

Glimpses of Glory God's surprising servant

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Great to be in church with you this morning. My name's Steve, and it is a brisk morning. I'm a little bit cold, and I'm hoping to warm up as I preach. So just bear with me on that. It's just really that my core temperature must be dropped or something this morning. But it's great to be in church with you. We've been on a journey through the book of Isaiah, and we're coming towards some really crucial bits and towards the end of it. So I'm really glad you're here, and I'm glad that you checked it in online with us this morning. I'd be grateful if you get Isaiah 53 open in front of you. Also, there's St. Paul's app. There's a message, an outline for today's message, God's surprising servant.

It will help you immensely as we go through. Well, Eric Liddell was a Scottish sprinter, rugby player and Christian missionary. He was known for his refusal to run in the heats for his favoured event, the 100 metre sprint at the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris. He received significant pressure from the then Prince of Wales and the World Olympic Committee to run on a Sunday, and it was against his Christian conviction to do so. And he only found out the heats were on on the Sunday as he was travelling to Paris on the boat. He ended up, by the goodness of one of his colleagues, swapped events with him, and he ended up winning the gold medal for the 100 metre race instead at the 24 Olympics. His life, at least at that point of his life, is captured in the 1981 movie, Chariots of Fire. But his legacy is much greater than winning a gold medal.

Immediately after winning the gold medal, he did what he wanted to do for the rest of his life, and he set out as a missionary to China. He returned to China. He was born in China to missionary parents.

And he remained in China until his death in a Japanese civilian internment camp in 1945. Liddell's Olympic training and racing, his Christian convictions, everything that influenced him, are there in that movie, Chariots of Fire, and I encourage you to watch it. But his enduring legacy is not mentioned in the movie. What he's really, really famous for is not mentioned in the movie at all, because it's not an Olympic gold medal. His enduring legacy is the time that he spent as a missionary and in the internment camp. Liddell became a leader and an organiser of the camp under harsh conditions.

He busied himself by helping the elderly, teaching Bible classes, arranging games, teaching science to students. He was referred to as Uncle Eric. One of his fellow internees later wrote a book about his experience in that camp, and the book's called The Courtyard of the Happy Way. And he described Liddell as the finest Christian gentleman it has ever been my pleasure to meet.

[3 : 47] Another said of Liddell in his writing, it is rare indeed that a person has the good fortune to meet a saint, but he came as close to it as anyone I have ever known. Another non-Christian said that.

Liddell, from the moment of his, beyond the internment camp and the end of World War II, many things have been written about him. His influence has been substantial and nothing to do with winning a gold medal.

He was known by all in the internment camp as someone who gave up his life for others. Despite him having a wife and three children who had escaped to Canada, when he was given an opportunity to be released from the internment camp and to return and to go to Canada, he surrendered that opportunity to a pregnant woman. He let her go.

And he stayed. His last words were, it's complete surrender.

It's complete surrender. A reference to how he had completely given his life to Jesus Christ, who had completely given his life for him.

[5 : 41] It's complete surrender. The passage, which was just read out to us by Sybil this morning, is one of the most important passages in the entire Bible.

And yet, in the storyline of Isaiah, these verses are a complete shock. They're unexpected. Because they subvert every human category of thought about greatness and glory and salvation.

There are three surprising things. So if you've got the St. Paul's app, you'll notice them there in the titles. Surprisingly Ordinary, Surprising Suffering and Surprising Glory.

That's the journey today. Open up Isaiah 53 and the St. Paul's app. Now the big shock of these verses is that by the time you get to Isaiah 53, we're expecting someone of power and greatness and majesty to come in and rescue God's people enslaved in Babylon.

[6 : 51] God's person coming to rescue his people from exile. The great divine king who we saw earlier in Isaiah is going to raise up every valley, fill in every valley and bring every mountain down low.

the one who's going to have big paths straight. This great king, the one who's going to bring renewal to the whole world. We're expecting someone majestic and big and powerful.

Instead, you read in verse 2, he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him. Nothing 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. The shock of these verses is that this majestic king, this God's servant here, has none of the markers of what the world would call successful.

[8 : 04] Looks, money, connections, credentials, none of it. And yet despite that, we read in verse 1, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

The arm of the Lord, in Bible talk, simply means, it's a metaphor for the power of God. This is saying that this servant, despised, held in low esteem, is God's power.

God's power. And it's how God's power works in the world, and it subverts every category that we have. Every category. It's exactly what we see in the New Testament.

Mark's biography of Jesus records Jesus turning up to his hometown, Nazareth. It's in Mark chapter 6. And in verse 3, it says that the people of his hometown took offense at him.

Now, what's surprising about that is that Nazareth could also be called Nowhereville. You know, it's a humble little village that is hardly mentioned in history at all, and its only famous resident is Jesus.

[9 : 36] Only one. In other words, these are grassroots people who knew Jesus as a kid, and Jesus turns up, and they're offended by him.

And the word translated offense in Mark chapter 6, verse 3, means that they were scandalized by him. To be scandalized is not to disagree with him.

It means to totally reject him. It means to feel hostility towards him. William Craig, sorry, not Willie Craig, William Lane, in his commentary on Mark chapter 6, states the issue really well.

Well, their discernment could not penetrate the veil of ordinariness that surrounded him.

How could the long-awaited Messiah, King, Rescuer of God's people be so ordinary?

[10 : 50] Ordinary. The ordinariness of Jesus did not fit with the village of Nazareth's worldview of a triumphant Messiah.

This is not who we're expecting. And in the same way, friends, the ordinariness of Jesus offends the normal moral understanding of how salvation, sorry, the normal human understanding of how salvation works in our world.

All religions, all philosophical systems offer a form of salvation and liberation that is from the ordinariness of human life.

It's escaping the ordinariness of human life. And it is always triumphant and it is always strong. the Christian view of salvation is unique.

God comes down into our ordinariness. He doesn't lift us just from it. He immerses himself in the pain, the vulnerability, the suffering of the ordinary human life.

[12 : 08] We cannot know what the good news of Christianity is if we've never felt the offence of Jesus Christ. But we must not take offence.

Matthew 11 verse 6 says, blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me. If we take offence at the ordinariness of Jesus, we can never know his blessing.

now I know I'm taking a lot for granted when I say that and so there's an extra incentive to sign up to Alpha to discover a bit more about the Christian faith and the good news that it actually is for all of humanity.

The reality is, this is how God works in all of life from beginning to end. the extraordinary power of God operates in our life in just ordinary ways.

For instance, the grace and the life of God grows in our ordinary life in ordinary ways is what I'm saying. Things like daily Bible reading, daily prayer, self-examination, worship, hanging out with people who are bold enough to point you to Jesus, to encourage you to keep on keeping on, to keep you accountable for walking with Jesus week in and week out and week in and week out for years.

[13:46] Ordinary things that you do over and over and over again have a powerful impact on your life. So imagine for instance, I got the seed right now for a Morton Bay fig tree.

If you don't know what that is, go to the Botanic Gardens or just Google it actually, there we go. Much easier to do, not now, later. Got the seed for Morton Bay fig tree.

It easily fits in the palm of my hand. Now imagine if I decided right now I'm going to go to the corner of this building just outside and I'm going to get this Morton Bay fig seed and I'm going to smash this building with the seed and try and bring the building down.

The seed has no power. I don't have any power. It has no power in itself. It's nothing. It's just small. It's little. However, I plant it in the corner of the building and I water it, give it some sunshine, give it time, water it, you know, fertilize the nutrients, sunshine every day.

It will grow and it will grow and it will grow big enough to crumble the building. It will tear it down over the course of time. That's the extraordinary power of God's work in our lives through ordinary means again and again and again and again.

[15:13] Slow and ordinary growth comes through the means of grace and it's so powerful to bring about incredible transformation in life. So I want to ask you, is the arm of the Lord evidence in your life, in your habits?

That's the first thing that's surprising. God's servant was so ordinary. The second thing surprising here is that God's servant suffers. How can a great triumph come through such weakness?

That's not how we work in this world. Notice the words in verses 4 and 5. Pain, suffering, stricken, afflicted, pierced, crushed. The word pierced there means the most painful possible death.

Then down in verse 8, taken away, cut off. The word cut off means a violent death. God's servant, Jesus Christ, suffered terribly.

many people think, and just a little bit of a side point here, many people think that because they're suffering, God doesn't love them.

[16:35] And the only response I have to that, look at Jesus. Just look to Jesus in your suffering. God's salvation in our lives is in fact compatible with a very hard experience.

His love for us is compatible with a very hard experience in life. God can be with you, love you, in you, working through you, growing you, even while you suffer terribly.

But the surprising thing about the suffering of God's servant here is why he suffered. there is at least ten times in these verses that he is described as taking on things that are not his.

He took up our pain, verse 4. He bore our suffering, verse 4. He was pierced for our transgressions. And again, the punishment that brought us peace was on him. Over and over again, he's taking on, taking on, taking on things that don't belong to him, that are not his.

[17:55] transgressions. What does all that mean? Cast your eye down to verse 12. It says, God's servant king was numbered with the transgressors.

What's surprising about that is that when you read through Isaiah 53, you'd notice that he is declared to be innocent at every point.

And yet here he's numbered with the transgressors. In Luke chapter 22 verse 37, Jesus quotes this verse at the end of his last supper with his disciples just moments before he's arrested and is executed.

And he says, Isaiah 53 verse 12 is about me. I'm the one who is numbered amongst the transgressors. He says this, he was numbered with the transgressors and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me.

He says this just hours before his death. Isaiah 53 verses 12 verse 12 is what is on his mind. What does it mean that he took our pain, our suffering and our punishment?

[19:16] to be numbered with the transgressors doesn't mean that he became a transgressor. It means that he was counted, treated as if he was a transgressor.

And just hours later he was hung on a cross between two other transgressors as if he himself was one. This is the surprising thing about his suffering.

He takes on what should be our suffering for our transgressing. He is treated as if he has done every single thing that we have done. What's even more surprising is that it says in verse 11 that my righteous servant will justify many.

So put verses 10 and 11 together and it's an amazing section. Verse 10 said it was God's will to crush him to cause him to suffer and through the Lord make his life an offering for sin he will see his offspring which simply means he through his suffering through his death will see the results of his suffering.

And then in verse 11 we read after he had suffered he will see the light of life and be satisfied by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many.

[20 : 51] To justify someone is to make them righteous it's a legal term to declare them to be right. It is the idea once again I was up here I talked about the idea of double blessing.

He had the peace but got the punishment so that we who deserve the punishment get the peace. Sin is forgiven but peace.

Jesus Christ is treated by God as he has done everything all of humanity has done throughout the history of humanity so that when we put our trust in him we are treated as if we have done everything that he has done.

Righteousness of life constant obedience to the father. That is the surprise that is the center that is the power that is the wonder of the Christian faith.

And there is nothing like it in all of humanity. It is radically different from every other religion. Every other religion in this world is from the strong to the strong.

[22 : 05] And the basic message is if you want to be great then you summon your strength and you focus your will and you live in a particular way and eventually you'll be great.

Jesus Christ died rejected and in utter weakness. He was despised. He comes in weakness and so his salvation is only ever for the weak.

Salvation is a gift from the weak to the weak. God's servant in Isaiah is surprising.

He is both a servant and a king just as God is both righteous and loving. God substitutes himself for us on the cross.

God puts himself where we deserve to be so that now we can stand in the place of honour only he deserves to plead.

[23 : 15] And it's a place of honour, it's a place of love, it's a place of acceptance, it's a place of approval, it's a place that's guilt-free, shame-free.

glory. And that's the surprising glory of this passage. God's servant is surprisingly ordinary, surprisingly suffers in weakness to make us right and strong, and this all points to a surprising glory because it's not how we would do it.

Have a look again at verse 10. It was the Lord's will to crush him and to cause him to suffer and through the Lord make his life and offering for sin. He will see his offspring and prolong his days and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

And then in verse 11 it says, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. What's happening in verse 11 is that it's completing the full circle of this poem, which began in 52, verse 13, where it says about God's servant that he will be raised, he will be lifted up and highly exalted.

That is, it's a reference to the cross and the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. He will be raised up on a cross, dying for the sin of humanity and he will be highly praised, exalted, honoured.

[25 : 02] Now we've seen this language before in Isaiah, the idea of being high and exalted. We've seen it before. You all remember the very first message in Isaiah chapter 6, several months ago, I'm sure.

But it's there in Isaiah 6, when Isaiah is commissioned, he gets a glimpse of the throne room of God and he says, I saw the Lord high and exalted seated on a throne.

He sees the God of the universe on a throne and it's saying here that this suffering servant is the God of the universe, seated on a throne.

What's even more remarkable is if you read through John chapter 12, John says, Isaiah was gazing on Jesus Christ.

Isaiah saw Jesus on the throne. At the cross, humanity passed its verdict on Jesus and its verdict was rejection and condemnation, but the cross is not the end of it.

[26 : 11] That's what this verse is saying in 52 verse 13. The cross is not the end. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became human, lived a perfect life, a perfect life, but to us humanity, he was ordinary, he was despised, rejected, he was disfigured, beyond recognition, he was placed in a grave.

That was our verdict on him and then God's verdict came. And he brings him powerfully from death. Resurrection is God's vindication. This is my suffering servant for humanity and he is high and he is exalted and he is honoured and he is lifted up at the right hand of the Father in heaven.

And the world falls silent as Jesus is vindicated in Isaiah 52 verse 15. The cross of Christ looks like a failed plan or a pointless gesture, but is the power and the wisdom of God.

As the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1, Jews demand signs for the wisdom, but we preach Christ crucify the power and the wisdom of God.

[27 : 43] substitutionary sacrifice is the surprising glory of his work.

And it is the surprising glory of the Christian life. In other words, you want to be great in life? Why shoot for an Olympic gold? Give up your life for others and you will be great. That's the surprising glory of the Christian life.

A life of substitutionary sacrifice is the Christian life. And it happens in all of life. It's there right through all of life. Let's take the example of parenting.

I'm glad that James and Sybil rose this one. I mean, unbeknownst to them. Let's take the example of parenting. A child comes into your life and all of a sudden you experience how much they hamper your personal freedom.

[28 : 53] How much they get in the way of your life. There are all sorts of things you used to be able to do but you can't do to the same degree. Travel, career advancement, social life.

life. This is particularly a conflict for the Westerner who deeply values personal and individual freedom, which is why so many Westerners are getting a dog rather than a child.

if you make a choice to hold onto your freedom and go down the road of selfishness, then that child will grow up with all kinds of insecurities.

insecurities. All kinds of insecurities. There is a sense where they will themselves grow up and be enslaved to their own complex brokenness if the parents are under their freedom.

On the other hand, if you give up your freedom as the way a parent should, then the child will grow up stable, responsible, free. And when they do, the parent will discover a new kind of freedom.

[30 : 07] A freedom that comes from a relationship with a child who's grown up to become a stable contributing adult to society. The freedom that comes from the richness of family life, transparency in relationship.

See the point? The point is, it's either you or them. Substitutionary sacrifice. It's either you or them. All real love, all real love is weakening yourself to strengthen the other, but it results in the giver getting a new strength that they could not have otherwise.

There is a freedom in that. Take another example. You've got wealth. What I mean is that you've got money and you've got assets that mean that you've got some power to make choices in your life.

That's what I mean by wealth. I don't mean whether you're on the BRW rich 200 list. You've got power to make choices in your life. That's the definition of wealth.

And you might not feel that you're wealthy, but you've got power to make choices. You have choices. And you can hold on to all of your money, all of your time, and all of your power for yourself in such a way that you become enslaved to it.

[31 : 27] And you will perish with it in poverty. You will perish with it in poverty. Or, on the other hand, you can give up your riches in various ways.

You can start to share your wealth and your power and your choices and invest your time and your money charitably towards others and you can use your wealth either to hold on to your power, you will always be weak, or to give up your wealth to empower others and you'll start to discover a new and real wealth, something that liberates and frees.

When Jesus gave himself away to win us, he then got the name that is above every other name. Not before. Not before.

He deserves far more honor for having lost his honor. In closing, at the end of his book, Mere Christianity, C.S.

Lewis, sums up the Christian life just beautifully. It's the very last page. Let me quote him. The principle runs through all of life from top to bottom.

[32 : 42] Give up yourself and you will find your true self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end.

Submit with every fiber of your being and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever really be truly yours.

Nothing that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin and decay.

But look for Jesus Christ and you will find him and with him every other thing thrown in as well.

What a way to finish a book.

Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis. And so I wonder friends, can you say with Eric Liddell at the point of death, it's complete surrender.

[34 : 07] It's complete surrender. what might be your next step to weaken yourself that others might be strong. Thank you. Thank you. I can't that quartet matter season so I he's estoy loving away and giving me have many them to work there's maybe to I has been there's