

“This compelling reflection on Isaiah’s extraordinary portrait of the Servant has a simplicity and directness which will provoke surprise, gratitude and worship. Pastoral and devotional in tone, it illuminates these remarkable chapters through thought-provoking illustration and application that will warm the heart, strengthen faith and encourage mission. A wonderful resource for spiritual renewal!”

JONATHAN LAMB, Minister-at-large, Keswick Ministries;
IFES Vice-President; Former Director of Langham Preaching

“*The Beauty of the Cross* is a wonderful resource for meaningful reflection on our Lord’s finished work at Calvary. Tim Chester does a fine job of focusing on rich texts in Isaiah 52 – 53, and then leads the reader to pray, meditate and praise our great God for his perfect plan of redemption. Poignant quotes from church fathers and others, as well as personal illustrations, are value added to this well-organized devotional. It’s a treasure! *The Beauty of the Cross* will be a great addition to any believer’s library.”

MARY K. MOHLER, Author, *Growing in Gratitude*

“This is a book to savour! Tim Chester has done an exquisite job in walking us gently through the richness of Isaiah’s vision of Jesus Christ, the Servant of the Lord, as he walks to (and through) his death in our place. Beautifully paced, theologically rich and deeply rooted in the real world—take it, read it slowly, and drink in its Christ-saturated truth!”

GARY MILLAR, Principal, Queensland Theological College

“Tim brings readers right into the bright light of Lent—Christ the Lord. Like the old hymn, Chester’s meditations and expositions from Isaiah invite you to turn your eyes upon Jesus, to look fully at the face of the suffering Servant, and to see how the things of earth grow dim in the divine wattage of Christ’s glory and grace.”

JEFF MEDDERS, Lead Pastor, Redeemer Church, Tomball, Texas;
Author, *Humble Calvinism* and *Rooted*

“Here is a book to treasure and to share. Tim leads us on a journey through some of the Bible’s most precious chapters, for a rediscovery of the Christ who has walked our road, and who goes with us still. *The Beauty of the Cross* will be a rich blessing to you.”

LEWIS ALLEN, Senior Pastor, Hope Church, Huddersfield, UK;
Director, Gospel Yorkshire

“The cross of Jesus is the centre of the Christian faith. None of us thrive when we drift far from the foot of the cross. It is there that we discover that God is not as the world thinks he is; that our only hope does not lie in ourselves; and that the hideous instrument of torture, the cross, is actually profoundly beautiful. Tim Chester’s book, *The Beauty of the Cross*, will be a great companion and guide as you meditate on the cross of Jesus.”

PETER MEAD, Director, Cor Deo; Author, *Lost in Wonder*

TIM CHESTER

The
Beauty
of the
Cross

Reflections for Lent from
Isaiah 52 and 53

the goodbook
COMPANY

The Beauty of the Cross

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INTRODUCTION

On holy ground

“Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” This is what Moses is told when he encounters God at the burning bush (Exodus 3 v 5).

Writing about Isaiah 52 – 53 has felt like standing on holy ground. Though he wrote 800 years before Jesus came, Isaiah gives us such a rich and intimate portrait of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Here, as clearly as almost anywhere else in the Bible, we see the true meaning of what was taking place as Jesus was nailed to the cross.

But this section of Isaiah is not simply an explanation. It’s a powerful and affecting portrait of the personal cost of our salvation. Here we see the man of sorrows, disfigured beyond recognition and yet also satisfied with what his suffering achieves.

This is hallowed ground. And God invites us to take off our shoes, as it were, and look at Jesus. “See, my servant,” he says in Isaiah 52 v 13.

My prayer for this book has been, “Hallowed be your name”. I want us to say as we explore these verses together, “Wow, that’s amazing!” Not in a light-hearted

way. I want our jaws to drop as we stand open-mouthed before the cross, lost for words as we see the love of Christ in all its fullness.

Some of these readings will then give suggestions for how this applies to our daily lives. But sometimes it's enough simply to have our view of Christ widened—for how we worship is always the catalyst for how we live.

And if these reflections on the cross leave you wanting to sing your praises aloud, you'll find a song based on Isaiah 52 – 53 on page 158.



We often speak or sing about the cross. Of course we do; it's central to our faith. This section of Isaiah is an invitation to pause; to take it slow; to go down deep...

THE BEGINNING OF LENT

*The
Servant*

ASH WEDNESDAY

Acts 8 v 26-39

Come with me to a desert road. The hardened earth stretches away towards the horizon, where it dissolves into the shimmer of the heat. Along the edge of the road walks a man—a man named Philip. Behind him a cloud of dust is slowly approaching, out of which emerges a chariot. Philip runs towards it and starts jogging alongside. In the chariot is a man. We can tell immediately he's a man of importance—a politician perhaps. He's reading an ancient text, the story of a mysterious servant of God, but his face betrays his confusion. Between breaths Philip shouts up, "Do you understand what you're reading?" "How can I," the man replies, "unless someone explains it to me?" (Acts 8 v 30-31)

The man in the chariot, an official in the court of the queen of Ethiopia, is not the first person, nor the last, to wonder who the servant is.

The prophet Isaiah has four songs about the servant of the LORD in chapters 42, 49, 50 and 52 – 53. Sometimes the servant appears to be the nation of Israel. "You are my servant, Israel," says 49 v 3, "in whom

I will display my splendour”. Yet two verses later, the servant is someone other than Israel—someone who will *redeem* Israel (49 v 5).

The nation of Israel was supposed to display God’s splendour to the nations, to be a light to the nations, to attract the world to God’s ways. But more often than not, Israel was drawn away from God and towards the ways of the nations. As a result, they brought God’s name into disrepute. The consequence was exile.

Isaiah lived 200 years before the exile. But he looked ahead to the day when God’s people would be defeated by the Babylonians and dragged off to Babylon. In these songs he speaks words of comfort to those in captivity (40 v 1). He promises that King Cyrus, the king of the Persians, will defeat the Babylonians and let God’s people return home. So in one sense, King Cyrus is God’s servant (44 v 28; 45 v 1-7). Isaiah even calls Cyrus—a foreign king who never acknowledged God—God’s “anointed”, his messiah, his christ (45 v 1). Whether Cyrus recognises it or not, God has chosen him to deliver God’s people and bring them home.

But the exile in Babylon was a pointer to a greater exile, and the rescue from Babylon was a pointer to a greater rescue. The prophets warned the surrounding nations not to rejoice in Israel’s defeat because it was (and still is) a sign of God’s judgment against all humanity. Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden with an angel brandishing a flaming sword to prevent their return to the place where they had once walked with God (Genesis 3 v 8, 23-24). Ever since,

humanity has lived in exile from God. “We all, like sheep, have gone astray,” says Isaiah 53 v 6.

So even when the Israelites eventually returned to their homeland, they still felt like slaves for they were still ruled by foreign kings (Nehemiah 9 v 36-37). Nor had their return solved the underlying problems—their sin and God’s judgment. That required a greater rescue and a greater Servant.

The Ethiopian eunuch reads from Isaiah’s final servant song in Isaiah 53. “Tell me, please,” he asks, “who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Philip is in no doubt who the ultimate Servant is. “Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture,” says Acts 8 v 35, “and told him the good news about Jesus”. Isaiah points way beyond King Cyrus to King Jesus himself.

Isaiah’s first servant song begins, “Here is my servant” (Isaiah 42 v 1). It’s literally, “See, my servant”. The final song begins with exactly the same words (Isaiah 52 v 13). This song cycle is an invitation to look at Jesus. We’ll look at the first three songs over the coming three days. After that we’ll slow down and take our time as we meditate on the fourth and greatest song in Isaiah 52 – 53. It’s an opportunity to pause at the foot of the cross and look at Jesus.

Ash Wednesday is traditionally a day for confession and repentance. So let’s begin by confessing that we have strayed like sheep, and let’s come home in repentance to God. Let’s pray that Isaiah would lead us to see Jesus the Servant afresh this Lent.

Meditate

*Almighty and most merciful Father,
we have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep.*

*We have followed too much the devices and desires
of our own hearts.*

We have offended against thy holy laws.

*We have left undone those things
which we ought to have done;
and we have done those things
which we ought not to have done;
and there is no health in us.*

*But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us,
miserable offenders.*

Spare thou them, O God, which confess their faults.

*Restore thou them that are penitent;
according to thy promises declared unto mankind
in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

*And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake,
that we may hereafter live
a godly, righteous, and sober life,
to the glory of thy holy name. Amen.*

*The Book of Common Prayer
(based in part on Isaiah 53 v 6)*

THURSDAY

Isaiah 42 v 1-7

Are you fighting fit and ready to do battle for the sake of Christ? Are you on fire for God today? There are times when Christians feel like this. But more often we feel a bit battered and bruised. We're not marching bravely into battle. We're more like wounded soldiers, limping along in trepidation.

If that's how you feel today, then Jesus is for you.

Three times we're told that Jesus the Servant will bring justice to the nations:

- *He will bring justice to the nations (v 1).*
- *He will bring forth justice (v 3).*
- *He establishes justice on earth (v 4).*

Justice here is not just the rule of law. The term describes the divine ordering of creation. So the servant's task is massive: he's going to re-establish God's righteous rule over the world.

But Jesus the Servant is not going to steam-roll God's kingdom into existence. Yes, he's a mighty King who "will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth". Yet at the same time, he's gentle with wounded saints. Yes, he will crush evil. Yet at the same time, he tenderly cares for fragile souls.

*He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.*
(Isaiah 42 v 2-3)

We have an open fire in our front room. Normally my wife, our family's resident pyromaniac, is the one who takes charge of it. But occasionally it falls to me to get it going. It always feels as if it has to be nurtured into life. Paper and kindling are lit first. Then larger pieces of wood can gradually be added. But if I'm not paying attention, then all too quickly the fire goes out, leaving the wood spluttering and smoking. With a bit of luck, though, gently blowing will fan it into flames again.

This is how Jesus nurtures weak and wounded Christians. He gradually builds us up. He doesn't give up on us when we splutter and smoke. Gently he blows the breath of his Spirit into our hearts.

In verses 5-7 God turns from talking *about* the servant to talk *to* the servant. The God who created the world is about to recreate it. Just as at creation God spoke and light replaced darkness (Genesis 1 v 2-3), so again light will dawn to liberate those in the bondage of spiritual darkness (Isaiah 42 v 6-7, 18-20). So it's perhaps no surprise to notice that the sword by which he conquers the nations is not made of cold steel. Instead his kingdom advances through "his teaching" (v 4)—through "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6 v 17).

Think how easily we get frustrated with other people and how easily a sharp word can crush them. “People, for a little smoke, will quench the light,” says the Puritan Richard Sibbes. “But we always see Christ cherishing even the smallest beginnings of a flame.” He goes on to give this advice:

It is not wrong to hide the deficiencies of young Christians, excuse some of their failings, commend their achievements, cherish their progress, remove obstacles from their way, help them in every way to bear the yoke of religion with greater ease, to bring them to love God and his service, lest they have distaste for it before they know it ... It would be good if, among Christians, one would work hard to give no offence while the other would work hard to take none.

Meditate

Jesus said,

*“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour.”*

Isaiah 61 v 1-2 and Luke 4 v 18-19



FRIDAY
Isaiah 49 v 1-6

What's it worth? You ask someone for a favour and they reply, "What's it worth?" In these verses we discover what the cross of Jesus is worth.

Israel had failed to be a light to the nations, but Jesus the Servant succeeds (John 8 v 12). What makes Jesus different? "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendour" (Isaiah 49 v 3). It's in Jesus that we see the true holiness, grace, wisdom, justice, compassion, power and love of God. And what we see is splendid! For he displays God's splendour.

But what's he worth? "What is due to me is in the LORD'S hand, and my reward is with my God" (v 4). God is going to reward the obedience of Jesus.

And what is that reward? His people Israel, yes. *But* that is not enough. The cross of Christ is worth more. The LORD says, "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept" (v 6). *Too small a thing.* The cross deserves more. The cross achieves more. And so God says, "I will *also* make you a light for the Gentiles [non-Jews], that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth".

Jesus left the glory of heaven. He did not cling to the rights of his divinity. He took on human form. He

became, says Philippians 2 v 5-8, a servant, *the* Servant. He was obedient to death, even death on a cross. He was betrayed by a follower, abandoned by his friends, beaten, mocked, spat upon and crucified. He died under the darkness of judgment, forsaken by his Father.

What is that worth? It's worth the nations! Not one nation. Not two or three nations. People from the ends of the earth. Jesus deserves the praise of *every* nation. That's why we share the good news about Jesus with all the nations—because this is what the cross deserves.

In Isaiah 49 v 4 the Servant says, “What is due to me is in the LORD’s hand”. It’s the language of the law court. It’s literally “My judgment is in the LORD’s hand”. On earth, Jesus was tried by humanity and found guilty, condemned as a blasphemer and executed as a rebel. But that decision has been gloriously overturned in the court of heaven.

The account of the ascension of Jesus in Acts 1 draws on the vision in Daniel 7 where what Daniel sees is a courtroom. In that vision, Daniel sees Jesus (referred to as “a son of man”) ascending through the clouds to be vindicated by the Ancient of Days. What does he receive from the Ancient of Days? The nations. “He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him” (Daniel 7 v 14). Jesus echoes these words in the Great Commission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28 v 18-19). Why do we go out in mission? To gather the nations to worship Jesus.

Every step we make in mission is a step towards the moment when people from every nation, tribe, language and tongue join together to cry, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!” (Revelation 5 v 12).

It is *too small a thing* to be concerned just for your family or just your parish. Christ is worth more than that. How will you show this in the way you use your time, in the places you give your money to, and in the focus of your prayers? The cross of Christ deserves the nations.

Meditate

*I cannot tell how silently he suffered,
As with his peace he graced this place of tears,
Or how his heart upon the cross was broken,
The crown of pain to three and thirty years ...
But this I know, all flesh shall see his glory,
And he shall reap the harvest he has sown,
And some glad day his sun shall shine in splendour
When he the Saviour, Saviour of the world is known.*

*I cannot tell how all the lands shall worship ...
But this I know, the skies will thrill with rapture,
And myriad, myriad human voices sing,
And earth to heaven, and heaven to earth,
will answer:
At last the Saviour, Saviour of the world is King!*

William Young Fullerton (1857-1932)

SATURDAY

Isaiah 50 v 4-9

Have you ever been accused of meddling when you were only trying to help? It can be a painful experience. Or have you ever received a hostile reaction for telling someone about Christ's love? Goodness and truth are not always well received.

In this third song it's becoming clear that the servant will *suffer*. He will be beaten, struck, mocked and spat on (v 6). It's not hard to hear in this description the echo of its fulfilment in the last hours of Jesus' life. What this song makes clear is:

1. *Suffering is part of the Father's plan.* "I have not been rebellious," says Jesus the Servant (v 5). It's a statement sandwiched between the instruction of the Lord in verse 4 and the hostility of humanity in verse 6. The point is clear: Jesus faced suffering in obedience to his Father's plan.

2. *Suffering can be faced with God's help.* Suffering is the servant's choice. "I offered my back to those who beat me ... I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting" (v 6). Jesus was not dragged kicking and screaming to the cross. "I set my face like flint," he says in verse 7. It's a powerful statement of his resolution.

This resolution is made with the help of God. That's the logic of verse 7:

*Because the Sovereign LORD helps me,
I will not be disgraced.
Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.*

The shame and disgrace here are not that of the cross itself. Quite the opposite. It would have been shameful if Jesus had turned away from the cross, disobeyed God and not followed through the plan of salvation. But he didn't turn away. Jesus could face the cross with resolution because the Holy Spirit strengthened him. Christ, says Hebrews 9 v 14, "through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God".

3. *Suffering is not the final verdict.* Jesus didn't avoid suffering because he looked beyond the suffering to his vindication. "He who vindicates me is near," he says (Isaiah 50 v 8). On earth Jesus and his accusers faced off (v 8). And it looked as if his accusers had won. But the verdict of heaven is completely different and it's heaven's verdict which will prevail. Ultimately it's his accusers who will "wear out like a garment" (v 9).

This is the most intimate of the servant songs. But we don't need to feel embarrassed about listening in. Verse 4 suggests Jesus the Servant wants his example to help others, and in verses 10-11 God exhorts us to follow the Servant's lead. This is intended to be a "word that sustains the weary" (v 4). We don't suffer to redeem the

world in the way Jesus did. But we are called to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Christ.

So let's retrace our steps. What's "the word that sustains" here for us?

1. *Suffering is part of the Father's plan.* Our suffering doesn't mean our lives are out of control. God is using our suffering to advance his kingdom and refine our hearts.

2. *Suffering can be faced with God's help.* We are not left to face suffering alone. The Spirit empowers us to endure.

3. *Suffering is not the final verdict.* "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8 v 18).

Meditate

*Therefore we do not lose heart,
Though outwardly we are wasting away,
yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.
For our light and momentary troubles
are achieving for us an eternal glory
that far outweighs them all.
So we fix our eyes not on what is seen,
but on what is unseen,
since what is seen is temporary,
but what is unseen is eternal.*

2 Corinthians 4 v 16-18

We've looked briefly at the first three of Isaiah's four servant songs. For the next six weeks we will slow down to look in depth at his final and greatest servant song...