

Engage the World with the Gospel
It Was the Will of the Lord to Crush Him
Isaiah 52:13-53:12

I was thinking this past week about difficulties that I have never had to experience – miserable things, such as war and famine in the land and homelessness and injustice at a high level. I know that some of you have endured some of these very difficulties and so you understand at a level that I do not. I heard this week that three African countries – Nigeria, Somalia, and South Sudan are on the brink of devastating famine, and Yemen may suffer as well. Both sides of the political aisle would argue that there is a human component of injustice that exacerbates the challenge of growing and distributing food in such an arid region of the world.

There is a great deal of pain in our world and we invest a great deal of resources to mitigate pain in our own lives and, if we care as we should, we will seek to ease the pain of others. Once again, politics could take us in many directions about the best way to ease the pain of others, but we are not at church to talk about politics, but, rather, we have gathered to hear from God, who tells us that in the face of great suffering, this is not all that there is to our existence and that our hope is in eternity, not in this life being pain free and wonderful, although as I have already confessed, I have missed some of the worst forms of suffering, and though I have suffered great loss in my life, I have not been without hope.

When you bring God into the picture of deep suffering, people will typically move in one of two directions – they will either blame him or they will seek to understand him. Once you decide to take the path of understanding, you may wander off on several branches of the path, all of which, except for one, contain a human element that seeks to “explain” God in some way that is meaningful to you rather than allowing him to define himself and believe what he said is true.

So, in this Season of Lent in the church calendar, how do you explain the cross? Do you seek to explain it in ways that fit into your own sense of justice, or do you allow God to tell you what it means? We have talked this past month about the theology behind William Paul Young's book and movie *The Shack*, which, ultimately, seems to be more about finding comfort in suffering than it is about theology. Criticism of Young frustrates many who have found hope in the story of one man's encounter with the Trinity, saying, "Hey, it's just a story!" You may know that Young has just released a non-fiction book about theology titled, ironically, *The Lies We Believe*. One of the "lies" Young suggests that people believe is that "The Cross Was God's Idea." That takes my breath away! A very influential man who is considered a godly Christian says the notion that the cross was God's idea is a lie. Here is an excerpt from what Young said in his book:

"Who originated the Cross? . . . If God did, then we worship a cosmic abuser, who in Divine Wisdom created a means to torture human beings in the most painful and abhorrent manner. Frankly, it is often this very cruel and monstrous god that the atheist refuses to acknowledge or grant credibility in any sense. And rightly so. Better no god at all, than this one."

Now, this is a problem. It is a problem because it refutes all of Scripture and it brings into question the power and authority of God. It belies an unwillingness to believe God and trust his heart. It is a false gospel that attacks the truth of Scripture at its very core.

Our text today is Isaiah 52:13-53:12. I did not choose this text to refute Paul Young, but, rather, because it is the season in our church when we think about Jesus' great sacrifice for us. I spoke about Paul Young because he is an example of how easy it is to get caught up in a story and lose your grip on truth. It is a fatal flaw to understand God based on your personal experiences. I know that God often leads us and gives us

a strong sense of his presence through our experiences, but the proper way to understand God is to interpret experiences by Scripture. When it doesn't make sense, trust him. The more you trust him, the more you will understand him. Today we engage a hard truth that, when believed, is beautiful beyond words – it was the will of the Father to crush the Son that he loved. Why? The answer is found in Scripture.

Today's text is the last of four "Servant Songs" found in chapters 42-53 of Isaiah's prophecy. The Lord's Servant, who sometimes is identified as the nation of Israel, is held up in contrast to the ungodly nations. There was more to the Lord's servant, though, than God's relationship with his covenant people, the Israelites. Several times in Isaiah, the Spirit of the Lord is found to be upon an individual, as in Isaiah 42:1, where the Father says, "I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations." There is so much in that one verse – Trinity, justice to the nations, covenant relationship with all nations. Our focus is on the 53rd chapter of Isaiah and the few verses that precede it in chapter 52. This fourth Servant Song of Isaiah brings to fruition just about everything from Isaiah 40 up to this point. Who was this servant? The 12th chapter of Matthew's Gospel identifies him as Jesus.

Just before we read our text, it may help you to know that as we read our text that "I" refers to the Lord, while "he" refers to the servant, or, to Jesus, and "we" usually refers to the disciples, which would be those who follow the Lord. Since we will not have time to examine the depths of this rich text, will you take just a moment and ask God to give you a heart to trust him and to believe his Word? Ask him to reveal his truth to you. Thank you. Would you please stand for the reading of the Word?

52:13 Behold, my servant shall act wisely;
he shall be high and lifted up,
and shall be exalted.

14 As many were astonished at you—

his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—
15 so shall he sprinkle many nations.

Kings shall shut their mouths because of him,
for that which has not been told them they see,
and that which they have not heard they understand.
53:1 Who has believed what he has heard from us?

And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
2 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.

3 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.

4 Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.

5 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.

6 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.

7 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.

8 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?
9 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.
10 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.
11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors.

You remember, of course, the story of David and Goliath. It was a case in which the Philistines taunted Israel and challenged them to send their best fighter against Goliath, and if Israel's man won, the Philistines would serve Israel, and if Goliath won, Israel would be slaves to the Philistines. We know how the story ended with David winning the battle and giving glory to God, so there was the power of one man winning the victory for the entire nation. But, who ever heard of one man taking all the guilt of a nation upon himself – much less, the guilt of the whole world – and paying for the sins of the people with his life and then commanding his followers to have no bitterness toward their enemies? That is what Jesus did.

When members of the first century church shared the gospel, they would inevitably go to Isaiah 53. The Ethiopian Eunuch found Jesus in this text, or, rather, Jesus found him as he read and as Philip explained the gospel of Jesus' sacrificial death to him. Perhaps you will be able to explain the meaning of Jesus' death from Isaiah 53 as you share the gospel with those who do not know Jesus. Let's give our thoughts a framework with three amazing truths giving shape to the passage, beginning with:

1. Our sin problem is greater than we know

Jesus died for our sins. We almost take that for granted. Well, we take it for granted until we do something that leaves us broken and disappointed with ourselves. We thought we were better than it turns out that we are. But, if we do our penance and feel bad enough about our sins and maybe do a few extra good deeds, then we will be able to look ourselves in the mirror without feeling guilty.

But, our sins are worse than we thought and the cost is far greater than we are able to pay. If God devised a private and quiet way for our sin debt to be paid, perhaps we would always take Jesus' substitutionary death for granted, but Isaiah 52-53 presents a humiliating scene for the sin-bearer. Look again at Isaiah 53:4-6:

4 Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.

5 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.

6 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.

Martin Luther said about these words: “His suffering was nothing else than our sin. OUR, US, FOR US, must be written in letters of gold. He who does not believe this is not a Christian.” Close quote. One of the reasons there are so few who believe that the Father put the Son to death is that there are so few who realize the devastating state and level and consequence of their sin, much like Paul Young.

When you speak about sin to others, the typical reaction is for the hearer to become defensive or to deflect, to talk about others’ sin. When you speak of sin the way that God defines sin in Scripture, though, regardless of the response of the one who hears the gospel you are sharing, God’s Word is doing its work, and as we will see from Isaiah 55 at the end of this month, the Word always finds its mark. That doesn’t mean that all who hear will be converted, but often an angry response to the truth can mask the working of the Holy Spirit underneath and the opposition to him from the world, the flesh, and especially the devil. Isaiah 53 leaves no doubt, though – our sin was worse than we thought. Second:

2. God’s plan for our redemption is more complex that we can imagine

The first verse of this fourth Servant Song and the last few verses of our text are triumphant in tone, pointing, in fact, to the resurrection. That’s a good thing when you look at the rest of the text. Everything in the middle is far worse than bleak – it is deeply disturbing and dark.

In Isaiah 53:2, the words “form” and “beauty” come from Hebrew words that can be translated “attractiveness” and “appearance,” two words used of beautiful Rachel. Here, Jesus is *not* attractive; he is *not* beautiful so that we should desire him. In the same way Jacob preferred Rachel over

Leah, Jesus was not loved by the community. He was despised and rejected.

Jesus was deeply loved by the Father, though – and so it comes as quite a shock that it was the will of Lord to *crush* him. Can you think of a stronger term than “crush” for the truth being communicated? Why would the Father crush the Son he loved with a perfect love from eternity past? So that Jesus would serve as an offering for our sin. Why was this complex and counterintuitive plan for redemption necessary? Because our sin was greater than we knew. And, because:

3. God’s love is far greater than we can ever comprehend or express

The Father’s love for us is at that level. Who can fathom such a thing? Jesus asked for the cup to pass. The Father’s silence shouted his love for us. Does he love us more than the Son? Don’t be absurd! It is just that he loves us that much.

As you can see, we could spend months examining this text that permeates the gospel truth that is quoted and explained over and over again in the NT. I will close with a quote from Reed Lessing, whose commentary on Isaiah took me to an understanding of God’s ways and his love for his people that deeply touched my heart. It is appropriate that we end with a quote from his commentary that provides a brief summary for the biblical teaching about God’s love for us, revealed in the cross of Christ:

“The Servant does not offer a sentimental or syrupy love, but a ‘love’ for us that is ‘fierce as death’ (Song of Solomon 8:6). It is driven by nails, marked with scars, and crowned with thorns. This is antithetical to any form of Christianity that offers, as Daniel Bailey says, ‘a God without wrath (who brings people) without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.’” Amen.

Let's pray