

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

Isaiah 53

Leo Douma

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Here is a scene that most worries any speaker with an audience. It is especially worrying for a preacher who addresses the same congregation week after week. Is this man simply tired from a hard week or a late night? Or is it a non-verbal indicator that the man is bored. He has heard it all before. He is no longer being polite and pretending to look interested. He is has zoned out and is in la-la land. It could be a symptom of a spiritual issue. You see, one of the dangers of growing up in a church community, where we attend church week after week, is that we can take it all for granted. We know it so well; we have heard it so often: 'Christ died for our sins.' This truth hardly strikes us in the pit of our stomach anymore. Well, this morning, this morning, I don't want you to get too settled. In fact, I'd prefer you to be unsettled, uneasy, yes even somewhat disturbed. Today I want the truth to strike us 'in the pit of our stomachs.' Today we have come together not on a Sunday but a Friday. We are here to remember Jesus and his suffering on the cross. I want the message of the gospel to grip our being. We want to think on the immense agony of our Lord that no human words can describe. And we want to remember and deeply reflect on the fact that by his suffering we have forgiveness. In the awful disgrace has come awesome grace.

This message is so powerfully made clear in Isaiah 53. Already 700 years before Christ's crucifixion the prophet described the 'suffering of God's servant.' Isaiah has such a vivid vision that he set the prophecy in the past tense as if it had already taken place. In the first verse Isaiah says that the message of the 'suffering servant' was hard to believe. It was hard to accept. There is something very offensive about it. Note verse 1: *"Who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"* In other words, it's a message that God has to reveal by his Spirit as true. It is only by God's power, by his Spirit working in us, opening us up to it, that anyone can believe this message. You see there is a certain repulsiveness about the servant and his suffering. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1:24) that the proclamation of "Christ crucified" was a *"scandal (offence) to the Jews and folly (stupidity) to the Gentiles."* The Greeks thought that salvation via a crucifixion was unbelievable nonsense; just a stupid idea. Many today still feel the same. The Jews were scandalised

by the idea. Many today are still offended by what is described as a 'blood and gore' theology.

Yes, says Isaiah, the whole situation is not seen as one that is good and beautiful. It is not seen as something heroic and inspiring; something that would attract us and draw us in by the glory of it all. Rather there is a marked ugliness, something very repulsive, something that makes us turn our head away. As Isaiah put it (53:3) *"Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not"*. Isaiah paints a picture of someone who has no endearing qualities at all. His background was seen as being of no significance. Yes, the servant lived in the presence of God. But to the people he appeared as someone who had it all against him from the start. There was a hopelessness from the beginning. Isaiah says he was *"...like a root out of dry ground..."* In other words, he was battling before he even began. Put a seedling in some dry soil and forget to water it and what hope has it got? Physically, also there was an unattractiveness, even an ugliness about him: *"He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him"*. He had no stature to human eyes, no glory. He was not seen as having charisma or being handsome. It was not that people were drawn to him. Rather the opposite. He was seen as a humiliation. And his whole life was one of misery. (There is no record in the New Testament of Jesus ever laughing). *"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering."* No one wanted to know him. He was very familiar with sickness and disease. Jewish tradition speaks of the 'servant' as a leper; an ugly diseased leper. Yes, says Isaiah, when we see this suffering servant we are very inclined to want to walk away. The ugliness and shame, the suffering and pain, it leaves us with a sick and uneasy feeling.

Now even though Isaiah pictures the servant as one we want to walk away from he will not let us do that. He forces us to face this 'suffering servant' directly and see him with open eyes. Because you see he forces us to see in this suffering servant a reflection of ourselves! Yes, we may be inclined to rationalise the situation. We may suggest that this man is for some reason "stricken by God". We might like to think he has deserved his suffering for his own terrible wrong. But Isaiah forces us to see ourselves and our terrible failure towards God. "Surely" he says with prophetic grandeur in his message, "surely" it's our fault. Twice in each of the next three verses (verse 4-6) Isaiah drives home the devastating message: (4) *"Surely he took our infirmities and carried our sorrows... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities...we all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."* You see the servant appears in such a repulsive manner because he bears our sin. The ugliness, the shame, the suffering is not due to himself.

He is not a fellow sinner. He is not just sick or suffering as we can be sick or suffer. Isaiah describes sin by its consequences: the pain and ugliness, the disease and suffering are the result of sin. It is sin that the servant carries and makes him so repulsive.

Yet Isaiah describes him as being innocent (Verse 7&9) *"...like a lamb led to the slaughter ...though he had done no violence nor was any deceit in his mouth."* The powerful contrast Isaiah makes in verse 4-6 shows that the suffering servant is our substitute. Ours are the *"infirmities...and the sorrows"*. Ours are the *"...transgressions and iniquities"*. We *"...have gone astray...and turned each to his own way"*. It's not that we have been a 'bit bad'. We have all rebelled against God; *"... each has turned to his own way..."* and gone against the Almighty and his way. Yes, ours are the transgressions *but "...the lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all"*. The servant suffers in our place. We are the guilty, but he suffered.

He was *"pierced...he was crushed."* Isaiah uses very strong verbs here to describe the punishment inflicted on the 'suffering servant'. 'Pierced' means to 'stab right through'. 'Crushed' is like 'stomping on a bug or a little animal'. So, the words 'pierced' and 'crushed' describe a very violent death. Isaiah so clearly saw the reality of Christ's suffering and death in all its ugliness. In New Testament terms we know that Jesus was forsaken, betrayed, mocked, abused and slandered. He was classified with murderers. He was whipped, robbed of his clothes and dignity. He was physically pounded to the cross. He was left to hang with his wounds and slowly suffocated to death. He was deliberately surrendered to Satan and hell. And all the while God did nothing. He did not come to his son's rescue. In the screamed question of Jesus *"My God, my God why have you forsaken me"*, we see the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy *"...it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer."*

Here is the heart of this text. It's not just that God left the 'servant' to suffer. It was his 'will' that the servant suffer in this horrific way. It is what God wanted. The Hebrew in verse 10 is remarkable. Our NIV says *'It was the Lord's will to crush him'*. The Hebrew literally says, *"It pleased Jehovah to crush him"*. The word means to 'take delight in'. How could it 'please' God to put his son to death? How could it give 'delight' for God to put Jesus through the torture of the crucifixion, to put him through the utter agony of hell? Right here we see a tension that is at the heart of the whole Bible. The Bible makes clear that God takes great delight in revealing his glory. He takes great pleasure in the creation, in all the peoples of the world, experiencing the awesome wonder of who he is. His pleasure in our bringing glory to God is an act of generosity because when we worship God we find life in its fullest. The other thing that stirs the heart of God is

saving sinners. His love for people is without end. But, and here's the tension, these sinners *"have gone their own way"*, they *"fall short of the glory of God."* God deeply loves those who go against his glory. But now with the death and resurrection of Jesus this tension is resolved. God's justice and glory are honoured. And also, the penalty for human sin is paid for. At the cross, God's justice and mercy embrace. So on the one hand God's heart is torn to see his Son suffer so badly. But God's will is astonishing as he can turn terrible evil into great good. So in that sense God takes delight in the servant's suffering because through it comes such wonderful good. All of creation will be restored. All of creation will be bringing glory to God without sin ever again. So we see in these words a clue of how much God loves us. How passionate he is to be reconciled with sinners and to bring hope to the world. God was 'pleased' to crush Jesus to save us!

Yes, Jesus suffered because he was the sin laden substitute for us; forsaken and rejected by God and man. As church folk we know it so well. We have heard it so often. "Christ died for the sins of the many". But let's be clear about it. Let's call it for what it is. I did it to him. You did it to him. We do not really understand the nature of our sin and our offence against God until we see God crushing his son in hell. We think little of sin until we see the suffering servant and confess 'I did that to him'. We did that to him. There is a deep sense of confession in this text. True repentance is when we no longer try to squirm our way around and blame someone else. 'It wasn't our fault. It just happened'. No. *"He took up our infirmities, he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities...we have gone astray"*.

Yet amazingly when we confess that we share in his victory! We notice in Isaiah 53, in amongst the powerful words describing the suffering of Jesus, also some tender words of salvation. Look at them: *"...the punishment that was upon him brought us peace...and by his wounds we are healed."* Again, notice the contrast. The 'servant' is punished bearing God's wrath. We receive peace. All is well between us and God. We are reconciled. The servant is wounded. We are healed. Everything is restored. All is as it should be between the believer and God. We can say that in amongst the disgrace in this chapter is also grace. That is the wonder of 'Good Friday'. God has laid on Jesus *"the iniquity of us all"*. That is the cause of the repulsion towards the servant. That is why Jesus suffered, cursed on the cross. But because the 'iniquity of us all ...[is] ...laid on him' we do not bear it any more! Jesus bore it on the cross. And when he had suffered hell he said 'It is finished' 'tetelestai- paid in full...done'. And with his resurrection God said 'Amen! It sure is!' and his delight, his pleasure was full. So now the curse for sin has been dealt with. Now there is hope for all the dreadful effects of sin in our world to be overcome. To every person who confesses 'I did it Lord. I have turned from God. I

have caused your deadly pain. Have mercy on me' – Jesus replies *"My body broken, my blood shed for you, for the complete forgiveness of all your sin."* Don't ever take this gospel for granted. Don't just think that wasn't too bad a sermon. I didn't get bored. I didn't fall asleep. Get passionate. Get worked up. Be deeply moved. God was. God took utter delight in what his Jesus achieved on Good Friday. He was so pleased because his love for sinners is so deep.

Under an Eastern sky, amidst a rabble's cry, a man went for to die- for me.

Thorn-crowned his blessed head, blood stained his every tread; on he sped- for me.

Pierced were his hands and feet, three hours over him beat, fierce rays of noontide heat- for me.

Thus you were made all mine, Lord make me wholly thine, grant grace and strength divine- to me.

*'Under an Easter Sky'
Simpson/Meredith*