

An Inconvenient Text?

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[0 : 00] Well, we were reading there from Isaiah 52 into 53, and that's where I wanted to anchor our thoughts in this service tonight.

I wanted to take as my title, I don't know if you usually have titles, I usually like to give my sermons titles, and I wanted to take as my title for tonight, An Inconvenient Text.

An Inconvenient Text. But that really is a title that requires a little bit of explanation immediately, I think you would agree.

And here's the explanation. We had a speaker from Christian witness to Israel in our congregation, and I didn't realize when I was preparing to say this that he was going to be here tonight, the speaker who gave the idea.

But nevertheless, he was at our midweek meeting in Falkirk. He was explaining that Isaiah 53 is a very, very significant passage of scripture in trying to reach out to and evangelize the Jews.

[1 : 05] which task, of course, scripture lays on the church very clearly. Isaiah 53 is not read in Jewish synagogues. Chapter 51 is, 52 is, 54 is, 55 is, but not Isaiah 53.

Jews, therefore, are not familiar with Isaiah, the 53rd chapter. And the interesting thing is that when they do hear Isaiah 53 read, they tend to assume that it is a New Testament portion of scripture that is being read.

Isn't that interesting that they should make that conclusion? Could there be any clearer proof and indication that this Old Testament passage is a prophetic anticipation of the agonies of the Messiah who came according to God's promises?

But not just his agonies, also the significance and the triumph of his cross are foretold here in these great lines. And so in the Q&A, the questions and answers at the end of the speaker's talk, I asked him how synagogues try to justify Isaiah chapter 53 being omitted from the public reading of scripture.

And he said that there are various things they would say, but that it is essentially an inconvenient text for them. And so I thought to myself, I'll tuck that one away and that will be a sermon title sometime.

[2 : 32] And so here it is. Tonight is that time. Isaiah 53, an inconvenient text. Well, what is inconvenient for some? Is profoundly transformational and eternally significant for us, for we who proclaim Christ, for we who confess faith in Christ crucified and risen.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul writes that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures. And this is the constant message of the New Testament, that the coming and the death of Jesus was not something unexpected at all, but was, in Paul's phrase, according to the scripture.

That's nowhere more clearly seen than here in Isaiah 53. Of the entire Old Testament, I think it's true to say that this is the most frequently quoted passage in the New Testament.

Certainly being quoted by Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, and the writer to the Hebrews. They all quote from this portion of the Old Testament. In fact, it's been described as the gospel in the Old Testament.

So clearly does it foretell the cross. And not only that, but the meaning and the significance for us of the cross of Jesus Christ.

[3 : 56] So Isaiah 52 and 53 reveals some 700 years in advance. The triumph of the cross. But of course, for the longest time, reading through the passage, through the chapter, it doesn't seem anything like a victory, does it?

Anything but. This is the fourth of Isaiah's so-called servant songs. And in this passage, it is the suffering servant who is betrayed.

And what I'd like to do is look a bit more closely now at the five stanzas that we find there that God gave us through Isaiah's ministry. And in doing so, we can see how the suffering servant triumphs. How victory comes through what seems like certain defeat for him. So first, tonight, number one, 52, 13 to 15, the servant is introduced.

He is introduced here. And it's a bit of a puzzling introduction. He is introduced in verse 13 as one who will act wisely.

[5 : 01] He will be raised, lifted up, and highly exalted. But then nearly everything that comes on after that for the rest of the song describes the appalling suffering and rejection that he experiences.

And it's not really until the last stanza of the chapter or the song, as you might say, that the servant is vindicated by God and that his work is shown to have significance.

But this introductory section acts as a summary of the whole song, really. Setting down the pattern of suffering as the road to glory. That's the pattern.

Suffering as the road to glory. That's the path that the servant will travel. Verse 14 indicates the extent of the suffering that the servant will endure.

And it's physical brutality that is portrayed there. His form is disfigured, almost beyond recognition. But then verse 15 gives a glimmer, just a glimmer, of the significance of all of that.

[6 : 05] The sprinkling referred to there. That was a common Old Testament practice. With water, with blood, or with oil. In the Old Testament, it generally had to do with cleansing.

With preparing the person or persons being sprinkled to be in God's presence and serving God. And thus the sprinkling for many nations emphasizes the universal applicability of the servant's work.

The kings and the rulers of this world will shut their mouths. Why? Well, because the suffering servant will, through his victory, confound all of the wisdom of this world.

And there will, in the end, be nothing else to say. It will be the servant who is vindicated. And so having been introduced in the first stanza, the servant is further described in the second.

This is verses 1 to 3 of chapter 53. And the words that stand out are despised and rejected. Despised and rejected.

[7 : 08] You know, it's conceivable that a great king might send his own son, the prince, into some domain to try to do something for him in his name.

And it's equally conceivable that that son might go into that domain and be brutalized and be hung up and be abused and suffer.

However, what is incomparable in all of this is that the great king, who is also the father, the father of the prince, deliberately sends his son in this way. Through this pattern of suffering as the pathway to glory.

That is what is incomparable and profound in all of this. He comes. And it's not just that he, oh, when he came, he happened to end up being despised and rejected.

Isn't that unfortunate? That was always the plan. That was the way it was to be in the sovereign wisdom and purposes of God. He was despised and rejected. Now, into chapter 53, it seems like the voice changes at this point.

[8 : 08] Seems to have been God himself speaking in the previous verses. Now it seems to be some witness or witnesses to the servant who speak. And these witnesses describe the prevailing unbelief that the servant here comes up against.

Who has believed our message is the question. Who has believed what they heard from us? In verse 1, the implied answer seems to be, well, nobody or hardly anybody.

The servant came. Seemed to show much promise to begin with. Growing up like a tender shoot, as verse 2 implies. But just then went on to face increasing hostility and opposition.

Verse 2b. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him. No former majesty that we should look at him or desire him. It was a lowly birth when it happened.

It was a humble backwater upbringing. He wasn't rich. He wasn't influential. Certainly not as this world measures these things. His appeal, any appeal he had, wasn't based on outward appearance.

[9 : 14] That's not what he was about. Nobody would believe. Nobody would believe that this was the great Messiah of God. And you think about Jesus' earthly life.

Well, the Magi, they went looking for him in Jerusalem. Expecting a palatial home for the king of all kings. Not a stable or a cave or whatever. When Jesus first spoke in Nazareth, at the beginning of

his earthly ministry, there he was.

The local people objected to him. Took offense at him. Who did this local boy think he was to speak to them in the way that he was speaking? And then after teaching the kingdom parables, they start moaning.

Isn't this the carpenter's son? In other words, who does he think he is? Why should we listen to him? He did not come in power and in glory in the incarnation.

He did not come with power and authority. He will come that way when he comes again at the end of the age to judge the living and the dead and bring all things to their appointed conclusion.

[10:18] That is the way he is coming. With power and majesty and glory and authority. All authority in heaven and earth given to him. But his first coming was in humility. His first coming was to suffer.

As this suffering servant depicted here. And even though this was all predicted seven centuries in advance, yet it still nevertheless seemed so unlikely to people that the lowly carpenter from Nazareth with no beauty or majesty to draw you or attract you to him could be worth listening to. And so he was, in the words of verse 3, despised and rejected. He was a man of sorrows and familiar or acquainted with grief. It's interesting to compare that to Psalm 22, which was, we were singing earlier on, where David, under the inspiration of the Spirit, anticipates Jesus' Calvary experience in remarkable detail.

And he says, I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. When he came, well, there were some who put their trust in Jesus very quickly.

But it seems like most of those who encountered him during his earthly life were offended by him or were scandalized by the company that he kept or objected to some aspect of his teaching or whatever it was or found some other aspect of his life or ministry to be offended by.

[11:48] John describes it all so succinctly in the beginning of his gospel. He came to his own, but his own received him not. And today, as then, people look at Jesus.

And they look at him in this worldly terms, if they look at him at all. They fail to understand who he is in their own minds and conversations. They sit in judgment on Jesus.

And they seem to think that the important thing is what I think about Jesus. Well, in answer to the fact, I hope that you are well aware of this fact, that in the final analysis, the important thing is not what you think about Jesus.

The important thing is what Jesus thinks about you. And Jesus has a view about each and every one of us. You, me, all of us. He has a view about us. And the question is a question of our faith in him.

Where do we stand positionally in relation to him? Are we in Christ or not? God willing, we'll think a fair bit about that tomorrow in the service then. Are we in Christ?

[12:52] Do we presume to sit in judgment on Jesus? Now, of course, at one level, people do need to take a view on who Jesus is and why he came and what it means to follow him. People do need to take a view.

But I would repeat that in the final analysis, what's really more important is what Jesus' view is of you. and where you stand in relation to him.

But when he came, Jesus did not look important. Not in the way that this world measures importance. A servant king. Servant king.

A suffering saviour. Suffering saviour. These are oxymorons to the people of this world. These are mutually exclusive terms to the thinking of this world.

It doesn't make any sense. Nevertheless, it continues. We're coming into the third stanza now. Verses four to six. And it gets more intense.

[13:51] And it actually gets more violent as well. As the servant is now afflicted and pierced. So these are the combination of words now for the third part. The third stanza. Afflicted and pierced.

But as well as the description of the violence done against this servant, there is also the clearest statement yet about the meaning and purpose of all of this.

People often say that when they suffer, they could just about stand to suffer if they just can be assured that there is some meaning and greater purpose to it all.

Suffering without purpose or meaning is thought to be virtually unendurable. Well, this is not suffering without purpose or meaning. There is great significance here.

And the meaning of it all begins to be revealed. I don't know if you're familiar. I'm sure you're not familiar with that musical called Jesus Christ Superstar.

[14:51] But there's an interesting thing that is sometimes observed about this, which is that when the performance ends, and the significant thing is that the performance ends after the cross, but before the resurrection.

It's just the end of the story after the cross. And people say that there is just a stunned silence at the end of it, with great emphasis put on the barbarity of the suffering of the Savior, and then nothing. And people just sit there and they say, and there isn't the usual outburst of, what do you think about that? Wasn't that great? Wasn't that performance amazing? And, you know, that's the normal thing in the theater. But you don't get that. You don't get that.

Without an explanation, the whole thing begins to look barbaric and tragic. But Isaiah explains it all here. He tells us what is going on at the cross, even though as a prophet 700 years before Christ, he could not possibly have understood in any degree of detail what was going to unfold, what was going to be the exact fulfillment of the words that he was saying and writing.

Nevertheless, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he explains it perfectly. Yes, Jesus was, verse 4, stricken, smitten, and afflicted. Yes, verse 5, he was pierced, and he was crushed, and he was wounded.

[16:17] And yes, furthermore, it was God who did all of that to him. It was God who did it. But not because he deserved it.

Not because he deserved it. It's something else. And that something else is emphasized by the repeated linking of the servant with the reader, which happens through these verses.

The repeated linking of the servant with the reader. So, verse 4, he took our infirmities. He carried our sorrows.

Again, verse 5, he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

See the way that works? It's we and he all the time being brought together in this moment, in this issue here. The servant, the servant didn't deserve any of that.

[17:17] The servant didn't deserve anything of all that violent barrage that came upon him. He had acted wisely, as verse 13 showed. He will be raised up and highly exalted.

So how could it come to this for him? Well, you know the answer. It's a question we're raising. It's a question we raise in order to answer that and share that together.

The servant is standing there. The servant is hanging there. The servant is suffering there in my place. In my place.

And in place of all who put their faith, their trust in Christ and in what he has done on his cross. The servant, the innocent one, is there in the place of those who are guilty.

Those who do deserve all of that to happen. Those who do rightly come under the just wrath and fury of God against sin, which we have all committed and under which we all stand condemned.

[18:24] That's what we find here. Verse 6. It's a statement of universal human sinfulness. We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each of us turned to his own way.

No exceptions. All humanity stands under that just sentence of death. And yet, the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Us who deserve what? Who deserve God's wrath. Who deserve God's condemnation. Who deserve an eternity in hell as the just reward for our sin and our rebellion against God.

And the Lord has taken all of that that we deserve and thrown it on his son, on his own beloved son, depicted here as the suffering servant.

and so Jesus is there afflicted and pierced as a substitute. As a substitute. This is so important. He is there not for his own sins for he has none but he is there for mine.

[19:46] He is there for yours if you trust in him. And this is the only way out of that problem that we have of the condemnation of God and his just wrath against human sin in which we are all guilty.

This is our only way. This is what we need. Now Isaiah, I mentioned the word substitution there. Isaiah as an old covenant man, an old testament man was very, very familiar with the concept of substitution.

It's there right at the very heart of old covenant life that's described in the old testament. What could you do as an old testament person if you had sinned?

What could you do? Well it's there in accordance there in the law of Moses and in accordance with the law you must obtain a substitute. A substitute, an animal of some kind.

An animal that is without fault and blemish and you must sacrifice that as an offering to God. It's not of course and it never was the case that the actual blood of animals could atone for sin and make you right with God and make all that okay.

[20 : 54] Only the grace of God can do that but the sacrifice of the animal in place of yourself was a foreshadowing of this greater reality that would come when God sent his own son the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the reality to which Isaiah is pointing here. Christ came as our substitute. Christ came as the perfect sacrifice. Christ came as the atoning sacrifice.

He came to do for us what we never could have done never would have done for ourselves. He came to stand in our place and pay our penalty. He is our substitute.

There's an American actor Kevin Bacon tells of the first time his six year old son saw one of the movies that he starred in one of his early movies that made him famous.

And his son saw the film and it's quite an all action film and his son said to him Dad, you know that thing in the movie where you swing from the rafters of that building? That was really amazing.

[22 : 01] How did you do that, Dad? Kevin Bacon says well actually I didn't do that part, son. It was a stuntman that did that. And the wee boy says a stuntman?

What's a stuntman, Dad? And his father says well a stuntman's a guy who is all comes in is all dressed up to look like me and does things that I cannot do. And the wee boy says oh and trudges off a wee bit disappointed.

Five minutes later he comes back hey Dad you know that thing in the movie when you swing around in that gym bar and do the triple flipping and go up in the air and land on your feet and it's all amazing. How did you do that, Dad?

And his dad says well actually I didn't do that either. It was a gymnastics double that did that. His boy says oh what's a gymnastics double, Dad? Dad says well it's a person who can do gymnastics who comes in made to look a bit like me and does what I cannot do and then that's all good.

And there's silence from the boy and then he says in a concerned voice Dad what did you do in that film? Do you know what he said?

[23 : 10] He said well I just got all the glory. See that's a wee bit of a parable of the grace of God in our lives.

Isn't it? Jesus took our sin on himself and did what we could never do ourselves. What did we do? We did nothing.

We did nothing. We just got all the glory. We got all the benefit of it. We got all the blessing all the fullness of so great a salvation.

That's what we did. That's what we got. We did nothing. Jesus did it all. Substitutionary atonement. That's what we're talking about. Jesus comes and stands in our place and does what we never could do in order that we might be released from our inevitability of our eternity in hell.

Substitutionary atonement is the glory of the gospel yet it is increasingly unpopular today. Sir Alfred Eyre who was a philosopher and atheist died in 1989 suggested that Christianity is the worst of all possible religions since it rested on quotes the allied doctrines of original sin and vicarious atonement which are intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous.

[24 : 36] Now aside from the logical problem of an atheist appealing to morality as he did in that quotation what an outburst but I'm afraid you don't have to look outside the Christian church the visible church to find those who object to the kind of doctrine that we're talking about here.

It's there in the church today I'm afraid. As an example of that you probably are familiar with the hymn by Stuart Townend which has gained a lot of popularity in recent years in Christ alone and it's become a very popular hymn in these days and there are some who seek to try to soften the message of God's grace to us in that hymn because there's a lyric in it that says till on that cross as Jesus died the wrath of God was satisfied till on that cross as Jesus died the wrath of God was satisfied and there are those who seek to alter that lyric so that it becomes till on that cross as Jesus died the love of God was magnified what do you think about that I'll tell you what I think about that just because stuff rhymes doesn't make it true just because stuff rhymes doesn't make it sound the whole problem don't they realize that the love of

God is most magnified when the wrath of God is fully satisfied in the substitutionary sacrifice of his son that enables sinners like you and me to go free isn't that where the love of God is most magnified at the precise moment when the wrath of God is satisfied and the transformational power of that that hell deserving sinners are set free and in that very moment when Jesus cries out it is finished on the cross all the redeemed of all time from before the cross from the era of the cross and from subsequent history down to today all the redeemed of all time in that one moment are justified what a moment that is the transformational power of God the transforming power of the gospel of

Jesus Christ so let us for our part be firmly and completely committed to stand firm in our commitment to substitutionary atonement but not merely in order to support sound doctrine but because this is the glory of the gospel because this is the glory of our God the grace of the gospel in terms of what he has done for us to lift us up out of our destination hell and give us a sure and certain hope for eternity without the cross without the atonement we are left in our sin and that is not a good place to be that is not a good place to be for you have no hope you have no hope in the final day on the day of judgment without Christ well we are moving into stanza four now where the servant is oppressed yet silent oppressed yet silent

I can't help but feeling I would be making a lot of noise if I was being treated in the way that this servant is described as being treated here maybe you would be shouting the odds about human rights and lawyers or whatever but nevertheless the servant here despite all that is happening to him is silent he did not open his mouth we're told twice in verse seven the imagery of the lamb being led to the slaughter and how closely that is fulfilled when Jesus appears before the religious courts and before Pilate just prior to his crucifixion in Isaiah third servant song Isaiah 50 it was shown how Jesus voluntarily submitted to his death on the cross he offered his back to those who beat him offered his cheeks to those who pulled out his beard did not hide his face from mocking and spitting and the voluntary nature of the servant's submission is again underlined here [29 : 05] Christ certainly had the physical power to overcome his tormentors could certainly have called on twelve legions of angels from the father to come and vanquish his foes and equally certainly Jesus had the legal and linguistic capability to outwit his accusers and his judges but he willingly submits to this fate willingly submits to this suffering keeping in mind both his father's promised vindication and what's more keeping in mind those who he would redeem by dying in their place and the thing is this stanza it ends on gritty and harsh reality the servant treated with harsh oppressive judgment dies with no descendants in verse eight for the ancient Jew for the Jew of ancient

Israel that was just about the worst thing imaginable to die with no descendants no seed no name going into the next generation that was thought to be unthinkable by these people also struck down because of his people's sin verse eight and in verse nine buried alongside the wicked if you did not know the story that would amount to a tragedy a tragedy and an injustice the servant appeared to be God's servant but he suffered so much so was God pleased can the servant somehow be vindicated well yes he can because we're just coming to that but let me just mention as an aside that this stands out of course that we've just been in there up to verse nine has been responsible for the conversion of at least one person that we know of in subsequent biblical history because this is the very portion of scripture that the Ethiopian official was reading recorded in Acts chapter eight when Philip drew alongside him and the official asked

Philip what it all meant and Philip began with that very passage of scripture and told him the good news about Jesus and the man believed and he would baptize in the spot so as a point of application don't ever let anybody tell you that you need to preach New Testament to preach evangelistically don't ever let anybody tell you that you need to preach New Testament to preach for conversions because there was Philip from Isaiah 53 leading the Ethiopian official to faith in the Christ who was foretold there in that passage finally then tonight 53 verses 10 to 12 the fifth stanza where the servant is crushed but also exalted crushed but also exalted these words don't seem to belong together but vindication does come as at last the sovereign hand of God is detected it has been there all along of course but there are times when God's hand is more evident in things than other times aren't there that's a reality and God is now seen to be responsible for everything verse 10 it was the

Lord's will all of this was the Lord's will the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer it's the Lord who makes his life a guilt offering it's been hinted at already and is now stated explicitly the

whole idea is the divine plan from beginning to end the vindication by the father of the son is seen wonderfully in these verses do you remember verse 10 speaking of his offspring remember in stanza 4 there were no offspring because he died with no descendants but now now he has spiritual descendants almost without number that is all those who trust in him that is you tonight if you are trusting in Christ this is the vindication it looked like there was no offspring but now he has descendants without number verse 10 also speaks of his days being prolonged as opposed to verse 8 where he was cut off from the land of the living see there is the vindication he was cut off from the land of the living now his days are prolonged in verse 11 he is satisfied with the light of life back in verse 9 he was in the darkness of wickedness and death but now with God's vindication satisfied with the light of life and in verse 12 he is given a portion among the great as opposed to verse 9 where he was assigned a place with the wicked assigned a place with the wicked in his suffering but given a portion among the great in his triumph yes the servant has come through his trial he has suffered and died paying the penalty for sin in place in place of sinners the righteous for the unrighteous the innocent for the guilty to draw us to God and now

Christ is more than vindicated and the closing picture of the servant in verse 12 is not not of a suffering oppressed figure no no the closing picture is of a triumphant warrior a triumphant warrior who has accomplished his mission who has succeeded in battle and with the spoils of his victory this then is the triumph of the cross this is the triumph of God's son the Lord Jesus Christ by pouring his life out unto death and numbering himself with the transgressors he has triumphed he has borne the sin of many he has made intercession for transgressors through his righteousness he has justified many and so we see him now not as the suffering servant not now not smitten or afflicted not humbled for a season though he has done all of that but we see him now in his present place where he is risen and ascended where he is highly exalted at the father's right hand where he has the name above all names where he is honoured above all things the saviour of the world who is glorified in the salvation of souls as believers we will we must never forget the anguish of the cross that in part is what we are about this weekend as we come not just through word but also in sacrament as we come to be reminded of the anguish of the cross of the cost of our salvation salvation is free to us but that didn't mean it cost nothing does it it cost the servant it cost

[36 : 07] Christ it cost the saviour so we will never must never forget the anguish of the cross but equally let us always boast in the triumph of the cross because that's what it is isn't it it is a triumph Christ's victory that has set us free from sin from death and from hell we will glory in the cross and more importantly in the wonderful saviour who died there but who because of who he was and because of the death he died the grave could not hold him but he burst forth victorious in triumph with great significance and with great achievement Isaiah 53 an inconvenient text I don't think so maybe for some well the message of the cross is after all foolishness to those who are perishing and a stumbling block to the

Jews as well as foolishness to Gentiles but for we who by God's grace have had our eyes open to see and perceive these things for we who have all of that well may the message of Christ crucified be the wisdom of God and the power of God in our hearts and in our minds today the gospel is indeed the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes let us then respond I think in two ways to this message tonight let us first of all pray for those for whom this is an inconvenient text let us pray that the truth will overcome that the light will shine into the darkness that the saviour the messiah will indeed be acknowledged and for ourselves well may it be that we always will glory in the cross of

Christ and the saviour who triumphed through his cross and in his salvation that he has decisively accomplished and that he offers freely to all let us take a moment then to pray concerning these things chaos