

# Glimpses of Glory God's servant suffers

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Preacher: Aidan Kemp

[ 0 : 00 ] Hey everyone, my name's Aidan. If you haven't met before, I would love to get to know you after the service. I'm a regular here at St Paul's. I also work in IT, but at the Sydney Opera House, and I'm married to the lovely Emma.

What I did just there was an introduction. I mean, genuinely, if I haven't met you before, I would love to get to know you after the service. But have you ever thought about how you introduce yourself? Have you got a particular way you do it when you meet a new person?

Have you got some important information they need to know about you, or some fun way of getting you to remember them? Or do you just vibe it every time? That is actually not a rhetorical question, sorry. I really believe that sermons are a group activity.

So what I want you to do is find someone nearby and ask them, how do you introduce yourself? What's the first few things you tell someone when you meet someone new?

There's going to be a second question to talk about later, so make sure you do introduce yourself to someone. And if you don't know the people around you, this is a great time to actually say those things. So I'll give you a minute, and then we'll come back in a sec.

[ 1 : 14 ] All right. Let's come back. If you're able to tear yourself away from introducing yourself. Now in case you're wondering, the way I used to introduce myself in high school was so consistent that a friend bought me this stamp, which has the words, Hi, my name is Aidan, nice to meet you, shakes hand written on it.

Because every time I met someone, I would do the same three things. But the passage we're looking into today starts off with an introduction of one of the big names of the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, the suffering servant of Isaiah.

And the picture we get from this suffering servant, from their introduction, paints a grand narrative of suffering, reward, and inevitability. So before we get stuck into analysing this intriguing figure of the Bible, it would be great if you can join with me in prayer for a moment.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the chance to read your word and hear your voice through the Bible today. Please help us understand the passage before us and use your spirit to bring us closer to you as we do so.

Amen. Now, as I said, Isaiah 49 opens with an introduction of the suffering servant. Now, to get you familiar with where we are in Isaiah, the last nine chapters have been a long conversation between three figures in the Bible.

[ 2 : 42 ] Got God up in heaven, his people, Israel slash Judah, here on earth, and this mysterious third person, the servant. And Isaiah 49 is actually the first time we get to hear the servant's voice, the first time we hear their input into the narrative of Isaiah.

And at their first chance to speak, they give an introduction. As you might have noticed when talking to the people around you, an introduction is often a statement of who someone is from their own perspective.

And as you hear the servant's introduction in Isaiah 49, you hear the same tune playing over and over again. Again, this servant is not called to a happy life. Have a look at verse 4.

The servant says, I have laboured in vain. I've spent my strength for nothing at all. And then again in verse 7, God introduces the servant as him who was despised and abhorred by the nations.

And even when it's a nicer comment, like the servant mentioning their sharp words in verse 2, sharp words that can cut through people like a sword, the servant is still prevented from using his great power.

[ 3 : 46 ] Hidden instead in the Lord's hand for a mysterious future purpose. And actually time and time again when the servant character is mentioned in Isaiah, they are constantly connected with suffering.

Now this might be the first time we hear their perspective, but in any past times we've heard of the servant, or any future times the servant is referenced, their life is depicted as moments of just pure betrayal, rejection and pain.

It's mentioned again in chapter 50 verse 6, the servant offered his back to those who beat him, his cheeks to those who pulled out his beard. And in chapter 53, as we'll see next week, they are pierced and crushed, and oppressed and afflicted, a man of suffering, and one despised, ejected by mankind.

Little wonder then, that this figure is known as the suffering servant of Isaiah. Now if you've been around church for a while, it might not surprise you to know that the New Testament reveals the identity of the suffering servant to be Jesus Christ, the Son of the one true living God, born on earth as a man.

But I'd be keen to get you to think about, why does Jesus choose to introduce himself to the readers of Isaiah with such a focus on suffering?

[ 5 : 07 ] Why does the identity of Jesus' character always seem to be defined by pain? I mean, it's interesting that in the Christian life, we do often tend to associate Jesus with suffering.

Christians like to make a big deal of the pain Christ felt on the cross, and the absolute, genuine brutality of crucifixion as just a barbaric form of death by torture. But the thing is, actually, other people have died in worse ways.

Jesus' bodily death is not exclusively terrible, and in fact, it's probably been outdone. Jesus was not burnt slowly over a fire, he was not killed by having his skin peeled off piece by piece, or having his limbs removed finger by finger and toe by toe.

All those words just made me feel incredibly squeamish. I think it's fair to say, though, that in terms of bodily pain, other women and men have suffered more than Jesus did on the cross. So then, what makes Jesus the suffering servant, the one defined by suffering?

Well, it seems to be from Isaiah 49, that Jesus is the one who suffered infinitely, more so than any other human being.

[ 6 : 27 ] Now, you rightfully might be asking, how can you suffer infinitely? Well, consider what the Bible says about God. God is not constrained by pitiful human needs for things to have a length, or a weight, or, you know, an end.

When Psalm 103, verse 11 says, For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. Remember that the heavens are infinite. The space between earth and space never ends.

God's love never ends. His infinite kindness, infinite peace, infinite joy, that is God. But if God is truly an infinite God, then his anger against those who do evil is similarly infinite.

His wrath burns against anyone and everyone who causes harm to the world and the people he created in it. And so the wrath burns for each one of us. As Isaiah 53, verse 6 says, each of us have gone astray from God.

By rejecting the source of eternal life, we have condemned ourselves to never-ending suffering and death. We have earned an infinite debt. But what does that actually mean, an infinite debt?

[ 7 : 43 ] Infinity can be really hard to visualise. I tried to draw it on the PowerPoint, but it just kept going on and on. What does it mean for something not to have an end? Like, can you actually picture an infinite debt?

Well, imagine you turn up to a special fancy hotel, one with infinite rooms. But when you rock up, unfortunately, all of them are full. All of them are booked.

Every room just has somebody in it. But, you know, this is the fanciest hotel in town, so you really want to spend the night here. So you walk up and say, oh, please, is there anything you can do to get me in?

And the guy at the desk says, oh, look, you seem lovely. Sure, we'll get you in. We'll just ask the guy in room one to move to room two, the person in room two to move to room three, and the person in room three to go to four, five to six, and seven to eight, and so on and so on and so on.

But, you know, you upright standing citizen that you are might say, oh, that doesn't feel fair. What about the last guy? He's not going to have a room to go to. He's going to be kicked out. That doesn't seem right.

[ 8 : 49 ] The guy at the desk will just laugh and say, sir, man, this is the infinite hotel. We have no last guest and we have no last room. Even though all the rooms are booked, there is still more space in the infinite room of the infinite hotel.

There is always more room in infinity and our debt to God also has always more space to fill, more sin that must be paid for before we can be made right with God again.

Even if we try to do good tomorrow, even if we did enough right to cover a million, a billion, a trillion sins, that would only be a drop of sand in the bucket when we have a Himalayan mountain of wrath to make up for.

Our infinite debt never ends. But the good news of the Bible is Jesus is not just a suffering servant, but the suffering servant. He's able to pay back our infinite debt.

He endured infinite suffering. Philippians 2, verse 6 to 11 says that Jesus is in very nature the infinite God, the one true eternal creator.

[ 9 : 58 ] And by becoming a servant, He made Himself nothing, giving up all authority under heaven and earth to endure death, even death on a cross. As the creator died to His creation, the servant suffered on our behalf, paying back the unpaid backable and giving up infinite power in the process.

If you think you know the extent of Jesus' suffering, think again. Like the infinite hotel, Jesus' suffering was full, but yet He took on more because our debt demanded more.

And then He took on more because I lied yesterday. And then He took on more because I will resent my boss tomorrow.

And then He took on more and more and more and more and more. And then He took on more. I don't know what that suffering looked like, but I know the wrongs I have done, the ways I have not lived up to my own standard, let alone God's.

And I know that Jesus suffered even more because of each one of my sins. Please just remember that this week. Australia has a history of remembering those who suffered for us, for those who fought and died.

[ 11 : 19 ] Remember in whatever way works for you. Remember the man who suffered infinitely, more than you can comprehend, more than you can ever know, for you. And each time you choose yourself over God, Jesus has already suffered for that.

The Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all, all punishment, all suffering, all the infinite wrath of God created by humanity in the past and the present and in the future placed on one man.

Remember Him. The suffering servant of Isaiah. But the question remains, what is the result of Jesus' suffering?

What is the point of it? Well, we find out in the rest of Isaiah 49 that Jesus invites His people to share in the rewards of His suffering.

That is the reconciliation of everything to Himself. Have a look with me back at verse 4. The first half we've already talked about discusses the vain labour Jesus has faced. But in the second half of verse 4, it says, yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with God.

[ 12 : 30 ] What is Jesus' reward for suffering? Well, as a result of Jesus' suffering and death and vain labour, He is owed.

Know the language of obligation here. Jesus' suffering means He is due a reward. Not merely waiting around for some gift, He has earned something. And what has He earned?

Well, as verse 5 says, Jesus is honoured in the eyes of God. Because Jesus is honoured in the eyes of God, He is now asked to bring back God's ancient people, Israel slash Jacob, back to God's kingdom.

This, in fact, is His reward in a beautiful piece of symmetry. Jesus' infinite suffering is the key that unlocks the reward for that same suffering.

The return of His people. The prize for Jesus' suffering, it seems, is having the women and men He has specifically chosen, brought back from the distant corners of the earth they've been stranded in.

[ 13 : 33 ] It's the metaphor of a second exodus. The servant's special nation is taken out of suffering and goes on a journey back to their rightful home and any difference between the mended and reconciled.

And this act of gathering Jesus' people together turns out to be a beautiful, joyous occasion. Listen to the metaphors and poetry on display. I will turn my mountains into roads and my highways will be raised up.

See, they come from afar, some from the north, some from the west. And my favourite bit, shout for joy, you heavens. Rejoice, you earth.

Burst into song, you mountains. The entirety of creation is rising up and awakening to hasten the return of the Lord's people and in doing so, returning to its rightful state of glorifying God and glorifying the servant who suffered to bring about this reconciliation.

And creation is rejoicing even more so now that the definition of God's people has been expanded. You'll see in verse 5, it initially talks about Jacob being brought back to God by the ancient Jewish people.

[ 14 : 45 ] But God declares that it is too small a thing for Jesus just to bring back the ancient Jewish nation. The degree of Jesus' suffering is such that he deserves all things. So for him to bring reconciliation to the Jews would be too small a reward for one who gave up infinite power.

Now instead, verse 6 says, that is the whole world Jesus is restoring. The servant is a light for the Gentiles, or in other words, all the non-Jewish people in the world, so that God's salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

Now the most exciting bit of Isaiah 49 is the detail that's not even here. This joyful picture of God's people hastening back to their home is given even greater clarity in the second half of the Bible.

At the end of Matthew, Jesus invites his people to be part of the reconciliation. As he says in the famous curly font verse of Matthew 28, 18-20, all authority on heaven and earth has been given to me.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit. This glorious readjustment of the world back to the way it should be, the gathering of God's people, the reward for Jesus' infinite suffering is opened up to us.

[ 16 : 06 ] Jesus calls us to be part of this divine readjustment. It's like the mountains lowering themselves and the highways being raised up. We are invited to help bring God's people home.

Now it's about halfway through the sermon, so just in case you're falling asleep, I've got another question for you. Have you ever had two friends get into a fight? Or co-workers or family members maybe?

You might be good at handling conflict for yourself, but how do you handle it when two other people get into a serious disagreement? More specifically, how do you help those two other people make up?

If you haven't ever been in this situation, just imagine you were. Imagine your two friends, Bill and Alice, get into a massive disagreement, start yelling at each other and refuse to ever acknowledge each other when everyone else is hanging out.

What would you do to help resolve the conflict? Have a chat with the person next to you and then we'll come back in a minute and hear some thoughts. Have a chat. All right.

[ 17 : 08 ] Let's come back. Now if you've ever been in that situation, I'm sure you know how painful and stressful it can be to see two people you care about start fighting. Whether it's parents or housemates or friends at work, it's a horrible thing to see those you love in conflict.

And this is rarer, but if those two people in conflict make up and actually resolve the problem, there is a great sense of relief that washes over you once you realise that the tension is stopped.

So how good then is Jesus' reward? Peace between his beloved people here on earth and the God he loves more than anything else. Because of infinite suffering, Jesus is given his due prize.

Reconciliation, an end to the fighting, a resolution of the tension between those he cares most for, humanity and their creator. And by his incredible kindness and mercy, we get to enjoy that same reward.

We get to see those we love the most end their fighting. How exciting is the prospect of reconciliation between the people here on earth we love the most and the God we worship the most.

[ 18 : 21 ] How great the joy of witnessing our friends make peace with God, ending the conflict between themselves and the one who loves them and made them and knows them more deeply and intimately than anybody else.

But enjoying this reward is not a passive action. Part of Jesus' prize is his opportunity to help God's people return to their home. Do you want to see this in your friends and family and co-workers?

Do you want to bear witness to the reconciliation of everything under earth back to God? Do you want to enjoy the reward that Jesus has earned from infinite suffering and now shares with you?

That reward is not something in the future. That is happening right now. This is an action point, a doing thing. And God is calling on each one of us to tell the people around us to be the messenger of this offer of reconciliation to everyone on the planet.

Just as each one of us struggles to get through life and sometimes can struggle to get through the day, our friends and families and co-workers who do not know Jesus struggle more because they are still fighting against God.

[ 19 : 34 ] Jesus offers you a chance to witness an end to the conflict, to tell the people you care about of their infinite debt that has been paid, of the peace that has been earned, in the rest that can be found in the one whose burden is light.

Let this be on your hearts and minds this week. You have an exclusive chance to enjoy Jesus' reward and bear witness to the gathering of God's people around him.

But as great as this reconciliation is, as truly beautiful as Jesus' reward is, how can we trust that it will actually come to pass? What evidence, what proof, what faith can we have that Jesus really will get his reward?

Well, the final part of Isaiah 49 says that nothing will stand between Jesus and his people. And so in turn, let nothing stand between you and Jesus. Now, all of Isaiah 49 has hung on Jesus' suffering being important and valuable enough to deserve the reconciliation of everything.

If you see that Jesus' death deserves glory, if you see the infinite suffering he endured for our infinite debt, how can you not help but follow his commands? How could there be anything that stands in your way?

[ 20 : 56 ] Actually, that's a very fair question because there's lots of stuff which stands in our way. There's a bunch of different roadblocks or clouds that obscure our vision of Jesus' glory and stumbling blocks that hinder our ability to follow his commands.

And Isaiah 49 looks at a bunch of them. To start off with, we can feel like Jesus did in verse 4. Labouring in vain for nothing, spending all of our strength for nothing, seeing no sign of the reconciliation that Jesus has promised in the here and now.

And maybe we can ask the question that the writer of Isaiah does in verse 24. Can plunder be taken from warriors or captives be rescued from the fears? Can we really be brought back to Jesus?

In this metaphor, we are the plunder, we are the captives. And the devil that holds us is fierce indeed. And finally, sometimes we can just forget the weight of Jesus' suffering.

The modern world is very distracting, almost by design. There are big companies making big money off your attention, off taking your attention from the stuff that really matters. Other stuff can just seem so much more important in the moment.

[ 22 : 06 ] But our God has answers for literally everything. It might feel like we labour in vain, but as we've already talked about, Jesus' reward is not based on chance or luck.

It is earned. The reward that Jesus shares with us lies in heaven and nothing on this earth can take it away. Can God really, I mean really, rescue us from the clutches of the devil, from the realm of sin and darkness and self-damnation?

Verse 25 loudly shouts, Yes! God says, Yes! Captives will be taken from warriors and plunder will be retrieved from the fierce. I will contend with those who contend with you and your children I will save.

And finally, we might forget God, but He does not forget us. If you open your Bibles and have a look at verse 14 and 15 with me, God's people in Zion say, The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.

How often do you feel alone and distant from the people around you, let alone the God who made you? Well, verse 15 follows up and says, Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has born?

[ 23 : 22 ] It's the metaphor of a mother holding her child while breastfeeding. How could she forget what she held in her hands? Not only because it's suckling at her breast, but because it is her own child, her own beloved.

We might forget God like Zion, but He does not forget us. Now, each of those could have been a sermon in of themselves, but the best news from Isaiah 49 is that even if we don't follow God's commands, even if we screw up, Jesus' glory is such that God's people will come to Him anyway.

There's such a strong sense of inevitability in the relationships of this passage. No matter what we do, God's world will be put to right and God's people will be drawn to Him.

The servant doesn't choose to be glorified for his suffering, it just happens as a natural, God-willed consequence of what he's given up. God can't help but remember His people any more than a mother can forget the child at her breast.

It's just who He is to be loving. And God's people will inevitably be given to the servant and his due reward and be gathered back to their king. The way I think about it is that once a decision has been made, the consequences are inevitable.

[ 24 : 36 ] If I decide to drop this piece of paper, you can probably guess what's going to happen. It's going to fall to the ground. Neither me nor you nor anybody else can affect that force of gravity. Now, I've got a more vivid description of this.

We need some help from Andy. So what I want you to do is imagine the distance between this ball and me is the distance between God and us.

If Andy decides to let go, just as Christ... Just as Christ decides to die, there is nothing that any of us can do to stop it.

Thank you, Andy. I wanted to pick a sort of fun one to finish off this sermon because I want you to remember that this week. Christ's reward is inevitable.

The weight of His suffering is such that He was glorified and His reward is God's people coming back to Him. There is nothing anyone can do about it.

[ 25 : 47 ] This is not an action point. This isn't even a reflection point. This is just a fact I'm telling you. You can do with this fact what you'd like. But can I implore you, please, come to know the King who will rule the world.

The servant of Isaiah 49 suffered and died and this same servant is now ruler of all. Do you expect this to come true? Do you expect Christ to make a real difference in the world this week?

Do you live knowing the inevitability, the complete reliability of Christ's return, His reign and His reward? Do you expect what you hear me talking about on a Sunday to be true for you on a Thursday?

Can I implore you, live with the expectation that no matter what you do this week, Christ is returning, He is reigning and He will receive His reward of His people being reconciled to Him.

Be part of that journey, be part of that reconciliation. Come be part of Christ's reward. Come be part of Christ's reward.