

July 25/26 – Didn't See That Coming

SERIES RECAP

This is the final week of our series “Didn't See That Coming,” looking at the prophetic words of Isaiah 40-55.

As we've covered, these passages were originally written for the Israelites when they were **in exile in Babylon**. It was an awful and humiliating time. They had lost their national and spiritual pride, their world was turned upside down, and they were starting to wonder if God - Yahweh - had abandoned them.

Into that context, the prophet Isaiah spoke with a crystal clear message: **God is still working**. Although, not in the ways we might expect.

Last week I introduced a reoccurring “character” in this portion of Isaiah - the so-called “**servant of God**.” There are four prophecies - poems - about this servant, and as you read them you see some common themes.

First, the servant is the exact opposite of what you'd expect from someone working for the God of the universe. Instead of power and might, the servant is **humble, gentle, peaceful...**

In a world filled with powerful people, this servant is kind of a nobody. And throughout these four “servant songs,” he faces humiliation as humanity essentially rejects and despises him.

Despite that rejection, though, the servant stays faithful to the “justice” of God. As I mentioned last week, that **justice** is another way of talking about God's intentions for humanity coming to fruition - the world made right.

Healing, peace, freedom, abundance, and harmony... A return to Eden.

The first servant song says:

Isaiah 42:4

He will not falter or lose heart until justice prevails throughout the earth.

In other words, by giving his life to this, the servant - this humble, rejected nobody - is **ultimately successful** in his mission. God's justice *does* prevail through him. Just not in the way we might expect.

Now, as I said last week, **Jesus is the perfect fulfillment** of these prophecies. When we think of his sacrifice on the cross, and the life that he lived, it's obvious that he is the quintessential servant of God.

But I also made the point that when you consider the original context of these passages of Scripture, you realize that in some ways these poems don't just describe *a* servant of God. They describe *any* servant of God, including you and me.

If we dedicate *our* lives to God's justice - to healing the world in Jesus' name - we're going to face some of the same challenges and rejections that he did. As the Apostle Paul puts it, we are going to "share in [the] suffering" of Christ.

All that to say, as we meditate these servant songs of Isaiah, we can listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit not just giving us insight into our savior, but calling to *us* as we give our *own* lives to healing this broken world.

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

Today, I want us to zero in on the fourth of these servant songs, which is probably the most familiar to us. But I'm hoping that with this **new context** on these poems in mind, we're going to be able to take away some fresh insights on these words.

So please turn to **Isaiah 52:13** and let's read.

Isaiah 52:13-53:3

See, my servant will prosper;

he will be highly exalted.

But many were amazed when they saw him.

His face was so disfigured he seemed hardly human,

and from his appearance, one would scarcely know he was a

man.

And he will startle many nations.

Kings will stand speechless in his presence.

For they will see what they had not been told;

they will understand what they had not heard about.

Who has believed our message?

To whom has the LORD revealed his powerful arm?

My servant grew up in the LORD's presence like a tender green shoot,

like a root in dry ground.

There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance,

nothing to attract us to him.

He was despised and rejected—

a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.

We turned our backs on him and looked the other way.

He was despised, and we did not care.

Yet again, right off the bat we are introduced to this very odd concept that the servant of God - the one working for the God of the universe, remember - is **rejected by humanity**.

Verse 15. "He will startle many nations." In other words, he's not just rejected by Israel. He's rejected by the world.

I love some of the **poetic imagery** here. Look at verse 2. "My servant grew up in the Lord's presence like a tender green shoot, like a root in dry ground." Nothing beautiful about him. Nothing majestic.

What is Isaiah getting at here? Well, remember the world *behind* the text: this was **an agrarian society** - they dealt with crops and trees all the time - so this

image would have definitely spoken to people.

Sometimes trees, when they're getting old or responding to an injury, they'll grow what's called a "**sucker**" - a new branch that comes out of nowhere. They can even grow out of the stump of a fallen tree. Which is really cool.

But if you're trying to keep a tree pruned and tidy, suckers can be kind of annoying.

On my farm there a bunch of really huge and old **catalpa trees**. [Image: catalpa] They've got these funky branches and huge leaves and they grow suckers like crazy.

I recently pruned a low catalpa branch to clear out an overgrown area and literally within a *month*, there was a brand new, 5-foot-tall branch growing right where I cut it. [Image: sucker] I cut *that* off a few weeks ago and these are the ones which have grown back since.

That's how humanity sees this servant of God - this tender green shoot. **An unwanted, unexpected, insignificant nuisance.**

But there's another layer to this imagery. And this is when the world *of* the text comes in (how passages and language connect across Scripture).

Because if you go all the way back to Isaiah 11 - way before the Babylonian exile - there's another prophecy about a young branch - a sucker. Listen to this:

Isaiah 11:1-2

Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him.

Now, "David's family" is code for the line of Israel's kings. This new branch,

according to Isaiah 11, is one from that family who will bring **God's justice** to the world.

But Isaiah 11 says that the branch is growing out of a stump. In other words, the tree of Israel's kings had fallen. It was destroyed. Hope for Israel's restoration would come from a humble little sucker growing out of the stump.

So, when you put those **two layers of meaning** together in Isaiah 53 - the unwanted sucker and the new growth from the fallen tree of Israel, what do you see?

You see the prophet suggesting that through this servant of God, Yahweh *is* working to fulfill his purposes. He's *going* to restore his people and heal this world. Even in the midst of the Babylonian exile, **the tree of Israel will bear fruit again...**

But it's going to happen through this tiny green shoot, which everyone else sees as an just unwanted sprout.

Verse 3. "We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care."

God's restoration was on the move, but nobody saw it coming.

SACRIFICE

(I love biblical poetry because there's always something to chew on!)

But let's keep reading. There's more to this prophecy of the suffering servant.

Isaiah 53:4-9

Yet it was our weaknesses he carried;

it was our sorrows that weighed him down.

*And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God,
a punishment for his own sins!*

But he was pierced for our rebellion,

*crushed for our sins.
He was beaten so we could be whole.
He was whipped so we could be healed.
All of us, like sheep, have strayed away.
We have left God's paths to follow our own.
Yet the LORD laid on him
the sins of us all.
He was oppressed and treated harshly,
yet he never said a word.
He was led like a lamb to the slaughter.
And as a sheep is silent before the shearers,
he did not open his mouth.
Unjustly condemned,
he was led away.
No one cared that he died without descendants,
that his life was cut short in midstream.
But he was struck down
for the rebellion of my people.
He had done no wrong
and had never deceived anyone.
But he was buried like a criminal;
he was put in a rich man's grave.*

Ok. "It was our weakness he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down."

This is a provocative idea, because in the ancient world, there was a pretty common mentality that if you were suffering in some way - disease or hardship - you must have **done something to deserve it**.

"We thought his troubles were a punishment from God."

But here, that's not the case. This servant, who is being pierced and crushed and beaten and whipped, does *not* deserve it. Not only does he not *deserve* it, but *we do*. Look at verse 6. "The Lord laid on him the sins of us all."

What this servant is experiencing is the consequences of *our* rebellion.

It's like **the Picture of Dorian Gray**. Are you familiar with that story? It's an old novel from the 1890's in which a young, wealthy aristocrat has a portrait made of himself. He sells his soul so that the painting ages instead of him.

As the story goes on he lives a lavish, sinful, selfish life, while the portrait ages and warps and gets corrupted because of his evil choices.

In Isaiah it's as if the servant of God is that portrait - a portrait of us. As we corrupt our lives by sin, **he is the one who bears the effects**.

Now, again. Obviously, the most *perfect* fulfillment of this idea - the one who shows us what it means to bear the sins of others - is Jesus. As it says in verse 8 and 9, he was "unjustly condemned," "he had done no wrong," he "never deceived anyone."

Jesus was **the ultimate suffering servant**, because he was sinless - perfectly in line with God's intentions for the world. And yet he willingly went to death as a result of humanity's sin. He was the ultimate sacrificial lamb, as it says in verse 7.

I talked about **the sacrificial system** back in February during our Return to Eden series, and brought up Isaiah 53 then, so feel to go back and watch if you want to go deeper.

But put simply, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus - he made it possible for humanity to experience not just *forgiveness* from sin, but freedom from the *power* of sin.

That's what the Holy Spirit within us makes possible.

So, Jesus is the ultimate suffering servant. This passage is absolutely about him.

But, as I said last week, there is a sense in which **these passages are about all servants of God.**

No, we don't atone for the sins of humanity... I mean, we're sinners too. We can't.

But think about what happens when you choose to be a servant of God - when you dedicate your life to following Jesus - to model your life after his. And to actually *give yourself* to healing this broken world.

For one thing, it means **descending into the brokenness** around us. We don't just lock ourselves in a church building and watch the world go to hell in a hand basket. No. We dedicate ourselves to spreading hope and life and justice wherever we go.

We bring the light of Christ - the gospel - into **dark places**. That's the whole point!

But if we're going to do that - if we're going to rub shoulders with broken people - it's going to be painful at times. I talked last week about the low-grade fever of sadness...

If you've ever loved someone dealing with an addiction, you know what it's like being **weighed down by someone else's sorrows**.

If you've tried spreading hope or light in a dark place, you know what it's like to be **mocked or ignored or despised**. Just an annoying green sucker growing out of a tree.

And if you've tried throwing yourself onto the gears of injustice, taking a stand against evil or corruption or exploitation, you know what it's like to be **pierced, crushed, and beaten** by the dark forces of this world.

As much as I wish following Jesus was one long, happy victory march, we know that as long as this world is still broken, we are walking a path

of self-denial. The low-grade fever of sadness is ours to bear. And it's not an easy road.

Jesus said it himself:

Matthew 7:13

You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus is not easy. So what hope is there for the suffering servants of God? Well, Isaiah's not quite done. Let's read how this servant song ends.

SATISFIED

Isaiah 53:10-12

*But it was the LORD's good plan to crush him
and cause him grief.
Yet when his life is made an offering for sin,
he will have many descendants.
He will enjoy a long life,
and the LORD's good plan will prosper in his hands.
When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish,
he will be satisfied.
And because of his experience,
my righteous servant will make it possible
for many to be counted righteous,
for he will bear all their sins.
I will give him the honors of a victorious soldier,
because he exposed himself to death.
He was counted among the rebels.
He bore the sins of many and interceded for rebels.*

Look at verse 11 one more time. "When he sees all that is accomplished by his

anguish, he will be satisfied.”

How could this be true? How can a servant of God, an unwanted green shoot, chewed up and spit out by the world, unjustly accused, giving his life for those who reject him... **how can that servant be satisfied?**

How can you? I just talked about how hard it can be to follow Jesus. What it costs us to try and heal this broken world in his name.

The Israelites were in an exile far from home that lasted for a generation. No temple, no power, no hope...

We're in the middle of a pandemic where everything is turned on its head. Our country is full of rage and confusion and the Church is losing its voice.

How can we be satisfied when it seems that serving God sometimes is like shouting into the wind? When it seems like our work is futile?

I believe the answer comes in the line right before what we just read - verse 10. “The Lord’s good plan will prosper in his hands.”

The Lord’s good plan.

From the very beginning of this series the big idea has been simple: **God is still working.**

This is an **encouragement** for us in a difficult time just as it was for the Israelites, but **it’s also a reminder.**

We are not the ones who heal this world. It’s not up to us. We are simply **instruments** of a God making all things new. We are his servants.

And as I’ve said before, God’s playing **four-dimensional chess** here. His ways are beyond our ways. I didn’t see that coming.

- He takes **humiliation** and turns it into victory.

- He takes **sacrificial generosity** and turns it into overflowing abundance.
- He takes **small acts of love and kindness** and uses them to shatter systems of injustice.
- Or to put it another way, he takes a **tender young shoot** and grows it into a mighty tree.

We don't know how God will use our feeble acts of love and justice and selflessness to bring his plans to fruition. We don't know how he will multiply our obedience for generations to come.

All we know is that **the Lord's good plan will prosper in the hands of his servants** if we are willing to pursue it no matter the cost.

Why? Because we're not the ones working. It's Christ working through us. As the Apostle Paul said,

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

I don't know **what you're feeling** right now as this pandemic grinds on, as the recession begins to bite, as our national discourse descends into chaos... Lost, confused, apathetic, hopeless, angry?

Whatever you feel, I hope Isaiah's words to the exiles come as **an encouragement to you**.

That if we dedicate ourselves to God's purposes in this world, if we pursue our destinies in Christ, then **the Lord's good plan will prosper in our hands**.

God will heal this broken world through us and at the end of the day **we will be satisfied**. [PRAY]