

“The Gospel in Isaiah 53” Pt. 1

Good morning, it's a privilege to be sharing with you all this morning. Actually, you get me for the next two weeks, as I'm filling the gap between the Jonah series Stan just completed, and the next series we have planned. The plan for these two sermons is really to revisit the Gospel as it is expressed in Isaiah 53. I heard a John Piper sermon in which he likened the Gospel to a diamond, in that its beauty deepens as you turn it to view its different facets. One way to change our angle on the Gospel is to look at it from lesser-known texts. Isaiah 53 is not exactly lesser known as it is almost always included in Holy Week services, but it is often pulled out of its context. So, what I'd like to do is set this chapter in its broader biblical context, as well as the context of Isaiah, in the hopes that this will lend new power to what is expressed in this important chapter of Scripture. And this week will be specifically devoted to considering Isaiah 53 in its general biblical context, and more immediate literary context.

As a disclaimer, we're not going to do a deep dive into Isaiah's context, so much as note a couple of themes that are important to the book, and therefore, are an important part of chapter 53's literary context. But before we focus on those themes in Isaiah, I'd like to briefly discuss where they come from before Isaiah picks them up.

First though, it's important to understand that pretty much every story includes a protagonist and an antagonist. I say, "pretty much", because writers are funny creatures who enjoy doing things just for the sake of doing them. Writing a story without a plot, or without the protagonist-antagonist element, as a couple examples. But, for all intents and purposes, all stories include a protagonist and antagonist. The protagonist of a story is the character or characters (as sometimes the protagonist is represented by a group) with whom the reader is intended to sympathize. Think Cinderella or Robin Hood, or Aslan. The antagonist is the character, characters, or element of the story that is opposed to the purposes of the protagonist. For Cinderella, this is her evil stepmother and stepsisters. For Robin Hood it's the Sheriff of Nottingham, or, if you watch the Disney version, Prince John. And for Aslan, the white witch. As I mentioned, the antagonist is not always a person. For instance, the antagonist for Curious George is his own curiosity that gets him into trouble. So, sometimes the antagonist is some nonpersonal element, like a force, a situation, or a character flaw. Whatever the specifics, what's important to understand is that the motivating force of story is the tension between the protagonist and antagonist.

Closely related to this is the struggle between good and evil. In most stories, good aligns with what benefits the goals of the protagonist, and evil aligns with the doings of the antagonist. This conflict between good and evil is so integral to the human experience that it constitutes the basis for perhaps the most prevalent worldview: the philosophy of dualism. Dualism comes in many different shades, but generally refers to the dividing of existence into two broad categories. Most frequently, when someone talks about dualism as a philosophy for understanding the world, they are referring to the division of reality into the categories of good and evil. Good and bad people; good and bad events; good and bad thoughts and feelings, and so on. In most conceptions of dualism, especially when we consider its representation in the stories we tell in our culture, good and evil are more or less equal forces. Because of this the struggle between the two is eternal. At times good has the upper hand, and at other times evil. In many of our culture's favorite stories, good is portrayed as hopelessly outmatched by evil, and so the excitement of the story comes from the protagonist performing some nearly impossible feat to defeat evil. This is why we tend to love stories of underdogs coming out on top.

If we were to speak of Christianity incorporating dualism (which I'm not sure it does, strictly speaking), it would be important to note a huge difference between anything called "Christian dualism" and dualism's other forms. Which is that in Christianity it is evil that is hopelessly outmatched. Good and evil are not equal in power, or even comparable in power in Christian thought. The big question in the story of Scripture is not whether good or evil will win in the end; biblically, that's never a question, or *in* question. There is never any doubt that evil will be vanquished, and so the conflict between good and evil doesn't really provide any driving tension to the story of the Bible, though it is involved. Rather, the driving tension of the story of Scripture revolves around the question, "*How* will good vanquish evil?" or "*What will it look like* for good to conquer evil?"

We can see this driving tension in Exodus 34:6-7. For some brief context, this passage occurs when Moses is on Mt. Sinai with God. It's after the Golden Calf incident, and so Moses has broken the original tablets with the Ten Commandments, and God has instructed him to cut new tablets himself and meet once again on the mountain to write the Commandments down again. Part of the lead up to this is Moses has a conversation with God in which he basically says, "Look, Israel is a tough nation to lead! They're stubborn! I need you to show me who you are, so I can know how you would have me lead this stubborn people. So, show me your glory!" And God grants his request, basically saying, "Ok. I'm going to put you in the cleft of this rock, and I'll pass by, and you can glimpse my glory." And so, that's what we're about to hear in these verses, God passing before Moses and offering a self-description.

Exodus 34:6-7 says, "The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.'" Do you see the tension? How is God supposed to forgive sinners their iniquity and yet visit iniquity on sinners at the same time? In God's own self-description there seems to be a contradiction. So, the driving tension of Scripture can be seen by asking the question, "How is God supposed to satisfy both His grace and His justice?" It is this seeming tension in God's own character that drives the story of the Bible. Or, to say it another way, when it comes to this story, God's character is both protagonist and antagonist.

You see, we humans at times sacrifice one impulse for another, sometimes extending grace, and sometimes demanding justice, often to the neglect of the other. As imperfect creatures with unfixed and flawed characters this is inevitable, and, at times, even right. But the God who is perfect cannot suffer any such compromise of His character and still be considered the perfect God. And so, in the uncompromising character of God, neither His impulse for grace, nor His impulse for justice can be forsaken; to do so would make Him other than who He is, which, theologically, is impossible. To thoroughly understate the matter, this is a tension without an easy resolution. Part of the complication is that it's hard for us even to say which of God's grace and justice is the protagonist, and which is the antagonist. We all want both grace and justice to be carried out, and yet, we all have issues with grace and justice being carried out. What I mean is that we all intuitively want grace for ourselves, and justice for those who wrong us. *And* we all intuitively fear justice being done to us and get offended when grace is extended to those who wrong us. This is the double-edged sword of the Gospel, which can simultaneously comfort and offend us. I've been slowly reading through Isaiah for the past several months, and my big take away has been that this tension between grace and justice in the character of God who is on full display.

In Isaiah, we have some of the most shocking expressions of God's displeasure with wickedness in the whole Bible. From the very first chapter, verse 9 speaking to Israel, says, "If the LORD of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we should have been like Sodom and become like Gomorrah." For any who are unfamiliar, Sodom and Gomorrah are the go-to examples of wicked people in the Bible, and the Old Testament particularly, and God utterly destroyed those cities because of their wickedness. And Isaiah is comparing Israel to these cities. In fact, Isaiah goes on in verse 10 to refer to the people of Israel as Sodom and Gomorrah, poetically asserting that the wickedness of Israel had reached the bottommost depths of wickedness. While God has plenty of rebuke for Israel in Isaiah, He also has terrifying words for Israel's enemies because they too are wicked, even though He uses Israel's enemies to discipline them. In 13:9 Isaiah says this of Babylon, "Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it." And this comes right before a cluster of other judgements in chapters 14-19.

And then beyond the story of Israel and its enemies, God is displeased with the wickedness of the whole earth. Chapter 24 is a judgement of the whole earth, and in verses 5-6 we get a sample of it. They read, "The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore, a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore, the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left." So, Isaiah shows God's fierce, undeniable sense of justice and righteousness. But we also have, in Isaiah, some of the most moving declarations of hope, blessing, and coming salvation in the whole of the Bible. Some that immediately fill us with a sense of joy, hope, and salvation. For instance: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." We love this passage because it promises that a savior will come to set all things aright. And a few verses later it says that it is the zeal of the LORD, His passion, part of His intrinsic nature that will bring this salvation to be.

Then, consider this contrast in chapter 19, the end of that cluster of judgements I mentioned earlier, this portion concerning Egypt specifically. Verses 16-17 start, "In that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand that the LORD of hosts shakes over them. And the land of Judah will become a terror to the Egyptians. Everyone to whom it is mentioned will fear because of the purpose that the LORD of hosts has purposed against them." So, this sounds about right, judgement for Israel's wicked enemies. But then comes verses 18-25 which are an incredible contrast. "In that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan..." That's the language of Israel! "...And swear allegiance to the LORD of hosts. One of these will be called the City of Destruction. In that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt. When they cry to the LORD because of oppressors, He will send them a savior and defender, and deliver them. And the LORD will make Himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the LORD in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and perform them. And the LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the LORD, and He will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them."

Let's stop here for a second. This is very God-and-Israel, covenantal language that's being used here. Reminiscent of times in the Old Testament where God is telling Israel, "I'm going to punish you, but it will be in order to restore you, and bring you back to me." It's that kind of language, but it's being used of one of Israel's enemies! But it goes on... "In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to

Assyria..." Now we have another one of Israel's enemies being brought in on this. "...And Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians." Two of Israel's enemies are united, worshipping the God of Israel, Yahweh, together! But wait, it goes on...

"In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.'" This is utterly shocking, God is predicting a time in which Egypt, Assyria, and Israel will all be united, and share the status of being a unique people of God. It would be impossible for me to overstate how shocking this would have been to Isaiah's Jewish audience when it was spoken. And then, right on the heels of God's judgement of the whole earth in chapter 24 that I mentioned, is a blessing of the whole earth in chapter 25, the gist of which is captured in verses 6-8 which say, "On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And He will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of His people He will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken." Promises don't get any better than that. And so, God cannot deny His grace, any more than He can deny His justice.

In fact, the whole of the first 52 chapters of Isaiah can be viewed broadly as a wrestling match between God's irresistible impulse toward grace, and His undeniable impulse for justice. Chapter 1 focuses on justice; chapter 2 starts with a prediction of grace. The rest of 2 through chapter 3 focuses on justice; chapter 4 is grace. Chapters 5-6 focus on justice; 7 focuses on grace. 8, justice; 9, grace; 10, justice; 11-12, grace; 13, justice; 14, grace; 15-first half of 19, justice; second half of 19, grace; 20-24, justice; 25-27, grace; first half of 28, justice; second half of 28, grace; 29-first half of 30, justice; second half of 30, grace; 31, justice; 32-33, grace; 34, justice; 35, grace. I'm painting in broad strokes here, representing God's warnings and oracles of coming judgment and wrath with justice, and His promises of restoration, salvation, and blessing with grace, but I trust you get the point.

And amidst this back and forth is the call for Israel to return to faithfulness. Chapters 36-39 pick-up on this theme more explicitly thought, telling a few stories about Hezekiah, and the grace or justice he and Israel experiences based on trusting or not trusting God. Then 40-52 is a long string of chapters that revolve around the folly of trusting idols (which Israel was prone to), instead of trusting God (which Israel struggled to do). In these chapters Israel's unfaithfulness, and the folly of other nations are again in view, because none of them trust God over their idols. But throughout salvation is also hinted at, revolving around the somewhat mysterious character of God's faithful servant. At the end of it all, the question one is left with after the first 52 chapters of Isaiah is, how will the tension between God's justice and grace be resolved? How will Israel and mankind's relationship with God be fixed? Answer: Isaiah 53.

"Who has believed what He has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For He grew up before Him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Surely, He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us

peace, and with His wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. By oppression and judgment, He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made His grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although He had done no violence, and there was no deceit in His mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush Him; He has put Him to grief; when His soul makes an offering for guilt, He shall see His offspring; He shall prolong His days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in His hand. Out of the anguish of His soul He shall see and be satisfied; by His knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and He shall bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will divide Him a portion with the many, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because He poured out His soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He bore the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors.”

Isaiah 53 tells of a servant of the Lord who will come, be rejected by men, regarded as cursed by God, who will suffer and die, not for His own wrongdoing, but for wrongdoing of others, bearing the justice of God in the place of sinners, opening the way to peace and healing, and grace. And yet, following chapter 53 the rest of Isaiah resumes the themes of coming salvation, which now has a new dimension, but still alongside coming judgement of sin. Isaiah actually ends with justice and grace side by side: some worshipping God, and some destroyed by His wrath. Isaiah 53 comes in the middle of the struggle, not the end, but it changes everything.

Once again, the question is not whether good or evil will win out, the question is what will the victory of good over evil look like? Isaiah’s answer is that generally, it will look like some worshipping the LORD in a new heaven, and new earth, and some lying dead on the putrid, burning trash heap of eternity, as chapter 66 describes. Please know, I take no pleasure in presenting the second part of that reality, but these are the two ways in which God’s grace and justice can now both be satisfied. In the first, and most desirable option, God’s grace is satisfied in the forgiveness of sinners, because His justice is satisfied in the servant by who’s wounds those sinners are healed. In the second, and most terrifying option, God’s grace is satisfied in that it is truly extended unreservedly to all, even though in this case it is rejected, and so His justice is satisfied in the righteous punishment of sin.

And so, the glory of Isaiah 53 is not that it changes whether or not good conquers evil, it just creates the way for God’s grace and justice to both be satisfied in His conquering of evil. It reveals the offer that someone else can bear God’s justice so that sinners can enjoy His grace, rather than sinners bearing His justice and missing out on His grace. This is the hope that Isaiah 53 proclaims, and yet at the time of its proclamation it likely would have left people wondering, “Who is this servant? When will he come?” Because, as you’ve hopefully seen, it is on the servant that all their hope now rests.

And, of course, that hope was finally realized in Jesus Christ, the one who would bear the sins of many and so make intercession for the transgressors”. And next week, Lord willing, we will look at how Jesus fulfilled what Isaiah predicted.