

Justified by Christ

'by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many'

Isaiah 53.11

Preached at Baldock Baptist Church by Pastor Jonathan Northern on 19 May 2024.

We turn this evening to the book of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 53. I'll read from verse 11 a phrase by way of a theme or text this evening, but I want to look at some of the other verses in this chapter as well. *'By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many.'* Our subject this evening is "Justified by Christ."

Justification

To appreciate this theme, we need to understand what we mean by being justified. Firstly, it means to be regarded by God as righteous, without sin and without condemnation. The opposite, of course, is to realise that we are all members of a fallen human race, and we are all, by our birth and by natural life, under God's condemnation. We are not justified. God, because He is righteous and because His law is perfect, He has to condemn us on account of our sin.

We are born with fallen natures; our lives are a catalogue of guilty acts, thoughts, and words. Our greatest need is to be justified by God - regarded by Him as without spot and without fault. That is the source of lasting joy.

We may know joys in this world; there may be certain pleasures that we can draw satisfaction from, but they will all be temporary and often shallow. But to know deep within that we are right with God, that His smile is upon us, and that at death we shall not be condemned, that is the greatest joy and satisfaction a person can ever know.

A remarkable chapter

This is a remarkable chapter. It has been called by some 'the crown jewels of the Old Testament'. Martin Luther, the great reformer, said that this chapter ought to have been written on parchment of gold and lettered with diamonds because its words are so rich, so exalted, and the themes are priceless.

It's remarkable, firstly, because it foretells in the greatest detail the work and sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ. The detail here, so accurately fulfilled when Christ should come, is remarkable. But more than that, the prophet understands, and by inspiration of God, reveals the reason for the death of Christ. The disciples, even at His death, could not fathom how the One they looked to as the Messiah, the Redeemer of their souls, should die. They had the Old Testament and yet, in a sense, their understanding was veiled. They couldn't appreciate it, and it took the Lord Jesus Christ after His resurrection to explain to them why He had come into this world and suffered such things.

But it's a remarkable chapter, secondly, because it was written about 700 years before the coming of the Saviour, and yet it would be fulfilled in every detail at Calvary. Now, some might argue that given the accuracy and the detail of this chapter, "Well, it must have been fabricated by the followers of

Christ after His death. They put this report together and they subtly inserted it into the Old Testament scriptures as if to say it was all part of God's plan."

But that's impossible, firstly because the Jews, even those Jews that do not accept the Lord Jesus Christ, regard this chapter as part of their Old Testament scriptures. They would verify the fact that Isaiah wrote these words.

But even if, (and we're not just trusting of science), we want scientific corroboration, there have been scrolls discovered - the Dead Sea Scrolls. We don't place much weight upon them, but the Dead Sea Scrolls, as they were known when they were discovered, have been dated to 100-150 BC, and yet they contain a complete copy of Isaiah chapter 53. And so, it's inescapable that these things were written, remarkable in their detail as they are, way before these events were fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ at Calvary. It compels us to recognise that this chapter is indeed from a divine source.

Who, but Almighty God, who oversees and superintends all the events of history, could so report with such detail the death of Christ, 700 years before He came? Only an Almighty God, a true and living God, could direct His prophet to write such things. This is holy ground, friends. When we look at this chapter, we should come with a degree of awe and wonder. The Christian religion is not based upon myth, conjecture, or the imaginations of men. It is based upon revealed truth, even things which were revealed many centuries before they were fulfilled. This is the stamp of its divine origin.

Have you ever been tempted? Satan, the enemy of our souls, will tempt us if he can, urging us to reject the Christian faith and not take the Bible seriously. But we come to passages like this, and we say to those suggestions, "That cannot be, because these things are so marvellously fulfilled".

This chapter, friends, and I say this with a degree of warning, will rise up on the day of judgment and condemn many people who have heard these words, who have had set before them their perfect fulfilment, and yet who rejected Christ. Is anyone here this evening in that category? We've read these words, we are almost compelled to accept that they speak of a mighty Saviour, and yet we haven't taken Him seriously, we've not sought His salvation and His pardoning grace. This chapter will rise up in the judgment and say, "But you saw these things; you were given the witness of the scriptures that Christ is indeed the Saviour of the world, and you did not come to Him, seek Him, or humble yourself before Him."

Isaiah's report

So, let's look at some of the detail that is in this chapter. I want to begin in verse one. It speaks of a report: '*Who hath believed our report?*' Now, usually, something that is regarded as a report is about an event after it has occurred. If you watch the news on the television, there are often reporters, but they are not reporting something that has yet to happen. They may speculate, but their reports are about events that have taken place during the past day, the past week, or historically.

But here is a report on something which was yet to be fulfilled. Only Almighty God could do that, and it's presented in the language of a report as if it has already happened, because in the purposes of God it is certain to happen. God has purposed it, and because He is God, no one can hinder or thwart that plan. Therefore, we read here, '*He hath borne our griefs*' and '*He was wounded*' (verses 4 and 5)—not "He is going to be." It's a report, and yet because it's past tense, it conveys to us the certainty of what will be accomplished.

But notice secondly, it says, *'Who hath believed our report?'* A report has to be evaluated. It may be that we see some report on the internet— not that I do this very often— but we read of those spurious online feeds nowadays, and they may give a particular statement or explanation of things or a report on something. But it may be some rogue state, some overseas interference, trying to mess with our heads or play politics with the people of this nation. We read the report, and then we say, "This isn't true. It's been made up; it's contrived; it's designed to deceive or influence me."

I read this week that foreign powers are trying to influence some of the Gaza protesters and stir up hostility and unrest in our nation. I don't know if it's true, but it may be. We read a tabloid newspaper perhaps, and we say, "Well, you can't believe half of what's in the newspapers. It's a report, but I don't believe it." Whereas if an honest friend reports something to us, we say, "If they've said it, it must be true."

What of Isaiah? Do we believe his report? This ancient prophet who stood before Kings Uzziah and Ahaz in the Old Testament—do we believe his report? Do we say, "Well, it was written by inspiration of God?"

In one sense, we have an advantage over the people of those days in that we have the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke, the testimony of the Apostles. We can see that this report is doubly to be believed, not only because it was written by inspiration of the Lord, but also because now it has been confirmed by the Apostles of the New Testament. We have no excuse.

"Who hath believed our report?" says the prophet. Perhaps He is predicting, and it would be true to a certain extent, the unbelief of the Jews when Christ came. He would be taken and by wicked hands sentenced to death: *'Away with Him, crucify Him'*, they would say. They didn't believe. It hadn't occurred to them that Christ would be a suffering Saviour, and when the Apostles began to preach Christ in the synagogues, the Apostle Paul says to the Jews, "These things are a stumbling block." The very idea that the Messiah, promised by Almighty God throughout their history, should be put to death, that He should suffer shame, mocking, scorn, ignominy, and crucifixion, being belittled by the Romans—it was beyond them. They couldn't believe it, and yet it was true.

And here the prophet tells us why. It may be that you say, "Well, I'm not like those who won't believe. When I read these things, I give credence to them. Yes, I believe that they were written by a genuine man of God, and they were written for my learning." And you go beyond that and say, "Yes, I believe that they were an accurate prediction of what would take place in the life of Christ."

But even that is not fully what is meant here by "to believe." There will be many who have sung the Messiah or been to a performance of the Messiah. They will be familiar with many of the beautiful phrases in this chapter concerning the sufferings of Christ. They may even believe that Christ actually suffered, and yet they haven't fully believed in the way the prophet is speaking here. That's what I want to come to in a little while.

God's servant

But I want to just give you a brief survey of some of the detail of this chapter. It's impossible this evening to look at everything in this chapter. You could preach a sermon on almost every phrase.

Firstly, we see here in our text a reference to God's servant. *'By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many.'* Well, you say, "I thought Christ was the Son of God, the only begotten of the Father. What does the prophet mean describing Christ as God's servant?"

Though He was a son, yet He became a servant. The Apostle Paul says he *'took upon him the form of a servant'*. In what sense? A servant does not have a will of his own. In those days, if you were a Roman slave, you had to do what your master said. You belonged to your master.

The word here implies that Christ was wholly devoted to the will of His Father. He came not to do His own will but the will of Him that sent Him. He came into this world, He was sent, He had a commission, and He had a work to fulfil. On Calvary's cross, He would declare almost His last words: *'It is finished.'* He'd finished the work that was given Him to do. In that sense, He was a servant.

Look at verse 2 here: *'For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground.'* This is a description of the obscurity of Christ. We may think that the Messiah, promised from the very dawn of time, should enter this world with a fanfare, but He didn't. He came into this world at His incarnation. He was like a tender plant, something insignificant. It speaks of His humiliation and His humble beginnings. He was born and placed in a manger, the carpenter's son at Nazareth.

'He hath no form nor comeliness'. There's nothing commanding about Him in that sense, naturally speaking. He didn't have that natural pedigree or commanding presence that the Jews sought. He was merely from a humble origin.

'A root out of a dry ground'. David's line, from which the Messiah was promised, in the days of Christ's birth, had almost become overlooked. You couldn't detect it. It was like dry ground. You would say, "Well, what's going to grow here? What can possibly sprout and flourish?" And so Christ came to a humble family of the line of David, Joseph and Mary. He was born and you would have no idea from a physical perspective that here was the Son of God, the promised Messiah. How accurately Christ is depicted here: *'despised and rejected of men'*. He was a servant.

And then secondly, we see in our text, He is described as the *'righteous servant'*. What is meant by that? He is God's righteous servant. It adds perspective, doesn't it?

He was, firstly, as one old Baptist preacher said, righteous because holiness was His very nature. Look at the end of verse 9: *'Neither was any deceit in His mouth'*. He was the holy, spotless Son of God. There was nothing that He had done amiss. He was righteous because of the righteousness of His life as a man. From beginning to end, He was the only person who had ever lived and who ever will live in this ruined world without sin—in thought, in word, in motive, in deed. Christ is wholly righteous. There's nothing that could be condemned in Him, in His person, or in His walk.

Secondly, He was righteous because He faithfully discharged as a servant the commission of His Father and He is righteous because He provides everlasting righteousness to His people. We have no righteousness of our own. When God looks upon us, He sees only our guilt and sin. But when He looks at His own Son, He sees perfection; He sees spotless righteousness - everything that delights Him as a holy God. And when that righteousness is imputed, credited to our account, then He regards us as righteous. He is the righteous servant, and the prophet foresees that here and refers to Him so accurately.

But thirdly, He is displayed here as the suffering servant. How could this possibly be conceived by human conjecture? The Almighty, all-glorious Messiah foretold to Adam, to Abraham, to David, to the Israelites, and here the prophet, as He is guided by the Spirit of God, sees this righteous servant suffering unimaginable grief, sorrow, and agony. Look at verses 4, 5 and 7:

'Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows...smitten of God, and afflicted...wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted.'

You almost could not find another adjective to further contribute to this description of the sufferings of God's righteous servant.

He was the substitute. That comes across so clearly here (verses 4 and 5). *'He hath borne our griefs', 'our sorrows', 'our transgressions', 'our iniquities'*. This is what we call a vicarious suffering, Christ taking our place. That's what the word vicarious means. He was to endure the punishment that was due to His people, and more than that, in verse 7, it's clear that He did so willingly. He wasn't put to death because it was inescapable. *'He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth'*.

As the almighty Son of God, He could have resisted arrest. He could have resisted the mocking of the soldiers that pressed that thorny crown down upon His brow. He could have resisted those that nailed His hands and feet to that cross and then lifted Him up in excruciating pain. He could have resisted those things, and commanded the angels of heaven to defend Him from that wickedness.

Look at verse 12: *'Because he hath poured out his soul unto death'*. It was a voluntary pouring out of His life." He didn't resist; He gave everything in order to lay down His life for His people. So He is the suffering servant.

Verse 12: *'He was numbered with the transgressors'*. Even though there was nothing sinful in Him, no cause for death, yet He willingly allowed Himself to be counted a transgressor, regarded as such not only by men—they regarded Him as a deceiver, a criminal, an impostor, a traitor—but even by almighty God. He's counted as a transgressor because He bears the sins of many, taking what should be ours upon Himself. Our sins were imputed, reckoned to be His.

This is a remarkable chapter, friends. Does it stir your heart such that you say the glory of Christ and His salvation is inescapable?

But lastly, before we move on, we see here the exaltation of this servant. Just look at verse 9. He is made *'obedient unto death'*, and *'He made His grave with the wicked, and with the rich in His death'*. This is a phrase that in the Hebrew is very difficult to completely interpret. We may read it and say, "Well, how can He both make his grave with the wicked and with the rich?" Well, say the commentators, it was the intention of the Jews who despised Him that when He was taken down from the cross, that He would have been cast out of the city to that valley of Gehenna, where the criminals' bodies were just left to rot. That's what they wanted, and that would have been His destiny.

But the Lord intervened, and even though in one sense that was the intention, yet the Lord had prepared Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man who admired Christ secretly. He came, begged for the body of the Lord Jesus, and placed His body in his own new tomb. *'Because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.'* The Lord thwarted those criminal, wicked intentions of men, and His body was preserved and the dignity of it in that sepulchre. What a precious picture is given to us here of Christ.

The reason for His death

But Isaiah goes on, and I must move on swiftly, because we see here the reason for the death of Christ. I've touched on it already: He was our substitute. But look at verse 10. This is not the whole reason, but it's the ultimate reason: *'It pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He hath put Him to grief.'* We may think, how did Isaiah write these words? That the Father's own son, the suffering servant, should be put to death on account of the pleasure of the Lord? It was all according to the covenant plan of God for the salvation of many sinners. It had to be so. God's justice had to be upheld; His perfect law had to be vindicated.

*"There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.
He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in."*

It was all according to *'the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God'*, says Isaiah, that the righteous servant should so suffer. He was *'stricken, smitten of God'*. God put Him to death in that sense. It was our sin that compelled the Lord, in mighty love, to appoint this place of suffering for His own dear son.

But we come back to our text now: *'By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many.'*

'Many' – that's the virtue of this work of Christ, and here in this verse is described the great acquittal of sinners at the bar of God's justice. We deserve God's wrath. All that is described here concerning the sufferings of Christ should be ours, and yet here, Isaiah describes how many shall be justified.

Notice it says *'many'*, not all. We should never run away with the idea, "Well, Christ has died, all is well." Some take people's funerals who have never had a thought of Christ in their life – they wear the badge of the church or perhaps something similar, and then they're sent on their merry way. All their relatives are assured, "Your loved one is in glory." The scriptures cannot allow us to do that. *'Many'* are saved, but not all. It's those who have a knowledge of Christ, this chapter says.

Just look at verse 12, the very last phrase: He *'made intercession for the transgressors'*. There are two works of Christ mentioned in this chapter: His sacrificial death and His great intercessory work, speaking in heaven for those that come unto God by Him.

Here is a picture of Christ as the great advocate of His people. Imagine the scene: a guilty wretch is brought into heaven at death, as it were, their soul naked and guilty. How can they stand before a holy God? But there is One there, even the *'righteous servant'*, who has suffered all in the place of that guilty sinner. Christ makes intercession before His Father for such and says, "The punishment has been paid. I have suffered in the place of this lost soul. Forgive them, receive them, count them as a child worthy of heaven for my sake." It's all pictured here by the prophet.

Salvation can be ours

But how can it be ours? *'Many'* saved, but not all. Can you and I be amongst the *'many'*? Well, here is the key: it's *'by His knowledge'*. What is meant by knowledge here? Well, dear old Matthew Henry says, "Without knowledge, there can be no faith."

First, we must understand all that is written of Christ in this chapter, and then we must believe it, and I said at the beginning, to believe is not simply to give credit to the historical accuracy of this remarkable prophecy; it's more than that. What is it? It is to recognise Him as God's appointed Saviour, our Surety, the one who speaks for us and who pleads for us on account of His death, and to entrust ourselves to Him.

Now, it may be that there is someone who has a very serious disease, and there is a medication that has been discovered or formulated which can provide a complete cure for that disease. If that person simply believes that the medication is able to cure them, or even that it exists, it won't do them any good unless they take that medicine. They must swallow the tablets or receive the injection. It's only as it becomes part and parcel of the person that it can get to work and do them any good.

And so it is with Christ. To believe this report is not simply to admire Christ from a distance and say, "I believe the prophet has told me everything that is true about Christ." We must take Him to ourselves. We must not only believe that He is the only Saviour, but we must receive Him. We must cast ourselves upon Him. We must depend upon Him alone and wholly for the salvation of our soul. We must come, as a person in great need comes to a great surgeon. We do not simply believe the surgeon is able to perform some operation that would deliver us from a fatal injury. We submit to his wisdom. We entrust ourselves to his care and surgery.

And so it is when we come to Christ. We say, "Lord, my heart is unclean, my life is broken. I need that divine surgery to change me, to make me a new person, to purge me of all my guilty stain, to rid me of the power and the pollution of sin, and to make me new. I call upon Thee, Lord. Draw near and bless me and forgive me."

That's what it means to believe the report: to so believe that we commit ourselves to the Saviour who is set before us here as the means of our justification. We need to understand, to have a knowledge of Christ that moves us to cast ourselves upon Him and yield our whole life to Him. That's what it means to believe.

Have we done that? Do we sit here this evening and say, "Yes, now I see that Christ is the all-glorious Son of God, foretold so clearly by the prophet seven centuries before, fulfilled in complete accuracy at Calvary. He's my only hope of glory, of forgiveness, of access and acceptance before God. I trust my soul to Him."

Closing prayer

Well, let's pray together:

O Lord, we thank Thee for this glimpse of Christ so deep in the Old Testament. We thank Thee because it corroborates for us the gospel preached by the apostles. O Lord, do overcome in our hearts and lives all the doubts, all the unbelief, all the indifference, and grant that we may have such a knowledge of our Saviour, such a glimpse of His dying power, that we come to Him and discover through Him eternal life and blessing. We ask these things in His precious name. Amen.

Closing hymn

The sinner that truly believes,
And trusts in the crucified God,
A pardon at once then receives,
Redemption in full through His blood;
The faith that unites to the Lamb,
And brings such salvation as this,
Is more than mere notion or name:
The work of God's Spirit it is.

A principle, active and young,
That lives under pressure and load,
This faith makes the fearful more strong,
And draws the soul upward to God.
It says to the mountains, 'Depart!'
That stand between God and the soul;
It binds up the broken in heart,
And makes wounded consciences whole.

It treads on the world, and on hell;
It vanquishes death and despair;
And what is still stranger to tell,
It overcomes Heaven by prayer:
Permits a vile worm of the dust
With God to commune as a friend,
To live in devotion and trust,
And walk in His love to the end.

Joseph Hart, 1712-68