

THE SUFFERING OF THE SERVANT-SAVIOR (Isaiah 52:12-53:12)

The place was Lisbon, Portugal, a great capital city in southwestern Europe. Portugal lies between Spain to the east and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. Lisbon is a port city.

The date was November 1, 1755. It was All Saints Day, and the churches were packed with worshipers. That morning a series of earthquakes rocked the city. Thousands died in the rubble of the 30 churches that were destroyed. Many fled from their homes leaving their cooking fires unattended which caused numerous infernos throughout the city. Great crowds went to the beaches and the seaside seeking safety. Forty minutes after the first earthquake, a tsunami arrived claiming even more lives, as did a second wave, and even a third wave.

No one knows the final death toll. At least 30,000 souls perished in Lisbon that day. Some say the count was closer to 90,000. The new Opera House that opened six months before burned to the ground. The royal library that housed 70,000 volumes and hundreds of works of art was a complete loss. The royal hospital was consumed by fire and hundreds of patients perished.

It was one of the worst natural disasters ever recorded.

One who heard of the tragedy was a French philosopher named Voltaire. The catastrophe confirmed what he already believed, that God is not both benevolent and omnipotent. He wrote a work entitled, "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster." In it, he wondered why we suffer if God is free, and just, and good. The Lisbon disaster caused many to ask those same questions.

The 20th Century saw the horror of the holocaust in which 6 million Jews (men, women, and children) were brutally and senselessly slaughtered. As it was happening, many in those death camps cried aloud, "Where is God?"

Suffering is not confined to those big events, those huge disasters. Virtually no one goes through this life without experiencing suffering brought on by some kind of terrible pain. It might be a debilitating illness, or a broken love affair, or the death of a child or a mate, or economic deprivation, or a miscarriage of justice.

When those things happen, we wonder, "Where is God?" A related question is, "Does God even care?" John Stott made a wise observation. He wrote, "Pain is endurable, but the seeming indifference of God is not." If a person gets the idea that God doesn't care, he or she will have nothing to do with God, or the church, or the Bible, or religion. There are untold numbers of people who are on our church rolls, but because of the hurts they have experienced, they have concluded that God doesn't care, and they dropped out, and they have no intention of ever coming back.

It is unlikely that those who are in that position are listening to the sound of my voice because they wouldn't come to a worship service, and they wouldn't choose to log on to our Facebook page to watch this worship service, and yet this is the message they need to hear. That means you and I must take this message to them because we are here, and I think it is quite likely that God will put on our hearts the name of someone who needs to know that God really does care. For that reason, listen closely; take notes, and ask God to

use you to convey this message to your friend, your family member, your neighbor who needs to hear it.

Today, we are going to look at a powerful portion of Scripture. If I could preach from only one passage of Isaiah, the text we will look at today would be it. If I could preach from only one text in all of the OT, this would be it. In this passage we see a clear depiction of Jesus and what He came to do on our behalf. I can't think of any OT text where Jesus is more clearly portrayed.

Last week, I said that there are four Servant songs in the Book of Isaiah. We looked at the first of those last Sunday. Today, we come to the fourth and the last Servant song in Isaiah. The song begins in Isaiah 52:13 and runs through all 12 verses of chapter 53. The song is composed of five stanzas, and each stanza tells us something about this Servant-Savior. He is God's Servant, and He is our Savior. He is our Savior because, as God's Servant, He fulfilled the work God had for Him to do.

On several occasions Jesus talked about the fact that God had given Him work to accomplish. John, in His gospel account, uses the word *work* far more often than any other biblical writers. Here are some quotes of Jesus from John:

- “Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent Me and to accomplish His **work**’” (Jn 4:34).
- “For the **works** that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very **works** that I am doing, bear witness about Me that the Father has sent Me” (Jn 5:36).
- “Jesus answered them, ‘I told you, and you do not believe. The **works** that I do in my Father's name bear witness about Me’” (Jn 10:25).
- “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the **work** that you gave me to do” (Jn 17:4).
- Then, while He was on the cross, we read this in John 19:30, Jesus declared, “It is finished.” He fully accomplished the work God gave Him to do.

The word God assigned Jesus to do involved suffering. Jesus knows all about suffering. He was no stranger to suffering. He suffered for you and me. The five stanzas of our passage acquaint us with, “The Suffering of the Servant-Savior.” With very simple language, I am going to relate to you what this text tells us about the suffering Jesus endured.

The Suffering of the Servant-Savior Was on Purpose

Jesus' death on the cross was not an accident. It was not as though Jesus' ministry went south, and He had to salvage something good from bad, unforeseen circumstances. No. Jesus' death on the cross was intentional. It was God's plan all along. Revelation 13:8 speaks of the Lamb “who was slain from the foundation of the world.” Peter declared in Acts 2:23 as he preached to the crowds who had assembled on the Day of Pentecost that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.”

That is why in Isaiah 52:12 that we are told the Servant acted *wisely*. He wisely did the work the Father had for Him to do. God's will is always best even when it is hard.

Ray Ortlund wrote, "The first thing we notice about a crucified Savior is that He looks, well, crucified." Look at v. 14.

Did you see *The Passion of the Christ*, the movie made in 2004 and directed by Mel Gibson? It depicted as realistically as it could what happened to Jesus when He was flogged, mistreated by the soldiers and eventually crucified. By the time He died, He didn't even look human. The film critic Roger Ebert said that it was the most violent film he had ever seen, but Mel Gibson claimed the real passion of Jesus was even worse.

Jesus volunteered to undergo that extreme abuse because His goal was to sprinkle the nations. Sprinkling blood on the Mercy Seat was what the High Priest would do on the Day of Atonement. Jesus is not only our High Priest, but on the day of His crucifixion, He was also the sacrifice.

Because He did what He did, He is exalted.

The Suffering of the Servant-Savior Was with Great Shame

Look at the second stanza (53:1-3). Jesus' death was not only painful. That is a given. It was also shameful. The text, however is not dealing with just the death of Jesus. It is also teaching that His life was filled with rejection and shame. David McKenna wrote, "His background is so blighted that no one can believe that He would be the seed of royal blood in the lineage of Jesse and David."

He added:

Some scholars suggest that Jesus' birth to the virgin Mary scandalized the family and permanently scarred His name. Despite Joseph's gracious act of love to marry the pregnant woman and give her child a name, Jesus never lost the label as the illegitimate son of Mary.

Rumors about Jesus' questionable paternity continued to circulate during His public ministry when he was then in His thirties.

Look more closely at v. 3. Consider the words used to describe Jesus: *despised, rejected, sorrows, grief, esteemed not*. Jesus did not belong to the *in* crowd. He was not one of the beautiful people. He was not idolized. He did become popular for a short time, but when he proved to not be the kind of Messiah the people were looking for, they left Him. They turned on Him. Some of His family members thought He was nuts. The religious leaders wanted to kill Him, and one of His own close followers stabbed Him in the back.

Have you ever experienced the pain and humiliation of social rejection or disloyalty on the part of those you thought were your friends and had your back? Jesus knows all about that. He experienced it to a greater degree than you ever will.

Before he became a full-time pastor, Kevin Miller was the editor for *Leadership Journal*, a Christian magazine read mostly by pastor-types like me. He told about an experience he had back in the day:

One year when I was working in publishing, we had our annual staff Christmas Party. There were about 150 people in the room seated around tables that held six or eight people. The CEO came in right before the program was about to start, so there weren't many seats left.

He spied an empty seat at our table and came over. Very politely he said to the woman sitting by the empty seat, "May I sit here?"

She was waiting for someone from her department to come, and so she kind of scowled at him and said, "No, that's taken."

"Oh, okay," he said, and walked away.

Once he got a few feet out of range, we burst out laughing and said to the woman: "You just dissed the CEO!" She said, "I did? What?" She had worked there for only two weeks, and she'd never seen his photo.

And that's what happens when Jesus enters the world he's created. Most people say, "Sorry, don't recognize you. No seat for you. That one's taken."

You know what it is like to be the odd person out. You have felt the pain of rejection. You know the humiliation of not being accepted. Jesus feels your pain. He sees the wounds you have tried to hide. He's been there, too.

The Suffering of the Servant-Savior Was for Others

Let's explore the third stanza of this Servant song (53:4-6). Look at how often the personal possessive pronoun *our* shows up. We read about *our griefs, our sorrows, our transgressions, our iniquities*. Then, without using the word *our*, the prophet mentions *our peace* and *our healing*. Jesus addressed these needs of ours by being *stricken, smitten, afflicted, pierced, crushed, chastised, and wounded*.

Theologians use the word *vicarious* to speak of Jesus' suffering. The dictionary defines *vicarious* in this way:

"performed, exercised, received, or suffered in place of another." Theologians also use the word *substitute*. Jesus experienced this suffering and God's judgment against sin in our place and on our behalf. We find substitution language in 2 Corinthians 5:21.

In Hollywood whenever there is a scene that is too difficult or dangerous for the actor to do, the scene will be shot using a stuntman. This stunt man or woman will be dressed like the actor, and from a distance will resemble the actor. He or she is also called a body double. If you don't want your multi-million-dollar star of the movie jumping off a 10-story building, you use the stunt double who is trained to do that kind of thing.

I read a disturbing story about how the extremely wealthy in China can avoid prison terms by hiring body doubles. The news organization, Slate.com, originally broke the story of how the super-rich in China can get away with pretty much everything, including murder.

According to Slate, a wealthy 20-year-old named Hu was drag racing his friends, when he struck and killed a pedestrian. Although Hu received a three-year prison sentence, allegations arose that the man appearing in court and serving the three-year

sentence wasn't Hu at all, but a hired body double!

In another case, the owner of a demolition company that illegally demolished a home hired a destitute man and promised him \$31 for each day the "body double" spent in jail. In China, the practice is so common that there is even a term for it: "substitute criminal."

Jesus isn't a substitute criminal. He is a glorious Savior who took upon Himself our sin and God's judgment against that sin.

Look also at v.6. Let's pretend this book was a record of every sin I had ever committed. If that were the case, it would be a much bigger book. Regardless, when Jesus died, the record of my sin was laid on Him, and He bore my guilt, and He received the punishment I should have received.

Since He died for me, it is my privilege to live for Him. But even the life I live for Him is not done entirely on my own strength. We read these words in Galatians 2:20.

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

The One who died for me is now the One who lives in me.

The Suffering of the Servant-Savior Was without Cause

Look at vv. 7-9. This is the fourth stanza. Jesus died for the guilty, but He Himself was not guilty. He had done nothing deserving death. In the Jewish religion, whenever a sheep or lamb was sacrificed, it had to be a spotless lamb, a sheep without spot or blemish or defect.

In that regard, Jesus was our spotless lamb. He was the sinless sacrifice. A sinner can't save another sinner. Jesus, however, was sinless. He had been completely obedient to God. Not a single time had He disobeyed God. It would take the sacrifice of someone who was fully righteous to make others righteous.

When it came time to fulfill His Father's will and become our Substitute, Jesus never sought to defend Himself. All kinds of false accusations were made, but Jesus held His tongue. He was silent before the high court of the Jews. He was silent before Herod. He was silent before Pilate in that He did not try to refute the charges against Him.

Whenever someone makes a false accusation against you, what do you do? If you are like most people, you bristle and bow up, and you reply, "Why! I never said that. I never did that. That's a complete lie." We want to set the record straight. We don't want our character maligned or our reputation tarnished by a falsehood.

The problem is that we base our identity on what others think about us. That is a terrible trap because if others, for whatever reason, have a low view of us, that injures our self-concept, our self-image. That gives other people way too much power in and over our lives.

The Christian alternative is for us to derive our self-identity from what God says about us. Go back to what we read last Sunday. We read from Isaiah 43:4 where God said, "You are precious in My eyes, and honored, and I love you." The Creator of the

Universe, the King of all Creation says of you, “You are precious in My eyes, honored, and I love you.” What does it matter that the blockhead down the street doesn’t like you? What difference does it make if your co-worker has it in for you? What do you care that the gossip that is going around town makes you look bad?

You don’t need to defend yourself or do certain things to polish your image. God is crazy about you, and that is what matters. That is all that matters.

I said that our Savior’s suffering was without cause. That is only partly true. What I mean is that Jesus was innocent; so, He wasn’t being punished for anything He had done. There was a cause, however, for His suffering, and that cause was God and God’s plan. God uses suffering to move forward His good goals.

One of those good goals is our growth. Stott pointed out three images from Scripture that illustrate the positive effect of suffering—a father disciplining his children, a metalworker refining silver or gold, and a gardener pruning his vine. All three seem harsh, but all three bring about positive results. The child becomes well-behaved. The metal becomes pure. The vine becomes more fruitful.

We need to follow the example Jesus set for us in how we respond to suffering when that suffering is unjust. Peter tells us, “For God is pleased with you when, for the sake of your conscience, you patiently endure unfair treatment . . . if you suffer for doing right and are patient beneath the blows, God is pleased with you” (NLT—1 Peter 2:19, 20b).

We have been looking at the suffering of the Servant-Savior. We have seen that His suffering was on purpose. It was with great shame. It was for others. It was without cause.

The Suffering of the Servant-Savior Was unto Victory

Let’s read the last stanza of this Servant song (53:1-12). We could use two words to describe the message of these verses—worth it. Jesus would say that all the pain, all the shame, all the suffering was worth it.

These verses describe how God rewards the Servant for His obedience and suffering. He shall see His offspring. That is you, and me, and all believers. His days will be prolonged through all eternity. He is satisfied knowing that His redemptive work has resulted in many being declared righteous. Then, with the use of a military metaphor, God declares this Servant the victor.

The chapter ends with a past tense and a present tense—what the Servant did and what He is doing. He bore sin. That work has been completed. He is interceding. That work is still on-going. Jesus is praying for sinners like you and me.

Recently, a Franciscan University in Ohio posted a series of ads on Facebook to promote some of its online theology programs. Facebook, however, rejected one of those ads because it included a representation of the crucifixion. The monitors at Facebook said the reason for their rejection was that they found the depiction of the cross “shocking, sensational, and excessively violent.”

The university responded with a blog post which agreed with Facebook's assessment! The Franciscan University posted:

Indeed, the crucifixion of Christ was all of those things. It was the most sensational action in history: man executed his God. It was shocking, yes: God deigned to take on flesh and was “obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8). And it was certainly excessively violent: a man scourged to within an inch of his life, nailed naked to a cross and left to die, all the hate of all the sin in the world poured out its wrath upon his humanity.

They went on to say that it wasn't the nails that kept Jesus on the Cross but His love for mankind. The post concluded:

He was God; he could have descended from the cross at any moment. No, it was love that kept him there. Love for you and for me, that we might not be eternally condemned for our sins but might have life eternal with him and his Father in heaven.

Praise be to God for His indescribably gift! If you have never done so, receive God's great gift of Jesus today.