

JUST WHAT ARE YOU ANTICIPATING? (Part One) ISAIAH 52:13 – 53:12

What are you anticipating this Christmas season? Shopping? Decorating? Eating? Gathering with family and friends? Enjoying great music? Opening presents on Christmas Day? There's no season of the year that has more things to anticipate than the Christmas season. Anticipation is, also, the whole point of Advent – this 20 plus day period of time preceding Christmas Day when Christians all over the world spiritually reflect again on the life changing significance that God entered this world at a specific time and place to do something only He could do. This Advent season we are looking at the coming of Jesus through the eyes of the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, who ministered some 700 years before Jesus' birth. Because he was unable to experience Jesus' life as an eyewitness, Isaiah had to anticipate – to look forward with longing – to who Jesus would be and what He would do.

Last week, we allowed two of Isaiah's prophecies to help us answer the question, "Just *who* are you anticipating?" Who is this Jesus whose birthday billions of people celebrate all over the world? We learned that He is God with us, God for us and God in us. Today, we ask another question: Just *what* are you anticipating? What did Jesus do and why does it matter? We'll begin to answer that question today and finish up on December 23. Now, Isaiah's prophecy includes some of the most important predictions about Jesus in the entire Old Testament. That's especially true of the passage in Isaiah we're going to consider today: 52:13-52:12. One commentator I read this week said these verses are "the summit of Old Testament prophetic literature." That just means it doesn't get better than this, more profound than this, more important than this anywhere else in the Old Testament. Instead of reading this whole portion of Isaiah at one time, I think it's better to read it and reflect on it a section at a time. Isaiah's prophecy is written in a poetic format, so what we have here are five stanzas or strophes. Let's read the first one now: Isaiah 52:13-15. Among other great truths, we see here that ...

THE MESSIAH WILL SERVE YOU. (52:13-15)

Again, the question is: Just what are you anticipating? Just what is the coming Messiah going to do? Well, among many points we could make from those verses, we learn that Jesus will serve you and me. In the book of Isaiah chapters 40-53, we find a dominant figure that Isaiah simply refers to as the "servant of the Lord." In some places in his prophecy, "servant of the Lord" can refer to the nation of Israel. But in other passages, Isaiah clearly has in mind an individual coming in the future who has a mission to Israel and to all the nations and peoples of the world. The passage we're considering today is one of those passages, because right there in 52:13, we read, "See, my servant will act wisely...." (Is 52:13 NIV)

It's very easy to miss the irony that in Jesus, God became the servant of human beings. Do you remember how dumbfounded Peter became when Jesus wanted to wash the disciples' dirty feet? The fact that his Master and Lord – Jesus – would stoop to such a humiliating task boggled Peter's mind. Peter had a really hard time grasping that Jesus had a servant's heart. I wonder if we're just too comfortable with the fact that Jesus is a servant. It doesn't surprise us. It doesn't shock us or take our breath away. As a result, we miss the incredible wonder and irony of the fact that Jesus came as a servant. Think about it again this morning. The Son of God – King of kings, Lord of lords, Creator and Sustainer of the universe – who has never known a beginning and will never know an end, absolute in holiness, limitless in power, willingly took upon Himself all the limitations of a human being in, 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." (Mk 10:45 NLT) The ultimate proof of this servant role was Jesus' willingness to die on the cross. Why is that? The only way that your relationship with God could be restored required the cross. Jesus is the servant – the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep voluntarily and sacrificially.

Here's another irony. You would think any and every follower of Jesus would understand that to follow Jesus requires that you become a servant, too. Instead, some Christians believe God exists to serve them and to make sure they're happy, healthy, problem-free and prosperous at all times. The Bible makes it clear, follower of Jesus, that you're here to serve God not vice-versa. What does it mean to serve God? It simply means to bring glory to God – to elevate God, to praise God, to exalt God, to point to God – by how you live your life every day: your attitudes, your actions, your words, your choices – everything. Most of all, serving God means serving other people in some way, shape or form – in your home, at your place of work, in your school, among your neighbors and here at church.

We all have various Christmas traditions. Few of us probably have a tradition quite like the Robynson family. This family of five, with three kids under the age of ten, chooses to celebrate the birth of Christ in a unique way. On Christmas mornings, instead of focusing on the presents under the tree, they make pancakes, brew an urn of coffee, and head downtown. Once there, they load the coffee and food into the back of a red wagon. Then, with the eager help of their three-year-old, they pull the wagon around the mostly empty streets in search of homeless folks to offer a warm and filling breakfast on Christmas morning. All three of the Robynson kids look forward to this time of giving a little bit of tangible love to people who otherwise would have been cold and probably without breakfast. Can you think of a better way to start the celebration of Christmas Day? Jesus served you. And if you're a true follower of Jesus, you're a servant, because He was and is a servant. Let's read the second section: 53:1-3. We learn here that ...

THE MESSIAH WILL SURPRISE YOU. (53:1-3)

Just what are you anticipating? Just what is the coming Messiah going to do? These verses point to the fact that Jesus will surprise you and me. In Jesus, we see that God often does what we would never expect Him to do. Most of the Jewish people in Jesus' day and time expected a very different Messiah than Jesus turned out to be. They expected someone born into a very noble family from a very distinguished community. Instead, Jesus came from a very average, working class family from a very insignificant town called Nazareth and the legitimacy of his birth was questioned. People then and now want leaders who look the part. When Isaiah says here, "...He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Is 53:2 NIV), he's saying that Jesus didn't look or act the part. He didn't look or act like a king or a celebrity. The movers and shakers in Jesus' day and time initially dismissed Jesus as someone unimportant. They just wrote Him off.

In addition, Jesus' death on the cross was surprising in an offensive sort of way. It was very hard for people in Jesus' day to think that God's chosen deliverer – the Messiah – would die a criminal's death. The crucifixion of Jesus seemingly disqualified Jesus as the Messiah. How does Isaiah put it? "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not." (Is 53:3 NIV) Death by crucifixion was the most humiliating form of execution out there. To believe God would provide salvation through something that wretched and ugly was hard to grasp. Imagine someone saying to you, "You know, friend, Jesus died in the electric chair for you", or "Jesus was lethally injected for your sins", or "Jesus took your place in front of the firing squad." What? Really?

Truth be told, Jesus continues to offend and surprise even today. We like to think that if Jesus came today, we'd recognize Him and treat Him differently. I doubt it. Despite all the efforts to be more tolerant and respect diversity, we still have pretty much the same prejudices about people that they had back in Jesus' day. I'm quite certain that if the Son of God had chosen our day and time to incarnate Himself in a human being, we'd have missed Him just as badly as they did. We would have missed what God was doing in the cross as well. At the end of the day, the cross still offends your self-righteousness – the idea that your own goodness and sincerity will get you into Heaven. The cross proclaims that you're so far gone spiritually and morally that God had to provide salvation. The cross still offends your self-respect – the idea that you're really a decent sort of person who deserves God's mercy. The cross proclaims that you're a moral basket case who deserves nothing but His judgment. The cross still offends your self-reliance – that myth that if you just try hard enough to be good and do religious stuff that God will be impressed. The cross proclaims that you can do nothing to either earn or deserve a relationship with God. Surprising as it may be, that's precisely why God had to act on your behalf. The third section, 53:4-6, says what? Clearly, this stanza reveals that ...

THE MESSIAH WILL SAVE YOU. (53:4-6)

Just what are you anticipating? Just what is the coming Messiah going to do? These verses point to the fact that Jesus will save you and me. That in and of itself might not sound so remarkable, but what these verses clearly reveal is that Jesus saves us, first and foremost, from God Himself. Why do you need to be saved from God? Isn't He a God of love, compassion and forgiveness? Indeed, He is, but notice who it is that brings judgment down on the Messiah. "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.... Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer...." (Is 53:6, 10 NIV)

God is an absolutely holy, sin-free Being. Yes, He does love sinful people like you and me, but you can't imagine how much God hates sin. His consistent attitude towards sin in any form is anger – a holy anger, a justified anger, but a terrible anger nonetheless. Now, God's anger is very different than our anger. It's clean and good. It's anger at the right things for the right reasons. It's justified anger that demands resolution. God's anger doesn't just fade away with time. He doesn't just get over it. Because He alone is the eternal Judge of the entire universe, He must uphold justice or He would become less than just. God decided to resolve His own anger by unleashing it upon Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus, on the cross. So, there it is. God the Father sent God the Son into this world to deliver you from Himself. I know that's a hard truth, an uncomfortable truth and difficult truth, but it's the absolute truth.

The language of substitution is so powerful in Isaiah's prophecy. "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." (Is 53:4-5 NIV) The Messiah saved you from God, yes, but it was made possible only by God. Don't ever think of God as some pouting, irrational hothead sitting on His heavenly throne just waiting to fry you with His thunderbolts of condemnation. And don't ever think of Jesus having to twist His Father's arm to convince Him to be merciful to you. From eternity, Father and Son shared this plan to bring you, me and countless others from all over the world into His forever family.

A woman was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping at a crowded mall. She was tired of fighting the crowds. She was tired of standing in lines. She was tired of fighting her way down long aisles looking for a gift that had sold out days before. Her arms were full of bulky packages when an elevator door opened. It was full. The occupants of the elevator grudgingly tightened ranks to allow a small space for her and her load. As the doors closed, she blurted out, "Whoever is responsible for this whole Christmas thing ought to be arrested, strung up, and shot!" A few others nodded their heads or grunted in agreement. Then, from somewhere in the back of the elevator, came a single voice that said: "Don't

worry. They already crucified him." How sad that so few in our culture understand that the greatest message of Christmas is the cross! Jesus saved you. The fourth stanza of Isaiah's prophecy reads like this. Here we're reminded that ...

THE MESSIAH WILL SUFFER FOR YOU. (54:7-9)

Just what are you anticipating? Just what is the coming Messiah going to do? These verses point to the fact that Jesus will suffer for you and me. Many people conclude that God is totally immune from suffering of any kind. How can God suffer, they wonder? I suggest that the awesome, majestic God is also the greatest sufferer in the universe. God's suffering was literal and real. It was concentrated in Jesus and experienced by Jesus. In these verses, Isaiah predicts many of Jesus' sufferings. Jesus faced tremendous opposition and hatred. He suffered cruel and painful humiliation. He absorbed terrible violence. When a thief was crucified on other side of Jesus, He was indeed "...assigned a grave with the wicked..." (Is 53:9 NIV). God knows all about undeserved, unfair suffering. The Messiah was sinless and yet His innocence wasn't enough to prevent the greatest miscarriage of justice the world's ever witnessed.

Isaiah points to incredible power of Jesus suffering. He says, "...For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken." (Is 53:8 NIV) He compares Jesus to a lamb being taken to the altar of sacrifice. Lambs were one kind of animal used in Old Testament sacrificial worship. The priest laid his hands on the lamb's head and – spiritually speaking – the sins of the person who brought the lamb were transferred to the lamb itself. Then the lamb was killed in the person's place as a substitute. God was teaching us that sin deserves suffering and then death. But He was also teaching us that He would provide and allow a substitute. When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming to him to be baptized 700 years later, he said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29 NLT) Jesus' suffering makes your eternity in Heaven a reality. Jesus suffered for you. Let's read just now the final stanza in Isaiah's great prophecy about the coming Messiah. Doesn't that say that ...

THE MESSIAH WILL SUCCEED FOR YOU. (53:10-12)

Just what are you anticipating? Just what is the coming Messiah going to do? These verses point to the fact that Jesus will succeed for you and me. The day Jesus died looked like a disaster for God. Strange as it may seem, however, on that day the power of sin and the devil was broken in one, mighty decisive stroke. The guilt of human sin was paid for completely when Jesus breathed His last breath and died. Now the way was open to have your sins forgiven, to begin to enjoy a relationship with God and to begin to experience eternal life. I don't think the devil ever saw it coming: this decisive, knock out punch. He thought he'd won some great victory against God that day; instead, he was utterly defeated.

Isaiah says, "...he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied...." (Is 52:10-11 NIV) I believe the resurrection of Jesus is being predicted in those words. If the Messiah remains dead, how is He able to have offspring? And who are these descendants? Every man, woman, boy and girl over the last 2,000 years of human history who has received the gift of eternal life by putting his or her personal trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Isaiah tells us that Jesus will be "satisfied". His mission will be accomplished. Victory and success will be achieved. Because of what Jesus did and continues to do, you're being forgiven at this very moment, you're being accepted this very moment, you're being made whole this very moment, you're being empowered and strengthened this very moment. Because the Messiah – Jesus – succeeded, you are able to claim that victory, enjoy that victory, live in that victory and live out that victory every day and forever. Jesus succeeded for you.

There it stood—the best tree in the lot. It was the second Christmas for Paul Richardson and his wife, Lisa. With newlywed-like impulse, they decided to forego the two-foot high plastic tree that graced their coffee table the year before. They had found the perfect tree instead. It was wide at the base and came to a perfect point on top. With blissful Christmas cheer they paid \$25, squeezed the tree into their old, beat up car, and drove to their apartment. Paul cleared a spot next to the couch and set it up in the corner. At least, he tried to set it up in the corner. The perfect tree immediately fell over. After multiple attempts only brought about the same problem, Paul and Lisa came to a reluctant conclusion: their perfect tree wouldn't stand up. When Paul probed into the green needles, he discovered his perfect tree had a huge flaw. The base of the tree began straight and centered, but the middle of the trunk contorted in pretzel-like twists, bending this way and that, but coming out straight at the top. It was perfect on the outside but hopelessly flawed inside. It could never stand on its own.

That not-so-perfect Christmas tree is the story of Christmas. On the outside we like to show that we have it all together: "Tis the season to be jolly!" But inside we know differently: hurts, pains, disappointments, anger, and bitterness. Worse yet, there is that contortion of our souls the Bible calls sin. No matter how many ornaments Paul and Lisa hung on their tree, they knew it could never stand on its own. And no matter how many ornaments we attach to our lives, we can never be right with God on our own. The Christmas story is not about God seeing how nice we were and coming down to spend time with great people. It's the story of God seeing twisted, hurting, sinful people, and loving us enough to come down to die for us. Yes, it involved the joy of a new baby being born, but it also ended up with Jesus taking our sins upon Himself and dying as our substitute.

Just what are you anticipating this Christmas? I hope – like Isaiah, the prophet – you will welcome Jesus afresh and anew: the one who serves you, surprises you, saves you, suffers for you and succeeds for you.