

The Suffering Servant

It is Easter Sunday when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and proclaim victory over sin and death.

I think about three weeks ago, Satan probably thought he had successfully cancelled Easter. Some certainly thought so. At the President's daily press briefing on April 4, a reporter asked a question beginning with this statement, "For the first time in our nation's history, we won't be celebrating Easter."

As I recall, Satan thought he had cancelled the first Easter too. He failed then, and he's failed today.

I want to take you back this morning not just to the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. I want to take you back to a gospel written 750 years before it happened. I'm talking about the prophecy of Isaiah, who writes about Jesus' life, character, and ministry in amazing detail centuries ahead of time.

In the last half of Isaiah, there are four passages which are known as the "Servant Songs". They aren't actually songs, but like the Psalms, they are written in a poetic style and with a lyrical flair. These four Servant Songs present a poetic portrait of someone that through the prophet Isaiah, God calls "my servant." These four Servant Songs are found in sections of Isaiah 42, 49, 50, and 52 through 53. Our core verse this morning comes from the last of these Servant Songs.

Each Servant Song is a portrait of Jesus. They give very specific prophecies about the Messiah, and it is astonishing just how perfectly Jesus fulfills them. In fact, some of them didn't make much sense at all until Jesus.

Isaiah's prophecy is important because everything that happened to Jesus was a part of God's plan. God wasn't surprised. Jesus was caught off guard. Everything, from the mocking crowds, the sham trials, the beatings, to the horrific suffering on the cruel cross was expected. As the Apostle Peter preached in Acts 2, Jesus was, "*delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.*" It was all a part of God's plan, and He told us about it 750 years before it happened.

I. The Nature of the Suffering Servant

So let's look at Isaiah's Servant Songs and his portraits of Jesus. First, they show us the nature of Jesus. In Isaiah 53 we see a portrait of a suffering servant, and Isaiah describes his physical appearance. Isaiah 53:2b says,

*he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.*

We tend to put a lot of importance on physical appearance. But when God put on human skin and came as one of us, he didn't come as one of the "beautiful people." He never appeared in the Galilee Gazette's listing of the 100 most eligible bachelors. Hollywood and Church curriculum writers portray Jesus as a handsome figure with very distinctive features. He most likely was not the blonde haired Jesus of the Sunday School lessons of my childhood.

Jesus was evidently an ordinary, average-looking person. You could walk by him on the street and never give him a second look. And yet, all through scripture you find people are drawn to him. There was an incredible attractiveness about Jesus. His magnetism did not come from his good looks.

So, what was it that drew people to Jesus? Listen to how Isaiah 42:1-3 describes Jesus:

*Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
2 He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
3 a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.*

Can you sense the gentleness of this Messiah? He will be able to bring justice to the nations without even raising his voice. How unexpected and astounding that the King of the Universe would come with tenderness.

This description reminds me of the expression: He wouldn't hurt a fly. When ALMIGHTY GOD came to earth, he lived with such gentleness that he wouldn't break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick. No wonder crowds followed him. This gentle Messiah was entirely approachable. Little children ran to him. The outcasts, the lame, the sick, all flocked to him. And when they came, he ministered to them with a sympathetic heart.

Do you want to know how Jesus sees you with all your brokenness and baggage? Not with a wagging finger pointed in condemnation. Not with an angry scowl and a stern lecture perched upon his lips. He treats your wounds with tenderness. He heals you with gentleness.

HIS MINISTRY:

The Servant Songs also describe the nature of Jesus' ministry. The prophet predicts the amazing healing ministry of Jesus. Isaiah 42 tells us the Messiah will come to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

Isaiah also prophesied that Jesus' teaching ministry would be unparalleled. Isaiah 50:4 says:

The Lord God has given me

*the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.*

Morning by morning he awakens;

he awakens my ear

to hear as those who are taught.

No wonder Mark 1:22 says of Jesus, “*the people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.*”

II. The Obedience of the Suffering Servant

And yet with all this power and authority, Jesus was totally submitted to the will of God in everything He said and did. As Jesus prayed in the Garden, He came to pursue not His own will, but the Father’s will. His was a life of perfect obedience. This was an obedience that led Him all the way to the cross, and all of the pain and suffering through which that road would take Him. Listen to the lyrics of the Servant Song in Isaiah chapter 50:5-7

5 The Lord God has opened my ear,

and I was not rebellious;

I turned not backward.

6 I gave my back to those who strike,

and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;

I hid not my face

from disgrace and spitting.

7 But the Lord God helps me;

therefore I have not been disgraced;

therefore I have set my face like a flint,

and I know that I shall not be put to shame.

Just as Isaiah foretold, Jesus NEVER rebelled against the will of God. These words were written centuries before Jesus was beaten and mocked. And yet they not only tell us the specifics of what the Messiah would suffer, they also give us a glimpse into the very MIND and HEART of Jesus.

Jesus consciously offered his back to the whip of the Roman soldiers. He offered his cheeks to those who pulled out his beard. He offered his face to those who mocked and spit on him. And here are the very thoughts of Jesus – foretold hundreds of years before the events. *Because the LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I shall not be put to shame.* He was determined to obey the will of the Father.

We see here the Heart and Mind of the Messiah. Isaiah prophesied about a messiah full of obedience and courage and faith. And Jesus displayed all those qualities in abundance.

II. The Reason the Servant had to Suffer

Isaiah's Servant Songs not only tell us that the LORD's Servant would suffer, and how He would suffer, but most importantly, our core verse this week tells us WHY He had to suffer.

⁵ *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.*

His suffering was because of our sin. His persecution made for our peace. His hanging on the cross, brought our healing.

I want you to think a moment about the wounds of Christ. These were wounds he accepted willingly so that we could be healed. We sometimes see pictures or sculptures of Jesus hanging on the cross. His suffering is obvious in these pictures, but the reality of his wounds are hidden under an artistic gloss. We see little marks where the nails went in his feet and hands. We may see trickles of blood on his face from the crown of thorns. Even though the Romans crucified people without clothing, a piece of cloth is always added for modesty.

We're used to some very realistic blood and gore from Hollywood horror movies and medical dramas, but I'm not sure we could not bear to look upon the reality of the wounds that we remember in communion every week. Mel Gibson brought an uncomfortable measure of realism to Jesus' suffering when he made *The Passion of the Christ*. Isaiah foretold how hideous he would look after the terrible beatings he endured. He wrote in Is. 52:14, "*As many were astonished at you— his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind.*" Jesus looked inhuman.

When the Romans hit him in the face and smashed a crown of thorns on his head, those weren't playful slaps. We're talking about the kind of beating that broke facial bones and knocked out teeth. His eyes were probably swollen shut.

Realize that victims who received the 39 lashes from the Roman cat-o-nine-tails sometimes did not live through the experience. It was like being skinned alive. Most of Jesus' skin and outer muscles around his torso were turned to hamburger and hanging in ribbons. It isn't any wonder he didn't have enough strength to carry his own cross all the way to Golgotha. Jesus had to be a man of uncommon will and purpose to even make it to the cross let alone endure it for those horrible hours before he finally died.

The torture at the hands of the Roman Soldiers was so intense that he was severely dehydrated and probably in some stage of shock from blood loss. As Isaiah had predicted, He would have been unrecognizable.

If you are ever tempted to minimize sin, to shrug your shoulders and act like it isn't really that big of a deal, to laugh at it instead of cry, to excuse it instead of plead forgiveness, remember each one of the horrific wounds our Lord suffered is a graphic display of what your sin really is.

Sin is not some old-fashioned idea of morality thrust on the shoulders of a modern, more enlightened society. Sin isn't just one option in a buffet of opinions. Sin is an assault on the holiness and majesty of our Creator. It is a horrendous abuse of God's plan and purpose for our lives. Our sins wound us and they wounded Him. That's why Jesus suffered.

This brings us to the simplest, most basic definition of Christianity: Jesus died for our sins. *Romans 5:8 says, "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

Understand this. He didn't just die for sins— all the sins everywhere. He died for my sin. He died for your sin. This. Was. Personal.

The Bible presents us with a most basic but gruesome formula— sin=death. Romans 6:23, "*For the wages of sin is death.*" This isn't because God is mean, or unfair, or just doesn't want you to have a good time. It is because God is the Source of Life, and sin separates us from God. If you are separated from God, you are separated from the source of life, and therefore death is the end result.

Sin doesn't separate you from God because God doesn't like you or doesn't want you. He loves you so much that he willingly sent His Son who willingly went to the cross to die for you. Sin separates you from God, because He is pure, He is perfect, He is holy in every way, and even the smallest sin presents an incalculable distance between you who is impure, imperfect and unholy, and the God who is perfect in every way. If you have an infinite God who is infinitely perfect and infinitely holy, then even one sin represent an infinite distance between you and that God. It's basic spiritual physics.

There is nothing you can do to bridge that gap. No amount of goodness on your part can erase or undo the bad you've done. This is where the Suffering Servant comes in. This is where Jesus enters the picture. What we cannot do for ourselves, the infinite Son of God can.

What happens when you take the perfect Son of God, perfect and holy in every way just like His Father, and He dies in our place? He pays the price for our sin. What happens then? The sin is undone. The bad is erased. The penalty paid.

Jesus died for our sins. And this is the point where Satan thought he had won. The Son of God dead in the grave. Satan wins. Easter cancelled. Just one little problem. Jesus is the Author of Life. Creator of the universe. Sustainer of creation. He is perfect in every way. Death couldn't hold Him. The grave can't contain Him. Satan didn't lock Jesus up; Jesus just broke us all out.

The price for sin has been paid, death has been defeated, and we have hope of life eternal.

Jesus is alive! Jesus is alive whether we worship in a church auditorium or we are stuck in our cars. Jesus is alive whether we celebrate it or not. Jesus is alive whether we wear new Easter dresses, have egg hunts and big family dinners. Jesus is alive. That's simply a reality, a fact of

history. Nothing we say or do can change that fact. We can acknowledge that fact, we can enjoy that fact, we can celebrate that fact, we can even deny that fact, but one thing we cannot do is change that fact.

Church doors may be closed. Services may have changed, but you can't close the church and you can't cancel Easter.

One of the great ironies of the CV-19 crisis is that people are going to more church than before. Over the last three weeks I've talked to a number of people who instead of participating in one church service, joined in 2, 3 or 4 online services. So much for keeping people out of church. Satan, you lose again.

You may keep us from gathering in one place, but still we gather as one online. You may keep us from assembling under one roof, but we still assemble under dozens of car roofs. Satan, you lose again.

The *Wall Street Journal* runs an article a couple of weeks ago called "A Coronavirus Great Awakening?"ⁱ and it asks the question, "could a plague of biblical proportions be America's best hope for religious revival? As the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II approaches, there is reason to think so." Satan, you lose again.

According to the Pew Research center, the Coronavirus has Americans praying more than they did before.ⁱⁱ The spread of sickness has led to the spread of prayer, including 15% of those who claimed they seldom or never pray. Satan, you lose again.

Satan loses, because Jesus is victorious, and because He is triumphant, we all win. We are here this easter to declare confidently and without equivocation that Easter has not been cancelled and Jesus is alive!

ⁱ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-coronavirus-great-awakening-11585262324>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/03/30/prayer-coronavirus-church-faith-americans/>