



Catalog No. 1662

Isaiah 53:4-9

6th Message

Brian Morgan

December 11, 2011

# THE FOURTH SERVANT SONG (PART 2)

## DEAD WRONG!

SERIES: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

One of the great frustrations of our humanity is the difficulty in getting people to see things from a different point of view. It doesn't seem to make much difference whether the topics are global in nature – like politics, economics, the environment or religion; or whether it concerns opinions about individuals, once conclusions are formed they often are set in concrete. There are several reasons for this. Perhaps the foremost is the deep-seated pride in being right, followed closely by the need to be in control. If I can explain all of life from my limited vantage point, I feel safe and in control. This is especially true in families, where perceptions of character and rank are extremely difficult to change. I suspect most of you have experienced the pain of being misunderstood at some time in your life. For some it may have gone on so long and run so deep that you have given up hope of it ever changing.

If that resonates with you, perhaps you will be able to empathize with God. No one has ever been as misunderstood or had their image as marred and polluted than God. Think of how much violence, greed, and sexual licentiousness has been done in God's name. Closer to home, consider how your inability to be as intimate with God as you would like has been due to a distorted image of God that you have been trying to overcome. So the question we come to this morning is, "How does God change our perception of who he is?"

We are continuing our studies in Isaiah's Servant Songs (I've entitled the series *Great Expectations*). These texts were designed to fuel Israel's hopes and dreams during the dark days of her exile. Israel's future lies with the one who will take on Israel's role as God's servant to do for the nation and world what Israel failed to do. The servant's life and ministry are poetically displayed in four songs. These were crucial texts for Jesus in terms of his own self-understanding both his person and mission. The fourth and final song (52:13-53:12) breaks down into five stanzas that are artistically arranged in a chiasmic pattern.

### 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 in our place.

### 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.

Today our text is taken from the 3rd and 4th stanza of Isaiah's fourth song where we hear the testimony of one whose understanding of the servant was unexpectedly and dramatically changed. From the song we will focus on three issues:

1. What was the shocking and new revelation about the servant?
2. What means did God use to change the person's viewpoint?
3. As servants of Christ, living in a multi-cultural world with varied religious traditions that go back thousands of years, how can we begin to change the ways others look at God and his servant, Jesus?

Last week we examined the reasons Israel rejected the servant. He had none of the credentials that one would expect for an individual marked for greatness. Furthermore, there was nothing prominent or attractive about him that would even raise anyone's expectations. No wonder he was dismissed, despised and shunned as someone who had no potential. From Israel's reasoned appraisal the mood of the poem suddenly shifts to unexpected surprise.

## I. The Shocking Revelation: Not Us, But Him! (Isa 53:4-6)

Surely he took up our pain  
and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
stricken by him, and afflicted.  
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.  
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. (Isa 53:4-6 TNIV)

The opening *'akhen* ("surely") expresses "a strong assertive force," as well as "emphasizing a contrast." In spite of all the evidence that seemed to validate Israel's evaluation of the servant, the shocking truth is revealed that they were dead wrong.

Claus Westermann describes the artistic beauty that shapes this new revelation.

It is a masterly piece of writing, amazingly forceful and direct. We have only to notice the way in which the converts' discovery of the new thing of which they had never dreamt is experienced in the rhythm called forth by the changing pronouns (he...we).<sup>1</sup>

The dominant use of first-person pronouns ("we" and "us") suggests that this is not the voice not a detached individual imparting cold, theological truths; rather, it is the awestruck voice of one who was once blind but now miraculously sees. It is the voice of one who has been healed and suddenly realizes that everything the servant suffered was for us! We are not yet told how this shocking realization happened (though Saul's conversion may shed some light), but the personal affirmation instills the truths that follow with gratitude and awe.

It is the kind of transformation that turned Saul's world upside down in Acts chapter 9. He was a Pharisee, had loved God his whole life, was zealous for God's name and considered this Jesus movement a cult. Saul was headed to Damascus to arrest anyone associated with this movement. And on the way, as he is meditating on the glory of God, he has a vision. Tom Wright suggests that it might have been similar to the one the prophet Ezekiel experienced in the first chapter of his book, when the heavens opened and he saw the glory of God transported by a great chariot with whirling, fiery wheels, carried by the four-faced angels. Paul does his best to describe it in magnificent language. Wright observes that some Jews of Jesus' day would meditate on that text to see if they – "by devout prayer and fasting, holiness, and devotion and contemplation ... might come even in this life to share in the climax of the vision:"

**Above the vault over their heads was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. (Ezek 1:26-28)**

It is not inconceivable that this is exactly what Saul saw. Consider his shock and surprise as he gazes upward upon God's glory and beholds the face, and it is the face of Jesus. Wright captures the moment:

Suddenly Saul's world turned upside down and inside out. Terror, ruin, shame, awe, horror, glory and terror again swept over him. Years later he would write of seeing "the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah" (2 Cor 4:6)...The law and prophets had come true; the law and prophets had been torn to pieces and put back together in a totally new way...The God he had loved since childhood, the God for whose glory he had been so righteously indignant...had done what he said he would, but done it in a shocking, scandalous, horrifying way. The God who had always promised to come and rescue his people had done so in person. *In the person of Jesus.*<sup>2</sup>

#### A. The servant suffered alone and misunderstood

The new converts confess that they had held the servant in contempt because they thought his sufferings were the result of being stricken by God. "Pain" (*mak'ob*) speaks of both physical pain and the mental anguish that often results from the consequences of sin. This was the common view and how it is used in Jeremiah and Lamentations.

Why do you cry out over your wound,  
your pain that has no cure?  
Because of your great guilt and many sins  
I have done these things to you. (Jer 30:15)

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?  
Look around and see.  
Is any pain like my pain  
that was inflicted on me,  
that the LORD brought on me  
in the day of his fierce anger? (Lam 1:12)

Therefore seeing the servant's bloody stripes, like Job's friends, they stood aloof, believing that his pains were God's punishment for

his sin. What's more, the Torah stated that anyone who is hanged on a tree "is cursed of God."

**And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. (Deut 21:22-23 ESV)**

In a second century debate between rabbi Tarfon (Trypho) and the Christian philosopher Justin Martyr, Trypho concedes that the Scriptures taught that Israel's Messiah would suffer, but crucifixion was another matter.

It is quite clear that the Scriptures announce that Christ had to suffer...We know that he should suffer and be led as a sheep. But prove to us whether he must be crucified and die so disgracefully and so dishonorably the death accursed in the Law. For we cannot bring ourselves even to consider this.<sup>3</sup>

What love is this, that God would allow his suffering to be misunderstood, which caused him even more grief and isolation. He suffered absolutely alone.

#### B. His suffering was deliberate, to identify *with* his people

The new thing that they never could have imagined was that the servant suffered not as a result of his wrongdoing, nor as victim of circumstance, but as one who deliberately chose to share in our pains and sorrows. The verb *sabal* ("bore") means to carry a crushing burden. The thought that a superior would deliberately choose to forsake the comforts and protection of his or her world to stand with us and feel the crushing weight of our burdens, gives our suffering supreme dignity. But the servant's suffering goes beyond identification *with* his people.

#### C. He suffering was sacrificial *for* his people

Not only does he suffer *with* his people as a result of their sins, but he suffers *for* them, *in their place*, so that they need not experience the consequences of their sins.

The language Isaiah employs comes from Israel's sacrificial system. Once a year on the Day of Atonement, all the sins of the people were laid on a scapegoat, who then "carried" (*nasa*) them far away into the wilderness, so that the people would be set free of the crushing weight of their sins.

**He [Aaron] is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness. (Lev 16:21-22 TNIV)**

In the same way, the servant is laden with the "iniquities of us all" and the punishment that results from them. Thus he suffers *in our place*, like the ram that Abraham sacrificed "instead of his son" (Gen 22:13). The verbs "crushed" and "pierced" make us feel just how incomprehensible it all was. Bearing the weight of our iniquities crushed (*dk*) the servant. "*Dk*" ("crush") is the strongest root denoting oppression and conveys the sense of oppression as smashing body and spirit, as a boot crushes a moth underfoot (cf. Job 4:19).<sup>4</sup> The verb "pierced" is rare; its only other occurrence in Isaiah is striking. In 51:9 a sword in the Lord's hand fatally "pierced" through the mythical sea monster, Rahab – the metaphorical name for Egypt. It would seem unthinkable that the Lord would later say,

“Awake, sword, against my shepherd,  
 against the man who is close to me!”  
 declares the LORD Almighty.  
 “Strike the shepherd,  
 and the sheep will be scattered,  
 and I will turn my hand against the little ones.” (Zech 13:7)

When we put these two images together, it is not difficult to surmise the fate of the servant: crushed and pierced. “No wonder the message was not believed, the revelation missed.”<sup>5</sup>

#### D. His suffering dealt with every aspect of our need

Alex Motyer writes, “With neither cooperation nor understanding from us, the Servant took on himself all the sickness and sorrows that blight our lives... and the moral and spiritual wrong and guilt that alienates us from God. Positively, in respect of the former he brings us healing (5d), and in respect of the latter, peace (5c).”<sup>6</sup> Can you imagine what it must have been like, being an eye-witness of Jesus’ early ministry in Capernaum, as he “cast out the spirits with a word and healed all who were sick” (Matt 8:16)? And then how amazed you would have been when a few days later, four men dropped a paralytic through the through the roof, and Jesus not only healed his infirmity but restored his broken relationship with God with the words, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:5).

His suffering dealt with every aspect of our need. Consider the depths of God’s amazing love that he demonstrated for us while we were his enemies. As Paul writes, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom 8:32). It is very difficult for us to get our minds around the height, length, breadth and depth of God’s love. Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, it would be impossible (Rom 5:5).

#### E. His suffering was efficacious for all

With an extended simile Isaiah highlights the comprehensive aspects of the servant’s suffering. “All of us” frames the stanza, emphasizing the universal need for a substitute (none are innocent, each one is responsible) and the inclusive nature of the gift (none are left out). The image of sheep captures our human plight of waywardness that spells disorientation and disaster. As Oswalt observes, “Sheep are notoriously single-minded and at the same time unaware of their circumstances. Their minds are on the next clump of grass and not much else. Furthermore, when they are frightened, they have a tendency to bolt off in any direction. As a result of these two tendencies, sheep are prone to get lost.”<sup>7</sup>

The servant has accomplished what no leader in Israel has ever been able to do. By allowing the Lord to lay on him “the iniquity of us all,” he has made it possible for the lost sheep of Israel and the whole world “to return to the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls” (1 Pet 2:25). As John writes, “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:2) This is the new revelation of God’s image through the servant. It is all about his love coming in to our world in the person of his Son, taking our place, being misunderstood, giving his life as a sacrifice, making a whole new community.

The second question is, What means did God use to transform their understanding of the servant? In the fourth stanza, the poet gives us a fresh look at the trial (v. 7), death (v. 8) and burial (v. 9) of the servant.

## II. Silence that Shouts (Isa 53:7-9)

**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 its shearers is silent,  
 so he did not open his mouth.  
 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.  
 Yet who of his generation protested?  
 For he was cut off from the land of the living;  
 for the transgression of my people he was punished.  
 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. (Isa 53:7-9)**

Goldingay notes how “The description of the servant’s suffering again changes its focus. In vv. 2-3 the focus lay on people’s reaction to him. In vv. 4-6 it lay on its significance for the speakers. In v. 7 it lies on the way he handled it; then in v.v. 8-9 the poem talks about its human processes and causes.”<sup>8</sup> With the spotlight on the servant, we eagerly anticipate how he will act with such insight and competence that God will highly exalt him. To our amazement, “at the climatic hour, he does nothing. He only lets things be done to him.”<sup>9</sup> As Goldingay notes, this is a strange thing, because we learn in the Old Testament, primarily in the Psalms – that when we are oppressed we are supposed to cry out to God (typically a lament psalm), and when God hears the prayers of his servants, he vindicates them by saving his servant and punishing their enemies. But this servant does “not cry out or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the streets” (42:2).

Now the sheep imagery continues, but in a different vein. “A lamb is killed for a feast, and an ewe is kept to bear more lambs, but is sheared for her wool.” In both instances the sacrificial lamb is silent and submissive. And think of the horror, that as the sheep is slaughtered and sheared no one protests! It is similar to the Holocaust; as the Nazis invaded Eastern Europe it became the slaughter of the innocents and no one seemed to protest. In some cases, nationals were all too eager to comply with extermination of their Jewish neighbors. In his book *Neighbors*, Jan Gross tells the shocking story of how on “one summer day in 1941, half of the Polish town of Jedwabne murdered the other half – 1,600 men, women and children – all but seven of the town’s Jews.”<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, no one laments the unjust way the servant is treated. He has no advocates to lobby for his life. It’s a kangaroo court, is utterly rigged! His death is the result of the corrupt legal system. Yet he is utterly innocent – sinless in deed (“no violence”) and in his heart (“no deceit in his mouth”). When he is cut off from life itself, his body is not allowed to be buried in his family’s tomb or with the poor whom he served, but is consigned to the dung heap of criminals and the wicked rich who get their money through illegal means. He is surrounded in death by those whose sins he carried.

This is the amazing way the servant handled his suffering.

When we ascertain how the transformation occurs, it is not through what we *hear* (for “who has believed our report?”), but by what we *see*. “In this poem no communication occurs. Throughout, silence is maintained, speech is avoided, by kings (v. 15), by witnesses (v. 8) and by the servant himself (cf. v. 9); the poem is about seeing, not hearing, so it is about vision rather than verbal communication.”<sup>11</sup>

What transforms our image of the servant and of God is *seeing* the cross, not hearing about it. Those brave enough to look discover

that he “bore our sins” and “carried our infirmities” not because he had to, but because he agreed to. Rather than the powerless victim, he was in every way one who was in total control of his destiny. This unimpressive, tortured figure of a man becomes a paradigm of power that subverts the mighty of this earth. You’ll never have your view of God changed until you see the cross.

**And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. (Zech 12:10 ESV)**

I wept over a firstborn, but I’m not sure I’ve wept to that degree over the cross, which means that I need to look more intently.

### III. Back to Saul’s Conversion

Isaiah’s prophetic voice keeps drawing me forward, hundreds of years later, to Paul’s conversion. What was it that turned Saul world upside down? What prepared him for the vision of Jesus? That vision occurred after he saw “one who had the face of an angel” be stoned to death and freely give his life. As Saul stood there, watching Stephen take his last breath, he watched him pray for his murderers, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). Until that moment, everything he heard had been a mystery – until he saw Stephen die.

What does this suggest about how we live in our multicultural world, with friends who come from the four corners of the globe, and bring with them religious beliefs and cultural norms that are as precious to them as our own faith? This text suggests a way more powerful than reason and argument. It calls for us to do what Jesus did – to go into their world, wherever they are, and bear their burdens; carry the weight of the sorrows that they carry on their shoulders. Weep with them, sacrifice for them. St. Francis of Assisi is thought to have said, “Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words.” Meet people at the place of their deepest needs. That’s why Paul says, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal 6:2).” Each one is to carry his own load, but some burdens are crushing, and can only be carried by the community. When we bear them with one another the love of Christ goes out into the world. Likewise, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty give him something to drink” (Rom 12:20). And bless them; this is the highest form of sacred love.

In the past few weeks I have been reading Eric Metaxas’ book *Bonhoeffer, Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. He relates the following story as witnessed by Payne Best, an English prisoner who was with Bonhoeffer in his final hours at the Flossenbürg concentration camp.

So less than twenty-four hours before he left this world, Bonhoeffer performed the offices of being a pastor. In the bright Schönberg schoolroom where they had their cell, he held a small service. He prayed and read the verses for that day: Isaiah 53: (“With his stripes we are healed”) and 1 Peter 1:3, (“Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” rsv). He then explained these verse to everyone. Best recalled that Bonhoeffer “spoke to us in a manner which reached the hearts of all, finding just the right words to express the spirit of our imprisonment and the thoughts and resolutions which it had brought.”

He had hardly finished his last prayer when the door opened and two evil-looking men in civilian clothes came in and said:

“Prisoner Bonhoeffer. Get ready to come with us.” Those words “Come with us” —for all prisoners they had come to mean one thing only—the scaffold.

We bade him good-bye—he drew me aside—”This is the end,” he said, “For me the beginning of life.”

The camp doctor at Flossenbürg was H. Fischer-Hullstrümg. He had no idea whom he was watching at the time, but years later, he gave the following account of Bonhoeffer’s last minutes alive:

On the morning of that day between five and six o’clock the prisoners were taken from their cells, and the verdicts of the court martial read out to them. Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.

*May we likewise be such servants of the King. Amen.*

1 Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 262.

2 N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part One, Chapters 1-12* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 138-141.

3 Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 90. Quoted by Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 94.

4 W. R. Domeris, *dk’ “crush, be crushed,”* NIDOTTE 1:944.

5 John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 502.

6 J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 429-430.

7 John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 389.

8 Goldingay, *Isaiah 40-55*, 505.

9 Goldingay, *Isaiah 40-55*, 506. I am indebted to Goldingay for my observations in this paragraph.

10 Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), cover page.

11 D. J. A. Clines, *I, He, We, and They*, (JSOTSup 3; Sheffield: JSOT, 1976), 43-44. Quoted by Goldingay, *Isaiah 40-55*, 506.