

## Our God Saves: Believe

Suffering Ends Through Suffering

Isaiah 52-53

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*Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 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. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand (Isa. 53:1-10, ESV).*

In our Western culture, there is nothing positive about the term “scapegoat.”

We think of the word as the way that one person deflects blame and puts it on another. Our familiarity with the concept is nearly entirely negative. The reason, of course, is that scapegoating has been used historically to describe the way that someone is blamed unjustifiably in an attempt by another person to get away with something for which they should be blamed.

To be a “scapegoat” is not positive.

But do you know the origins of the term? It wasn’t always negative. In fact, in the Old Testament the concept of a scapegoat was celebrated. It was the emotional climax of the most important celebration during the Jewish year – The Day of Atonement.

Somewhere between mid-September and mid-October the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the sins of the people. According to Leviticus 16, the high priest first made atonement for his sins by sacrificing a bull. Then he would collect two goats and cast lots. One goat was sacrificed, and the blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat on top of the ark of the covenant

in the Holy of Holies. But the other goat remained alive. The priest would lay his hands on the head of the goat as he confessed the sins of the nation. And then the goat would be led out into the wilderness. It was the high point of the annual celebration and a deeply moving symbol of the spiritual reality of the sins of God's people being taken away. It was the scapegoat, and it was an amazing and moving moment.

To get this located in your emotions, you might think of it like the feeling of patriotism and gratefulness for freedom as an eagle soars around Lucas Oil Stadium. Or the gauntlet that wedding guests form as a bride and groom leave for their honeymoon.

But the scapegoat image was even more meaningful because it symbolized the freedom of atonement. The transfer of guilt was celebrated, and it became central to the identity of God's people. The people of God were defined by redemption. They were delivered from judgment by sacrifice.

This theme—deliverance through sacrifice—not only defined their worship, but it was also their identity. And that truth applied to their lives in ways that they didn't fully understand or even appreciate.

So, when Isaiah desires to encourage God's people when they think about exile, he points them back to their deliverance through their future deliverer. In Isaiah 52-53 we see this Old Testament prophet give God's people hope through different kind of deliverer – the ultimate scapegoat.

Looking back through the lens of history, these chapters show us the early predictions about Jesus. And we see not only fulfilment, but we can also see how Jesus's suffering became the basis for hope. This text highlights two foundational truths related to deliverance and the deliverer.

### **1. Deliverance: Living with Expectant Hope**

Once again Isaiah returns to the theme of encouragement and hope. Remember that this section, chapters 40-55, are designed to bring comfort to God's people. Isaiah has in mind the time of Babylonian exile when the people of God will wrestle with troubling questions and exhausting tensions.

I would guess that you can relate. Perhaps you find yourself overwhelmed with difficulties and troubles such that you are battling unbelief in a unique way right now. We seem to be in a season of history with all kinds of opportunity for fear. How should God's people think during times like these?

52:1 begins with a "wake up" call. Isaiah is reminding them about who they really are. They need a dose of spiritual recalibration. That's why he tells them to "put on strength," "put on [their] beautiful garments," in verse 1 and why he says to "shake yourself from the dust...and be seated" in verse 2. This is an invitation to gain a different perspective about themselves and their situation.

Anyone need that today? Anyone discouraged today? Anyone weary? Anyone depressed? Anyone anxious? Anyone disheartened? If you are a Christian, this text is designed to help God's people to think about bigger and encouraging realities.

However, it's really important to understand the basis for this hope. It's rooted in who God is and what he has done.

In verses 3-5 God assesses their situation. The people do not have the power to redeem themselves. But that doesn't mean they are without hope! They just can't hope in themselves. They need to look to deliverance from God himself. Verses 6-7 sing!

*"Therefore my people shall know my name. Therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here I am." How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns" (Isa. 52:6-7).*

The text continues this theme but puts it in the voice of the watchman as they look for the coming deliverance that God will bring. Verses 8-9 expectantly look for the day when they will see their deliverance with their own eyes. Isaiah even invites the "waste places" of Jerusalem to sing because "the Lord has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem" (v. 9).

Don't miss this! Isaiah calls upon the places that look like a disaster to break into song because God has a long track record of redeeming brokenness. As one of the songs that we sing says, "he turns graves into gardens, bones into armies, seas into highways. He's the only one who can." So, Christian can I invite you to sing over your waste places, today. Just a reminder that when Lamentations says, "his mercies are new every morning" (Lam. 3:22-23) that was proclaimed over something that didn't look merciful: the destruction of Jerusalem.

What's more, we see the expectant hope of God's strength. Don't miss verse 10! The Lord bared his holy arm so that all the earth sees the salvation of God.

Finally, the deliverance of God's people is described in Exodus-like terminology. In verse 11, the people are commanded to depart and to "go out from the midst of her...." The people are invited to look for a day when they shall be delivered, but notice the connection between their exodus and God's protection.

They are not going to flee. They won't be in a hurry. They will be protected at the front and the rear by the presence of the Lord:

*For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight, for the LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard (Isa. 52:12).*

So, let me ask if you are a Christian, do you live with expectant hope? Do you live with God's deliverance in mind? Isaiah invites the people of God to wake up and get up! Both steps take faith. To wake up to who you really are in Christ and to live emotionally in light or what is true about you

in Christ takes faith. But it also takes faith to get and live every day in light of these promises. It takes faith to follow Jesus in the dark night of exile.

This text reminds us of Romans 8:35, 37:

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?" No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Rom. 8:35, 37).*

Notice that Paul says "in all these things." Part of the way God delivers us is by providing expectant hope before and during the exile.

But what's really amazing about this text is that it connects directly into a person who is going to make all of that happen.

## **2. Deliverer: Embracing a Suffering Servant**

What follows in 52:13-53:12 is an incredible text that highlights the characteristics of a deliverer who will lead God's people to deliverance by his own suffering. Throughout this passage, Isaiah bounces back and forth between statements about blessing and statements about suffering.

God's deliverance for his people from suffering comes through a suffering servant.

We begin with a statement of victory in 52:13—this servant will act wisely and he will be high, lifted up, and exalted. That seems to fit the victorious theme of the previous verses. God's people will be victorious, and the deliverer will be exalted. That makes sense.

But what follows must have been mind-blowing.

### **Seven Characteristics:**

#### **1. He was appalling**

Verse 14 identifies that people will be astonished at the servant. The Hebrew word means to be dreadful or to be appalled. And the reason for the astonishment is because his appearance is extremely marred. In fact, his appearance is so disfigured that people might wonder if he's even human because of how he looks. So, this is a deliverer who acts in a way that doesn't make sense.

Yet it's the path of victory, and verse 15 shows us this clearly. Many were astonished at him, but he will "sprinkle" many nations. The deliverer will provide cleansing and atonement on a scale that doesn't fit with what human beings see with their eyes.

#### **2. He was unimpressive**

Chapter 53:1-2 continues this theme but not from a position of physical malformation but from a position of being shockingly unassuming. He's described as a young plant, a root out of dry ground with no form, majesty, or beauty.

### 3. He was rejected

The servant isn't popular. In fact, he's described in 53:3 as despised, rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. People turned away from him, and he was not esteemed highly. But even more, he bears the griefs and sorrows of others, and people believe him to be smitten by God and afflicted. He was rejected by men and by God.

### 4. He was afflicted

Skip ahead to verse 7. The servant suffers deeply. He's oppressed and afflicted. And he does so willingly and without protest.

### 5. He was treated unjustly

All of this suffering took place even though he was innocent. Verse 9 states it clearly: "he had done no violence and there was no deceit in his mouth." What's more, he embraced it willingly. He suffered unjustly on purpose.

When you put all of this together, it's not a natural picture of human strength. We tend to value leaders, rescuers, and heroes who are attractive, popular, impressive, successful, and victorious. That's why we are impressed with beauty, fame, wealth, and acclaim. But central to Christianity is deliverance by a completely different means. At the very foundation of what Christianity is all about is a complete inversion of how we normally think and operate.

That's one of the reasons that it's a miracle that anyone comes to faith in Jesus! It's why Jesus described it to Nicodemus as being "born again" in John 3. It's why faith is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8-9). It's why Paul said that the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:14). An appalling, unimpressive, rejected, afflicted, and unjustly treated deliverer doesn't make sense.

Unless you understand the concept of atonement and a scapegoat. And unless you understand that our greatest need for deliverance is not from our earthly exile but from our internal guilt.

We see this in two places, and it's deeply connected to the redemption.

### 6. He was gracious

Savor with me verses 5-6:

*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. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:5–6).*

Notice the gracious exchange between what we receive versus what he receives.

- He was pierced for our transgressions
- He was crushed for our iniquities
- He received chastisement; we received peace
- He was wounded; we were healed
- We went astray; he bore our iniquity

This is servant who provides atonement through personal sacrifice and suffering.

### 7. He was victorious

Our text ends in verses 10-13 by making it clear that everything that happens to this suffering deliverer is according to the will and plan of God. And it results in ultimate victory. God's plan for deliverance works!

- "Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied" (v. 11)
- "make many accounted righteous and he shall bear their iniquities" (v. 11)
- "he shall divide the spoil with the strong because he poured out his soul to death...yet he bore the sin of many" (v. 12)

And so, we get a glorious picture of what the deliverer does and how he does it.

During Isaiah's day, they had no idea of what they were reading and what it would mean. But the New Testament writers sure did! They quoted Isaiah more than any other book and no wonder! The suffering servant became the model that Jesus fulfilled.

Jesus became our sacrificial lamb. He was the scapegoat upon which our sins were laid. It was the means by which God rescued his people, and it was the hope God gave his people as they waited in exile.

### Applications:

There are many ways for us to apply this text today, and I trust that you've been doing that throughout this message. Let me highlight four:

1. **Ponder the amazing nature of grace.** Allow this Old Testament text to stun you again and again about the incredible kindness and mercy applied to you through Jesus. His entry into the world, his life, his suffering, and his death are all reminders of how far Jesus goes to rescue wicked sinners.
2. **Embrace the inverted values of God's kingdom.** We see, once again, how upside-down the values of the kingdom of God really are. A suffering Savior who dies alone provides atonement for all who would trust in him. Humility, mercy, and grace win!
3. **Understand the redemptive purpose of suffering.** Because of a broken world, God's mission involves suffering and hardship. The hope for the Christian is not the absence of suffering but the transformation of suffering. Don't be surprised. Don't be angry. Don't give up. Remember: "in all these things we are more than conquerors."

- 4. Live in exile by looking for our soon coming King.** Remember that these chapters were written to encourage people as they considered their exile. Isaiah called them to hope in something beyond their present circumstances. And from the John's exile on Patmos, he wrote the following hopeful words:

*Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. And one of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" (Rev. 5:1–13).*

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