

Suffering Servant

SCOTT HOEZEE

Suffering; nobody likes to suffer, and so we spend a good bit of our time avoiding suffering, or seeking relief from whatever pain does come our way; in fact, people who enjoy suffering are called masochists, even as people who like inflicting suffering on others are called sadists. Both terms usually mean you need help because neither condition is normal; and yet, at the heart of the Gospel, there is the intense suffering of God's own Son; but why does salvation have to come through suffering? Today on *Groundwork*, we will dig into some Old Testament passages that predicted the suffering of the Messiah, and then we will wonder what it all means.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are today, Dave, preparing ourselves for Holy Week, which begins, of course, on Palm Sunday, or Passion Sunday, as some traditions call it, and that will be the culmination of the recent season of Lent, where we, once again across this week, follow Jesus through his final days to the Upper Room, to the hall of Pilate and Herod, and then ultimately, of course, to the cross and to the tomb.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we all kind of live according to the calendar – January through December, but for Christians, there is this Church year that we are continually called back to, and it is a wonderfully helpful thing because it helps us focus on the whole story of salvation; and in particular, the life of Christ. So, now we come to Passion Week, and the suffering, the cross, the death and resurrection, which is at the very heart of our faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

[0:01:50.5] And as we get ready to meditate on that cross of Christ and what it means, today we are going to look at first a couple of Old Testament passages; first being Psalm 22. Probably the person who wrote Psalm 22 did not know that he was being prophetic. I think he was just reflecting on his own life, which was bad; so, this is what we call a psalm of lament, where he is lamenting before God his lot in life, and that was a pretty common form of psalm writing back then. I do not know how you were raised, Dave, but when I was raised, you sort of got the message that you should never complain to God because what God does is right; so, do not complain; do not lament...

DAVE BAST

Keep it cheerful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, grin and bear it – but the Israelites had a different attitude – so, a lot of the Psalms are like Psalm 22, which are psalms of lament; psalms where they are saying to God: I am in a bad situation. This is not right. Help me out. And maybe we can hear a little bit of those psalms.

DAVE BAST

Yes, let's listen to a few of these verses. They are pretty familiar, I think; but the psalmist begins:

22:1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me; so far from the words of my groaning? 2 My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer; by night, but I find no rest. 6 I am a worm, not a human being. I am scorned by everyone; despised by the people. 7 All who see me mock me. They hurl insults, shaking their heads. 8 "He trusts in the Lord," they say. "Let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him." And then toward the end: 14 I am poured out like water and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax. It has melted within me. 15 My mouth is dried up like a potsherd and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. You lay me in the dust of death. 16 Dogs surround me; a pack of villains encircles me. They pierce my hands and my feet. 17 All my bones are on display. People stare and gloat over me. 18 They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment. And if you wonder why we are reading this psalm in connection with the suffering and death of Christ, wonder no more because it reads like the guy was at the cross seeing what happened to Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it almost reads like a transcript of what happened: Pierced hands; pierced feet; divided clothing; people surrounding them as Jesus was surrounded...

DAVE BAST

Mocking and jeering...

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it does indeed sound like it; but, of course, in the New Testament, Jesus only quotes the first line, and many of us, if we are familiar with Matthew and Mark's account of the crucifixion, we know that Jesus cried out in Aramaic, which is a form of Hebrew, crying out: My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? And there is that phrase many of us have heard in church over the years: Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani; which was the Aramaic version of verse 1 of Psalm 22.

DAVE BAST

Well, it is one of the so-called seven words from the cross, but we get seven words from the cross only by combining and sort of conflating the four Gospel accounts; because, as you mentioned, Matthew and Mark – the first two Gospels – only have this one statement. In that whole description of Golgotha and what happened there – those terrible hours of suffering, and especially the three hours of darkness that began at noon – they only say that Jesus spoke this one thing, and out of the darkness came this haunting cry, as you say, in Aramaic: My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? And actually, people have debated about what that means for a long time.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and what is interesting... of course, some people's Aramaic was not very good, so they thought he was calling Elijah. They did not realize the Eloi is God; but, you know, Dave, we were saying that the writer of Psalm 22 was not aware that the Holy Spirit was using him, almost to foreshadow and prophetically anticipate his death. He was just talking about his own situation, and for him, for the psalmist, like a lot of psalmists who wrote psalms of lament, it felt like God had abandoned him. It felt like God had gone off duty and was not staying true to God's own promises, and so they said that; but what is interesting in the tradition of the Church is we say: When Jesus appropriated that first verse about My God, why have you abandoned me? In his case, in some very significant spiritual, theological way, he meant it. He felt abandoned.

DAVE BAST

Yes; exactly. There are those who reject this idea: Wait a minute. Come on. Number 1: If Jesus was God, how can God abandon himself? That is a theological puzzle. Number 2: If Jesus was this wonderful, perfect human being, how could God ever turn his back on such a one, such a Son; even as the human Jesus. So,

there have been those who have suggested: Well, it does not really mean that Jesus was abandoned. As you say, some suggest: He only felt that way; just like the psalmist. But my reaction to that is: Really? You think you know Jesus' psychological state better than he did himself?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DAVE BAST

Do you think the words do not mean what they say?

SCOTT HOEZEE

For Calvin – for John Calvin, and for a number of theologians in the history of the Church, when we in the Apostles' Creed say: When he descended into hell, a lot of theologians, including John Calvin and others, locate that in this moment because what is hell? You can forget about visions of flames and dark, dank places. Ultimately what hell is, is not having access to God, which is an experience nobody has ever really known. Even atheists who do not believe in God have access to God in this world; but it looks like – the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; they had complete unity for all eternity – and it looks like for the sake of our salvation, the Spirit and the Father did briefly turn away from the Son and he felt the absence of their fellowship for the first time in all eternity; and that is when he cried out this cry of dereliction – this abandonment – and that is what he did for us.

DAVE BAST

And I really believe that we cannot understand the depth of what Christ endured in order to save us without taking these words at face value – without taking them quite literally – that in some way beyond our possible imagining, the man God, Jesus Christ, underwent this experience of being cut off from the only source of life and the only source of love and the only source of light, and he went for a moment that must have been an eternity in some way – he went through hell – he went to hell for us – and as a result, there is no hell for those of us who are in him; who are united to him.

There is a wonderful phrase that I love again and again from our church's communion liturgy that says he established this covenant of grace so that we might be accepted by God and never be forsaken by him – because Jesus was forsaken.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the reasons we look at the psalms of lament like Psalm 22 is because we believe all those psalms of lament, all the sad and sorrowful passages that are in the Bible would finally come to rest on God's Son, who would bear the punishment, bear the suffering for us all.

Next, we will look at an even more famous passage that predicted all of that in a very prophetic way. We were told all along, the Messiah, when he comes, he is going to suffer. We will look at that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture for the foundation of our lives. Along with Scott Hoezee, I am Dave Bast, and we have just been looking at Psalm 22, as we are thinking today about the suffering and death of Christ, and it describes it in graphic terms, and this central confession that Jesus cries out from the cross: My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? Now, the question is: Why did he have to undergo that? It is a real experience of hell, we have said; but why? And that also is explained in prophetic terms in the Old Testament.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and you know, Psalm 22, other than that first line – a few of the lines from Psalm 22 are pretty well known to a lot of people because they made it into Handel's famous oratorio, *The Messiah*, that a lot of people know. He trusted in the Lord, so let the Lord deliver him, since he delights in him. That is from Psalm 22, but another passage that made it much more into Handel's Messiah, and that is very familiar, is the one

we will look at next. Let me read these verses from Isaiah Chapter 53:

¹Who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? ²He 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. ³He 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. ⁴But surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering; yet we considered him punished by God; stricken by him and afflicted; ⁵but 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. ⁶We all like sheep have gone astray. Each one of us has turned to our own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

DAVE BAST

That might not quite take you back to the Messiah because it is a modern translation; but many of those phrases do occur in the old King James Version in Handel's masterpiece, and they are all talking about the suffering servant of God, whose suffering would be undergone for the sake of God's people in order to pay for their sins.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; it is a major theme in Isaiah starting around the 40th chapter. The whole last section of the book of Isaiah talks about this again and again and again; and so it becomes very, very clear that when God's Chosen One gets here; when the one who is going to bring back shalom and redeem the fallen creation – when he gets here, he is going to be a suffering servant. He is going to be one from whom we hide our faces because he looks so terrible. He will look more like a car wreck than a hero. That was what was predicted by Isaiah, and it was very, very clear that this was predicted; and yet, over time...

DAVE BAST

People did not get it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

People forgot.

DAVE BAST

The amazing thing that you see in the New Testament over and over is that people, including the disciples, just had this unshakable expectation that Jesus was the Messiah and that he was going to be a glorious king and they were going to cash in with him on setting up again the kingdom of God in Jerusalem. I was just thinking recently about that passage in the Gospels where James and John come up to him – and in Matthew, it is with their mother – and they say: Hey, will you give us the place on your right and your left when you come into your kingdom, as they are on their way to Jerusalem, and Jesus has just said: I am going to suffer and die there – and they still do not get it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I would like to be Secretary of State and my brother Secretary of Defense...

DAVE BAST

Right; but here is all is in Isaiah, saying he had no form or comeliness that we should desire him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Part of the reason I think they forgot is that – something that happens to all of us – and that is, we relocate our main problem. So, for the Israelites and the Jews who had lived under first one occupation after the next: Persia and then Alexander the Great and then the Romans. When you identify your main problems as political and not spiritual, then you look for a political hero who can take on Caesar and King Herod; but the Bible all along says whatever else is going on in the externals of your life, your main problem is sin and iniquity and all the stuff Isaiah just talked about in that 53rd chapter. So, the Messiah who comes is going to

have to deal with that, not with politics; and the only way to deal with that is to go straight at sin and death and suffering; and that is what the Messiah is going to do; but they forgot, which is why every time in the New Testament when somebody says: Hey, I think you are the Son of God, Jesus. Jesus says: Shhh. Do not tell anybody.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. You do not quite understand what that entails. It is very interesting, you just mentioned the political and the spiritual because Isaiah really talks about both of those things in these chapters toward the end of the book. He promises that they are going to come back from exile in Babylon. Comfort – comfort my people says the Lord. The time of your suffering has ended. Make the way through the wilderness so my people... So, that is the political problem, but the difficulty is, even when they are brought back to the Promised Land, they are still going to have the spiritual problem, and Isaiah says at the end of Chapter 49: There is no peace for the wicked. Your problem is that you are still restless and you do not have this peace with God that will only be established through the Suffering One – through the Messiah, and the way he pays for our iniquity with his stripes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and the difficulty was that over time people forgot that core truth of sin, and what, really, we need to be delivered from. So, when the Suffering Servant showed up, they figured: Well, that cannot be the Messiah. He has to look more like a conquering general on a white stallion. But really, sometimes I think today we still resist the suffering servant message. We still get these health and wealth gospels on TV. We still have worship services that work overtime to be nothing but happy and upbeat and everybody is smiling and we are too blessed to be depressed; and psalms of lament get banished because they are downers. So, even today, sometimes we forget that we need that Jesus on the cross; we need that Jesus with the split lip and the cauliflower ear; the one from whom we would hide our faces. Who could believe this message, Isaiah says in verse 53, that from that car wreck of a human being, that is where salvation comes. We still have a little bit of a hard time with that even today. We would rather be happy and upbeat than look at something that is grotesque to our minds.

DAVE BAST

Well, let's turn next to the New Testament, because obviously all of this is brought to fruition in the Gospel story; and then in the comments of the Apostles in their letters on the deep, inner meaning of how it had to be this way. That is where we will look next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and on this program, as we are entering Holy Week this year, we have been thinking about some Old Testament passages – Psalm 22, Isaiah 53 – that ultimately pointed forward to the idea that when the Messiah came, he would have to be a suffering servant who would save us through sacrifice, and the question we want to conclude with today, Dave, is why is that? For that, I think we can turn to 1 Peter and see what Peter had to say.

DAVE BAST

Well, here is a passage among many that we could have chosen that reflects the meaning of the cross; the meaning of Christ's death; and Peter actually makes direct reference back to Isaiah 53, and the words of the prophecy there. So, this is what he says about it:

^{2:24}He (that is, Jesus) himself bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

There is a lot there, and we only have a few minutes left...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Basically what he is saying is this was God's surprising, paradoxical way to deal with sin and evil, and that was to have God's own Son go straight into the heart of darkness; straight into the mouth of evil, as it were; so that he could absorb it all into himself; take without giving back; be punished without seeking revenge; be punished unjustly; and somehow... You know, C. S. Lewis, in the Narnia tales, when Aslan died he referred to it as *the deep magic of the universe* – that somehow, when Jesus took all that terrible stuff into him and absorbed it, it snapped the cycle once and for all.

DAVE BAST

Yes, well, you know, we are not going to plumb the depths of this, and there are so many different aspects to it; so many things we could say. We could talk about the example that he set for us. Peter does that a few verses earlier – I did not read that part, but he says: He himself sets you an example in the way he endured suffering that was not just or fair; but he took it because he trusted God, and that God would one day vindicate him, which he did – and that is Easter; but he also says here: He bore our sins on the cross. The idea that they were placed on him. Isaiah gets at that, too. Our transgressions were placed upon him. It is almost like the image of the goat in the Old Testament that took the peoples' sins...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, the scapegoat.

DAVE BAST

and died for them. So, there is a sense here, I think, inescapable – although this is the part that a lot of people object to – but that sin has to be punished, and God did it himself instead of us. He offered himself in our place.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is like after sin and evil entered into this creation, it is as though everything was out of whack – everything was out of balance – and something had to bring the balance back. Something had to right the wrongs and get the book straightened out. Use whatever image you want. Somehow, by taking it into himself – as a true human being on the one hand, but also as true God, so that he had the power to do more than just get killed by it – somehow that mysterious combination of why Jesus was both fully divine and fully human worked; and God has released us. That is why we said in the earlier segment that people had come to look for a political hero; well, if Jesus had been just a political hero, and let's say he actually succeeded in chasing out the Romans in his day, he might have made things better for a little while; but ultimately, he wanted to make things right for all eternity, and that is what he did through his death on the cross.

DAVE BAST

Yes, there is one other important point here, I think. Peter says: By his wounds you are healed. It does not happen instantaneously. The guilt of our sin is dealt with by his death on the cross. That is the one perfect sacrifice, we say; offered once on the cross for the sin of the whole world. That is acceptable to God. He takes it instead of our death, of our dying; but the healing is a process that takes longer. We have so much junk inside us, and so Peter says here: He died so that you might die to sin and be raised again and live for righteousness; and that is the ongoing effect of the cross.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is really our hope, too. Fred Craddock is a wonderful preacher whom some people probably have heard of before, and he has a lot of wonderful sermons. In one of his sermons he said the disciples, who also had those political aspirations, and so forth, along with other people in their day, performed what Craddock called a majestic flip-flop – they did a reversal – but in a good way, because the disciples, along with others, said they believed all along that when the Messiah came that would mean nobody would ever suffer again. Everything would be instantly made right and whole. So, they would always say: When the Messiah comes, no suffering; but once they saw what Jesus actually did for our salvation, they changed it to say: Now,

wherever there is suffering, that is where you will find the Messiah. That is our hope now. Because of the cross, he has entered into all of our brokenness and our hurt; and that healing, Dave, that you just talked about, that is what he has made possible, now and from here on out until all things are made new.

DAVE BAST

And he enlists us in the project. He calls us to him. He invites us to follow him. He invites us to join him in servanthood and suffering and those places that James and John wanted – on his right and on his left – right now and here, they are not places of glory. They are for us to also die to sin and live for righteousness and come alongside others wherever there is suffering and be the hands and feet of Christ, as we say. That is part of the challenge of the cross as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is the hope of Holy Week, even though Holy Week ends at a cross – just before Easter, it ends at a dark place – but out of that darkness comes all the hope that we have as believers.

Well, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So, visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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