

Holman Hunt saw that the way in which God would bring rescue and forgiveness to his people in all nations wasn't by a goat being sent out into the desert. In fact it wasn't by an animal sacrifice in a temple at all.

God would bring about forgiveness and salvation through a person. Through his servant. Through the person that Isaiah 53 is all about – Jesus Christ.

Both those Jewish exiles in Babylon 2,500 years ago and we today need to realise and to remember that God does not rescue people through a system – he brings forgiveness through a person.

God does not rescue people through a system – he brings forgiveness through a person – his servant.

Now while for some here this morning Isaiah 53 is pretty much a new adventure, for most of us I guess it isn't. You don't have to be around Christians and Christian things very long before you get a pretty hefty dose of this chapter in one way or another.

You could open pretty much any hymn book from the last 500 years and if one of the first six songs you looked at didn't use some of the images from this chapter I'd be very surprised. To be honest when I started my preparation for this talk I pretty much thought it would be a breeze. Isaiah 53 – that's the one that's all about Jesus. No problem.

Well I have to say that the longer the week has gone on the less I have thought that. Because there are simply so much wonderful things in this chapter that it was really hard to know where to start – and even harder to know when to stop!

So I hope that, even if you feel like you've heard reference to Isaiah 53 a million times you'll come with me for the next 20 minutes or so on a journey through these verses, be reminded that ***God does not rescue people through a system but through his servant*** and, who knows, even learn something new about Jesus who is, firstly, a

1 Sorrowful Servant (52:14-53:3)

If God hadn't revealed the identity of his servant nobody would have believed it.

Who has believed, 53:1, our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

Unless God revealed the identity of the servant no-one would have ever have guessed.

That's actually almost a commonplace in the Bible. If you were at our church weekend away last weekend you may remember some of God's chosen servants in the book of Judges – disfigured left-handed Ehud, a woman with a tent peg and terrified Gideon. Moses didn't want the job; Elijah ran several hundred miles to escape serving God, Noah landed the ark and promptly got leathered and so on and so on.

And if you thought they were unlikely see what Isaiah has to say about the servant of God who will finally rescue people from sin and death.

He is a little seedling, v2. He didn't look like a king. He didn't even look like a hunk. In fact 52:14, he was profoundly disfigured.

When people saw him the unlikely aspect wasn't that they were going to look at the servant and ask if he was really God's man.

No; they were going to look and ask if what they saw was a man at all. Not "is he the servant?" but "is it human?"

And it isn't that the servant would be disfigured by nature. It's not that he has suffered a terrible genetic misfortune as some people tragically so. And it's not that he's been in a terrible accident.

No the destruction of the servant's humanity would come about because, 53:3, he would be despised and rejected by people. People would hide their faces from him not simply because he was hideous but because they did not want to know him.

God servant, v3, would be a man of sorrows – not because he was a miserable character but because humanity rejected him and esteemed him not – considered him nothing, zero, not significant.

Throughout history this kind of thing has happened to God's servants again and again. The people rejected Moses. They turned on Noah. They rebelled against David. It even happened to Isaiah himself.

But supremely these verses are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. On the cross his humanity was broken, marred and disfigured beyond belief. And he is still despised.

When the world sees Jesus it asks how God's Son could possibly die on a cross. One of the world's biggest religions, Islam, finds the idea so offensive that it insists he was not crucified – for how could God's man be a sorrowing servant?

We too when we present Jesus only as the resurrected victor over sin and death that he is and not ALSO as the kind of man to whom, by nature, none of us will be attracted – one with nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. Well we too can reject the sorrowing servant for a more marketable saviour can't we?

2 Substitute Servant (53:4-6)

And there's no doubt that the fate of the servant in this chapter isn't the sort of thing you'd generally want to shout about.

He meet an extremely nasty end. He is pierced and crushed – both words that almost invariably describe death in the Old Testament. He is punished and wounded.

And the natural response of men and women in the face of such terrible suffering is to turn their faces away – and then gossip about it.

When Jean Charles de Menezes was shot dead at Stockwell underground station on July 22nd people shuddered in horror at the thought of this young man being shot 8 times at close range – and then started to use the well worn, and largely inaccurate phrase “there's no smoke without fire” - until it turned out that, in a piece of terrible tragedy, de Menezes was nothing at all in any way to do with terrorism.

That was the response of the people to the death of the servant. They considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted.

The observers of the servant's death were in no doubt about God's rule in the world. If the servant suffered it must be because he was stricken by God himself.

And they were right. But not because behind the apparent righteousness of the servants life lay some dark and guilty secret that God had exposed. Not at all.

No his punishment was not for his own wrongdoing – but for ours. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The Lord, God himself, has laid on the servant the punishment that was due not for his own sin but for the sin of others.

The servant is the scapegoat. And the servant is the sin offering. In the end it would not be a goat that took away the sin of God's people but a man. In the end it would not be animal blood that was shed to meet the demands of God's justice but the servant's blood. Jesus' blood.

Now I know that for many people here this morning this idea of Jesus' death as a moment in history where he bore the punishment from God that was due to us is right at the centre of what you believe. And it won't do you any harm to be reminded that that is what was happening at the cross.

But I know that there are other people here for whom this may be just a bit fuzzy. And I want us just to take some time to make sure we are absolutely crystal clear because it is at the very heart of the Christian gospel, the good news about Jesus.

What happened at the cross, as Jesus, God's servant died was that he bore the punishment of God for our sin.

That agonising moment of hell. Of being cut off from all the blessing and presence of his Father was Jesus taking upon himself God's judgment on our sin.

There will be all sorts of people within the Christian world who suggest to you that this idea of Jesus as a substitute who is punished by God for our sin is either wrong or not that important.

But I want to say to you this morning that it is a vital thing to believe. Because, as this passage shows us, it is at the heart of the answer to the question “how can God bless people who are wicked?”

Over Easter as we think particularly about talking to people about Jesus' death it would be great if we could all get clear in our minds why Jesus has to die for there to be a Christian message.

You see if it was simply that the devil was powerful and had to be defeated Jesus could, if you'll excuse the phrase, had the devil in a fight any day.

If, like one book I read recently you think that the reason for the cross was that we needed “a demonstration of just how far God as Father and Jesus as his Son are prepared to go to prove [their] love” for us... Well to be honest I can imagine a million more effective ways of showing that than the cross. How

about simply the abolition of world poverty?
Even flowers would have been preferable.

Jesus, God's servant, died under the judgment of God for the sin of his people. He bore God's wrath to bring us peace.

At the cost of his wounds we are healed.

The substitute servant wins total rescue in every way for his people. Infirmities taken away, sorrows carried out of our lives, transgressions forgiven, iniquities wiped away, peace granted and healing assured.

We, all of us, have behaved like sheep – following each other into sin and wickedness and depravity and, frequently, justifying our lack of love for God and other people, with no more justification than that other people do worse than we do.

We have behaved like sheep – but it is the servant who has suffered the fate of a sacrificial animal.

He is a substitute servant and he is also a...

3 Silent Servant (53:7-9)

One of the great objections that is levelled against the idea of Jesus Christ as a substitute bearing God's judgment that I have just outlined for you is that it isn't just.

It has been described as "cosmic child abuse" and as an "emotion laden God striking out in frustration".

Well that's not the impression given by Isaiah 53. In fact Isaiah 53 shows that the problem of an apparent lack of justice is exactly the problem the servant solves.

In moments of profound insight many Old Testament believers wondered how it was that the death of a goat could substitute for the sin of human being.

And in these verses Isaiah shows us how the servant is both profoundly similar to and utterly different from those animal sacrifices.

Just like a lamb he was silent. But a dumb animal might be silent whether it was going for a haircut or going to face its doom. It didn't speak out – because it didn't know. The lamb was an unwilling scape-goat.

The servant was as innocent as a lamb. V9 both his actions and his words were pure and perfect – he had done no violence and spoken no deceit.

But the silence was not the silence of ignorance. It was the silence of power.

The Lord Jesus Christ knew exactly what he faced as he went to his trial and execution. He had told the disciples about it many times.

He was like a lamb because he was innocent. But he was unlike a goat because he was willing.

God did not randomly pick a servant from the people walking along the streets of Jerusalem and say "ah – you'll do – you can suffer judgment so others can obtain the blessing of eternal life."

God's servant cooperated with the Father, indeed the Bible tells us that Christ and his Father planned eternally for this moment and the Servant-Son walked freely to his death for us.

In a sense it is true to say that the way in which God forgives us through the cross is not just.

But that's not because it is less than just. It is not that God is unjust.

Rather God is more than just. He is gracious and, in himself, in his own perfect Servant, his eternal Son, takes upon himself the judgment we deserve.

The suffering of the servant is nothing at all to do with an "emotion laden God striking out in frustration". It is about a God of infinite mercy and grace giving of himself for me.

And the sacrifice of the servant is not just unique in its willingness. It is also unique in its results...

4 Satisfied Servant (52:13 & 53:10-12)

In the Autumn of 1984 BBC news carried a report by Michael Burke about life in the North of Ethiopia. It was really the first time that British TV viewers had seen pictures of children dying from nothing more than not having food right in their living rooms. Many people, perhaps most famously Bob Geldof, were so shocked and moved by what they saw that they gave really enormous amounts of money to aid agencies to provide food and other essentials to people living in that whole region of Africa.

Last week the World Food Programme announced that it is tens of millions of dollars short of the money it needs to provide food to

Ethiopians and other nations in the Horn of Africa.

In fact things are in many ways worse than in 1984. Then an average Ethiopian had \$190 a year – 29p a day. Now an average Ethiopian has just \$108 a year – 17p a day.

So why are our TV screens not filled with this? Well it's because the west has got bored with it. Familiarity has bred contempt. We know that there are millions of starving people in the world. And it doesn't really have that much impact on us any more.

It is astonishingly easy for us to become contemptuous or blasé about what is familiar. And that is a great danger for Christians in thinking about God's Servant Jesus. And it is one of the reasons why it is so good to read the prophecies about Jesus Christ in the Old Testament where they are raw and sharp and shocking.

The idea of sin offering seeing its offspring and prolonging its days would have been utterly unbelievable to Isaiah's first readers.

The point about a sin offering was that it died. Once you have poured out your life, v12, unto death, you are not going to see the light of life and be satisfied. Death was as final then as it is today. But this servant is not like the sin offering, or the scapegoat sent out into the wilderness to die.

Because God's perfect servant will offer his life and then have his work sealed and approved by God as he raises and exalts him. Like the sin offering and the scapegoat the sacrifice of the servant is God's solution for sin.

But unlike them his offering is so complete and perfect that, unlike a normal sacrifice, he will not cease to be after his death. Instead his ability to justify many, to take away the sin of all who put their hope in him, will be demonstrated by his resurrection to new life.

God's servant will be glorified. He will be honoured. He will look on his work and be satisfied. What looked like a defeat will be seen to be a victory. What looked like weakness will be seen to be strength. What looked like shame and disaster will be seen to be honour and triumph.

God rescues his people – not through a system – but through a person – his servant Jesus Christ.

If we have not put our trust in him, if we are believing in a system of religion for our righteousness then we are not rescued.

For me and most of us here this morning though you have put your trust in Jesus. He has borne your sin and was crushed and pierced for you.

And, if you're anything like me, the challenge is to remember that this is not just some mechanism or system that God designed to make everything OK.

Our forgiveness is not brought about by a process. It is won for us by a person. A person who really, genuinely, historically, actually suffered that we might live.

A man whose great satisfaction is making people like you and me righteous.

A man, the Servant, who bore the consequences of our sin, who took God's judgment, to liberate us from the fate we deserved.

A man who meets our deepest desires and longings by giving up himself to death.

People long to be set free from guilt; he justifies the ungodly. We desire to be loved and accepted as part of a family; he makes us his own offspring – sons of God. We want security – he shares with us the riches of the universe.

God's salvation comes through a person.

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