

This coming Sunday, April 5th, is Palm Sunday. Under normal circumstances, we would join together in worship, and celebrate the triumphant entry of our Lord Jesus Christ into the City of Jerusalem by the waving of the palm branches and joyful singing. We would come together with Jesus at our communion table. But then, as we enter Holy Week, we are reminded of the turn of events, events that led to suffering, humiliation, and betrayal—the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew 27:11-54

Questioned by Pilate

CHAPTER 27:11 Jesus was brought before the governor. The governor said, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus replied, "That's what you say."

12 But he didn't answer when the chief priests and elders accused him.

13 Then Pilate said, "Don't you hear the testimony they bring against you?"

14 But he didn't answer, not even a single word. So the governor was greatly amazed.

Death sentence

15 It was customary during the festival for the governor to release to the crowd one prisoner, whomever they might choose.

16 At that time there was a well-known prisoner named Jesus Barabbas.

17 When the crowd had come together, Pilate asked them, "Whom would you like me to release to you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called Christ?"

18 He knew that the leaders of the people had handed him over because of jealousy.

19 While he was serving as judge, his wife sent this message to him, "Leave that righteous man alone. I've suffered much today in a dream because of him."

20 But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and kill Jesus.

21 The governor said, "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" "Barabbas," they replied.

22 Pilate said, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Crucify him!"

23 But he said, "Why? What wrong has he done?" They shouted even louder, "Crucify him!"

24 Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere and that a riot was starting. So he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I'm innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It's your problem."

25 All the people replied, "Let his blood be on us and on our children."

26 Then he released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus whipped, then handed him over to be crucified.

Soldiers mocking Jesus

27 The governor's soldiers took Jesus into the governor's house, and they gathered the whole company of soldiers around him.

28 They stripped him and put a red military coat on him.

29 They twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They put a stick in his right hand. Then they bowed down in front of him and mocked him, saying, "Hey! King of the Jews!"

30 After they spit on him, they took the stick and struck his head again and again.

31 When they finished mocking him, they stripped him of the military coat and put his own clothes back on him. They led him away to crucify him.

Crucifixion

32 As they were going out, they found Simon, a man from Cyrene. They forced him to carry his cross.

33 When they came to a place called Golgotha, which means Skull Place,

34 they gave Jesus wine mixed with vinegar to drink. But after tasting it, he didn't want to drink it.

35 After they crucified him, they divided up his clothes among them by drawing lots.

36 They sat there, guarding him.

37 They placed above his head the charge against him. It read, "This is Jesus, the king of the Jews."

38 They crucified with him two outlaws, one on his right side and one on his left.

39 Those who were walking by insulted Jesus, shaking their heads

40 and saying, "So you were going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, were you? Save yourself! If you are God's Son, come down from the cross."

41 In the same way, the chief priests, along with the legal experts and the elders, were making fun of him, saying,

42 "He saved others, but he can't save himself. He's the king of Israel, so let him come down from the cross now. Then we'll believe in him.

43 He trusts in God, so let God deliver him now if he wants to. He said, 'I'm God's Son.'"

44 The outlaws who were crucified with him insulted him in the same way.

Death

45 From noon until three in the afternoon the whole earth was dark.

46 At about three Jesus cried out with a loud shout, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani," which means, "My God, my God, why have you left me?"

47 After hearing him, some standing there said, "He's calling Elijah."

48 One of them ran over, took a sponge full of vinegar, and put it on a pole. He offered it to Jesus to drink.

49 But the rest of them said, "Let's see if Elijah will come and save him."

50 Again Jesus cried out with a loud shout. Then he died.

51 Look, the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split,

52 and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised.

53 After Jesus' resurrection they came out of their graves and went into the holy city where they appeared to many people.

54 When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and what had just happened, they were filled with awe and said, "This was certainly God's Son."

55 Many women were watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to serve him.

56 Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons. (CEB)

Our scripture reading in Matthew does not end with Jesus, King of the Jews, leading a vast army into battle and claiming victory over Rome. The passage ends without victory, without hope. It ends with a humble, nonviolent servant of God dying the horrible death of crucifixion on a cross, the form of execution used only for slaves and criminals. It was done. It was over. Those around Christ knew no different. His followers wept. They wept for their loss of a loved one, friend and teacher. They wept out of despair and loss of hope for a new King and a new kingdom. They wept because they believed that they would remain slaves, slaves to Rome and slaves to the Law forever. Maybe their Messiah had not come. Maybe they had been wrong. Maybe they misunderstood Him.

By God's grace, we know the rest of the story and know that this was not the end, but the beginning. But let's take a journey back to that time, that place. Imagine yourself as one of Jesus' twelve, or as a member of his family, or as one of the women that followed Him, or as a friend, such as Lazarus. Imagine that we don't have the New Testament, and for purposes of this message, let's imagine that we have only the words of the prophet Isaiah to rely upon. What was the message of the prophet to first century Christians? What is God's message to us today?

First, some background on our scripture passage in Isaiah which follows. This section of Isaiah was probably written between 545-539 BCE, during the time of exile of Judah to Babylonia. Four passages of Isaiah are separated out as the four Servant Songs. The four passages are Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; and 52:13-53:12. When the words of the prophet were originally written, it appears that his intent was to identify Israel as God's servant and to help the exiled Israelites see their role as suffering servants. After all, they were God's chosen people, whom God continued to help throughout their history of unfaithfulness. However, unlike the first three Servant Songs, the fourth speaks of the servant as an individual, rather than a nation.

The first Servant Song (Isaiah 42:1-4) introduces us to a chosen one who has received a divine spirit; one who will bring justice to all nations, not just Israel; one who will do so quietly, humbly, without force.

The second passage (49:1-7) identifies Israel, or a remnant of Israel, as the Lord's servant in verse 3. The servant is called to his servanthood mission even before his birth, and the mission of the servant becomes more universal. The mission is to be "as light to the nations so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (v. 6b). Even though I have not provided the first two songs in this message, I suggest that you go to your Bibles and read them at this time. Remember, these passages were written over 500 years before Christ was born. It is certainly awe-inspiring to read these passages and identify with the Messianic message that was given so many years before Christ walked the earth!

Continuing on, Isaiah 50:4-11, today's passage, is known as the third Servant Song.

God's faithful servant

CHAPTER 50:4 The LORD God gave me an educated tongue to know how to respond to the weary with a word that will awaken them in the morning. God awakens my ear in the morning to listen, as educated people do.

5 The LORD God opened my ear; I didn't rebel; I didn't turn my back.

6 Instead, I gave my body to attackers, and my cheeks to beard pluckers. I didn't hide my face from insults and spitting.

7 The LORD God will help me; therefore, I haven't been insulted. Therefore, I set my face like flint, and knew I wouldn't be ashamed.

8 The one who will declare me innocent is near. Who will argue with me? Let's stand up together. Who will bring judgment against me? Let him approach me.

9 Look! The LORD God will help me. Who will condemn me? Look, they will wear out like clothing; the moth will eat them.

10 Who among you fears the LORD? Who listens to the voice of his servant, who walks in darkness and has no light? They will trust in the LORD's name, and rely upon their God.

11 Look! All of you are kindling fire, igniting torches. Walk by the light of your fire, by the torches you have ignited. This is what will happen to you by my hand: you will lie down in grief. (CEB)

In this passage, the CEB translation identifies the servant as an educator, a teacher, who is given God's mission to awaken others. The servant remains obedient and faithful to God, even through suffering, ridicule, humiliation, persecution. Through it all, the servant is confident that God will not desert him and all will not be wasted. God will vindicate him. He tells others to trust in the Lord, for those that do not will suffer torment and grief.

I am sure that the early Christians found hope and comfort in these first two passages. They were persecuted by unbelievers to the point that they had to go into hiding after Jesus was crucified because they feared for their lives. Christians continued to be persecuted throughout history, even until today in many parts of the world and sometimes in this country as well. But in these first two servant songs, God shows His people that He is a God of justice and that He will not quit until there is justice for all. Many continue to suffer from poverty, oppression, workplace inequalities, racial discrimination, terrorism—and now the unjust thrust of the COVID-19 virus upon the world. Trust in the Lord. He is our help in times of trouble.

During this time of attack on our lives and our way of life, some of us may feel inclined to turn our backs on God, even blame God because we believe that He could put a stop to all of this if He wanted to. Just as the suffering servant wondered why God didn't do more to end his suffering, do we wonder the same? But as you meditate on this third song, do you sense the servant's intimate relationship with God? Despite his suffering and lack of understanding, he did not turn away from God. Instead, he endured. He held on to God, and his trust and confidence in God deepened as a result.

One of God's messages to us may be just this. Maybe we would be wise to do the same during this time of uncertainty and suffering so that our trust and confidence in God deepens. "God awakens my ear in the morning to listen, as educated people do" (Isaiah 50:4). Our scripture passage seems to indicate that the suffering servant began each day by listening to God. No matter what each day looks like for us, all of us should take the lead from the suffering servant and find time, morning, noon or night, to listen to God.

There are many ways to listen to God, and we all find time to do the things that we want to do. Maybe it is through scripture reading and prayer, a quiet walk, journaling, sitting quietly and inviting the Holy Spirit to fill you and speak to you, listening to Christian or classical music, drawing a picture, tuning into a Christian radio station at home or while driving, making a list of the things that you are thankful for, reading a good book, praying the Lord's prayer. This time spent with God will deepen your relationship with Him, and instead of feeling like you are in sinking sand, you will find stability that will help you persevere, strength that will guide you in your personal life and in your ability to help others, and confidence to trust in God more and more each day.

The fourth Servant Song takes us to the glory of the suffering servant that we celebrate on Easter Sunday (and every Little Easter Sunday in between). It is written so that by reading it, we are dramatically reminded of the passion of Christ as we enter Holy Week. The fourth and final Servant Song is cited nine times in the New Testament and five times in the preaching of John Wesley (52:13-53:12 Notes, The Wesley Study Bible). It is no wonder that the early Christians looked to this passage to help them understand Jesus, the suffering servant, as Messiah, and it reminds us today of His glory and the ultimate sacrifice that He made for us.

The Suffering and Glory of the Servant

CHAPTER 52:13 See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.

14 Just as there were many who were appalled at him — his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness—

15 so he will 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.

CHAPTER 53:1 Who can believe what we have heard, and for whose sake has the LORD's arm been revealed?

2 He grew up like a young plant before us, like a root from dry ground. He possessed no splendid form for us to see, no desirable appearance.

3 He was despised and avoided by others; a man who suffered, who knew sickness well. Like someone from whom people hid their faces, he was despised, and we didn't think about him.

4 It was certainly our sickness that he carried, and our sufferings that he bore, but we thought him afflicted, struck down by God and tormented.

5 He was pierced because of our rebellions and crushed because of our crimes. He bore the punishment that made us whole; by his wounds we are healed.

6 Like sheep we had all wandered away, each going its own way, but the LORD let fall on him all our crimes.

7 He was oppressed and tormented, but didn't open his mouth. Like a lamb being brought to slaughter, like a ewe silent before her shearers, he didn't open his mouth.

8 Due to an unjust ruling he was taken away, and his fate—who will think about it? He was eliminated from the land of the living, struck dead because of my people's rebellion.

9 His grave was among the wicked, his tomb with evildoers, though he had done no violence, and had spoken nothing false.

10 But the LORD wanted to crush him and to make him suffer. If his life is offered as restitution, he will see his offspring; he will enjoy long life. The LORD's plans will come to fruition through him.

11 After his deep anguish he will see light, and he will be satisfied. Through his knowledge, the righteous one, my servant, will make many righteous, and will bear their guilt.

12 Therefore, I will give him a share with the great, and he will divide the spoil with the strong, in return for exposing his life to death and being numbered with rebels, though he carried the sin of many and pleaded on behalf of those who rebelled.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, we praise your holy name. You came into this world, fully divine, fully human, realizing your destiny, the suffering that you would endure for all sinners, including me. Thank you, Lord, for redeeming me from the darkness and bringing me into the light. Even though you prepared yourself for suffering and death, it is evident that you were not any more ready for death than we are when we try to prepare ourselves for death or the death of a loved one. We sometimes know death is inevitable, but we never want to face it. You had these same feelings, but still carried out your mission as the suffering servant. Knowing all, the ridicule, humiliation, pain and suffering, you continued to love us, and trusted your Father through all of the suffering to final victory.

Help us also to trust you God, our Father. Be our guide when we are confused and lost. Be our helper in times of trouble and uncertainty. Be our provider for sustenance when we are empty and without, physically and spiritually. Be our loving Savior that holds us and calms our fears. Be our protector from evil and harmful things of this world--and not of this world. Be our rock on which we can lean for courage and strength. Give us humility; the humility of a suffering servant, and hope for the days ahead. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Related scripture readings for the week: Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11

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