

## "The Suffering Servant"

Kevin Watkins

12/3/23

Have you ever been at just the right place at just the right time?

Maybe you were hunting or fishing at just the right time in the right place for the catch of a lifetime. Or maybe you just happened to have your camera out when something amazing happened. One small right place at the right time moment was yesterday when my family went to the Carolina Basketball game and in a crowd of 20,000 people, we just happened to run into Greg and Abigail Hardy and family. That was so fun. And you ought to get my friend Irving Perez to tell you the story of how 5 years ago tomorrow, he was at just the right place and at just the right time. The short version is he was in a local coffee shop, when he overheard a job interview that went poorly, and just invited himself to interview for the job (with no idea what the job was). And in his sweatpants and hoodie, won a job with a company that he still works for. He was promoted again a few weeks ago.

He was in the right place at the right time and it was incredible.

There is a story like that in the book of Acts in the New Testament. Acts is the history of the early church and we studied this story earlier this year, maybe you will remember it. Philip, one of Jesus' students and friends, is in the right place at the right time, but it was not an accident. An angel orchestrated for Philip to overhear a man reading Isaiah 53 and ask

*"Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.*

*31 "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.*

*32 This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:*

*"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,  
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.*

*33 In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.*

*Who can speak of his descendants?*

*For his life was taken from the earth." (Isaiah 53:7,8)*

*34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

This fall, we are studying together Jesus in the Old Testament and our passage from Isaiah 52 and 53 is all about Jesus. Jesus himself said that this passage was all him. After that Passover dinner with his disciples, Jesus told them in Luke 22, "37 It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors' (Isaiah 53:12); and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment." The words of our text were written about Jesus and fulfilled by him.

This is the quintessential Jesus in the OT passage and in order to understand the passage, here is the context.

The people of Israel were in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people. And it was all their fault.

The people of Israel were 1000 miles from home in exile in Babylon. The year is 540 BC and it has been almost 50 years since any of them had seen Jerusalem. Actually, most of the people who ever lived in Jerusalem have died. Just the grandmas and grandpas can remember back that far. Sometimes at the end of the work day, before the sun went down, families would gather around and ask one of the elders to tell them stories of the hills and the king's palace, stories of sacrifices and the temple. It would often bring a tear to the eyes of those who could remember.

Sometimes the people of Babylon would over hear the stories and make fun of the Israelites.

Psalm 137 remembers

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. 2 There on the poplars we hung our harps, 3 for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? 5 If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. 6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.*

*7 Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. "Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!" 8 Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. 9 Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.*

That is dark at the end. But that is how Israel felt, this is how they prayed. They did not censor their prayers. Babylon had killed their children and their grown men. It had been 50 years, but they were determined to keep the memories alive of the ones they had lost and of the city of God.

What made their situation worse was that Israel had been given a special role on Earth. They had been chosen to be God's witnesses to the world. They had been blessed to be a blessing. It was their privilege to be God's representatives, his servants among the nations. And they had given that up. They chose sin, which as St. Ignatius of Loyola once said, sin is the "unwillingness to trust that what God wants for me is only my deepest happiness." They did not trust God. They served other gods, looked for help in the wrong places, and lived unjust lives. And their choices led them to these consequences.

They were in exile as a consequence for their decisions. And the pain of their circumstances had them asking serious questions, "Is God still God? Has God been defeated by the Babylonian gods? Is He still powerful? And if He is still powerful, does God still love us? Is He done with us? Have we sinned too much?"

Difficult circumstances, of our own making or by someone else's choosing, still make us ask these kinds of questions. Have you ever wondered: Is God real? Is He still powerful? Does God love me? Have I done too much?

The answers to these questions are paramount. Our lives, our futures depend on the answers to these questions. It was the same with Israel. God himself answers these questions in Isaiah 40-55. Beginning in *Isaiah 40:1*, God says, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” God says be comforted. You are still my chosen people. *Isaiah 44:1-2* says, “But now listen, Jacob, my servant, Israel, whom I have chosen. 2 This is what the Lord says—he who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: Do not be afraid, Jacob, my servant, Jeshurun (meaning the upright one) whom I have chosen. I have chosen you, I formed you in your mother’s womb. Don’t be afraid. I am going to restore you, Israel. I will bring my people back to the land. God says, I will come to you and say,

*Out of here! Out of here! Leave this place!*

*Don’t look back. Don’t contaminate yourselves with plunder.*

*Just leave, but leave clean. Purify yourselves*

*in the process of worship, carrying the holy vessels of God.*

*But you don’t have to be in a hurry.*

*You’re not running from anybody!*

*God is leading you out of here,*

*and the God of Israel is also your rear guard. - Isaiah 52:11-12 (The Message)*

You don’t have to hurry. No one is chasing you. I am leading and protecting you. You will be safe.

Chapter after chapter Isaiah says God is still here, He is still powerful, and He is not done with you, but there are lingering questions, like, How? How will God rescue them from Babylon? Even more, how will God restore their relationship? How will God fix their broken sinful hearts that caused them to choose exile over closeness to God?

Their problem is not just their external circumstances, not just exile. It is internal. Who can fix a broken, disordered heart?

This is where we get to our passage. Our passage says there will be a rescuer. God will send someone to save his people, to restore their relationship with God, but it will not be who you think.

Because, first, God’s rescuer will not look the part.

Back then, there were physical expectations for leaders and kings. In the Bible, Joseph and David especially are mentioned as being handsome. Saul was a head taller than everyone else. He looked the part. Leaders, heroes were expected to look the part.

It is the same today. We idolize the beautiful and the handsome. I have watched TV shows from other countries and often the actors look normal, but in America, the actors and actresses are genetic superstars. Chris Hemsworth is not normal. Even the people who report the news are models. As I was studying this week, I was struck by how much time and energy we put into how we look. The time we spend, I spend comparing myself to other people. And I have come to believe that my life would be easier and better if I was better looking. And we spend so much time and money working toward that end. And I am not even saying that is all bad, but it is true that power, influence, and opportunity often come with physical expectations.

And it turns out, in God’s greatest plan, being handsome or beautiful is not of any value. Here are the phrases our passage uses to describe the one who will save Israel:

People will be appalled at him; his appearance will be so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness; He will have no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. Like one from whom people hide their faces he will be despised, and held in low esteem.

On a scale of 1-10, he will be a .5. We will all just ignore him, divert our eyes. Swipe left. Undateable. We definitely would not follow his Instagram account or his exercise program.

Jesus the rescuer was not physically impressive. Now we should say there is no mention in the New Testament that Jesus was disfigured, but the passage is trying to make a point. Jesus does not influence people through his looks. Especially, not at the end of his life, when he was beaten and may in fact have been marred. God's rescuer did not look the part.

And God's rescuer did not achieve success in the traditional ways.

*v. 9 says this, He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, (And this is true, Jesus is killed next to criminals and laid in a rich man's tomb.) though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.*

Deliverance will come, but it will not come by coercion. No stretching the truth. Jesus could have lied or simply denied being the Christ. He could have defended himself even but he didn't. The passage twice says that he was silent. His success did not come because he was manipulated through his words.

And God's rescue came without political power and violence.

Isn't that how you change the world? Isn't that how you get your way on earth? You do whatever it takes to get your people/your political party into positions of power and then you force people to do what you want?

That is what Assyria did. That is what Babylon did. That is what Rome would later do. What other options are there? How will God rescue his people?

The answer is God will rescue his people through a servant.

*Isaiah 52:13, See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.*

God will rescue his people through His servant. This servant will be wise – which in the Old Testament means more than just book smart. To be wise is someone who knows what is good and acts on it. It is that same way still today actually. If someone is wise, it means they have insight into life and puts it into practice.

God did not send a hero or a king or a political ruler, but God sent Jesus as a wise servant.

In Mark 10:45, Jesus said, *"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* He did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. And that is what he did.

*Isaiah 53:3 He was despised and rejected by mankind,*

*a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.*

*Like one from whom people hide their faces*

*he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.*

*4 Surely he took up our pain*

*and bore our suffering,*

*yet we considered him punished by God,*

*stricken by him, and afflicted.*

Jesus came to serve God and restore humankind's relationship with God and he was punished for it. Jesus was despised and rejected. We talked about it last week, but here is the language of rejection again. What a horrible experience? But it goes beyond being rejected. He suffered and experienced pain.

This is a far cry from a warrior king, the hero. And then these amazing words:

*5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,*

*he was crushed for our iniquities;*

*the punishment that brought us peace was on him,*

*and by his wounds we are healed.*

Remember, the circumstances of our lives are not our biggest problem. Exile was a symptom for Israel. Their problem was their disordered desires, they wanted things other than God and his way of life. The problem was they loved to sin and they pushed God away. If God rescued them from exile, but something was not done about their hearts, they would find themselves alienated from God all over again.

*6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,*

*each of us has turned to our own way;*

*and the Lord has laid on him*

*the iniquity of us all.*

All of us have sinned and gone astray. Each person wants a life where they are right about everything, where God agrees with everything we already think, and nothing we do is really that bad. But there is right and wrong. God had designed Israel for a specific purpose. There is a way that leads to life and all of us like sheep have gone astray. That was true then and that is true now.

God has made us for a very specific type of life, a life of love as Jesus' defines it, and we so often choose easier lives. And for that we are separated from God. We put ourselves at odds with God. But Jesus has come to rescue us. This passage in Isaiah helps give language to Jesus' arrest, his flogging, and his crucifixion on the cross. He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our sins, and the punishment that brought us peace was on, by his wounds we are healed.

We no longer need to be alienated from God. There is a way for us to come home to be with God. He has shown that He still loves us in Jesus. And as we trust in Jesus' rescue, He sends His spirit to work in us to have hearts of love and well ordered desires. To be again, his witnesses to the world.

Jesus did not look or act like the hero that was expected. He was not a handsome king who came to save the world through conquest, but a God who came as a servant, who was willing to suffer and die for those he loved. To make us family with him again.

And if Jesus' came to serve and was willing to suffer for love, then God may that be our plan too. May God make our lives about more than just looking good and getting our way. But about serving Jesus and other people, even if we have to suffer.

I want to close with this. 6 weeks ago at Bob Young's funeral, Pastor Bob shared some reflections from Garrett, Bob Young's grandson and Dr. Peter and Lisa's son. Garrett had written out "Lessons from Grandpa." And there were a number of great lessons Bob Young had taught his grandson, but there is this one that has stayed with me. Some of Garrett's favorite memories of his grandfather were when they would work on and modify cars together. There is a picture of grandpa and grandson when Garrett was young and both of them are covered in grease with big smiles on their faces. And one of the lessons was "fixing things is rewarding" and then this, Lesson 3, When it might have been easier and faster to hire someone else to fix something, Bob would say to Garrett, "You want to do it the hard way? Let's do it together."

And it is that line, "You want to do it the hard way? Let's do it together," that has stayed with me. The lesson was to say yes to the hard things. Jesus could have come as a hero, a handsome king, using a quick tongue and violent force to get his way, but he doesn't. He chose to be a servant. Jesus said yes to the hard thing. He saved us by suffering, and because he said yes to the hard way, we can be together.