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Isaiah 53:4-9

Eleventh Message

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SCOURGED, YET SILENT

SERIES: A NEW SERVANT, A NEW COVENANT, A NEW AGE

Modern society has, I feel, caused great damage by saying that people are not responsible for their actions. We have all but removed the word “sin” from our vocabulary. Today, we treat all kinds of wrong behavior as sickness. When we say that people are not responsible for their actions, however, we diminish their dignity as human beings. We remove the possibility of true guilt, which weighs heavily on the soul that is being dealt with. In his book, *The Crisis in Psychiatry and Religion*, Dr. Hobart Mowrer wrote, “Just so long as a person lives under the shadow of real, unacknowledged, and unexpiated guilt, he cannot... ‘accept himself’... He will continue to hate himself and to suffer the inevitable consequences of self-hatred.” The Scriptures teach that even the psychotic who has turned his back on God, still is aware in the depth of his heart of “the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death” (Rom 1:32). “Sin must be dealt with in the private courts of the human heart,” wrote Karl Menninger.

The truth of this came home painfully to me a few years ago. A member of my family married a young man who did not disclose to his bride that he was an alcoholic. He had abstained from alcohol for five years before the wedding, but on his honeymoon he began drinking again. She forgave him, but his shame was so great he could not accept her forgiveness. Then he went and had an adulterous affair with her best friend. She forgave him yet again, and offered to reconcile with him. Once more, however, his shame weighed so heavily on him he could not accept forgiveness. He died at 38, from cirrhosis of the liver. Why could he not accept forgiveness? The Scriptures declare that forgiveness cannot be offered until someone pays a price. This young man felt he had to punish himself with self-hatred, and he began that punishment by hating the one he loved most. Perhaps this explains much of the abuse we hear about today—it is really a form of self-self-inflicted punishment. Many people live in a deep well of shame. They spend much of their life hiding their shame, because it is too painful to expose. They feel there is no possibility of cleansing because the damage that has been done is too great.

Our text from Isaiah 53 is good news for anyone suffering from this syndrome. There is One who has already exposed your shame, and has already paid in full the damage caused by your sin. We are referring to the atonement, the pure, naked truth of the atonement, set out in the Holy of Holies of Scripture, chapter 53 of Isaiah. Last week, we saw that this text breaks down into five sections, each composed of three verses. We likened the scene to a stage, upon which God displays his Servant to the entire world, and in each section the spotlight shines on a different person onstage. And we discovered that each section unveils an amazing, astonishing paradox about salvation history. We saw revealed the complexity and the majesty of God, and the astonishing way in which he brings about salvation.

We could say that the soul must take a five-step journey in order to comprehend the depth of the love of Christ as it is expressed in his cross. In the first section, the spotlight was on God, who exalted

his Servant. The astonishing thing was that the Servant would have great success among nations who had no Old Testament background whatever. They were not looking for a Messiah; they knew nothing of the patriarchs or the prophets, yet when they even heard the name Jesus, they began to worship him. Later, they would come to know the background details. Isn't that astonishing? The nation of Israel, on the other hand, who had the background, the promises of the OT and the blood relationship with the Servant, rejected her Messiah. Don't you find that amazing?

Today, the spotlight shines on the naked truth of the atoning work of the Servant. I feel unworthy to share this good news. I would rather have one of our Romanian brothers, whom we ministered to over the last three years, preach this text, because they have suffered so much and have entered into the meaning of the cross.

I. The work of the Servant for Israel: He died my death! (53:4-6)

A. A vicarious atonement that was misunderstood (53:4)

**Surely our griefs He himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted. (NASB)**

Notice there the repetition of the pronouns “our,” and “He”: our griefs He himself bore; our sorrows He carried; He was pierced through for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening of our well-being fell upon Him, etc. Jesus suffered vicariously for us by carrying our sins and dying our death. He need not have died at all. The fact that he died is evidence that there is an atonement; he had to die for someone else because he was sinless.

The term “bore” is an allusion to the scapegoat which was banished on the Day of Atonement, foreshadowing Christ's atoning death. “Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel, and all their transgression in regard to all their sins... And the goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land” (Lev 16:21-22). “Griefs” and “sorrows” refers to the consequences of our sins, that trail of mental and physical anguish that sin leaves behind in its path.

In a television interview a few nights ago, General Schwarzkopf described what he saw during his journey to meet the Iraqi commanders to arrange the cease-fire—the fireballs from the oil wells, the thick black smoke, the death and devastation. If there is a hell, he said, this is what it must look like. It will take years to clean up the mess. Isn't this what happens in our lives when we want to go our own way? We seek a divorce from our mates, or we enter into alcoholism or other abuses. It doesn't seem we are hurting anyone; we are just doing our own thing, we say. But the damage has been done, and the consequences of our sin will pass down among the generations. The good news of this passage, however, is that not only

has Jesus forgiven our sins, he also has paid the damages. One writer put it this way,

Jehovah lifted up his rod;
O Christ, it fell on Thee!
Thou was sore stricken of thy God;
There's not one stroke for me.

The Servant died our death for us. How astonishing!

Secondly, he died our death misunderstood and unappreciated. He died our death willingly, and yet the text says that the nation esteemed him, "Smitten of God, and afflicted." The reason, of course, was that Israel regarded him as being under the curse of God. They had the book of Deuteronomy as proof: "And if a man has committed a sin worthy of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God)" (Deut 21:22-23). Even while he was hanging on the cross, dying for them, they mocked him, as Luke's gospel declares: "And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, 'He saved other; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.' And the soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, 'If you are the king of the Jews, save Yourself!'" (Luke 23:35-37).

The cross has always been the great stumbling block for the Jews. In a debate between Trypho, a Jew, and Justin, a Christian philosopher, following the crushing of the Jewish revolt in Palestine in AD 135, Trypho said in response to Justin's teaching that the Messiah had to suffer, "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." Israel disdained and despised him.

And so does the modern world, with its love of power, its arrogance and ambition. Here is how Friedrich Nietzsche, in 1895, regarded Christianity, as quoted in John R.W. Stott's book, *The Cross of Christ*:

Near the beginning of his book *The Anti-Christ* (1895) [Nietzsche] defines the good as 'the will to power', the bad as 'all that proceeds from weakness', and happiness as 'the feeling that power increases...', while 'what is more harmful than any vice' is 'active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak—Christianity'. Admiring Darwin's emphasis on the survival of the fittest, he despised all forms of weakness, and in their place dreamt of the emergence of a 'superman' and a 'daring ruling race'. To him 'depravity' meant 'decadence', and nothing was more decadent than Christianity which 'has taken the side of everything weak, base, ill-constituted'. Being 'the religion of *pity*', it 'preserves what is ripe for destruction' and so 'thwarts the law of evolution'. Nietzsche reserved his most bitter invective for 'the Christian conception of God' as 'God of the sick, God as spider, God as spirit', and for the Christian Messiah whom he dismissed contemptuously as the 'God on the Cross'.

This is the philosophy that our university students are exposed to throughout our land today: The will to power, to be your own god, have contempt on everything weak. Yet the astonishing thing is that in the cross of Christ, the very One for whom you are taught to have contempt was dying for you. What an amazing love, to give your life for someone, knowing that it will not be understood or ap-

preciated, to do a good deed only to be despised for it. Yet he did it for us anyway.

Furthermore, our inability to recognize the atonement did not make it ineffective. If you as a parent give a gift to your child, and it is not appreciated by him, that renders your gift ineffective. It is not so with the cross of Christ, however, as we will see.

B. A vicarious atonement that was effective (53:5)

**But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening of our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.**

The Servant was pierced through, crushed, chastened, and scourged, yet his atonement was not ineffective. Our guilt was heaped upon him, and his life to us. Isn't that astonishing? Abused people often take upon themselves the guilt of the one who abused them, but it is unheard of for an oppressor ever to take on the righteousness of his innocent victim. Yet this is exactly what happened on the cross. Jesus took our guilt, and in return we were given his righteousness. Sometimes today we hear people say, "I don't want forgiveness. I want to pay my own way." Well, here is the charge: "pierced through, crushed, chastened, scourged." As guilt bears down on the soul it has a crushing weight to it that rips apart the flesh, penetrates deep into the bowels and then pulverizes one into the dust. If you want to pay your own way, go ahead. That is the cost Jesus paid. This is how Scripture describes it: "Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and had Him scourged" (John 19:1); "They pierced my hands and my feet" (Ps 22:16); "But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately there came out blood and water" (John 19:34).

And what did we, his oppressors, receive in return? "Well-being," is the answer given in this verse. *Shalom* is the term. Because full payment was made, all the well-being that was due to Jesus is gifted to you and me—reconciliation (we have been reconciled to God), justification (it is as if we had never sinned), adoption (as sons and daughters, having the same rights as Jesus himself), and glorification (we are made like Christ, without the presence of sin). Isn't that amazing? That is how effective the Servant's atonement was.

Thirdly, the sacrifice of the Servant resulted in

C. A vicarious atonement that was universal (53:6)

**All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused to fall upon Him,
The iniquity of us all.**

The need is universal, as this verse clearly states. The New Testament letters agree. In 1 Peter 2:25, for instance, the apostle wrote, "For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls." And in Romans 3:23, Paul wrote, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

If the need was universal, however, the sacrifice of the Servant was adequate for all. To make the point clear, the Hebrew text begins and ends with the word "all." All are in need of Christ's sacrifice, and Christ's sacrifice was adequate for all. The writers of the New Testament will expand this to include not only *all* Israel, but also the *whole* world. "He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

There we have the third paradox of the cross. Jesus died my death, and though his sacrifice was utterly unappreciated and despised, its very rejection ensured that its benefits became available to the whole world.

Two weeks ago, our Romanian brother, Vasile, the man who organized the many conferences we held in that country over the past few years, visited us here in PBC. He spoke to our men's Bible study and astounded the men by saying, "I came to say thanks. You did everything for us. You sent us brothers and sisters who loved us. You taught us, and gave us our hymnal, all in the midst of danger. We have one gift to give you, and that is our suffering. Perhaps that is Romania's gift to the nations." Having seen the spiritual benefits of the suffering they experienced, I have to say that their gift of suffering has more value than all of our gifts combined.

When God became flesh, the only gift he gave to his apostles was the cross, the gift of suffering. He did not give them money, position, status, or prestige. The value of this gift of suffering was so great, however, that when the apostles suffered, instead of cowering and complaining, they experienced joy and a sense of privilege to be considered worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. They were more than willing to be treated as the scum of the earth in order to impart this gift to others. Why is this gift so great? It is because no other gift so perfectly displays the love of God for man than this.

II. The execution of the Servant: I killed him! (53:7-9)

A. His trial (53:7)

**He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.**

We come now to the fourth paradox of the cross. Here we have juxtaposed the violence of the nation, and the silence of the Servant. He died a violent death, yet he said nothing. The account in Matthew's gospel tells the story of the cruelty and the violence he faced: "Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him, and said, 'Prophecy to us, You Christ; who is the one who hit You?'" (Matt 26:67-68).

Yet he did not respond to his torturers and accusers. "He will not cry out or raise His voice, Nor make His voice heard in the street" (Isa 42:2). Matthew corroborates: "And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He made no answer... And He did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so that the governor was quite amazed" (Matt 27:12, 14). Why did Jesus not say anything in his defense? It was because his silence magnified the horror of his death and the depravity of his executioners. Furthermore, in his silence, Jesus was showing that he was saving his speech for the courts of heaven, when he would stand before the true Judge and Advocate. Silence in the face of unjust charges forces the accuser to think most carefully about his own depravity.

Now we come to the death of the Servant. Here again we see the violence and the blindness of the nation.

B. His death (53:8)

**By oppression and judgment He was taken away;
And as for His generation, who considered
That He was cut off out of the land of the living,
For the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due?**

No one present at the Servant's trial had enough insight to consider that he was dying for them. They scourged him, crowned his head with thorns, beat him, and forced him to carry his own cross to Golgotha. What violence they inflicted upon him! Yet, he says, "I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting" (Isa 50:6).

Referring to the blindness of the nation in his sermon in Acts 2, the apostle Peter said,

"You nailed (this Man) to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power... Be saved from this perverse generation!" (Acts 2:23, 40)

Likewise, the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians,

but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Cor 2:7-8)

Finally, we come to the burial of the Servant.

C. His burial (53:9)

**His grave was assigned with wicked men,
Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Because He had done no violence,
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.**

It is significant that Pilate, in order to free Jesus, offered to release to the crowd Barabbas, a convicted murderer and revolutionary. Barabbas, in a sense, epitomized what Israel had become—a nation of Zealots determined to introduce the Kingdom of God by force and violence. Jesus instead took his place and died the death of a wicked revolutionary. Pilate asked the mob,

"Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?"... And they said, "Barabbas."... And they put up above His head the charge against Him which read, "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS." At that time two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and one on the left. (Matt 27:17, 21, 37-38)

Immediately after the death of Jesus, however, God began to vindicate his Son. This is seen in the fact that no one, except those people who loved Jesus, was allowed to touch his body. God "kept all of his bones, none of them were broken." Though he died the death of a criminal, he was placed in a virgin tomb that was fit for a king. Here is Matthew's account of the burial:

And when it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered to be given over to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock." (Matt 27:57-60)

Archaeologists have since discovered only three tombs of the type which used a rolling stone to close the entrance, in all of Jerusalem. Two of them belonged to royalty, and the third to Joseph of Arimathea, which means that Jesus' burial was fit only for a king.

Truly, this second part of our text is an amazing self-disclosure. In the first part we find that Jesus died for us, revealing the love of God. But now alongside that is the revelation of the depravity of man. Not only did we not recognize him as King of kings and Lord of lords, we slaughtered him. Isn't that the height of wickedness? Don't ever make the mistake of saying that the Jews did it, or the Romans did it. The truth of the matter is, you and I did it. We were represented at the trial. We scourged him. We mocked him. We spat upon him. We slapped his face. We refused to recognize him. Here is how Charles Haddon Spurgeon described what happened, "We took our sins and drove them like nails through his hands and feet. We lifted him high up on the cross of our transgressions, and then we pierced his heart through with the spear of our unbelief." It is a travesty to say that the Jews were the Christ-killers. They were merely fleshing out the sin of Adam. You and I tortured and killed him just as surely as if we were there at his kangaroo court and his execution. The cross not only reveals the magnitude of God's love, it also reveals the horror of our own depravity. John Stott wrote,

Nothing reveals the gravity of sin like the the cross...It is impossible for us to face Christ's cross with integrity and not to feel ashamed of ourselves. Apathy, selfishness and complacency blossom everywhere in the world except at the cross. There these noxious weeds shrivel and die. They are seen for the tatty, poisonous things they are. For if there was no way by which the righteous God could righteously forgive our unrighteousness, except that he should bear it himself in Christ, it must be serious indeed. It is only when we see this that, stripped of our self-righteousness and self-satisfaction, we are ready to put our trust in Jesus Christ as the Saviour we urgently need.

The cross exposes each one of us in our shame and blackest sin. Earlier, I shared about a young man who could not bear the shame and guilt of his past once it was exposed to the light. When you are exposed, you have to choose between suicide or confession. But in the cross, Christ took the shame, and paid in full the penalty due your sin. Do not cower in shame and self-hatred any longer, but boldly expose your sins to the light, and in that radiant light which is the Son, they will evaporate like morning dew.

Contrast the Servant's meekness and submission with the cruel violence and repudiation of him by Israel. Is this not a necessary ingredient to salvation? Our sin must be fully displayed in its darkest hues that we might see by contrast the glory of God's grace in his Servant. It is then that the wicked heart is converted.

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to your Cross I cling;
Naked, come to you for dress;
Helpless, look to you for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

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