

What's it all about?

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[0 : 00] This morning's first reading is from Isaiah chapter 52, a reading from verse 13 until the end of chapter 53.

See, my servant will act wisely. He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him, his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being, and his form marred beyond human likeness.

So 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.

Who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root of dry ground, he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him.

Nothing is in his appearance that we should desire him. 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.

[1 : 10] 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.

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away, yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living, for the transgression of my people he was punished.

He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

[2 : 27] After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors.

For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. And our second reading this morning is from Luke chapter 18, from verse 31 to 34.

Jesus took the twelve aside and told them, We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, and spit on him. They will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again. The disciples did not understand any of this.

[3 : 31] Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about. In some situations in our lives, sometimes we can get the basics internalized, can't we?

We can get them kind of so embedded in our minds that we don't have to think about those fundamentals anymore. I remember being told when I was learning to drive, for instance. Usually for the first while that you're learning, you're focused on what you're doing yourself.

I need to move this pedal. I need to turn the wheel. And then you kind of learn how your actions relate to the car. And you start to think, well, the car needs to turn right.

The car needs to slow down. But then the next stage beyond that, you start to focus on the world outside the car. This is a good thing, that you're paying more attention to what's happening around

you.

You're thinking then, you know, that that car over there, that's coming quite fast. I'll slow down a little bit. And that kind of, they're coming fast, automatically shifts to I should slow down, which shifts to I press the pedal and that makes it happen.

[4 : 46] Without those steps of conscious thought of what you need to do, it's internalized. It's automatic. I don't think I'm going to press the pedal now. You just do it.

Same as, you know, you don't have to count on your fingers to do three plus three. You just know the answer. Sometimes things become automatic. They don't require conscious thought anymore. But folks, the Christian faith is not like that. It is profoundly dangerous for us to act as if it is like that. To think that we can kind of have the fundamentals down pat and move on to better things. The truth is we must keep coming back to the basics.

We need to be reminded of the core of our faith. Because that which is assumed is, at least in this case, quickly neglected. So if we don't remind ourselves about God's grace, then our right desire to be obedient, to live the way he says is best, that quickly shifts into thinking that we're saved by that obedience if we don't keep coming back to grace.

[5 : 56] If we don't remember that all of humanity. If we don't remember that all of humanity is created in the image of God and keep reminding ourselves of this fundamental truth, then that tends towards starting to undervalue people and treating one another, or for that matter, treating ourselves as disposable, trampling one another underfoot.

Or if we don't remember Adam and Eve's first sin and the repercussions that that had for all of creation, then we get frustrated by the things that aren't the way we want them to be.

Not least our own propensity to sin. We have to come back to remind ourselves this is the repercussions of the fall at work and so on and so on. We come back to the basics.

Now that's not to say that we ought never to learn more than the fundamentals. There are vast depths to be explored, aren't there? There's enough in God's word to occupy us for a lifetime.

In fact, for several lifetimes of learning more about him and more about ourselves. And that is greatly profitable for us. But we must not neglect the foundation.

[7 : 05] If we neglect that, thinking we're focused on something more interesting, more exciting, on some greater depth, then we're like the king who goes off to war in a far-off country and returns home to discover there was a coup in his absence and his kingdom is no more.

You've lost the most important thing, thinking you were getting more. It does not profit us to explore the finer points of different eschatological schemes if in doing that we become so puffed up with our knowledge that we lose sight of our need of a savior.

We might have great learning, but our souls be lost. And therefore, today we circle back. Jesus, once again, in those verses that Sarah read for us, Jesus speaks to his followers to predict what lies ahead for him, to tell them the reason why he came to earth.

It's quite straightforward, quite briefly stated in these verses. But the implications of that are immense, aren't they? The fundamentals are vitally important. Jesus took the twelve aside and told them, We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled.

He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, and spit on him. They will flog him and kill him. On the third day, he will rise again. So I want to examine three things with you this morning.

[8 : 30] Firstly, it is all according to plan. Secondly, we'll explore the extent of Jesus' suffering. And then thirdly, spend a bit of time on the implications of the disciples' lack of understanding.

So first, first in these verses, see that what unfolds is according to God's plan. It's very easy, isn't it, for us to kind of drift into imagining that God was caught by surprise.

Easy to drift into thinking that the opposition to Jesus just kind of built and built and built and built, whilst he was concentrating somewhere else, maybe. And by the time Jesus looked back at what was going on in Jerusalem, suddenly he was on trial.

And there was nothing he could do to stop it, and he was dead and buried. And then God takes a day or two to think about it and figure out, how can I bring this back and concludes, aha, I could bring him back to life, and suddenly God's redeemed a plan that had gone astray.

I mean, it sounds almost comical when I put it like that, doesn't it? But, you know, we know when we think about it that that's not how it works.

[9 : 35] But I think that when we're not paying attention, when we're not being put on the spot with the theological question, that we can drift into at least softer versions of that kind of thinking, and that the plan went astray, and then God pulled it back.

But Luke records here, as do Matthew and Luke, records that Jesus made not only this declaration, but several others as well, predictions of what would take place, predictions of his coming sacrifice. Now pause and think about that for a moment. Jesus knew what was coming. Jesus knew when he set out on this journey to Jerusalem that we've been following along with for the last year or so. Jesus knew that at his journey's end, he would suffer and die. Jesus knew. Now, nearing this journey's end, he knew the price he would pay.

Folks, Jesus knew what it was going to cost him. Jesus thought there was a price worth paying. The God of all the universe chose knowingly to endure the agony of the cross in order that you might be redeemed.

[10 : 59] We're going to focus on the extent of his suffering in a moment, and when we do that, we'll remember that is what you are worth to God. That is the price that he willingly paid to buy your freedom.

Don't listen to people who want to pull you down. Don't listen to the voice in the back of your head telling you that you're worthless, telling you that you can't do anything good. Listen instead to the objective facts that are recorded for us in the pages of God's word.

Listen instead to the decision that the God of the universe made in order that you might be set free. This was God's plan. Not just a plan that he made once Jesus was in the thick of it down here on earth.

Not a plan made a year or two before Jesus was born. No, verse 31 tells us everything written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. Those prophets were writing hundreds of years before Jesus was born.

Only God can do this. Only God can declare hundreds of years in advance what is going to take place, and only he can do it with absolute certainty that it will come to pass.

[12 : 06] And more than that, not just that God knows what will take place, but God chooses what will take place.

Sarah read those verses from Isaiah. Verse 10, God's will expressed through the prophet Isaiah and plenty of other prophets beside, expressed hundreds of years before it would take place. And in fact, not just hundreds of years before, but his will settled and set before the dawning of time, before time itself was created, never mind anything else.

The eternal Son of God knew he would suffer and die to buy our pardon. Now that is good news, isn't it?

It's wonderful news. Bishop Ryle again, I love the way he puts things sometimes. He says, The love of our Lord Jesus Christ towards sinners is strikingly shown in his steady purpose of heart to die for them.

[13 : 33] Another last minute decision, his steady purpose settled, decided. Jesus' love is shown by this steadiness of purpose.

And then secondly, his love for you is shown by the extent of the suffering that he endured. These verses say that everything written about the Son of Man will take place.

Now there's a promise of victory in that last sentence, isn't there? That he will rise again on the third day, but the weight of these verses is on the suffering, isn't it? He will be handed over to the Gentiles.

They will mock him. They will insult him. They will spit on him. They will flog him. They will kill him. He's handed over to the Gentiles.

It's Roman soldiers that carry out his crucifixion. But Acts chapter 2 verse 22, Peter says, Fellow Israelites, listen to this. Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs, which God did among you through him as you yourselves know.

[14 : 36] This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan of foreknowledge. And you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

Notice who Peter's addressing. Peter's speaking to a Jewish audience. So if the Jews are guilty of putting him to death according to Peter, and the Gentiles are guilty according to Jesus, well, that doesn't leave anyone else, does it?

And we're deceiving ourselves if we think 2,000 years later that we would not have gone along with the crowds, spaying for his blood. And we aren't better than they are.

And yet, Jesus willingly suffered to buy our pardon. I think it's interesting in these verses what aspects of the suffering are focused on.

I don't know about you, but my instinct would be to kind of focus on the bodily pain, to reflect on the agony of being whipped over and over again. Maybe you've seen pictures of people's backs after they've been flogged.

[15:42] It is not a pretty sight, is it? I thought I'd spare you it this morning. And the thorns pressing into his brow. The nails pounded in.

The hours of agony fighting for breath on the cross as you hang from those nails, tearing through the flesh. I'd focus on that. But Jesus doesn't.

See, what he says he'll suffer. They will mock him. They will insult him. They will spit on him. They will flog him. They will kill him.

It seems to me that in this sequence, even the flogging and the killing, the focus isn't really on the physical agony, but on the abuse, the mental agony, the pain of rejection.

Flogging is physically painful, but it's also deeply degrading, even dehumanizing. The disdain that is expressed is significant, isn't it?

[16:49] And what kind of death does he die? This is not a glorious death in battle, is it? It's not even at home in bed, surrounded by his grandchildren.

It's not death by natural causes. No, he is deliberately killed. People want him gone. The Jewish authorities, the Gentile officials, they want rid of him.

The crowds want him gone. Not in the kind of neat, sanitary way that executions are carried out today.

No, the form of his death is deliberately calculated to cause maximum pain. That's why the Romans crucified people. And with that maximum pain, maximum degradation.

The rejection of Jesus is readily apparent in this, isn't it? And to know even more than that, degradation at the hands of men.

[17:52] The manner of Jesus' death shows rejection by God too, doesn't it? Cursed is anyone who's hung upon a tree, says God's law.

Jesus dies under the curse of God himself. Can you imagine what that felt like? The agony of being rejected.

That agony, these verses seem to suggest, is greater than any physical pain. And that reading from Isaiah again fleshed out a bit more of this, didn't it?

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. This was the plan. This is what he willingly accepted.

[18:51] This is what he endured for you and for me. Because let's not forget that purpose behind it. This isn't random suffering. This isn't attributable to chance happenings.

This isn't fully attributable even to the men who did it. Pilate and his soldiers certainly guilty. The Jewish leaders who handed him over certainly share the blame. But it was also God's plan.

We read it a moment ago in Peter's speech. Handed over by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge. Isaiah again. Verse 10, it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer.

Why? Why? Well, because of the great exchange that the central verses in that song in Isaiah highlight. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering.

Our pain. Our suffering. Yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions.

[19:55] 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. This pain. This suffering. They should have been ours. We deserved them. The transgressions. The iniquities. We are the ones who committed them.

We are the ones who have gone astray. And yet the Lord laid it on him. He was pierced. He was afflicted. He bore the wounds. My friends, it does us good, I think, to reflect on what Christ suffered for us.

That we might not think lightly of our sins. That we might treasure his sacrifice. And that we might live in the light of the price that he paid to buy our freedom.

[21 : 08] Finally then, let's turn to the last verse of our reading. Verse 34. The disciples lack of understanding. Because Luke clearly thinks this is important. Because even in this one verse, he says it three different ways.

They did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them. They did not know what he was talking about. So what are they not understanding? Because I don't think Jesus is using vocabulary that they don't know.

The sentence structure is not unusually opaque. They grasp the nouns and the verbs of Jesus' words. What do they not understand? It has to be, doesn't it, that they cannot reconcile what Jesus is saying with what they already believe.

They can't figure out how can it be possible that the promised Messiah, the long-awaited Son of Man, how can he be rejected and die? How can that possibly be God's plan?

Surely this is some kind of metaphor. Surely this isn't really dead dead. Surely this is figurative language. This does not make sense.

[22 : 12] Now before we dismiss too quickly the disciples for their failure to understand, let's admit this plan of God's, this plan where Christ would suffer in our place, that he would die rejected on the cross, let's recognize this has always been and always will be a major stumbling block and an offense.

It's an offense to our pride, isn't it, that doesn't want to need a savior. It's a stumbling block to imagine that this man with his appearance so disfigured beyond that of any human being, his form marred beyond human likeness, it is a stumbling block to suppose that this could be the savior of the world.

It doesn't make sense. We want a savior who swoops in like Superman come to save the day, not one who's born as a baby in a manger and dies in still greater degradation.

It doesn't fit with what we expect, certainly didn't fit with what the disciples expected. And it seems to me that given how vitally important this truth is that the disciples didn't understand, understand that perhaps it's worth us pausing and kind of asking ourselves, or at least having them in the back of our minds for the future, the possibility that our own presuppositions blind us.

The things that we start off thinking, the things that we assume to be the case, the things that we aren't really paying attention to, but believe them anyway, that these things blind us, that we don't understand what God's revealed because it feels incompatible with what we think we know.

[24 : 03] Number one giveaway when this is happening, I think, is when we find ourselves saying or thinking to ourselves something like, a loving God wouldn't, whatever it might be.

Do you see what's happened there? I've taken my assumption that I know what God's love looks like and said, well, it can't look like that, so therefore everything else must be wrong because I already believe this about God, even though it's not actually what God has said his love looks like. When we think we know what God must be like and therefore deny what he says he is like, then something's gone astray, hasn't it? Now, I think we should probably also forgive the disciples for their failure to understand because their failure to understand was also God's will.

Do you see the phrase, its meaning was hidden from them? Grammatically, this is a passive sentence. The ball was thrown rather than he threw the ball.

In other words, in this case, we're not being told who did the hiding when it was hidden from them. But we know who did it, don't we? And actually, this is a well-established pattern to the extent that theologians have a term for this.

[25 : 22] This is called a divine passive, where this grammatical passive voice is used to refer to what God does. This is quite often the case that the passive is something God does.

God hid the meaning from Jesus' disciples. God chose that they wouldn't understand or at least not understand right away. But they still are told in order that they might understand more fully after the fact.

And they remembered in order that it might be recorded for us that we might know today that this was God's plan all along. Here, here in Luke 18, Jesus explains what was written in the prophets would be fulfilled.

And then to the disciples on the Emmaus Road after the resurrection, he explained what was written in the prophets concerning himself. And then they understood.

And therefore, given that understanding how's now dawned, as it were, therefore we cannot, we must not now act as if these things are hidden from us.

[26 : 32] Whether or not we should pity the disciples for their failure to understand the time, we certainly should not be okay with that kind of an attitude today because it has been revealed to us.

And remember, remember these things that the disciples didn't understand. This settled plan that led to the cross. These things they didn't understand were the most crucial things, weren't they? This is the crux of the matter. This is the foundation of our faith. We know, we believe that Jesus died and rose again for the forgiveness of sins according to the set plan and foreknowledge of God. And any idea that we formulate, any idea that is presented to us of Jesus, any claim to Christianity that fails to keep this front and center, that is not Christianity at all.

And it's not uncommon, is it? It's not uncommon for Jesus to be kind of appropriated to different causes. Jesus, the eco-warrior. Jesus, the iconoclastic rebel.

[27 : 46] Jesus, the mystic guru. But we align ourselves to his cause. We don't align him to ours. And the path to that, that path leads straight to the cross, the center of our faith.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, keep us centered, we pray. Keep us centered on these truths about you that you revealed to your disciples in order that we might know and understand.

We thank you for the love that you showed us, not only in the willingness to go to the cross, but in the fact that that was your plan all along. Thank you for enduring that agony in all of its different aspects to buy our pardon, to buy our freedom.

Lord, may we not take this lightly. May we not dismiss the cross as something in the past, an irrelevant, something to move on from. But Lord, keep it central in our minds that we depend upon what you have done and we align ourselves behind a suffering savior who died and rose again.

Amen. Amen.