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 Isaiah 52:13–53:3
 5th Message
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THE FOURTH SERVANT SONG (PART 1): AND CAN IT BE?

SERIES: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

What makes the gospel true for you? How do you confront your doubts? For many, it is the historical evidence of the resurrection, which provides the only reasonable explanation for the radical change in the lives of the disciples and the birth of the church. Others are strengthened by reasoned apologetics that force people to take a good look at the faulty presuppositions of their worldview and to test them against inescapable realities. From a philosophical point of view, I would suggest that the Bible presents the only coherent worldview that makes sense of history, is brutally honest about our depravity, and gives us a true hope that delivers in our experience. Besides the evidence of history, the reason of apologetics and coherence of the Bible's worldview there is another aspect of the gospel that strengthens my faith, perhaps even more than all the others. I first discovered it in a prepositional phrase that Paul uses to contend that his gospel did not originate from human agency but came directly from God. As evidence of its divine origin he says, "For I want you to know brethren, the gospel that is preached by me is not *kata* man" (Gal 1:11). Various versions have translated the preposition *kata*¹ in a variety of ways:

- NASB – "not according to man"
- ESV – "not man's gospel"
- ASV and KJV – "not after man"
- NIV and NRSV – "not of human origin"
- NIV – "not something that man made up"

Each translation is attempting to convey the profound truth that the "way" in which God has rescued the world is so astonishing and mind-blowing, you cannot even compare it to anything man would do or even make up. A mere preposition sets the gospel apart from all man-made religions. Astonishment, awe and wonder – these are the authentic marks of a follower of Jesus.

Perhaps no text in Scripture sets forth the enigmatic wonder of the gospel with as much dramatic intensity as Isaiah's fourth servant song. The apostles make more references to it in their writings (39 times) than any other text in the Old Testament.² It became the basis for Peter's first sermon on the day of Pentecost, a message that resulted in the conversion of 3000 Jews. By the turn of the century Christians were so effective in their application of the song to Jesus that some synagogues removed it from their lectionary readings.

The song is composed of five stanzas, artistically arranged in a chiasmic structure of three verses each. Each stanza spotlights different players in the drama and describes the treacherous trauma and terrible truths that magnify the majesty of the servant beyond human comprehension.

A Spotlight on God (52:13-15)

God exalts his servant, granting him astonishing success among the nations.

B Spotlight on Israel (53:1-3)

Israel rejects the servant because he did not have the credentials she sought.

X Spotlight on the truth (53:4-6)

The atonement: The servant suffers the death Israel and the world deserved.

B' Spotlight on Israel (53:7-9)

Israel executes the servant, while the servant is silent.

A' Spotlight on God (53:10-12)

God rewards the servant as head of the new human race. God has the first and last word regarding his servant.

I. The Setting: Great Expectations (Isa 52:7-10)

The sacred song is set in the context of Isaiah's announcement of great and glorious news. Having endured decades of servitude in Babylon, Israel's weary exiles had long been waiting for God to save His people and reestablish the fortunes of Zion. In chapter 52 the announcement finally comes.

**How beautiful on the mountains
 are the feet of those who bring good news,
 who proclaim peace,
 who bring good tidings,
 who proclaim salvation,
 who say to Zion,
 "Your God reigns!"
 Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices;
 together they shout for joy.
 When the Lord returns to Zion,
 they will see it with their own eyes. (Isa 52:7-8 TNIV)**

The imagery depicts a messenger running into the capital city with the glorious news of a great victory resulting in peace, good, and salvation. Israel's God has defeated his enemies and established his reign on the earth. What does it mean "Your God reigns"? As John Oswalt explains, it means the world has been set right "with nothing hanging, incomplete, or unfulfilled (peace, shalom); it entails a condition where creation's purposes are realized (good); it entails the freedom from every bondage, but particularly the bondage resultant from sin (salvation)."³

On the wall of the city are Israel's watchmen, the faithful remnant who never forsook the God of Israel or gave up hope. Hearing the good news the ensemble joins the soloist with resounding shouts of "Joy to the world, for the Lord has come!" Their singing resonates throughout the city, enlisting all to join their praise.

**Burst into songs of joy together,
 you ruins of Jerusalem,
 for the Lord has comforted his people,
 he has redeemed Jerusalem.
 The LORD will lay bare his holy arm
 in the sight of all the nations,
 and all the ends of the earth will see
 the salvation of our God. (Isa 52:9-10)**

Just as he did in the Exodus, God will "bare his holy arm" and exercise his redemptive power in the sight of all the nations. Bruce Waltke explains the figure: "By throwing back his encumbering royal robe the Lord made bare his arm to fight majestically." Once the Lord has established his reign of peace, Jerusalem can finally be rebuilt unto its former splendor. Talk about great expectations! Israel could not have imagined greater news. As Israel eagerly waits in anticipation of a new and greater Exodus, you can almost hear the faithful singing,

And can it be, our Lord would come
 and bare his arm to set us free?

Amazing love, how can it be
that my God would deliver me?

With renewed hope Israel's exiles eagerly await the unveiling of God's powerful arm to save them. But what means will God use to demonstrate that power? Isaiah focuses their hope on the figure of a servant who will take on Israel's role and rescue Israel and the world, inaugurating a new covenant and new creation.

II. The Servant's Reception Among the Nations (Isa 52:13-15)

See, my servant will act wisely (or "succeed");
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 human
being
and his form marred beyond human likeness—
so he will sprinkle (or "startle") 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. (52:13-15)

A. The servant's surprising exaltation (v. 13)

The song's opening, "Behold my servant," is identical with the first song, where God placed his servant center-stage and showcased him before the nation as the one commissioned with the daunting task of setting the world right ("he will bring justice to the nations"). Now in the fourth and final song, the servant is applauded for his incredible insight that granted him success in accomplishing the impossible.

The Hebrew root *sakal* combines "keen insight," knowing exactly what to do, with "success" in accomplishing the task. For such an accomplishment, the servant is rewarded in language that is beyond human comprehension – "He will be high and lifted up, and very exalted." John Oswalt observes that the combination of the two terms "high" and "lifted up" are used four times in Isaiah (and nowhere else in the Old Testament). "In the other three places (6:1; 33:10; 57:15) they describe God."

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne,
high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. (6:1)

"Now will I arise," says the Lord.
"Now will I be exalted;
now will I be lifted up." (33:10)

For this is what the high and exalted One says—
he who lives forever, whose name is holy:
"I live in a high and holy place,
but also with those who are contrite and lowly in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly
and to revive the heart of the contrite. (57:15)

Oswalt continues, "The same point may be made concerning exalted. The section 2:6-22 speaks forcefully against every exaltation of the human; v. 17 says that God will humble the exaltation of man, so that only God will be lifted up."⁴

And the arrogance ("exaltation") of all people will be brought low,
and human pride humbled,
the LORD alone will be exalted in that day. (Isa 2:17)

Point #1: how do you put "servant" and "high and exalted" together?

The threefold exaltation of the servant is beyond anything we could therefore imagine.

B. The significance of his exaltation

The resurrection doesn't merely mean that Jesus is just miraculously alive again. It is much more than that. The Jews believed in the resur-

rection of the dead, an event that would occur at the end of history. But God did with Jesus in the middle of history what the Jews were expecting at the end of history. The resurrection meant that Israel's exile was truly over and the age to come had dawned with the blessing of a new covenant (Isaiah 54) and a new creation (Isaiah 55) where heaven and earth are totally integrated. Jesus has begun that astonishing and world-shattering renewal. He is the first man who is fully at home in both spheres of heaven and earth, and crowned head of the new human race.

Don't think of heaven as some destiny far away out in space; it is another dimension. What made the Garden of Eden unique was not its geography, but rather that it was the intersection of heaven and earth. Eden was holy, and ever since the expulsion of humans from the Garden the whole goal of history has been to bring heaven and earth back together again, to be totally integrated as a new creation. This is what Jesus accomplished at the resurrection. He became the first man to be totally at home in both worlds, heaven and earth, and now by faith the Holy Spirit imparts to our decaying bodies the life of the age to come so that we are actually living in the future.

Point #2: Did you know the gospel proclaims that the future has invaded the present and is available through the gift of the Holy Spirit?

The biblical picture, contrary to popular belief, is not that you go to heaven when you die, but rather you live the rest of your life bringing heaven to earth and making it holy before you die. The implication of the gospel is that you can experience heaven now. Through Jesus heaven intersects earth now and we can experience that intersection in holy moments when we sense Jesus' presence in a tangible way.

C. The impact of his exaltation: shocked speechless (v. 14-15)

1. Shocked speechless at his humiliation (v. 14)

The threefold exaltation is followed by inconceivable contrasts. When God unveils his holy arm and unleashes his power to rescue Israel and the world, we are shocked to discover that the arm of the Lord ("the servant") does not crush the enemy but, to the contrary, is crushed by it. There is no English equivalent to the Hebrew term *shamam* ("to be desolate or appalled"). The servant's suffering is so severe it leaves the onlooker speechless in horror. Few victims ever survived Roman's brutal torture of flogging their victims, as Merrill Tenney explains:

The Roman scourge consisted of a wooden handle to which several rawhide thongs were fastened. Into each thong small butterfly shaped pieces of metal or bone were fixed. Wielded by a powerful arm, the scourge was a deadly weapon, which in a few strokes would strip the flesh from a man's back. Frequently death followed immediately so that the victim did not survive for crucifixion.⁵

When the soldiers were finished with Jesus, his appearance was so marred it was beyond human recognition. How can this be a son of David, Israel's charismatic king who slew the giant Goliath with a sling and a stone? Are you astonished, appalled, and repelled by the face of one who allows himself to be so brutally abused and will not resist? It certainly goes against the spirit of our age that prizes beauty and strength and glories in the survival of the fittest. But before you turn your face away, remember: this is the gospel.

Point #3: It was the servant's submission to humiliation that led to his exaltation.

That's why Paul can say of him in Philippians 2:6-9:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his
own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human being,

he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name. (Phil 2:6-9)

The depth of Jesus' humiliation transcends human categories. To lay aside all the prerogatives of deity and live in utter dependence on God in order to become fully human is difficult for us to imagine. To submit to death is harder still to swallow; but to die the death of a criminal, crucified and hung on tree as if he was cursed by God (Deut 21:22-23), is quite frankly, unthinkable. Yet, if you want to follow the savior, you must go down that road of humiliation (Jas 4:10; 1 Pet 5:6).

2. Speechless in awe at his exaltation (v. 15)

Isaiah says, just as many were shocked speechless in the horror of his humiliation, so many will be rocked out of their chairs ("startle, leap")⁶ in awe of one so holy and magnificent that rulers and heads of state will cover their mouths in revered silence. In the aftermath of cruelty and unspeakable treachery, he freely offers us forgiveness and mercy, along with the invitation to a new life reigning with him on his exalted throne. In a miraculous reversal of Isaiah's initial call (which hardened the nation with blind eyes and deaf ears – Isa 6:9-10), the blind shall now see and the deaf will hear. With little to no preparation or training in Biblical matters, the idol-worshipping nations will grasp the secrets of the kingdom as if they were born into it. Once they miraculously grasp the mystery, they spend the rest of their lives learning the context and background of the promises they so readily received. Who writes a script like that?

Point #4: The idol-worshipping Gentiles grasp the mysteries of the kingdom of God.

Does this astonish you? Just mention the name of Jesus, or pray in the name of Jesus, or preach in the power of his name, and those who are blind, those you would least expect to be responsive to a crucified Messiah, suddenly see. Light shines out of darkness; it is a new creation! How do you explain that?

Some people are surprised when they learn I wasn't raised in a Christian home. Do you know who taught me to pray? John Wayne! At eleven years old I watched the Hollywood classic *The High and the Mighty*. I was riveted as Wayne's character pilots a faltering airplane safely home. At the climactic moment of the movie, the Duke recites the first line of the famous childhood prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep ..." and I thought to myself that if John Wayne prays, then so should I. For the next 5 years I prayed every night to a God I knew next to nothing about, until finally someone told me about Jesus when I was 16 years old.

Do you know what prompted James Garcia to give his life over to Jesus? After two friends started praying for him, James received an invitation to follow the living Christ from a billboard! James was a rock star, playing clubs at night but growing weary from the hard-partying lifestyle. One day he walked out of rehearsal and saw a giant billboard with a picture of Jesus, arms outstretched, and Matthew 11:28 as the caption: "Come to me all who are weary and I will give you rest." James cried out, "I'm weary!" and dropped to his knees and poured his soul out to one who gives rest, and God met him in that dark place with a peace that transcended his tears. Decades later, he is still learning the depth and beauty of his roots in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Such is the power of the gospel, to bring light out of darkness and to bring life out of death.

III. The Servant's Reception Among the Jews (Isa 53:1-3)

Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the 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 others,
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. (53:1-3)

A. The paradoxical, painful question (v. 1)

Point #5: If it is astonishing that those with no previous knowledge of the Servant worship him, it is even more amazing that those to whom the promises were given, for the most part rejected him.

When I came to Christ it was a very painful thing for my parents, especially when I left the career path I had been studying for to become a pastor. My decision created a wall between my father and me such that for 20 years it was difficult to have intimate, not to mention spiritual, conversations. Then, through an incredible set of circumstances I was able to facilitate an operation for my dad that saved his life. His recovery coincided with the PBCC men's retreat that year, and as we spent time together on that retreat my dad started to share intimately with me – stories from his life and questions he had about spiritual matters. One of his first questions for me – it came out of the blue – was, "Why did the Jews reject Jesus?" I was so stunned I couldn't answer in the moment, but the question, the mystery of it, really troubled my father. Why did the Jews reject Jesus?

Isaiah gives the reasons for Israel's unbelief.

B. The reasons for Israel's unbelief (v. 2)

1. No significance

"Tender shoot," is a shoot that grows from a plant's stem or root. A good gardener knows that when a sucker shoot sprouts in a plant or vine, it must be removed or it will sap the vitality of the plant. Jesus had no identity within mainline Judaism. He would not identify himself with the Essenes; he attacked the Pharisees, the Scribes, and the Sadducees; and he would not partake in the cause of the Zealots. In their eyes he and his small band of disciples were an insignificant offshoot of true Israel. They did not have eyes to see that "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit (Isa 11:1).

2. No potential

Secondly, Israel regarded the servant as "a root out of parched ground," suggesting he had no potential for success. He was raised in Galilee, a land of renegades and revolutionaries. His parents were poor, lacking prestige. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. His disciples were a collection of outcasts from varying backgrounds. At his death he had no following, yet he claimed to be the Messiah. Though claiming to be the children of Abraham, they did not have the faith of Abraham to believe in the power of God for a new creation.

I will make rivers flow on barren heights,
and springs within the valleys.
I will turn the desert into pools of water,
and the parched ground into springs. (Isa 41:18)

3. No royal attraction

Thirdly, the servant had none of the attractive qualities that were typically given by God to royalty. He did not possess the outward beauty of a David or a Joseph, nor the splendor or majesty God bestowed on his king through his victories over his enemies (Ps 21:5). Instead of entering Jerusalem in triumph, he rode on the foal of a donkey. At his coronation he was crowned not with gold but with thorns. Instead of a scepter, he wielded a broken reed.

C. Israel's rejection of the servant (v. 3)

1. Israel's estimation of the servant = 0

Since there was nothing in Jesus' appearance to attract Israel to him, they valued his significance as an absolute zero. Such a response is hardly neutral. The double "despised" cuts deeply. Their distaste and dismissal quickly escalates to cruel contempt and shunning, as if the servant was a leper.

2. The impact on the servant = constant pain

The language of isolation ("rejected by others" translates literally as "cessation of men" meaning "humans have ceased having any relations with the Servant because they do not see him as having any significance for them") and loneliness is reminiscent of the psalmist, when he gives voice to his pain. For David, however, these afflictions were temporary, but here they characterize the servant's entire life, even unto his death. He was held in contempt without kindness or courtesy all his days, from the crib to the cross. No wonder it made him sick.

Paul sums up the mystery of the paradoxical reception Jesus received in Romans 9:

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but the people of Israel, who pursued the law as the way of righteousness, have not attained their goal. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone. (Rom 9:30-32)

Point #6: Even after that rejection, God does not reject his people. God still extends mercy.

God takes the rejection of Israel and uses it to save the Gentiles, but he is still pursuing the Jews because he loves his people, and "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). The salvation of the Jews is the goal of salvation history. God's design is to make the Jews jealous as they behold Gentile believers playing their role as a light to the nations.

For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? (Rom 11:15)

Paul argues that if the Jews put an end to their disbelief, God will take them – branches broken off the vine so that the Gentiles could be grafted in – and he will graft them back in. You must then ask yourselves, "How do you feel about Jews?" Whenever I am with a Jew I feel such emotion, because I wonder how was I so privileged to receive the promises that were meant for them. "Theirs is the divine adoption, the glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, and the promises" (Rom 9:4); and they've been subject to endless persecution and an unspeakable holocaust – and I think, "Who am I?"

Emily's stepfather was Jewish. His roots were from Romania and his grandfather was a rabbi. When I first met Sid he was a welder and a card-carrying socialist, while I came from a conservative family of means. We were as opposite as two people could be. Then five deaths in the family brought us together like father and son. When I made my first trip to Romania in 1988, I woke up in the middle of night burdened for him. The next day I went to a synagogue in Bucharest, bought him a yarmulke and on the trip home I composed a poem for him about his fear of death and my love for him. I closed the poem with these lines:

I woke one night weeping for you, Papa,
yearning for you to know
the love that filled my breast
of the Jew who died for you
that you should have no fear of death.

For it is not enough
that you have adopted me
in this short life,
I want to be your son forever.

And on that Day,
I will introduce you
to your grandson, David.
You will love him
in the New Jerusalem.
For the prophets cannot lie,
that is your city, Papa.

What does a boy desire?
Affection, touch,
a Papa to sing with
to hug and to hold,
even to dance with,
in the New Jerusalem.
I love you, Papa!

What makes the gospel true for you? For me it is because the gospel is not "kata" man. How can it be? – no one could ever write a script like this. Years after his conversion, when Paul was finally able to get his mind around the mysteries of the gospel, all he could do was to break out in unspeakable praise.

Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! (Rom 11:30-33)

¹ *kata* with the accusative means "according to," "in conformity with," "corresponding to."

² "According to the index in the Greek New Testament, this song is quoted or referred to thirty-nine times in the New Testament," Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology, an Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 845.

³ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 368.

⁴ Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66*, 378.

⁵ Merrill C. Tenney, *The Gospel of John* (EBC, Vol 9; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 176.

⁶ Commentators are divided translating the Hebrew root *nzh* as either "sprinkle" or "startle." Oswalt prefers "startle" because 1) the parallelism does not show any synonym for 'sprinkle,' and 2) in the other occurrences of *nzh*, 'sprinkle,' the object of the verb is the liquid that is being sprinkled, and the thing being sprinkled on is prefixed with a preposition such as 'upon.'" Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66*, 374.

⁷ Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66*, 382.

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