

The Servant Suffers

DAVE BAST

In 1885, former president Ulysses S. Grant, was engaged in a race with death. He was dying of cancer and he was trying to finish writing his personal memoirs. Grant was struggling to complete this task, not only so that his story could be told, but also because he knew his wife would need the money the book would bring in. So each day, Ulysses S. Grant forced himself to work, enduring the constant pain with the same fortitude with which he had faced enemy armies twenty years earlier; but in the midst of the struggle, he commented in a letter to a friend: A verb signifies to be, to do, or to suffer. I signify all three. I think that could even more truly be said of Jesus Christ, as we will see today on Groundwork. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

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

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, we are in the middle, really, nearing the end of a fairly lengthy series on some of the great chapters from the book of Isaiah, from the Old Testament. We started with Chapter 42, and its first Servant Song, as they are called. A number of passages that look at this very enigmatic, very compelling, very powerful figure known as the Servant of the Lord.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this Servant of the Lord is, indeed, as you just said, the key figure; and we have been looking a little bit about what He is going to do. He is going to bring justice; He is going to restore Israel; He is going to bring them back from exile so Israel can be a light to the nations; but now, particularly during the season of Lent, we think about this as well.

Today on the program, we really want to turn to the question of *how* will that Servant accomplish all those things?

DAVE BAST

Right; and the key word that summarizes everything, I think, that we find now in Chapters 50 through 53, is the word *suffering*, which if you stop and think about it, is rather odd – really rather striking. The Servant of the Lord – this great figure who is endowed with the Spirit of the Lord – who is cloaked in God's strength and authority and power and wisdom – all these things He embodies – nevertheless is characterized by terrible suffering; and those two things don't really seem to go together, at least in most people's minds. For most people, you think you are blessed, if you are really... God has got His grip on you; He has put His mark on you; well, you are going to kind of go forth in power and victory all the time, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

But not this one. This chosen Servant who, as we have seen, Dave, in the previous programs of this series, is going to be empowered by God – by Yahweh, the God of Israel – God Himself is His strength; God Himself is His source of inspiration and motivation. This Servant is going to be full of the power of God, and yet, where it is going to lead is suffering, and actually, as we will see today, to death – to an early grave. All of which, again, and we will be thinking about this this program and the next program, seems like an odd way to get *anything* done, much less the grand mission of this Servant; but that is what we are told is the mystery of

it all.

DAVE BAST

Frankly, I think this is what made it so difficult for so many of Jesus' contemporaries to accept Him. They just didn't put together these two ideas of the great Servant of the Lord and the terrible suffering and rejection of these chapters, even though it is prophesied here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is prophesied, and it seems like even Israel, at least as time went on after Isaiah prophesied and after Isaiah was written down, it was all there in black and white – right there in the scrolls of Isaiah – but it seems like the leaders kind of forgot about that part...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And by the time Jesus got here, His suffering seemed to mean He couldn't be the Messiah, and so they forgot that; but let's listen to some of these words from Chapter 50.

DAVE BAST

Here is Chapter 50 of Isaiah, beginning at verse 4, and it is the Servant Himself speaking: "The sovereign Lord has given Me a well-instructed tongue to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens Me morning by morning; wakens My ear to listen like one being instructed. ⁵The sovereign Lord has opened My ears. I have not been rebellious. I have not turned away. ⁶I offered My back to those who beat Me; My cheeks to those who pulled out My beard; I did not hide My face from mocking and spitting. ⁷Because the sovereign Lord helps Me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore, I have set My face like flint and I know I will not be put to shame. ⁸He who vindicates Me is near. Who, then, will bring charges against Me? Let us face each other. Who is My accuser? Let him confront Me. ⁹It is the sovereign Lord who helps Me. Who will condemn Me?"

Lot of overtones of the New Testament in those words, aren't there?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, indeed; as we see in these words, not only is this Servant going to suffer, He is going to suffer willingly. He is going to turn to His accuser; He will offer Himself up to be a sacrifice because somehow or other, salvation will come through all of that; but what we can look at in this first segment for a minute, Dave, before we move on, is just how the New Testament, and the Gospels in particular, but a few other passages, echo these prophetic words of Isaiah from centuries before, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we could look at the first verse you just read from Isaiah 50:4:

The sovereign Lord has given Me a well-instructed tongue to know the word that sustains the weary; and then you jump ahead to Matthew 7. Jesus has just taught: ²⁸and when Jesus finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at His teaching, ²⁹because He had taught as one who had authority, and not as the teachers of the Law. That is what Isaiah predicted.

DAVE BAST

Yes, the power of His words – His forecast; and "sustaining the weary," I think of a verse like Matthew 11:28: Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. And the idea that the Servant will accept all of this willingly; so we read in Isaiah: ⁵The sovereign Lord has opened My ears. I have not been rebellious. I have not turned away. And then think of Jesus in the Garden, you know: Father, if

it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; but nevertheless, not My will but Thine. I honestly believe that passages like this filled Christ's mind and heart, and shaped His attitude toward His own sense of calling; that He self-consciously identified with this figure and chose to bring these things to pass in His own acts of obedience.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I suppose we could point out that more liberal progressive commentators, more cynical people say: Well, the authors of the New Testament wrote it that way so it would look like... I mean, they knew about Isaiah so they wrote it this way to match the prophecies; but I think what you just said is true, Dave. Our faith says: No, that is the way it went. It really was predicted. Jesus was conscious of it. These words were fulfilled in Jesus; they were not written just to look like Isaiah was a smarter guy than he was. This is really the way it went.

We could think of another line we just read:

⁶“I offered My back to those who beat Me; my cheeks to those who pulled out My beard.” And then you go to John 19. Pilate had Jesus flogged. Matthew 27; again, they stripped Him; they put a scarlet robe on Him; they put a crown of thorns on Him; they spit on Him; they struck Him in the head with a staff; all of these things echoes of Isaiah 50 in the Gospels.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; you know, make up your mind. Does that sound like somebody concocted this, or does it sound like what actually happened? What other people did to Jesus of Nazareth perfectly fulfills, really, the prophecies of Isaiah from so long before; and this is one of the reasons why Isaiah is sometimes called “the fifth Gospel,” because it is as though he is writing about Good Friday seven hundred years before it happened. How could that be? How could... Well, again, I invite you to make up your own mind. Is this because the Spirit of God, who inspired the prophet Isaiah, also filled Jesus of Nazareth and led Him to obediently accept what came? But again, just to reiterate it as we wrap up this segment, this is astonishing that one who was so wonderfully full of God and so dedicated to the mission of God – dedicated to bringing peace – dedicated to bringing healing and hope and encouragement to the people – light to the world – should be so treated – so filled with humiliation and so turned on by so many. That is the thing that we want to ponder and dig into a little more deeply, and we will do that in just a moment.

Segment 2

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 Dave, we are in Isaiah 50, so far in this program; and we were just talking about the oddity that the Servant of God, who is going to bring so much goodness, and who is Himself so full of God and full of the power and authority of God, is going to suffer cruelly, and that is predicted in Isaiah 50. There probably were some lesser servants of God along the way who fit this description. Prophecy often has multiple fulfillments; but as Christians, we believe the final fulfillment was in Christ; and concentrated in that final week of Christ's life, and super, super concentrated in those final hours on the evening of Maundy Thursday, after Jesus is betrayed and He is flogged, and then of course, He is crucified... but one of the things I think we want to talk about in this segment, Dave, is that you don't want to just put the suffering of Jesus in those last 48 hours. He suffered His whole life.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in many different ways, which is what we want to talk about. It wasn't just the last 48 hours when He bled. There were other types of suffering that Jesus endured from the moment He was born. I mean, one of the things... We did a program on the temptations of Jesus a while back and we said: Don't think that those 40 days in the wilderness were the only times the devil tempted Jesus. He tempted Him all along, and similarly, Jesus suffered His whole life and His whole ministry, not just on the cross.

DAVE BAST

I think often, and many have pointed this out, in the Apostles' Creed, which summarizes what we believe, it sums up the whole life of Jesus with that single word: Suffered. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. So, that is it. From birth to death, and the only thing that fills the in-between is suffering.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if we think about that... We just said, Dave, certainly the suffering of Christ is physical. We just saw some of that in the first segment; and of course, when we consider that, we have to also, as Christians, remember the two natures of Christ. Yes, He was fully divine, but yes, He was fully human. Cut Him, He bled. A slap would sting His face as surely as it would sting your face or my face.

DAVE BAST

Yes; somehow His divinity didn't give Him a special anesthetic, you know, that diminished the pain. He felt it all.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; He is not Superman; He is not the man of steel who cannot really be hurt. Jesus could be hurt. So, the physical part of Jesus' suffering is important, but it is not theologically. The Church has always said there are other aspects that are even more important. In fact, a few years ago some will remember that movie that Mel Gibson directed called *The Passion of The Christ*, and the movie was criticized by a lot of theologians because it really went a little crazy on the physical suffering. The flogging scene alone took like eight minutes and it was gory and bloody and horrible, but there were other aspects to Jesus' suffering that we believe were just as important, including the spiritual nature of His suffering.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; interestingly, the Gospels never draw attention to the physical side. It is there, it happened, and I suppose you could choose to depict it in a movie. There is actually a certain brand of Christian piety historically – it goes back to the Middle Ages – that emphasizes the wounds and the blood and the pain and the lacerations. You see pictures, you know, of Christ on the cross in agony; but the Gospels don't do that. They are actually rather chaste in their description. In fact, basically they say He came to the Place of the Skull and there they crucified Him; and then it moves on; and what we see in Isaiah is again a mention of it, but not an emphasis on it. We could think of the spiritual suffering, and perhaps we will focus a bit more on that in our next program, when we come to Chapter 53, but Isaiah in Chapter 50, it seems to me, draws special attention to Jesus' emotional suffering. The shame of it, the embarrassment, the mockery, the cruelty. That comes through again and again. It happened already at His trial. If you remember the Gospel story, Jesus was first taken before the High Priest, and in the High Priest's presence, apparently they blindfolded Him and somebody hit Him and said: Now prophesy. Hey, hey, Mr. Prophet. Tell me who hit You. Ha, ha, very funny. A kind of bullying that took place. And then the soldiers, that is maybe a better known incident, how they took Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and mocked Him as a king and put a robe on Him and pretended... they bowed before Him in mockery. Mockery hurts, and Jesus probably... you know, probably and possibly also as a child already Jesus was mocked. There were different times He was mocked during His ministry. Different people said: You are not anything. The Pharisees would say: You are nothing. You are breaking God's Law. Jesus was

accused His whole life of doing things that weren't true. Jesus came here as the perfect fulfillment of God's Law, and look how many people in His whole life told Him He was a lawbreaker. That had to hurt His feelings – that had to hurt... There are stories, although I think we have mentioned them before, of when Jesus was little where He takes revenge on children. Children make fun of Him and He turns them into goats and stuff. Those are not true stories, of course; but surely Jesus did have all the power of God and all the wisdom of God and all the love of God and all the perfection of God. So anytime He was questioned, mocked, been accused of sin, that all had to hurt; and that happened His whole life long, culminating in those last hours; but it went on and on, and He endured that for all of us, who are also mocked; all of us who know cruelty; all of us who know false accusations. Jesus had to... The New Testament says He had to endure it all. He had to experience it all so He could take our place.

DAVE BAST

Yes; not to put too fine a point on this, but we know from ancient writers that victims of crucifixion were stripped naked. So, you will see a picture of the cross and it is always tastefully draped, you know, with a bit of...

SCOTT HOEZEE

A loincloth.

DAVE BAST

A loincloth or something, but Jesus was subjected to the ultimate brutality, shame, humiliation, mockery; and you know, one of the things I draw from this... I want to stop and think about myself. When He came into the world, the Son of God was mocked by many around Him; and what about us? When we look around us at our neighbors or associates or friends – people we go to school with or to work with or to church with – they are children of God, too. I don't want to take the part of the soldiers, you know. I don't want to take the part of the taunters. I want to stop and be careful and reflect before I tell a joke or make a comment or run somebody down. You know, I don't think it is too far a stretch to look at the story and apply it to ourselves; not only as an encouragement, if we are the victim of that kind of bullying, you know; but also if we are tempted to perpetrate it ourselves, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

All through history mockery and humiliation have been key tools of evil people. Neal Plantinga has often told the story from World War II in the concentration camp, where the Nazi soldiers took a rabbi, stripped him naked and made him stand on a table, and then read the sermon he was going to preach for that coming Sabbath. The only article of clothing they let him wear was his yamaka, you know, the little cap, because that only added to the mirth. Humiliating people – mocking them – has been a hallmark of sin from the very, very beginning; and Isaiah predicts, and in Christ it comes true, Jesus has to take that humiliation – that mockery – on Himself. That is a key to how He is going to heal our problem with sin, and that is why Jesus had to suffer; not just from the lash of the whip, but from the lash of the tongue and from humiliation. He had to endure that because we have endured it all through history, and we have inflicted it on each other.

DAVE BAST

Yes; listen again to this verse, where the Servant says, ^{7a}“Because the sovereign Lord helps Me, I will not be disgraced; ^{8a}He who vindicates Me is near; who then will bring charges against Me?” Others can do this to Him, they can do it to us, but God is on our side. God vindicated Him, He will vindicate us. You think of the great statement of Paul in Romans 8: Who shall bring any charge against God's chosen ones? That is the Good News of the Gospel; because He endured this for us, we know that God will vindicate us one day, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if we know that Good News, we want to share it; and that is what we will think about next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and today we are in Isaiah. We have been looking at Chapter 50, with its depiction – its prophecy – about the Suffering Servant of the Lord. We have been looking in these programs about the figure of the Servant, but now we are introduced to this idea of His terrible suffering, really; both physical and spiritual, and even emotional suffering as He is subjected to the mockery and the torture of the cross, words that are fulfilled in Jesus, but now we want to turn to Isaiah Chapter 52, and some other verses that speak about how we might share the Good News of what Jesus has done.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So after some of these doom and gloom and difficult chapters in Isaiah that depict all that suffering, all of a sudden in Isaiah 52 you get this:

⁷How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news; who proclaim peace; who bring good tidings; who proclaim salvation; who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” ⁸Listen, your watchmen lift up their voices. Together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion they will see it with their own eyes. ⁹Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted His people. He has redeemed Jerusalem. ¹⁰The Lord will lay bare His holy arm in the sight of all nations and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

So, when we know...

DAVE BAST

Good News, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

When we know the Good News, we go to the high mountain and we proclaim it; and we say: Look world, because of all that suffering, all that terrible humiliation, new life has come; and it is the Church’s job – it was Israel’s job then – and now our job certainly today as we live on the other side of Easter – to proclaim this Gospel in every way we can.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I love that verse that you read, verse 7: How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news; which is, again, another little unusual twist perhaps. I mean, why are their *feet* so beautiful? Normally, I don’t think of feet as the most beautiful part of the human anatomy, but I wonder if it isn’t because they have undertaken to go. These are missionaries, you know, who have set out... They have climbed the mountains... maybe because their voice can go further from the mountain; you know, the old spiritual: Go tell it on the mountain...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and back in those days when there were no newspapers or telegraph, much less telephones and all the rest, people had to run from village to village. When a victory was won on the battlefield, the messenger would run and almost wear their feet out; and actually, by the time the messenger sometimes got to the people to say we have won the war, their feet would actually be a mess. They would be bloody and torn. They would have worn through their shoes; and yet, when they come to bring good news, even those terrible looking, bloody feet are beautiful because they brought... those feet brought the person who brought the good news, and we want to proclaim this to the ends of the earth. This is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; and in the next program in this series we will think a little bit more about, as we have even on this program, the odd, surprising, paradoxical nature of the Gospel; but when you recognize in the work of the Servant no less than the work of God to restore all things, then all things are going to be restored and all things should hear about it to the ends of the earth, Isaiah writes here in verse 10.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you know, we mentioned earlier the problem of missing the significance of all this prophecy that was so spelled out. I think that it is not just Old Testament Israel. Each of us is tempted to read scripture selectively,

you know. We pick out certain parts of the Bible and we sort of forget about others. We shape our own favorite image or picture or message, and then that is what we hang onto; and that is always a danger. So, you know, maybe they looked at the positive aspects of the Servant, and all the wonderful things that He would do and be and bring, and that shaped what they expected from the Messiah. It was going to be great news and good times, and it was going to mean power for Israel, and Israel would take its place at the top, at the top of the heap; and they forgot this part about the suffering; and they forgot about the ends of the earth; the fact that this has always been for all people everywhere; that God's plan was never limited to just one group or one particular tribe; it was always for the ends of the earth. So, somehow, too, we face the challenge of holding it all together.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; there is a popular TV preacher who was interviewed on a radio station a while back. This was a preacher who preached the prosperity gospel, and the interviewer said what about the cross? What about Jesus' cross and suffering? And he said: Well, like all great men, Jesus had His setbacks, but He put it behind Him and so can we. And to that we say: No. We need the whole Gospel – all of the Good News – the suffering and then also the glory. That is the word we preach.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation today. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you dig deeper into scripture. So visit us at groundworkonline.com and tell us what you would like to hear next on Groundwork.

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Printed on September 5, 2025