

The Paradox of Salvation

SCOTT HOEZEE

The term, oxymoron, refers to the combining of two opposite words. If you talk about a bright darkness, or an original copy, or jumbo shrimp you are creating an oxymoron. Often we use this humorously, saying that airline food or elementary algebra don't really seem to go together; or we joke that military intelligence sounds as paradoxical as stores that claim to sell kosher ham. Well, oxymoron phrases are paradoxical – unexpected; but really, a lot of Isaiah 53 is like that when the prophet predicts the kind of saving work that we Christians believe was fulfilled in Christ Jesus our Lord. Salvation will come from a very unexpected combination of things; and today on Groundwork, we will ponder these holy paradoxes. Stay tuned.

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 in the sixth program now – program number six of a seven-part look, Dave, at the Servant Songs that are in the latter part of the prophetic book of Isaiah; and we are now in program six, up to Isaiah 53 and its well-known imagery of the Messiah; imagery perhaps known to a lot of Christian people, even more so because in Handel's oratorio, *Messiah*, a lot of these verses in the passion part of the *Messiah* are set to this glorious music that many of us know very well.

DAVE BAST

Yes; this is certainly the best known chapter in the book of Isaiah, the best known of the Servant Songs; it is also the last of them. It contains these wonderful, powerful, familiar words, which are especially appropriate as we think of the Passion of Christ – Passion Week – Maundy Thursday and Good Friday – and just the climax and culmination of His life, and really, of the Christian faith as He approached and endured the cross; and then moving through it, of course, to the great triumph of Easter morning; but here are the words, again familiar and beloved:

³He was despised and rejected by others, a Man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity. (Many of us think of the King James Version: A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.) And as one from whom others hide their faces, He was despised, and we held Him of no account. ⁴Surely He has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we counted Him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁵But He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the punishment that brought us peace, and by His wounds we are healed. ⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

So those, indeed, are familiar words to many of us. We know them well; but of course, one thing that sometimes happens when we are so familiar with a passage is we miss a few things that are kind of hidden in plain sight. We tend to remember the, “All we like sheep,” line, and we remember, “acquainted with grief,” but there are a couple of other things that in this first segment we want to look at that goes to our reaction to seeing the suffering of the Messiah; and basically what Isaiah is saying there is: Sometimes when you look at someone suffering as much as the Servant of Isaiah... and we believe Jesus in the Gospels, ultimately... sometimes you want to just avert your eyes and disassociate yourself from it.

DAVE BAST

Right; just listen again: ³He was despised and rejected by others; a Man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity... Okay, that picks up on what we were talking about in our last program from Isaiah 50; all the shame and all the humiliation, the contempt, the mockery that was poured out on Him; just really shocking, the amount of abuse He endured, and you want to ask: Why? What did He ever do? Nothing to deserve that, but that is how people treated Him; but then listen to how the prophet goes on: ^{3b}He was despised and *we* held Him of no account. So, it wasn't just others who were doing this, who were kind of looking down their long noses at Him, who found Him contemptible, but we were part of that crowd – there we were.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and then the prophet goes on to say: ^{4b}And we esteemed Him stricken by *God*... In other words, we think: Well, God must be doing this to this guy and He must have deserved it. He must have done something bad to warrant it. God is punishing *this* Man; and that sort of takes us out of the picture, right? Well, He is stricken by God. God is doing this to Him. He must have deserved it. And then Isaiah also says: He is one from whom we hide our faces. It is like going by a terrible highway accident and maybe there is some blood on the pavement and we say to our kids: Cover your eyes, kids; and we look the other way ourselves. In other words, we want to think this doesn't have anything to do with me. This suffering, this spectacle... That Man must have deserved it. God is punishing Him. I am going to look away. Too bad for Him, but it doesn't have anything to do with me; and Isaiah says: No, wait a minute. This has *everything* to do with you and with me and with us.

DAVE BAST

You know, just today I got an e-mail from a friend pondering the truth of the Gospel, really, and happened across an old hymn that many of us know as a Lenten hymn: Ah, holy Jesus, how hast Thou offended? And that hymn includes the stanza: Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon Thee? Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone... It wasn't just the Romans, it wasn't just the Jews. We want to shift the blame. It wasn't even God. It was really I who was responsible – who am responsible for what happened to Him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God has laid on Him the iniquities of us all. That is the punishment for my sin, not somebody else's sin. Lent is not the season – and Holy Week after Palm Sunday and leading up to the cross – that is not the week to say: Well, other people have problems with sin, and maybe Jesus suffered for them, but not for me. No, no, no. You know, the other great hymn that ends with the line: I crucified Thee... I am the one... I am the one who drove the nails in... because You are there for me. Those wounds, those grievous scars, all the suffering that we see that is so bad that we want to turn our faces away and avert our eyes... we shouldn't because that is us. Those are the things that *our* sins did to Him, and God is now using Jesus as the scapegoat, as the sacrificial victim, so we cannot say we had nothing to do with this, we have everything to do with this.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; I mean, one of the most monstrous failings and sins of the Christian Church has been anti-Semitism. In many centuries it was justified by saying: Well, they killed Christ. They killed Jesus. They brought it on themselves. The only way to combat that is to come to a more true evangelical, Gospel-oriented, biblical view of what all this involves – that it wasn't anyone else; everyone else had their hand in it, but it was really you and me – it is really on *me*, and don't look to point the blame or shift it or point a finger at anyone else. We despised Him; we rejected Him; we were the ones who were guilty, and He took it upon Himself.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But as we will think about next, there is hope somehow in all of that; and Isaiah here presents the Gospel in preview. He presents the Gospel in preview through a series of odd paradoxes, and those are the things we want to think about next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are digging into one of the great chapters of the Bible, the last of the Servant Songs from the book of Isaiah, Isaiah Chapter 53, where we read of the One who took upon Himself our iniquities; who was bruised and despised and rejected, but it was all for our sake; and Scott, at the top of the program you mentioned the concept of the oxymoron, and threw out a few of them. I always liked the one I read driving down the road: Clean dirt wanted.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

It's humorous, often, but it can be very profound, too; the paradoxical twist; and there are a number of them here in this chapter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And all of what this gets at, really, is the deep, deep mystery of scripture. I think we have mentioned it before, but I can always remember in seminary one of my professors saying: Why is it that in the Bible it looked like God had an easier time creating the whole universe than He did in redeeming it? In Genesis, God speaks and it is; but once sin comes, God cannot just speak it away; He cannot wave a magic wand over it and just sort of say: Whoop, there now, everything is better. For God to engage sin and evil requires a lot more work and a lot of *surprising* work, and one of the biggest surprises Isaiah first predicts, and Jesus ultimately fulfills, is that somehow or other, the worst things about our sinfulness and our broken world are going to get healed through those very same things.

So, we talked about oxymorons; you just had one, right? Like clean dirt and so forth, but really, Isaiah has some surprising oxymorons here, too. I mean, think of these phrases from the 53rd chapter that we read in the first segment of this show: The punishment that brought us peace; by His wounds we are healed; and then later in the chapter: He is cut off from the land of the living – He is dead – and through that comes our life. So you've got punishing peace, wounded healing, living death. Why do these things go together and how do they give us hope?

DAVE BAST

Right; you just have to kind of ponder that and let the mystery settle upon you. I mean, if you think about punishment, most of the time that brings tears – that just brings more suffering – that just brings more pain...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Children certainly think so.

DAVE BAST

Yes; how can that lead to peace? What possibly could punishment have to do with a sense of well-being? I mean, those are two ideas from totally different areas of life. Peace makes us think of forest glades and beautiful mountain scenery and clouds overhead and everything is soft and warm and the breeze is blowing; and punishment makes us think of pain, suffering...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Prison cells, darkness, bleakness, dankness... Very nicely put, Dave. I mean, the associations are totally opposite, and yet, Isaiah says there is going to be such a thing as punishing peace. Somehow because Jesus gets punished in our place, that is going to lead to *our* peace – to shalom, which we have talked about many times right here on Groundwork – to an ultimate sense of wellbeing.

Similarly, we talk about wounded healing: By His wounds we are healed. Well, we all have wounds – some of them physical, but many of them emotional – scars on our heart, bad memories, there are lots of wounds – humiliations we have endured in the past; we are lonely; we are angry; we are isolated; we are depressed; we

are resentful. There are so many wounds we have, and Jesus took them on Himself; and yet, His wounds somehow lead to our healing.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I mean, come on; wounds *require* healing. Wounds don't *produce* healing, wounds are the opposite. Wounds are the things that have to be healed. More wounds would simply call for more healing. How does that make sense?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And yet, there it is. That through what was inflicted upon Christ, we end up coming out on the other side healed. Our wounds mysteriously – almost magically – but spiritually – by a miracle of God, our wounds begin to disappear when we meditate on the wounds of Christ, because again, He is taking our place; and the biggie on that one is death itself.

DAVE BAST

Yes, well, we could do the same thing with death and life. How can death lead to life? Death is the end. Death leads to regret. You think of somebody nearing the end of his life; he realizes his time is running out and all he feels is sorrow because he didn't get a chance to fulfill his bucket list, maybe, or he couldn't make right the one wrong that had haunted him all of his days and he just has this overwhelming sense of regret because death cuts off any potential for new beginnings or restored relationships or anything.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, sometimes people when they are dying they will say: You know, what I regret most is I won't be able to be there for my family in the future. The dead cannot do anything. When you are dead, you are dead. That is the *end* of striving; that is the end of productivity; that is the end of a chance to do anything; and yet, again, Isaiah says that because this great Servant of Yahweh – the great Servant of the God of Israel – is going to be cut off from the land of the living, we all get to go back to the land of the living.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, I think ultimately all these things point to the cross. The punishment that brings peace. The wounds that bring healing. The death that brings life. It all points to the ultimate paradox of the cross, which is maybe the worst thing that has ever happened – maybe the greatest injustice that has ever been visited. God became one of us. He came into our world. He lived a perfect life and we spat upon Him and then hung Him – nailed Him to a tree – and put Him to death; and yet, it is the cross that makes salvation happen; and out of it flows... So Paul could say in I Corinthians Chapter 1 that the message of the cross is foolishness, you know; but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am reminded of the soldier at the cross who when Jesus breathes His last, the soldier is reported to have said: Surely this was the Son of God; or some Bible commentators wonder if he said it somewhat differently: Surely *this* was the Son of God? How could You be the Son of God and end up dead? And yet, you know what? Both senses of how he might have said it are true. You are right. You look at this limp body on a cross and you say: That's the Son of God? That is impossible. God cannot die; and yet, surely this is the Son of God. God did die for our sins. He did take our place; and in what C. S. Lewis called the *deep magic of the cosmos*, death undoes death. Being wounded undoes wounding. Being punished undoes punishment. It is all unmade from the inside out; and all things are made new through the great paradox and surprising mystery of the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

And I think again what it points to, and the point perhaps that we need most to hang onto, is that in Christ this is God. This is happening to God. This is not just a man who is going through these things. If it was just a man, we would look at it and we would kind of throw up our hands...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, well; too bad!

DAVE BAST

And say, yes, that's life. That is the way it goes; but the fact that God takes all this upon Himself, lifts it from us, absorbs it into Himself like some divine black hole... I don't know... pulling it all in, sucking it all in, and then turning it around as only God can do; that is the mystery and the wonder of the Gospel; and really, what does it mean? Let's bring it on down to the personal level. What does this mean for us in our own life and walk as we walk through Holy Week and prepare once again to celebrate Easter? Let's think about that next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are finishing this look today, Dave, at Isaiah Chapter 53, those great words about the wounding of the Servant of God, and through those wounds is our healing. Some of us maybe have seen this very curious movie, or read the novel called *The Green Mile*. It is on TV a lot these days, and it is a story about this man named John Coffey, who is falsely accused of murder, but it turns out as the story goes along, John Coffey is a special servant of God who has the gift of healing; and what is interesting about the movie is that whenever John heals someone... So, he heals a prison guard of a terrible infection, and then later in the movie he heals a woman of an inoperable brain tumor; he heals them, but all the disease comes into his body. Now, through a way we will not talk about, he is able to expel all the toxins later, but the point is, they don't just disappear, they go somewhere. They go into John Coffey's body, and clearly, the author of that is thinking of Christ there. Christ takes our wounds. They don't just disappear; they aren't erased; they are taken into Him. All the curses that the Bible ever promised in the Old Testament and in Deuteronomy, which we looked at recently in a Groundwork series, all those fell on Jesus. They didn't just go anywhere; they went to Jesus specifically, and that is where the healing and the restoration of the rest of us have come from.

DAVE BAST

You know, sometimes people will ask: Well, can't God do anything? Why doesn't He just wave a magic wand and say...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, snap His fingers.

DAVE BAST

It's all forgiven. Nobody has to pay. No problem. It doesn't matter. Richard John Neuhaus, a wonderful Lutheran, then later Catholic priest, writer, theologian, said: God cannot simply say sin doesn't matter without also saying then we don't matter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and love doesn't matter; lots of things don't matter.

DAVE BAST

What we are and do does matter; it cannot be ignored; and so God does only what He can do – what He only can do – and that is, to take it upon Himself to make it all right without simply ignoring it. There is a verse in the Psalms, in Psalm 115, where the psalmist says, speaking in the voice of Israel:

³Our God is in heaven; He does whatever pleases Him. And that strikes me as a definition of the almighty power of God. It doesn't mean He can do anything or everything. He cannot do nonsensical things; He cannot do things that are not able to be done...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; or contrary to His own nature.

DAVE BAST

Right; but He can do whatever He chooses to do; and what He chooses to do is to save us; and He does it the only possible way, by absorbing it all.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; which means, practically speaking, as we close out this program, Dave, there are a couple of different applications, I think, that are very meaningful to each of us. We no longer... as Christians we believe we are no longer punished by God for our sins. That all fell on Christ, but we do still suffer. We are still between the times of the already and the not yet. The kingdom has come in Christ, but it has not fully come; so we still get ALS; we get cancer; we have tragedies in our families, and Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. We suffer; and among the things that the Gospel implies, as Isaiah predicted in the 53rd chapter, and was fulfilled in Christ, that means that we serve a very knowing God. God in Christ has experienced all of this within God's own experience.

The Greeks and Christian theologians have struggled sometimes with what is called the impassibility of God; God is incapable of suffering. Well, in Christ that changed. Christ as a perfect God-man was able to suffer, and that has been incorporated into the life of the Triune God. So when we suffer today, we are comforted to know God understands on a personal level, if you want to talk about God that way, existentially, really, God understands. We never stand in suffering alone. Christ is always with us as a very compassionate, knowing presence.

DAVE BAST

I think that is such an important point that we need to repeat it. I love the way John Newton put it once. He said that our cup is not penal, it is merely medicinal. It is not punishment. Nothing that we undergo – none of the trials or sorrows or pain – is God punishing us because that is all dealt with. That is done away with. What we believe is, ultimately He will turn it to our good. That is what He has promised. He is there with us. He suffers alongside us, if you will; but He will make this painful business somehow in the end multiply our blessing, our joy, our happiness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and another thing I think that means, Dave, is that we are also called to be Christ to one another now in the Church; and what that means is that we enter each other's pain, right? We rejoice with those who rejoice... that is the fun part; but we are also called to weep with those who weep; and so, even as we are comforted to know that when we suffer, Christ stands with us and He will turn it to our good, as you just said, and has already won the victory over cancer and everything... Parkinson's, you name it; but similarly, we are able to stand with each other, and we are able to be Christ to one another, entering into each other's pain. We share the burden. That is what Christ calls us to do. That is part of what – because we serve a crucified God – that is part of what we do for each other. When we see a brother or a sister in pain we don't run the other way or look the other way, we remember Jesus and we walk straight toward it.

DAVE BAST

Well, at least we should.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; that's our goal.

DAVE BAST

I mean, we are tempted to run the other way because it is painful, it is hard; it is hard to know what to say. Often our attempts to express sympathy or concern or identification in another's trouble, we fumble and we stumble and we say things that make it worse. So, remember Job's friends. They did okay as long as they were silent. It was when they started talking that... But given the strength of the spirit of Christ within us, we can overcome our natural reluctance, our cowardice that wants to avoid the pain of identifying with another, and we can reach out to them and just say: I am here. I am here for you, whatever that means. That is a beautiful thought and a wonderful way of applying what Christ has done for us when He took our transgressions upon Himself and healed us with His wounds.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thank you for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast. We always like to know how we can help you dig into the scriptures. So go to our website, groundworkonline.com, and suggest topics and passages for future Groundwork programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/the-paradox-of-salvation>

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