Isaiah 53:4-6 *53: The Suffering Substitute*

***On Substitution***When I was in seminary, I did some substitute teaching.

I was not very good at it.

Actually, training to be a teacher is part of the story of my call to be a pastor. When I was an undergrad, I majored in history. There are not a whole lot of jobs whose educational requirement is a BA in history; so, like many of the students at the University of Northern Iowa, I enrolled in the teaching program. The goal, I suppose, was that I would teach middle or high school. Except, in order to graduate from the teaching program, you have to be a student teacher. And, while I met the requirements of my student teacher assignments, I quickly realized that classroom management was not a skill I possessed. This, along with other things God was doing in my life at the time, led me to enroll in seminary.

But since I had the teacher training, and since my seminary did not schedule classes on Fridays, I called a number of schools in the Chicago suburbs and got myself registered as a substitute teacher.

Some people are very good at substitute teaching. They are capable of walking into a classroom as a complete stranger, look over the regular teacher’s lesson plans, and engage the students in constructive learning.

I was not one of those people. I was young and I looked younger. The schools I subbed at were larger than virtually every school in Iowa and I often got easily lost in the buildings. I rarely subbed in the same classroom more than once. I was always just a one-day sub—only Fridays—so even if there were lesson plans I usually ignored them. My goal was to survive. To make sure no kids got into trouble while I was responsible for them. Generally, when I subbed, the classroom became an additional study hall. I don’t have any stories of completely losing control of the class; but every time I subbed I felt like it was a real possibility.

I’m sure for the regular teachers it was frustrating to have someone like me as a sub. Whatever lesson plans they left and whatever momentum they had in the class was interrupted by me. I’m sure for the kids it wasn’t so good either. Sure, they might have thought it was fun to blow off learning for a day; but they weren’t getting the educational experience they deserved.

That’s the thing about substitutes, they usually aren’t as good as the thing they are replacing.

Take another place we use the word “substitute”: in the world of athletics. In basketball, one player will sub in for another. Sometimes this is helpful, the substitute usually has fresher legs and maybe offers a different style of play than the player being replaced. But still, there’s a reason one player is a substitute rather than a starter. At the end of the game, the starters tend to have more minutes played than the substitutes. Substitutes are usually a step down.

Or, another place we use the word “substitute”: in the world of cooking. If you are following a recipe and discover you don’t have a certain ingredient, there are websites that suggest possible substitutes. Like you can use 3 tablespoons of mayonnaise instead of an egg. But when you sub one ingredient out for another, your dish is rarely as good. When the recipe calls for heavy cream and you use skim milk; or real butter and you replace it with margarine; it’s just not the same dish.

(Quick cooking disaster story: a couple of Christmases ago we decided we were going to make crème brulee: the desert with the custard bottom and the hard, sugary coating on top. Only as we made the custard something went wrong. Either we accidentally substituted salt for sugar, or we left the sugar out entirely. Our custard tasted like salty scrambled eggs. It was not good. We have never tried to make crème brulee again.)

My point is: we don’t usually think of substitutes as an upgrade. But in our sermon today we are going to see that substitution is the vital principle in Jesus’ mission to save us. **Jesus took our place when He went to the cross, and it is the most important act of substitution ever.**

***The Heart of the Heart of the Good News***Our text today is Isaiah 53:4-6. When I introduced Isaiah 53 a few weeks ago I tried to show that the structure of Isaiah’s book is such that the most important point comes right at the center of the chapter. The last 27 chapters of Isaiah are the good news portion of his book. The central chapter in that is chapter 53. And the center of the chapter (when you include the last 3 verses of chapter 53, which you should) is verses 4 through 6. **This, then, is the heart of the heart of the good news of Isaiah:**

**4**Surely he took up our pain  
    and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
    stricken by him, and afflicted.  
**5**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.  
**6**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.

Last week, Beth focused on verse 6 to highlight our greatest problem. “We all, like sheep, have gone astray.” “Each of us has turned our own way.” Our greatest problem is sin. Sin is a universal, personal rebellion against God. Unless our sin problem is fixed, all other problems are irrelevant.

But these verses also point to the solution. A substitute.

John MacArthur says: “These three verses may well be the most magnificent verses in the entire Old Testament.” He goes on to say: “It is not only the vital theological key to Isaiah 53; it is also the vital marrow of everything scripture teaches about how sin is ultimately atoned for.” (p. 92)

**John Piper writes this:**

This is the heart of the gospel of Jesus—substitution. This is the great message of good news that God has for rebel subjects who are willing to lay down their rebellion. Instead of collapsing in grief over our rejection, he bears our griefs. **Instead of increasing our** sorrows, he carries our sorrows. Instead of avenging our transgressions, he is pierced for them in our place. Instead of crushing us for our iniquities, he is crushed for them as our substitute. And all the chastisement and whipping that belong to us for our rebellion he takes on himself in order that we might have peace and be healed.

**You don't have to understand all the intricacies** of how this works in order to be healed and forgiven any more than you have to understand how a computer works in order to write poems on your word processor. God tells us what we need to know. His rejected Servant is in fact a ransoming Substitute for rebel subjects. That's the gospel. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/surely-he-has-borne-our-griefs>

My goal for us today is to look at how this substitution works. Piper says that we don’t need to understand all the intricacies to benefit from it, and we don’t. But I believe the more we can know about what Jesus did for us in taking our place, the more we can appreciate and love Him for it. So I want to look at the principle of substitution in the Bible, and then we’ll come back to these precious verses to see how they were fulfilled by Jesus, the perfect substitute.

***Snapshots of Substitution***Let’s start with the principle of substitution in the Bible. I want to show you that substitution is a part of God’s work with His people. I want to share **three snapshots of substitution**.

The first snapshot comes from **Genesis 22.** God instructs Abraham to take his son; his only son; Isaac, whom he loves; and sacrifice him on a mountain in Moriah.

It is a devastating request. Not only is the notion of child sacrifice appalling; but the idea of giving up this child, in particular, is unthinkable. Isaac is the child of promise. The child of Abraham’s old age. Isaac is the child that Abraham has gone through so much in order to bring into the world.

We are told right away that this is a test. We know that Isaac’s life is not actually in danger. But Abraham does not know that. He is given no explanation, no qualification to soften the blow. He can only figure that God gave Isaac to him, and so God has the right to take him back.

And yet, in spite of what is at stake, Abraham moves forward in obedience and faith. The rest of the chapter is a slow escalation in tension as Abraham cuts the wood and saddles the donkey and takes two servants and his only son on a three- day journey. At one point as he and the boy are climbing the appointed mountain on foot, Isaac seems to sense **what is about to happen**:

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

Abraham’s answer is both **heartbreaking and hopeful**:

**8**Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

Eventually, they reach the place God had told him about. You can imagine the tears in Abraham’s eyes as he stacks stone after stone to build an altar. You can imagine the trembling of his hands as he arranges the woods. You can imagine the cracking in his voice as he asks Isaac to stand still as he binds the boy’s hands and feet. You can imagine the sheer terror both father and son felt as Abraham raised the knife to take Isaac’s life…

And then, relief. **An angel of the Lord appears to stay his hand**. Imagine Abraham’s pure joy as he loosens Isaac’s bindings and takes him in his arms.

And then, the substitution. **Genesis 22:13:**

**13**Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. **14**So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.”

Abraham sacrificed the ram “as a burnt offering instead of his son.” As a substitute. We never do find out why God wanted Isaac’s life; but Abraham would never forget the ram who took his son’s place.

**The next snapshot** comes from Exodus 12. It is the end of the long battle between Pharaoh and the LORD. Already God has unleased 9 plagues against Egypt, now He is going to send the 10th and final judgment that will release the Israelites from bondage. The Angel of the Lord is going to pass through the land and strike down the first born of every family. There will be no discrimination between animals and humans, between rich and poor, nor even between Egyptian and Israelite. Every firstborn in the land will be destroyed.

Except, for the Israelites there is a means of protection. They can gather in their homes, shut their doors, and offer a substitute. **Exodus 12:21-23:**

21Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, “Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. 22Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. None of you shall go out of the door of your house until morning. **23When the Lord goes through** the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down**.**

It happens exactly as God said it would. That night terror falls upon Egypt and in the morning Pharaoh urges Moses to lead the Israelites away.

But for those Israelites who slaughtered a Passover Lamb in place of their eldest and then huddled together in their homes, no harm comes. And from that point forward the Passover becomes an annual observation where the people remember the blood of the lamb that took their place.

**The third snapshot**, then, comes from Leviticus 16. Here God is giving the instructions for the rituals and sacrifices that will keep His people in right relationship with Him. Specifically, He is giving instructions for an annual day known as the “Day of Atonement.” The day when an accounting will be taken for the sins of the nation.

The ritual involved two goats. **One goat was to be sacrificed** and its blood sprinkled on the altar in the usual way (Leviticus 16:15). The other goat was to be the scapegoat. **Leviticus 16:21-22** explains what was to be done:

**21**He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. **22**The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness.

Some have tried to find different purposes for the two goats; but really, they should be seen as fulfilling their purpose together. One goat—the one that dies--exhibits the means of the atonement, substitutionary death in the place of the people. The other—the scapegoat, which is left in the wilderness—exhibits the results of the atonement, the sin of the people being born far away.

It is in this snapshot that we get the clearest picture of how reconciliation with God is possible: substitutionary sin-bearing. God shows His willingness to accept a substitute as the payment for the debt of sin that we owe Him. The people are reminded of their need for another to take their place.

***Three Observations***Those are pictures of substitution in the Bible. They pave the way for Isaiah 53:4-6. But before we go back to that passage, let me make three observations:

**1. It is to God that atonement must be made.** Please notice that in all these stories, the sacrifice is being offered to God. He is the debt-holder. He is the offended party when we sin. He is the righteous judge that demands sins be paid for.

God’s holiness demands that an accounting be made for sin. He cannot let sin go unpunished and remain a just judge. And so, in each of these cases, it is God’s wrath that must be satisfied, and no one else’s.

**2. Animal sacrifices are not truly sufficient to pay for human sin.** The thing about the sacrifices of the Old Testament is that they had to be repeated again and again. There is no record of Abraham’s sacrifice being commemorated, but the Passover and Day of Atonement were observed every year. In addition to many other sin sacrifices.

This is a recognition of what I talked about at the beginning, substitutions are usually a step down. It’s hard to find a substitute as good as the original; or, in this case, an animal sacrifice that can bear the cost of human sin.

In the New Testament, the writer of the **book of Hebrews puts it bluntly**:

**3**But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. **4**It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Hebrews 10:3-4)

Which leads to a third observation:

**3. These stories are pointers to a greater act of substitution.** The principle of substitution is firmly established in the Old Testament as a means of atoning for sin; even as the repeated nature of the sacrifices are a reminder that sheep and goats are an insufficient substitution. These stories are here then to make the people long for a perfect substitute, one who can truly stand in for us and atone for our sins.

***The Sin-Bearer***Which is precisely what **Isaiah 53:4-6** is talking about.

**4**Surely he took up our pain  
    and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
    stricken by him, and afflicted.  
**5**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.  
**6**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.

Notice the language of substitution in these verses. See how many times Isaiah uses “our” and “we” and “us.”

“Our pain.”  
“Our suffering”  
“Our transgressions.”  
“Our iniquities.”  
The punishment that “brought us peace.”  
“With his wounds *we* are healed”  
“*We* . . . have gone astray”  
“*We* have turned”  
“The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of *us* all”

The servant described here did not suffer for his own transgressions and iniquities. It was not pain and sorrow that he deserved. He was taking the place of others. He was a substitute.

Pay attention, too, to the language of sin bearing:

“He took up our pain.”  
“He bore our suffering.”  
“The punishment…was on him.”  
“The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Nothing in this passage makes sense until you feel the full weight of this truth:

What the suffering servant did, he did for us

He was the ram caught in the thicket, the Passover lamb, the scapegoat; He was the perfect sacrifice who takes the place of sinners and pays our debt once and for all.

And, of course, we believe that Isaiah was talking about Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy. Jesus is the Suffering Servant who took our place. We believe that these verses explain what happened on the day we call Good Friday. The pain and the brutality and the indignity of the cross, it was all for us.

Here’s what the New Testament says, picking up the language of Isaiah. **1 Peter 2:24**

**24**“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”

**Hebrews 9:28:**

**28**so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

And **2 Corinthians 5:21**:

**21**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Jesus is the ultimate substitute. The one who takes our place and bears our sin once and forever so that we don’t have to experience the suffering God’s righteousness demands and our rebellion deserves.

Almost 1000 years ago a French monk named Bernard of Clairvaux capture Jesus’ substitution for us in the hymn “O Sacred Head Now Wounded.” **The second verse says:**

Mine, mine was the transgression  
But thine the deadly pain  
Lo, here I fall my Savior  
Tis I deserve they place!

This is the message of Isaiah 53. This is the meaning of the cross. **John Stott wrote:**

The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. **Man asserts himself against God** and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.

***Will You Let Him Take Your Place?***

**5But 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.

Jesus took our place when He went to the cross, and it is the most important act of substitution ever. The question is: will you let him take your place?

Sometimes, we don’t want to be substituted for. We see this in sports all the time. The star quarterback doesn’t want to come out of the game, even though he is limping. A basketball player glares at her coach as another player enters the game for her. They believe they can do the job themselves. They don’t want another to take their place.

Sometimes we can be the same way. In our pride, we want to atone for our own mistakes. Either we cannot bear to acknowledge the seriousness of our sin or the incredible penalty it deserves. We don’t want another to stand in for us. We think we can handle it. We often give the impression that we would rather suffer our own punishment rather than suffer the humiliation of seeing Christ bear it in our place.

But Jesus is not an inferior substitute. He is the perfect lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And He has paid a debt greater than we are willing to admit that we owe.

Let Him sub in for you. Let Him take your place.

Find you healing in His wounds.