his death. Now that's so important as we think of Easter.

Made his grave with the wicked. It's so important when you read the accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus. There's a little detail that's often ignored. He died, he was buried, and he rose again the third day.

In other words, three events. He died, a literal event. He was buried, another literal event, and he rose again from the grave, another literal event.

[20 : 05] In other words, he didn't just rise in the hearts of the disciples, the rise of faith. He rose literally and bodily, this servant who had given himself to death.

And because he did this, that means that you and I can now appear in the presence of God. I'm going to read from the Narnia stories to finish off because as so often, C.S. Lewis puts it so well, if you know the line, the witch and the wards, you know that Edmund, Edmund, the least attractive of the children, had allied himself with the white witch, with the evil powers.

And she had, and the white witch had said the only way that Edmund could be saved was if someone stood in for him.

And Aslan offered to do this. And Aslan was killed as a result. And we've come to the point where Aslan comes back to life. Oh, you're real.

Oh, you're real, Aslan, cried Lucy. But what does it all mean, asked Susan. It means, says Aslan, that though the witch knew the deep magic, that there is a magic deeper still, which she did not know.

[21 : 23] Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back into the stillness and darkness before time dawned, she would have read there a different story.

She would have known, and this is the point, that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the table would crack and death itself would start working backwards.

When a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in the traitor's stead. According to Scripture, we're all traitors. We're all straying sheep.

But also according to Scripture, someone has taken our place. Someone has stood in for us. And if we accept that from him as a free gift, if we as sinful people come to him and accept his forgiveness, then indeed, the death starts working backwards.

And we know that we have passed from death to life. That's what Isaiah 53 is about. Let's pray. And to him who loves us and washed us from our sins in his own blood, to him be glory and honour and power now and forever.

[22 : 44] And may we indeed benefit from the servant's death, share in his death and thus share in his resurrection. We ask this in his name. Amen.