

## The Who, What, For Whom, How, and Why of the Suffering Servant

We stand on holy ground today, as we consider this Scripture. These words about the Suffering Servant are some of the clearest, most specific prophetic words about the passion of Christ in the entire Bible. In very few other Old Testament verses will you find such explicit detail about, or such thorough theological explanation for, the suffering and death of Christ. But this passage is about more than just suffering and shame. The Apostle John, talking about these very words, wrote, **“Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory” (12:41)**. 700 years before Jesus was even born, Isaiah was able to look into the future and see with mind-boggling detail the glory of Jesus, manifested in his suffering and death. But when was suffering and death ever glorious? And what makes this Friday good? And how does it impact our lives, and our eternity? A million questions circle through our minds as we read this prophecy about the Suffering Servant, questions like: who is this man; what did he suffer; for whom did he suffer; how did he suffer; why did he suffer? Good questions, that are good for us to ask on this Good Friday, as today we see all of God’s goodness suspended from the cross.

First of all, who is this Suffering Servant Isaiah speaks of? That question has been asked before. Remember the account of Philip and the man from Ethiopia? As he was travelling from Jerusalem back home to Ethiopia, the man was reading this passage from Isaiah 53. But he didn’t understand it. So he asked Philip, **“Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?”** In other words, who is this Suffering Servant? **“Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus” (8:34-35)**. Isaiah is writing about Jesus. 700 years before he was born, Isaiah is prophesying about the suffering and death of Jesus. And listen to how Isaiah describes Jesus. **“He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.”** Jesus looked like an ordinary guy, with an ordinary family, from an ordinary town. He didn’t look like the glorious king of Israel that the people were hoping for. Jesus came to be the Suffering Servant.

So what did he suffer? Well, he suffered this: **“He was despised and rejected by mankind, 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.”** Jesus was despised, by his own people, by the people he created, the people he loves, the people he came to save. Remember what happened in Nazareth? He preached a sermon, and then they tried to throw him off a cliff! **“We want you dead,”** they said. Same as the mob that shouted, **“Crucify him, crucify him!” (Lk 23:21)**. Just think of the hatred for Jesus! He was rejected, despised, utterly disrespected. Back then, and still today. By them... and by us? Surely not us, Lord? **“He was despised, and we held him in low esteem.”** That “we” hurts. We – you and me – we are among those who have rejected Jesus. We are the ones whose sins nailed Christ to the cross. We are the guilty ones! On Good Friday there is no time for finding fault in anyone else – soldiers, Sanhedrin, disciples, other sinners. We must first find the fault right here, in ourselves. **“He was despised and rejected by mankind,”** including us – that’s what Jesus suffered.

He also suffered this: **“We considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.”** God did this! We like to sing: *“Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer. In his arms he’ll take and shield you; you will find a solace there” (721:3)*. But on Good Friday, as Jesus hung on the cross, he found no solace in God the Father. When he cried out, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46)**, he was suffering complete and total separation from God. His Father had abandoned him. That is the very essence of hell. Hell is complete separation from God. So on the cross, Jesus literally suffered hell as his Father abandoned him.

And if that were not enough, he also suffered the macabre brutality of physical, bodily torture. Isaiah lines up this barrage of hurtful words: **“pierced, crushed, punished, stricken, afflicted, wounds, oppression, judgment, despised, disfigured, marred”** – which makes you think of the whips and thorns and the punches and the spit and the blows from the wooden staff and the splinters from the jagged cross and the betrayal and the nakedness and the humiliation and the nails hammered through his wrists and the spikes smashing through his feet and the blood loss and the suffocation and... STOP! We can hardly bear to think of all that our dear Savior suffered!

Especially when you consider for whom he suffered. Isaiah is very clear on this. **“Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering... 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.”** For whom? For us! Everything Jesus endured on Good Friday, he did for us! About this passage, Martin Luther once wrote, *“These words, OUR, US, FOR US, must be written in letters of gold” (LW 17:221)*. We must apply these words to ourselves, personally, individually, every one of us, and realize that we are the ones for whom Jesus suffered. **“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.”** Every one of us, everyone in the world, is objectively and undeniably guilty before God. Whether you feel guilty or not, we all carry the tremendous guilt of sin. But what makes Good Friday so good is that on the cross we witness a transfer of guilt. Guilt is transferred from us onto Jesus. Listen again: **“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.”** That is a transfer of guilt.

Think about it like this: One day you and a group of bystanders witness a crime take place. Someone calls the police; they arrive quickly; and the criminal is arrested. But then one of the witnesses standing near you, whom you know is innocent, willingly volunteers to trade places with the criminal and be charged in place of the criminal. And you watch, with jaw dropped, as the handcuffs come off the guilty and are snapped onto the innocent. We would call that a miscarriage of justice. God would call it a transfer of guilt. And while it doesn't work that way in our American courts, that's exactly how it works in God's divine judicial system. You and I are the criminals, guilty, handcuffed, headed for hell. But Jesus, innocent Jesus, willingly volunteers to take our place. And that means two very important things. 1) You and I are released, set free from the punishment of our sin. And 2) Jesus is punished in our place. When you look at the cross, when you behold the innocent Son of God bleeding and dying on Good Friday, you are witnessing your punishment, your damnation, being exacted onto an innocent substitute. The theological term for this vicarious atonement. Atonement means that Jesus' death makes us at one, at peace, with God. Vicarious means substitutionary. In other words, Jesus was crucified as our substitute, in our place, on our behalf, so that our guilt, our punishment would be transferred from us onto him. That is exactly what happened on Good Friday. And that is exactly what Isaiah means when he writes, **"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."** For whom? For us!

What about this: how did he suffer? And by how I mean: in what manner did he conduct himself through his passion? How did he carry himself through the whole thing? Typically criminals would first beg for mercy, grovel for grace. And then when they were sentenced, they would curse the judge with every imprecation they could conjure. From the cross crucified criminals would call down violent, vindictive, vengeful curses on their executioners, right up to their dying breath. What about Jesus? How did he suffer? **"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."** Which is fulfilled when: **"[Caiaphas] stood up and said to Jesus, 'Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?' But Jesus remained silent"** (Mt 26:62-63). And when: **"Pilate asked him, 'Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?' But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge – to the great amazement of the governor"** (27:13-14). Jesus was not your typical criminal. He didn't dignify their slander with a response, and he didn't curse the soldiers. Instead, he prayed for them! **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"** (Lk 23:34). Throughout his entire passion, Jesus carried himself with the utmost of dignity. That's how he suffered.

But now the big question: why did he suffer? Why did Jesus have to endure this atrocious injustice when everyone, including Pilate, knew he was innocent? Here's why: **"It was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer."** It was the Lord's will for Jesus to suffer and die on Good Friday. This whole thing was God's plan – going all the way back to the Garden of Eden, when the Lord said, **"He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel"** (Gen 3:15). The "he" is Jesus; the "you" is Satan; the heel-striking is Jesus' death on the cross; and the head-crushing is Jesus defeating Satan, sin, death, and hell. This was God's plan of salvation for his world from the very beginning: **"It was the LORD's will to crush him."** But, **"after he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied."** God would raise Jesus from the dead. Make no mistake: when Jesus drew his final breath on the cross, the Lord had no intention of leaving him dead. The first light of Easter Sunday morning brings the bright message of the resurrection, that Jesus is alive and once again sees **"the light of life."** Listen: you come back to church this Sunday morning, and I promise you that we will celebrate the resurrection of Christ. And by his suffering, death, and resurrection, **"my righteous servant will justify many."** Everything that Jesus endured these holy days was for one specific reason – it's the why of Good Friday and Easter: to **"justify many."** In Christ you stand justified before God, declared not guilty, sins forgiven, guilt erased, punishment paid, salvation accomplished, transfer of guilt (as Jesus said) finished! **"It is finished"** (Jn 19:30). Everything necessary to get you to heaven is finished, not by you but by Christ, and Christ alone. That's the why!

And this why is so important! If you were to stand before the gates of heaven and an angel were to ask you why you should be let in, what would you say? If you answer why in the first person, you are immediately on the wrong track. "Because I'm a Christian, I believe, I went to church, I'm a good person, I did this, I did that." No, you can do nothing to save yourself, and it is the height of arrogance to think otherwise. The only correct answer to why any of us should be allowed into heaven must come in the third person. "Because he, because Christ, because Jesus died and rose, because of the cross, because of the empty tomb." That's why! The reason Jesus endured the agony of the cross was to **"justify many,"** to cancel our guilt and bring us to heaven. That is the why of our salvation.

Today, as we see Jesus **"pour out his life unto death,"** Isaiah shows us, with remarkable detail, who this Suffering Servant is, what he suffered, for whom he suffered, how he suffered, and especially why he suffered. And so with profoundly grateful and humble hearts, today we kneel before the cross and praise our Savior for the fact that he suffered.

In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.