

## **The King of Zion and the Epicenter of God's Salvation** *The Book of Isaiah*

### **The King Who Entered Our Sin and Suffering** *Isaiah 53:4 – 6*

#### **Introduction: The Ragman**

Many times, we need help understanding what Jesus did for us. We need help articulating it in ways that aren't clichés. We know a few phrases, like 'Jesus died for us.' But what does that really mean? Walter Wangerin draws up a simple, powerful picture of Jesus in his story *The Ragman*. I can't wait for my children to be old enough for me to tell it to them. So I'm going to tell that story for you.

I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the darkened, dirty alleys of the city. He was pulling an old cart, filled with clothes, bright and new, and he was calling in a clear, tenor voice, 'Rags! New rags for old!' I wondered about this and so I followed him. The Ragman came to a woman sobbing on her back porch, with her elbows on her knees, wiping her face with a handkerchief. Her shoulders shook with each sob.

'Give me your rag,' said the Ragman, 'and I will give you mine.'

She looked up and he took her old handkerchief and laid a new, clean, white linen one in her hand. Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman put her handkerchief to her face and began to weep, to sob with grief as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear.

'Rags! Rags! New rags for old!'

In a little while, the Ragman found a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage. Blood soaked her bandage. Blood ran down in a line down her cheek.

'Give me your rag, and I will give you mine.'

The child stared back helplessly. So he untied the bandage and tied it to his own head. Then he put a brand new bonnet on hers. I gasped at what I saw, for the wound went with the bandage! Against his brow it ran with fresh blood, his own!

'Rags! New rags for old!' cried the sobbing, bleeding Ragman.

The Ragman met a man slumped against a telephone pole.

'Do you have a job?' the Ragman asked.

'Are you crazy?' said the man, showing that the right sleeve of his jacket had no arm in it.

'Give me your jacket and I will give you mine.' He took off his jacket, and I trembled because the Ragman's arm stayed in its sleeve. When the other man put it on, he had two good arms, but the Ragman had only one.

I wept to see the change in the Ragman. He stumbled, weeping, bleeding, exhausted to the garbage pits of the city. He climbed a hill. With clumsy labor he cleared away a little space on that hill. Then he sighed. He laid down. And then he died.

I slipped into a junked car and cried because I had come to love the Ragman. The wonder of this man remained in my mind, and I sobbed myself to sleep. I slept through until Sunday morning when I was awakened by a light. Light slammed against my sour face and I saw him. The Ragman stood there, folding the bandage carefully, a scar on his forehead, but healthy! And all his rags were clean and shined. I lowered my head, trembling, and walked to him.

'Please dress me,' I said. And he put his new rags on me, and I am alive beside him. The Ragman, the Christ. (paraphrased from Walter Wangerin's *The Ragman*)

#### **Context – The Song of the Suffering Servant: 52:13 - 53:12**

We're going to look at a very old poem that will speak to us in fresh ways. The writer of this poem was a poet, prophet, and perhaps a statesman named Isaiah. Isaiah lived around 700 years before Christ. We're not sure what post he occupied, but he apparently was a Vaclav Havel of ancient Israel: statesman and poet. Among Christians, this is one of the most precious sections of the Old Testament. This chapter is mentioned in all 4 Gospels, Acts, and 1 Peter 2 in some detail. Why is that? If someone comes to you and says, 'Seven hundred years from now, the United States will be taken captive by Canada; but the President of the United States at that time will be a man who died a violent death and is raised to life again,' that would be interesting. It would be incredible if that prediction actually came true. That's the significance of

Isaiah. Isaiah predicted that the king of Israel would be a man who died a violent death and is raised to life again.'

Yet among non-Christians, it is somewhat of an embarrassment. Some have claimed that it was written after Jesus. However, this is clearly untrue, because Isaiah was translated by Jewish scholars into the Septuagint version of the Bible 200 years before Christ. It came before Jesus. An even older manuscript was discovered near the Dead Sea in 1947. Those Dead Sea Scrolls date back to 200 BC. Among the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe there was a rabbinical attempt to remove it from the Jewish Bible. The Sephartic Jews of Spain, however, kept it in their Bible, so, there it is! Basically, the prophecies concerning Jesus Christ are so accurate and descriptive in detail that people at various times have had a hard time dealing with it. There is no way Buddhists, Hindus, or Muslims can point to prediction and fulfillment like this *in history to be verified*. But Christians can point to this and say this is one reason we believe our faith is true.

The Song of the Suffering Servant is part of a larger vision. Isaiah looked ahead into the future and saw that Israel would sin, and for that sin, God would send the nation into Exile and the city Jerusalem would fall. From the point of Jerusalem's fall, God's judgment would also ripple outward over the world. That's what Isaiah 1- 39 are about. But then, in Isaiah 40, Isaiah looks ahead and sees how God would transform all of that mess. It would also start at Jerusalem, and from there would ripple outward into the whole world, in a wave of blessing. The key figure in that wave of blessing is the King of Israel, who would begin to reign from Jerusalem. And it's his reign that would bring peace as it rippled outward from Jerusalem.

#### **The Suffering of the King: v.4 – 5**

This section tells us why that King can bring peace. Why did Jesus bring us peace, as his reign in fact did ripple outward from Jerusalem two thousand years ago? Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 as a poem falls into five stanzas. What is also unusual about Hebrew poetry is that they didn't make rhyme schemes of 'a-b-a-b, a-b-a-b.' Instead of sounds, they matched up ideas and concepts, sometimes repeating them. So stanza 1 and 5 match in theme: the resurrected King who sits on the throne. Stanzas 2 and 4 match in theme: the events leading up to the death of the King. What is the very center of the poem? The third stanza, and specifically 53:5, the explanation for the death of Jesus. Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, Isaiah sees Jesus Christ go through agony because he loves Israel and the world. What really happened there? Why?

Verses 4 and 6 give us a summary statement about what Jesus did. 'Surely our infirmities He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried.' Our life is seen as a sickness and a sorrow. Those are very good descriptions of our human problem. We have one major problem – our separation from God. We were born separated from God, and we need God to do something about that. That separation – our sin – makes us not as healthy as we should be – we're sick with a kind of disease – and not as joyful as we could be – we're carrying a kind of sorrow. We'll see what that is in a few moments.

Jesus bears this. He carries it. Yet in the next breath, Isaiah says the people's reaction to their king is ironic: 'yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.' The people watching this seem to size Jesus up and say, 'What a tragedy for him, but you know I really had nothing to do with it. He was stricken. He had a demon, or he was possessed by a demon, said the Pharisees, some of the opinion leaders of Jesus' day. He was smitten by God by some kind of lunacy, afflicted by some madness; fate just worked it out that way. I feel kind of sorry for him.' Yet is this response the right one?

Verse 5 begins with the word 'But' and Isaiah is immediately going to take issue with that attitude. We cannot ignore Jesus. Now in this one verse, Isaiah explains why. He places four images together, one after the other.

But he was pierced through	for our transgressions
He was crushed	for our iniquities
The chastening	for our peace fell upon him
And by his scourging	we are healed.

In each image, he describes first the suffering Jesus endured, and then the reason for the suffering. It's a four part progression and each gets more descriptive and more intense than the last.

### **He Was Pierced for Our Transgressions: v.5a**

The first image is one of physical suffering: 'But he was pierced through for our transgressions.' The word 'pierced through' is very strange. To highlight the strangeness, I want you to picture yourself as a Jewish person standing next to Isaiah at 700 BC. You would have peeked over Isaiah's shoulder and said, 'Isaiah, you've got that wrong. We put people to death by stoning. That verse should read that he was stoned for our transgressions. 'Pierced through' makes the punishment sound like a weird practice we don't know about yet, that's going to be brought here 400 years from now by a guy named Alexander the Great. At that time, they will call it crucifixion. But that doesn't exist in Israel yet!' Obviously, my point is that it's a very strange word for Isaiah to use because Isaiah is looking hundreds of years down the road.

Now, when Jesus was crucified, this is what would have happened physically. A Roman spike was put through each of his hands; one was used to pierce both feet. Sometimes a small ledge was put underneath the butt so the victim could kind of sit down, or underneath the feet so the victim could relieve some of the pressure. We're not sure if Jesus had those; probably not. When his cross was lifted to its upright position, all his weight was supported by those three spikes. This caused his shoulders to dislocate. To exhale, Jesus would have had to relieve the pressure on his chest by pushing upward on the spike that went through his feet. Some crucifixion victims died by slow suffocation, exhaustion, or heart attack because the heart must work overtime to get oxygen all around the body. Others died by quick suffocation when the Romans soldiers came by and broke their legs with a club. Jesus was probably so exhausted by not getting any sleep, by being beaten beforehand, and by the loss of blood, that he didn't have the strength to shake off the flies landing on his cracked lips. Finally, after six hours, he gave up his spirit. It has to be noted that people in classical Rome felt crucifixion was too horrible to implement. Cicero the Roman philosopher condemned it as 'a most cruel and disgusting punishment.' So the cross was reserved only for the worst offenders.

So why did Jesus suffer this torture? It's physically worse than the torture at Guantanamo Bay or Abu Graib. Isaiah says that it was for our transgressions. Now here, Isaiah begins to tell us about the nature of this problem called sin. Previously sin was a sickness and a sorrow; now it is a transgression. Generally, transgression simply means 'crossing a line; violating some boundaries.' God articulates boundaries between people for our good. Because I didn't have God when I was younger, I destroyed things or vandalized things, because as a young man, I didn't know how to deal with my anger. I ripped down street signs. I vandalized people's houses and cars. In fact, my friends and I got into a high speed car chase with the father of this girl at school because we vandalized her house. I lit a whole couch out on the street on fire and the fire fighters had to come. Even though I don't destroy things nowadays, I'm very tempted at times to destroy people verbally. I can rip people apart with my words. It's very easy for me to forget God's boundaries and limits. 'That's another person whom I cherish – you are not to treat them that way.' But I can push beyond those limits all the time. We're all capable of doing things like that.

So what did Jesus do? His physical body was whipped and tortured and pierced by nails by people who obviously did not respect his physical boundaries. Normally your skin tells other people where you are physically and where they need to stop. His body was literally invaded. So what we do all the time, pierce through boundaries, Jesus entered into that, and he took those sins into himself. He was pierced through because we pierced through. He was transgressed because of our transgressions. There's a symmetry to that. And it's as if Jesus said, 'You want to enter my body?' But by doing this, he turned this violation into his invitation, 'Enter my body, my community.'

### **He Was Crushed for Our Iniquities: v.5b**

Now it would be really easy just to stop there and say that sin is doing things: this, this, and, oh yeah, that. But the next image uses the word 'iniquity.' 'He was crushed for our iniquities.' And 'iniquity' is often translated 'wickedness.' It's a word that talks about character or the internal condition of the heart. Sometimes you cut open a melon and you see that it's rotten. Or you slice open a peach and you find that it's mealy. Isaiah says we're like we're rotting fruit, diseased on the inside. People get a taste our lives and say, 'Oooo...that's kind of rotten.' Jesus himself said in Matthew 15:16-20, 'The things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.' And what's on the inside works its way out.

So what did Jesus do to heal us on the inside? He allowed his insides to be crushed, according to the second image. Now the word 'crushed' is used in to describe emotions. First, crushed is used in the Old Testament to describe the victory of one warring nation over another. You would crush your enemy if you penetrated into their very soul as a nation and left them with no hope. But secondly, on an individual level, the spirit can be crushed, as Psalm 34:18 refers to those 'who are crushed in spirit.' Interestingly enough, it is never used to describe a victim of stoning.

The best feeling for this I have is from a story by Chaim Potok, called *My Name is Asher Lev*. Asher is the only child of highly orthodox Jewish parents in downtown New York. His mother is an expert in Russian history, and his father is such a well-respected teacher of the Torah that he establishes *yeshivas* in Europe. They want Asher to study Talmud and Bible like the other boys. Instead, Asher is swept up by his desire to be a master painter. Some of his relatives call it a gift that comes from 'the Other Side.' 'It is a goyim thing,' they say. Nevertheless, he is consumed by this passion to paint. So he gets apprenticed, and studies Picasso's *Guernica*, Guido Reni's *Massacre of the Innocents*, and then Michaelangelo's works. Throughout this time, his father gets more and more angry, and his mother feels more torn between them. Asher learns the rich history of the world of art. He learns to paint nude models, a scandal for an orthodox Jew and for that Jewish community. Each step Asher takes into the world of art causes his father more anger and his mother more pain. So finally, Asher decides to put his feelings for his family into a painting. He sweats feverishly as he paints his mother tied to the blinds in the window, wrists and ankles tied by the cords of the blinds. Then he paints his father on her right, dressed in a suit with an attache case. Then he paints himself on her left, dressed in paint-spattered clothes and carrying a paint brush. They were looking at each other and at mama. She was clenching her fists and had anguish in her mouth. And Asher thinks, 'For all the pain you suffered, my mama. For all the torment of your past and future years, my mama. For all the anguish this picture of pain will cause you...I created this painting--an observant Jew working on a crucifixion because there was no aesthetic mold in his own religious tradition into which he could pour a painting of ultimate anguish and torment.' (*My Name is Asher Lev*, p.313) When I read that book on the plane, I nearly jumped out of my seat! I wanted to shout, 'This is Chaim Potok, a Jew of Jews, graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, writing that there is no greater symbol of anguish than the cross of Jesus!!!'

Jesus came from heaven, from God, for us. He came to make peace between us and God, and also between Jews and Gentiles, crips and bloods, different youth gangs in Dorchester. But everyone rejected him. Jesus' anguish must have been huge. The night that he was betrayed, he knew what would happen. He went to pray in the garden called Gethsemane just outside Jerusalem. He prays and he asks his closest friends to pray with him, but they just lie down and sleep. He's going to die the next day and they just sleep. He asks God for another way, but the heavens are silent. Instead, in the dark night, Jesus got God's answer: the heavy footsteps of an entire Roman cohort, getting closer and closer. Jesus looked down from that garden into the Kidron River Valley and saw them on the winding path, with their torches, on fire, snaking closer and closer. And who was at the head of that fiery snake but Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' closest friends. Then Simon Peter snapped. He whipped out his sword and cut off a man's ear, wanting to fight those Romans. Jesus was trying to lead a movement of peace, not violence, and his right hand man totally missed the point. It's amazing Jesus had any patience at all. He healed the ear of the man. But then he's brought to trial anyway. He became a pawn in the power politics between the Jewish leaders and the Roman oppressors. The Roman officers just wanted to keep crushing Jewish hopes, to embarrass and humiliate Israel. So they whipped Jesus to shreds, trying to make him a bloody example to anyone who doesn't respect the Romans. Then they dressed Jesus up like a king. They give him a crown...of thorns. They give him a stick for a scepter. And they put a robe of royalty on him and parade him in front of Israel to prove once again that they put Israel to shame. The Jewish crowd, disappointed and frustrated with Jesus, cries out for the Romans to release Barabbas, a thug, a gangster! Barabbas led a violent Jewish uprising against Rome. He probably had half his teeth knocked out already, and he still had trouble left in him. The Jewish crowd rejected Jesus, who offered them life, and instead ask for death: 'Give us Barabbas!' Both Romans and Jews mocked Jesus, and they kept hating him and each other. And between them, Jesus hung crucified. I can't even guess how Jesus felt emotionally.

### **The Punishment for Our Peace Fell on Him: v.5c**

But what did this accomplish? The third image gives a positive explanation for what Jesus accomplished. 'The chastening for our well-being [shalom] fell upon him.' The word for well-being is the Hebrew word

‘shalom.’ Most of the time (154 out of 235 occurrences), ‘shalom’ appears in the OT it is translated ‘peace’ or ‘wholeness.’ It’s like this: A judge sentences a notorious war crimes criminal to a death sentence. The judge steps off the bench and onto the courtroom floor. He says to the criminal, ‘You’re going to die one way or the other because I uphold my own justice. You will begin dying. But because I also love you, I will also die under the same sentence. The thing is: I will rise again on the other side into a new life. If you take my hand now, you can die with me now and rise with me into that new life, the death sentence behind you.’ That is what God did by stepping into this world in Jesus. Jesus himself was chastised, too. Through Jesus, God participated in His own judgment on humanity, in order to offer humanity a way through His judgment. So Jesus died the death we were already dying to give us the life we could never live on our own. Jesus says to us, ‘Come die with me, to rise with me on the other side.’ With Jesus, God creates a realm of peace, of shalom, where our war with God can end, where our war with each other can end, where swords would be beaten into plowshares, where guns would be melted down into welcome signs.

Spiritually, we were all in a state of war with God.<sup>1</sup> That’s another picture of what sin is: a state of war. We war with God by denying who He is. We deny God’s holiness by saying that our sins aren’t that bad, that God just winks and nods at our sin – He just lets us get away with stuff. Or we deny God’s love by saying God doesn’t care, doesn’t come to be with us, doesn’t feel anything for us. Or we deny God’s justice by saying God doesn’t really condemn sin. Or we deny God’s mercy by saying that God hasn’t done anything. This is what got humanity exiled from the Garden. But God kept pursuing us all the way to the point of sending Jesus into that world of war to die and rise. Only with Jesus, all of God’s holiness, which demanded perfection into a loving character, met all of God’s compassion, which demanded the embrace of the sinner. All of God’s justice, which demanded condemnation of sin, met all of God’s mercy, which demanded that sinners be liberated. We can only accept all of who God is through Jesus. Because only in and through Jesus was God able to bring all of who He is to meet all of who we are, in all of our unholiness, all of our lack of compassion, all of our injustice, and all of our unmercifulness.

The outcome is not just peace for us, but also peace in us. For God can now place His Spirit in us. There is a void in us that we try to fill to be whole. We might think it’s filled by getting people to like us, or getting more money, or getting more power, or playing with demonic powers, but is that true? No – all of that struggling confirms to us that the world is in a state of war, of competition. Why else would we try to control everything around us? But is that real peace?

The first time I really experienced Jesus’ peace was during the summer after my junior year of college. That was during a time of war – the time my parents finally decided to get their divorce. My dad’s drinking had escalated to an alarming place and my mom had had enough. Now my way of dealing with my family, ever since 10th grade, was to leave. After I got my driver’s license and my car keys, I was out of there. I’d go over to a park or to a friend’s place to distract myself. I didn’t even have a thought for my younger sister, who was four years younger than me, who I left at home to deal with the mess I didn’t want to deal with. That’s what you do in a state of war, right? Think of yourself. But that summer, I felt Jesus say to me, ‘I want you to stay.’ I said to him, ‘I don’t have the strength or the peace to do that. If what you said is true, Jesus, then you need to be here in me, living your life out through me.’ And he did. My parents couldn’t afford a lawyer, so they had me arbitrate who gets what. I remember going into that time saying, ‘I can’t do this!’ But during that time, Jesus filled me with a sense of his love for me. And he gave me his love for my parents. I was able to listen sensitively to both of them. In fact, every other time before that, my response to them was, ‘You have to stay together – for my sake’ or ‘You have to get a divorce – for my sake.’ But I had never considered it for their sakes. Jesus helped me separate myself from my parents’

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<sup>1</sup> Ancient Israel saw the rest of the world as a world at war. But when Israel sinned, God chastised them by allowing them to be taken over by Assyria, then Babylon, then Greece, then Rome. The word ‘chastised’ in our modern day language sounds very trivial, almost like ‘Mom’s scolding’ as if she were telling you to go to your room. But in the Bible, it’s used in another way. Isaiah uses the word elsewhere with the idea of being put through enormous pain (Isa.26:16). And Hosea and Habbakuk tie the chastisement of God to judgment and destruction (Hos.5:2, 7:12, 10:10, Hab.3:9). That was what was happening to Israel. They were at war, they were experiencing pain, judgment, and destruction by being in Exile. People in the Jewish community, instead of saying, ‘Hello,’ said, ‘Shalom.’ That was because Israel had had so much trouble, so much unrest, and so much war. They wanted ‘shalom,’ peace and wholeness. And so the classical Christmas Song says, ‘O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lowly Exile here, until the Son of God appear.’

marriage so they could make a decision that was best for them. Jesus gave me his love for my parents. He gave me his strength to stay at home. He gave me insights so I could counsel my sister with what she was feeling. At the end of that summer, I was talking to my friend Malcolm, whose family had gone through a similar thing earlier. I told him what I was experiencing and how I was meeting Jesus throughout it all, and he said these words to me that I'll never forget: 'Mako, how can you be so other-centered at a time like this?' I treasure those words as a reminder to me of the peace Jesus gave me: Jesus' peace in a world at war.

### **His Wounding Heals Us: v.5d**

Now the fourth and final image seems to be that of people being mortally wounded, lying in the hospital, needing a miracle to recover. 'And by his scourging we are healed.' Ming and I have recently started talking about me donating a kidney to Ming's brother Paul. Paul's kidneys have slowly deteriorated over the last few years. He may have to go on dialysis soon if there's no donor. If I have the right blood type, I can donate a kidney to Paul. One of my organs can be taken from me and put into him, so he could be healed. Likewise, we need to be healed. Our hearts are sick with self-centeredness. Our spirits are sick with sin. Our souls are sick with bitterness and self-pity. Our eyes go lusting after whatever we see. We need new organs. The only way for that to happen is for Jesus to take his heart and his spirit and put them into us spiritually. That's exactly what he does.

But Jesus didn't get anesthesia. It wasn't a nice clean surgery, was it? No: Jesus was tortured. 'Scourging' is beating or torture and that word is used in all four Gospels to describe the whipping and the torture that Jesus took. Violence is a symptom of our disease, and he took on our disease: sin. Jesus went to the core of our disease and came out the other side, so that our disease would be healed if we join ourselves with him. He went into our disease, battled it to the end, and even put it to death to give us his renewed good health on the other side. Like the Ragman, Jesus took our sobbing and gave back his peace. Jesus took our handicap and gave back his good arm. Jesus took our bleeding and gave back his health. The only way for me to be healed like this is for Jesus to do it. This is the essence of Christianity. Jesus enters my death so he could give me his life.

### **Jesus' Purpose – To Take Up Our Sin: v.6**

In verse 6, Isaiah gives another summary. 'All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.' Here's the great irony of Jesus' life. People turned away from God and experienced death. But Jesus turned towards God and experienced death. People turned away from God to sin. But Jesus turned towards God and entered our sin. Notice there is a great poetic progression that just happened in v.5. Our sins go from active violations to our inward character, to a state of war, to a mortal wound. It intensifies as it goes down. But so does Jesus' love for us. Jesus' death and resurrection was not the death of one misguided man, but the love of one purposeful God. At the height of man's arrogance, comes the depth of God's love. At every point in this exchange, while we were at our sinful worst, God was at His loving best.

What's left for us is to respond to Jesus. Jesus has entered the prison. We are dying here. But Jesus offers us a way out. Die with him, so we can live with him and live in his kingdom of peace. That response is called 'faith.' When we tell this story to others, the response that God wants from others is 'faith.'

There are two major questions we have as human beings who tell this story. First: How do we know which religion is true? Christianity opens itself up for historical verification. Others do not. They are only philosophies, ideas. There are ways to evaluate that, but Christianity is in a totally different arena. Christianity is *factual history*, therefore it offers a way to verify itself from the outside. Christianity satisfies my *mind*. Second: What 'god' enters into our experience? Who understands all the crap we've gone through because he's plunged right into it? Only Jesus. The Allah of Islam is a god who sits in the heavens without ever coming down, without ever touching us. Buddha is portrayed by statues with eyes closed, arms folded, as if to say, 'I don't see it. Suffering is an illusion that needs to be ignored. I don't even see it.' I prefer Jesus, who has entered our lives. Christianity satisfies my *heart*.