

IT IS WELL

EXPOSITIONS *on*
SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT

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It Is Well: Expositions on Substitutionary Atonement

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PREFACE

My conversion occurred as a very abrupt and sudden change in my life. I can recall the moment when the Lord shook me out of my former self. Sitting in the pew on a Sunday morning next to Rebecca, we were hearing of the crucifixion from the book of Luke. I had never read or heard the text. The Lord, in his mercy, very clearly showed me the differing fate of the two men crucified next to Jesus, and that the defining difference between them was in their hearts. I was shaken by the intensity and immediacy of the scene at Calvary, the certainty of death, and, through it all, the calm assurance Jesus offered. He would remember the man who asked to be remembered.

Prior to that morning I was not just an unrepentant sinner, but I was in love with my sin. And I was unwilling or unable to understand the significance of the death of Jesus. But shortly after my conversion, I had a dream, about which I told my senior pastor Mark, in which I awoke in a room filled with treasure, treasure that I hadn't earned but that I owned, that I hadn't worked for but that I now possessed.

Praise the Lord! He knew what my hard heart needed! Before that day, my experiences in church had been interesting and mostly academic. But since then I have not read or sung of Christ's crucifixion without being emotionally stirred and freshly affected by his work on the cross for me.

That is the story of Hanz, a good friend of mine and a new Christian. As he talked to me about his story, he said, "I still weep when we sing about Christ's death for us, or when I read about it." Hanz first heard the story of Christ's substitutionary death on the cross during that sermon series on Luke's Gospel. By God's grace, he hasn't been the same since.

Of course, not everybody is like Hanz. Other people may come into the same church hall, the same sanctuary, and not see the cross at all.

From time to time I've been asked, "Where is the cross in your church?" People look around our 1911 meeting house and find no cross there. You won't find it in gold, silver, or wood. You won't find it embroidered on a banner or carved in the paneling. It's nowhere on the pulpit or on the table. Where is it?

It's there. It's there at the heart of our church. It's in the Bible. It's in the sermons. It's in the songs and the prayers. And it's in the hearts of the people—like it is in Hanz's heart.

Today, the cross is hard to find in many evangelical churches. Even as crosses proliferate on screens and Web sites, the cross seems to be fading in public worship. It may be more common in architecture and ornament than in the past, but it seems to be disappearing from our songs and our sermons.

What's going on?

For centuries now, there has been a move to understand Christianity more by the religious experience it provides than by its doctrines. We want to feel God, or at least feel better. We want to feel joy or commitment or sobriety or intimacy with God. We want to see our lives here and now improve. The crucifixion of Christ seems like an important, even necessary, event historically, but not anything that needs to be highlighted today. It may be a moving story, but how will it help my work on Tuesday or my marriage tonight?

Yet the neglect of the cross in our churches is the result of more than our growing fascination with the subjective and with self-improvement. There is also a growing hostility to the whole notion that Christ suffered as a substitute, that God would desire such a thing, or that God is at all wrathful. Theologians and biblical scholars have reread parts of the Bible—or set it aside—in order to fashion a seemingly more humane religion, a religion of improvement rather than rescue. In such a domesticated version of Christianity, there is no place for a bloody cross.

That's why Michael Lawrence and I decided that the sermons that have come to comprise this book needed to be preached.

In our congregation in Washington DC, we normally preach expository sermons through consecutive sections of Scripture. In this series we did something a little different. Rather than preach straight through a book of the Bible, or even do a topical series on Christ's atonement, we decided to take crucial texts from the Old and New Testaments that shape our understanding of atonement, and preach

through them in canonical order. In so doing, we helped ourselves and the congregation see how deeply rooted atonement and substitution are in the story of the Bible. We also saw the beautiful development of this doctrine from its beginnings in Genesis through Isaiah, to the teaching of Christ, to the crucifixion itself, and finally to the Holy Spirit-inspired apostolic teaching about it.

We Christians serve no mute God. God predicts, God acts, and God interprets his actions. Long ago God revealed the connection between sin and death. He taught his people that forgiveness would involve sacrifice, and he planted the concept of substitution from very early in human history. Isaiah the prophet was given unusual clarity about the substitution that we as fallen humans require, and that God would provide. And in the life and ministry of Jesus, all the prophecies came true. God provided a substitute for us.

These sermons explore the same biblical texts dealt with by Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach in *Pierced for our Transgressions*.¹ These friends have provided the pastor and serious Christian with a wonderful treatment of the heart of our faith. The sermons in this volume are meant as a supplement, a meditation, a path through the Bible to trace one of the deepest truths in God's Word.

In our congregation, Hanz isn't alone in being moved by the cross. Without fail, it seems, the songs and hymns that we sing that remind us of God's wrath and Christ's bearing it for us stir up solemn joy in the congregation, which then climaxes in wonder and awe. You can hear it and see it and feel it.

This is never truer than when we sing the hymn "It Is Well with My Soul." I wish you could hear the church sing the stanza, "My sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul." Our voices join in ecstasy, and we stand amazed at our inclusion, stunned and relishing God's costly, gracious mercy toward us in Christ. The truth of the Word, the cross in the Bible, explodes into glorious joy at the foundation and heart of our life together as a church. When we experience that solemn joy, that deep delight, that loud celebration together, whether we're at the Lord's Table or simply rejoicing after confessing our sins in prayer, the cross is seen to be the center of our church.

¹Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007).

Have you wondered about the cross lately? Have you wondered where it is in your own church, or in your own life? It's our prayer that these meditations will help you re-center your life on God's sacrifice for us in Christ and join in the celebration that's going on eternally as the saints in heaven praise God for the Lamb who was slain for us.

—Mark Dever, Washington DC, June 2009

CRUSHED FOR OUR INIQUITIES

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

MARK DEVER

One popular objection to the idea of substitutionary atonement is that such an image of forgiveness is quite simply meaningless today. It employs a vocabulary of sin and punishment, it is argued, that we don't use and that we don't understand. Now, if substitutionary atonement were simply an image, perhaps we might indulge such a conversation. But there is a difference between an image and the reality that image represents. The substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ is not merely an image, one perspective, or one way among many that we might choose for thinking about forgiveness. Penal substitution is presented in Scripture as reality. God has substituted someone for us to take the penalty that we deserve, a truth we have seen in the last two studies from the books of Moses.

Now we go from the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, written by Moses, to a book of prophecy written several hundred years later. Thus we pass by Joshua and David and Solomon. The kingdom of Israel is founded, flourishes, divides, and declines. And then we come to the prophet Isaiah. Reading through the book of Isaiah, it becomes clear that God's great plan for his people and for his world seems to turn on a person. Thus Isaiah 28:16: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed."

There was an innate sense of this even in the way that God's people looked to a king for protection and deliverance (either a foreign king, or one from David's line). And God revealed to Isaiah the prophet that a Messiah-King would come. (Actually, all the kings of Israel and Judah were "messiahs" in the sense that they were anointed, which is what the word means. But Isaiah prophesies of a Messiah to end all others). So we read in Isaiah 32:1: "A king will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice." As we read this prophecy, however, we get the sense that this coming king will be more than just a good king. Remember the famous passage in Isaiah 9:6–7, which is quoted so selectively every year around Christmas:

For to us a child is born,
 to us a son is given,
 and the government will be on his shoulders.
 And he will be called
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and peace
 there will be no end.
 He will reign on David's throne
 and over his kingdom,
 establishing and upholding it
 with justice and righteousness
 from that time on and forever.

In addition to the king, Isaiah also prophesies that another would come: a servant. And God seems to specially call this one "My servant" (see 42:1–4; 49:6–7; 50:4–10). Now, if this servant is exalted, could this servant also be this king? Could they be one and the same?

Throughout this prophecy and prediction about God's provision, the question crying out is: How will a holy God forgive and restore sinners? That question is answered in the famous passage we come to now, to what one writer has called the jewel in the crown of Isaiah's theology. Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is known as the song of the Suffering Servant.

Even atheistic scholars who study this passage tell us that Jesus' contribution to theology was a combining of the teaching about a coming Messiah with this teaching of the Suffering Servant here in Isaiah.

As far as we can tell from history, Jesus was the first one to teach that these two figures were the same person. This is what he taught his disciples. Jesus clearly knew and relied on this song to understand and explain his own ministry. In Matthew 8:17, Matthew quotes Isaiah 53:4 to explain Jesus' exorcisms and healings. He clearly applied the servant passages to Jesus, just as Jesus had taught him to do.

The song is divided into five stanzas, which can be understood like this: (1) this Servant is appalling; (2) we have despised him; (3) God laid our sins on him; (4) this Servant accepted his substitutionary suffering; and (5) the Servant would be satisfied.

1) This Servant Is Appalling (Isa. 52:13–14)

The song of the Suffering Servant is introduced in verse 13 with a summary: "See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted." The language used here, of being "highly exalted," is used elsewhere in the Bible only of God himself. So from the very beginning, the careful reader finds some things that surprise and shock, things that maybe he doesn't even understand. There is something unique about this Servant's nature and his fate. The Servant is going to do something unique, and God will exalt him uniquely.

But then in verse 14, the song turns strangely dark. We learn that many were shocked by the Servant's appearance. Look at verse 14: "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." This surprising message is about the Suffering Servant who will prepare the world to worship God.

So who is this servant? He is Jesus Christ. The references here to his appearance—"appalled . . . disfigured . . . marred"—are not to some native deformity in Jesus but rather to the horror of his crucifixion. It is this horror connected with the Servant that makes his effect described here so surprising. That mention of the sprinkling of many nations in verse 15 refers to the Old Testament religious practice of splashing water on an object in order to ceremonially cleanse it so that it can be admitted to the worship of God. This is the image Isaiah uses to describe how the Servant will prepare many others to

be admitted to the worship of God. By means of the message about him, the Servant will have not just a ministry for Israel but for all the nations of the world! “For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.” Even the Gentiles, who were not studying the Jewish Old Testament, would hear, and see, and believe.

Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. He came to bring salvation to the world. As his self-styled followers, what do we do? Do we exalt ourselves around family, friends, and coworkers? Are we willing to risk our carefully cultivated reputations in order to tell them about Christ? This may not seem at first like the most obvious application of this passage, but in Romans 15, when Paul is explaining his ambition to take the gospel where it has never gone before, he says, “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation. Rather, as it is written: ‘Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand’” (Rom. 15:20–21). Paul longed to join in the Servant’s work of taking the message places where it had not been heard. That was his desire, his ambition.

What about you? My brothers and sisters, have you considered how you are helping in that task? Have you considered how you are ordering your life, how you are making decisions about what you will do, where you will live, whom you will befriend, what you will put your time and resources into? What are you doing to see the gospel spread to the nations? You can choose to live, work, or shop in a certain community, and part of your reason for doing that should be to get to know people so that you might share the gospel with them.

Anyway, we begin this song with the surprising, even shocking, news of the Servant’s disfigurement. The camera, if you will, is squarely on the Servant, and then on the further surprise of his mission to the nations.

2) *We Despised the Servant (Isa. 53:1–3)*

Not only do we find that the Servant is appalling, but in this next stanza of the song, *we* appear. Now the nation of Israel seems to speak, and we find that the message to be delivered to the nations is a message about God’s salvation of his people. Verse 1: “Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” The

message is shocking both in its means, this disfigured Servant, and in its end, the whole world.

This question implies much unbelief. The message strikes many as incredible. So in John's Gospel (12:37–38), he tells us: "Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet." Then John quotes this verse, Isaiah 53:1. Paul, too, turns to this verse to show the widespread rejection of this message among his fellow Jews, saying, in Romans 10:16, "But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?'"

Why would this message be so incredible? Because, as Isaiah's already begun telling us, the Servant will not be humanly attractive. The Servant will not be the type of person you would want to approach and talk to at a party. Look at verse 2: "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." Have you ever noticed how telegenic many religious teachers who succeed on TV are? These verses show that the Servant would look different from the actors that turn up playing Jesus or Superman in movies. The Servant will be unexpected and unattractive. In that sense, Isaiah here is reinforcing what he told us in the first stanza.

But have you noticed how *we* have all of a sudden entered the story there in verse 2? "He had no beauty or majesty to attract *us* to him, nothing in his appearance that *we* should desire him." In verse 3 it's even clearer that the servant will be despised: "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." The song thus begins to implicate *us* in the guilt of not valuing God's Servant, of considering him of no account.

I wonder if you think, "I really have no opinion of Jesus. I'm not a Christian, but I have nothing against Jesus. Seems like a fine guy. I just am not particularly interested." Friend, Jesus didn't leave an "independent" category of response to him. You have to choose. As Jesus said, "He who is not with me is against me" (Matt. 12:30; Luke 11:23).

As the song goes on, the identification of this Servant with Jesus Christ becomes even clearer. Jesus Christ *is* the despised Servant. So

how can we, his disciples, be surprised when we are despised and rejected for being Christians—among family, or friends, or at work? How do we cultivate in our own souls, in our children’s hearts, this idea that our main responsibility is faithfulness not to someone else, not to the crowd, not even to ourselves, but to God?

Praise God that he has revealed himself to us and grown a desire in us for him, when we had no such desire ourselves! Has he not been good to us, and kind? He clearly picked us, for we would never have picked him on our own. We didn’t esteem Jesus; we looked down on him and spurned him. How many times have non-Christian friends told us that perhaps they could believe, if only they could have known Jesus personally? Yet this prophecy was fulfilled. Reading the New Testament, we see that Jesus was despised; people avoided him and hid their faces from him. They passed him by and turned away from him. If we know the truth about ourselves, we know that this has been our response as well.

All this is why we must be very careful not to add worldly attractions to try to make this gospel seem attractive. We are not to do anything artificial to try to get people interested. We want to be honest about ourselves and our sins, and part of the message we’ve been called to bring is to call people honestly to confess sins. How can we engage in a call to confession and in flattery at the same time? It’s not possible. So we try to be faithful, telling people, “You have sinned. You need a Savior.”

3) God Laid Our Sins on the Servant (Isa. 53:4–6)

It is in this song’s third stanza that we find perhaps the clearest statement in the whole Bible about how God deals with our sins. Some have suggested that Christ took up our infirmities in the sense that he was incarnate and joined us in our sufferings. But to join us is not the same thing as to help us, let alone to heal us and bring forgiveness for our sins and peace with God.

One of the earliest post–New Testament expressions of Christ’s atonement comes from Clement of Rome. He said, “Because of the love he had for us, Jesus Christ, our Lord, in accordance with God’s will, gave his blood for us, and his flesh for our flesh, and his life for

our lives.”¹ That’s what we see in this central, climactic stanza of this Servant Song. In these verses is the answer to the riddle of the Old Testament—how a holy God can forgive sinners, how mercy and justice can meet, how a righteous God could, as Paul put it, justify the ungodly.

This song is full of words signifying suffering and anguish. Why? Why such anguish? It is because the Servant bore our infirmities. Look carefully at verse 4: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.” What an amazing statement! Note that it was God who struck and smote him. This was not, however, because he in any way deserved it. No, it was because we deserved it. Some of the verbs here are passive, showing what God did, and others are active, showing that the Servant himself has acted to take up our suffering and to carry our sorrows. The Servant may in some sense be a victim, but he is no *mere* victim. This was his action. As we’ll see in verse 12, he poured out his life and bore the sin of many. Do you see this amazing combination? God’s will and the Servant’s willingness. This is no cosmic child abuse of a heavenly Father gone terribly wrong, abusing his trembling child who shrinks back from his Father’s strokes. This is the eternal, triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—determining from eternity past that he would deal with our sins.

Verse 5 is the climax of the song. The Servant’s suffering brought us salvation: “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.” What a picture! Those words “pierced” and “crushed” indicate a violent death. The Lord prophesied in Genesis that the offspring of the woman would crush the serpent, and here the Servant, Jesus, would be crushed so that by his death he might destroy death (Heb. 2:14).

Why would we need to be so delivered? Because of our sins. As Isaiah says in verse 6, we have sinned, yet God laid our sins on the Servant: “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.”

The Israelites had been taught for hundreds of years, on their two great national holidays, Passover and the Day of Atonement, about

¹“The Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians,” in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 85.

God's holiness, their sin, and their need for a God-appointed substitute. Every spring and fall they were taught this. For centuries God was drilling into their minds the facts that he was holy, that they were not, and that they needed a substitute whom he would provide. Now, however, they see that that substitute is the Servant, a God-appointed person. This is what people had not been told before. The Servant is substituted for the sheep. The Servant is slaughtered so that the sheep—you and I—are saved.

This image of sheep is strange to us. If you've never lived in the country around sheep, sheep might seem like a fine thing. They're clean animals, little squishy things you give your kids stuffed versions of. But if you've lived in the country around sheep, you realize that sheep are dumb and dirty. It's not a compliment to be called a little sheep. It means you are helpless, that you'll kill yourself without intending to. You're not a confident creature but a dirty one, and you are kind of ornery. This is not a complimentary image. Yet as sheep, we've gone astray—all of us! Human beings are not represented as some great, proud animal, confident and to be feared—though I fear many religious teachers are telling their congregations that's how they should think of themselves. That's not the truth according to the Bible. I don't care who's flattering you; they're lying to you. According to the Bible, we all, like sheep, have gone astray. We need someone to save us from the sins we have committed.

My friend, if you're not a Christian, you have sinned, and you are responsible before God for your actions, for your life, for what you have done. You will give account to him for every sin you ever have or will commit. You can bear God's just punishment of you for your sins, yourself, or you can trust that someone else has suffered for your sins and paid the penalty for them. Trust the claims of Jesus Christ, that he has paid that penalty, and turn from your sins to follow him. God made us all in his image, to know and love him, and yet we all like sheep have gone astray. We have sinned against him. God would be completely just to allow us to go our own way and be destroyed, but in his mercy and love he has not. He has found a way that mercy and justice can act together, and that's in the eternal Son of God being made flesh, living a perfect life among us—the life you and I should have lived—and dying a death he didn't have to die.

Jesus did not sin; he died the death we deserve in order to bear our iniquities and our transgressions, to bear God's correct and right

penalty against them. When that work was done, God raised him from the dead and highly exalted him to show that he accepted the sacrifice and that all of Jesus' claims were true. Now he invites us to turn from our sins and to trust in Jesus Christ. Friend, God's answer for your guilt is not to explain it away by circumstances that have victimized you, but to call you to own your sins fully and to entrust them all to Jesus Christ by faith. Jesus Christ is our substitute. He has taken our penalty.

Brothers and sisters, do you realize that all your disobedience is not ultimately disobedience to another or to yourself, but to God? Your sins will never be taken care of any other way—not by success in your marriage or family, your friendships, or your work. Christ alone is the way God has appointed to bear our sin. He died for us. Luther said, "We all walk around with His nails in our pockets." It was our sins that put him there. Consider what God did here. Remind yourself of his sovereignty in all of this, and return to the cross daily. Meditate on this passage. Consider what the Son of God has endured on your behalf.

4) The Servant Willingly Accepted His Substitutionary Death (Isa. 53:7–9)

Verse 7 says that although the Servant was oppressed, he did not cry out. "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."

Consider here the Servant's humble acceptance of his role. He was quiet. He allowed himself to be brought like a lamb to death. Can't you see Jesus in Pilate's hall? Remember him in the garden a little before telling his disciple to put away his sword. He was like a sheep being shorn. He chose not to open his mouth to dispute, to denounce, or to prevent. Jesus Christ accepted this because it was God's plan.

The speaker here is either Isaiah prophetically describing the Servant's oppression, or again the Lord himself. Either way, verse 8 makes it clear that the Servant was killed because of the sins of the people. "By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken." In God's amazing providence it was these very verses that the Ethiopian official in Acts 8 just happened to be reading as he was returning from Jerusalem to

Ethiopia. The Holy Spirit brought Philip to the official, and he asked Philip, “‘Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?’ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:34–35).

Back in Isaiah 53:9 we see yet another prophecy that was fulfilled in Jesus’ life and death. Though without sin himself, the Servant died and was buried: “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.” The verse makes it very clear that this Servant had done no violence. That is, his suffering was not caused by his own sin. He had no wickedness and no injustice to account for himself. As it says in verse 11, he was righteous, different from what we’ve all confessed about ourselves in verse 6.

If you remember the accounts of Jesus’ trial, even Pilate himself testifies to Jesus’ innocence. It was as if he had read this prophecy in Isaiah and was following the script. As Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:22, “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” Yet Jesus Christ, our Passover Lamb, was slain for our salvation.

Some have thought that Jesus’ example of nonresistance here should serve as an example for Christians never to resist injustice. But I think this is a misreading of the importance of the text here. Jesus is certainly an example for us, but he was also undertaking the unique work of our salvation. There are many callings in life in which we have and should exercise authority, even to correct or punish. We know this in our homes, and we know this in our jobs. But while this does not teach that we should always practice nonresistance, it does teach us that we should always be humble.

Brothers and sisters, don’t retaliate for wrongs done against you. Yes, if you can prevent them, do so, but follow the example of Christ here. If this Righteous One was so humble, surely we should be even more humble. Do you feel very righteous sometimes? Perhaps I’m the only one. Let me put it this way: I feel so righteous sometimes, for instance, when I forgive someone who has done something wrong against me. I feel like I have this great bank account of moral credit, and I’ve just inflated it still further. How false is that? I am a debtor to God’s mercy alone. When I act even in the greatest act of forgiveness toward someone else, I have done so little compared to what God has done to me in Christ.

Brothers and sisters, when we act out the kind of love we see in the Servant Jesus Christ, we act not out of some great store of virtue

and merit that we have, but rather out of our knowledge of how much more greatly God has forgiven us. We must constantly remind ourselves of God's mercy to us, and out of that mercy deal with those who have sinned against us. If we have been shown mercy, how can we not, in turn, show mercy to others? Pray that there would grow and flourish in your church a God-honoring culture of forgiveness and nonretaliation. Because we want our lives to reflect the humility of this Servant who accepted his special substitutionary suffering out of his love for us, and for his glory, we want to have that kind of life of forgiveness among ourselves.

5) *The Servant Will Be Satisfied*

In this last stanza of the song, Isaiah says that it was the Lord's will to crush the servant and yet cause him to prosper. Verse 10: "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."

To understand this, you need to understand that most of the offerings of the Old Testament weren't totally consumed by flame. Most of them were killed and eaten, and that was considered an offering. The guilt offering was the one big exception. The guilt offering would be wholly consumed by flame, and it was the only Old Testament sacrificial suffering that was intended to atone for sin (cf. Lev. 5:16, 18; 7:7). The Servant's death is presented as just such an atoning sacrifice, and that is how we as Christians understand Jesus' death.

The Suffering Servant will justify many and be satisfied. Look at verse 11: "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." The Servant's knowledge referred to here is his wisdom, shown not only in his relationship with God but also in his leading others to have such a relationship. That's what the Bible calls wisdom. It's not having a PhD or a certain position. It's not being an expert in this field or that. It's knowing God and bringing others to know God. That's the essence of wisdom in Scripture. That's the Servant's knowledge. As Paul writes to the Romans (5:19), "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous."

We noted in verse 11 that the Servant's death was a guilt offering, but it was a new kind of guilt offering, because this Servant would be wholly consumed (as guilt offerings were) and yet satisfied *after* his suffering. How could that be? Remember what was said in 52:13: he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

The last verse summarizes the song, concluding that because the Servant bore the sin of many, God would reward him. "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."

This Servant would be an atoning penal substitute for the people whose sins he bore. Note the background of this. Just as we saw in Leviticus 16 in the last chapter, there is one who bore our sins. Those animals in Leviticus were signals and signs pointing forward to the one who would truly bear our sins, to the Suffering Servant of the Lord. John the Baptist recognized Jesus as this one, and when he "saw Jesus coming toward him [he] said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29). John the Baptist saw that here was coming the Servant who would bear away our sins, not just the sins of those in Israel, but the sins of anyone from any nation in the world who would turn from his sins and trust this Lamb instead of trying to defend his own record before God.

At the Last Supper Jesus quoted this phrase, "numbered with the transgressors," and said, "This must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment" (Luke 22:37). Part of what would be fulfilled was the prophecy that God would reward him. The Servant's life can be summarized as *suffering, then glory*. Isaiah 53:11 uses the interesting language of being satisfied: "After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied." The Servant who has suffered will come to know joy. He will enjoy the many who have been justified, whose sins have been borne. Again, this key passage on penal substitution does not present the Servant as one abused by the Father but as one who shares the will of the Father—the Father's will is his will, the Father's plan is his plan, the Father's joy is his joy.

Friend, if you are not a Christian, I want to point out to you that all the good things this prophecy says will come to the Servant come to him only after he pours out his life unto death. This chapter

presumes the resurrection from the dead of the Servant. If you want to understand who this Servant is, you must grapple with the idea that we Christians actually believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. That's how he fulfills this prophecy.

The wonderful news of this chapter is that not only will we be forgiven but Jesus Christ will be satisfied in it. He will have accomplished his end in all his actions connected to it. He's not waiting to be satisfied based on what *you* do or by how *you* act in this or that situation. The glorious news is that he *is* satisfied based upon what he has done. We are not laboring under the hope that somehow we might satisfy this unbending, merciless God. No, that's not the picture in the Bible at all. God is satisfied based upon what he has done, and we should follow his example in this. Our ultimate satisfaction should not be found in marriage or family, friends or work, but in God himself. If you struggle with the thought of God's loving you, consider the Savior's sacrifice of himself. Consider the joy that he finds in having fully satisfied himself with his own sacrifice. The cross is no contradiction to God's justice, and it is the pinnacle of God's love for us. What greater thing could he do to show you that he loves you?

Friends, if you are spending your Christian life right now looking for those sweet little circumstances that will give you satisfaction, abandon that search. The last circumstance lied to you; the one just over the horizon is lying to you also. Satisfaction is to be found in Christ. So pray that God will help you to be satisfied in Christ, even as Christ himself was satisfied in his action.

This wonderful passage is, as you can appreciate, especially controversial in the Jewish community. In the public reading through the Scriptures in many synagogues, this passage is simply left out. In their lectionary readings through the Prophets, the rabbis will literally read up to Isaiah 53:12 and on the next Sabbath day pick up with 54:1. Why? "It is too easily misunderstood," it is suggested. It has simply too often and for too long led people to think that Isaiah prophesied the coming of Jesus Christ to die as a substitute, bearing the penalty for the sins of many. Well, I think there's good reason for that. This is what Christians have always understood Isaiah to mean here, because Jesus taught us that's what it means. It is an idea that is both ancient and modern. So united are Christians' understanding of this that words

from antiquity sound like the meditations of the Christian's heart just this morning. Here's what one early Christian said:

O, the surpassing kindness and love of God! He did not hate us, or reject us, or bear a grudge against us. Instead, he was patient and forbearing; in his mercy he took upon himself our sins. He himself gave up his own Son as a ransom for us—the holy one for the lawless, the guiltless for the guilty, “the just for the unjust” (1 Peter 3:18), the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else but his righteousness could have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us, the lawless and ungodly, to be justified, except in the Son of God alone? O the sweet exchange! O the incomprehensible work of God! O the unexpected blessings, that the sinfulness of many should be hidden in one righteous man, while the righteousness of one should justify many sinners!²

Many commentators say that the last of the Servant Songs in Isaiah is found in Isaiah 61:1–2a: “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor.” This is the Servant speaking again, the one who would be satisfied in the salvation he brings. With all this in mind about the Servant and his sacrificial death, consider that when Jesus began his earthly ministry:

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:16–21)

²“Epistle to Diognetus,” in *Early Christian Writings*, rev. ed., ed. Andrew Louth, trans. Maxwell Starnforth (London: Penguin, 1987), 148.

Think of everything that must have gone through Jesus' mind when he said that. He knew what it meant. He knew the life of the Servant, and he knew the Servant would suffer. Did he swallow hard before he said that sentence? Perhaps those words were a preview of the garden of Gethsemane, a kind of "Let it begin!"