

Behold the God of Diverse Excellencies

Behold the Savior Who was Silent (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on December 27, 2020

Introduction

- ❖ Church, it's been a while since I preached to you. As you may know, our daughter came earlier than expected, and so I took some vacation time sooner than planned. I was scheduled to preach this message a few weeks back in our previous series. But circumstances prevented me, and both Fred and Henry graciously filled for my absence. Well, since I already had this message prepared, I looked forward to a chance to preach it. So now at the end of a long and hard year, I'd like to draw our attention back to the God of Diverse Excellencies.

- ❖ Now that we've got a newborn in the home, I have to accustom myself, once again, with those late night feeds and the Herculean task of trying to soothe a crying baby in the middle of the night, who doesn't want to go back to sleep. It's been almost 10 years since our last newborn, so I'm a bit rusty.
 - And I feel totally inadequate. I'm not bad at swaddling and I have a few lullabies and hymns up my sleeve – but that's about it. I, like all fathers, lacked the natural gifts of a nursing mother. Suffice it to say, I was a poor substitute to a nursing mother.

- ❖ Now I bring up how ill-suited I am as a substitute – not to earn your sympathy – but to connect to our larger point in our text. **This morning's passage is about the need we have for a suitable substitute.** Perhaps you've never thought of it like this, but Christianity is a religion of substitution. At the heart of the faith is the good news that we are saved from our sins by way of substitution. Someone does for us what we could not do for ourselves.
 - **This theme of salvation by way of substitution runs throughout Scripture.** Just think of how a ram was substituted for Isaac. Or how the Passover lamb was substituted for the firstborn sons of the Israelites. Or how David was substituted for the army of Israel, fighting the Philistines in their place. Or how, in the temple system, the blood of sheep was substituted in the place of worshippers.
 - But by the book of Isaiah, that substitutionary sheep is now identified with a person. **He's introduced to us in Isaiah as the Servant of the LORD.**

- ❖ This mysterious figure shows up in Isaiah 42 in the first of the four Servant Songs of Isaiah (42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). So our text is the fourth song, and it centers on the theme of substitution. **It prophesies that the Servant of the LORD will one day come to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.** He'll sub in for us. He'll take our place. And this fourth song is trying to exalt the Servant for his fitness as a suitable substitute to save us.
 - **The Bible is scattered with failed substitutes who were ill-suited to save.** Moses and Joshua were strong leaders, but they couldn't prevent the people from falling into disarray and disobedience. The judges and kings of Israel could fare no better. And while the blood of bulls, goats, and sheep were effective to the extent of God's Law – the constant repetition of these sacrifices signaled that they were insufficient.
 - They were all pointing to another. **In fact, you could argue that the entire OT is telling one big story that there is only one Person out there suitable to save us by way of substitution.** And that's the Servant of the LORD. We know him now as Jesus Christ.

- ❖ This morning I want to focus our hearts and minds on Jesus the Servant. Which fits our previous sermon series called *Behold the God of Diverse Excellencies*. **We had been looking at passages that highlight the unique juxtaposition of seemingly opposite virtues found within the one person of Jesus Christ.** He's both mighty *and* meek. He's a Lion *and* a Lamb. He's infinite God *and* finite man. He's a supreme sovereign *and* a foot-washing servant. He's all of those things in one.
 - **Today's text is about how an Almighty Savior remains strangely silent in the face of suffering that he knows he does not deserve.** And it's this diverse excellencies in Christ that make him unique and suitable to save you by way of substitution. I'll tell you upfront that in today's message, the main application won't be for you to do anything but to behold. **To fix your attention on Christ and his full array of diverse excellencies and to let that lead you to praise.**
- ❖ Now there are five stanzas in this fourth Servant Song. Each of them are so rich and could be standalone sermons, so there's no way we can do a deep dive in each. **Instead, I'm going to offer some highlights from each of the five stanzas and call your attention to behold something unique about the Servant.** It'll be like taking five glances at a priceless jewel, but each time we'll come at it from a different angle and behold a different view of its diverse excellency.

Behold He Who Embodies Wisdom

- ❖ Our first glance in the first stanza starts us in chapter 52:13-15. Let's **behold he who embodies wisdom**. That's how the Servant is introduced. Start in v13, "*Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.*"
 - So the song begins by exalting the Servant for his wisdom. The wisdom of the LORD will be on full display in him. **He will embody God's wisdom. But we learn in Scripture that God's wisdom is often misunderstood and easily overlooked.** Because his wisdom confounds human wisdom. In our eyes, it looks like foolishness.
- ❖ Keep reading in v14. It says many were "*astonished*" at him – at this Servant in whom God's wisdom is to be displayed. Now that doesn't mean astonished as in impressed. No, it means astonished as in horrified. Other translations say "*appalled*".
 - **People took one look at his appearance, and they were appalled.** It says, "*his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind.*" Isaiah doesn't elaborate on what ordeal this Servant went through to have his appearance so mutilated to the extent that he's barely recognizable as human anymore. But whatever the case, the outcome is that this highly exalted Servant – who manifests God's wisdom in v13 – is presented in the very next verse as appallingly mutilated and marred. That's another example of the strange juxtaposition we keep coming back to.

- ❖ And the paradoxical nature of this text continues on in v15. It says, “*so shall he* [the Servant] *sprinkle many nations.*” Now in the OT, whenever you read about sprinkling, it’s usually blood, water, or oil being used, and it’s done in reference to ritual cleansing. You’re making a person or object clean. Fit to be used in service for the LORD or just to be in his presence.
 - So by sprinkling many nations, the Servant is doing priestly work – cleansing the Gentiles and bringing them to the LORD. **But notice the irony – he whom the nations regard as unclean will be the one who cleanses the nations.** The one we regard as appalling and disgusting will be the very one to make us clean and beautiful in the eyes of God.

- ❖ That confounds human wisdom. **If I was going to wipe down the counter to make it clean, I wouldn’t use a rag that I considered appalling.** That makes no sense. But that’s the kind of wisdom on display in the person and work of this Servant of the LORD.
 - And it only begins to make any sense when we keep reading in the Scriptures to see where this Servant of LORD shows up again. And it’s in the Gospels where we find Jesus taking on the role of the Servant, tasked with a job that led him to Calvary. And there he was “*high and lifted up*” on a cross. He had been beaten and scourged to an inch of his life. He was marred and mutilated beyond human form. **He was appalling to look at. And yet, on the cross, the Servant of the LORD was making us clean and beautiful in the eyes of God.** Sprinkling the nations by the blood of his cross.

- ❖ Friends, human wisdom couldn’t fathom this. **The irony of the cross – the paradox of the gospel – is actually a strong apologetic for its veracity.** In other words, we couldn’t have made this up. We couldn’t have imagined that a suitable substitute who makes us clean and holy would be, at the same time, someone we we’d consider unclean and appalling.
 - But that’s the wisdom of God. It confounds human wisdom and keeps us humble. Who are we to question God’s design? Who are we to think we are too unclean, too sinful, to be saved? **For those of you who feel dirty because of your sins – behold, he who sprinkles you and cleanses you by his shed blood.**

Behold He Who Bears the Strong Arm of the LORD

- ❖ That was our first glance at the Servant of the LORD from the first stanza. Now let’s look at the second stanza, which is found in chapter 53:1-3. Here we’re going to **behold he who bears the strong arm of the LORD**. The Song points to the Servant as the one who will manifest the saving power of God in himself, and yet the Song also acknowledges how unbelievable this message will be.
 - Listen to v1, “*Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?*” The Song rhetorically asks, “To whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” In other words, who is able to recognize the saving power of God? Who is able to identify the strong arm of the LORD? **The point is that God’s saving power will be revealed in the person and work of his Servant. But who is going to believe that?** No one is going to believe this message.

- ❖ And why is it so hard to believe? **Because the Servant – when he finally arrives on the scene – will come across as ordinary. Unattractive even.** You would think that a Mighty Savior who bears a strong arm to save would be handsome and dashing. King Saul was described in 1 Samuel 9 as a handsome young man – *“not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he”* (9:2). And in 1 Samuel 16, young David was portrayed as handsome in appearance with beautiful eyes (16:12; 17:42).
 - **So God’s people were far more accustomed to following attractive leaders.** Those who were easy on the eyes and won you over with their natural charm and charisma. But listen to how the Servant is described. *“²For 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. ³He 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.”*
 - **The more he will be despised and rejected, the more unbelievable it will be that this Servant of the LORD could be the manifestation of God’s saving power.** That he could bear the strong and mighty arm of the LORD.

- ❖ That’s why the Apostle Paul describes the message of Christianity as foolishness to the unbelieving world. The message of Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles (1 Cor 1:23). Because, again, it flies in the face of conventional wisdom.
 - **That’s why, when Jesus arrived on the scene, so many rejected him – because he appeared to have an ordinary background.** He was poor and penniless. Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head. And Jesus would frequent the homes of the most despised members of society. Giving cause for the religious to despise and reject him even more. They esteemed him not.

- ❖ I wonder, if we were alive in those days, would we have recognized Jesus for who he is? **Would we have esteemed him as the earthly embodiment of the saving power of God?** If we’re being honest, we probably would’ve overlooked him ourselves. **Because we tend to assume that power is found in those who are impressive physical specimens.** Just think of the superheroes we love. Their alter egos might be ordinary and unassuming, but when the superhero is revealed, there’s no questioning their might or power. Clark Kent might be some unimpressive reporter, but Superman will blow you away.
 - So we accept that Jesus lived in obscurity for those first thirty years. That was his alter ego. **But when he begins his public ministry, the assumption is that he’ll blow everyone away and leave no doubt in their minds that he is the Son of God.**

- ❖ And it’s not to say that he didn’t draw a crowd. But he still ended up on a cross. In the end, the crowds esteemed him not. And let’s not get too high on ourselves and assume we would’ve acted any different. **If we were looking for a suitable substitute to represent us before the the High King of Heaven, I don’t think we would’ve chosen a man who was rejected as a criminal; despised as a insurrectionist; hanging cursed on a Roman cross.** But that’s the irony – the paradox of the gospel. He’s the one with the strong arm to save.

Behold He Who Secures Peace With God

- ❖ So we've taken two different glances at the Servant of the LORD. Now let's turn to our third stanza in chapter 53:4-6 and take a look from a third angle. Here we'll **behold he who secures peace with God**. Scripture says that human sinfulness has put us at odds with God. **Every one of us is born – not as beloved children of God – but as his bitter enemies.** We childishly reject his good authority over us, and he rightly condemns us in his holy anger.
 - So our greatest need in the world right now – is not greater distribution of the vaccine; it's not for this pandemic to end – it's to secure peace with God. To placate his righteous wrath. **We desperately need to be at peace with the Almighty.** And peace is what the Servant came to bring. But ironically, many would take one look at him and assume *he's* the one at odds with God. That *he's* the one who needs peace.

- ❖ Look at v4, "*Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*" We esteemed him – not as the embodiment of God's saving power – but as stricken, smitten, afflicted by God. **We saw the Servant's sufferings and assumed that he deserved it.** God must have been punishing him for something he did.
 - But how can someone smitten by God secure peace for us when it appears that he's not at peace himself? It doesn't make sense – until we get to the cross. Then we see the paradoxical wonder of the cross. **On the cross, Jesus truly was afflicted by God as someone who deserved it.** God was not punishing an innocent person. Had he done so, that would've been unjust. And God is never unjust. So on the cross, God was punishing a sinner.

- ❖ Martin Luther once said that, "*Jesus Christ was the greatest sinner that ever lived.*" Now Luther was known for his hyperbole, but I really think he meant this one. **On the cross, Christ was the greatest sinner that ever lived because on the cross he bore the sins of a countless many.** He had no sins of his own. That's clear. V9 says, "*he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.*" And v11 calls him the "*righteous one.*" He had no sins of his own, but sins were laid on him. He who knew no sin became sin for us (2 Cor 5:21).
 - Look at v5 and notice whose sins the Servant has identified with, "*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.*"

- ❖ Think about that. **Picture all the sins, all the transgressions, all the iniquities that you've committed in your life up to this point – all written down on record.** How big of a volume would that be? Can you imagine how heavy that book would be? And it's not even finished. For you, there are likely countless chapters of sins yet to be recorded in that book.
 - **Now picture Jesus carrying your heavy volume for you.** And not just your book. Picture him weighed down and crushed by the weight of an untold number of books of sinners across the generations who put their trust in him. These countless volumes of sins have been laid on him. "*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*"

- ❖ In that sense, Jesus was the greatest sinner who ever lived. **Because he was the greatest and only suitable substitute to take all our sins upon himself – to be chastised and punished by God to reconcile us to God.** Everyone of us who feels the heavy weight of our sins should be relieved that the Servant of the LORD has carried them for us onto the cross.
 - Friends, are you still carrying your own sins – that heavy volume of sins and iniquities? **Do you want to take that risk of standing before a holy God to give an account for what’s in that book of yours?** You’ll be crushed by his holy wrath. If you’ve never asked Jesus to step in for you – to be your suitable substitute – to take the weight of your sins off your chest and to bear them for you on the cross, then today is the day. Call out to Jesus for rescue, and you will be saved.

Behold He Who Silently Suffers for Us

- ❖ Now this third stanza flows pretty seamlessly into the fourth, and the fourth glance we’ll get of this Servant reveals a related image – **behold he who silently suffers for us.** That’s hard to comprehend. Because the instant we’re accused of something we didn’t do, we cry foul and complain of things being unfair. **We’re quick to defend ourselves.**
 - And yet in this fourth stanza, in vv7-9, the Servant of the LORD silently receives the punishment we incurred, and he did so without a retort, without mounting a defense. Look at v7, *“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.”*
- ❖ In v6, we were just compared to sheep. Which is no compliment at all when you consider the stubbornness and foolishness that’s common to sheep. But here in v7, the Servant of the LORD identifies with God’s people. He’s compared to sheep as well. **But in his case, the sheep-like quality in view is their meekness.** Sheep have no defenses. When they’re caught by prey, they resign themselves to their fate.
 - **The point being made here is that when the Servant was asked by the LORD to substitute himself for sinners – to bear their affliction – he didn’t put up a fight.** He didn’t argue or complain. He humbly accepted the task. He allowed himself to be so poorly treated. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, he opened not his mouth. Through his excruciating ordeal, he silently suffered.
- ❖ **Recall how, in the Gospels, Pontus Pilate was caught off guard by Jesus’s silence.** As the chief priests and elders rolled out their list of accusations, it says he gave no answer, not even to a single charge. We’re told that Pilate was greatly amazed (Mt 27:14). He was used to accused persons arguing and complaining. Trying to justify themselves or to excuse their behavior. Claiming to be innocent victims. **But ironically, the only man who could truly claim to be an innocent victim stood there silently and took the abuse.** More than that, he willingly took our sins upon his shoulders and was accounted accursed.

- ❖ Look at v8, *“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?”* His generation considered him accursed – cut off. He died a shameful death on a wooden cross. As Scripture says, *“Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.”* (Gal 3:13)
 - **But the way that Jesus’s body was handled after his death – with a mixture of shame and honor – highlights, once again, the paradoxical nature of the man.** Keep reading in v9, *“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.”*

- ❖ **The circumstances surrounding Jesus’s death prove that he is the fulfillment of the Suffering Servant.** Think about how he was put to death along with the wicked. In the Roman era, crucifixion was reserved for the worst of the worst –like insurrectionists who call themselves King and raise up a following. **His death was purposely dishonorable and shameful. And yet, he ends up honored by being buried in a rich man’s tomb.**
 - We’re told that Joseph of Arimathea – a wealthy member of the Jewish High Council who opposed these actions against Jesus – received permission to take down his body and to bury him in his empty tomb (Mt 27:57-60). So Christ was dishonored in his death and yet honored in his burial. **That just illustrates the strange mixture of shame and honor to be found in the person and work of Christ.**

- ❖ But think of what this demonstrates – what it says about how Jesus feels about you. **Who else would be willing to subject themselves to such shame and humiliation for the sake of another – and to do it without complaint, without a word?** We would scarcely do that for another – though perhaps for a family member or a close friend we would dare to consider it – *“but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Rom 5:8) And he died for us as silent as a lamb. Just think of what that demonstrates – of how much it tells you that he loves you.

Behold He Who Shall be Satisfied

- ❖ Friends, we’ve taken four good glances at the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. Let’s finish with a final glance through our fifth stanza found in vv10-12. Here we’ll **behold he who shall be satisfied**. Now you’re supposed to be surprised by that. We saw how this Servant will be pierced and crushed, oppressed and afflicted, led to the slaughter, and yet somehow he will be satisfied? How do we make sense of that?
 - Let’s read vv10-11, *“¹⁰Yet 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. ¹¹Out 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.”*

- ❖ **So this fifth stanza begins by affirming that what will happen to the Servant is not arbitrary set of unforeseen consequences.** This is the will of the LORD. To crush him. To put him to grief. To set him forth as a guilt offering.

- ❖ Now according to the Law, guilt offerings were burned by fire and then consumed by the Levitical priests in the temple. And that was it. There was nothing leftover. **And yet, with the Servant – after he’s offering up as a guilt offering – he remains to see his offspring, to prolong his days.** He will prosper in the work of his hands. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied.
 - How is this possible? **How can the Servant be offered as a guilt offering and yet still survive to see his offspring and be satisfied?** Friends, that mystery can only be explained by the Resurrection that follows the Cross.

- ❖ Hebrews 12 says that it was for the joy set before him that Jesus endured the cross. **That means he knew that – even though the path to Calvary would cost him everything – he would be satisfied in the end.** Because he knew he would be delivered up for our trespasses and yet raised for our justification (Rom 4:25). Look back to what it says in v11, "*by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous.*"
 - Jesus was satisfied in the end, knowing that he would see the fruit of his labor. He would see a countless many saved from their iniquities and accounted righteous in the eyes of God. Justified in his sight. That was the joyous outcome set before him.

- ❖ **Now notice how this Servant Song – which began with so much sorrow and suffering for the Servant – ends on a high note with victory.** After going through all that suffering – after serving as our suitable substitute – he'll return to the LORD and receive a victor's spoil.
 - Listen to v12, "*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; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.*"
 - **So by the end of this Servant Song, we're beholding how the Servant's weakness will turn to strength. How his dishonor will lead to honor. How his defeat will result in victory.** This, once again, is the amazing juxtaposition of seeming opposites found in the one person of Jesus Christ.

- ❖ Church, this vision of Christ is what we need to behold as we've arrive at the last Sunday of a very long and hard year. **We need to set our eyes on our Satisfied Savior.** Many of us are ending the year still feeling anxious and troubled by this pandemic and all of its effects. We don't know when it's going to end and what life will look like on the other side. But of this we can be sure – our souls can be satisfied when we look to Jesus our Suitable Substitute and Satisfied Savior!