

The Mysterious Character in Isaiah

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[0 : 00] Lord, grant that as we turn our minds and our hearts to your word, that you will set our hearts aflame as you inform our minds of the things which concern your eternal purpose in our lives and in our world.

Amen. I want you all to work hard through this sermon, which means keeping your Bible on your knee and working at it.

So turn to 648, where the first lesson came from. And in order that I can impress upon you, I want to read again the text which was read as our Old Testament lesson.

And I'm going to read the first phrases, the first part of each verse, and ask you to respond with the rest of the same verse. And it's Isaiah chapter 53, and it begins at verse 7.

Are you ready? He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth. Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, like a sheep that before its years is done, so he opened not his mouth.

[1 : 31] By oppression and judgment, he was taken away. And as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people, they made his grave with the wicked and with the rich man in his death.

Although he had done no vile, there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise him, for he has put him to grief.

And he is, I will not offer him for sin. He shall see his offspring. He shall prolong his days. The will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

He shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul, and be satisfied. And the crown of the self-righteous one of my servants, make many to the amount of the sins, and he shall bear it.

Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoils with the strong. Because he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors, yet he bore the sin of many, and made an assassin for them.

[2 : 46] I would say one of the most profound mysteries in the whole of scripture is the passage which you have just read.

And I would say that in this, in the verses that you've just read, you get probably the dividing place of all the great religions of the world.

They divide over what this passage means. It's not over what the passage means so much, as it is over who this mysterious person is, that is spoken of in this passage.

Who is it that was oppressed and afflicted? Who was it that opened not his mouth? Who was it that was taken away by oppression and judgment?

Who was it that bore the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors? Now, I don't want to do injustice to other religions, but I want to explain something to you, and you have to, I think, hear it.

[4 : 02] When a Jew reads this passage and looks at this mysterious character that is spoken of, he's very liable to interpret this as being a personification of the nation of Israel.

And it is Israel that was oppressed and afflicted. It was Israel that opened not his mouth. It was Israel who, by oppression and judgment, was taken away.

And if you were to read this to a Muslim, I think the place where he would take offense at it would be that it was the will of the Lord to bruise him.

He has put him to grief when he makes himself an offering for sin. The sensibilities of any Muslim are terribly offended by the thought of a God who would die, who would make himself an offering for sin.

And if you turn to the religions of the East, the trouble they find is considering even the possibility of the transgressor being justified, being forgiven.

[5 : 28] that only an immoral God could forgive a proven sinner. And they are offended.

And so, this mysterious passage is very basic. And even though its words are very familiar, there are so many things it doesn't say.

so many questions it leaves unanswered, so many difficulties that it raises that can't easily be solved.

What does this passage mean? Who is it that was oppressed and was afflicted? well, I'll tell you something about him on the basis of what it says in this text.

The first thing it says about him is that he opened not his mouth in the face of his accusers. Now, you know, when a policeman stops you by the side of the road to give you a ticket, to silently submit to that is a superhuman task in itself.

[6 : 46] to be accused of something which is worthy of punishment by death and not to open your mouth to defend yourself is, uh, something that goes way beyond the limits of our human experience.

And yet, this mysterious character opened not his mouth. He said nothing. And it's been suggested that he said nothing.

Not because he didn't understand who he was, but because he was there on behalf of somebody else.

Uh, if it was his own case that was being tried, then he would have defended himself. But because he was there on behalf of somebody else, he opened not his mouth.

Because he knew that the person or persons whom he was represented had no way to defend themselves, could not defend themselves.

[8 : 00] The second thing about him that it says is that there was nobody in the crowd who would plead his cause. And, uh, I point you to, uh, to verse 8 where it says, as for his generation who considered him, they didn't think who he was.

They didn't defend him. He stood alone and was condemned. and nobody interfered on his behalf.

Do you know what prevents us from rising to the defense of other people most often? of our own guilt? The awareness of our own guilt.

And I think the terrible silence of this mysterious character was taken and condemned. The mysterious guilt, silence, was because people recognized in a deep way their own guilt.

says of him further in verse 9 that he did no violence. And, uh, you know, we, South Africa has valiantly tried to avoid violence.

[9 : 39] Mahatma Gandhi tried to avoid terrible violence. and it broke out all over the country on his death. And man cannot seem to express himself without resorting to violence.

And, uh, every newspaper, every news report, every day is really gravitating around a sort of flashpoint at which violence can no longer be restrained and breaks out.

But of this character, it says, he did no violence. It says further about him that no deceit was found in his mouth.

Now, I would like to spend the morning on that because, uh, because I think we are such inveterate liars.

and the possibility of spending one day or even one hour speaking the truth is so far removed from the habit of our mind and the pattern of our thinking that we could probably not do it unless we were locked in a padded cell and muffled.

[11 : 04] Uh, how, I mean, it's just very difficult. And what, and I'm not suggesting that we do it occasionally. I'm suggesting we do it all the time.

It's just how we live. When you speak, your emotions are involved. There is body language and there is words and, uh, to put your words and your body language and your emotions all together so that they're saying exactly the truth is a feat that few of us would even attempt to do.

We recognize that we have to speak the language of the people around us and so we use lies. It's a convention which we all accept and so it doesn't stand out as being particularly wrong but it's a convention which we can't escape from either.

Even if you ask a person how are you and they say you don't want to know to which you could say and you probably don't want to say and the reason you don't want to say is because you're not sure and so it's better to allow this trivial conversation to end now than to try and probe any deeper into the simple reality of how are you.

It's very difficult to speak the truth and yet this person there was no difference between what he was thinking in his heart what he was feeling what he was demonstrating with his body and what he was saying with his tongue it would be a very very arresting moment in our lives if somebody did that to us we broke with all the conventions of deceit which we need to get by on but he no deceit was found in his mouth then it says that he suffered for a purpose now the greatest problem human problem that there is in the whole of the world and the most ancient problem is what is the meaning of suffering and somehow the meaning of suffering and the fact of suffering come together in this mysterious character it's spoken of in Isaiah 53 suffering and meaning are locked together he suffered for a purpose sometimes we aspire to find purpose in our suffering but we don't always and most of us and I think to our great shame hide ourselves from the mercy and goodness of God because we think he allows unwarranted suffering we must meet the character that's spoken of here and see how he understood suffering and then it says that in this passage that he gave his life as a ransom for many that's how it was interpreted in the

[15 : 03] New Testament this morning by his knowledge shall the righteous one my servant make many to be accounted righteous by what he did many are ransomed you know this terrible protest that's gone on in South Africa over the weekend over the man that was hanged on Friday morning how all the leaders of the commonwealth sent word asking for clemency for this man now there is no question that underlying the situation there was a simple matter of justice a black policeman had been shot the man who shot him was hung and why all the chaos and confusion the chaos and confusion seems to come out of the fact that there seems to have been other issues at stake there were deeper issues at stake somehow it should have been dealt with differently well

I am certainly not prepared to say how it could have been dealt with differently I only refer to it because I think what is spoken of here is comparable to the commonwealth leaders meeting in the Bahamas drawing lots among themselves and one of them going to South Africa and saying I will die in his place now that is an unthinkable thing that anything like that would ever happen and yet what's spoken of here seems to imply that this is what happened to him ah this is what he did and the strange thing about it is and I I don't know how you can read this or I can read it it says that in verse 11 he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied he undergoes this suffering and it says that he sees the consequences of it and is satisfied you know what that means that means that he was completely ready to live his life and die his death for no other purpose than to please

God we might ask well what's in it for me and he would answer what's in it for me is that by doing this I please God the old King James version says it pleased the Lord to bruise him strange language isn't it but it pleased the one who was bruised to serve to please God by doing it and then it says at the end of the session at the end of the section we read that he died for transgressors that is those who had breached the covenant relationship they had with God he died for them and as he died he prayed for them he bore the sins of many and made intercession for the transgressors now this passage doesn't say who this person is but let me show you how the

New Testament treats this person and I want just quickly to if you want to follow I'd like you to but you'll have to be quick with your thumbs John 1 29 John the Baptist tells you who this person is when walking with the disciples on the shore of the sea of Galilee in verse 29 he saw Jesus coming toward him and he said behold the lamb of God that is the one who was oppressed and afflicted and opened not his mouth like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and John the Baptist picks it up and says behold the lamb of God remember in Acts chapter 8 where the Ethiopian was returning from having worshipped in Jerusalem and do you know what passage he was reading as he traveled he was reading this passage that is our

Old Testament lesson this morning as a sheep led to the slaughter verse 32 or a lamb before its shearers is done so he opens not his mouth and when Philip joins him he asks about this passage as I'm encouraging you to ask as I think the whole world needs to ask about the mysterious character spoken of the eunuch asks about who prayed does the prophet say this about himself or about someone else and Philip opened his mouth and beginning with the scriptures he told him the good news of Jesus and then if you were to look and up in Revelations chapter 5 right at the end of the Bible you'll see how this same passage is picked up again in the peculiar language of the book of the revelation and it's in verse 8 it says when he had taken the scroll of four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the lamb and the golden bowls full of the saints and they sang a new song you go down to verse 12 saying with a loud voice worthy is the lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might honor and glory and blessing so that you see a time in the future that

[22 : 11] Revelation speaks about and the lamb that was slain becomes the object of our worship character spoken of in Isaiah 53 is the object of worship in Revelations chapter 5 then if you look in 1 Peter and again it's 1 Peter chapter 2 and verse 22 and Peter takes up the same mystery who is this person and he speaks of Jesus Christ in 1 Peter chapter 2 and verse 22 when he says he committed no sin no guile was found on his lips that interprets that's the translation of the verse he committed no violence no guile was found on his lips Peter goes on when he was reviled he did not revile in return when he suffered he did not threaten but he trusted to him who judges justly he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness by his wounds you have been healed so Peter at the heart of the declaration of the good news says this is the man that is spoken of in Isaiah 53 now I want you to look finally at

Romans chapter 5 and verse 18 John the Baptist has identified him Philip the Ethiopian eunuch has identified him to the Ethiopian eunuch John in the revelation has identified who the lamb is can I confuse you slightly by asking you to look at Luke chapter 22 before we come to Romans Luke chapter 22 and verse 37 Jesus identifies who the man is in Isaiah 53 when at the last supper he turns to the disciples and says to them chapter 22 verse 37 I tell you Jesus says to his disciples that this scripture must be fulfilled in me then he quotes and he was reckoned with the transgressors for what is written about me has its fulfillment so when

Jesus was at the last supper the scripture that was on his mind was this scripture and the fulfillment of it in him and now finally turn if you will to Romans chapter 5 verse 18 and Paul picks up the same theme in a slightly different way and with this verse I want just to leave it with you 5 verse 18 where he says then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men right back in the beginning of the book of Genesis you have Adam and Eve in the garden standing before a tree and there man chose to disobey

God and that's spoken of by Paul as one man's act of disobedience condemnation has fallen on all men and most of us end there but there is another man standing before another tree and that man is Jesus and that tree is the cross and there he chooses unlike Adam and Eve he chooses to be obedient and in his obedience Paul says in dying on the cross one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men most of us identify ourselves with the disobedience of the tree in the garden of Eden what we're called to do in

Christ is identify with Jesus in his obedience at the cross and John Dunn in a poem says what I guess lots of people have thought he says we think that Christ's cross and Adam's tree stood in one place then goes on to say and as the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face may the last Adam's blood my soul embrace it is the heart of the Christian faith that the mysterious character in Isaiah 53 is Jesus

[28 : 21] Christ and the only way you can know it is to find him on the cross and read the crucifixion story the trial and death of Jesus against the background of Isaiah 53 we're going to sing now