

Isaiah 52:13-53:6 Pierced for our Transgressions (1)

T: The sufferings are appalling AND wonderful

A: understand (penny drop) Jesus took MY sin and punishment

53v6 ▲ Have you been to many executions lately? I doubt it, because they don't happen in that many places in the world any more. But suppose you are there, seeing someone receive the death penalty, and then then the person next to you says, "That was the most important event in history. That person has just saved the world. God is rescuing humanity from its deepest problem". I'd be a bit surprised wouldn't you? Most of us are very familiar with the death of Jesus, and so we get kind of immune to how shocking it is in what happened and in what it means. But it's not intuitive that a man caked in blood and gasping for breath is saving the world, is it? I think that's why we need Isaiah 53. God explained what was going to happen 700 years before it ever took place. So we could be in no doubt about what's going on it when it happened, and say "That was the most important event in history. That person has just saved the world. God is rescuing humanity from its deepest problem".

We have open before us today one of the most beautiful, Jesus-focused, astonishing pieces of the Old Testament.

It's beautiful because of its carefully constructed and expressive poetry: 5 sections of 3 verses each, each section carefully growing by one extra line each time in Hebrew from 9, 10, 11, 12 to 13 lines of text. We are just going to focus on the 1st, 2nd and 3rd sections today (the third is the most central and important), and we'll look at paragraphs 4 and 5 next week.

It's Christ focused, because there's no doubt that it finds its fulfillment in the sufferings of Jesus on the cross and speaks prophetically about him. / It's the fourth of 4 so called servant songs in the OT prophet of Isaiah: lengthy prophecies that focus on a "servant of God" who is going to bring comfort to the fallen people of Israel who

are facing exile because of their sins. Now in previous songs this servant is identified with Israel, (and that's how Jews today still understand this passage) but here it can't be Israel, because Israel is being helped by this servant. No it's a future rescuer- the servant, the Messiah. And in Luke 22:37 Jesus uses this very passage to point to himself as the does NT in about 6 other quotations, and with up to 34 allusions (it's referred to more than any other passage in the OT).

Beautiful, Christ focused, Astonishing. It's astonishing because written 700 years before Jesus (and we have manuscripts that date to over a century before Jesus' birth so it couldn't have been doctored after the events) and yet it speaks with clarity of some of the details surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. v1- the way he's rejected, v3-9 - his gruesome suffering (pierced for us), v7 his silence before his trial, v9 his connection with the wicked in his death (remember the thieves on either side), and a link with the rich in his death (Joseph of Arimathea who donated the tomb).

And it's especially astonishing because it tells us how God can still accept us, when have mucked up so horribly. Do you ever sin? Me too. Do you ever despair of your sin, and wonder if you've blown it too many times? Me too. Listen up to this surprising passage to find out how.

Beautiful, Christ-focused, Astonishing.

I hope that over these 2 weeks, as we near Easter, this passage will cause us to love our *Bibles* more (as we see these amazing prophecies coming to fulfilment), but especially we will love *Jesus Christ* even more as we discover he has done for us.

There's a part of me that would love to just have it read out and sit down, and not get my grubby fingers all over it as we study it today, but it's not a museum piece, it's God's word to be dug into and applied so let's look at the first 1/2... well 3/5 of the passage today under three headings which are there on your sheet.

The sufferings of the Servant are...

1) v13-15 ... apparently in contradiction

I wonder if you spotted that as Jenny read this first section. Take another look!

On the one hand, v13 this servant is acting wisely (or footnote will prosper). He's achieving something good and purposeful, and he's going to be triply exalted and vindicated (v13b). v15 He's going to achieve something that will affect many nations, to such an extent that even Kings will be silenced and profoundly enlightened v15b. The word sprinkle gives us a clue as to what this will be (it's used of sacrifices in Leviticus to cleanse from sin) but there's some ambiguity surrounding it at this stage (footnote- amazed), so we can't read too much into it yet, we just note v13 and 15, he's achieving something for God.

But at the same time in the middle verse, his appearance is appalling.

v14

▲ In the late 19th century there was a guy called Joseph Merrick (known as John Merrick in the film about his life- the Elephant Man) who grew such bodily deformities (a massive skull, swollen limbs, sagging skin) that one doctor described him as the most disgusting specimen of humanity he had ever seen. It's a tragic story.

And here in this passage the description of this surprising servant is one of a person so disfigured (perhaps by dreadful suffering) that you almost can't see that he's still human.

What a strange contradiction. A hero, yet at the same time sort of disgusting. I haven't seen Mel Gibson's film the Passion, but I understand it's pretty graphic in how it portrays the cross and the gory side of Jesus' crucifixion.

▲ In new houses in the UK, like the one we live in, you have taps on the bath that kind of merge in the middle, so you turn the hot tap and the cold tap on and get a kind of lukewarm water in the middle. I actually prefer the old baths that have a big old cold tap and a big old hot tap and you can have both on full blast. ICY COLD and SCALDING HOT.

Never think that Jesus is lukewarm. Some kind of grey insipid bland character a little bit like the Simpson's born again Christian, Ned Flanders whose favourite food is white bread, with a glass of water on the side for dipping.

Jesus is a combination of extremes at the same time.

We'll begin to get some more clarity in the 3rd paragraph about what's going on, but for the moment let's not forget this, and certainly let's not run away from it.

Some people are fooled by appearances when it comes to Jesus. They see someone who's too complex to try and work out. He's angry enough to turn the tables in the Temple, peaceful enough to welcome children. So attractive that thousands flock without their lunch to listen to him, so powerful that farmers ask him to leave the area. And here- so unlovely and yet so successful- an apparent contradiction.

He had extreme reactions in his earthly life and he does today- people love him or hate him. He is both shocking and wonderful at the same time.

Well don't put Jesus in the too difficult bin. Because actually Jesus' apparent contradictions may turn out to be important for us, especially if we too have ever felt unlovely in appearance, or at least ugly in the sense of our sin. God specialises in using surprising people (the weak, the despised, the foolish things of this world) to achieve his purposes.

In the next stanza we see further misunderstanding before it starts to make sense. (1 apparently in contradiction)

2) In verses 1-3 we see his sufferings are met with non-recognition.

The question of the first sentence is answered by the last sentence.

Question: v1..... Answer- we held him in low esteem. In other words, we made the mistake of falling for appearances.

This section describes the suffering of this Servant very accurately, but everyone seems to completely miss what it's all about, (and actually that's how both John's gospel and Romans 10 pickup this verse- unbelief).

First there's his start in life v2. In other words his beginnings were surrounded in humility. There's nothing impressive about his origins. Born in a stable, with a question mark over his legitimacy. He's nothing more than a vulnerable shoot in the back garden. Who knows if this root will even survive?

And v2c nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He's not a beautiful plant from the garden centre- he looks more like a weed. That's his beginnings- his growing up.

What about his life? v3. Despised and rejected by mankind. A man of suffering, familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces.

And then the final phrase- no one really thought much of him. It's a case of misunderstanding, non-recognition. This servant will appear to most to be a false alarm. Nothing special about him at all.

Doesn't this so accurately describe the situation all of us faced before we understood who Jesus was?

We held him in low esteem. We didn't think much of him. Perhaps we thought he was a good man or a figure of history, we may even have given the theologically correct answer that he is the Son of God, but we carried on regardless.

Worst of all, some of us parceled him up in a little box called religion, so that we could keep him at arm's length and not have to give him a blind bit of notice when he tells us how to live, except maybe an outing on Sunday.

▲ I've been in email contact with an atheist now for around 5 years. I've never met the chap, I don't know what he looks like, but for some reason he got hold of my email a while back and emails me once in a while to ask me about Christianity and then give me his opinions.

To Him Christianity (like all other religions) is a waste of time, and the butt of a lot of jokes. He's recently described the death of Jesus as "mundane" and he's tried to convince me that if God was real he would have surely done something more impressive than send his son to die. It's a case of non-recognition.

This guy (like we all did before the Holy Spirit worked in our lives) sees Jesus and his sufferings, as nothing special. And maybe this is you this evening. You just can't get why Christians are so keen on the cross, why we sing about it, think about it, talk about it. The penny hasn't dropped.

But actually even if we are committed Christians this evening, and we can get full marks in our penal substitution exam, isn't there still a sense in which we long for the penny to drop further down, deep into our hearts, deep into our insecurities and doubts, so that we might see more?

Well verse 1 reminds us that the arm of the Lord (the work of God in his Messiah) has to be revealed to us so we see it's value. We need God to open our eyes. It's very humbling, but we cannot understand the cross, unless God reveals himself to us. So I'm going to do a funny thing half way through a sermon.... I'm going to pray again.

Lord the cross will always be an enigma to us unless you reveal the truth to us. Open our eyes afresh to see the significance of Jesus' sufferings. Amen.

Let's move onto the third stanza, verses 4-6, the centrepiece of it all.

3) The sufferings of the Servant are explained by substitution (v4-6)

As I studied this passage last week, I discovered some treasure.

The word "Surely" at the start of v4 is a sort of exclamation of surprise to emphasize the unexpected.

It's used in Genesis when Jacob has a dream at Bethel, and then wakes up saying "Surely God is in this place and I didn't know it".

We might say "OH!", or "AAAH I get it". Like when you are looking at one of those magic eye pictures, or optical illusions of an old woman's face, and then you see for the first time that it's a picture of a beautiful young woman's face at the same time.

The words are put onto the lips of someone who has made an incredible discovery.

v4. Surely he (and the emphasis is on that word) took up our pain.

And bore our suffering.

v5 shows what we originally thought.

We thought he was struck down by God, in other words suffering directly at the hand of God for his own sin.

But now we see it. Here is a man actively picking up the sin and suffering of other people. Do you see the two contrasting pronouns "he/him" and "we/our" emphasized- they couldn't be more obvious.

v4-6. HE WE.

In this servant we have the most extraordinary thing. While we were looking at him and considering him not really worth anything (if you like the picture was an ugly one), he was loading onto his own back the sin and suffering and judicial punishment that we deserved (a beautiful one).

The punishment that brought us peace was on him.

▲ When I was around 10, we had a near family disaster. My dad drove our car onto the car ferry in Dorset between Studland bay and sandbanks. It's just a few minutes across. We were the last on, and got out and enjoyed the view. Only minutes later we heard gasps, and turned to the back of the ferry. A car without its handbrake on, had rolled back against the barrier and was being held from plunging into the water by a piece of wood an inch thick.

Yikes- check it out- look at that... And then the realisation. It's our car. And all the family watched silently thinking about the dog in the car, and the new shopping about to go down to the sea bed, and the shame of being the family that needed a lift home because their car was at the bottom of the sea.

Fortunately they backed up the ferry and our car was driven on, this time with the handbrake firmly on.

Well after 2 stanzas of contradiction and non-recognition, there's a moment of realisation. We are watching a spectacle that we are involved in. Our names are written into this. He is taking our penalty.

All the sin that you and I have committed. Our stubborn, willful rebellion against God. The stuff we are ashamed of, the stuff we haven't even thought of, and HE is picking it up and placing it on his own back.

- It's not that he suffers and dies like us, sharing our suffering (though that is wonderfully true).
- It's not that he suffers and dies with us (though that is true from elsewhere in scripture).
- What's being emphasized here is that he suffers and dies FOR us, in our place, instead of us. A truth that is picked up again and again in the New Testament, and called penal substitution by the theologians.

Christ is bearing the penalty v5 that we deserve, and taking it in our place.

▲ A tiny and inadequate illustration would be me being caught speeding and you pay the fine instead, and take the penalty points onto your own license.

The only trouble is that it's against God's law for an innocent 3rd party to take the place of a guilty person, just like it's against the law for you to take my penalty points on your license.

But Jesus is not an innocent 3rd party, he is God, and in Christ, God is reconciling the world to himself. God, the judge places on himself the punishment we deserve.

John Stott in his book the Cross of Christ describes it like this: *"The concept of substitution may be said then to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man."*

Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; god accepts penalties which belong to man alone".

▲ Anyone familiar with rugby or football will understand a substitution.

But this is called Penal substitution because the swap is such that an innocent party (God) is taking the place of the guilty party to take their punishment.

And the result is right there in the verses. And it's wonderful.

v6- PEACE- wholeness after the ravaging effects of sin. HEALED.

Who would ever have thought it watching this appalling execution.

Stop. Think! Peace with God because he has done everything.

More on this next week in the final 2 sections, and ask me afterwards if you have questions for me, but two questions for you as I close...

1) Have you seen the depths of your sin? There are several words in this section which magnify the horror of our rebellion against God. We don't like to talk about it, but each one of us has committed transgressions, sins, iniquities. v6, we haven't looked at it yet. It's one to memorise.

It's a wonderful verse and if you are in the choir for Handel's Messiah you will get to know it well, repeated in two halves for nearly 4 minutes. But it starts with incredibly bad news.

We all like sheep have gone astray. Handel puts it to pretty jolly music, because perhaps the sheep has no concept of the danger he is in.

We all like sheep have gone astray. Isn't that so accurate of your life and mine. We are sheep. We follow the crowd. We don't want to be different. But it's a disaster, and we are led into sin and every catastrophic consequence of sin that the Bible mentions. Suffering, sickness, and the punishment of God for our rebellion. The righteous wrath of God for our rebellion.

But then the second half of the verse, and that leads me to the second Q:

2) Have you seen the love of your Saviour? ▲ Luther used to read out bible to family. Gen 22. Wife Katie- "I can't believe it God would never treat his own son like that". "But Katie, luther replied. He did".

v6 again. The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Handel puts this in serious tones, as it dawns again what has to happen to get the sheep out of this mess.

God brings all our iniquity together upon Jesus. See Jesus plunged into darkness on the cross. Jesus facing the wrath of God on the cross. Why? Because of you, because of me. I can't imagine loving someone enough to let one of my daughters die in their place- I'd almost have to love them more than. But he did it. He did it for us. Have you seen the love of your Saviour? As you take communion tonight. Blood shed for you. Body ripped apart for you. Instead of you.

He did it for you. Are you trusting him? Let's pray.