

Behold, my servant

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[0:00] I'm going to read the passage at page 741. It's Isaiah 52 from verse 13 to the end of 53.

! Just as there were many who were appalled at him, his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being, and his form marred beyond human likeness.

So he will sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.

Who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He 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. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering and familiar with pain, like one from whom people hide their faces.

[1:21] He was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering. Yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.

But 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. 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. 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. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested?

For he was cut off from the land of the living. For the transgression of my people he was punished. He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

[2:28] Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer. And though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong. Because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.

For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. This is God's word. Let me pray. Almighty God, we thank you for your word, the Bible, and we pray that you would teach, rebuke, correct, and train us in righteousness.

That we, your servants, might be equipped for every good work. In Jesus' name. Amen. So, it's the 15th of February.

[3:37] Middle of winter. How do you feel about February? How are you feeling? Lots of people dislike this month and want it to get it over.

We've been in the cold, dark months for too long, and we want to see signs of spring. Is that how you're feeling on this Sunday morning? Does it affect how you feel day to day?

The mundane kind of, you know, day to day rhythm of life. It just feels a little bit more mundane in February. Because there's, you know, what is there else to do apart from eat, sleep, work, repeat?

More gray skies. Everything feels slower, heavier, a bit more pressed down. And perhaps we struggle to find the energy to lift ourselves up. Is that how you feel today?

If you've ever felt like that, or if you've, if you ever were, if you ever do, I want to just start by acknowledging that it's not wrong to want to lift ourselves, so to speak.

[4:47] It's not a sin to want to have that desire to rise above the mundane. We weren't made to stay in the gray of life.

But actually we're designed to want to be lifted up, to be elevated. What do we call that sometimes? Well, one of the words we have for it is ambition. And we feel like ambition or that desire to lift ourselves is squashed or squeezed when we feel kind of flat.

Winter's just one of those things that maybe squashes us. But there's lots of other things you could add to that effect of kind of squashing your ambition. You might think, you know, getting older.

You think, oh, don't have as much ambition as when I was sprightly. Maybe your poor health. Maybe you've got your own kind of limitations. Or maybe even your qualifications.

You think, oh, if I had this, maybe I'd be able to do something different. They can all feel like all these things kind of like squashes and they stop us reaching our true potential.

[5:57] I remember that at school. It was always like reaching your potential was like a big phrase. And so when we hear the first line of our passage this morning, I think it does something to us.

Because I think it grabs us. Because what we see in this servant, I think, is something that we kind of want for ourselves. Just look with me in verse 13. See what he says.

He says, see, this is God speaking. He's speaking about a servant of God, a servant of his, the servant of the Lord. And he says about this servant, see, look, behold. My servant will act wisely. And then it says, he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. It grabs our attention because what happens to the servant is that's what we want.

That's what we desire. We see kind of, oh man, whoever this servant is, he's kind of elevated and he's reached some sort of potential. We want our lives to matter.

[7:05] And we want to be noticed for what we do. This passage is up there. It's kind of one of the most well-known, I think.

And one of the most important passages of the whole of the Old Testament. It's a song about the servant of the Lord, whoever this servant is. And we see straight away the living God.

He's singing, speaking, and he says, look. And then he's going to tell us about this servant, look.

This is who he is. This is what I think of him. And this is what he's going to do and what I'm going to do for him.

And what follows in the rest of the passage that we've read is kind of, this is kind of summary like a title verse. He's going to show us how the lifting up, the elevation, the exaltation, the reaching of potential will happen.

And how it's brought about by the servant's wise choices. The servant will act wisely to bring about his own lifting up. Just to say, you know, when we hear this, we're not just reading a kind of a mere work of literature.

[8:17] This is not a kind of a creative linguistic project. You know, these very words are a document that stands outside of time.

What we see here is the heartbeat of the gospel. It's more than just predicting. It is God informing his people exactly who to look out for in history. This is who to look out for.

Someone whose life follows this pattern of what we see. And here is kind of what I want to get across this morning as we read this.

If Isaiah is proved right about what will happen to the servant, and what we're going to see is his life is kind of a descent downwards. And it's really pointing at Jesus, the Roman piercing, the rich man's grave, the spit, the shame.

And if this is what we're going to see, it's going to map perfectly onto what will happen hundreds of years later to Jesus Christ. If that's true, it gives total credence to what it's going to say about his lifting up, to his exaltation.

[9:24] If he's accurate about the grave, he can speak with authority about the glory. That's what I want you to take away. First point then, that we're going to look at as we go through this amazing song about what's really pointing to Jesus.

We see it's kind of a journey where the servant starts in a lifted up, exalted place, and it's kind of like a U shape. He goes down, and then he goes back up again.

So we're going to start with kind of the journey down. And the first point that we're going to have is the unrecognizable servant. Now, we've talked about wanting to lift ourselves up, the kind of, you know, achieving your potential.

In the working world, in normal world, to move yourself higher, you need to be remarkable, don't you? You need to be remarkable. You need to be better. And to have that kind of something extra that elevates you above everyone else.

You know, you have something that kind of no one else has. When you walk into a room, you put everyone at ease. Or you have amazing people skills. Or you can problem solve any situation.

[10:37] It gives you an edge. The edge that is the potential for you to move higher. As we follow the life of the servant, we see a path that goes in the exact opposite direction.

It starts with a message that nobody wants to hear. You know, the servant doesn't start with moving higher, but by going down. And particularly, in this passage, I want to hone in, I think it does hone in, in what that looks like for his reputation.

And I've mentioned before, it's worth stating from the off, everything we read points to the servant being Jesus. Because of how this song is fulfilled in his life. His life mirrors his text so precisely.

It could only be about him. It's so precise. Some people have even questioned. They've said, this must have been written later. It's too precise for it to be written 700 years before.

But the reason it is precise, it's because from the living God, who knew it was going to happen? And we see this descent downwards. We know, don't we? Jesus entered the world to shepherding nobodies.

[11:51] It never gets more impressive than that. Right from the moment Jesus enters the world, his beginning is not of someone significant, but of a no one. And as his life takes shape, Jesus' reputation doesn't get any better.

It just gets worse. Even if you didn't know who he was, he wasn't a man who turned heads. There was nothing about him that said potential.

Nothing. And look with me. We've got 53 verse 2. See what he says? It says, Imagine that.

There was nothing about him that was remotely appealing. About even just him as his normal human frame. If you saw him, you wouldn't have thought anything.

He had the kind of, you know, you think about his start in life, he had the kind of start in life that made people frown. I mean, can you imagine, you know, Mary telling the birth story?

[13:04] It's a disaster. He didn't begin in luxury, he begins in squalor. There's nothing about him that's appealing. This is where his path starts.

And in the eyes of the world, that's the high point. That's the highest it's ever going to be in the world. Because the trajectory of his reputation is, it never moves higher. It always descends lower than you can imagine.

He had become lowest in estimation of those who should have known him best. Look, as we go, so we go, he's born in squalor. And then we just go down.

Look with me in verse 3. 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. You think of what it means to despise someone.

[14:11] To despise someone. Or to hold someone in low esteem. You think of like a weighing scale. To hold someone in low esteem. It means weighing someone in the balances of reputation.

Okay? And the scales tip. And the finding is you find them worthless. No value. That edge, that potential that people respect when someone walks into a room.

Jesus had an edge. But it made him disrespected. And they didn't just ignore him. You know, you can imagine they would. As the kind of person that you would actively cross the street when he was walking in your direction.

Talk about him behind his back. Reject him like you disregard an old rug that needs to go to the skip. Now that life seems unbearable.

But you see, the descent of opinion would go down further still. We're still talking about repetition. It actually comes a little bit earlier in the reading.

[15:14] Look, but just a few verses earlier. Verse 14. Just read what it says. It says, Just as there were many who were appalled at him, His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being.

And his form marred beyond human likeness. We've said in our world you move up by being better looking, better spoken and more capable.

In God's kingdom, the servant moves towards his success by becoming so mad he is barely recognisable as a human anymore.

We're told to reject the ordinary and unremarkable. We're told to fix our attention on the flashy, the noticeable. His success begins in the dust of rejection and finishes there too.

You know, this is X-rated violence here we have. He's so disfigured on the cross that if you saw him, you would struggle to believe that what you were looking at was even a human.

[16:28] He was hanging there. You would turn away in horror. It's the type of image that would be seared into your conscience and give you nightmares, make you nauseous from what you were looking at.

When we know that that's what we're reading about and we know that that is what happened, it's not hard to understand, is it, why Jesus was looked down on. Verse 1 makes a lot of sense.

Who's believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? I mean, apart, at the cross, apart from his mother, at this point, it's slim pickings, isn't it?

Who the Lord's been revealed to. You know, no one believed, no one looked at the cross and thought, wow, look at his potential. Look at it. The lifting high, the elevation, that's not the type they're after.

He was lifted high for everyone to see, but the sight of it horrified everyone. They weren't applauding. Jerusalem looked at Jesus the way the world looks at him still. I don't want anything. I don't want anything to do with, not him, that.

[17:41] I don't want anything to do with that. You see, the truth is, is that following this man and being about it, being open about it, there kind of is a bit of a reality check that we have, is that we might want potential, but following this man can limit your own.

You may not get as high as you could without him. And there is the temptation, isn't there?

That perhaps we might say the right things, but even to treat him ourselves a little bit like that old rug. We don't hate the rug.

We just don't want anyone to see him in our living room. Because others hold him in low esteem, and we don't want to be thought of that way either. This is tough stuff.

This is Jesus being hard to stomach. And because of our association with him, what we believe in might be hard for others to stomach too.

[19:08] And our potential for success could take a hit because of that association. When we follow a king whose throne is a cross, we shouldn't be surprised when the world stops applauding.

So that's the first thing, is the unrecognizable servant. Now the question we might have, perhaps lots of us do, is, why would the living God allow his servant to look like this?

Why would God allow his servant to go through this? And here's where we're going to kind of go deep in before we move in, is that really the mad disfigurement is actually what qualifies him.

That's actually what qualifies him to save the whole world. Let me explain it. In Old Testament Israel, in the ancient Near East, if kind of temple worship, especially in Israel, if you looked like this man, you would not be allowed anywhere near the bricks and mortar of the temple.

Nowhere near. You'd be, you know, you were a curse. You were looked at with total shameful eyes. You were an unclean, crucified curse. But look at verse 15, the script has flipped upside down.

[20:31] The one who looks the most unclean is actually the high priest, who goes into the temple to perform worship. Look what he says in verse 15. It says, So he will sprinkle many nations.

Kings shall shut their mouths because of him. When we read about sprinkling, that is a temple ritual. It's kind of technical terminology of a job reserved for the Jewish priests. It's all over the earlier books of the Bible. Example, you look in earlier books of the Bible. This is one example. When a leper was healed, the priest would sprinkle them in the building with blood and water to declare them clean.

And they could bring them back into the community of God's people. Sprinkling with blood and water was the act that had cleansing power, applying to the unclean person or the guilty person. Jesus would not be allowed in the temple because of the way he looked. But you see what he's doing? He's making the world his temple.

[21:39] Because he doesn't just sprinkle the lepers. He sprinkles the nations with his blood. The very wounds that made him unclean, unrecognizable, looked on in the hands of the Jews and indeed the world, are the fingers of a priest able to cleanse the world in your soul of sin.

So at this point, we're going to pivot towards what that means for us. The second point, the sacrificial servant.

Now you might think, I mean, that was pretty brutal, the first point. You might think, surely it can't get any worse. It can't get any worse, surely. But actually, that's not the end of the descent downwards. You might even think that perhaps his physical pain was the climax of suffering. It's hard to see, isn't it? Past that, the truth is the servant Jesus had to go lower still. The extrated violence wouldn't be the hardest thing that Jesus had to deal with.

Look with me at verse 4. As the crowd watched Jesus' crucifixion, they had a theory of their own.

[22:58] That Jesus was actually guilty. That he deserved to die. And they had the theory that Jesus was being punished by God for his sin.

And they'd hit a half-truth. He was being punished by God. He was afflicted and struck by God. But not for his own wrongdoing.

For theirs. You see the beginning of the verse. He took up our pain. Our suffering. In verse 5, it continues.

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. Verse 7. He was oppressed and afflicted.

Didn't open his mouth. Like a lamb to the slaughter. He didn't open his mouth. Verse 8. He was cut off from the laveland living. Why? For the transgression of my people he was punished.

[24:01] Verse 10. They were right. It was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer. But why? Well the answer comes right in the middle of this song. It comes in verse 6.

We all. Includes us. Like sheep. Like wandering sheep that don't know where they're supposed to go. We all like sheep have gone astray. We've wandered off.

Each of us has turned. We've turned our own way. And we've, you know, like a, you know, you've seen sheep in the, on the hillsides you're driving through. And without anybody to lead them they go anywhere.

We all like sheep have turned our own way. Thought we knew best. But the Lord has laid on him, on his son, the iniquity of all of us.

It's like a, like a funnel over Jesus' head. Picture a funnel. With all our sins, our iniquities, our mess, our mistakes poured onto his shoulders.

[24:58] It's laid on him, not on us, by the Lord. Each word we read carries so much weight. Physical, emotional, spiritual pain.

Jesus absorbs all of it. Every physical beating is kind of an in-your-face metaphor for his emotional and spiritual suffering. He is crushed like he might stand on a spider.

His body is a wreck. Like he's cut off. Cut off from his own father and cut off from the world. Like a lamb. A direct link to the Passover. He's the lamb slaughtered in place of the people.

And in the midst of that, this is the thing that's worse than the, the physical beatings. For the first time, for the first time in his entire life he would experience the anguish of what it means to feel guilt.

We know what guilt feels like. As fallen people, we, you know, experiencing guilt is part of our condition, isn't it?

[26:09] And if you've ever felt guilty for anything, it feels awful. Cuts you up. Cuts you deep. You think Jesus, up until the cross, had never experienced that emotion or understood what it means to have a guilty verdict over your head, over his head.

And here's where it comes. Then in one moment, in one moment he experiences, you know, it's not just the guilt of a white line that he experiences or some minor misdemeanor. In one moment, as the cross is erected, he feels the weight and guilt and verdict of every sin at once.

All the guilt of every sin you and I and every one of God's people will commit. Think of that. The guilt of every sin you and I and every one of God's people will commit.

That's what crushed his soul. What beggars belief is that none of this was a surprise to him.

This wasn't a tragedy that happened to him. It wasn't a young man taken before his time. No, this is the wise choice of the servant. This is the, this is, see, my servant will act wisely.

[27:26] This is the wise choice of the servant to follow to them. This is Jesus fulfilling what his father said about him 700 years before. Verse 12, see, my servant will act wisely.

At any point he could have said, is enough enough? I can't do this. It's not, I'm not going through with it. But his divine wisdom kept him going so that he wasn't a victim, but chose this path for himself.

Doing it for us. And I think, you know, if we consider this really, when we're piecing all of this together, you can't help but be moved.

You know, it's right to read this passage and think about what it means. It's right to be emotional. And if we're not, you know, we show emotion in different ways.

I'm not saying we all should be blubbing. I'm just saying we should be moved and it's not a surprise. It's a surprise if we're not in some capacity. How do we respond to this level of dissent?

[28:31] How do we respond to a king who went this low for us? Now, while you're, each of us, we're individuals and whilst our response will be personal, I just want to suggest two things.

Two things. The first thing I want to respond is praise. I'm not talking about singing. I'm talking about a deep heart level thankfulness.

Because Jesus is bitten by death instead of us. He's bitten by death for us, his sheep who've gone astray.

The first thing is praise. The second, actually, is to respond with thinking, if Jesus can suffer like that for me, what would it look like in my life to have a desire to suffer for him?

When we see the unrecognisable servant go to this depth, this low, the cost of our own, you know, the cost of our own reputation in the world, it suddenly seems like quite a small price to pay, does it not?

[29:48] Let's make no kind of bones about it. The servant is now at his lowest ebb. It doesn't get any lower than this. But Isaiah doesn't just predict the death of his servant, he predicts a post-death success.

You remember where we started? The servant who acts wisely will what? Be lifted, high and lifted up, he shall be exalted. The lifting up of Jesus on the cross is the very means, as he's lifted on the cross, it's the very means by which he's high and lifted up to be triumphant.

So we move to that. And a third point is the vindicated servant. The vindicated. Look with me in verse 10. Yes, we saw, yes, verse 10, it was the will of the Lord to crush his servant, cause him to suffer.

But look at what that means. Second half of the verse. And though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, and here we have it, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

It's saying that the servant has offspring, children, that he will see because of his death. It's not a physical family, but it's a spiritual one.

[31:04] Everyone who's healed by the servant's wounds, by this crushing affliction, he will then get to see, to meet, and this is the will of the Lord. Now, at this moment in time, the truth of what this law looks like

is kind of clothed in secrecy when it's written.

But as has been mentioned before, this is so accurate to Jesus that actually, as we read this and we know Jesus' life, it confirms that Jesus is the servant. If you were to read this at the time, if you were to hear this, it doesn't make any sense 700 years before it happens.

And the natural question you might ask is, how does someone cut off, buried in a grave, that shares with the wicked, prolong his days? How is he satisfied? How does he get to see his spiritual children?

And there's only one answer. Hundreds of years before it happens, resurrection, hope, is actually a reality. Jesus' resurrection is the satisfied receipt.

It's the proof that his death was enough. It's this historical evidence that the payment didn't just clear, that it overflowed. And the receipt says paid in full.

[32:15] It doesn't just satisfy the legal payment for God, but it satisfies the heart of the servant himself. He sees the many who've been made righteous and he's satisfied by the result of his agony.

In the night before he died, you know, Jesus, there's this famous, John 17, there's this famous prayer that Jesus says, he says, and one of the lines in the prayer that he says is this. He says, he's speaking to God, he says, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am.

That's what he says. I want those you have given me to be with me where I am. His death makes that prayer a legal possibility.

His resurrection makes it a guarantee. He rose so that he could see his offspring, his children, so that he could see you.

And so that you, for the first time, will one day see him. Life now is not as we knew it before because we live in light of the knowledge that the check has cleared.

[33:27] We don't have to spend our days trying to pay off what we owe God. There is no divine spiritual debt repayment, no spiritual bailiffs. We don't owe him. It's been paid. And no matter what you do, that status will remain forever.

You've been given a new resurrection life in him. And what does that mean? The benefits? The benefits of the resurrection life? Well, it comes in verse 12.

Therefore, I will give him a portion among the gro... among the many. And what will he do? He will divide the spoils with the strong. The spoil of victory.

When somebody has a great victory, what do they do? They have a... you know, they have sort of the things that they take after the victory, the spoil. And it comes full circle. Because he's lifted up, he'll share the kind of the takings of the victory, his exalted status, his being lifted up, his glory, he will share with the many, with you.

He's not a king who hoards his success. He's a servant who divides his portion with the many. Now, I'm not good at dividing my portions. When I order cake, I don't know about you, but it's hands-off.

[34:45] But Jesus doesn't just give you a slice of his glory cake. No, he shares the whole lot with you. He divides the spoil of his victory over death, sin and evil and he shares every bit with us.

Because of his work, verse 11 tells us, we're now counted righteous. He's making a session for us at this very moment and he's prolonged his days so that he can prolong ours.

He is satisfied by seeing you. and you'll be satisfied when you see him. He won the war, but we get the treasure.

We started by talking about February. The grey skies and how the sky kind of mirrors how we feel on the inside. The struggle to find the energy to lift ourselves out of the mundane.

We've lost our ambition, our potential in life doesn't feel like we can, a potential we doesn't feel like we can reach. What we have here is the realisation that we all have the spiritual potential.

[35:57] The potential that you imagine for yourself is too low. It is too low. The spiritual potential Jesus has for you is much higher than you could ever imagine.

If the ceiling of your ambition is constructed by the world, it is too low. Whatever it is, I don't know, if it is to turn heads when you enter a room, to be the loudest voice, to be defined by a title, a car or a house, they're trinkets.

They're trinkets. The potential available to you in the servant in Jesus is of another order entirely. It's a ceiling you must, that if you want to reach or you want to earn, you don't have to earn it yourself because it's grounded not in what you can achieve but what he has achieved for you which has already been fully realised.

Nothing can stop you from reaching it if you put your trust in Jesus. It's the startling truth of that potential. There is no ceiling. not routine mundane Feburies, not your health, not your age, not your physical limitations or qualifications.

The sky is actually the limit. If you want to know what is possible, if you want to know where your potential is, look at what has been achieved by Christ for you and that is yours in him.

[37:21] Jesus, the servant king, the suffering king, the unrecognisable king but now who will one day be recognised by all. The vindicated king has come and paid it in full.

He was cast down so that you might be lifted high. And so can I encourage you today, can I encourage you to do this empowered by the spirit of God to stop the exhausted project of self-lifting your own reputation and let the king exalt you.

Let the king exalt you. See my servant will act wisely. He'll be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

Let me pray. Almighty God, this U-shaped journey that we see in your son is just to comprehend it and to fix our attention on it is beyond what we could possibly ever have dreamt or imagined.

We have that desire that you've given us for glory to be lifted up but we look for it in the wrong places and we thank you that in Christ, in you, the ceiling, there is no ceiling because you share with us the spoil of victory.

[38:49] You give us everything that you possess, that you own. we receive it in you and so would you forgive us and would you help us to stop trying to lift ourselves up but to turn to you knowing that we are lifted up, that we have forgiveness, that we have peace and joy on offer.

Would you empower us by the spirit of God to take hold of it and bless us and be a people that go out into the world possessing this treasure that you have won the war but we get the treasure and so we pray that we would receive it and live and work for your praise and glory as you the great high priest who intercedes and who sprinkles the nations with your blood.

We ask for this in the name of Christ. Amen.