

The Suffering Servant - *Isaiah 53*

Introduction:

- I want to begin with doing a bit of an experiment together. I'm going to list of a couple of professions, and I want you to think of the first kind of person that pops into your mind.
- What do you think of when I mention a firefighter? What about a police officer? What about a business man or business woman?
- All of your answers probably would have little differences here and there, but I bet at the core of it, you all thought of similar types of people.
- Well let me ask you another one. What type of person would you think of if I said the word saviour to you? What about messiah?
- Well, if you've spent much time in the church, especially considering the time of year, you probably just thought of a little baby in a manger. If you're thinking ahead a little bit you might have thought of a man hanging on a cross.
- But I can tell you one thing for sure, for the Israelites in Isaiah's day, when they thought about God's promised messiah, one word they almost certainly would not have used, would be "suffering".
- You see, the entire book of Isaiah is a warning to the people of Israel that if they don't change their sinful ways, and return to a life of obedience to God, there would be consequences and judgement.
- But along with the warning of judgement, there was also a promise of hope in the form of the Servant of the Lord who's described throughout the book and who would come as a saviour for God's people, to redeem them.
- And we saw some of the promise of what that Servant would do last week as we looked at Isaiah 42, and I want to look back at a bit of what we saw in those verses.
- In V. 1 it says,

"I have put my Spirit upon him;

he will bring forth justice to the nations." - Isa. 42:1b (ESV)

- Then in V. 4

*"He will not grow faint or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;*

and the coastlands wait for his law.” - Isa. 42:4 (ESV)

- And that’s just a few examples. You hear these words, and what do you begin to think this servant will be like? Maybe a great warrior, to come and battle against all of Israel’s enemies. Maybe a great king who will rule over God’s people, defeating whatever occupying nation was in power.
- You have this idea of a very powerful, and influential person to bring justice to the earth.
- Yet today, we’re looking at a passage which has been referred to as the chapter of the “*Suffering Servant*”. It gives us a bit of a different look into what this Servant of the Lord would be like, and shows us that this servant would actually be much different than the people expected him to be.
- Isaiah 53 is one of the more well known promises of Christ in the Old Testament, so it’s fitting that we would be talking about this passage in this advent series looking at promises of Christ from the Old Testament.
- And there’s two main things that I want us to see in this passage, and the first is that the appearance of this Servant of the Lord, is not what we expect it to be.

The Servant’s appearance is not what we expect:

- Like I said, coming from looking at some of the other descriptions of this Servant of the Lord from earlier in the book of Isaiah, you may have a picture of some great warrior or king, coming with lots of fanfare, maybe even an army to bring justice to the nations, and the earth. Yet I want to look at the way this Servant is described at the beginning of Ch. 53.

How the Servant is described

- The description starts in V. 2, and what we see here is honestly pretty shocking, and would have been especially so for the Israelites, considering all that they were expecting the Servant of the Lord to do for them. That they would be hanging all of their hopes on this individual to rescue them from the exile that they would face because of their sin.
- But look at what V. 2 says:

“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.” - Isa. 53:2 (ESV)

- That seems like a pretty far cry from the kinds of descriptions we were getting in Isaiah 42, and it kind of leaves us scratching our head a bit.
- In one passage this Servant is promised as a great deliverer who will bring justice to the entire earth, and yet here he's described as having no majesty or form that we should look at him. Nothing really appealing about him at all.
- So maybe in our minds we cut out all the fanfare and entourage that we would expect this Servant to have, yet we still expect him to be some great and powerful conqueror.
- Verse 3 continues the description, and it doesn't really get less shocking from here.

*“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.” - Isa. 53:3 (ESV)*

- I'm willing to bet when I asked you what you thought of when you heard the word saviour, those were not the words that would have first come to mind, and again, certainly wouldn't have been for the Israelites. This would have been so confusing to them.
- They were expecting this Servant to save them, but how could a man, like the one described in these two verses, actually do much to help them in their time of need?
- So we have a very shocking description of the servant here. Certainly not what we expect.

How the world responds to the servant

- And we see also in these verses how Isaiah tells the people they would react to this unexpected Servant of the Lord.
- Look back at V. 3. *“He was despised and rejected by men.” “Someone from whom men hide their faces.” “We esteemed him not.”*
- Then at the end of V. 4, *“We esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.”*
- Because this Servant would not come as the type of deliverer that the people wanted him to be, or expected him to be, Isaiah tells them that they will reject him.
- They will reject the saviour that they have been anticipating for so long. They won't even recognize who he is, because they're looking for someone different, a different type of person to be their hero and king.
- These are such sad verses really, because even as Isaiah is telling the Israelites about the one that God would send to rescue them, he's telling them that they would reject him.

- As we read even the first part of this passage, if you're familiar with much of the Bible it's pretty clear that this description is pointing us straight to Christ, both in the way that he is described, and the way that the world responds to him.
- We even see a message similar to this in the New Testament. Look at John 1:11:

“He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” - John 1:11 (ESV)

- Jesus was born in a manger. He was the son of a carpenter, he wasn't some great and well respected religious teacher. He wasn't some great conqueror, or political ruler like the people had hoped.
- Just as it says in Isaiah, he had no beauty that the people should desire him, and so he faced their rejection.
- And as we look at this passage, it's easy to wonder how the Jews in Jesus' day, who would have known passages like Isaiah 53 by heart, waiting anxiously for the coming of the Servant of the Lord, could have missed this?
- How could they read a passage like this, and still doubted who Jesus was? It seems so clear to us.
- Yet don't we do the same thing sometimes?
- The truth is that we all have in our minds an idea of what Jesus is supposed to be like, and the types of things he should be doing, and when things don't go the way we expect them to, we can tend to wonder if he's really a saviour worth following. We see so much brokenness in the world, and we begin to think “God should have fixed this by now. Why would he let something like a global pandemic happen?” Or maybe even in our own lives, we think “I've tried my best to follow Jesus, to obey him and not sin, yet I'm still struggling. Isn't Jesus there? Doesn't he care about what I'm going through?”
- Just like the Jews, we struggle when Jesus doesn't show up in the way that we expect him to.
- But there's a reason that the Servant of the Lord came in a way that people did not expect. It wasn't just to keep the people guessing, or try to trick them. There was a much deeper purpose to it, and that leads into the second major observation in this passage. The servant of the Lord did not appear as we expect because he came to do a work greater than we expect.

The Servant's work is greater than we expect:

- Even though the servant's appearance is not what we would expect for a hero or a saviour, the work that he came to do is so much greater than we expect.
- The Israelites in the days of Isaiah, and the Jews in the days of Jesus were waiting for this saviour to come and rescue them from oppression, and foreign occupation. That's what they

were expecting, and that's why they were expecting this Messiah to come as some great warrior or conqueror or political leader.

- But that's not what Jesus came to do. The truth is that the people had a much greater need than just political liberation. And it's a need that we all still have today.
- So as we read on in Isaiah 53 we see more of the work that this Servant, the work that Jesus actually came to accomplish, and it's something that is so much greater than the people expected.

What Christ has done

- And you begin to see what this work is in the beginning of V. 4, "*He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.*"
- Can I take a moment just to point out how amazing that is? This Servant, Jesus came to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows. Do you feel grief? Do you know the weight of grief, how it weighs on your heart? Christ came to carry those griefs, and bear those sorrows. They're not burdens you are forced to live with and walk through alone. "He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows".
- Then, as if that wasn't enough, V. 5 continues to tell us more of what the servant came to do.

"But he was pierced for our transgressions;

he was crushed for our iniquities;

upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,

and with his wounds we are healed." - Isa. 53:5 (ESV)

- Isn't that amazing? By his wounds we are healed.
- And V. 6 makes clear that this is something that we all need, it says:

"All we like sheep have gone astray;

we have turned—every one—to his own way;

and the LORD has laid on him

the iniquity of us all." - Isa. 53:6 (ESV)

- "*We all like sheep have gone astray*". That includes me, and it includes you too. We all have gone astray, and rebelled against God, just like the people of Israel that Isaiah was talking to as he wrote these words. And yet the Lord has laid on this Servant the iniquity of us all.

- And these verses make it clear why the Servant had to come in the unexpected way that he did, as a humble and suffering servant rather than a great conquering warrior, and it's because of what it would cost for him to take our sin onto himself.

What Christ's sacrifice cost

- Look at the words there. *"He was pierced for our transgressions" "He was crushed for our iniquities". "By his wounds we are healed"*. All of our iniquities were placed on him, and he took the punishment that we deserved. That's the work that he came to do. Not to topple governments, but to take our iniquities on himself.
- This is such a powerful picture of what Christ did for us on the cross, when he gave up his life for us.
- V. 8-9 give even more detail on this costly sacrifice.
- *"By oppression and judgement he was taken away", "He was cut off from the land of the living", "They made his grave with the wicked, although he had done no violence"*.
- For the Servant, for Christ to take our iniquities on himself, meant laying down his life, and dying a death he did not deserve in our place.
- It was such a weighty sacrifice.
- But as we think about that cost, I want to point you to something in V. 7:

*"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." - Isa. 53:7 (ESV)*

- Despite all that he had to endure on our behalf, despite all of the rejection that he faced from the people who wanted him to be a different kind of saviour, he laid himself down willingly, refusing to speak in his own defence. Christ did not go to his death to take our sins while kicking and screaming. He went willingly, out of love and obedience, to take our punishment onto himself so that by his wounds, we could be healed.
- Can you imagine the depth of love that would motivate him to do that? The depth of love that he has for you, to give up his life, and suffer the way that he did so that you could be forgiven?

What Christ's sacrifice accomplished

- As we move on to the end of the passage the final verses show us even more of what Christ's humble sacrifice actually accomplished.
- We've seen it already as we've gone through this beautiful chapter, but I want to take a moment to look at some of these verses before we finish off today.
- Look at V. 11

*“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.” - Isa. 53:11 (ESV)*

- Christ came to bear our iniquities so that, before a Holy God, you and I could be accounted as righteous. Something that never would have been possible on our own.
- When you've given your life to Christ, and placed your trust in him, when God looks at you, what he sees is his son, and the blood that Christ spilled on the cross to cleanse you from your sin.
- Then V. 12 says:

*“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 makes intercession for the transgressors.” - Isa. 53:12 (ESV)*

- *“He poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors, yet he bore the sin of many”*
- It is through Jesus' death that he is victorious. It is through his death that he is able to bring justice to the nations, and to the earth, not through some political conquest.
- He took the death he did not deserve to bear our sin on himself.

- As Christ hung, dying on the cross, he bore my sins. Every act of disobedience and rebellion that I have ever committed, or ever will commit was placed on him in that moment. And by his wounds I am healed.
- And if you've trusted in him, the same is true for you too.
- But we can rejoice that through Christ's sacrifice on the cross on our behalf, he also showed his power over death three days later when he rose from the dead, defeating the power of sin forever.
- Then at the end of the final verse, we're told that after his sacrifice on the cross, after his resurrection, and later his ascension, Jesus now makes intercession for the transgressors.
- Even now, Christ is in heaven making intercession for you. Wayne Grudem describes this as Christ praying on our behalf.
 - *“Jesus continually lives in the presence of God to make specific requests and to bring specific petitions before God on our behalf”.*
- How amazing is that? And this the Gospel. This is such good news.

Conclusion:

- So often we feel like we're beyond God's love. We wrestle so much with feelings of guilt and shame because of our own sin, and because of what we've done. We think that if God really knew what we were like, he'd want nothing to do with us. Have you felt that? Do you feel that right now? We think that he loves everyone else, but we've just gone too far.
- Well look again at what Christ has done. *He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was pierced for our transgressions. By his wounds we are healed. The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all, allowing us to be considered as righteous.*
- When we place our trust in Christ, we are set free from all of that guilt and shame that comes along with our sin. He took all of that when he gave up his life on the cross so that we could be forgiven.
- So I want to ask, have you placed your trust in Christ? Have you recognized your need for his forgiveness and given your life to him? If so, when you read this passage, you truly have a reason to rejoice, because of the love that has been given to you in Christ.
- If you haven't, I want to invite you to do that today. Whether or not Jesus is the kind of saviour you expect him to be, he is the one that we all so desperately need. *“We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquities of us all”* We all need this. So make the decision today to place your trust in Christ and receive the forgiveness that he made available through his death.

- So no, Jesus did not come to be some great conquering warrior, or political leader, to fix every problem we see with the world in the way that we want it to be fixed. He didn't come to do things exactly the way that we think or expect. He came, unexpectedly as a humble and suffering servant, to give up his life on our behalf to provide a solution to our true need.
- When you struggle to see where God is in your life, and wonder why things aren't going the way that you expect them to, remember this passage. That Christ has already accomplished a greater work, filling a greater need than any other we will face in life. The need to be reconciled to God, and because of him, no matter what happens to us here on earth, we have the hope of eternal life spent with him.
- So trust in Christ, that even when he works in ways that we don't recognize or expect, he's doing something greater than we could have asked for. Look at what he's already done. He laid down his life on the cross so that we could be saved. What greater gift could there be?
- Jesus came as the suffering servant that we did not expect, in order to accomplish a work that is greater than we ever could have expected.