

# An Astonishing Salvation

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[ 0 : 00 ] Today's scripture reading is found in Isaiah 52, 13 through 53, 12. Please follow along as we read. Behold, my servant shall act wisely.

He shall be high and lifted up and shall be exalted. As many were astonished at you. His appearance was so marked beyond human semblings and his form beyond that of the children of mankind.

So shall he sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him. For that which has not been told them, they see. And that which they have not heard, they understand.

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 design 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.

[ 1 : 06 ] 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 everyone 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 conceded, 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.

[ 2 : 07 ] 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. This is the reading of God's work. Hi. How are you all?

That's good. Merry Christmas to all of you. It is Christmas time, and the time of Advent, where we remember the coming of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, to this earth.

[ 3 : 17 ] And as we've been going through this series of Advent, we've been considering how Jesus came, how his arrival was unexpected, that it wasn't what God, or what God was doing, wasn't what people would expect.

And today we'll look a little bit closer, at what God is doing in this world. How Jesus came to bring forgiveness, to bring reconciliation, to accomplish these things by his life, as we'll see, and his death.

And in this passage that was just read out for us, in Isaiah chapter 53, we'll see that this is one of the key passages in the Old Testament that speaks of the one who was to come back for them.

And it's the key passage to unlock and to understand what it is that Jesus came to do. And so this theme that's in there is one of forgiveness and reconciliation.

And one person who is known in the world today for forgiveness and reconciliation, for practicing forgiveness and reconciliation, is the late Nelson Mandela, who passed away maybe 10 days ago. [ 4 : 41 ] And some words were written, many words were written about him. And these words were written by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was a friend of his and an ally in the work of reconciliation in South Africa.

He says, that emerging from prison in January 1990, he, that is Nelson Mandela, proclaimed the message of forgiveness and reconciliation. And he embodied what he proclaimed.

He walked the talk. He invited his former jailer to attend his presidential inauguration as a VIP guest. And he invited the man who led the state's case against him at the Rivonia trial, calling for the imposition of the death penalty to lunch at his presidential office.

He visited the widow of the high priest of apartheid in the white, Afrikaner-only enclave of Irania. Can you imagine what would have happened to South Africa had Mandela emerged from prison in 1990, bristling with resentment at the gross miscarriage of justice that had occurred in the Rivonia trial?

Can you imagine where South Africa would be today had he been consumed by a lust for revenge to want to pay back for all the humiliations and all the agony that he and his people had suffered at the hands of their white oppressors?

[ 6 : 06 ] Instead, the world was amazed, indeed awed, by the unexpectedly peaceful transition of 1994, followed not by an orgy of revenge and retribution, but by the wonder of forgiveness and reconciliation.

From where comes this story of the wonder of forgiveness and reconciliation?

Many writers and thinkers and even secular philosophers will say that it came through one man, Jesus Christ.

And indeed, Nelson Mandela was also one one who sought inspiration from the example of Jesus. This passage in Isaiah talks about the forgiveness and the reconciliation that comes through the work, not just the work, but the suffering of Jesus.

The book of Isaiah contains five songs about the servant of the Lord, and this one here in chapter 52 and 53 is the most famous. So please have it open in front of you.

[ 7 : 15 ] And we'll be referring to it. Jesus himself quoted these songs in his ministry, seeing himself as the servant.

And the first thing we learn about the servant from this passage is that Jesus was rejected as one who suffers. And we'll see that the second thing that we learn is that Jesus suffered for others, for many.

And the third thing that we'll learn is that it was not in vain. It was not in vain. But first, we see that Jesus was rejected as one who suffered.

We see in this passage a depiction of people's reaction to the servant. And their reaction is blind. They can't see what it is the servant has come to do or why he's here. All they can see is this pitiful, wretched figure who is struck down, so they think, by God and despised and rejected.

[ 8 : 32 ] Have a look at verse 3 of chapter 53 there. It says, He was despised and rejected by men, pitied by everybody.

It says that he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. In the people's eyes, he was just another victim. Cast down, downtrodden, beaten up.

It says that he was one from whom men hide their faces. No one wanted to be like this person, this figure. No one wanted to trade places with him.

Instead, people shunned him, hid their faces from him, turned away from him. And as it says, he was despised and we esteemed him not. Nobody, nobody at all thought that this figure was successful or victorious as he stood there surrounded by his accusers, his attackers, and as he was ultimately put to death.

No, what people saw was one who was hated and rejected and cursed and struck down. Surely not a servant of God.

[ 10 : 00 ] Surely not one who would be the Messiah. This is the way that people saw it. And as chapter, as chapter 53, verse 1 says, who has believed what he might have heard from us?

Nobody believed this message that the servant would come and suffer like this. And so it was with Jesus. As he was standing there in the courtyard, all his friends had deserted him, had run away.

His closest ally denied him, denied he knew him. As he was standing in there in the trial room, he was alone. Not one of his allies or compatriots stood by him.

And he died alone, without his friends, surrounded only by strangers, criminals. And the people saw this and despised him and esteemed him not, as it says.

That is, they did not count this figure, this wretched figure as someone worthy, as someone worthwhile to follow, as someone who had achieved anything in his life.

[ 11 : 23 ] By people's account, he was a failure, just another victim, one who was to be discarded. God. And yet, the second point in this passage that we see is that this blindness is only overcome when people see and realize what God is doing through the servant.

As it says in verse 4, surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, spidden by God, and afflicted.

Yes, the servant was indeed characterized by griefs and sorrows, but they were not his own. Yes, the servant was indeed struck down by God.

But that didn't mean that he was not the servant. Rather, it was the servant's role to come and be struck down by God. And that's what the second part of the passage tells.

It explains this paradox, this blindness, the reason why it is that the servant had to suffer in this way. There's a story I heard once about a school teacher who went into a school in Ireland and this school was in the roughest areas in Ireland.

[ 12 : 59 ] Very poor, kind of urban area. And this teacher was supposed to go in and be a scripture teacher to teach the kids about Jesus.

And when they walked into the classroom, everything was everywhere. Kids were throwing stuff at each other, they were standing on the tables, they were swearing at one another, at the teacher, and so on.

And she thought, how am I going to bring order to this classroom, let alone actually teach anything? Anyone who's actually taught scripture in school, I sympathize with you because I've done it as well. In my first year of teaching, at the end of the year, one kid stood up and said, this year, none of us have learned a single thing from Mr. Chu.

We need to do better next year, as she rebukes the class. That was my first year of teaching, I got better after that. But as this teacher was thinking, how do I control this classroom, which would have been much worse than anything I'd faced, she came to a plan.

[ 14 : 04 ] Instead of kind of sitting down and opening up lessons and getting them to read things or anything like that, she got them boxes, fish tanks actually, and a whole bunch of different materials, soils and plants and different things and they were to decorate their fish tank.

That's what they did. They got in and put stuff in and then they were to make a creature, anything they wanted to place in. Some people made human-like figures or animals that they would place in their tank.

some of the rowdier boys made kind of misshapen ugly looking monsters which they could fit in and they would craft them and create them and this went on for some weeks and they had to create an environment for them and there was some water there and some sand and trees and all these different things.

And then after that she got them to make some rules for the creatures so that they would be able to live well in this environment. And some of the kids they made a rule like you must obey everything that I say.

And some of the other ones would make up different kinds of rules like don't go in the water or you'll get wet and then fall apart and things like that. As the creatures are made of clay. And so this continued on for a few more weeks.

[ 15 : 38 ] And then one day the teacher kind of walked in and they were all looking after and creating something new for their creature in the box. And she said, what if your creature stood up one day and said to you as the person who had made it, I don't have to listen to you anymore.

I'm going to do what I want to do and your rules are worthless. They're stupid. I don't want to follow them. What would you do? And one of the little boys clenched his fists and said, I'd crush him like a bug.

And at that point she opened up Genesis chapter 1 and told them about the God who created this world and made us and placed us in it and given us this fantastic world to live in and the way that we rejected him.

What is God going to do with the people who had rejected him? Would he crush us like bugs? The servant's role was to be struck down by God. And he bore griefs and sorrows. in his life that were not his own, but they were ours.

[ 17 : 14 ] It was not his own troubles that Jesus bore that were the reason why he suffered in his way. It was not some flaw in himself or some pride within him, but it was for our sakes.

peace. The middle part of this passage gets to the heart of this when it says in verse 5, he was pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed, yes, but for our iniquities, our sins, our failings. Upon him was the chastisement, the punishment that brought us peace.

And with his wounds, we are healed. You see, we are like sheep that have gone astray, that have turned away from the one who created us.

Each one of us has turned to his own way. And so, instead of crushing us, God laid on him, on the servant, all of our sin and our rebellion and our iniquity.

[ 18 : 26 ] Why was Jesus despised and rejected and struck down and cut off from the land of the living? For our sakes.

People turned away from the horror of what happened to him, gasping in astonishment at this figure that was so disfigured that they even said, is he even a human?

And yet, the astonishment of people changes as they realize the astonishment of the salvation that Jesus brings.

The astonishing grace, the astonishing forgiveness, the salvation and the astonishing cost of that salvation.

Sometimes you hear people today think, take offense at the things that are said about Jesus or the things that are written about him or the things that are done to him and so on.

[ 19 : 35 ] And as I'm reflecting on this passage, I think that Jesus just would have laughed at that. He would have despised the shame of it. he wouldn't have cared what people said about him.

I mean, what more can the world do to him? They already killed him, took away his dignity, humiliated him, crushed him.

We know that this is the way that, in fact, the way Jesus would have acted rather, would have been to pray for those people who wanted to mock him, to humiliate him.

And he wouldn't have prayed that God would strike them down in their sin. He would have prayed, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Father, bless them, cause them to come back to you. He would have been seeking their good, even as they were crucifying him.

[ 20 : 39 ] when it says that he was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, what that is saying is that it is our sin that brings Jesus to the cross.

It is our sin that brings Jesus to this earth. We are the reason that God came down at all, and not our goodness or our purity or our attractiveness but the fact that we rebelled against God, that we flouted his laws, that we decided not to listen to him, to rule our lives our own way, and succeeding only in hurting and destroying one another and this world that we live in.

It doesn't take much to look around now at the world to persuade people that things are not the way that they should be in this world. And even such a figure as Nelson Mandela suffered great injustice as he was imprisoned for many, many decades.

And that kind of injustice is repeated throughout the world as we see instead of forgiveness and reconciliation, hatred and ethnic cleansing and mutual exclusion.

Jesus came to cut through all of that to show that forgiveness was the antidote to injustice. There's a few implications we see from this.

[ 22 : 24 ] Firstly, we see God's compassion because he did not just, he did not come, Jesus didn't come in order to crush the world or to judge the world or to point fingers or to bring an army or a sword.

In fact, when two of his disciples wanted to raise up swords to defend him, he made them put them away and said, enough of that. God has not crushed the world or us in it.

Instead, he's had compassion upon us. God has not given up on the world either. that's another thing that we might have done. If your little creatures had rebelled against you, maybe you just would have walked away and left them to rot, to decay, to die in that box.

But God didn't do that either. He came back. He came into the world to seek and to save those who were lost. God is the judge.

God is the judge. God is the judge. That actually is good news in a way because it means that there is meaning in this world because without a judge, without someone to whom you and I are accountable, someone to whom all of the Pol Potts and Hitler's of this world are accountable to, then this world is meaningless.

[ 24 : 03 ] And whatever anybody does means nothing. We would have to then succumb to hopelessness. But that God is the judge means that there is meaning.

And it means also that what we do in this life has meaning. That what we do in this life, in this world that we have, is so important to God that he should send his son to die to atone for our sins, to save us from our sins.

But the third implication is that we do in fact need saving from our sins. We need what the Bible calls repentance. In order to be reconciled, to be reconciled with one who has hurt you, you need to forgive them, but they also need to repent and come back to you.

Repentance means owning up to what you've done, to who you are. It's a little bit like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was established in South Africa and in other places around the world.

That reconciliation could only occur between victims and perpetrators of injustice when the truth was revealed. That is, when everything was spelled out, when everything was aired out, was opened up, and exactly what happened, what occurred, and when was listed out for all to see.

[ 25 : 45 ] that is what repentance involves. That is, that we own up to who we are and to what we've done. And we need to repent of our own sin, of our own rebellion against God, of our own desire to exclude God out of this world and live in a way that rejects any authority over us, even the authority of the one who created us.

We need to repent as well of hatred. Hatred and exclusion is to seek to create a world without the other.

And in this world, whether it's in the killing fields of Sarajevo or just in your own personal lives here in Hong Kong, we see that hatred and judgment rather than reconciliation and forgiveness is what tends to rule the relationships that we live in and that we work through.

Instead of wanting to forgive, instinctively we seek revenge. revenge. The trouble with revenge, however, is that it enslaves us and it turns into this kind of endless cycle of violence and revenge. Violence feeds on revenge, revenge on violence. And so victim and perpetrator are locked into this prism of mutual hate, unable to forgive or repent.

[ 27 : 29 ] rather than seeking revenge, Jesus taught a new way. One writer said, the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth.

And it's such a different climate, kind of like a breath of fresh air that he brings. because the climate in Jesus' day was that of pervasive oppression and the principle was, if anyone hits you, hit back.

If anyone takes your coat, burn down his house. In the Bible we have someone called Lamech who his kind of revenge was to strike back 70 fold upon those who would strike anyone who would dare to strike him.

This seemed to him to be the only way to defeat injustice. But turning that logic on his head, Jesus demanded of his followers not that they strike back 70 times, but to forgive 70 times.

The injustice of oppression must be fought with the creative injustice, it seems, of forgiveness, not with the injustice of revenge. And as Jesus hung on the cross there where he was sent by an unjust judge, he became the ultimate example of his own teaching as he prayed, Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do.

[ 29 : 07 ] As I was reading through this passage and reflecting on it and reflecting on my own life, I realized that I too needed to repent of this. In my own life, I haven't bullied people or kicked people down, but I've experienced those things in myself, in my own life.

And that hatred that I was talking about before, where you seek to create a world that is without the other in it, is something that I've been guilty of.

And that cycle of revenge that I was talking about before is something that I've experienced as well. Not that I've had the opportunity to do anything about it, but there's that hatred, that seeking to want to inflict back onto the one who inflicted upon you hurt, to what seems to you at the time like justice, but actually is just revenge, because you want to see them suffer in the same way that they made

you suffer.

And I realized, as I was reading through this passage, that I needed to repent of this, just as much as the perpetrator needed to repent of what they did.

[ 30 : 40 ] And each one of us is like that. whether we are perpetrator or victim, what unites us in humanity is our capacity to hate, to despise, to exclude one another.

And it's of this that we need to repent and learn to forgive one another. But how can we learn to forgive? It seems such a monumental endeavor to truly forgive when you have been truly hurt seems just too much for so many people.

Whether it's in the context of a family feud, where years of pent-up anger and aggression or passive aggression have led to silence and exclusion, or whether it's a relationship in your work, or a friend who you feel has betrayed you.

Real hurts require real forgiveness and real repentance. And the only way that we can begin to understand forgiveness is to understand our own need for forgiveness.

forgiveness. When we realize that we too are sinners who treated God as if he didn't exist, as if he didn't create this beautiful world that we live in, even if we have messed it up somewhat.

[ 32 : 18 ] If he didn't create us with bodies that can run and jump and leap and sing and dance and work and play and do all these things.

If he didn't create the air that we breathe. Rather than living as though we owe God everything, we live as though we owe God nothing.

Or, even worse, we live as though God owes us. Why, God, didn't you give me this that I wanted?

Or, if you were really God, then what you would do is this thing that I want you to do.

when we realise the way that we've treated God and that we need forgiveness and that we have received forgiveness or are able to receive forgiveness from what Jesus has done by dying on the cross for our sins, only then are we able to turn, as Nelson Mandela understood, to turn and forgive others, to not hold against others what they've done to us.

Because God does not hold what we've done against him, against us. Instead, he poured it out upon his son, Jesus. God will be to us.

[ 33 : 48 ] The third thing we learn from this passage here is that it was not in vain. That Jesus' death on the cross was not a failure or the end as everybody thought it was who was standing there that day, even his followers.

was not others. Rather, it was the beginning. The beginning of a new people that God would bring into being. And God exalted Jesus.

I don't know if you noticed, but in the very first and the very last lines of this song, we see God sing the praises of his servant. God delights in his servant.

Let me read out the first verse here. It says, Behold, my servant shall act wisely. He shall be high and lifted up and greatly exalted. God is going to raise up Jesus.

And Jesus himself reflected upon these words. And they carried him through as he looked beyond, seeing, as it says, the joy set before him.

[ 35 : 01 ] He endured the shame of the cross and now seated at the right hand of the throne of God almighty. God's plan of reconciliation, of salvation, revolves around Jesus and the exaltation of Jesus.

And so, what are we doing in this world? Are we a part of God's plan? Or are we still standing on the sidelines? God's grace? Many people still hide their face from him in the same way that those did earlier.

And yet more and more find true majesty in the face of Jesus, even as he was on the cross. To have God's great servant as our saviour is to be saved from the wrath that fell on him.

To reject him is to face God's justice forever by yourself. Each one of us in this room, no matter where we stand, we need to repent, to come before God and to realise that we have not done as we ought or thought as we should, towards him or towards one another.

And so, I urge you all to come before God this very day to confess your sins and to receive, once again, the forgiveness that comes through Jesus and to receive the healing and the peace that come from his wounds.

[ 36 : 38 ] Let's pray. Father, we know that Jesus was pierced for our transgressions, that he was crushed for our iniquities.

Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace and with his wounds we are healed. Father, we ask that you would bring us this peace, this shalom. We ask that you would give to us healing. We ask that you would forgive us, forgive me, Father, for when I have failed to love others as I should, failed to love even those who I would consider enemies, in the same way that Jesus loved those who were his enemies.

Father, help us to be people of Jesus, people of the cross, people of forgiveness and reconciliation, people who understand and know the great cost it was to you to free us from our sins and to bring us into your kingdom.

And we pray that you would help us to extend that same love and forgiveness to those around us so that we can be a reflection of Jesus' forgiveness to us.

[ 38 : 04 ] So we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.