

THE MESSIAH WILL SURPRISE YOU

ISAIAH 52:13-15

One kind of surprise in life we call irony. The dictionary defines irony as “a set of circumstances or a result that is opposite of what might be expected.” For instance, of all the places in our country that might benefit from the cash flow that an oil well produces, the city of Beverly Hills, California might be the least deserving. It’s already one of the wealthiest communities in the United States in terms of per capita income. It’s known for multi-million dollar homes, movie stars and the shops along Rodeo Drive. Here’s the irony. Some years ago, oil was discovered underneath property belonging to Beverly Hills High School. Yes, a bountiful oil field with estimated reserves of 25-30 million barrels is right under the high school. For leasing a $\frac{3}{4}$ acre plot on its high school campus near the soccer fields to the Beverly Hills Oil Company, the Beverly Hills Unified School District gets paid about \$100,000 a month or \$1.2 million a year in oil royalties. The city of Beverly Hills is paid an equal amount. Small wonder that the teachers in Beverly Hills are the highest paid in California. Some folk just seem to have all the luck, don’t they? What a surprise! What an irony!

The portion of the Bible I want to look at with you over the next five Sundays is full of surprises and irony as well. Who could have guessed that a Jewish prophet named Isaiah living some 700 years before the birth of Jesus would so accurately describe His suffering on the cross? Who would imagine that in an Old Testament document written to fellow Jews living in 8th century BC Palestine, we would find the message of the New Testament clearly presented? In fact, Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 is so forceful, so precise, so compelling in its parallels to the experience of Jesus in the New Testament that many Jewish folk today are forced to dismiss it as inauthentic. As you might know, people of the Jewish faith accept and believe the Old Testament, but reject the New Testament. They also don’t believe that Jesus is God’s way of salvation. One orthodox Jewish rabbi said this about this section of Isaiah, “If I accept the Old Testament as I should, I must confess that you (meaning Christians) are right. It does portray many facets of the life of Jesus Christ. But since I do not believe in Jesus, I do not accept this portion of Isaiah.” Now, please read with me the whole passage in question and then let’s concentrate on the first section of it – the last three verses of Isaiah 52.

I suggest that we have here a portrait of Jesus before He even came. No, not a literal portrait, to be sure, but a Holy Spirit-inspired description of the significance of what Jesus did at the cross. As you can see from the list of the messages that I want to present this Lenten season, each one refers to something about the Messiah. That’s a biblical title for Jesus. It’s based on a Hebrew word meaning “the anointed one.” It’s very close in meaning to a more familiar word based on the Greek language – “Christ.” Jesus Christ is the same as Jesus Messiah. In the centuries leading up to Jesus, the Jewish people were looking for their Messiah. Nowhere in the Old Testament is a specific person identified or named as the Messiah. Nevertheless, Christians believe that Jesus was and is the Jewish Messiah. He is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament predictions and prophecies. The very first Christians were ethnic Jews and, of course, there are Jewish Christians today all over the world who recognize Jesus as the Messiah and worship Him accordingly. But the majority of Jewish people have rejected

Jesus as their Messiah over the past 2000 years of human history. In fact, many Jews are still waiting for their Messiah to appear. They don't believe that Jesus fulfills the expectations of what the Messiah is supposed to do and to be. Irony: "a set of circumstances or a result that is the opposite of what might be expected." Jesus can be too surprising and His claims too ironical for some people to accept. Consider with me three examples found in those last three verses of Isaiah 52. Here's the first one.

THE SURPRISE OF THE SERVANT

Isaiah never uses the word "Messiah" in these verses. But he does refer to the Messiah as "servant" there in v. 13. Assuming the voice of God, Isaiah says, "See, my servant will prosper; he will be highly exalted." (Isaiah 52:13 NLT) Most of us are quite familiar with the idea or thought of Jesus being a servant. Maybe that's just the problem! You can get so used to a concept that it no longer surprises you. You can easily miss the amazing irony of God becoming a servant of human beings. Imagine the Son of God giving up all the perks and privileges of heaven in order to enter this world as one of His own creations – as a human being! Peter was horrified when Jesus wanted to wash his feet on the night before Jesus' crucifixion. Why? Peter was beginning to understand just who Jesus was and is! The thought that God in human flesh would stoop to wash his dirty feet was mind boggling to Peter. "Oh, no, Lord, you must never wash my feet!" Peter was dumbfounded at this revelation of Jesus' servant heart. I wonder if you and I are too comfortable with it. "Yeah, Jesus is a servant.... Big deal!" It doesn't surprise us. It doesn't take our breath away. We miss the incredible irony of it all.

Think about it with me again this morning. The Son of God – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords – who has never known a beginning and will never know an end, absolute in His holiness, limitless in His power, willingly took upon Himself all the limitations of a poor Jewish carpenter – one, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus defined Himself as a servant. "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45 NLT) Now the ultimate proof of this servant role was His willingness to die on the cross. The cross wasn't an accident. It's wasn't an outrageous case of bad things happening to a good person. Instead, the cross was Jesus' destiny. By the cross and through the cross, Jesus reveals Himself as servant. How is that? Jesus served His Father because the cross was the only way God's plan for restoring a relationship with you and me could happen. Jesus also served you and me because only the cross could repair our shattered relationship with God. Jesus is the servant – the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep voluntarily and sacrificially.

Now, many Jesus followers are glad that He's a servant, but fewer of them realize that they're called to be servants, too! Talk about irony. You would think that if a person identifies with Jesus and wants to be like Him that being a servant would naturally follow. Instead, some Christians give you the impression that they believe God exists to serve them, to make sure they're happy, healthy and prosperous at all times and to ensure they don't have too many problems. The Bible makes it clear that you're here to serve God not vice-versa. What does it mean to serve God? It means to serve people

in some way, shape or form. Being Jesus' servant is a loving choice to make life better for others in some way in the name of Jesus and for his sake. Marriage is a primary place to serve. Husband, are you serving your wife. Wife, are you serving your husband. Family relationships are a place to serve. Parents, how do you serve your kids? Children and teenagers, how are you serving Mom and Dad? The street you live on, the place you work, the school you attend are all places where you can serve Jesus. Whose life are you making better in the name of Jesus and for His sake?

The local church is another place where you can serve Jesus. Some years ago now, it became popular to talk about "burning out" by doing too much at the church. Is that possible? Sure. It happens when you serve in an area God hasn't gifted you to serve or you don't manage your time well. But there's a bigger threat than "burning out". Let's call it "rusting out." "Rusting out" is the result of being overly protective of your time, your talents, your money and your energy. The result is that you do precious little for Jesus. Here's what I know. Most Christians don't "burn out" from doing too much; they "rust out" from doing too little for the Kingdom of God. It's somebody else's job to be a servant – not mine. Let someone else tithe... run the AV equipment on Sundays... take a turn in the nursery... work with kids on Wednesday night... pray faithfully... develop a genuine relationship with a nonbeliever and seek to share the message of Jesus with him or her... serve the poor in some way. I've known my share of Christians over the years who always have an excuse why they just can't do much of anything for Jesus. They rust out long before they burn out. If you're a true follower of Jesus, you are a servant, because He was and is a servant.

The late Mother Teresa made a wonderful comment. She said, "God doesn't expect big things. What He expects from us is small things done with great love – ordinary things with extraordinary love." During World War 2, a group of coal miners approached Winston Churchill, the British prime minister. They wanted to leave the mines and join the army. They didn't feel like they were contributing to the war effort just by digging coal out of the ground. The next day, Churchill addressed 4,000 coal miners in the Royal Hall of London. He said, "Gentlemen, they say Hitler is coming. They say he has 100,000 on the sea, 100,000 in the land, and 100,000 in the air. But I say to you that one day we are going to be victorious over this matter and one day we will walk down the streets of London in victory and I will say to a young soldier, 'Where were you in Britain's finest hour?' And he will answer, 'I was in the trench with my rifle fulfilling my responsibility, doing my part for my country.' And, I will say to a wife and mother, 'Where were you in Britain's finest hour?' She will say, 'I was in a hospital caring for the wounded, fulfilling my responsibility and doing my part for my country.' And I will ask some of you where you were in Britain's finest hour and you will say, 'I was down in the pit of the mine with my face against the face of the coal, fulfilling my responsibility, doing my part for my country.'" God has given you different gifts than me or the next person, but He has called each of us to serve Him in this place and beyond this place. Whatever God has called you to do, it is significant. There will come a day when Jesus will say, "Where were you in the Kingdom of God's finest hour?" And you need to be able to say, "I was doing thus and so, Lord Jesus, and fulfilling my responsibility for my Lord and for His Kingdom." Let me mention a second surprise.

THE SURPRISE OF THE CROSS

Don't get too comfortable with the cross. It is a terrifying and utterly surprising thing. Isaiah predicts here that those who actually witnessed it would be appalled by the cross and appalled by the One who hung upon it. Why? It's human nature to believe that a person gets what he deserves. Death by the cross is utter humiliation; therefore, it's easy to conclude that Jesus was some great criminal. Those who watched Jesus die were paralyzed by the sheer degradation of what they witnessed. Isaiah says, "But many were amazed when they saw him. His face was so disfigured he seemed hardly human, and from his appearance, one would scarcely know he was a man." (Isaiah 52:14 NLT) On the cross, Jesus was a physical wreck: bones out of joint, tongue dried and stuck to his inner jaw, wrists and ankles spiked, his back cut to ribbons by the Roman whip, a crude crown of thorns pressed into his scalp, blood – so much blood – everywhere, spit upon, insulted, taunted, cursed. There was nothing admirable about that scene on that day. Instead, it invited horror, scorn and derision. Except for a precious few, no one wanted to be identified with that Man or that scene on that day.

The cross still offends people today. Some years ago now, I read about a priest at a Catholic church who, shortly before Good Friday one year, put out several crosses draped all in black on the front lawn of the church. Not long after Father Ed got a call from the nearby North Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce. The person said, "Look, preacher, we've been getting complaints about those crosses in your churchyard. Now inside the church, who cares? But out front, where everybody can see them, they're offensive. The retired people don't like them – they find them depressing. The tourists don't like them either. It'll be bad for business. People come down here to get happy, not depressed." There's the irony. – the surprise of the cross. If the cross offends you, it's because you have no use for Jesus. It discourages, angers, and depresses you. But if you find the cross wonderful and beautiful, it's because you love Jesus. It blesses, enriches, and enlightens you.

But the surprise of the cross doesn't end there. The irony gets deeper and larger. How could anything so humiliating as a cross become the means of supreme exaltation for anyone? But that's what happened to Jesus. The Bible says, "(He) then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion. Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father." (Philippians 2:8-11 MSG)

Did you know that Jesus said you have a cross as well? "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me." (Matthew 16:24 NLT) What does that mean? It's yet another example of the sheer surprise and irony of the cross. Jesus wasn't referring to a literal, physical cross. Instead, He means that when you follow Him in life, it will demand increasing levels of self-denial. When you first commit your life to Jesus, it requires you to utterly reject the idea that you can save yourself through your own good actions or religious sincerity.

You take up your cross, so to speak, by refusing to trust in yourself and transferring that trust to Jesus. But it doesn't stop there. It then means allowing Jesus to work on every area in your life that needs to be changed – every attitude and behavior that dishonors God and hurts you. That requires self-denial. It will be a lifelong process and probably painful – like dying on a cross. But it doesn't stop there. It might well mean, next, learning to want God's will for your life even more than your own will for your life. That's a deep level of self-denial. Now, here's a significant irony. In God's hands, your self-denial is the pathway to joy in this life and the next. God is only interested in helping you to say "No" to anything in your life that will ultimately harm or destroy you and to say "Yes" to everything that brings eternal joy and life. Oh, yet another irony! Another surprise! If you let the cross do its work in you painful though it be, it will do for you what it did for Jesus. What's that? Exaltation. Somehow the experience of heaven will be richer and more rewarding for you because, in this life and on this side of heaven, you carried your cross. Quickly and finally, let me point to a third surprise.

THE SURPRISE OF THE GOSPEL

That word "gospel" simply means "the good news about Jesus." Look with me at what Isaiah said in v. 15, "so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand." (Isaiah 52:15 NIV) That word "sprinkle" refers to the practice of sprinkling the blood of a lamb sacrificed to pay for the sins of the people. By killing an innocent animal in payment for the people's sins, God was teaching His people that one day He would provide the real substitute to pay for those sins: His own Son. Isaiah implies here that the Messiah's blood was not shed to pay for his own sins, but rather to cover or atone for the sins of many people the world over.

I'm surprised by something else in this verse. Seven hundred years before Jesus, Isaiah knew that the salvation that the Messiah would offer would be for everyone. Most of the Old Testament people of God – the Jews – concluded that God only loved and cared about them. Most of the first Christians were ethnic Jews and it took them awhile to understand that what Jesus did applied to everyone on the planet. It took the apostle Paul – who before he became a follower of Jesus was about as Jewish as you can get – to explain clearly that God was creating a whole new chosen people made up of folk from every tribe, nation, culture, and ethnic group under the sun. He called it the Church – the Bride and the Body of Christ. The Church is made up of everyone who has lived, is living or who will live in the future who has put his or her trust in Jesus anywhere across the earth. No one could have thought this up on his or her own. I believe that's what Isaiah is alluding to when he says, "...For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand." (Isaiah 53:15 NIV)

So what? First, the surprise of the Gospel should make you eternally grateful. God's plan of salvation has been offered to the likes of you and me! We're included! Second, the surprise of the Gospel should make you appreciate anew the need for you personally to reach out and share this message with others. Jesus didn't just die for you, or your kids or your family. Jesus died for people who curse and reject Him this

morning. Jesus died for the child born in an inner city dump already addicted to crack cocaine – and for his mother, too. Jesus died for the homeless person shuffling down the street. Jesus died for the people our society wants to forget: the elderly, the handicapped, the mentally retarded and the unborn. Jesus even died for the person who really hurt your feelings deeply just this past week.

Who are you praying for? With whom are you building a friendship today who is, frankly, far from God? Those folk have as much right to hear this surprisingly good news as you do. Now here's maybe the most surprising news of all! What's that? God actually entrusts to you and me – messed up, broken, imperfect creatures – the most precious news in all the universe. What are you doing with it?

Most of you have heard of Chuck Colson – the Watergate “villain” who was wonderfully converted to Christ and has gone on to found Prison Fellowship and become an evangelical Christian leader. He tells a story about doing ministry with several Prison Fellowship volunteers to inmates on death row at an Indiana state prison. Colson's schedule was very tight that day. He had a meeting set up with the governor of Indiana, so he really needed to leave. He noticed that one of the volunteers in the group had stayed back and was talking with one of those death row inmates in his cell - a man by the name of James Brewer. Colson went to get the volunteer because the warden had to usher out the whole group of volunteers at one time. “I'm sorry, we have to leave,” Colson said, looking nervously at his watch. The volunteer, a short white man in his early 50s, was standing shoulder to shoulder with Brewer. The prisoner was holding his Bible open while the older man appeared to be reading a verse. “Oh, yes. Give us just a minute, please,” said the volunteer and then added softly, “This is important.” “No, I'm sorry,” snapped Colson, “I can't keep the governor waiting. We must go.” “I understand,” said the volunteer, “but this is important because I'm Judge Clement. I'm the man who sentenced James here to die. But now he's my brother and we want a minute to pray together.” Colson says that he stood frozen in that cell doorway. It no longer mattered who he kept waiting. Before him were two men: one powerless, the other powerful; one black, the other white; and one had sentenced the other to death. Anywhere other than in the Kingdom of God, that inmate might have killed that judge with his bare hands – or wanted to. Now they were one in Christ. Their faces reflected an indescribable expression of love as they prayed together. On the way out of the prison Judge Clement told Chuck Colson that he had been praying for James Brewer every day since he had sentenced him four years earlier.

Irony: “A set of circumstances or a result that is opposite of what might be expected.” Isn't the Gospel – the good news about Jesus – surprising? Aren't you glad that it is?