

# Good Friday

## CRUCIAL PREPOSITIONS

### Isaiah 52:13–53:12

#### Good Friday

#### Analysis by Jerome Burce

*13 See, my servant shall prosper;  
he shall be exalted and lifted up,  
and shall be very high.*

*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 mortals—*

*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.*

*Notes: 1) For background to this analysis see “Mrs. Spitzer didn’t just stand by, she stood tall,” a column by Regina Brett in the March 14, 2008 edition of The Plain Dealer (online for 180 days at [www.cleveland.com/brett](http://www.cleveland.com/brett); thereafter check newspaper archives for stories pertaining to the demise of New York’s Governor Eliot Spitzer in the week preceding the above date, with particular attention for comment about his wife). 2) For an all but final word on the matters at issue in Step 4, see Robert W. Bertram, “How Our Sins Were Christ’s,” a study of Luther’s thought on the most important question in all of Christian theology. <https://crossings.org/archive/bob/HowOurSinswereChrists.pdf>*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: When One Stood By**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : The Mockers**

Last week offered a slap-in-the-face reminder: We post-moderns (are we still that?) are as quick as any ancient to heap abuse on the innocent “stander-by,” as in Tammy Wynette (of “Stand by Your Man Fame”), or, suddenly, the New York governor’s wife. What’s she doing up there all silent and suffering for the world to see? Why won’t she validate our contempt for the cad by flashing some contempt herself? Her power to punish is obvious. The more pathetic, then—despicable, even—is her refusal to use it. Should someone argue on her behalf (she opens not her mouth) that loyalty to her wrongdoer is an integral aspect of her innocence, then we argue back that this is surely a culpable innocence, at the least a bad example for spousal victims less powerful than she is. In any case, we add, her humiliation is unsightly, and had she some manners, she’d keep it from public

view. Etc. etc., and etc. some more. And in all the yammering, whether from pundit's desk or at the water cooler, those with ears to hear will catch echoes of the scorn that Isaiah describes (53:3) and that Jesus suffered. He suffers it still, of course. Empty are the Good Friday pews in America these days. And why not, says Joe American. This endless replay of the Fool's Death: Who wants it? Who needs it?

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : A Yen for Righteousness (version 1)**

"Give me," says Joe, "some real righteousness." Good guys beating bad guys. An injured party gutsy enough to hand the creep his head with class and style the way Oprah did a few years ago with that lying author who bamboozled her into selling his fiction as the real thing. "Now there's a woman for you," says Joe, not realizing that in saying it he's exposing the contradictions of his own heart, a heart that hankers for a "righteous one" while simultaneously despising "the righteous one" (53:11b) of whom Joe hasn't "believed what we have heard" (53:1). Nor does he, for that matter, believe in the project God claims to have in mind for the one he calls "my servant" (53:11b). It seems too much, even for God, to "make many righteous" (53:11b). And from an aesthetic point of view, (a moral one too, perhaps), it would feel much more satisfying were the wicked simply "struck down...and afflicted" (53:4), a great huzzah rocking the rafters as the culprit skulks off the stage and the good guy stands triumphant. You want crowds on Good Friday? Tell a story where Christ comes down from the cross and kicks some major tail. Now there's an outcome the Joe-in-me would go for.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Poor Dead Joe**

Problem is, in such a telling it's Joe's own tail that gets booted from here to hell, a one-way trip, no coming back. "All we like sheep," straying, "have turned to our own way," (53:6),

and no, it isn't just the randy governor, it's everyone in the nationwide crowd that exulted last week in his comeuppance (how sweet the hypocrite's fall!). Among the revelers were other bullies, other adulterers. Among them was Joe, whose flash of righteous indignation had two effects. First, it eased the ache of living with his own habits of transgression ("my lesser sins," he wants to call them, as if that will help). Second, and simultaneously, it exposed him yet again to God for the hypocrite he also is—as are we all. As is even that silent, suffering spouse whose own sins, however unrelated to her husband's misbehavior, disqualify her from lodging a claim of innocent victimhood in the one and only court that finally matters, namely God's. In that court no sinner stands tall. All bob, weave, and grovel unsuccessfully. All face the eternal equivalent of the governor's present fate: to be banished from public view, or, as the prophet says it, to be "cut off from the land of the living" (53:8).

## **PROGNOSIS: When One Stood In**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Poor Dead Jesus***

Now comes God own "spousal" dilemma: that governor is God's governor, that Joe is his Joe, that sinner his sinner—no matter that God himself is the one most sinned against. To abandon us to our disgrace is not an option that the "great compassion" or "everlasting love" of this God allows (54:7-8). But neither will it do simply to "stand by" the sinner, or even "with" the sinner; for then the sinner stays a sinner and the sin itself abides. But the situation changes if One can be found to "stand in" on the sinner's behalf, both wearing the sin and destroying it. Enter "my servant" who, in attending to God's sinners, "will prosper" (52:13). That's another way of saying God's servant will succeed, the success coming the moment he's "exalted and lifted up" (52:13) on that obscene cross we nailed him to. No, he's not a pretty sight (52:14, 53:2b). Yes, he wears our sin

and eats the wrath and retribution that our sin stirs up (53:4-5, 8b, 10a). Yes, the one who authorizes the violence perpetrated on him is God (53:4b, 6b, 10a), the very God that Joe echoed when he itched to make things right by punishing the transgressor (Step 2). Yes, this Servant's suffering leads directly to our rehabilitation (53:5b). It does so because the sin he dies for—the sin that dies with him—can only be our sin, he himself being the one and only True Innocent (53:9b, Luke 23:47). How innocent is he? So innocent that he never wavers in his loyalty to God's own sinners; so innocent that his loyalty entangles him in our sin and gets him "numbered with the transgressors" (53:12). So innocent, so loyal, that the sin he dies for includes the sin we'll commit this week as we scorn and ignore him all over again.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : A Yen for Righteousness (version 2)**

Says the Joe-in-me, "You've got to be kidding." Says the God of Good Friday, "I'm not." So what happens when the tellers of that God's Gospel—to them "the arm of the LORD has been revealed"—keep repeating "what we have heard" (53:1)? Well maybe, just maybe, the Joe-in-me starts thinking again. Maybe it dawns on him that he too has an eternal stake in an unsightly Christ who sticks to that ugly cross of his. Maybe it hits Joe that with this Righteous One in the picture, things with him are perfectly right in the only court of opinion (judgment too) that finally matters. Might Joe at that point recall his earlier prayer? He had begged, remember, for some "real righteousness" (Step 2). So now it hits him, how real righteousness is the very thing that God's servant Christ has handed him—no, not the tail-kicking kind he had lusted for, but a new version altogether. The old versopm banishes the transgressor and finally kills him. The new one makes him alive and brings him home. It puts the Righteous One in the exalted position of "divid[ing] the spoil

with the strong" (53:12), the strong being every Joe and every Jane who has tumbled into "all-rightness" simply by trusting that Christ has made them so. You want a righteousness that satisfies? This is it, the Real Deal.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The Mocked***

And if all this, as it finally sinks in, puts Joe in a church pew this coming Good Friday for some time of quiet thanks and adoration, great. All the better—better by far—when Joe goes public with his Christ's humiliation; when, that is, Joe wears that humiliation as his own even as Christ wears Joe's sins as his own. This means that Joe's days of baying for a transgressor's blood are behind him. It means that he starts (or continues) to suffer indignities foisted on him with a patience that strikes others as weak and foolish, to the point of provoking their derision (53:3). It means refusing to bleat when someone does him wrong (53:7). It means demonstrating his own unwavering loyalty to God's other sinners, and at the cost, perhaps, of being falsely branded as an enabler of sin. Incidentally, it also means recalling with awe that governor's wife and the image she presented last week. Dare we suggest that we caught in her a glimpse of that other Sufferer? Or of the sufferer that each of us is called and formed in Christ to be for the sake of every wayward, arrogant, and oh-so-stupid sinner, man, woman, or child?