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[0 : 0 0] to Isaiah chapter 53. I'm not sure if this is the same Bible you've got in the pew, but if you do have that Bible, it's page 523. Isaiah chapter 53, and we're just going to be reading the middle bit of that chapter, verses 4, 5, and 6. So this is, as you probably know, one of the servant songs that Isaiah wrote, and he's speaking of the servant, the servant of the Lord, in these words. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Well, before we consider those words, we're going to sing together once again, Oh to see the dawn. The words will be on the screen, so let's pray briefly together. Father, we thank you so much for these wonderful words of Isaiah 53, what they speak about concerning the Lord Jesus and the love that took him to the cross in our place. And Father, I pray for myself now as I prepare to preach on these words, and for each one of us as we prepare to hear them, that Father, you would give us each humble and attentive hearts, and that our hearts would warmly receive your word to us this morning, and that through the work of your Spirit you would be changing us and bringing forth your fruit in our lives. And Father, we pray these things in the strong name of Jesus. Amen.

Do have that passage open in front of you if you've got a Bible there, page 523 in the church Bibles, if that's what you're using. Isaiah 53 verses 4, 5 and 6. Really are incredible words. It's amazing to have been asked to preach on these words. I would say they're probably my favourite words in the whole Bible, so I was delighted. I think it was Barry who emailed me asking if I would preach on these this morning, and they really are great words. I would go so far as saying that until the resurrection of Jesus, these are probably the most important words that had ever been written down by anybody. They really are that significant, and it's great to have a chance to look at them this morning. About three weeks ago, if you were watching the news, I'm sure you'll have heard of the news of the Hillsborough report being made public, the findings there concerning what happened all those 23 years ago at Hillsborough Stadium and the 96 people who lost their lives on that day. If you've been following that story in recent weeks, and indeed in the last two decades or so, you'll know that one word has been cropping up more than any other throughout these past 23 years, and that is the word justice. For the last 23 years, the families of all those 96 people who lost their lives have been crying out for justice to be done. And of course, justice is something we all want to see in the world, isn't it? I take it that this morning there's people from very many different walks of life, different ages, different backgrounds represented. Of course, many of us will be Christians who are here this morning. I'm sure that some of us are not Christians. We've come along just to find out more about the Christian faith. But regardless of who we are or where we're from or where we're at in our spiritual lives, I'm sure that we would all agree that justice is a good thing. If I can put it like this, the very idea of justice has been deeply etched upon the human heart. We all agree that it's a good thing. We're people made in the image of God, and just as God is a God of justice, a God of perfect justice, so also in his image we love to see justice being done. And yet that presents a bit of a problem for us as well, doesn't it? Because the problem is that whilst we're very happy to point the finger of blame at other people, criminals and murderers and such like, it becomes very uncomfortable when the finger of blame is pointed in our direction. You see, we love the idea of justice when we're the victim, but we start to feel uncomfortable with the idea of justice when we're the perpetrator of whatever has been done. And if we're honest with ourselves, which we have to be, we know that we've all done things which mean that we deserve to be on the receiving end of God's justice.

All of us have done those things. Mark Twain famously commented that human beings are the only species with the ability to blush, and he said we're the only ones who need to as well. We know that we are guilty people. We've got things that we're ashamed of. And that knowledge of our guilt, of our culpability before God, is etched into our conscience, but it's also heightened whenever we come to the Bible. Because in God's Word, he has given to us a very honest, a very profound diagnosis of our guilty state before him. God's Word says to us, all have sinned, all fall short of the glory of God. There is none righteous, not even one. And by our sin, we have turned our back on the God that loves us. We've lived in his world as if we're in charge of it. We've set our own rules, we've disregarded his. And for that, we're told, we deserve his perfect justice. And he has told us what this will mean. It will mean an eternity outside of his blessing, undergoing his punishment. And Jesus gave to that punishment a name. He called it hell. And the Bible says that is where we all deserve to go. So it's a very bleak diagnosis of our situation, isn't it, that the Bible gives to us. [5 : 57] And yet it's true. And because of the way in which the idea of justice has been etched onto our hearts, deep down we know that that diagnosis is true as well. And therefore, what I want to start by saying this morning is that whoever you are, whether you're a Christian or not, and I do hope that if you're not a Christian that you feel very able to come along, you're very welcome to come to Christian services.

But whether you're a Christian or not, this idea of the justice of God and our guilt leaves us with an enormous dilemma, doesn't it? If the God who is there, if the God who reigns over this creation is a God who is committed to justice, and if he knows all about our sin, well, that leaves us in a very difficult situation, doesn't it? It leaves us asking the question that I posed to the little ones earlier on. What can we do about our sin and guilt? How can we deal with our sin? How can we be reconciled to this God of justice? How on earth can he be for us and not against us? What can we do about our sin and our guilt before this God of perfect justice? I wonder how you'd answer that question. I'm sure that there are many different possible answers that might be in your minds right now. But what I'd like to do this morning is to give three possible answers to that question.

The first two that we're going to look at are both answers to the problem of our guilt, which human beings themselves have come up with. Then the third answer is the answer that God has given to us concerning our guilt before him. So what do we do with our guilt before God? Well, the first option is that we simply try and shift the blame elsewhere. We try and make out that really we're not sinners. We haven't sinned at all. About a year or so ago, you might remember that a minor celebrity was caught committing an equally minor but no less embarrassing crime. Maybe you remember the news story which circulated after his arrest. And in the statement that he brought out following his arrest, he made a whole series of quite frankly bizarre excuses to excuse his behaviour. So for example, he said that he ended up committing this crime because he was hit as a child. Then he said it was also probably because he was sent to boarding school. Then he worked in a high-pressure job. And then to top all of this off, he said that he claimed his behaviour was perhaps the very early sign of the onset of Alzheimer's disease, which by the way, he doesn't suffer from. And yet so often that is how our culture deals with this idea of sin and guilt, isn't it? We hide it behind excuse and excuse. We try and shift the blame elsewhere, try and convince ourselves that really we're not guilty before God or before anyone else. And we blame our behaviour on our upbringing or on our surroundings or on external pressures or on unfortunate circumstances, all in an effort to claim that really we're not guilty.

No, the blame is out there in society, we say. And actually we're the victim because of everything that we've suffered that has brought us to this point of committing that crime or telling that lie or having that affair. And of course it's ludicrous to try and put the blame elsewhere. We know that we are guilty. The author G.K. Chesterton once read an article in a newspaper and it was entitled, What's Wrong With The World? And in response he wrote a letter to that columnist and his letter read simply as follows, Dear Sir, regarding your article, What's Wrong With The World? I am yours truly, G.K. Chesterton. You see he realised, didn't he, what that celebrity was trying to get out of. He realised that he was to blame. The blame for the world's problems is not something out there, something vague. But no, the problem is something which is in here. The blame is right there in the depth of the human heart. And we might try and shift the blame elsewhere, but really we're just deceiving ourselves if we do that. 1 John says, if we claim that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. So what else can we do with our guilt before God? Well, option number two that we're going to look at is we try and make up for it with good behaviour. For example, we might go for a

moral life, giving money to charity, we're nice to our neighbours, we don't tell lies, we recycle our rubbish and all those kind of things. And of course they're good things to do, aren't they? Living a moral life. Or the type of good behaviour that we might opt for is a religious life. So we give money to the church, we attend Sunday services, we read our Bibles, we say our prayers, we try and follow the Ten Commandments. And again, they're all good things to do, aren't they? And yet the truth of the matter is, a moral life or a religious life does not deal with our guilt before God. If we try and make up for our guilt with a life of good behaviour, or moral behaviour, or religious behaviour, then really we're just exactly like the Pharisee that we met in the story earlier on, aren't we? Trying to impress

God with being good enough for him and hiding our guilt behind a facade of moral or religious works. Let me try and put it like this. Imagine you're at home this afternoon and you realise that the carpet in your lounge is very dirty and so you decide to get the Hoover out to go and clean it up. And yet whilst you Hoover around, you're also wearing incredibly dirty shoes. And so as soon as you've hoovered over a particular area, you just walk straight over it again in your muddy shoes and it's dirty straight away. And that is what it's like when we try and clean up our lives by good behaviour, or moral or religious behaviour. We don't make ourselves any cleaner in God's eyes. It's futile.

[11:52] We're just moving the dirt around, moving the sin around in our lives. That's why the Bible says, as Isaiah writes, that our best efforts are filthy rags before the eyes of God. A moral life and a religious life does not deal with our guilt before God, nor does it deal with the sin in our lives.

And so we see that option one, which is trying to shift the blame away from ourselves, it doesn't work before God. We're simply deceiving ourselves. And option number two, which is trying to make up for our guilt by living a life of good deeds. Again, it doesn't work, does it? Again, we find ourselves condemned by this God of perfect justice. And therefore, it leaves us only with option three. And option three is what we call the gospel. Option three is the good news that even though we ourselves as humans are utterly, utterly futile in trying to deal with our sin and our guilt before God, that actually God himself has done everything, absolutely everything that is necessary to remove our guilt before him. And therefore, his justice need not terrify us, but actually his justice should delight us. And that brings us to these words of Isaiah chapter 53, verses 4, 5, and 6, which we read earlier on, and which hopefully you've got open there in front of you now. Isaiah, if you don't know who he is, he's a prophet who lived in and around Jerusalem about 700 years before Jesus was born. And in the book that he wrote, there are a series of four songs towards the end of the book, all about a particular individual whom Isaiah calls the servant of the Lord. Now, from elsewhere in the Bible, particularly from the New Testament, we know that the servant is also God the Son, the one who has existed for all eternity, but who would come to earth as a human being. And the words that we are focusing on today is just one part of the fourth, the final, and the most famous song about the servant of the Lord. The servant of the Lord is someone who will come to do the will of God on earth. And the New Testament tells us that this person, this servant of the Lord, whom Isaiah was looking forward to, is none other than the person Jesus Christ. And he is the one who is going to deal with the sin and the guilt of all of God's people. And the answer to our guilt before God is not trying to shift the blame. And the answer to our guilt before him is not good behavior. It's not religious rules. It's not a particular philosophy. No, the answer to our guilt before God is a person.

Isaiah calls him the servant of the Lord. We call him Jesus. We know his real name. These words speak of what he would do to deal with the sin of his people and to get rid of their guilt eternally. And there's one question we need to clear up before we look at the text in any detail. And that is that you'll notice that this is written in the past tense. And that raises an obvious question for us, doesn't it? If these words are about Jesus, then how on earth can Isaiah, writing 700 years before Jesus, speak about him in the past tense? Surely he should be speaking about him in the future tense.

Now the answer is that in Hebrew, the language that this is written in, they have this device that they use, which in fancy chat is called the prophetic past tense or the prophetic perfect tense. And basically what that means is that when the prophets are predicting a future event, such as the life of Jesus or his death and his resurrection, sometimes, sometimes they talk about it in the past tense to give the idea that these things are so certain in the mind and the will of God that it's as if they have already happened. They're just that certain. Now occasionally in English we do a slightly similar thing.

[15 : 42] Imagine the following scenario, for example. Imagine that you're at home one evening and you're watching football on the TV, you're watching the first half, you've got some friends around, you're watching this game take place and it gets to half time and the score is already 4-0 to Sheffield Wednesday.

This is obviously a made up scenario. And as the adverts come on at the half time break, you're about to go put the kettle on and you turn to your friends and you say, well it's 4-0. This game's all over, isn't it? Now of course the game's not all over, is it? There's still the whole of the second half to come.

And yet what you mean is that the final outcome of this is so certain already that you can start talking about it as if it's already happened. That's the idea here in Isaiah 53. The things we read of here about the servant of the Lord, about Jesus Christ, were firmly established in the mind of God for all eternity past.

And therefore even 700 years before Jesus was born, Isaiah could write about the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus as if it had already happened. We can be absolutely certain of these things. So what has Jesus, the suffering servant, done in order to deal with the sin and the guilt of God's people? Well the song is in total five stanzas long or five verses long.

It starts back in the end of chapter 52. We're just looking in detail at the middle one. But what has Isaiah said in stanzas one and two to lead into this? Just to very briefly summarize the background.

[17 : 18] He said that in the end, in the end, the servant of the Lord is going to be raised, he's going to be lifted up and highly exalted. And so we know right from the first line of the song that the final destination of the servant of the Lord is glory. And yet he takes a very surprising route to that place of glory. Isaiah tells us that this servant would be born in very obscure circumstances. He said he'd be like a tiny shoot springing up out of dry ground. The servant would have very humble beginnings humanly speaking. There'll be nothing about him as he grew up which would necessarily catch your eye.

Isaiah says he had no beauty, no majesty, nothing about him which would attract us to him. There's nothing in his appearance that you should desire him. If I can put it like this, if the servant were to walk the earth today, you could sit next to him on the bus and you would have no idea that the man sat next to you was the one in whom the grand plan of God for the entire universe would find its fulfillment. Everything about his appearance was very ordinary. He is a servant and he looked just like a servant as well. And not only that but he was very unpopular as well. Isaiah says that he was despised. He was rejected by men. He was born in obscurity. He appeared ordinary. He received rejection from those around him. And then to cap it all off, Isaiah says he died in agony. He was bloodied and he was beaten to such an extent that his appearance was disfigured beyond that of human likeness, Isaiah writes. In other words, after people had finished doing their worst to the servant of the Lord, you could hardly tell that he was still a human being. You certainly wouldn't have recognized him. Such were the extent of his wounds. This is very graphic. This is very gruesome language that Isaiah is using here.

And he's describing to us the birth, the life, the trial and the execution of Jesus. Born in a humble stable before growing up initially as a refugee and then later on in his childhood in the backwater town of Nazareth, spending his early adult life working as a carpenter. And then when his teaching ministry did begin, he found himself opposed initially by the religious authorities and then in the end opposed by the public at large. And even his closest friends, his disciples, right at the end either betrayed him or denied him or deserted him in his hour of greatest need. And then he was beaten, he was flogged before undergoing the excruciating death of the cross. For someone looking on at that life of apparent failure, there would only be one conclusion that they would come to. Surely this man has done something terrible in order for God to treat him in this way. That's what Job's friends thought about Job, wasn't it? Job's that famous character in the Old Testament. He lost his health, his possessions and his family in a series of catastrophic events. And when his friends come to speak to him, their only conclusion is that Job must have sinned in some great way in order for God to send all these things against him. And Isaiah says that is how people looking on at the life and in particular the death of Jesus would have reacted. He must have been a terrible sinner to have ended up nailed to the cross.

And yet in verses 4, 5 and 6 of Isaiah 53, Isaiah gives to us the real meaning of what was going on at the crucifixion of Jesus. Just look at verse 4 to start with. Isaiah writes, Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by God and afflicted. And

Isaiah is speaking on behalf of all God's people here and it's almost as if suddenly, as in his mind's eye, he looks ahead at the crucifixion 700 years in the future from his point of view. This realisation hits him between the eyes. Yes, yes the servant who would undergo such pain, such agony, would be undergoing the punishment of God. And yet remarkably, he would not do so for his own sin. The servant, Isaiah says, has no sin. Unique among the human race, the servant of the Lord has never sinned at all. He is perfect, or as the Bible puts it, he is righteous. And therefore, at the cross, he cannot be undergoing punishment for anything that he has done. And yet Isaiah realises, almost as he writes this song, that the punishment that he is undergoing, he's taking that for the people of God, taking their punishment in their place and for their benefit. See, at the cross, it was our pain, our suffering, our punishment, our affliction, that Jesus underwent, so that we don't have to. Verse 5 spells it out in glorious technicolor. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. You see, God's justice demands that every sin must be punished. And yet in his great mercy, he has provided for us a perfect substitute, a servant who has willingly stood in our place, taken our punishment upon himself in all of its terrifying intensity. The words crushed and pierced are meant to convey that. It was no small thing that he underwent for us on that day. The judgment of God is a terrifying thing. And yet out of immeasurable love for us, Jesus has stood in the way of that judgment, shielding us from it forever.

[23 : 08] The novel, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, is set on a Greek island during the Second World War. And towards the end of that novel, a group of Italian soldiers are captured, they're rounded up, and they're put in front of a German firing squad, all lined up, ready to be shot. And amongst the Italian soldiers about to be shot are two characters in particular. The lead character, Captain Corelli, and his good friend Carlo, who is a real giant of a man. And the scene reads as follows.

What no one had seen was that at the order to fire, Carlo had stepped smartly sideways, like a soldier forming ranks. Antonio Corelli, in a haze of nostalgia and forgetfulness, had found in front of him the titanic bulk of Carlo, had found his wrists gripped painfully in those mighty fists, had found himself unable to move. He stared wonderingly into the middle of Carlo's back.

Carlo stood unbroken, as one bullet after another burrowed like white-hot parasitic knives into the muscle of his chest. He felt blows like those of an axe splintering his bones and hacking at his veins. He stood perfectly still, and when his lungs filled up with blood, he held his breath and countered. Just as he thought he might be failing, he looked up at the sky and flung himself over backwards. Corelli lay beneath him, paralysed by his weight, drenched utterly in his blood, stupefied by an act of love so incomprehensible, so ineffable, and so filled with divine madness. It's a great picture, isn't it, of what the servant did for us at the cross, as it were, standing deliberately in the pathway of God's judgment against our sins, suffering it in our place in order to save us. And therefore Isaiah says, his punishment has brought us peace, and by his wounds we are healed. You see, where previously there could only be condemnation for our guilt before God, there is now reconciliation with God. You see, God's justice demands that every sin, every sin must be punished, and yet God's justice also demands that every sin must only be punished once. You can't punish the same sins twice and still be called the God of justice. And so if this servant of the Lord has already taken your punishment for your sin, God will not allow you to face any punishment for your sin, ever, ever.

As Paul puts it in Romans chapter 8 verse 1, there is therefore now no condemnation whatsoever for those who are in Christ Jesus. And for the simple reason that that condemnation has already been exhausted 2,000 years ago on a hillside just outside the city of Jerusalem, in the body of the servant, in the body of our servant, who is Jesus. And see how Isaiah responds to these truths. Look at verse 6. He says, We all like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. See, Isaiah responds, doesn't he, by confessing his sin, by confessing his guilt before God, along with the guilt of all of God's people. And he says, we're all like sheep. I don't know what you think of sheep, but Isaiah didn't intend that as a compliment. He says, we're like sheep in the sense that we wander around aimlessly.

[26 : 41] We don't follow God's will for our lives. We go our own way. We ignore his rules. We disobey his commandments. And our hearts are turned away from him. And yet the Lord has laid on the servant, the iniquity, that is, the sin of us all, of all of God's people, their sin laid on the servant, as the servant willingly took it upon himself to pay for their sin. And therefore, as we close, let me ask you, how have you responded yourself to these truths? How are you trying to deal with your

guilt, your sin before God?

It's futile, isn't it, to try and shift the blame elsewhere? It's futile to try and make up for our sin with a life of good behaviour, be that a moral life or a religious life. And yet, thank God that he hasn't left us to try and deal with our sin ourselves, because we simply can't deal with our sin ourselves.

And yet, in the person of Jesus, God himself has already dealt with the sin of his people, giving us freedom from it, rescuing us from its inevitable punishment, and giving to us a relationship with him for eternity.

And that's how the song ends. In the final few lines of the song, Isaiah will go on to write about how the suffering servant would later rise from the dead, and that many people would come to know him and have their sin washed away by him and benefit from what his death has achieved for them, and enjoy the fruit of that for all eternity.

Let me urge you, take your sin to him, confess it to him, acknowledge that you aren't perfect, you have gone astray like all of us have. And if you do go to him with your sin, trusting in what he has done, that on the basis of his sin-bearing death, you can be assured of the eternal forgiveness and the cleansing which he's offered to you in him.

[28 : 27] Let's pray together. Amen. Some of you will be familiar with these words of a song which wonderfully speak of what Christ has saved us from by his death on the cross.

Without him is hell where his wrath will consume, in perpetual fire and eternity doomed. Yet in him is all love, and my soul is at rest, for hell's gates have been barred through his glorious death.

Yes, wave upon wave of grace reaches me. He deals with my sin, and he washes me clean. And each accusation is drowned by his blood, for Jesus has paid with immeasurable love.

Father, like Isaiah does in these verses, we want to acknowledge before you the fact that we are sinners. And like sheep, we do go astray, heading off in our own direction and ignoring you.

And Father, we know that because of this we deserve nothing other than your just and your right punishment for these things. And yet, Father, we read in these words of Isaiah 53, the glistening truth that your eternal Son took on flesh, and that he lived on earth as a human, perfectly as we have failed to live.

[29 : 42] And then in the end, he died the death that we ought to die, undergoing your punishment, which stood against the sins of all your people. And therefore, for anyone who comes to Christ, confessing sin and trusting in him, there is the great reassurance that there can be no condemnation for our sin, but rather in its place, glorious, joyful, eternal reconciliation to you.

Father, we pray that if we've already come to Christ, that you would, by your Spirit, warm our hearts by reminding us of the remarkable sacrifice that Christ has made for us. And that you would also be drawing others to Christ as well, so that they too can know the total, the free forgiveness that Christ has purchased by his death.

And Father, we pray all of these things in his strong and his precious name. Amen. Well, to close with, we're going to sing together this great song, which is a song of thankfulness for all that Christ has done for us at the cross.

Let's stand and sing with one another. My heart is filled with thankfulness. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[31 : 54] Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you. Thank you.

Christ. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.

[33 : 32] Amen.