

Lenten Meditations On Isaiah Chapter 53 Substituting For Sinners.

Text: Isa 53:4-5

1) Substitution, the blessed mystery of Calvary

Suggested Hymns:

2) Substitution, the very heart of our Christian faith

59, 360, 70, 68, 265

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Isaiah 53:4-5, *⁴ Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

This year our sermons during Lent are based on Isaiah Chapter 53. The theme for today is Jesus “Substituting for Sinners.”

In the south part of the Holy Land lies the **Dead Sea**, the lowest body of water in the world. It is some 50 km long and 15 km wide, six times as salty as the water of the oceans, and for that very reason contains no animal life whatsoever.

And not only is it empty of life, but its lower end, covers some of the ruins of ancient Sodom and Gomorrah, those wicked cities destroyed by the fiery death, which the Lord rained down from heaven.

Very fitting, therefore, is the name, Dead Sea; for the same reason too, the Dead Sea is a picture of the natural heart of man, dead in trespasses and sins, dead to God, and dead to do good.

North of Turkey lies another strange body of water, the **Black Sea**, covering some 436,000 square km, more than all of the American Great Lakes put together. Storms are frequent on its surface, cold winds sweep over it, and

dismal fogs surround it. And here, too, because of the hydrogen sulphide in its deeper waters, there is almost no life at all.

The Black Sea is, then, a picture of the evil of sin, its results and defilements, and all the heartaches and heartbreaks which are ours because *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*¹ Because of sin, you and I are black with guilt before the Lord, our God.

Between Asia and Africa, where East meets West, there is still another famous body of water, the **Red Sea**, on whose waves sailed some of the first ships ever launched by man. It is an arm of the Indian Ocean, about 2,250 km long from the straits of *Bab el Mandeb* in the south to the Suez Canal in the north.

Because of its name, it reminds us of the *“fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel’s veins.”* As the Israelites once passed from the slavery of Egypt through the Red Sea and on to freedom, so we can pass from the slavery of sin and the fear of death through the red sea of the Saviour’s blood into the promised land.

Far to the north, an arm of the Arctic Ocean bends down into the Soviet Union to form what is called the **White Sea**. It is icebound from September to June, and around it the dazzling whiteness of winter snow lies even longer.

And so the White Sea, may well picture for us, the sinner forgiven through Christ. *“Come now, and let us reason together,” Says the LORD, “Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow”* we read in Isaiah 1:18.

Here, then, we have a spiritual map to guide us to heaven: dead in trespasses and sin, and black with guilt before God, yet by the Saviour’s red blood we can nevertheless pray with the Psalmist, *Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*²

And if this seems too good to be true, too great to believe, too grand and hard to understand, then with Isaiah the prophet let us look once more to cross-crowned Calvary, where we see God’s suffering Servant Substituting for Sinners. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Substitution, The Blessed Mystery Of Calvary!

He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, There is no beauty that we should desire Him. ³ *He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.*³ — this is the frightening picture which the prophet paints for us in Isaiah 53. *His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness* we read in Isaiah 52:14, so that people gazed up with open-mouthed astonishment. How shall we explain the agony of this great Sufferer?

The prophet himself gives one explanation. *We esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted.* Looking into the distant future, Isaiah tells us about the reaction of his own people as they stood under Calvary. Watching Him die there on His cross, hanging between two malefactors, many of them said: *“He deserves it! That is what he gets for claiming to be the Son of God and our long-promised Messiah! Any man who pretends to be what this man said he was, ought to get the worst kind of punishment!”* But deep down in their hearts that answer could not have satisfied even His bitterest enemies.

They knew very well, and Jesus had time and again challenged them to disprove it, that His personal life was spotlessly clean and that His teaching was in no point contrary to the Scriptures of Moses and the Prophets. And so this explanation of the cross, that Jesus died for crimes of His own, does not satisfy.

Nor does any other explanation which men have suggested: that He was the victim of a fanatical mob, that He died as a martyr to His convictions, or that He was simply a pawn on the chessboard of Jewish-Roman politics.

There is only one explanation which really explains Calvary, and that is God’s own explanation as given here in our text by the mouth of the prophet Isaiah, ⁴ *Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; ... He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.*

Six times in these two verses alone, the Spirit of the Lord tells us that the suffering and death of Calvary was the suffering and death of our sin-bearing Substitute, of One who suffered and died instead and in place of someone else.

Only God Himself could have planned such a way of salvation! In fact God's plan of salvation was planned even before the foundation of the world. We read in 1 Peter 1:20, ²⁰ *He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world.*

Now, let us use our imagination and consider a for a moment what would have happened if God would have sent angels to try and save us.

In our first example, an angel could have shown man the light of a perfect example, how he should walk to find favour with God. Surely man will follow that light, and therefore come back to God. But the reality is, that man now loves darkness more than he loves light, and he will not follow. The angel's light is mighty indeed, **but not mighty enough to save.**

In our second example, an angel could have reasoned with man. He could say to man, "*It does not make sense that you should hate your Creator and be forever lost.*" Convinced by his own mind, man will come back to God. But the reality is, that an angel would not be able to reason with man, because man's mind, his understanding, is now darkened; His eye is blind, his ear is sluggish, and his heart is cold. The angel may be mighty to reason, **but not mighty enough to save.**

In our third example, an angel could have come with his great two-edged sword flashing and turning every way. He could roll over the world the thunders of the holy Law. Man will tremble in fright and repent and return to God. But the reality is, that the angel's efforts would be to no avail. The flashings of his sword would be of no use, because man's heart is hardened, and he will not be frightened into faith and love toward God. The angel maybe mighty with his sword, **but not mighty enough to save.**

In our fourth example, an angel could have come with holy song. He could have flooded the earth with all the songs and melodies of heaven, and hearing that music of heaven, man will want to turn and come back to God. But the reality is, that the angel's sweet music and melody of heaven would not have changed the heart of man. Sweeter still to the heart of man is the music of sin and the melodies of the earth. The angel maybe mighty to sing, **but not mighty enough to save.**

What these examples show us is that no angel is mighty enough to save sin-cursed mankind! It also shows that man is sinful through and through to the core.

The only solution was for God to send the Son of God Himself, whom all the angels and saints honour and worship. Jesus came down to earth. He laid aside the glory which He had with God before the foundation of the world. He humbled Himself and took upon Himself our own form and flesh, and in our place become obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

He was disfigured, despised and rejected of men, spit upon, crowned with thorns, pierced with nails, and thrust through with a spear. He lived as man should have lived, He died as man deserved to die; and thus, by His living and by His dying, Jesus redeemed mankind. This is Jesus Active and Passive obedience in order to save us. Actively He fulfilled the law for us, and passively He suffered and died in our stead.

That, my friends, is the blessed mystery of Calvary, God's own Son becoming the sin-bearing Substitute for all mankind! Truly it is only God Himself who could have planned such a way of salvation!

It is still the only way for you and for me. The hymnist writes,⁴

Stricken, smitten, and afflicted,
See Him dying on the tree;
'Tis the Christ, by man rejected,
Yes, my soul, 'tis He, 'tis He.

Our text says, *'Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; ... He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.*

The hymnist, Horatius Bonar wrote,

Upon a life I have not lived,
Upon a death I have not died,
Another's life, Another's death,
I stake my whole eternity.

Not on the tears which I have shed,
Not on the sorrows I have known;

Another's tears, Another's griefs.
On them I rest, on them alone.

2. Substitution, The Very Heart Of Our Christian Faith

Substitution was the very heart already of the faith of God's children in the days of the Old Covenant. We think, for example, of that fearful night in Egypt when God's stern command through Moses, "Let My people go," was finally answered.

The hour of midnight approached, and as it drew near, there was fear and dread in the heart of all Egypt, from the oldest man down to the smallest child. And then suddenly it came — that long wail of woe, that tidal wave of lamentation, sweeping over the entire land. In his marble palace the great Pharaoh woke up and called for his prince, his first-born, the son and heir, only to learn that the prince of Egypt lay dead.

In the dungeon the prisoner shook his chains and turned over to find that the son at his side was dead. And even the cattle in the fields moaned over their dead; for that was the fearful night of which it is written that the Lord struck all the first-born of Egypt.

We read in Exodus 12:29, ²⁹ *And it came to pass at midnight that the LORD struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of livestock.*

Death reigned everywhere that night! In the palace, in the huts, in the dungeons, in the temples, on the river, on the highways, on the fields — everywhere there was death, and a moan of anguish went up to Egypt's skies.

And yet not everywhere, for in the province of Goshen, death passed over all the homes whose doors were marked with the blood of a lamb. In those homes a lamb had been slain, according to the command of God, a lamb by whose death and by whose blood, the first-born could be saved.

What was that, if not what we call substitution? And from that time forward, there was much more of that in the religion of the children of God: every

morning one lamb, every evening one lamb; two lambs in the morning of the Sabbath day, two lambs on the Sabbath evening.

Like this it went on, day after day, year after year, century after century. Why all this shedding of the blood of sacrifices? Why all this suffering and dying of the beasts of the field? This was God's prescribed way of making atonement for man's sin, and above all else, this was God's way of keeping alive in the hearts of His people that great promise which He had made about the true Sin-Bearer who was yet to come, that final Substitute for all sinners, of whom John the Baptist would one day cry out, "*Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*"⁵

Another thought: Substitution is the very teaching which makes our Christian faith different from all other so-called religions, and therefore the only true religion. "*What must I do to be saved?*" That, you will remember, was the terrified question of the jailer at Philippi when he saw his little world crumbling around him and when he was face to face with death and eternity.

"*What must I do to be saved?*" That is also the basic, fundamental question which religion must answer. My conscience tells me that there is a supreme being. My conscience tells me that someday I am going to die and then, I shall have to face my Maker. My conscience tells me that in my present condition I am not fit and ready to stand before His judgment seat.

What, then, must I do to be saved? How can I make peace with God so that I may also have peace in the hour of my departure? That, I say again, is the basic, fundamental question which my religion must answer for me if it is to do me any good.

Now, what are some of the answers which the religions of the world have given to that question? If you could take all of the world's religions — hundreds and thousands of them — and throw them into one large kettle and boil them all down to what they really mean, you would find that, in the final analysis, there are only two religions.

And now, what do these two religions have as an answer to the question, "*What must I do to be saved?*" The one religion — and there are hundreds and thousands of forms of this one religion — says: "*You must save yourself! It is up to you! You must make yourself so good, so holy, so perfect that God will be*

satisfied.” In other words, you must be your own saviour! Be good, do good, and God will be good to you.”

On paper that sounds fine; and this is, in fact, the very religion to which the vast majority hold. The big trouble with this kind of religion is simply this: It is an impossible religion because no human being has ever lived the kind of life which God’s holy Law demands!

But what does the Christian religion say to the question, **“What must I do to be saved?”** We need not be in any doubt about the answer, for St. Paul himself said to the man who first asked that question, in Acts 16:31, **“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved!”** And right there you have the big difference between true Christianity and all other religions: Only the Christian faith knows of a substitute who has already kept God’s holy Law as God wants it kept, and who has already suffered all the punishment of sin which man was doomed to suffer.

And for that very reason, too, substitution is the only teaching which can bring real comfort to a frightened and penitent sinner, especially in the hour of his death.

The Gospel says to every frightened, penitent sinner today: “Son, daughter, don’t ever forget it — that suffering Servant of God on Calvary’s cross bore your sins, carried your sorrows, was wounded for your transgressions, was bruised for your iniquities; the chastisement of your peace was upon Him, and with His stripes you are healed.” And finally, it is only this teaching of substitution which gives all glory to God, to whom alone it belongs.

Scripture says, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith,** (through faith in a substitute); **and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.”**⁶ Even this faith which we have in Jesus is not our own accomplishment: **“Not of works, lest anyone should boast.”**⁷

A certain product is advertised as being 99.4% pure. That may sound pretty good, but salvation is a product which is 100% pure — pure grace, without any merit or worthiness in me.

When you and I are in heaven, we shall more than gladly say, to Jesus, to the substituting Saviour on Calvary’s cross, who **loved us and washed us from our**

*sins in His own blood, ... to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever.
Amen.*⁸

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Rom 3:23

² Psalm 51:7

³ Isaiah 53:2-3

⁴ Hymn 70

⁵ John 1:29

⁶ Ephesians 2:8-9

⁷ Ephesians 2:9

⁸ Revelation 1:5