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Suffering, Splendor, and Singing: Why Such a *Painful* Death?

By Jeff Bonzelaar, Executive Director

I have never been to Victoria Falls in Africa or the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. I've never seen first hand the Northern Lights or Mt. Everest. I've never been to Paricutin Volcano in Mexico or the Harbor of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. While I've come close to the Grand Canyon in Arizona (I've flown over it plenty of times, always to have it covered by the clouds!), I can't say I've ever been there either.

But I have witnessed something more spectacular than all these natural wonders combined. And it's in the most unlikely of places.

Isaiah 53 is the bloodiest, goriest, most gruesome chapter in the Bible. There is more anguish, misery, torture, and despair in these twelve verses alone than any horror movie ever created. It is graphic, savage, and sickening.

Isaiah the prophet is given an amazing window into the sufferings of Christ on the cross some seven hun-

dred years before their actual occurrence. He describes how Christ was "*pierced*" for our transgressions (v. 5), the strongest term available to depict an excruciat-

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ing and violent death. In the same verse, Isaiah continues, "he was *crushed* for our iniquities," meaning "to pulverize, grind into powder, break down completely."

Later, the prophet records that this Suffering Servant was "*oppressed*" (v. 7), a term used most often in the Old Testament to depict what taskmasters do to make

the lives of their slaves miserable. It implies harassment and tyranny. Isaiah then writes that he was “*afflicted*”—brought low, shamed, treated with utter contempt.

Verse 3 tells us that he was a “man of *sorrows*,” a word the RSV almost always translates as “pain.” And note that “sorrows” is in the plural. Christ experienced an avalanche of *multiple pains* simultaneously. He was well acquainted with “*grief*” (v. 3, KJV). Christ knew to the core of His being anxiety, calamity, weakness, and sadness like no one else.

Christ’s sufferings are incomparable.

He received blows and beatings, whippings and thrashings. He was spit upon and mocked. A crown of thorns was pressed into his skull. Spikes were driven through His hands and feet. He was abandoned by His best friends and forsaken by God. It is no wonder He sweat drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane knowing the agony that awaited him.

Isaiah 52:14 records that his appearance—“disfigured beyond that of any man”—caused onlookers to become “appalled.” They were stunned, shaken, shocked, devastated. Those who beheld the broken and bruised Son of Man at Calvary became nauseous by what they saw.

No one ever deserved to suffer less, yet suffered so much.

Seeing the splendor that Christ’s sufferings reveal evokes singing.

And then come these startling words: “Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer” (53:10). A better translation reads, “Yet it *pleased* the Lord” to do this (KJV; see also NASB, ESV). It gave the Father great “delight” and “pleasure” to bring upon His Son all this abuse and torment. What!? Is God sadistic?

Christ died because God-dishonoring sin could not be ignored. “God will not act as though sin—which belit-

les His glory—didn’t matter. It cannot simply be swept under the rug of the universe as though nothing awesome were at stake” (John Piper). The Father was *pleased* to bruise His Son because in so doing His glory was most brilliantly displayed. The Apostle Paul writes, “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, . . . He did this to *demonstrate* (i.e., make known) his justice (or righteousness), . . .—he did it to *demonstrate* his justice” (Rom. 3:25-26).

God’s pleasure in striking His Son was not in the suffering but in what it revealed. At Calvary, we discover that the glory of God is of infinite value. God is infinite in nature. Sins committed against Him, therefore, are infinite in scope. Infinite crimes must receive infinite punishment if justice is to be served. Thus, the passion of Christ.

All the pain, shame, and humiliation Christ suffered showed how infinitely valuable God’s glory is. That is why Christ not only died, but why He died *painfully*. Since God is infinite in value and worth, Christ’s pain and sufferings were infinite in scope. The cross is the clearest and most powerful declaration of God’s greatness.

Some have said that Christ’s death is a witness to *our* worth: “Look how special we are that Christ died for us!” But this turns the cross upside down. It’s not about us! It’s about Him.

God is magnificent, and the measure of Christ’s pain communicates this profoundly. May we tremble at the glory of God as we meditate upon the sufferings of the Son of Man. But may we tremble with joy knowing that by these very wounds we are healed (Is. 53:5).

Interestingly, after the glorious prophetic vision of the Suffering Messiah in Isaiah 53, the next chapter breaks out with, “Sing . . . burst into song, shout for joy” (54:1). Seeing the splendor that Christ’s sufferings reveal evokes singing. In fact, we will sing through all eternity “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain” as we contemplate the glory of God in the crucifixion of Christ (Rev. 5:12)!

Testimony

Adam Collins

“I was raised in a close-knit, Christ-centered family. I knew the power of God at an early age. We attended church regularly, and I was involved in church activities.

Sports was a big part of my life. I began high school with the hope of getting a scholarship to play basketball, but in my sophomore year I tore some ligaments in my knee and had to have surgery.

With dreams of a future in basketball ended, a huge void was left in my life. I became less involved in the church and started hanging around with the wrong crowd. I began drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana, and taking pain pills. I spent more time partying and getting high. By the time I graduated I was using cocaine and ecstasy on a daily basis.

My first semester of college was a disaster. I would stay up all night and miss class the next day. I failed all of my classes. By the time the second semester started I was using oxycontin, a strong pain medication. Somehow I managed to pass all of my classes this time. Crack cocaine and heroin came next. I lost all control over my life.

One night my parents found me lying on the floor in the hallway not breathing. They began interceding in prayer for me and a few minutes later I was revived. I was frightened by what had happened but still could not stop using.

In the fall of 2004 I was arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol and for possession of narcotics. I told myself I had to stop. But after a couple of months I went right back to my old friends and old ways.

I was fighting a losing battle. I tried therapy, outpatient treatment, and support groups. Nothing worked.

My parents kept urging me to turn back to God but I was unwilling to listen.

November of 2006 was a turning point in my life. I got arrested for the third time and was looking at some serious jail time. My parents were able to make arrangements for me to go to Life Challenge for one year instead of jail.

I entered the program the following month. I slowly let God continue the work that He had begun in me years before. Two weeks into the program I rededicated my life to Christ. The first month in the program was a real struggle for me. As my mind cleared, I started realizing how badly I had hurt God and let my family down.

I knew I could not make it through the program alone. I asked God to forgive me and be my strength. Through the morning Bible classes and chapel, my relationship with Jesus Christ was restored. By the sixth month I vowed I would never return to the old life.

I graduated in December of 2007 and know in my heart I am a changed man. I have hope and a future now as I grow in Jesus Christ. I am currently attending Lansing Community College and am also managing a coffee shop. I believe that God is calling me to full-time ministry. I thank Jesus for rescuing and redeeming me.”



Your love-gifts and prayer support enable us to show men and women the most wonderful, wonder-filled Person in the universe. Thank you, and to God be the glory!

Together for souls,

Jeff