

Our Greatest Problem

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[0 : 0 0] What do you reckon is our greatest problem? You're probably thinking heat. No, it's not the heat. What is the most fateful thing that we face with the greatest prospects of undoing us?

Aggressive dictators, scourge of pandemics, political polarization, economic disparities, global warming, racial tensions. There are a good number of plausible contenders.

How about personally? Financial stress, chronic debilitating health issues, bad or abusive relationships, a seeming unshakable destructive habit, the long wearying failure to find love. These are hard things. And even harder is the question, what do we do about them? How can they be overcome? Well, the passage before us this morning takes up this very question. What is our greatest problem? Both corporately, the whole of the world of humanity, and individually, each one of us. What is the thing we face that can crush us, that will really sink us? And our passage gives us its answer to that vital question, but further, it gives us an answer to the inevitable and urgent follow-up question, what can be done about it?

Is there any hope in the face of this, our greatest problem? Now, we ought not to be surprised if our text strikes us as modern hearers, with modern ears, as somewhat strange and alien in parts. After all, the author, a Hebrew prophet Isaiah, is writing from a time and a culture very different from our own.

Some would suspect that Isaiah's distance from us is so great that nothing he says could possibly have any relevance to us today. But this, I think, a mistake, for surely the fact that we don't share things like cell phones or cellophane matters far less than the fact that we do share flesh and blood.

[2 : 3 4] We are of a common humanity. So, as we read our passage, don't be put off by its foreignness. It contains a message well worth our effort to understand. Let me read it for us.

It can be found in your pew Bibles on page 574. 574. Isaiah 52, picking up in verse 13 and carrying on through the next chapter.

We have chapter 573.

and his form beyond that of the children of mankind. So shall he sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him.

For that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand. Who has believed what he has heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

[3 : 5 3] For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray.

We have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth.

[4 : 57] Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like sheep before its shears is silent, so he opened not his mouth. 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, and they made his grave with the wicked, and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth, yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him.

He has put him to grief when his soul makes an offering for guilt. He shall see his offspring. He shall prolong his days. The will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

Out of the anguish of his soul, he shall see and be satisfied. By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore, I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors.

[6 : 14] Yet, he bore the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors. The word of the Lord. So, what is identified here as our greatest problem?

It's most clearly stated in the first part of chapter 53, verse 6. Big number, first numbers, chapters, small numbers, verses. 53, verse 6.

And it may strike you as a rather odd reading practice to jump right in the middle of a piece, but it really isn't. For with Hebrew poetry, and this is an instance of Hebrew poetry, the themes often work themselves from the outside in toward the middle, with the heart of the matter right in the middle, right in the center.

So, the heart of the matter is at the center of this poem. And here we find Isaiah expressing the heart of the matter when it comes to our biggest problem.

Here is how he puts it. All we like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way. I wonder if you find that a surprising answer.

[7 : 35] It's not that in Isaiah's day, people didn't face things like plagues and hunger and ravages of war and disease and deportment and inflation or poverty. No, all of these things were conspicuously present.

It's simply that Isaiah identifies a more fundamental root-level problem. Our going astray.

Our turning to our own way, as he puts it. So, what does Isaiah mean? Straying from what? Turning away from what? Notice, his image is that of sheep.

The picture is of sheep straying from the path marked out by the shepherd. So, who is the shepherd? Well, of this, there was no question in Isaiah's hearers' minds.

The picture was perfectly clear and very familiar to them. As their minstrel King David opened his famous Psalm 23, The Lord is my shepherd.

[8 : 37] So, the shepherd is God, our creator. It is from the path that God marks out that we stray. When we go our own way, we are turning aside from the creator's way.

So, Isaiah is saying that common to all is waywardness with respect to God, our creator. Ours is the attitude which says, I don't care what path you've marked out.

I will be in your world as I jolly well please. I shall set my course without regard to you. I will make my own way.

Thank you very much. And really, a moment's reflection reveals that to go our own way is to make ourselves our authority.

It is to repudiate our shepherd God. It is to regard the very creator as a rival. It is to take the defiant stance of a rebel.

[9 : 49] I shall play the part of God in my own life. I shall be the arbiter of what is good, right, and just. The effects of this turning aside from the ways of our creator are varied and terrible.

From genocide to lack of generosity, selfishness to suicide attacks, sex trafficking to spoilage of the earth, we have made a ruinous mess of things.

We have vandalized God's world and victimized God's creatures. Yes, the effects of our chosen paths are bad enough.

Bad enough for us to think that they are our worst problems. They are not. But it is the essence of our chosen path that is supremely morally horrifying.

We have substituted ourselves for God. We put ourselves in his place. That, according to Isaiah, is our greatest problem.

[11 : 02] Tell me you do not know Isaiah's description to be true of you. It certainly is true of me. Isaiah knew that it was true of him.

Notice his statement is in the form of a confession, and he places himself in the company. All of us, like sheep, have gone astray.

I wonder, can you make that confession? I have a problem. I have substituted myself for God. I have made God my rival.

If so, our second question forces itself upon us. What can be done about this? Now, the people of Isaiah's day had been long taught to understand that such a stance toward God was deserving of his terrible but just judgment.

Death. That much was clear. The whole sacrificial system acknowledged and reinforced that death was due transgressors.

[12 : 17] An endless parade of bulls and goats and sheep were offered on altars to atone for the sins of the people. But the sense was that the blood of bulls or goats couldn't really constitute atonement for sin.

It was simply a postponement. Animals were no ultimate answer. So the question remained, both for them and for us, what can be done about the fact that we keep piling up capital offenses against the very judge of the universe?

It doesn't look good for us. To be sober-minded is to grow pale. But look at the remarkable answer Isaiah gives to deal with this, our great, truly our greatest problem.

God is sending someone, his servant. This is the opening verse of our passage, 52 verse 13. Behold my servant.

Now Isaiah has made reference to the Lord's servant before. Sometimes it refers to Israel as a nation, then more narrowly to the faithful remnant within the faithless nation.

[13 : 41] Once the title is given to a pagan king Cyrus who does God's bidding. But this time it's different. For this time the servant is identified there, verse 53, 1, as the arm of the Lord.

This is remarkable. For the designation, the arm of the Lord, is none other than a metaphor for God himself.

The arm of the Lord is God rolling up his sleeves to act himself in great power.

Now, a quick observation to hopefully clarify where there's typical confusion. Notice how God's solution to humanity's problem involves his arm, not just his mouth.

It's not enough to send a prophet, a mouthpiece, a spokesman to tell us how to get out of this mess that we've made. It takes his coming down himself and acting.

[14 : 56] And if your notion is that Christianity is fundamentally about instruction, how we ought to live, and in a way, who could be faulted for thinking so because it's such a common error?

And so many religions seem to consist in simply that, instruction on how to live. But if we get what Isaiah is saying here, we realize this is something very different.

It is not fundamentally religious instruction. It's about God himself coming down and acting. That's what makes Christianity very distinctive here.

It's not advice. It is announcement. Not, this is how you need to change your life. Rather, this is what happened that changes your life.

It's fundamentally news, or as the first Christians called it, the good news to be declared. So, what can be done about our terrible plight?

[16 : 09] God is sending someone, his servant, but this servant is none other than the arm of the Lord. God himself come down to act in power. No wonder he says at the start, behold, behold.

Yeah, you're telling me this I'd like to see, God himself coming down to act? We've seen him bear his arm before. Plagues of Egypt, angel of death, splitting the Red Sea and the Jordan.

Surely, we're going to see some remarkable fireworks. But this is the odd, the very odd thing. The profile, the servant, of the servant that Isaiah gives us is not at all what we would expect.

In fact, it's closer to the opposite of what we'd expect. No, no, thank you.

Fashion must be maintained in these parts. It's the opposite of what we'd expect. Even as Isaiah describes his servant, Isaiah recognizes this.

[17 : 21] Who's going to believe this? He asks in verse 1. So, what's so unlikely or implausible about this profile? Well, for one, the servant, who we've heard is God coming down, is an unimpressive, inglorious figure.

Verse 2, he has no stately former majesty. Clearly, this servant is not the hero of folk legends, the glorious warrior God from Valhalla.

in fact, supremely, the suffering servant, sorry, the servant is a suffering figure.

Verse 3, he was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. But there's something haunting about him. While suffering is the common lot of us all, there is something extreme in his.

He is, verse 5, pierced, crushed, scourged. And all this naturally generates the impression that he must somehow be under the special judgment of God.

[18 : 37] And in a way, Isaiah tells us, this is true. Verse 10, the Lord was pleased to crush him, putting him to grief. His fate, it would seem, compels the conclusion that he must have been terribly guilty and God gave him what he deserved.

But, we discover the fact is, the odd, inexplicable thing is, he was innocent. Verse 9, he has done no violence, nor was there any deceit in his mouth.

If not for his own sin and offenses, then, why is he punished by God? Why is he marked out for horrendous suffering? Happily, where clarity is most needed, Isaiah is most transparently clear.

And what he says is astonishing. Verse 5, he was pierced through for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities. Why does the servant suffer? Because he is, verse 10, a guilt offering, a sacrificial lamb, verse 7, an offering to God to compensate for the violations of transgressors.

[20 : 03] Ours. The background here is very familiar. The very familiar world of ritual sacrifice in which the Hebrews lived. The guilty party would lay their hand on the head of the sacrificial animal in identification.

This is the fate I deserve and symbolizing a transfer of my guilt to the offering. So the servant suffers as a substitute for sinners.

Were it not so clear, we would scarcely dare believe it. He, God himself, comes down, gives his life for us.

He takes the lash for rebellion for us to whom, verse 8 says, the stroke was due. The servant is treated by God as if he had done every vile thing we have done and do.

the innocent servant takes hold of everything that blights our lives, our griefs, our infirmities, our sorrows, our afflictions, but our follies and our rebellion.

[21 : 30] He takes them up and he faces their consequences. In short, and this is the summary so far, if you get nothing, get this, our great calamity, we substitute ourselves for God.

Our only rescue, God substitutes himself for us. And what does this great substitution accomplish?

Chapter 52, 15, a sprinkling of many nations. Drawn from the language of Jewish ritual, sprinkling meant cleansing, as a leper would be sprinkled and declared clean.

And it is a cleansing by removal. For the servant to have borne away our iniquities, verse 4, is for him to have borne them away. To have our sin placed on him is to have them removed from us.

Verse 11 expresses what this substitution accomplished in a slightly different light. Ah, but a wonderful light. It justified many. That is, it gave them a perfect moral record.

[22 : 53] In this substitution, there is a double exchange. Not only does the servant take the consequences of our wicked and wayward lives, we in exchange receive the credit for everything the servant did and was.

My righteous servant will justify the many. That is, provide righteousness, a perfect moral record, his own record, for our very, very shabby one.

He steps into our shoes, and we into his. Really? Really? I mean, this sounds altogether too remarkable.

Can it really be so? As Isaiah would later record, just beyond our passage, my ways, says God, are not your ways. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so much higher are my ways than your ways.

And another remarkable thing, notice that though the servant was smitten, cut off, yet he strangely lives to see the fruit of his work.

[24 : 05] The servant will see the travail of his soul and be satisfied, verse 11. So here then is Isaiah's portrait of the suffering servant.

And although Isaiah the prophet presented it, he himself could not penetrate it. We're later told in 1 Peter that the prophets themselves puzzled over their own words, seeking to know what person or time their prophecy referred to.

Ah, but friends, there would come a day when there would be no doubt who this suffering servant really was.

And it would be this very passage of Isaiah which would prove most precious and important to the first Christians.

for it, above all others, help them to grasp what God was doing and how it related to this Jesus who had turned their world upside down.

[25 : 10] Can you see how this prophecy, such a mystery, was seen to be in the light of Jesus, such a match? If you're at all familiar with the gospel accounts, I don't think you can fail to see it.

As with the servant, so with Jesus, nothing about his origin nourished hopes of greatness. Jesus of Nazareth sputters Nathaniel in incredulity.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Special? Him? Is this not the carpenter's son? Just a local nobody? Reckoned to be a zero?

Was Jesus a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, as the prophet foretold? Grief was his intimate acquaintance, sorrow, his constant companion.

Scarcely had he started his ministry when the religious leaders of the day were planning on how they might dispatch him. The pressure of sorrow was so intense it came out in sweat like drops of blood.

[26 : 19] You, a king, scoffed Herod in derision. His only royal robe, Herod's, draped in mockery.

His only crown, thorns. Those hoarse cries of the crowd yelling, crucify him, crucify him, only interspersed by Pilate's thrice repeated verdict, he's innocent.

He's innocent. They cry out, but he holds his peace. Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep silent before his shearers, he opens not his mouth.

He is crushed beneath the burden of the cross, then pierced through upon it. Yes, and as Isaiah foretold, his grave was assigned with the wicked, verse 9, for his body was to be flung in a common grave with the criminals who flanked him on the cross.

But the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea interposed, asking for the body to be placed in his own tomb, and so he was indeed with a rich man in his death.

[27 : 35] But as Isaiah's prophecy cryptically indicated, his inglorious death was not the end for him. 4, verse 10, he will prolong his days.

He would see his offspring. The Lord himself takes up the final words of Isaiah's prophecy as a final verdict upon his servant.

Verse 12, therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he will divide the booty with the strong. The servant proves to be, despite all appearances, Jesus, a victor.

Friends, the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus fits Isaiah's profile like a hand in a glove. Jesus is the suffering servant.

He is the arm of the Lord. He is God come down to act in power for our rescue. This the first Christians saw with clarity, and as we saw with the Philip and the Ethiopian, proclaimed it unhesitatingly.

[28 : 44] The mystery was dissolved, and it was dissolved both ways. Jesus dissolved the mystery of Isaiah's cryptic prophecy, but Isaiah's prophecy also dissolved the great mystery of Jesus.

For the great inexplicable question for Jesus' followers was this. If Jesus was God's chosen servant, whom he greatly loved, and we heard the Father say so from heaven, how could God let Jesus come to such a terrible end on a cross?

Indeed, as they knew from Scripture, anyone hanged on a tree is especially cursed of God. Deuteronomy, Galatians. How could the anointed of God be the cursed of God?

How could the faithful servant of God suffer the frightful judgment of God? It just didn't add up for them, but it was Isaiah's prophecy which provided the answer.

The servant of God was as our substitute, and it all came together as the strangest and most glorious good news.

[30 : 11] Now, it's possible that some of you are thinking, well, I'm really glad for them that it all made sense to them, but I'm glad they got their questions answered, but I still have a few.

for one, this whole notion of sacrifice at the center of Isaiah's vision sounds so primitive. You know, on the order of propitiating angry gods by dropping victims in volcanoes, you can't expect modern people to credit such a thing.

And this is certainly an understandable reaction, given that we in our sensibilities, largely heirs of the enlightenment, for whom primitive simply means unenlightened, aka stupid.

But, the question for us is, dare we be so dismissive of all things primitive? For in this case, by primitive, we are identifying a strong instinct and deep intuition as ancient as history itself and near universal across cultures, an instinct that we are and live in relation to a reality beyond us, not just forces, but a being, and that we are alienated from that being and need reconciliation, and that some cleansing, some propitiation must transpire to affect that reconciliation.

And we may pronounce all such mumbo jumbo, but let us at least be aware that in doing so, we part company with the overwhelming majority of mankind across time and cultures, and that it is Isaiah's framework work which stands in deep and profound resonance with those abiding human instincts.

[32 : 23] Perhaps that should give us pause if we find ourselves dismissive. Others here may find difficulty with the notion of substitution.

How can a God be considered just and good who, in remedy for the offenses of some, punishes, in their stead, an innocent third party? Well, of course, on that apprehension of the matter, the revulsion is understandable.

But this would be a grave misapprehension. For the suffering servant is not an innocent victim seized upon, but rather one who willingly put himself forward as a substitute.

His life was not taken from him. He laid it down voluntarily. Neither, as we discovered, is the suffering servant some third party God punishes.

No, he is the arm of the Lord, God himself, taking the lash of his own judgment. Here, substitution is the voluntary self-offering of God, and rightly understood, evokes not scandal, but marvel.

[33 : 41] Now, some of you are probably still thinking, okay, okay, but this is all still so strange. Well, was this not Isaiah's point precisely?

Who would have thought this, the arm of the Lord? Who would have thought this, the saving action of God in the world? Well, will you, friend, miss of it for its strangeness?

Let me ask you, through what lens are you looking for God? What fancies dictate your expectations in relation to God's action in this world, in relation to you?

And may I further ask, what good reason do you have for those fancies to dictate, to form the lens through which you will look for God and discern His working?

be very careful that you have not screened out the divine provision, the only provision there is for your greatest problem, a problem so great it will ultimately crush you.

[34 : 54] Will yours be as the eye of Sauron scanning the landscape for the ring, never thinking to look for a hobbit, but a hobbit was the ring bearer.

But some of us here perhaps face a different challenge. The arm of the Lord is for us not unfamiliar but over familiar. We've been instructed from Sunday school up, heard sermons and sung songs about Jesus the suffering servant, but let us be careful here for familiarity does not mean beneficiary.

And it is very possible to penetrate the identity of the suffering servant and yet his sacrifice not propitiate for your sins. As with the sacrificial goat, one must place one's hands on the head of the victim in identification.

My sin rightly would place me there. the Hebrew word for placing the hand on implies leaning hard, placing the weight of one's reliance fully upon the sacrifice for there is no other way of expiation.

Have you done this? Placed your full weight upon God's suffering servant? Admitting your transgressions against God would rightly put you in the place of death and adhering to him as your substitute with all the weight of your complete reliance.

[36 : 40] In the Hebrew, the final word of Isaiah's appeal that we have read together is the servant's appeal for transgressors. And this is my appeal for you.

place your hand upon the substitute and put the full weight of your reliance upon him.

If you have never done so, why not do it now? Let today be the day of salvation. Well, we have sought to unfold the meaning, challenge, and appeal of this mysterious servant song of Isaiah.

If you have begun to grasp it, three things you can know and what a difference they make. And I conclude, briefly, I assure you, with these.

First, you are not alone in your suffering. God, your creator, is not remote.

[37 : 48] Do you see it? He is with you in your suffering. God has not shared your humanity in some sanitized way, staggering as that in itself would be.

He has known it intimately, at its worst. He has, as Isaiah says, borne our griefs and suffered our sorrows. He has taken upon himself the deep wounds of life, sunk under its woes, and carried its terrible scars.

In the horror of trench warfare of World War I, and in the maimed and amputated aftermath, the anguished cry went up, where is God in this horror?

In this context, one survivor composed these lines as he looked at Isaiah's servant. The other gods were strong, but thou wast weak.

They rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne. But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak, and not a god has wounds, but thou alone.

[39 : 11] let the servant song seep into your soul, and you will know you are not alone in your suffering.

And let the servant song sink into your soul, and you will begin to feel that you are loved to a breathtaking degree. For why did the servant take on those scars?

It was for you. For you, he laid aside his beauty and became marred beyond human semblance, as one from whom we hide our faces.

All this to have you as his beloved forever. Take this servant song into your soul, and not only will you begin to feel beautiful in the eye of your beloved, his love will begin to make you beautiful in the ways that really matter.

Finally, take the servant song into your being, and you shall have a record that finally lets you rest.

[40 : 29] Do you feel crushed under the burden to achieve? By your performance to cut a figure that garners approval and applause? are your nights haunted with terrors of failing to meet the standard, of being found out of failure?

You toil on frantically to make the grade, to get the record that gains the verdict approved, accepted, all the while knowing you are ever only as good as your last performance.

such toil is unending, and your record is fragile and faltering. But remember, the servant offers to exchange your record for his.

He steps into your shoes, you into his. His record, by his record, not yours, you are justified. He took your place in court, and the verdict is in, accepted.

You are in the sight of God the judge, as good as his, the servant's record. What resting joy is this?

- [41 : 46] What more security do you need than to know that the one whose verdict really matters, the one who knows all you are and everything you are not, has declared immutably, you are in the beloved servant, perfect in God's sight.

There and there alone is real deep rest for the soul. Oh, friends, take this message of Isaiah into your heart.

Lay your full weight upon the substitute, and you may, as did the Ethiopian that we read of earlier, go on your way rejoicing. May it be so for each one of us.

Well, how Isaiah's description of the suffering servant illuminates the death of Christ, setting it forth as a substitutionary sacrifice on behalf of his people.

Will we come now to another setting forth of that substitutionary sacrifice of the suffering servant in the bread and the cup that the suffering servant himself gave to his disciples?

- [43 : 10] Hopefully you've received one of these and you came in, otherwise the ushers can help you. When Isaiah was called as prophet, he describes an angel touching his mouth with a burning coal taken from the altar.

Behold, this has touched your lips, and your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for. Notice the purifying coal touched his lips.

lips, speech, words. You would think that that a prophet's best part. But even at his best, where he might naturally have taken pride, he was guilty.

He needed cleansing and atonement. And that atonement could come alone from the altar of sacrifice. brothers and sisters, if you know that even at your best, you need cleansing, and if you know it comes from nowhere else but the altar, the sacrificial death of Christ, the bread and the cup is for you.

Friend, if this is not yet true of you, while the bread and the cup is not yet for you, the Savior that they set forth is for you.

- [44 : 46] Take him. The apostle writes, the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body, which is for you.

Do this in remembrance of me. Do this in Ganon remembrance of me. Do this in remembrance of me. Do this in remembrance of me. Do this in remembrance of me.

Do this in remembrance of me. Do this in remembrance of me.