Isaiah 52:13-53:3 *53: The Misunderstood Messiah*

***Crossed Signals***If you have your Bible with you—or a Bible accessing device—I would like to invite you to turn to Isaiah 53. If you bring your Bible to worship every week, you can put a bookmark here, because we will be in this chapter through Easter. Today, we are going to look at 52:13 through 53:3. If you prefer to follow along on the screen, we’ll be sure to put the relevant verses up as we go along. I’m going to read our key verses in a moment, but first let me pray:

<<prayer for illumination>>

**Isaiah 52:13 through 53:3:**

**13**See, my servant will act wisely;  
    he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.  
**14**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—  
**15**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.

**53**Who has believed our message  
    and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?  
**2**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.  
**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.

Last week we I introduced you to this great chapter. I said that it is one of the most remarkably accurate descriptions of Jesus’ life and death found in the Old Testament. It is also one of the clearest explanations the Bible gives for the meaning of Jesus’ death. We saw that it has been called the “fifth gospel” and “a Bible in miniature.” We marveled that Isaiah could predict such amazing details as the manner of Jesus’ burial multiple centuries before Jesus was born.

And yet, despite the uncanny precision of this description; people in Jesus’ day did not recognize Him as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. Despite incredibly high expectations that the promised deliverer—the Messiah—was coming; when Jesus showed up “his own people did not receive him.” (John 1:11) In fact, in the end, they outright rejected Him. They actively arranged His death.

**Charles Spurgeon puts it like this:**

Every unprejudiced person might have seen from this passage [Isaiah 53] that the Messiah, when he came, was not to be surround with pomp, but would come as “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief,” to be “despised and rejected of men.” **Yet, though the truth** was written as with a sunbeam, and the Jewish people were pretty generally acquainted with their own Scriptures, so that they had the opportunity of knowing it, yet when the Messiah came unto his own, his own received him not, and though favoured with the clearest prophecies concerning him they rejected his claims, and cried “Let him be crucified!” (quoted by John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to God,* p. 67)

It is one of the most astounding facts of Jesus’ life: despite matching up so well with the prophecies given in the Old Testament for a coming Messiah; when push came to shove the very people He was sent to help detested and destroyed Him.

Even more astounding, Isaiah predicted that this is exactly what would happen. Isaiah 53 predicts the doubt and rejection Jesus would encounter. **53:1:**

Who has believed our message  
    and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

And verse 3:

**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.

Isaiah says that when the Lord’s servant appears on the scene, he is going to encounter unbelief. “Who has believed our message?” He is going to be despised. He is going to be rejected. The question is: how did the people get their signals so crossed? How is it that the people who knew the scriptures best could misunderstand Jesus so badly?

The answer, I believe, is this:

**Jesus was not the kind of Messiah the people expected, but He was exactly the kind of Messiah we needed.**

That’s our big idea for today. Jesus was the Misunderstood Messiah. He was not what people were expecting, but He was exactly what we needed. The sermon will have two main parts: first we’ll talk about the Messiah that was expected. Then we’ll talk about the Messiah that we need.

***Comic Book Hero***First, let’s consider **the Messiah that was expected**. The people of Israel were looking for a hero who would exact vengeance on their enemies and restore them to power.

**Consider 52:13**. This hints at what was expected:

**13**See, my servant will act wisely;  
    he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

I mentioned last week that chapter 53 is one of 4 sections in Isaiah known as the “servant songs.” I noted that it is an unusual way to refer to the coming Messiah because he was more often thought of as a bold hero than a humble servant. But, at the same time, this verse hints at the exaltation of this servant. He is going to be raised up. That’s how the Messiah was popularly thought of. **You see it again in 52:15:**

**15**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.

This is what Israel was looking for, this is how they pictured the Messiah: shutting the mouths of their enemies. Putting doubters in their place. Exacting vengeance on those who have made them suffer. It’s verses like this that make it clear that this passage is referring to the Messiah.

Now, let me talk for a minute about that word: **Messiah**. Messiah comes from the Hebrew word, ***Mashiach***, and it means, simply **“the anointed one” or “the chosen one.”**

In the Old Testament the primary leaders of the people: the prophets, the priests, and the kings, were marked for their positions of responsibility in a ceremony that involved anointing with oil. So, in the Old Testament, if you were *Mashiach,* anointed, then that meant you had been chosen by God and set apart for the work He had for you. In Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word for “anointed” is ***Christos.*** Thus, as you may have heard, when we call Jesus: “Jesus Christ,” we aren’t giving His first and last name. Rather, by calling him Christ we are giving Him a title. We are saying that we believe He is the Messiah.

Over time, this general word for an “anointed one” became a specialized term referring to a coming leader—God’s Chosen One—who would fulfill a number of prophecies and restore Israel’s fortunes. There were a number of expectations about this coming Messiah.

For one thing, He was expected to be in the line of King David. This is in keeping with a promise given to David in 2 Samuel 7 that he would have a descendant who sat upon an eternal throne. **Ezekiel 34:23-24** picks up on this idea:

**23**I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. **24**I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken.

The references to David are important because David was considered the greatest of Israel’s Kings. He was a military hero, a great fighter who took on and defeated the enemies of God. More than that, under David’s reign the tribes were united and the city of Jerusalem was built into a great capital. Plus, for all his flaws, David was “a man after God’s own heart” who led the way in worship and devotion to Jehovah.

The expectation, then, was that when the Messiah came he would be like David in leading a revival of Israel’s fortunes. For example, **Psalm 110 is written by David about the Messiah** (and is the most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament):

**1**The Lord says to my lord:

“Sit at my right hand  
    until I make your enemies  
    a footstool for your feet.”

**2**The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying,  
    “Rule in the midst of your enemies!”  
**3**Your troops will be willing  
    on your day of battle.  
Arrayed in holy splendor,  
    your young men will come to you  
    like dew from the morning’s womb.

This is heady stuff, and you can see why the Israelites were waiting for this to be fulfilled. “Your enemies [will be] a footstool for your feet.” “The Lord will extend your mighty scepter from Zion [which is another name for Jerusalem].” You “will rule in the midst of your enemies!” “Your troops will be…arrayed in holy splendor.”

For centuries the people of God had been beaten down and overlooked. Really, ever since David’s day, they had been bit players on the world stage. Conquered and carried into exile. Scattered all over the map.

And yet, despite this, they had managed to hold onto a national identity. They maintained their commitment to God. And one of the things that sustained them was promises like this, that the Anointed One was going to come and make them matter again. **Psalm 149:**

**6**May the praise of God be in their mouths  
    and a double-edged sword in their hands,  
**7**to inflict vengeance on the nations  
    and punishment on the peoples,  
**8**to bind their kings with fetters,  
    their nobles with shackles of iron,

And, of course, for this to all happen, it was believed that the Messiah would be a very impressive person. The expectation was that He would be a conquering hero of comic book proportions and abilities. One of the most influential prophecies was **Daniel 7:17-18:**

**13**“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. **14**He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

One who stands in the presence of the Ancient of Days. One who is given “authority, glory and sovereign power.” One who will come riding on the clouds and who will have a kingdom without end, Amen. Amen.

This is the Messiah the people were looking for, and the Messiah many Jews are still waiting for today. A cosmic warrior. A superhero. A man who immediately commands attention and is hurt by no one.

Now, let me be clear. We believe that all of these prophecies apply to Jesus. The New Testament goes out of its way to show that Jesus is descended from David. We believe that the day is still coming—when Jesus returns, riding on the clouds—that He will make His enemies a footstool and exact judgment on evil. The phrase, “Son of Man” from Daniel 7 was one of Jesus’ favorite ways of referring to Himself and he quoted that passage on the night of His trial. These are prophecies of Jesus.

But Jesus did not fit all of these expectations during His time on earth; or, at least, He did not fit them in the way people expected. They wanted salvation, but they did not expect any suffering. They wanted a king wrapped in glory; they did not expect a servant robed in humility.

***Despised and Rejected***That was the Messiah that was expected. Now we need to talk about **the Messiah we needed.** Isaiah predicts that the Messiah will be a servant who is humble and unassuming. Isaiah describes him as **a nobody from nowhere**. **Verse 2:**

**2**He grew up before him like a tender shoot,  
    and like a root out of dry ground.

The “tender shoot” reference describes what is sometimes known as a “sucker plant.” It’s the little starter plants that grow up at the base of a fruit tree. Usually, the gardener prunes them away before they can steal resources from the main plant. They are insignificant.

And, a root out of dry ground is clearly not a plant with strong prospects. A plant growing where there is no water is not going to amount to much.

Jesus was not born in Rome. He wasn’t even born in Jerusalem. He was born in a most unlikely way, to a peasant girl in a dingy stable in a small town. He grew up in Nazareth. A place so little thought of that when Nathanael—one of His first followers by the way—heard that Jesus came from there his immediate response was “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” (John 1:46)

His parents were people of little means. He did not have the kind of resources that prepare one to be a major player on the world stage. Years later, when he had grown up, His critics dismissed him by asking, “Is this not the carpenter’s son?”(Matthew 13:55) They didn’t mean it as a compliment.

Jesus was nobody from nowhere; just like billions and billions of other people who have lived and died on this planet. In spite of the fact that He was God’s own Son, he identified with the ordinary experience of regular people.

Plus, he had **an unimpressive, ordinary appearance. The second half of verse 2**:

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,  
    nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

The Bible does not give a physical description of Jesus. We aren’t told how tall he was, whether he was skinny or stocky, what length of hair he had, or what color his eyes were. This is as close as we get to physical description, and it was written centuries before Jesus came.

Of course, we all have an idea of what we think Jesus looks like. One of the most influential paintings in American churches is Warner Sallman’s **Head of Christ.** I call this Jesus’ graduation photo because it looks like a yearbook picture from the ‘50s.This is what millions of Sunday School children think Jesus really looks like. He has long flowing hair, a nicely trimmed beard, chiseled features, piercing eyes, with a soft glowing light that seems to radiate from his face.

That’s a very European portrait of Jesus. In reality, he probably looked much more Middle Eastern. But we don’t know. **This is pretty much the only passage that addresses** His appearance and the stress is on the fact that He was rather unremarkable. No beauty or majesty. No matinee idol good looks or comic book hero muscles.

In fact, I have heard some speculation that—based on Isaiah 53—Jesus may have been physically disfigured in some way. Especially because **of 52:14:**

**14**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—

I’ve heard speculation that Jesus may have been exceptionally short; or had a twisted spine, or a facial disfigurement; or something else. And it is possible. Though as has been pointed out, if Jesus had any such noticeably distinct physical features, it probably would not have been necessary for Judas to kiss him in order to single him out to the soldiers on the night of the betrayal. If he was the shortest one there, or if he had a humpback, Judas would probably have identified him in that way.

**The point seems to be that** Jesus was ordinary in His appearance. A face that would have blended into the crowd. His physical presence did not set Him apart as the kind of Messiah people were expecting.

And then, and probably the biggest reason people could not see Him as the Messiah: **He had a despicable end.** This is probably what 52:14 is referring to when it talks about His appalling appearance and His form being marred beyond human likeness.

When Jesus died on the cross it was the end of a terrible ordeal. He had been beaten and flogged until his skin was torn open and trailing in ribbons behind Him. When He was nailed to the cross beam and raised to the top of the crucifixion post, His body would have been wracked with pain and twisted into unimaginable positions of torture. His disfigurement came at the time of His death, and it became the biggest argument against His Messiah-ship. **Verse 3:**

**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.

People expected a comic-book hero. Superman with the Incredible Hulk’s muscles and Batman’s ingenuity. They expected a conquering warrior. So when Jesus was marched up Golgatha and hung up to die; when He didn’t fight back or call down legions of angels to protect Him; there was just no way they could see Him as their King. In fact, the Old Testament says that anybody who dies the way Jesus died—hung on a tree—is under the curse of God (Deut. 21:23). How could Messiah be under the curse of God?

And so, Jesus’ death becomes another reason He is despised and held in low esteem. Many decided then, and still decide today, that He could not possibly be the Messiah.

Which is precisely why Isaiah 53 is so important. Because even though suffering was not a part of people’s expectation for the Messiah; it was the expectation of God. Even though people didn’t want to see it; what happened to Jesus was exactly what Isaiah said would happen.

The expectation of the people was that the Messiah would bring them national revival. Vengeance on enemies and new influence in world affairs. They were looking for someone who would run the Romans out and restore their fortunes. They thought that would make everything better.

But God knew that their biggest problem wasn’t the status of their nation or their political situation. God knew the biggest problem was humanity’s separation from Him. What Israel needed—what everyone in the world needed was atonement for sin.

And so, He sent the Messiah into the world not, first of all, as a conquering King, but as a suffering servant. Messiah came to take the curse of God so we wouldn’t have too. **Verse 4:**

**4**Surely he took up our pain  
    and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
    stricken by him, and afflicted.

This is the description of Messiah that Isaiah gave. It is what God said would happen. And it is exactly who Jesus turned out to be.

***Application***What’s our take away? I love these looks at prophecy and how God described in advance exactly what Jesus would do. As a student of the Bible, these are things I enjoy digging into for hours on end.

I hope it also fascinates you. I hope, as I said last week, that you will have a deeper appreciation for God’s Authorship of scripture.

But what else can we take away from today’s sermon? I have two things:

**1. Don’t confuse Christ’s mission.**

Do not make the same mistake the Jewish leaders made so long ago.

Do not put Jesus in a man-made box.

Do not demand that he meet your expectations.

It’s tempting for the Church today to fall prey to the same expectations people had back then. We see the mission in terms of political power. We feel like Christians must dominate the cultural landscape. We believe that we only have influence if we are in control.

But too often this approach paints the wrong picture of Jesus. When we portray Jesus as a culture warrior, people have a hard time picturing Him as a suffering servant. When it appears that the only thing Christians are interested in is political power and putting our opponents in their place; Jesus is seen as one more would-be world ruler, and not as the loving savior of the world.

Jesus is the Messiah who will come again to establish His reign in His own time. In the meantime, let’s not confuse the mission. Our calling is not to bring about Christian rule on earth; but to point people to the One who died in their place.

**2. Rejoice that the man of sorrows carried your sorrows.**

I’m a little disappointed in the NIV’s translation of **verse 3:**

**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.

It has “man of suffering.” It’s not that that’s wrong. In fact, since this chapter is known as the “Suffering Servant Song”, it makes sense to highlight that word.

But older translations have it as “man of sorrows.” A phrase that has made it into some of our songs. A phrase that seems just a bit more poetic.

At least the NIV is consistent, however, in using the **same word in verse 4:**

**4**Surely he took up our pain  
    and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
    stricken by him, and afflicted.

“Suffering” here is translated as “sorrows” in older versions as well. The point, of course, is that Jesus takes our suffering for us. He carries our sorrows. That’s the key to our salvation, the foundation of our hope.

Have you asked Jesus to carry your sorrows for you? Have you recognized that He is the servant who suffered on your behalf? If you have not, you can do so today. Recognize that He is the Messiah we needed. The Messiah you need. And give your life to Him today.