

Pierced for Our Transgressions

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

May 29, 2022

We've now reached the mid-point of our sermon series that we're calling *We Believe: Exploring Our Statement of Faith*. Last Sunday, Pastor Douglas spoke on Article 4, what we believe about the person of Jesus Christ. Douglas took us to that important passage in Matthew 16 where Jesus asked his disciples the pointed question,

“Who do you say I am?” (Matt. 16:15, NIV).

You'll remember that Peter, the unofficial spokesman for the group responded with the right answer,

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16, NIV).

Peter's confession was spot on pertaining to the person of Jesus Christ. But how well did Peter understand what the Messiah, the Son of the living God was sent to do? Where did Peter stand on the work of Christ? We get an answer to that question in the very next passage.

“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns”” (Matt. 16:21-23, NIV).

At this stage in his spiritual development, Peter (and really all of the disciples with him) didn't have a category to understand how God's promised deliverer, the Messiah might suffer and ultimately be put to death. If the Messiah was the one who would bring about God's promises of salvation, how then could he do that work if he were dead? Who could imagine a suffering Messiah?

But Peter wasn't the first to ask that question. If you have a Bible with you, turn with me to the book of Isaiah and to the very end of chapter 52. If you are using one of our blue Bibles in the back of the Sanctuary, you'll find our passage on page 1146. As you're turning to the end of Isaiah 52, I want to read for you Article 5 of our Statement of Faith, The Work of Christ.

We believe that Jesus Christ, as our representative and substitute, shed His blood on the cross as the perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins. His atoning death and victorious resurrection constitute the only ground for salvation.

Now you might be wondering, if today we're looking at Article 5 about the saving work of Christ at the cross, why are we turning to a passage in the *Old Testament*? Great question. If you're reading through either of the two books that we've been recommending to go along with this sermon series, *Evangelical Convictions* or *Concise Theology*, you'll notice that most of the Scripture references that are related to the doctrines found in Article 5 do come from the New Testament. I'll be pointing to a few of these later in this sermon. But this doesn't mean that the theme of the work of Christ is merely a New Testament doctrine. Without the Old Testament, the New Testament teaching on the work of Christ would not make sense.

In this passage, we're going to meet a figure often referred to as the Suffering Servant. This isn't the only passage in Isaiah where we read about God's Servant, but I would argue that all that Isaiah says about him culminates in this passage.

As we walk through this text, I want us to see four attributes of the Suffering Servant that are fulfilled in the work of Christ. This passage is often referred to as one of Isaiah's Servant Songs. We can think of it like one of the hymns in our church hymnal, a song with four verses or stanzas where each stanza reveals an attribute of the Suffering Servant. In fact, if I had the ability, I would try and turn this passage into a four-verse song that we could sing together on a Sunday morning.

Let me first read this passage in its entirety and then we will consider these four attributes that point us to the work of Christ.

[Read Isaiah 52:13-53:12]

What was God revealing about his Suffering Servant through the prophet Isaiah? What attributes would be true of this promised figure that God's people should be aware of?

First, Isaiah's readers are told that **the Suffering Servant will be a surprising Savior (52:13-53:3)**. In the first of four stanzas of this Servant Song, Isaiah reveals that God's promised savior will catch people by surprise. Whoever this servant would be, he would be an agent of God's saving work to reveal God's mighty power.

A few verses prior to this passage Isaiah prophesied that,

“The LORD will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God” (Isa. 52:10, NIV).

That same reference to *the arm of the Lord* shows up again in 53:1 where Isaiah asks on behalf of God's people,

“Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” (Isa. 53:1, NIV)

In other words, there is something surprising, something shocking, something unbelievable about the one through whom God would accomplish his saving work. From God's perspective, the promised servant will appear rather glorious. Look again at 52:13 where God says,

“See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted” (Isa. 52:13, NIV).

God knows that the one he will send will be successful in his work and he will be exalted in his mission. But even that language of being lifted up and exalted hints that this one would be someone special, someone, who shares attributes with God himself.

But there may be a double meaning here. When Jesus spoke of himself as the Son of Man and said that he would be lifted up, he meant it in two ways. Jesus knew that in his death he would be lifted up, that is lifted up as one nailed to a cross. But he also knew that he would be lifted up in the sense that he would rise from the dead, ascend into heaven, and sit down at the right hand of the Father. He would be lifted up in the sense that he would be glorified.

But that's not what it looked like from a human perspective. When God's servant comes, many people would find him to be unexpected, unattractive, and unwanted. Isaiah says in 52:14 that many will be *appalled at him*, and in the next verse that kings will be at a loss for words because of him. Why? Because Isaiah says in 52:14 that the servant's appearance will be *disfigured beyond that of any human being*. What he means there is not just that this one will be physically beaten and bloodied, but that he will experience such great suffering that many will conclude that he couldn't possibly be anyone of significance.

Similarly, Isaiah goes on in the first three verses of 53 to say that God's servant will be *unattractive*, not in the sense of his physical attractiveness, but in the sense that will seem ordinary. Most people won't see him the way God does because when he comes, he won't fit the stereotype of a heroic figure. Therefore, this servant will be unwanted. In 53:3 Isaiah says that he will be *despised and rejected by mankind*. As one who experiences great suffering, many will be embarrassed by him. Many will ultimately dismiss him as nobody of significance from nowhere special.

And this is exactly the kind of reception that the Lord Jesus received. John 1:10-11 (NIV) says of Jesus,

“He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:10-11, NIV).

Even in his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus was dismissed as a nobody.

““Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary, and aren’t his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren’t all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” And they took offense at him” (Matt. 13:55-57a, NIV).

And let’s face it, even Peter, who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God, rejected outright Jesus’s claim that suffering and crucifixion were necessarily part of the plan.

Maybe you’ve felt some of that same tension. Maybe you’ve wondered why God with all of his mighty power and with all of his infinite wisdom couldn’t find another way to save us from our sins that didn’t involve the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Some have even called into question God’s love with respect to the cross, and have found the idea of God pouring out his wrath upon his Son repulsive.

But there was no other way. Hebrews 2:17 (NIV) says of Jesus,

“For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.”

And Jesus himself explained to his followers after the events of his crucifixion and resurrection,

“How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” (Luke 24:25-26, NIV).

The Suffering Servant is indeed a surprising Savior.

As we come to the second stanza of this Servant Song, we find another attribute of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah’s prophecy. In 53:4-6 we learn that **the Suffering Servant will stand as our substitute (53:4-6)**. In these verses, Isaiah pulls back the curtain to show his readers why it is that God’s servant will experience such suffering. Though he was described in 53:3 as *a man of suffering, and familiar with pain*, (or as the KJV translates it, as *a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*), we learn in 53:4 that the servant bears *our* pain and suffering, *our* griefs and sorrows.

Isaiah wants to make sure that his readers don’t misinterpret the servant’s suffering. Don’t mistake his suffering as God’s punishment for *his* sins. No, as Isaiah prophesies in 53:5 that when God’s servant comes, he will be pierced for *our* transgressions and he will be crushed for *our* iniquities.

If you like to mark up your Bible, let me recommend that you underline or circle every instance of the plural pronoun *our* or *we* in 53:4-6. Let me read those verses again emphasizing those words.

“Surely he took up *our* pain and bore *our* suffering, yet *we* considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for *our* transgressions, he was crushed for *our* iniquities; the punishment that brought *us* peace was on him, and by his wounds *we* are healed. *We* all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of *us* has turned to *our* own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of *us* all” (Isa. 53:4-6, NIV).

If I counted right, that’s eleven uses of *our* or *we* in just three verses. With that emphasis, Isaiah wants us to understand two very important ideas.

First, we must recognize that we are a sin-sick, rebellious, and broken people. In our sin, we are transgressors, we are rebels, we have said, “No, God, I won’t obey you.” In our iniquity, we are guilty of turning away from the righteous way of God. Like stupid sheep, we aren’t just lost, we’ve foolishly wandered away from our Good Shepherd in search of greener pastures only to expose ourselves to danger. And as a result of living in a world broken by sin, we suffer the effects of illness, disease, and bodies that don’t work the way they were designed to.

But second, Isaiah also wants us also to see that the Suffering Servant, the one in whom God’s salvation is to be revealed, *he* will stand in our place as our substitute. But what does that mean? In what sense do we mean, as it says in Article 5 of our Statement of Faith that Jesus Christ is our *representative and substitute*?

Clearly, substitution is implied in the words that Isaiah uses in this passage. Look again at 53:5,

“But he was pierced *for* our transgressions, he was crushed *for* our iniquities; the punishment that brought *us* peace was *on him*, and *by his* wounds we are healed.”

Look also at the sense in which this servant will stand as our substitute. Isaiah was prophesying that when this Suffering Servant comes, he will be pierced, he will be crushed, and he will be punished *on our behalf*. The due penalty for our sin would be placed *on him*. And, as it says at the end of 53:6, the LORD God himself would be the one who will lay the iniquity of the straying sheep upon his servant.

What Isaiah is describing in this passage is something theologians call *penal substitutionary atonement*. You won’t find those words in this text, but you will find the

concept. Let me break those three words down for us so we can have a better handle on what *penal substitutionary atonement* means.

Let's start with the easiest of the three terms: *substitutionary*. We've all likely, at one time or another either served as a substitute, had someone else substitute for us, or we've been in a setting where one person stood in for another. We have subs in the classroom, subs on the playing field, and even subs in the pulpit. (Thanks again to Pastor Douglas for subbing in for our guest speaker last Sunday).

Now let's add a second term to the mix: *atonement*. If you've been reading J. I. Packer's book, *Concise Theology*, you may have already come across his definition of atonement in his chapter on Sacrifice (ch. 51). I like this definition because Packer defines it, well, *concisely*. Packer says,

“*Atonement* means making amends, blotting out the offense, and giving satisfaction for wrong done, thus reconciling to oneself the alienated other and restoring the disrupted relationship.”¹

So how does a sinner make amends with God? How can they blot out their offenses or make satisfaction for wrongdoing? Our human tendency is to think that we can atone for our sins by balancing out our misdeeds with good works. We also may try to appease God's displeasure by performing religious rituals. But that way of thinking misunderstands the nature of sin and God's attitude toward it.

This is where the word *penal* comes into play. In the sports world, when a player violates one of the rules, that player, and thus the team is penalized. He or she might need to sit in the penalty box, the team might be penalized with a loss of a down or yardage, or the opposing team might be granted a free throw or a penalty kick.

But when God's image-bearers rebel against their creator, the penalty for sin is far greater. Paul states it simply in Romans 6:23,

“For the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23a).

The just penalty for sin is eternal separation from a holy God—death. We saw that a few Sundays ago when we looked at Article 3 of our Statement of Faith regarding sin and the human condition.

So let's put those three terms back together: *penal substitutionary atonement*. As sinners, we are alienated from God and we are under his wrath. We have no ability to make atonement for ourselves. What we need is a substitute. We need something to

¹ *Concise Theology*, J. I. Packer, p. 150.

stand in our place and pay the penalty for our sin that we cannot pay. Only then can we be reconciled to a holy God.

Under the old covenant, God's people offered up sacrifices of atonement as a way of being reconciled to God. An animal was sacrificed as a substitute; its blood was shed in place of the sinner. But how could an animal ever be a sufficient substitute for a human being? Hebrews 10:4 (NIV) states the obvious,

“It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4, NIV).

No, we need someone who can stand in our place as a *perfect* substitute, one who can pay the penalty due us by dying the death we deserve. But paying the penalty by itself doesn't make a sinner right with God. This perfect savior would also have to be willing to substitute his own perfect life of obedience for ours, thus crediting his righteousness to us.

Of course, in the New Testament, we see this act of penal substitutionary atonement fulfilled in the saving work of Jesus Christ. But what I want us to see today is that the promise of such a Savior was prophesied in Isaiah's Suffering Servant.

Let's look at stanzas three and four of the Isaiah 53 Servant Song. In the middle of the passage, we learn that **the Suffering Servant will die the death that we deserve (53:7-9)**.

Look how God's Servant, fulfilled in Jesus Christ is described in verses 7-9. He is like a lamb that is led to the slaughter. But does this lamb go to its death kicking and screaming, exclaiming to all how unjust his treatment is? No. Isaiah says of God's servant that he did not even open his mouth.

Listen to how Matthew describes Jesus's appearance before Pilate after his arrest.

“Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” “You have said so,” Jesus replied. When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, “Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?” But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor” (Matt. 27:11-14).

Jesus, the Suffering Servant willingly went to the cross in order to die the death that we deserve.

Isaiah continues to speak about God's Suffering Servant in 53:10-12. In these verses, Isaiah shows us that **the Suffering Servant will make many righteous (53:10-12)**. This

section is still rich with language related to substitution, atonement, and paying our sin penalty. But what I really want us to see is there in verse 11 where God says,

“By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many” (Isa. 53:11, NIV).

Oh, how I wish I had more time this morning to dive deep into the doctrine of justification. The NIV is right to translate the end of this phrase as he *will justify many*, but I really like how the ESV translates this phrase,

“By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous” (Isa. 53:11, ESV).

What this means is that Jesus Christ, the Suffering Servant not only bears our guilt and dies in our place, in exchange, his righteousness is credited to us and we are legally declared to be not guilty before a holy God.

The Apostle Paul says it this way,

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21, NIV)

We, of course, will continue to struggle against sin and should seek to grow in holiness as long as we live, but our righteous standing before God will never change. We are declared not guilty in him.

But let’s not overlook those two little words: *in him*. You see, all that Jesus Christ has done as the Suffering Servant, he does for those who are *in him*. Isaiah’s prophecy warns us that not everyone will respond in faith to the Suffering Servant. We know that many people will persist in their rebellion and they will dismiss their need for a Savior.

Jesus saw it first hand in his day. Speaking to a group of religious leaders who knew Isaiah’s prophecy but who failed to connect the dots, Jesus said to them,

“I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins” (John 8:24, NIV).

I’ll leave us with the question that Isaiah posed to his original readers, and ultimately is one that is posed to us,

“Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” (Isa. 53:1, NIV).

Let’s pray.