

## “What Did the Cross Achieve?”

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

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I do not intend to provide an exposition of Isaiah 53 this evening. Rather, in this Lenten season, I want to use this text as a springboard for a consideration of the Lord’s suffering and death and the growing distaste, even in the church, for what the Bible teaches to be the purpose of the cross.

### Text Comment

v.13 “high and lifted up” is several times in Isaiah a description of Yahweh himself. The Servant of the Lord *is* the Lord, Yahweh himself!

v.15 In the imagery of the Bible to sprinkle the nations is to make them clean before God.

53:1 “Arm of the Lord” in 51:9 is a periphrasis – a literary device in which a longer phrase is substituted for a shorter one – for Yahweh himself.

If 52:13-15 give us God’s estimation of the Servant, 53:1-3 give us man’s. God places the highest value on him; man places none. So typical of men to miss the presence of God among them!

v. 9 All of this is in the past tense. This is called the prophetic past. It is a common literary device in the prophets. The idea is that the future being predicted is something is so absolutely certain of fulfillment that it can be placed in the past tense as if it had already occurred.

v.12 This text is like Cinderella’s slipper. Only one historical person fits it or could ever fit it. After the Christian understanding of this prophecy became widespread Jewish interpreters began to favor interpretations that took the passage to refer to something other than a personal Messiah. Rashi, the great medieval Jewish commentator, introduced the interpretation that the Servant of the Lord was the nation of Israel herself. Maimonides, the 12<sup>th</sup> century Jewish biblical scholar, sometimes called the Jews’ “second Moses,” called Rashi’s interpretation preposterous. Israel couldn’t fit this description. There is only one who can!

Richard Ganz, a former Jewish psychiatrist and later Reformed Presbyterian minister who became a Christian at L’abri in Holland, was converted through the realization of this simple fact. One day someone read Isaiah 53 in his hearing. He didn’t know the Bible and so didn’t know that Isaiah was being read. He had replied to the effect that such a passage didn’t prove anything because anyone could describe and interpret the Lord’s death that way *after the fact*. It didn’t prove anything. But the fellow handed him the Bible and showed him that what had been read was from the prophet Isaiah, who wrote his

prophecy 700 years before the birth of Christ. The argument from fulfilled prophecy was powerful proof for him and he believed.

Some months ago Suzan Gross gave me David Powlison's new book, *Good and Angry*. Dr. Powlison is the executive director of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation, the CCEF, the organization that produces the booklets on various challenging aspects of life that we have long made available in the narthex of the church. Many folk in our Reformed evangelical world think the CCEF represents one of the most sane and helpful approaches to dealing with the trials and tribulations of life. Why Suzan thought I needed a book on anger, I have no idea, but the fact that she did really made my blood boil!

*Good and Angry* is a fine book, not least because Dr. Powlison provides a very thoughtful and helpful anatomy of anger. After considering anger in its many manifestations, he defines anger as "active displeasure." His entire definition is "active displeasure toward something that's important enough to care about." What is illuminating and helpful about that definition is that it applies equally to righteous anger and sinful anger. We all know that anger can be the expression of true goodness, as is God's anger for example, or of the worst and most harmful selfishness, as it is far too often in our lives. Well, I want to consider with you this evening *something that ought to make you angry*. It makes me angry. It is certainly important enough to care about and it ought to evoke in all of us an *active displeasure*.

I am referring to a growing unwillingness *among Christians* to embrace the historically Christian and obviously biblical understanding of the cross, of Christ's death on the cross. The fact that unbelievers find the Christian message of the cross either objectionable or actually repugnant does not anger me and shouldn't anger you. That has been the case from the beginning as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 1. Neither the typical Jew nor the Gentile could wrap his or her arms around the idea that his or her salvation required Jesus' death on the cross. It was a stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to the Gentile. Of course it was! Neither Jew nor Gentile believed that his or her sin required nothing less than the incarnation of God and the suffering and death of the incarnate Son of God on the cross. The gods of the ancient Gentile world wanted gifts, but they cared little how you lived your life. And both Jew and Gentile alike suffered from the pride that blinds the mind to the truth, supremely the truth about oneself! We understand that; we have seen that often enough not to be surprised by it; nor even to be offended by it. This was the problem Jesus encountered among the Jews in his day; it was the problem Paul encountered among the Gentiles in his day: neither thought their forgiveness required so earth-shaking or so ghastly a sacrifice! Jesus' parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee perfectly illustrates that problem. For the Pharisee the mercy of God was a predictable, dependable advantage for the properly religious person. Paul's mighty polemic against justification by human effort discloses the same problem: an utterly unwarranted self-confidence on the part of the sinner before the Living God.

But to hear Christians nowadays openly condemn, even find disgusting the understanding of the cross that the Christian church has so long proclaimed, that the devout have so heartily believed and sung, and that Christians have so long and so faithfully explained as the reason why everyone should put his or her faith in Jesus Christ, is something that ought to make you angry; it certainly makes me angry. We are living in a day when more and more professing Christians

consider the historic understanding of the cross almost a pagan idea, even a psychologically damaging idea. Here is one such Christian writer in a book published by well-known evangelical Christian publishing house (Zondervan), a press that not so many years ago would *never* have published a book with these words in it.

“...a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement: ‘God is love.’”  
[Steve Chalk and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, 182-183]

When an unbelieving feminist tells us that the Christian understanding of the cross is a justification for child abuse, we shake our heads at the willful ignorance. But we expect nothing more of such a person. But when a professing Christian writer says the same thing in a book published by a Christian publishing house we ought to be angry, and that especially for two reasons.

I. *First, the Christian doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement*, that is, when Christ died on the cross he was suffering on our behalf and in our place *the penalty* of our sins, is so plainly, emphatically, repeatedly, and unmistakably the teaching of Holy Scripture, that to deny it is willful unbelief!

It was for this reason that I read Isaiah’s famous servant song this evening. Isaiah tells us here not only that the Servant is our savior, but *how* he is our Savior. Would it be possible for Isaiah to have made this point more clearly than with the magnificent language he employed here?

“*He* has borne our griefs and carried *our* sorrows...”  
 “*He* was wounded for *our* transgressions...”  
 “*He* was crushed for *our* iniquities...”  
 “The *punishment* that brought *us* peace was upon *him*...”  
 “With *his* stripes *we* are healed...”  
 “The Lord has laid on *him* the iniquity of *us* all...”  
 “He was stricken for the transgression of my people...”  
 “It was the Lord’s will to crush him and he has put him to grief, though *he* had done no violence nor was any deceit in his mouth...”  
 “When his soul makes an offering for guilt...”  
 “He shall bear their iniquities...”  
 “He bore the sin of many...”

J.I. Packer, in his little masterpiece entitled, “What did the Cross Achieve?” cites the British scholar, J. S. Whale, who observed that this Servant Song “makes twelve distinct and explicit statements that the Servant suffers the *penalty* of other men’s sins: not only vicarious suffering but penal substitution is the plain meaning of its fourth, fifth, and sixth verses.” [Packer, *What did the Cross Achieve: The Logic of Penal Substitution*, 34n.] We were guilty. We deserved punishment for our persistent, willful, and inexcusable moral failure – great punishment for a life of constant selfish pride, and indifference to both God and man – we have been put into this

world to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind and to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves and we have not done those things for ten minutes in our entire existence - and Jesus Christ suffered the punishment we deserve in our place on our behalf. The soul that sins must die. Divine justice demands punishment for sin; God's perfect holiness demands that the scales be balanced; that the debt be paid. And the Servant paid the debt for us. Seven hundred years before the cross, Isaiah said that this is what the Messiah would do and this is how he would save his people from sin and death.

In my place condemned he stood,  
Sealed my pardon with his blood.

Franz Delitzsch, the great 19<sup>th</sup> century commentator on Isaiah, wrote: "The fifty-third [chapter] of Isaiah reads as if it had been written beneath the cross of Calvary. The Holy Ghost has here excelled himself!" [Whyte, *With Mercy and With Judgment*, 201-202; Delitzsch, 340].

And, as you well know, what Isaiah said long before Christ appeared, is then repeated and still more explicitly explained in the New Testament. I could demonstrate this at wearying length. The language of propitiation – the turning away of God's wrath – of redemption – the buying out of bondage by the payment of a ransom – and reconciliation – the act of overcoming alienation is found throughout the NT, on the lips of Jesus himself and in the writings of his apostles. All of those concepts, so familiar from the OT and its sacrificial ritual, are used to explain the cross, *and all of them, as before in the OT, are understood in terms of substitutionary punishment*. Paul says in Romans 3, explaining how the *redemption that came by Christ Jesus* delivered us from God's just judgment, that Christ propitiated God's holy wrath by his sacrifice on the cross. That is, he suffered God's wrath in our place; he turned it away from us by bearing it on our behalf. In Galatians he reminds us that because of our sins we stood under the curse of God's law that threatens punishment for offenders. But "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us..." The entire logic of Israel's sacrificial system was that of substitutionary punishment and that understanding thoroughly pervades the New Testament. As Peter put it:

"For Christ also suffered once *for sins*, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God..." [1 Peter 3:18]

It is precisely *in this way* that the cross accomplishes the forgiveness of our sins. This language, this explanation of Christ's death is so pervasive in the Bible, that it is no wonder God's people through the ages have assumed that this was precisely what Jesus was doing on the cross: suffering the penalty of *our* sins so that we would not have to suffer that penalty ourselves. This is what they sang in their hymns because this is what they read in their Bibles.

Well might the sun in darkness hide, and shut his glories in,  
When Christ, the mighty Maker died for man the creature's sin.

True enough, there have been through the ages Christian theologians who suggested other explanations for the cross. They should have known better, but, like other men they resisted the idea that their sins were so great that only Christ could offer atonement for them and only in such

a terrible way. Theologians, intellectuals that they are, often have struggled to believe what ordinary Christians find easy to understand. These thinkers argued rather that on the cross Christ was paying a ransom to the Devil, or by his death was inspiring us to faith and love by his example of selflessness, or by his death was demonstrating God's abhorrence of sin so that God's forgiveness which itself required no atonement would not undermine our commitment to righteous living. Many others were more like the English theologian of another day, F.W. Robertson, of whom it was said: "He believed that Christ did something or other which, somehow or other, had some connection or other with salvation." But these explanations hardly satisfied the Bible's ringing explanations of the cross and never displaced the plain-speaking of the Word of God in the hearts and minds of God's people!

More than that, not only did none of those explanations satisfy the Bible's own explanation of the cross as penal substitution, Christ taking upon himself the punishment we deserved, but it was pointed out that the cross, understood in this way, accomplished all of those other purposes at the same time. Penal Substitution alone could solve our problem with sin and reconcile us to God, but by doing so all these other happy results came in train. The Devil's grip upon us was broken as soon as we were freed from the guilt of our sins and became the children of God. As Paul explains in 1 Cor. 15:

"The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law [that is, the law as it condemns sin and threatens sin with punishment]. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Or, as John put it, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. How did he love us? Well John tells us: God loved us by sending his Son into the world *to be the propitiation* for our sins, that is, the sacrifice that turns God's holy wrath away from us. [1 John 4:9-11] In the same way, the cross has powerfully and wonderfully inspired God's people to love and good deeds *precisely because on that cross Christ loved us in that most costly way, the way that did the very thing for us that we needed most to be done, and all while we were yet his enemies, and by so doing he reconciled us to God by dying for us.* "As I have loved you," Jesus said, "so you must love one another." And what more powerful demonstration of God's moral government and hatred of sin could there be than that God required nothing less than the punishment of sin in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ before he could forgive sinners.

The reason why this understanding of the cross has always satisfied the vast majority of the believing church and why it always will is *both* because it lies face up on the pages of the Bible *and* because our consciences bear witness to the fact that we are guilty before a God whose eyes are too pure to behold sin and will not clear the guilty, that we deserve the very punishment God promised to those who break his law, and that God must be just if and when he justifies or acquits the ungodly. Only by punishing our sin in our substitute, Jesus Christ, could God remain just while forgiving the sins of a multitude no man can number! It was the perfect genius of God that conceived a way to deliver us from sin and guilt that did not in any way impinge upon his justice. There is mystery here to be sure, much we cannot understand or explain, but that Christ suffered punishment in our place is what the Bible teaches in a hundred different ways. This is not morally dubious; this is not a barrier to faith; it is the only explanation of the cross that satisfies the demands of our case and so the demands of an awakened conscience.

But there is *another reason* why we ought to be angry, actively displeased, at this growing number of Christians who are denying that Jesus Christ suffered the punishment due us for our sins, in our place, on the cross.

II. *This caricature of the cross – as a form of child abuse, an ill-tempered father angrily taking out his vengeance for someone else’s failures on his own son – is a virtual denial of the deity of Jesus Christ!*

Christians should know better. Christian thinkers and writers have no excuse. The idea that the Father alone is punishing the Son for someone else’s sins, still more doing so in ill-temper, is a travesty of interpretation and strikes at the vitals of the Christian doctrine of the tri-unity of God. In the Christian doctrine of God, developed by the church fathers from the information provided in Holy Scripture and preserved in the believing church ever since, a distinction is made between what theologians call the *internal works* of God, the *opera Dei intra*, and the external works of God, the *opera Dei extra*. By the internal works are meant the distinctive properties and inter-relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We don’t know and can’t explain what they are, but we know that the Father is always the Father and never the Son or the Spirit. Somehow each of those names appropriately identifies the distinctive properties of each person of the Godhead. The Father always relates to the Son and the Spirit *as the Father*. And so it is for the Son and the Spirit. They always remain in the internal life of God as the Son and as the Spirit, whatever those names convey of the distinctive properties of each person. This is what theologians mean when they speak of God’s *inward* works; they are distinct since each of the persons is distinct, however perfectly the three persons form and live in the unity of the one God. The first person of the Godhead is always the Father and always acting as the Father, the Son as the Son, the Spirit as the Spirit.

But the outward works of God – by which is meant everything that God does in creation and providence, and so in redemption – those works are, as the theologians say, *indivisible*. The term is *opera Dei extra indivisa*. That is, all of those works *are common to the three persons*, even though the distinction of the persons is maintained or preserved. That is, the Father sends the Son, never vice versa; the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit; it is the Son who is sent by the Father and so comes into the world as a man; it is the Holy Spirit who conceives and attends the incarnate Son, who indwells the church, and so on. They may each contribute to the work in the way appropriate to their distinct persons, but the work itself is theirs together. So the ontological Trinity – the Trinity as God exists in himself in three persons – is mirrored in the economic Trinity – the three-person-God who acts in the world.

To put it another way, in their work – this too is fundamental to the Christian theology of God – the three persons *are always the one and the same God who acts*. The three persons fulfill the roles appropriate to them as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, *but they act as one*. The biblical argument for this is many-sided, and it is and has always been convincing to the church. It rests on many direct statements found in the Bible, it rests on the use of particular prepositions in reference to the three persons, and it rests on the logic of the doctrine of God as one in three persons. So when Jesus says that he and his Father are one; when he says that he delights to do his Father’s will, a great deal is being said. [Bavinck, *Ref. Dogm.* III, 318-319]

God the Son did not come into the world against his will; quite the contrary, he was as willing to come as the Father was to send him and as the Holy Spirit was to accompany him every step of the way from his conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary to his death on the cross to his resurrection from the dead. Indeed, as we read in Hebrews, Christ went to the cross for the joy that was before him. He knew what he was doing and why, why he had to suffer. No one took his life from him, as he himself made a point of saying; he laid it down *of his own accord*.

In other words, the redemption of the world was the plan, purpose, and accomplishment of the one living and true God, each of the three persons contributing his distinct and appropriate part. Do you see what this means? Jesus Christ was not a third party to the great exchange, as if he stood between God and man as something other than God or man. He was a man, but he was also God the Son. He could be the mediator between God and man *precisely because he was both God and man!* But being God, true God, eternal God, God as the Father is God and God as the Holy Spirit is God, the love that sent him into the world *was his own love*. The justice that had to be satisfied and was satisfied on the cross *was his own justice*. Do you see? Jesus Christ was bearing *his own wrath* on the cross. He, God the Son, was angry with the wicked every day. *His eyes were too pure to behold iniquity. It was his curse that had fallen upon men on account of their sin.*

Remember, as the New Testament tells us again and again, it was God the Son, the NT will even say, anachronistically but with precise theological accuracy, that it was *Jesus* who appeared to Moses at Sinai in the fire and the smoke; Jesus who threatened Israel with destruction for her sins; it was Jesus who delivered the law at Sinai, the very law that demanded obedience or else; the law that threatened sinners with death; and it was Jesus who redeemed a sinful people from bondage in Egypt, the great anticipation of what he would do centuries later on the cross. People so often and so foolishly think of the God of the OT as a less merciful, more demanding person. *But that God was Jesus Christ*, the same Jesus Christ who suffered and died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins!

We rightly celebrate the heroism and self-sacrifice of a soldier who falls on a grenade to save his comrades from certain death. Greater love has no man than that he give up his life for his friends! But the cross is a far deeper mystery, because Christ, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, *threw the grenade in the first place*. They had to put man to death for his willing, persistent, and ugly selfishness and rebellion; his lack of love for God and man, his perpetual idolatry. The perfect justice and holiness appropriate to the living God demanded that sin be punished. So, when the Son fell on the grenade to save his friends he was falling on the grenade he himself had thrown.

So let's have nothing more of this nonsense about the cross being some sort of moral travesty. It was perfect love and perfect justice at one and the same time: God saving his people from the consequence of their sins in the only way they could be saved, God being God. Let's not give the time of day to anyone who suggests that there is something unworthy in penal substitutionary atonement. There has never been anything done in this world more worthy than Christ's dying in our place, undergoing the curse of the law on our behalf, to deliver us from our sins into the family of God. Any Christian who says otherwise and so diminishes and besmirches our Savior's

sacrifice should be met with our active displeasure, since the sacrifice of himself on the cross for us is certainly something important enough for us to care about. Indeed, if there is anything in the world we ought to care deeply about it is this!

Alexander Moody Stuart, one of the luminaries in the galaxy of great preachers in Scotland in the second half of the 19th century, recalled in his memoir of John Duncan, the celebrated and eccentric Rabbi Duncan, Presbyterian missionary to the Jews in Hungary and then professor of Hebrew in the Free Church Divinity School in Edinburgh, an incident in a seminary class which Duncan was teaching and in which class Moody Stuart was a student.

“In the winter of 1864, Dr. Duncan was reading part of Isaiah with his senior class. The particular passage I cannot remember, nor does it matter, for it only served as a suggestion of the cry in verse 1 of the 22nd Psalm, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ By the time Dr. Duncan had reached that point he had left his desk and, bent nearly double, was pacing up and down in front of the students’ benches, his snuff-box and pocket-handkerchief in one hand, a huge pinch of snuff occupying the fingers of the other, but utterly forgotten in the absorbing interest of his subject, our Lord’s sufferings for sinners, which he was turning over and looking at, now on this side, now on that, but all with a loving reverence, and as one who spoke in a half-sleeping vision, when suddenly a flash went through him as if heaven had opened. He straightened himself up, his face kindled into a rapture, his hand went up and the snuff scattered itself from the unconscious fingers as he turned to the class, more as it seemed for sympathy than to teach – ‘Ay, ay, d’ye know what it was – dying on the cross, forsaken by His Father – d’ye know what it was? What? What?’ (as if somebody had given him a half answer which stimulated him, but which he had to clear out of his way, a very usual exclamation of his when wrapped in thought.) ‘What? What? It was damnation – and damnation taken *lovingly*.’ And he subsided into his chair, leaning a little to one side, his head very straight and stiff, his arms hanging down on either side beyond the arms of his chair, with the light beaming from his face and the tears trickling down his cheeks he repeated in a low intense voice that broke into a half sob, half laugh in the middle, ‘It was *damnation*--and he took it lovingly.’” [*The Life of John Duncan*, 104-105]

The cross is not the story of events that somehow got out of hand, or of a good idea gone bad, or of the unfortunate end of a process that was begun without a clear end in view. No! Absolutely not! This great salvation was born in the counsels of the divine mind and in the love of the divine heart. It was forged in the only way it could be forged so that God might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. This salvation was the result of the love for mankind and the thirst for perfect justice in the heart of the one God and all three persons of that one God. They together agreed that the people of God whom they loved should be given to the Son to save and that the Son should save them, each one, by meeting for them in their place, the demands of God’s holy and rightfully inflexible justice. Remember and never forget, and hurl back at the Christian who ought to know better: it was Jesus who said of himself, “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for many.”