

Good Friday

WITH MERCY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

*13 See, my servant shall prosper;
he shall be exalted and lifted up,
14 Just as there were many who were astonished at him—
so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortal—
15 so he shall startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which had not been told them they shall see,
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.53:1
Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
2 For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
3 He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised,
and we held him of no account.

4 Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and
afflicted.
5 But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;*

upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.

9 They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.

11 Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

DIAGNOSIS: Getting What We Deserve

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Demanding Justice

Have you noticed how very quick we are to demand justice from each other? We become outraged when we have been offended; we expect the best—heck, we deserve only the best! Or so we assume. (Notice the plethora of narcissists our society produces today.) Sometimes though, despite our “specialness,” things don’t work out the way they should, life falls apart on us, and we exclaim, “This is a living hell!” Some 2,500 years ago, Israel thought they were going through a living hell when they were captured and dragged to Babylonia as exiles. They couldn’t believe God had allowed it to happen to them. They were special, so they were stunned.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Affixing Blame
When bad things happen, we whimper and whine, “It just isn’t fair!” We take offense and point fingers to make someone else, even God, responsible for the mess we find ourselves in. After all, it can’t be our fault! Isaiah pointed out that, yes indeed, it was their (Israel’s) fault. Back home, he said, they had not acted as the special people God had chosen them to be. They had not ensured justice for all, they had exploited and ignored the poor, they had behaved like other nations. Isaiah described that as being astray. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way” (53:6). Astray-ness is turning away from God, insisting on doing it “my way,” being our own gods, finding “good” elsewhere, such as in possessions and powers.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Getting Justice
Sometimes it takes a lot of “living hell” to catch on that in

fact, God is giving us exactly the justice we demand. And it kills us, literally. Truth is, we are not the offended party after all. Our astray-ness makes us the offenders, and God the offended party. It was pretty clear to Isaiah that via the exile, Israel was receiving justice from God: Struck down, crushed, exiled, abandoned. Absolute justice becomes absolutely unbearable. What Israel, and we, really need is relief from justice.

PROGNOSIS: Getting What We Don't Deserve

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Justice Accomplished

Believe it or not, Isaiah (as God's spokesperson) promises that relief IS on the way: mercy is coming, for everyone—for Israel and for all God-offenders. God will be merciful, not by ignoring justice, but by satisfying justice. God, the offended, will absorb the ramifications of Israel's and our offenses into himself through his own special agent, "my servant." This special servant will bear the sins of many, will be crushed with pain, despised, held of no account, struck down, afflicted, wounded, and finally killed. But then, to assure that mercy prevails, he will be "exalted and lifted up" (v. 13).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Affixing Righteousness

In amazement we learn that justice has been secured (53:11) on our behalf, in a most merciful way. Even as we hang our heads in sorrow and contrition, we can't help but gladly grasp the healing (salvation) this special servant makes available to us. In addition, it causes a profound change in us which re-focuses us from justice-insisters to mercy-dispensers.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Securing Justice
Justice now becomes, not something the world and God owe US.

Rather, it is something WE owe God and the world! We busy our lives in service to the people and world around us, seeking to ensure justice for all. Notice, this doesn't always involve dramatic battles against exploiters, cheaters, and the like. More often, it involves behaving like the special servant and absorbing others' offenses into ourselves in order to get rid of those offenses for good.