

The Silent Sheep

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[0 : 00] Good evening, I'm Neil, Neil McMillan, so if we haven't met before, I am a minister in Morningside here in Edinburgh.

We're going to spend a little time now just looking together at Isaiah chapter 53 and the final verses. So I was doodling earlier this week, came up with a little sketch for you, so there you go.

This is Rembrandt and it's Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal son. So there you have the old father at the centre of the picture and the son, the wandering son has returned home.

He kneels before the father and the father embraces him. So there's a Dutch Catholic theologian who comments on this painting, Henry Nowan, and he said, as he looked at this painting, he asked himself a question and this is a question that he asked, he said, had I myself ever really dared to step into the centre, kneel down and let myself be held by a forgiving God?

Had I ever myself ever really dared to step into the centre, kneel down and let myself be held by a forgiving God?

[1 : 36] Now when one went on to say this, he went on to say, the journey from teaching about love to allowing myself to be loved proved much longer.

So I can put the picture, I mean thanks, Glenys, but that's just the kind of question that I think I want to look at with you for this little while about this idea of not just knowing about God's love, but allowing ourselves to be loved.

Moving away from the idea of God's love simply as an abstraction that we understand to a reality that we experience. Because I think a lot of us would identify with what Nowan says.

We know about the love, but we don't know the love. We talk about the love, but we don't experience it. And God's love, like honey, is better tasted than described.

And we need to allow ourselves to be held by God despite our great reluctance. We're thinking through the Christmas season, the Advent season, the Christ who has come to us so that God might be with us, so that God might hold us.

[2 : 59] And what that means then is that as we look through these verses of Isaiah 53, I want to do so just thinking through this idea of knowing and experiencing the love of God.

Because for all of us, Christianity cannot be true unless love is at its center. There's anything people understand about Christianity.

It is that it proclaims itself to be a religion of love. If you're not a Christian this evening, then that might be part of your question or your skepticism or your inquiry.

Where is the love? Is the love real? Can the love be experienced? And is that love working its way out in the life of this Christian community?

And so it's really important that we are individuals who know the love of God, hold the love of God at the center of our beings, but it's also very important for us as a community that love lies at the center of who we are and what we are together.

[4 : 04] So I'm going to think about three things. The language of love that we find here, the action of love and the joy of love. So the language of love, the action of love, the joy of love.

So let's think about the language of love. I am a man who loves a bit of crime drama, Nordic noir or Wallam down and all these kind of books and films and TV shows or Harry Bosch if you like Michael Connelly's books.

So detective novels, there's always a post mortem and a detective novel. There's always something about the cause of death as blunt force trauma or gunshot wounds or exsanguination.

And here I just want to say that there is an awful lot about the language of death, the cause of death in the text of Isaiah 53.

And that as we read all that's said about how Jesus died, God is communicating his heart of love to us because this detailed and intimate graphic portrait of the suffering servant is Christological.

[5 : 19] So Corey said that to his last time. This is great Christology. Jesus himself in the Last Supper describes himself as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53.

So here Jesus is giving you and I an incredible glimpse into the way in which he loves us and the extent to which his love takes him.

So what we're seeing here then in the language of love is the suffering that Jesus experiences, a suffering experiences because he loves us.

If you wonder if God loves you, come to the text. I've rolled back a couple of verses into verse five first of all where Corey was speaking.

I'm not going to go through every single experience of the suffering but I just want to look at some of the language that's used. So in verse five we read that he was pierced for our transgressions.

[6 : 23] The word actually means that he was pierced through. It's the idea of receiving a deadly wound. It is a deliberate assault.

It is non-accidental. It is a violent strike. In verse five and in verse ten we read about Jesus being crushed.

He was pierced for our transgressions. Verse five he was crushed for our iniquities. Verse ten it was the will of the Lord to crush him. That means being ground into dust.

Sometimes I grind my coffee because I'm from Morningside so I grind my own coffee. I get the little grinder out. I get my beans and I make myself a delicious espresso or whatever it might be.

So I just take the bean and it's ground and it's ground until it's a fine powder. That's the idea of grinding, crushing, breaking into small pieces.

[7 : 25] It speaks of emotional and spiritual pressure placed upon the sufferer. It's an idea of unmitigated agony, merging in a crushing destructive experience that causes a sufferer to disintegrate.

This is the love of Jesus. In verse seven we read that he is oppressed. That's a word that's used in the book of Exodus for the way that the Egyptian slave taskmasters treated the Israelite slaves.

They were oppressed. They were treated harshly. As the idea of being whipped, beaten, battered. It's the experience of physical violence from those who have power over you.

In verse seven we read that he is slaughtered like a lamb. Jesus, the lamb of God, is butchered for the people of God.

In verse eight we read that he was cut off from the land of the living. The idea of being cut off is of a violent and abrupt ending.

[8 : 52] In Psalm 88 it says, I am cut off from your care. The Sammet is a relationship with God broken. He is isolated, lonely and desolate.

In Lamentations chapter three it says the waters rose over my head. I thought I was about to be cut off. A abrupt rupture in relationship.

In verse nine we are told that they made him aggravated with a wicked, with a rich man and his death. So Jesus, although he is shamed by humanity, he is honoured in death.

The plural of death in verse nine, or the word death in verse nine is in the plural. So if you read the Hebrew it would say he was given a grave of the wicked with a rich man and his deaths.

So I'm not a linguist, but linguists tell me when I read them that that's a plural of intensification. It's an intensifier, his death, his deaths.

[10 : 03] That intensifier means his utterly horrendous death. In verse 11 we are told about the anguish of his soul.

Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied. The word anguish speaks of toil and pain in the most difficult and wearying kind of endeavor.

The kind of effort that drains us and drains our whole being. In verse 12 we are told that he poured out his life, gave everything, exposed himself completely, took himself to the furthest extreme, even to death itself.

All this language is very stark, very harsh, and it is the language of God's love for us.

It's a catalogue of horror. It's a litany of terrible woe. It's a record of extreme human suffering.

[11 : 21] What causes Jesus to suffer in this way? Only love. It is love that holds Jesus there. It is love that keeps Jesus there.

The love of Jesus is real and it's costly. It's a really important lesson for us to know that that's a way that God loves us and cares about us.

It's also a really important lesson for us as we think about what it means to love others. Because often in life we want kind of cheap love or easy love. We want love without the effort.

Love always proves to be costly. Sometimes we resist that and we take the easy path. We avoid hard relationships. We avoid the cost of relationships.

I was watching a film last night that I'm told is a good film, but I don't know if it really is or not. But anyway, about time is about a father and a son who can both time travel.

[12:25] So the son uses time travel to go back and fix any little problem that comes up in his life. He can only travel back through his own lifetime. He can't go to previous generations.

Anyway, he can travel back through his own life to fix things as they come up. So he goes out on a date. The date goes wrong. Then he time travels back to the beginning of the date and does it again until the date goes right and the girl starts to really like him.

Or his sister crashes the car so he time travels back so that he can prevent the car crash. And so he uses his time travel gift to make life easy, to make love easy without cost.

He doesn't have to suffer because he can love people in the simplest way. He can fix everything until one day his dad dies. And he finds out that love really does have a cost.

We often want love that feels easy and pleasant, but love will always involve sacrifice, dying to self and living for other people. How can we love others like this?

[13:32] Because he is loved is like this. It's out the strength of his love. It's because he first love does. That we can love others, lay our lives down for them, sacrifice our good, give ourselves freely and do so without resentment.

So that's just the first thing I really want to say then is the language of love shows as the reality of love. I want to talk about the action of love secondly.

It's very clear that Jesus is suffering for us in this passage. He's going through all this, not for anything he's done, but for us.

So I just want to look at that more closely. Two or three ideas in here that I want to pick on. So very clear idea in this passage of substitution.

So love is not just emotion. I've said that. It's not just feelings, good, beautiful feelings. Love is always a determination to seek the good of the other person and that involves concrete, deep, discrete, distinct actions.

[14:47] Love moves towards the other person. Love will do what it has to, to secure the interests of the beloved. So when Jesus is suffering, it's because he is moving towards the beloved.

He is securing the good of those that he cares for. God is not just suffering for the sake of it. He is suffering for our salvation.

So verse tells us this. It tells us that he is numbered with the transgressors. He's bearing the sin of many. He makes intercession for the transgressors.

So verse 12 there, he's numbered with the transgressors, means this. He's counted as a sinner. Your sin has become his sin.

Our sin goes on him. Our lies, our anger, our greed, our injustices, our pride is all made his.

[15:49] He is made sin. He's made liable for sin. He pays for our sin even though he's innocent.

So there's the idea of substitution. There's the idea of justification. So in verse 11 we read that he will make many to be accounted righteous.

So that's the word justification that we often use is to be accounted righteous, to be held righteous, to be seen as righteous.

And so Jesus, by his substitutionary death, by his vicarious, violent and voluntary death, he puts us back in right relationship with God.

In verse 11 we're told that he gave himself up. In verse 10 we read that he was made an offering for guilt.

[16:54] He becomes a sacrifice. So the offering of guilt, of course, is a recent reference to the Old Testament, to the guilt offerings and sacrifices of the Jewish religion.

And within Judaism sacrifices were to be perfect and unblemished. Hands were laid in the animal to be offered, a goat or a lamb perhaps.

And as you laid your hands in the head of the animal that's about to be sacrificed, you were transferring your guilt symbolically onto the animal that is about to die.

And so when Jesus is made a guilt offering, we're being told that our guilt is transferred onto his head.

Our guilt is laid on him. He's offered up. He gives himself up. He becomes the sacrifice for our salvation.

[18:00] He bears our inequities. There's substitution, there's justification, there's intercession. He bore the sin of many and made intercession for transgressors.

Now we often think of the intercession of Jesus as the fact that he pleads with us before God. He prays on our behalf. But here the idea of intercession is not simply that he pleads on our behalf, but it is this, that he stands between us and the punishment that is due to us.

He stands between us and the wrath of God and he takes it on himself. And he makes restitution for us, satisfying the judgment of God.

That whole process, so costly to him that's at the heart of restoring right relationship with God.

Substitution, justification, intercession. Christ acting on your behalf, out of love, at great cost for your salvation.

[19:15] Such an important lesson for us that love takes the steps it needs to, to secure the interests and the well-being of the beloved. So Christmas is coming up and Christmas means that you're going to be forced into spending lots of time with people that you find difficult and who annoy you.

Okay, that's usually family gatherings, can be tense occasions, can they? There you are, sitting around the table, full of turkey, feeling annoyed about something.

And it's in all these little kind of irritating situations of life or difficult situations of life that grace has to become real, that the action of love has its opportunity to be made concrete.

So if you want a Christmas survival pack, I want to say to you first of all show grace, because this is a story of grace, isn't it? God love, favor shown to those who do not merit it, and we need to show grace.

And to show grace, we need to receive grace. One of my favorite sayings, there's a book I think called Relationships Making a Mess, or a mess worth making, one of my favorite quotes from that book is this, that our need for grace is as great when we are sinned against as when we sin.

[20:49] Our need for grace is as great when we are sinned against as when we sin. So we need grace to show grace when people are getting up our nose, or rubbing us up the wrong way, or pushing our boundaries or whatever it might be.

Be generous at Christmas, okay? Not just with extravagant great gifts, but with extravagant love.

We can spend a lot of money on people, but we can hardly bear to give them a kind word.

But love is shown in thousands of small acts. And be gentle, be gentle.

God is so gentle with us. Why is God so gentle with us? Because Jesus suffered so brutally, God can be so gentle with you.

And yet we're not very gentle with each other a lot of the time. So be gentle. Love acts on all these beautiful ways.

[22:06] The action of love. Just want to speak for a few minutes about the joy of love. So there's a language of love, which is a language of suffering and cost. There's the action of love, which is about substitution and justification and intercession, and making real steps, real efforts, moving towards people to show them grace.

And then there is the joy of love. So we read this, don't we? It's quite extraordinary when we read what's going on in Isaiah 53.

So I just want us to have a look at verse 10. It was the will of the Lord to crush him.

He has to put him to grief. That's devastating language if you begin to think about it. It was the will of the Father to crush him.

How? How can it be that God the Father would grind his Son into the dust of the earth?

[23:19] How can it be? Jesus cries out from the cross, why have you abandoned me? The Father doesn't reach down in love.

He reaches down with a sword and he smites the Son. It is the Lord's will.

So Peter says in Acts chapter 2, when he's preaching in Jerusalem after the resurrection, he was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge.

This is the will of God that Jesus should suffer for sinners. Why would the Father turn his face away from the cross, from the cries, from the tears, from the anguish of the Son?

Because he loves us. Because he loves us. There is a joy in being loved in this way if you can experience this love.

[24 : 21] And we read that Jesus is willing, isn't he? I can't remember what the sermon was called, the silent sheet, maybe something like that. That's verse 7. He was oppressed, he was afflicted, he opened not his mouth, he's not protesting, he's not fighting back.

In fact, we're told this, that the will of God prospers in his hand at the end of verse 10. He's doing the will of God and he's bringing it to fruition through his suffering.

This is not cosmic child abuse. This is the eternal Son giving himself to achieve the purposes of the Godhead.

He gives himself willingly. In John chapter 10, Jesus says, no one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord. He gives himself willingly, but not easily.

If it be possible, let this cup pass from me. He pleads, he prays, he weeps, he's on his face in the dust, pleading with God.

[25 : 31] Let the cup pass, but not my will, but your will be done. He submits himself to the will of the Father and the God's rescue plan prospers in his hand.

And he is delighted at the outcome. He's delighted at the outcome. Verse 10, it was the will of the Lord to crush him, he has put him to grief. He makes his soul an offering for guilt, but he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days.

The Lord shall prosper in his hand, from the anguish of his soul, he shall see and be satisfied. So there's a real interesting line there in verse 10, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days. That's a connection back to Genesis 12 in the covenant with Abraham, where this promise is made to Abraham that through your seed, the nations will be blessed.

The offspring of Abraham will be a blessing to the whole world. The offspring, that's the key word here.

[26 : 42] Abraham was told that his offspring would be more numerous than the sand in the seashore, the stars in the sky. It was God's promise to create a family, a people.

It was God's promise of rescue. Written in the book of Revelation is a great number that nobody can count.

So Jesus by his suffering is the one who rescues his people. He sees his offspring, he sees the multitude that no one can number.

We are his reward, in other words. Through the joy, the reward, the treasure for which he suffers. Why is he satisfied with the fruit of his suffering? Because through his suffering he gets you.

Hebrews 12, for the joy set before him, he endured the cross despising its shame.

[27 : 40] Tim Keller says about that in the sermon, what joy did Jesus lack in heaven? What was the joy that Jesus did not have in heaven, that he wanted so much that he would come and endure the shame of the cross?

And the answer to that is you. You're the joy that Jesus wanted with him in heaven. You're the joy that was set before him when he endured the cross.

He's satisfied when he sees that he has rescued us. He's delighted. He knows it was worth it. We are his joy, his reward, and so he becomes our joy and our treasure.

Jesus said this, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy he went and sold all he had, and he bought that field.

Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything that he had and bought it.

[28 : 48] You are Jesus's great treasure. Is he your great treasure? Is he the one that you would sell everything for?

Because he is your treasure, your joy, your great reward. When we really treasure something, we think about it a lot.

You might want a relationship, somebody you see, and you would treasure a relationship with that person. You would give up anything to be in a relationship with them.

You think about how can I meet them? How can I hang out when they're hanging out? How can I talk to their friends so that I can get an introduction? You start to think about this person all the time because you treasure them.

You might want a job or a certain kind of career, and you think a lot, and you talk to the right people, and you pursue it, and you make sacrifices for relationships, you make sacrifices for careers.

[29 : 51] When you treasure something, you will give everything you have to get it, and that's what Jesus is saying. Treasure. Treasure me. What will you give up so that you can kneel before Jesus, kneel before the Father and feel his embrace?

So there's going to be a lot of feasting going on this Christmas. I don't know what you're planning to binge on. Vegan haggis? I don't know.

Some people will. Turkey, yes please. Some of you will binge on box sets and Netflix. Some of you will binge on wine perhaps.

Please feast on Jesus. Feast on Christ. Set the time aside.

Kneel before him. Ask God to help you to engage with the story of Jesus' birth. I've read a prayer this morning from a book of prayers for Advent, and part of the prayer was just this.

[30 : 55] Fill me again Lord with childlike wonder and renewed hope about the story of the birth of Jesus. I pray that familiar scriptures would come alive in fresh and transforming ways that my heart would be inflamed with gratitude and praise.

So many things you could feast on this Christmas, but only one of them is a true and lasting treasure, and that's Jesus.

Let's get the picture up again, Glen, just as I finish. So there we go again. What can I say from this passage? He loves you. He loves you.

He loves you. His love is costly, it's extravagant, it's a rescuing love, it's a life-giving love, it's a joyful love. It's a love for you.

The love you read of in Isaiah 53 is a love for you. And so I invite you to kneel before him, in your inner person kneel before him now.

[32 : 06] Kneel before your Father in heaven and ask him to place around you the arms of his love.

Ask that he would give you a taste of his joy, and as you ask, ask boldly when you ask God for things.

Ask for great joy. Ask for a great feast. Ask for a great embrace. Ask for great love.

We're going to pray very briefly, and then we're going to sing a song. Lord, we do pray that as we think of Jesus this evening, that we would have an appetite and a desire for him above everything else.

Well, God, may we kneel before you now in humility of heart. May we come to you now and ask.

[33 : 03] Father receive us, and Father hold us, and do not let us go. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.