

The Saving Work of Christ, I

Let us pray.

Father, we praise You for Your grace that saves us once and for all. We praise You for Your grace that keeps us day by day and that works in our lives and even uses us to minister to others. We give You the glory for all of this, Father. We thank You for Your great grace. Father, honor Your name tonight as we study what Your Word says about the work of Your Son. Fill our mouths with praise. May our lives say thank You to You for Your marvelous grace given to us in Christ. We commit our time to You; work, we ask, through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

We begin our study of the work of Christ with a look at Isaiah 53. When we started Christology we took a glimpse at Psalm 110 and John 1. For the work of Christ, we will again start with a great Old Testament passage and then work our way to the New Testament by way of some historical views, though this time they are not all heretical. There are actually a few pretty good ones in there with some heretical ones as well, but we will benefit from that look at historical theology. But first, please turn in the Scriptures to Isaiah 53:13 through the end of chapter 53. As I read, pretend you have never read or heard this before. I would like to know what your impression would be if you had never heard it before. What is the main theme, and how do you feel about that? Isaiah 52:13-53: says,

See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him [His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness] so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand. Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Hear this as if you have never heard it before (which is impossible). It is also impossible to put Christ out of your thinking as we read it, but try the impossible. What would your first impression be as to the

major idea? What strikes you? The first comment was that the passage speaks of the servant suffering on behalf of others, the notion of his being a vicar or substitute. The second one is a surprising comment to me, though a good one. It is that there is an element of exaltation in the passage. The passage begins and ends that way, interestingly. More about that in a bit, but the comment was also made that it is surprising that it starts this way and ends that way in light of what is in the middle. What is in the middle?

Suffering in the extreme. Suffering like you have never heard about. The major thing that would hit you is the major idea, which is indeed terrible, terrible suffering. It is incredible. Verse 14 says, "People are appalled at Him, His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man, His form marred beyond human likeness." Again, given the premise you do not know what this refers to, you see somebody beaten to a pulp. Someone has been disfigured. He has been so brutalized. Furthermore, in verse 3, he does not have a lot of company or commiseration: "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering." People just turn away from him at the end of that verse.

Furthermore, he seems to be "stricken by God" and afflicted. There is oppression and affliction in verse 7. It is terrible. It piles up. Verse 8 says, "By oppression and judgment he was taken away." What is the normal human response to this type of thing? How do we feel to learn about such suffering? We are depressed, moved, affected—sympathetic in some way—and the question comes about deservedness. Does he deserve this punishment? So my second question to you—after the first one, which was what is the theme of the passage?—is this: is the passage deserved or undeserved? Is the suffering just or unjust? Now, again, put Christian theology out of your mind; this is impossible to do, but try. The best and first correct answer of the two correct answers to that question is that the suffering is unjust. Show me from the passage why that is the case. The end of 9 says, "He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth." The servant apparently is righteous; he is innocent and is being punished unjustly.

It might be an implication of verse 6. It does not say he was not guilty but in that he is bearing others' iniquities—it is an implication. It is so hard for us not to read Christ back in there. I guess there could have been some person who was part of a rebellion, for example, and therefore tainted with guilt, suffering on behalf of the others who got away or somehow he suffered for all of them. But there is one more example: verse 11, which says, "My righteous servant." So the suffering is unjust, according to verses 9 and 11. But just to complicate matters, the suffering is God's will. Unjust suffering is God's will? From the passage we have concluded the suffering is in some sense unjust. There is no doubt that it is God's will. Look at verse 10. "It was the LORD's will to crush him"—strong word—"and cause him to suffer." Now we really have a problem. By the way, the emotional response to unjust suffering can be everything from anger to indignation. It is more than just being moved with compassion; now we are mad—that is the way God made us. Part of the law of God on the heart is that we want justice and when there is injustice we should react to it. Now how do we respond when we learn this is God's will in some sense? We are confused and perplexed. What is the solution to our problem of terrible, terrible suffering? It is unjust and yet there is a sense of which it is God's will. How could unjust suffering be the will of God? By the way, if we were left right here and the passage said no more, we would have to fall back on the Bible's teaching about God. It is the old ethical situation in which you are married and your spouse is not there when you get home and you were expecting him or her there. There is no communication and an hour later a car pulls up out front. You open the door and you see somebody of the opposite sex with your spouse, driving the car. The car door opens and your spouse gets out. Now, how do you respond? Given a good marriage and other things being equal, you would like an explanation, but you are not immediately suspicious. That is, you give your spouse the benefit of the doubt, and again you would desire some communication. It is the same way based on God's reputation. Based on what we know of God, even if we could not figure it out, we would not impugn His motives; we would say this is hard to understand. We need help elsewhere. But from the passage itself we are pointed in the right direction, although I admit at this point that we are working with New Testament hindsight, no doubt. This is one of Isaiah's servant songs. They begin with Israel as the nation being the

servant and they move toward this last servant song, which is an individual suffering on behalf of his fellow Israelites, and even beyond that, we might say for the world, for the Gentiles—I will show you that later on. But it is in this notion of vicarious suffering or substitution, everything John said as good Christian theology, although it is from the New Testament that we get that idea of propitiation, of the cross being directed toward God Himself and having to do with His own moral integrity, but this points in that direction. The two dominant themes were not only suffering, but likewise, substitution. And actually, it is a toss-up as to which is more dominant because they are both written all over the place. Substitution is seen in verse 35:5: “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed [...] the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” This is remarkable language. The servant is a vicar; he is a substitute. He dies on behalf of others. “He will bear the iniquities” of others is said at the end of 11. The end of 12 says, “He bore the sin of many.” He is a sin bearer in some sense that we need to try to understand.

I am amazed at how advanced Isaiah 53 is. It just amazes me how much is here for our faith and we cannot possibly avoid looking at it through New Testament eyes. It is a good discipline to try, but we cannot avoid it. There is so much here. There is the pattern of suffering encircled by glory; it is an amazing thing. I do not know what the poor rabbis would have done trying to figure it out: “See my servant will act wisely” (verse 13 of chapter 52). Notice the three-fold emphasis: “[...] raised and lifted up and highly exalted.” This is the language of exaltation, praise, recognition, but immediately it plunges into this terrible language of being appalled and disfigured. How in the world does this fit with the former notion? By the way, scholars of the fourth gospel thinks John’s picture of the Son of Man lifted up, which is in John 3, 8, and 12, has its roots here in Isaiah 52:13 where the servant is lifted up. It is an ambiguous lifting up in John’s Gospel because in chapter 12 John says, “The Son of Man must be lifted up”—this is from Jesus’ own mouth—and He says by this He was speaking of His death. So it is a literal lifting up in crucifixion, which is terrible: “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself,” He says. There is a double meaning; it speaks also of exaltation. The sense seems to be something like the worst people could do to God and His Christ is to put him up on a cross between heaven and earth, but God will use the wrath of men to praise Him and the worst crime becomes the source of the greatest blessing. Indeed, the traditional pattern of state of humiliation, then state of exaltation, is somewhat exploded by John. Paul has a hint of this, too, in Colossians 2 in texts we will look at later on. Where already on the cross Christ is victorious, that is what is supposed to be the epitome of the state of humiliation; the worst that people can do to Him is thrust that cross in the ground and jar Him, as it were, and hang Him up between heaven and earth. They cannot frustrate the plan of God, so they merely launch Him, as it were, they put Him that much closer to going back to the Father, and indeed, He does go back. His seeming defeat is His victory, and it is a defeat of the world. It is a marvelous pattern that seems to have its roots here in glory surrounding horrible, undeserved suffering. One other element I should have mentioned is that the suffering is not unjust if the servant willingly undertakes it. Notice verse 12 just to close out the pattern; it is another inclusion. Inclusion, from the Latin *inclusio*, is a literary device whereby the same unit of literature appears at the beginning and end of a passage of a unit of literature, serving to pull it together. Some years ago after that explanation or something akin to it, a student asked, “Why do you not just call it bookends, doc?” People will understand what you are saying, and I have called it “bookends” ever since. We get bookends here. Verse 12 is the other bookend to verse 13 of chapter 52. Isaiah 53:12 says, “Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong.” This is the language of victory. In between is the great suffering. An amazing thing to me is the number of biblical themes that we find here. We have the language of sacrifice, so in the midst of this passage that speaks of the substitutionary atonement of the Messiah who will come we have the language of sacrifice. I have now given up all pretense of objectivity and reading it as if we never heard of Jesus; we cannot do it. It is probably here

already in 52:15: “So will he sprinkle many nations.” It seems to be the language of the priestly function of sprinkling the blood. Think of the consecration of the tabernacle. The holy place was sprinkled, the altar, the book of the law, the priests, the people; the blood spattered the people and all of it spoke of consecration, of setting things apart as holy unto God. “Without the shedding of blood,” Leviticus declared, “there is no forgiveness of sins.” It uses figurative language, saying, “So he will sprinkle many nations” with his blood, presumably. More direct is verse 10. It is all the more shocking for the strong language and the putting of the Lord behind the suffering: “Yet it was the LORD’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.” Those last couple of lines there I should have included under the glory section; so we have glory in the beginning, glory in the middle, and glory in the end. He will see his offspring. I suppose a rabbi would say the servant looks forward to his spiritual descendants. I do not know if a rabbi would think of resurrection. We cannot help but think of it when we read this verse and of others coming into the kingdom of God because of the servant’s work. It is like John says in chapter 12, perhaps he was meditating on this chapter. This is fascinating; as I speak to you some things are pulling together in my own mind.

“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds,” Jesus said in John 12:24. So it is here, the Lord makes the life of the servant a guilt offering, and yet he will see his offspring and prolong his days. He does the will of God. It prospers in his hand. Leviticus 5 gives us the background of this guilt offering. It is one of the sacrifices of Israel. Leviticus 5:14-19 says, “The LORD said to Moses: ‘When a person commits a violation and sins unintentionally in regard to any of the LORD’s holy things, he is to bring to the LORD as a penalty a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value in silver, according to the sanctuary shekel. It is a guilt offering [...] he is to give it all to the priest, who will make atonement for him with the ram as a guilt offering, and he will be forgiven. If a person sins and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD’s commands, even though he does not know it, he is guilty and will be held responsible. He is to bring to the priest as a guilt offering a ram. [...] In this way the priest will make atonement for him for the wrong he has committed unintentionally, and he will be forgiven. It is a guilt offering; he has been guilty of wrongdoing against the LORD.’” The themes of sin, guilt, atonement, and forgiveness repeat. They are woven into the fabric of Israel’s society by the Lord in Leviticus. Now in Isaiah 53 the prophet says it was the Lord’s will for the servant to suffer so terribly. It is God crushing the servant and being responsible for his suffering and making his life a guilt offering. This conjures up in the Jewish mind the notions of sin, the deserving of punishment, guilt, and the making of atonement. This time atonement was not with the life of an animal and its violent death, but with the life and violent death of the servant of the Lord. The result is unmistakable in Leviticus: forgiveness. And so it is in this servant song. So sacrifice is woven in here.

The theme of victory is in this chapter of the Bible as well. We will see that one of the major New Testament themes of Christ’s saving work is victory. If you ask the average evangelical Christian individual or church how Jesus saves us, you usually get one of two answers. This is your garden variety, average church—charismatic Christians do better on this victory idea than the average Christians that I have found. The average response would be, “Jesus saves us by paying the penalty for our sins.” That is legal language; it is biblical, it is good. It is one of the themes. Sometimes mingled with that is the sacrificial idea like this: Jesus was a sacrifice for our sins. That, too, is biblical and even the mingling of these images is biblical so I have no problem with that. I have no criticism except to say that the pictures of sacrifice and the legal idea, while true, are partial. The saving work of Christ is richer than that. There are a number of other themes that we will look at in a bit, but one of them, already embedded in Isaiah 53, is victory. Christ, in His death and especially in His resurrection, overcomes our enemies, and we need to understand that. For one thing if we look at these different themes, as I call

them, or pictures of the work of Christ as God's gifts to us and tools for ministry—in our day and age, we need every tool in our little tool box that God has given us. This whole victory picture has great relevance to people who are in bondage. We are inventing new ways to be in bondage these days, ways that were not thought of a hundred years ago. We still have some of the old ways, alcoholism for example, but people need to hear about Christ the victor, Christ the champion who can set them free. Isaiah 53 is rich in its imagery. There are details here that boggle my mind. Could Isaiah have fully comprehended what he wrote? I do not think so. I think it is a case like 1 Peter 1 with the prophets straining to try to understand the things that the Spirit of God was indicating through them as they wrote about the Christ. The very last verse, "He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors," is an example. It is a prediction of Jesus on the cross saying, "Father forgive them"—I think the meaning of the next words is something like this: they have no idea of the full extent of what they are doing. It does not mean that they are guiltless, that they do not really know who I am—Father, forgive them. Again, looking back with New Testament vision, we see clearly a prediction of His prayer from the cross for his persecutors. How about the beginning of verse 9? This is remarkable to me. It is reflected in the Hebrew text and not in the English: "He was assigned a grave with the wicked," plural, with the wicked ones, the wicked men, "and with the rich," singular, man, "in his death." Isaiah could not have possibly understood that He was crucified between thieves, plural, but buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a rich individual. Probably he would have understood rich as parallel to wicked as in a couple of the Old Testament themes. In Proverbs God blesses His people so there can be abundance for the Lord's people. On the other hand there is the theme of the wicked rich persecuting the righteous people, the righteous poor. Probably he would have thought of that. But again, let us look back with careful attention to the words: "He was assigned a grave with the wicked"—crucified between thieves—"and with the rich in His death"—buried in a rich man's tomb. This is remarkable.

Seeing justification in verse 11 is unique in the Old Testament in the conjunction of ideas. What do I mean by that? If somebody were steeped in the Old Testament use of language, then James 2 really would give him or her little trouble. We have such trouble with James because we read James over against orthodoxy, which we equate with the apostle Paul. We are backward on this. James is not strange. Paul, in fact, is a radical. He almost lacks Old Testament precedent for the way he puts together his ideas. You know by now I am not criticizing either James or Paul, but I want you to see that if you read James from an Old Testament perspective, what he says in chapter 2 about faith and deeds is not radical at all, because in every place in the Old Testament except one the verb, "acquit," when used of human judges or of God as judge is always used favorably when the human judge acquits the innocent and the human judge condemns the wicked. This is the normal way for the Old Testament to read and so in Deuteronomy we learn that it is the job of a magistrate to condemn the guilty and to acquit or justify the righteous. The book of Proverbs actually tells us that the Lord hates a human being who condemns the innocent and who acquits the guilty. So as we go to James we have God acquitting his own righteous people. Abraham and Rahab are given as examples. Granted, Rahab is a scandalous example to his audience, but he does it deliberately. That is, there is no contradiction between Paul and James if you let James be James and he uses "justify" in the common Old Testament sense of God vouching for His people. He sees Abraham offer up Isaac and He says, "Now I know that you fear me. I will vouch for you; I will stand up for you in the judgment that you are a man of faith." Did He teach him salvation by works? No. He is not looking at the beginning of salvation. He is looking at its demonstration and indeed, James is just simply orthodox in an Old Testament Jewish sense, which fits perfectly the character of James, the Lord's half brother as revealed in the Book of Acts. James 2:24 is the verse that just about stumbled Martin Luther because Luther was so filled up with Paul: "You see a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." He is acquitted in the sight of God by validating deeds, I would explain it, and not by mere profession of faith alone. This is God acquitting His man, Abraham, and His woman, Rahab, because their actions reflected their professions. They not only professed to

believe in the Lord, but they also showed it by what they did and God acquitted them. Is this initial justification by works? No, this is final acquittal based upon a life that demonstrates one's profession is genuine. In any case, James is perfectly in accord with the predominant Old Testament use of the verb "justify or acquit" and in that regard, Paul, in a passage such as Romans 4, is scandalous in his language. In Romans 4:5 he actually speaks of God in these terms: "God who justifies the wicked." Wait a minute; you have got some explaining to do, Paul. In the book of Proverbs the Lord condemns a human being who does that. It is a terrible thing in the Lord's sight. It is an abomination to the Lord to acquit or justify the guilty or to condemn the righteous. You mean to tell me the Lord is going to justify the guilty? That is exactly what Paul says. There is only one place I have found in the Old Testament where these two ideas, God justifying the guilty, are put together. Do you know where it is? It is in Isaiah 53:11. I am not saying Paul quoted this. I am saying it provides the conceptual background for his seemingly scandalous doctrine of God declaring sinners righteous. I might back up and say the Old and New Testaments are not at odds in any way. Already in Genesis 15:6 Abraham believed God and God credited it to him as righteousness. So the ideas are the same in both testaments; God is gracious to sinners and saves them. I am talking about the use of language, specifically about the use of the verb "acquit or justify," and this is the only place in the Old Testament where we have that language of God justifying the wicked. Isaiah 53:11 says, "After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge"—which involves knowing and doing God's will—"my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities." It is in the context of the servant of the Lord being the sin-bearer, dying a vicarious death, making a substitutionary atonement, that we read what is uniquely found here in the Old Testament that the servant justifies many because he bears their sins. Thus Paul's doctrine—and again, I do not mean to speak against Paul—makes perfectly good sense. You have got to understand that nothing is unusual about James, but Paul is a downright radical and it is only because of Paul's understanding of his presentation of Christ as the one who takes our condemnation, which sounds just like this, that God is able to declare sinners righteous because our condemnation has been paid. It is only because Paul presents Christ as the one who procures righteousness for His people that God again is able to declare the wicked righteous, because He does it justly in Christ. God credits Christ's righteousness to the spiritual bank account of everyone who believes in Him; He credits Christ's condemnation as the condemnation of His people. I rest my case. Isaiah 52:13 through 53:12 is remarkable. It is remarkably advanced in its ideas. I am not saying the rabbis in between the testaments or even Isaiah himself could fully understand the words that he wrote, but I am saying that they are here and they are wonderful as we look at them. The New Testament has a number of good quotations from this chapter—at least half a dozen, and up to a dozen—depending on how you count. The New Testament has 30 or 40 allusions, indirect references, to Isaiah 53. It exerted a profound effect on the apostles, on the writers of the New Testament.

In answer to a question, I am not saying Romans 4:5 is quoting Isaiah 53:11, but I am saying that Isaiah 53:11 forms the only linguistic antecedent to Paul's notion expressed in Romans 4:5 and elsewhere of God justifying the wicked. It is a scandalous notion from an Old Testament background. It is shocking, and Paul needs to defend God's character. He does it well through his doctrine of Christ, but he is presenting a radical presentation of the Gospel that has its roots right here. I am not saying he is citing it specifically. I am defending Paul and showing where in the world he could have gotten this from. We are so Pauline in our thinking that we do not even see how radical his gospel is. Our people today take offense at that. Wait, what kind of God is this who would declare sinners righteous? How does that work? You have got to talk about the cross. It is only because of the cross that God is just in doing that. And it is contrary to the normal Old Testament use of the language. It is kind of jarring to the ethical sensibilities, at least at first. So if we understand that and let James be James, it solves a big problem for us there and then we are jarred by Paul's presentation of the Gospel as we should be, because it is radical. It is wonderful and it does not contradict either the Old Testament or James, of course. The Old

Testament in that way is complicated and both James' and Paul's understanding have their roots sunk deep in Old Testament soil. Paul has more shallow roots in terms of his use of the verb, "justify," anyway, but he has got them.