

Suffering Servant 1

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[0:00] When you go to the cinema and you pay, it could be quite a lot these days, to see a film. You are confronted at the beginning if you turn up on time with a long time of adverts, aren't you?

And you think, when's the film going to get there? But then the movie trailers come on. That's actually my favourite bit, even better than the films often. I love watching the short little clips of a film that's to come and think, will I watch this? Will I come back to the cinema and watch this?

Will I wait for it to come out on Netflix? Or will I just not watch it at all? Because the trailers give you a really good idea about what is in store in a film.

And Isaiah 52, verse 13 to the end of chapter 53, are a bit like a movie trailer for the Easter weekend.

Easter is coming upon us. We've said Easter is coming upon us. Come and join us in a few weeks' time for it. And here we have a preview to the Easter weekend.

[1:16] Written not just a few months or a few weeks before it was due to happen. Actually about 700 years before it was due to happen from the pen of Isaiah the prophet.

And we have here a very compelling, a very accurate, a very sobering description of the things that would later on in history take place.

As Jesus took up his cross and died for his people. And actually also I think we see his resurrection described a little bit in this chapter as well as we'll see in the weeks to come.

Just before we get to it though, Isaiah is a big book. 66, I think, chapters in it.

It's huge. And it could be just a bit overwhelming coming and landing in a portion of Isaiah. What is going on in this book? Well, in the Old Testament, the good design that God had for his people was for them to live with him, with God as their king, hence the crown, in the land that he had given them, hence the land, enjoying his blessing, hence the thumbs up.

[2:44] But we see time and time again that his people sadly reject God as their king. And at some points we see they are taken away from the land that he's given them.

And they do not enjoy God's blessing. And that is seen in the book of Isaiah. You can split it into two quite nicely.

Chapters 1 to 39 are sort of warnings of sin and judgment. And then in chapter 40 to the end of the book, Isaiah is writing for people who have left their land, been in exile, and now come back to the land.

He's writing to people post-exile, long after Isaiah lived. And he's saying to them that actually sin is still a real issue.

You're still rejecting God. But God's going to work out a wonderful salvation and work out a way for your sins to be forgiven in their entirety.

[3:58] And what we have as we join Isaiah 52 in the movie trailer, you can imagine the first words being, if this was turned into a trailer, in a land full of sin, behold, a servant highly exalted.

A magnificent start to the movie trailer. It's there in verse 13, isn't it? See or behold, my servant will act wisely.

He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. What a wonderful start. See, my servant.

It's talking about one single person. A servant-type figure. Come to serve the Lord and serve his people. And it says he will act wisely.

And that word for wisely has the sort of meaning of he will know exactly what to do. He will know exactly how to do it and the right time to do it.

[5:04] His work will be effective in serving me and you. And so effective that he will end up being raised up and highly exalted.

Lifted up, highly exalted. Which are words that are used of God elsewhere in the book of Isaiah. So it's just worth turning to Isaiah chapter 6 verse 1.

Where we read those words. Spoken of the Lord God Almighty. Isaiah 6 is a wonderful chapter. I'd love to just read the whole of, but I'm not going to. I'm going to read verse 1 because that's relevant to this morning. Isaiah writes, Those words, lifted high, highly exalted are there.

And they're there at the start of Isaiah 52 verse 13. Words spoken about the Lord God Almighty.

[6:33] And so this servant that we're reading of is surely the Lord God Almighty. As will become abundantly clear as we continue to read through and look at bits in the New Testament which are relevant.

But then we see something that just doesn't fit with what we've read in verse 13. Have a look there at verse 14.

How do verse 13 and 14 go together? Just as there were many who were appalled at him, His appearance was so disfigured that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness.

So we read in verse 13 of someone highly exalted. And then we read of someone who looks very unexalted. Someone whose appearance becomes gross, appalling, disgusting.

You look at them and you want to hide your eyes away from them. You can't bear the sight. Some wonder, are they even human? Some commentators suggest it's language used of a leper or someone with a skin disease.

[7:58] Don't go anywhere near them. Don't touch them. They're unclean. Someone who'd be shunned from the community. An outsider. A person who doesn't belong.

It just doesn't fit with the person in verse 13, does it? How can someone be highly exalted, highly praised if they're going to be shunned and put aside and viewed as horrendous and appalling?

See the shock for the people as they read those words. And then what's said of him in verse 15.

He will sprinkle many nations and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see.

And what they have not heard, they will understand. So this highly exalted figure who was also beyond human likeness, appalling, gross.

[9:09] It says he will sprinkle many nations. Is that going to be a good thing or a bad thing? What's that about? What's the sprinkling about?

Well, if we were Old Testament Jewish people, I think we would know exactly what this means. In Leviticus 14, for example, there are recorded rules about what to do with someone who has had a disease, a bit like leprosy, about how they can come clean again and be able to be clean before the Lord God Almighty.

And in the act of helping them to become clean before the Lord God Almighty, we read these words.

He, that is the priest, is then to take the live birds and dip it together with the cedarwood, the scarlet yarn, and the hyssop into the blood of the bird that was killed over the fresh water.

Seven times he shall sprinkle the one to be cleansed of the defiling disease and then pronounce them clean. After that, he is to release the live bird in the open fields.

[10:33] So there's a sort of a sacrifice, a blood of an animal, and that blood is sprinkled upon the person so they become clean again in the sight of God and in the community as well.

And the sprinkling of blood happens in other places. It happens on the Day of Atonement. Blood is sprinkled on the mercy seat. And even at places, the priests themselves have to be sprinkled with blood because they are sinful before the Lord and they need to be cleansed.

Blood is used as sprinkled to cleanse people, to make them clean before a holy God. And that's what the people in Isaiah's time needed.

They needed to be cleansed. They needed blood to cleanse them. In Isaiah chapter 1, it's worth turning there, verse 5 to 6, here's a description of God's people right at the beginning of the book.

This is how unclean they are before the Lord. Isaiah chapter 1, verse 5 and 6, God's people are described as sick, as wounded, as unclean.

[12:11] A bit like the person in Isaiah 52, verse 14. They should be shunned, put out the way, not able to come before the Lord.

They need sprinkling with blood. And so this makes some sense of the verses before us in Isaiah 52. He will sprinkle many nations.

He will sprinkle people, make them clean by his blood that he will shed. And we know that in the Gospels, the Lord Jesus absolutely does shed his blood, doesn't he?

So that people can become clean, so that they become right in God's sight. Now this isn't just for Israel, this sprinkling.

Notice, it's for the whole world. Verse 15, see he will sprinkle many nations, many nations, not just you. The whole world can have this opportunity.

[13:27] It goes beyond little Israel to the whole world. A whole world will know salvation from their God, just as those words that we read earlier in chapter 52 say, The Lord will lay bare his only arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

And they will see it in the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 15 continues in an interesting way. A description of kings, rulers around the world, thinking, This isn't how you win victories for your people.

This isn't how you conquer other lands. You don't become a weak-looking human being, do you?

No, for ruling your lands, you need strength and might and courage.

Don't show weakness. Don't think about being a servant. Think about your own political strength and reputation.

Think about the votes that you need to amass. But Isaiah 53 says, no, this is how God, in his great love, is choosing to serve his people.

[14:58] By not only being the exalted God who is high and lifted up, but also as the one who will be laid low, and whose appearance will look very unhuman like us.

He's marred and disfigured. God says, I am coming to serve you. I'm coming down in order to sprinkle you with my own blood.

And this is so necessary. Because, as the New Testament says, it's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

There was that whole Old Testament sacrificial system. We've read a little bit from Leviticus about animals being sacrificed, blood from animals being sacrificed in order to cleanse people.

But it can't sort out someone's whole sin problem before the Lord's. And so God is creating something even better. God the Almighty is coming to sort this out.

[16:12] That verse that we read at the beginning of our service, 52 verse 10, the Lord will lay bare his holy arm. It's a wonderful image. If you were to roll your sleeves up, you would bare your arm, wouldn't you?

Perhaps you do that as you go into the garden to do some gardening. You go and get your hands dirty. The Lord will lay bare his holy arm. He will get his hands dirty.

He will do this job for his people to save his people. Isn't that amazing? That God's willing to become this disfigured, appalling, barely human-looking figure in order to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

But the question possibly is still in our minds. How on earth does the disfiguring and the being lifted up and highly exalted fit together?

In John chapter 12, verse 32, we read this. Words of the Lord Jesus, where he says, And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

[17:31] He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. Of course, that death on the cross, he's lifted up on the cross to die for his people.

And so, there's a glorious thing about that as we see that death is to draw all people to himself. And yet, there's the awful agonies and suffering that he goes through in order to achieve that.

But this is God's plan of salvation. And God's plan is a glorious plan. What an amazing act of love to behold our Savior on the cross, lifted up in order to be executed on behalf of his people.

An extraordinary thing. The movie trailer continues. It began with an exalted servant come to a land full of sin.

And things quickly turn ugly, as we've heard. And then we see something unbelievable. The unbelievable and unattractive servant.

[18:49] Who could imagine this? That a bear from the country of Peru, wearing a blue duffel coat with a red hat and eating marmalade sandwiches, could become such a national treasure.

You're wondering, what is he talking about? I'm talking about Paddington. He's everywhere, isn't he? We were in Scotland a few weeks ago. And in all the souvenir shops that you can go and buy Scottish things in.

There were Paddingtons as well. Why he ended up there, I don't know. But he's become a national treasure, hasn't he? Three blockbuster films and a musical.

From a bear from humble beginnings. Seems unlikely, doesn't it? And at the same time, who could imagine that a little baby born in a little town called Bethlehem, laid in an animal's feeding trough, living in a despised town called Nazareth, who could imagine that he could become the savior of the world?

Who could imagine that people 2,000 odd years later would be in a church building like this, still thinking about him? Who could imagine that a church could be in existence for 150 years, proclaiming him?

[20:22] And yet, that's what has been happening, hasn't it? Who can believe this? Verse 2, he grew up.

This is Isaiah 53, verse 2. He grew up before him like a tender shoot and like a root out of dry ground. A tender shoot.

Here's a tender little shoot. The beginning of life, the beginning of a plant. Small, fragile, vulnerable. How can this grow up to be a big plant, a big tree?

Seems unlikely, doesn't it? Or a root out of dry ground. Imagine a very parched ground.

The sun beating down on it. It hasn't rained in months. And there's a little root there and it's trying to grow, but its circumstances around it is not very good for growth.

[21:32] No sign of rain, no sign of anything that's going to help it to grow strong and healthy. It seems impossible. And so were the circumstances around the Lord Jesus' birth.

Remember that he was born at a time when King Herod heard about the Messiah's being born. And so he thought, well, need to get rid of any threat to me and my rule.

And so I'm going to make sure all the baby boys under two are killed. It's not very good circumstances if you've just been born. But the Lord God revealed that to Joseph and Mary in a dream.

And they went off to Egypt. They lived as refugees there until all was safe. In so many ways, you read his story and you think this is the most unlikely person to become the savior of the world.

And yet this is what happened. And Isaiah 52 verse 2 even continues, saying, He didn't look particularly attractive towards others, we're told here.

[22:56] Which isn't great if you're becoming a very influential person. Remember Israel, when they were choosing a king in Samuel, they saw that Saul was tall and more handsome than the rest of the people.

And they thought, well, that must be our king. He looks great. He looks the part. We want him to lead us. And it all turned very messy. And that's what we often do, don't we?

We look to those who sort of look the part. Look the deal. They can be our leader. They can be our boss. They can be our prime minister. And so it all seems rather unbelievable that this small, tender, fragile shoot and root in a dry ground would be the savior of the world.

And yet that's what we read. If we had been alive when Jesus was walking the earth, perhaps we would think, oh yes, wouldn't that be amazing?

But don't take it for granted that you yourself would come to believe in who he was. It's what we see in the Gospels. I was struck in a conversation with someone the other day how Jesus' own family didn't sort of believe in him at first.

[24:18] So take his brothers. Mark 3, 21, when his family heard about this, this is Jesus driving out demons and healing people.

When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him. And they said, you're out of your mind. And John chapter 7, verse 5, even his own brothers did not believe in him.

And John chapter 12, verse 37, even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, you might think, if only I saw those miracles.

Perhaps you've got friends who think, if only I saw him raising the dead, then I'd believe in him. But this says, even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him.

This was to fulfill the word of the prophet Isaiah. Words that we've read this morning from Isaiah 53. Lord, who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

[25:27] Who can believe these things? We can believe these things if the Lord God, by his Spirit, is gracious to reveal them to us, is gracious to open our blind eyes and our deaf ears and our hard hearts.

I guess many of us, when we think about sort of the evangelistic things coming up ahead of us in the next few weeks, we think, how can my unbelieving husband or wife come and come then to believe in Jesus?

How can my unbelieving son or daughter come to believe these unbelievable things? How can my neighbor come to believe these unbelievable things? As God, by his Spirit, opens their eyes to see that this Jesus, this one who grew up from humble beginnings and died a humiliating death on the cross is actually also the glorious Savior of the world who has been lifted up and exalted on the cross and lifted up and exalted in his resurrection and now is seated in heaven.

It's only by the Spirit that their eyes might be open to these things. And so we put on events like the dessert night and the guest service and the Easter weekend to invite people to you.

We pray unbelievers will come. We invite them. We say, come and join us. We pray that God would be at work in the speaker and in all of us who gather. And we pray that God would be gracious to reveal these things to people.

[27:08] Because on our own, who can believe them? And if we are those who have come to believe in the Lord Jesus, come to see who he is in all his marvelous beauty, please don't take that for granted.

Please don't look down on others who don't believe. Because it's all simply by the Lord's gracious revealing to us.

This is the Lord Jesus. He can, he needs to be your savior. So the movie trailer, it begins with an exalted servant.

It goes on to say, this is sort of unbelievable. Unbelievable. And then finally, it shows us the rejected man of sorrows, verse three. He was despised and rejected by mankind.

A man of suffering and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces. He was despised and we held him in low esteem.

[28:21] Not only did people not believe in him being God's. People resolutely stood and despised and rejected him.

Choosing to side with the religious authorities and calling for the murder of Barabbas to be released. While saying of Jesus, crucify him, crucify him.

And if we were there in that Easter week, would we have done any different? Is that him earlier says, ashamed I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers.

Because it was my sin that held him there. So we see here, he is a man of suffering.

Or as other translations would say, a man of sorrows. He's familiar with pain. He's familiar with that because of people's rejection of him.

[29:31] We see that in the Gospels, don't we? We see the night before he would then go and die on the cross in that garden of Gethsemane, weeping in agony.

Tears coming from him, sweat drops of blood that he shed because he knew what was coming. He knew the pain and incredible, immense suffering of the cross was to come.

For some of us, we can take some real comfort in our Savior's suffering because I'm aware there's many of us who are experiencing pains and sorrows of many kinds.

As we read of this, of our Lord Jesus, we can think, praise God, we have a Savior who understands my pain, who understands my suffering, who understands my tears, who understands what you're going through.

