

Good Friday: The Penal Substitutionary Suffering of Christ | Isaiah 52:13-53:12

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The Song of the Suffering Servant is recorded in Isaiah 53. It's the clearest articulation of the life and work of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament.

Written some seven hundred years prior, it's five stanzas seem to follow the contours of Christ's life. His humble birth (52:13-15; 53:1-3), rejection by his people (51:1-3), his healings, sorrows, and sufferings (53:4-6). His unjust trial and death (53:7-9). Even his resurrection: "when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days" (Isa 53:10-12).

Nearly every verse is quoted or echoed in the New Testament. Isaiah 53 was the passage God used in the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch, when the evangelist Philip showed him this mysterious figure, "my Servant" (52:13; 53:11), was in fact Jesus Christ (Acts 8:26-39).

I want to draw our attention to how this prophecy focuses on the heart of Christ's work: *His suffering*. During his ministry, how often he said to his disciples, "the Son of Man must suffer many things, be rejected, and killed" (Mk 8:31). The Cross cast its shadow over Jesus' life and ministry.

What Isaiah 53 does, is help us understand the *nature* of Christ's suffering. Suffering can vary in extent and intensity. It can also vary in cause. Understanding why, precisely, the Servant must suffer so much is essential to understanding the Gospel.

Therefore, on this Good Friday, we consider the *nature* of the Servant's suffering. We then ask how this particular feature of His suffering helps solve the problem of Divine Forgiveness: *how can the Righteous God pardon sinners without corrupting justice and defiling His Holiness?* Put another way, I want us to see why the Servant's sufferings are the only way to hold justice and mercy together.

I. Penal Suffering

The Servant is suffering in Isaiah 53. He is a "man of sorrows" (53:3). But why?

Not all suffering is the same.

A student may suffer waiting an extra hour after school, missing crucial time for playing with friends. If this is because her mom is late to pick her up, or because she's waiting for her ride's soccer practice to end, then her suffering is *incidental* or *circumstantial* suffering.

But if her hour of waiting is because she is in detention for her own wrongdoing, then her suffering is not *incidental*. It is *penal* (or punitive) suffering—this is suffering as a penalty or punishment for wrongdoing.

So, you can suffer the pain of a one hour wait, but that suffering can be for very different reasons.

Why is Servant suffering?

Christ suffered in many ways in his life, but the suffering foregrounded in Isaiah 53 is not *circumstantial* or *incidental*—it is *penal*. The Servant is being punished, bearing a penalty.

The punitive language is replete. Notice verses 4-6, where He is

stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 ... **pierced** for our transgressions; ... **crushed** for our iniquities; upon him was the **chastisement** that brought us peace... 6 ... the LORD has **laid on him the iniquity** of us all (53:4-6).

In verse 8 he is “**stricken for transgression.**” In 12, He “**bore the sin.**”

The language of “bearing” in relation to “sin” or “transgression”—as in, “he bore the sin of man” (53:12)—conveys the sense of *experiencing the consequences* of breaking God’s law.

For example, God warns Israelites against breaking the Passover:

If anyone who is clean and is not on a journey fails to keep the Passover, that person shall be cut off from his people ...that man **shall bear his sin.** (Num 9:13).

In this passage, “shall bear his sin” is equivalent to “shall be cut off from his people,” where bearing means experiencing the consequences.

When God announced Cain’s punishment, Cain cries, “My punishment is greater than I can **bear**” (Gen. 4:13).

“Bearing,” in the sense of bearing sin, means here experiencing the penal consequences of wrongdoing.

And while “bear” conveys experiencing a consequence, the language of “**smiting,**” “**piercing**” and “**crushing**” (vv. 4-5), violently depicts their meeting out.

And when we add that this punishment is due to “**iniquity**” (vv. 5, 6, 11) “**transgression**” (vv. 5, 8) and “**sin**” (v 12), we can only conclude that the nature of the Servant’s suffering is *penal*: he is paying the penalty for sin.

And it is the Lord doing the striking—not Assyria or Babylon. In Leviticus 26, the Lord warned Israel of the consequences of brazen rebellion that refuses to repent:

if by this discipline you are not turned to me but walk contrary to me, then I also will walk contrary to you, and I myself will **strike** you sevenfold for your sins (Lev 26:23-24)

This term “**strike**” is used twice for the Servant: “we esteemed his **stricken**” (v 4) and “**stricken** for the transgression” (v 8). And as in Leviticus 26, it is the LORD’s doing: “the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (v 6); “it was the will of the LORD to crush him” (v 10).

In summary, the suffering the servant is undergoing *punitive* or *penal* suffering for sin—God has laid a “chastisement” upon him (v 5).

II. Substitutionary Sufferings

Along with being *penal*, however, the nature of the Servant's suffering is also *vicarious*, or *substitutionary*.

He himself is innocent, has clean hands: "he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth" (53:9). So, for what did he suffer? The answer resounds across the poem: *for our sins*:

He was "pierced for **our transgression**" (5); "crushed for **our iniquities**" (5); "the LORD has laid on him **the iniquity of us all**" (6); he was "stricken for **the transgression of my people**" (8); "shall bear **their iniquities**" (11); "he bore **the sins of many**" (12).

Jesus stands in our place as a substitute to bear the penalty for our sins.

This general idea was not foreign in Israel. In the Day of Atonement rituals, at one point we are told that the high priest

Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions... and the goat shall **bear their iniquities** to a remote place (Lev 16:21).

The goat was sent outside of the camp—signifying sins being removed—born by another. We might think of Jesus being crucified outside the city of Jerusalem.

We call this substitution—Christ suffers in our place. And because he suffers our penalty, we call this *penal substitution*. Christ penalized for our sin; Christ bearing our condemnation ("our chastisement," v 5). Which is why Paul writes: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1).

To summarize: In Isaiah 53, the Servant is not suffering as a war hero; he is not merely suffering circumstantially or incidentally. He is suffering as *a substitutionary sacrifice*, paying the penalty of God's wrath by bearing our sin.

This prepares us now to consider a final but broader matter: *how does penal substitutionary suffering satisfy the requirements for divine forgiveness?*

III. His Satisfying Suffering.

The servant ends up *satisfied*—resurrected and vindicated! "Out of the anguish of his soul, he shall see and be satisfied" (53:11).

Many of those who mocked him, end up transformed: "the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous" (53:11).

Because of what the Servant has done, God can now say that the "many people" who mocked and hurt him, are "counted righteous." This means forgiven of sin and placed in a right standing before God.

I want now to explore why all this suffering was necessary to forgive and announce righteous—to *satisfy* the requirements for divine forgiveness.

In the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury published a book about the work of Christ. In it, his imagined interlocuter asks,

why it was not proper for God to put away sins *by compassion alone*, without any payment of the honor taken from him.¹

It's a penetrating question.

Why couldn't God just forgive our sins? Let bygones be bygones without demanding such recompense. Wouldn't His compassion move him to do so—without requiring the Servant to suffer?

Humans forgive like this all the time. Governments pardon crimes or grant amnesty; loved ones forgive each other for hurts, demanding an apology but not full compensation. Hospitals or charities may cancel—forgive—unpaid medical bills.

Why can't God forgive our sins this way—without requiring any payment or recompense? Why was the penal, substitutionary suffering of the Servant necessary to *satisfy* the requirements for divine forgiveness?

Our confusion about this question involves at least two things: confusion about **ourselves**—the nature of our sin. And confusion about **God**—the nature of His Holiness.

The Nature of Our Sin

We tend to think of sin as breaking a rule here or there. It's rather impersonal.

But the Bible understands it as far more.

The Bible reveals a *God-centered* view of Sin. Here, sin is a *self-centered* rebellion *against God*. More than breaking a rule, "sin is defiance" As Emil Brunner writes, "the desire to be equal with God...the assertion of human independence over against God."²

In defiance, someone is defied, and that someone is God.

And sin is *abdication*—failing to fulfill our God-given mandate to honor and serve God with all our heart, soul and strength.

"To sin," answered Anselm, "is nothing else than not to render to God his due."³

Sin, then, is personal: defiance of God and abdication of our God-given responsibilities. "All have sinned," concludes Paul, "and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23).

For God to simply excuse sin, to never ultimately judge it, would risk corrupting the nature of Justice.

¹ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*

² Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth, 1939), 129; cited in John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 92.

³ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*.

It would also further dehumanize sinners. For we would never be held accountable, never faced with the ramifications of our actions. Merely from a psychological vantage point, this would be unbearable. There is something within the human conscience that cannot be at peace knowing that all the wrongs we have done have never been made up for. We want to *pay* for them—so the pain of guilt will go away and we can have peace. And how could we be reconciled with God, knowing that all the defiance we've done against him as never been paid for?

The Nature of God's Holiness

The second reason God cannot simply forgive sin with no cost has to do with God—His holiness.

We tend to imagine God forgiving sin the way, say, a good human father might forgive a son or daughter. He will eventually just let things go because he loves his child. But God is God, and not a mere man.

The essential background to Christ's sufferings on the Cross is a Holy God's response to *defiance* against His Name. We need to let the Bible remind us of who God is.

God is Holy.

His "eyes are too pure to look upon evil" (Hab 1:13).

No sinner can be in the presence of God and survive.

Even the greatest leaders in the Scriptures, when they approach God's presence, come undone: Moses "hid his face," Isaiah announces, "Woe is me" (Isa 6:5), Job says, "I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6), Ezekiel "falls on his face," (Ezek 1:28), Daniel is knocked unconscious "with his face to the ground" (Daniel 10:9), John falls "at his feet as though dead" (Rev 1:17).

Sinful humanity *cannot* approach God. He is "high" and we are low. He is light and we love darkness.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.... for our God is a consuming fire (Heb 10:31; 12:29).

The natural reaction of God's holiness to sin is called God's wrath. When it burns forth, it is like a flame meeting a gust of oxygen and surging. Wrath is God's antagonism to evil.⁴

While human anger is often arbitrary, rooted in insecurities and uncontrolled; divine wrath is always principled and controlled, aroused only by true evil and sin, and expressed appropriately.

John Stott puts it this way: "God's holiness exposes sin; his wrath opposes sin. So sin cannot approach God, and God cannot tolerate sin."⁵

⁴ At times in Scripture, when the sin of people grows so great, the land is described as "vomiting them out" (Lev 18:25-28). God's anger is like this—a divine revulsion to evil. Just as the body cannot tolerate certain pathogens, the holiness of God cannot tolerate sin—it vomits it out.

⁵ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 107.

The reason God cannot simply forgive sin without judgement, is because it would violate his nature. By His nature, He responds to evil and sin with righteous wrath.

Can you imagine a human judge, who prides himself on being a person of justice, but who simply forgiving, or pardons, every criminal he sees—and telling you it's because he is a man of compassion? Would that not corrupt the nature of justice and undermine that judge's character?

Here, then, is how we understand the mission of the Suffering Servant—His *penal, substitutionary suffering and death on the Cross*.

Jesus Christ is the God-Man, fully God, and fully man—the Suffering Servant turns out to be Yahweh himself, come for His people.

On the Cross, Jesus, **fully God**, bears the sin—the punishment for our wrongdoing—that upholds his Divine standards of Justice. Therefore, God's holiness is honored.

But, it is the Judge taking the Judgement instead of us. So, God's holiness is honored but we sinners are protected.

Jesus is also the **perfect human**—fully man but without sin. So, on the cross he presents to God a life of perfect obedience: never breaking God's will and obeying His will even to the point of death. Therefore, Jesus presents to God *perfect* human obedience—upholding the integrity of humanity.

Now, by our faith in Christ, our union to Him, our sins are punished by God *upon God* on the Cross; and our faithful obedience to God is represented *by Jesus* as our representative.

And so, we are forgiven and declared righteous because of the suffering servant:

The righteous one, my servant, makes many to be counted righteous, and shall bear their iniquities (Isa 53:11).

Only the *penal substitutionary suffering* of the Servant, God's Son, satisfies the requirements for Divine Forgiveness: the Justice of God and the Mercy of God truly meet on the Cross.

And now, for sinners, the equation is as simple and stark as John puts it:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the **wrath** of God remains on him (John 3:36).

And also, Paul,

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the **wrath** of God. (Rom. 5:9)

We close by considering a few implications of the Suffering Servant's vicarious sufferings.

First, Jesus' substitutionary work on the Cross reminds us that the behind all our other problems lies our broken relationship with God. We are either sinners in enmity with God, or children at peace—and this peace is *only* wrought through the Cross of Christ.

This is a preaching draft.

Second, it teaches us that God's forgiveness—though free to us, though offered by grace no matter how awful our sins—is not unconditional for God. It can only be offered because Jesus met all the conditions necessary for God to remain holy while also bestowing mercy to us.

And third, Jesus penal and substitutionary suffering for us deepens our understanding of the Love of God. It is a **pure love**—a love that would not tolerate leaving any injustice or evil in its relationship with you. It is a **suffering love**—a love that was willing to experience the parting of Father and Son, the weight of all our sins. It is a **reassuring love**—for as Paul reasoned,

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom 8:31-32).

This is Servant who “poured out his soul unto death” in order to “bear our sins” (Isa 53:12). Can we not entrust Him today with every detail of our lives? Let us pray.