

# The Suffering Servant

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[ 0 : 00 ] So it's March 2012 and it's the end of the opening episode of Britain's Got Talent Series 6, which was Saturday night TV through the 2010s. It was an old fashioned talent contest on TV with extra flashing lights.

! So a talent contest, picture the stage, the theatre is packed and the four judges are seated and the live audience is buzzing with anticipation. And onto the stage at the end of the show comes the final act in this talent contest.

A couple of teenagers, they're singers apparently. There's a girl who is well dressed and made up and by her side, Jonathan Antoine. And as he appears on stage, there's an intake of breath and gasps and laughs because Jonathan is enormous and heavily obese.

He's dressed in shades of grey. He has big lumpy tracksuit bottoms on and a cardigan, long lank hair and a pale face and a look in his eyes of someone who's been pointed at for years.

He's the very opposite of a 21st century star. Simon Cowell, who runs those shows, leans over to his co-judge and Sniggers, just when you think things couldn't get any worse.

[ 1 : 15 ] And members of the audience stare and then they glance at each other with raised eyebrows. And Simon Cowell looks at him and says, and do you think you can win? And Jonathan kind of shuffles around nervously and shrugs his shoulders.

It's like brutal TV. This young man exposed on the stage in front of onlookers. Another kind of self deluded loser in life, everyone thinks.

And the room goes quiet and the camera pans around to the audience and some people shaking their heads. And the tinny backing track starts up and then Jonathan Ontwan opens his mouth.

And within 20 seconds, the audience kind of rise to their feet shamelessly, cheering wildly for him. Because his voice is so beautiful and powerful and glorious.

And you see audience members wiping tears from their eyes as this divine sound washes over them from him. 150 million people have watched that clip on YouTube since then.

[ 2 : 19 ] You could look it up, Jonathan Ontwan. It's such a dramatic moment made for TV. Like one young man, centre stage on a show for stars.

There's no beauty in him. Onlookers are sneering and appalled and turning away. Before they kind of stand and rise at someone of such unexpected glory.

In Isaiah chapter 52 that we've just heard read, hundreds of years before the coming of Jesus, there is a buzz of anticipation at this point in the Bible. And the stage is set for someone who will change the whole course of human history.

The book of Isaiah tells a story of failure and hope. Firstly, the failure of humanity and the people of Israel to love and serve our Creator.

In Isaiah's day, 700 years before the coming of Jesus, the nation of Israel was corrupt. There was pride and empty worship and self-indulgence and grinding the faces of the poor.

[ 3 : 21 ] And Israel were repulsive to their God and shame and death was coming to them. And yet the people of Judah back then, 700 years before Christ, really just a reflection of all human beings by nature since the fall of Adam and Eve.

Kind of twisted self-centredness and denying of God at our core. All of us in the UK today, which leaves us under God's curse of death.

There was failure. And yet through the prophet Isaiah came a mounting message, secondly, of hope. As the Lord God promised to restore us and forgive us and change our hearts.

In Isaiah, in this part of the Old Testament, all God's promises to save human beings funnel down and focus onto one individual. And from the children of Abraham, one person, one seed who will arise.

And we heard last Sunday as Tyler was preaching, he'll, this man will be a king. He will be the son of David. Isaiah 9, the nations will gather to him and of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end.

[ 4 : 31 ] Do you know who that is? This king, secondly in Isaiah, will be God's servant. So in our first reading, Isaiah 42, God would delight in this servant, put his spirit on him, bring justice on the earth, be a light for the nations.

Through this servant, God would save the world. All of that promised and prophesied in Isaiah. And so for our world today, the curse of death overturned through this one man.

And peace with God, peace with one another forever through this king and servant. The second half of Isaiah builds and builds with expectation.

The glory of the Lord will be revealed and all people will see it together. Isaiah chapter 52 is full of it, actually. If you've got it open, please do. Look down at Isaiah 52, verse 7.

How beautiful on the mountain are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings. The gospel, who proclaim salvation and say to Zion, your God reigns.

[ 5 : 36 ] Listen, your watchmen lift up their voices and they shout for joy together. When the Lord returns to Zion, they'll see it with their own eyes. Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem.

For the Lord has comforted his people. He has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations. And all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

Until, finally, in chapter 52, verse 13 onwards, and it's called the fourth servant song, this. The pressure valve is kind of released.

And we're invited to feast our eyes on this servant king. Who will be sent by God and through whom God will save the world. And this famous song and poem, Isaiah 52, Isaiah 53, is right at the heart of the Bible.

And written hundreds of years before he was born in Bethlehem, points to, prophesies, shows us the Lord Jesus Christ. The one in whom all of God's promises are fulfilled.

[ 6 : 44 ] But, and here's the thrust of this poem. As God's servant walks onto the stage of history, Jonathan Antoine-like.

This supposed to be moment of glory, what an appalling sight he is. With that all in mind, let's look at these verses together.

And from chapter 52, verse 13 onwards, would you notice firstly, the shock of the servant when he comes? Following through the text, verse 13 starts normally, in a sense.

See, says God, my servant will act wisely. He'll succeed. He'll be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. You think that would be right when God's servant comes? In Isaiah, the Lord God is lifted up and highly exalted.

That is the proper place for God's servant king. The Apostle Paul in the New Testament testifies that after Jesus succeeded in his mission, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that's above every name.

[ 7 : 53 ] But before that, and for now, verse 14, 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've not heard they will understand. That is, as people will see God's servant, they will be appalled, and they'll shudder in horror, because his appearance so disfigured and his face so marred he looks barely human.

During the Falklands War, 40 years ago, there was a man called Simon Weston, who was on board the landing ship Sir Galahad in Bluff Cove when it was bombed and set on fire. And Simon Weston, you may know, survived with 46% burns, and his face melted really.

And he recalls, quote, He was barely recognisable.

This is a prophecy here about God's servant king. About 33 years after his birth, as Jesus hung dying on the cross, the sign above him read the king of the Jews, and yet in the hours leading up to his crucifixion, he'd been flogged with a leather whip, and beaten and stripped and spat on, and a crown of steel and a crown of steel and a crown of steel.

[ 9 : 36 ] And a crown of thorns pressed into him before he was pierced and lifted up. And by the time he bowed his head, I think we're to imagine he was damaged beyond human likeness.

Do you know that? Disfigured and marred God's servant. Were we to have actually been there at the foot of the cross, we would have shuddered in horror at a sight so appalling.

Just as there were many who were appalled at him, verse 14, so verse 15 he will sprinkle, maybe startle, many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him.

So as the message of Jesus crucified spreads to the nations, it will leave people speechless and stunned into silence. Isaiah 52 had trumpeted, all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God, and now prophesied here, see God's servant bowed and broken and battered.

Isaiah takes us next to his life. First, the shock of the servant. Second now in these verses, the suffering of the servant. And verses one to three.

[10:49] Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? In the Gospels, in John 12, verse 38, John reflects on how so many who met Jesus personally would not believe in him.

Why? This was to fulfil the word of Isaiah the prophet. 53 verse one. Lord, who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

In the poem, this is the servant's first steps.

So un-majestic. And I think you can't but think of Jesus's fragile beginning in the backstable of the village inn, and growing up like a little plant struggling for life in unwatered ground.

His beginnings, verse two, his face. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. This is the prophecy.

[12:02] When the saviour of the world comes, he would be plain and ordinary. Not flawless skin, high cheekbones, wavy blonde hair, droopy blue eyes. Not a commanding warrior hero.

He had no beauty or majesty, nothing stand out or attractive. That is, were you to pass this saviour of the world in the street, your eyes would flicker across him. Just one of the crowd.

Just a regular five foot something Jewish man. So striking that when Jesus came, that's exactly what he was like. And his neighbours said in Mark chapter six, isn't this the carpenter?

Isn't this Mary's son? And they took offence at him. He's like an ordinary guy in Orchard Park who drives a carpenter's van up and down Chieftain Way.

How could he be the one to bring in God's salvation? And his first steps, his face. Now look at his treatment, verse three. He was despised and rejected by mankind.

[13:06] A man of suffering or sorrows in the old translation. And familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised and we held him in low esteem.

Repeated twice here, despised, despised. The word means held in contempt, treated as worthless, unworthy of attention. Like the plastic wrappings of your sandwich, kind of rubbish to be thrown out. And think of Jonathan Antoine in his lumpy tracky bottom standing on stage, sneered at. And he's like, I wonder if you can see how this verse points forward so painfully to Jesus.

And we can't read the last few chapters of each of the Gospels this morning, but in the hours leading up to his death on the cross, Jesus was tossed from one group to another and spat on and struck and stripped and mocked and despised.

And, verse three, rejected by mankind. That is all the world bar none against him, as even Peter and the others fled and left him utterly alone.

[14:17] He was deserted with no human comfort or help. Despised, rejected, and now, verse three, a solitary man of suffering and familiar with pain.

That is sickness or weakness. In view here, the physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering that Jesus would undergo, certainly through the course of his life.

And yet, at the end, ramped up so terribly. As they held his body down, drove nails through his hands, nailed his feet to the upright and hoisted him up on the cross to hang.

Think again, were we to have been there at the foot of the cross of this so-called saviour of the world, how would we have reacted to such shameful public weakness and suffering?

End of verse three, like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. I mention every so often this early piece of graffiti from the second century discovered in Rome.

[15:25] It's a crude drawing of a cross, and stretched out on it a man with the head of a donkey. And to the left stands another man with one arm raised in worship, and scribbled underneath are the words, Alexaminos worships God.

It's a kind of sneering, scornful drawing. To say to Alexaminos, this Christian, Is this beaten and crucified man, appalling and ugly and low, is that your salvation? Is that your long-promised Messiah and God? Can't be. Can't be. He can't be. But he can be. And he is.

And this is Isaiah 53, the fourth servant song, the starts of it. And there's buzzing anticipation. The stage is set for God's servant king.

When he comes, it will be good news. It will be salvation for the world. And so you see here, prophesied in such striking detail, Our Lord Jesus. Disfigured, appalling, tender and growing, ordinary, rejected, suffering, despised.

[ 16 : 43 ] You say, but why? Why? Why, when God's servant finally comes into the world, will he suffer so, like this?

And the answer, so many of us know, is here in verses four to six. The centre of this song, and the centre of all God's plans through history for our good.

Because Isaiah chapter 53, verses four to six, show us that Jesus Christ, God's servant, chose and allowed himself to be disfigured and despised and crucified.

And he actively came and suffered. And he did all that and endured all this through his life and death for people like you and me. That we might be saved and restored to our God.

The shock of the servant, the suffering of the servant. Now finally in verses four to six, the sacrifice of the servant for us. What is going on as he suffers?

[ 17 : 46 ] Look from verse four. The punishment that brought us peace was on him.

We are healed. We are healed. 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.

Notice firstly in the text of the hour. Our pain, our suffering, our transgressions, our iniquity. So ask what do we need saving from?

And it's this. That transgressions and iniquities speak of our sins. And how we willfully rebel against the Lord and bend away from his good commands and anger him rightly.

And all the stuff you do that you know is wrong. That hurts others and offends the God who made you. Pain and suffering speak of our experience in a world under God's curse.

[ 19 : 05 ] Weakness, disease, sorrows and death. What does this servant do? He took up our pain and bore our suffering.

In Jesus' public ministry in his life you may know this. He deals with fevers. He heals the ill, makes the paralysed walk, raises the dead.

He somehow absorbs other people's pain and suffering into himself. Matthew writes, this was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah.

Chapter 53 verse 4. He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases. And then, having lived and suffered, he went to suffer and die on the cross.

So ask what is happening as Jesus is crucified? And verse 5 tells you. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities.

[ 20 : 08 ] The punishment that brought us peace was on him and by his wounds we are healed. Do you see that verse? So on the cross as he dies, Jesus Christ takes our place, stands in for us, dies as our substitute.

He sacrifices himself for us, for all who place their trust in him. It's in the verse here. Our transgressions and our iniquities, our every self-obsessed, God-denying thought and word and deed, which deserve death, are lifted off us and placed on him.

The sin and guilt and punishment due to all his people this innocent man takes for us. On the cross, Jesus is pierced for our transgressions.

He is crushed for our iniquities. He is punished by God for our sins. He dies as a substitutionary sacrifice for us.

It is the most stunning thing in all of history that the Lord God would come from heaven to earth and die in your place and for you, bearing your sins on his shoulders.

[ 21 : 32 ] And do you see what his work on the cross does? The punishment he endures, verse 5, brings us peace. That is, with your sin and your guilt taken away, with God's punishing anger satisfied, you are gifted peace.

Peace with the living God. You can be healed and forgiven and put right with God and restored to friendship with him.

We are granted eternal life instead of death. And all of that, the heart of the gospel, the heart of the good news, all of that because, and only because, this servant Jesus, in fulfilment of this ancient prophecy, died for our sins.

When the apostle Paul in the New Testament, writing to the church in Corinth, says, let me tell you the gospel by which you are saved.

And in the Bible, he says, 1 Corinthians 15, verse 3, for what I received, I passed on to you as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.

[ 22 : 51 ] According to this scripture, Isaiah 53, fulfilled as Christ died for us.

This is of absolutely first importance for us and our lives into eternity. Isaiah 53, 6, we all, like sheep, have gone astray.

Each of us has turned to our own way. And the Lord has laid on him, on Jesus, the iniquity of us all. This series leading up to Christmas is called Waiting for the Saviour.

In Matthew chapter 1, the angel speaks to Joseph and says, Mary will give birth to a son. You are to give him the name Jesus.

The name Jesus means God saves. Because he will save his people from their sins. And that is what he came to do.

[ 23 : 54 ] This long-promised snake crusher and seed of Abraham and son of David. It says to us that this morning, 2,000 years after his birth, life, death and resurrection, you can put your trust in Jesus confidently.

For all the prophecies are fulfilled in him. You can put your trust in him confidently. And secondly, you must trust him urgently.

You've got to come to the Lord Jesus Christ and receive him as your Saviour and your Lord and become one of his people. And you can be saved from your sins.

See the Lord Jesus Christ, the son of David, born in Bethlehem. See the Lord Jesus Christ, the suffering servant, crucified in Jerusalem. He's one young man at the centre stage in all of history.

On the cross, do you see him? No beauty, onlookers sneering, they're appalled and they turn away. Meant to look again at the Lord Jesus and see the glory in him.

[ 25 : 08 ] This beautiful, majestic, despised, long-promised Saviour who came into the world and sacrificed himself to bring us peace.

It's true, he did it. All the prophecies were fulfilled and now you can have eternal life. So this Christmas you're meant to see him. You're meant to put your trust in him.

You're meant to bow before him. You're meant to worship him. I'm going to lead us in a prayer and then we're going to sing together.

Let's pray. Well, we like sheep have gone astray. Each has turned to his own way.

And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. We praise and thank you so deeply, our Heavenly Father, that when the time had fully come, you sent forth your Son to be born of a woman and to die for our sins.

[ 26 : 17 ] He, the great King. He, the long-promised servant. He, the innocent one who took up our pain and bore our suffering.

We thank you that he was pierced for our transgressions and he was bruised for our iniquities.

Thank you that the punishment that brought us peace was on him.

Thank you that by his wounds we can be healed. Thank you that by his hand. Thank you that by his hand. Make us those, we pray, who turn away from ourselves and fill our eyes with the Lord Jesus Christ this Christmas.

May we know him and trust him and worship him. Please help us, Father. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.