

The Arm of the Lord

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 | Psalm 22 | Hebrews 10:16-25 | John 18:1-19:42

ISAIAH 52:13-53:12

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. 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.

INTRODUCTION

You may have heard the name, James Ellison. He was part of the Zarephath-Horeb Community Church, in Pontiac, Missouri, in the early 1970s. By the late 1970s, the church had begun to fuse together its Christian identity with white supremacist ideology, and even developed ties to esteemed organizations like Aryan Nation and the Ku Klux Klan. As this theology evolved, they took on a new name: *The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord*.¹ Apparently, racists like to rhyme. But it's that last phrase that is particularly interesting. You see, they were attempting to evoke the righteous judgment of God—his power metaphorically depicted in the strength of his arm as it is often referenced in the Scriptures—as a way of overthrowing the corrupt, leftist, Zionist government of the United States in a second American Revolution—and, in particular, putting racial and ethnic minorities in their place. For them, the arm of the Lord represented power and righteousness, strength and justice, all securing the way for God's chosen, albeit vanilla, people.

¹ Much of this information is available from the FBI's public investigation records, file 100-HQ-487200. See vault.fbi.gov/The%20Covenant%20The%20Sword%20The%20Arm%20of%20the%20Lord%20.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

It sort of makes sense, even if just in the deluded minds of these separatists. There is plenty of biblical background to support this use of the imagery. From Exodus, where God promises the mighty deliverance of his people—*“I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement.”*—to how it is seen retroactively in the Psalms—*“with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, for his steadfast love endures for ever.”*² And even right here in Isaiah, it becomes a major theme.³ The arm of the Lord is the chosen instrument of his rule (chapter 40, verses 10-11), his judgment against the Chaldeans (48:14), and even his means of providing salvation, as noted just a few verses before our Isaiah reading begins: *“The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.”*⁴ God’s salvation comes to his people through the might of his arm.

PROPOSITION: HOW AND WHO

The question, though, becomes one of how. How exactly does the Lord provide salvation? Through his might? Through his violent judgment of his enemies, as Jim Ellison, *The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord*, and such groups suggest? The answer, shockingly, is yes. Yes he does. God’s justice requires the violent adjudication of evil and the necessary repayment, the appropriate punishment, for such evil, delivered by his swift and mighty arm. This is the essential nature of justice, and so an essential characteristic of God. His righteousness demands the firm and unequivocal setting right of all evil.

But here’s the important thing we must realize. Ellison and company got two very big things wrong. How and who. How and who. But our Isaiah reading offers us insight that we might get them right.

1. WHO

I know this is taking the text slightly out of order, but let’s start with the *who* question. Who exactly is to be judged? And for this, we must see the middle stanza. The passage itself is set up as five stanzas of poetry with three verses each—and the central stanza, chapter 53, verses 4-6, sheds light on this question of who. *“Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases,”* it begins.⁵ The next verse, likewise begins: *“But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities.”*⁶ The use of the first person is not an accident. The author asks the reader to identify with those whose infirmities and diseases, whose transgressions and iniquities sit before the Lord’s judgment. Of course, you might think: ‘Well, this only applies to the sinful.’ The next verse makes it even clearer: *“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 Did you notice the repetition of the word *all*? This is universal. This condition of sinfulness is not limited to a certain race. This deserving of judgment is not only for a specific ethnicity. There is nothing more colour blind in all of Christian theology than the universal depravity of humankind. Paul picks up this idea in Romans 3 where he pieces together parts of a few Psalms:

² Exod 6:6 and Psa 136:12.

³ See Isa 30:30, 32; 33:2; 40:10, 11; 48:14; 51:5, 9; 52:10; 53:1; 59:16; 63:5; 63:12.

⁴ See Isa 52:10.

⁵ Isa 53:4a.

⁶ Isa 53:5a.

⁷ Isa 53:6.

There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one.⁸

This is us, brothers and sisters. Every selfish whim. Every hateful thought. Every indulgence in something we know is wrong. Every sordid moment of neglecting perfect righteousness. Every dishonest phrase. Every word of arrogance. Every syllable of self-justification. Every fraction of a second of malice. We are sinners. The first step to solving any problem is admitting that there is a problem. And we, too often, live in denial—thinking our good deeds somehow offset our evil deeds. Well, there is a problem. We are the problem. And we deserve God’s violent wrath. In the introductory words to evening prayer in the 1662 *BCP*:

We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we not to have done; and there is no health in us.⁹

But why is sin so bad? You might be wondering... ‘so what if I do some bad things?’ Well, the short answer is alienation. Sin alienates us from ourselves. You see, God designed the world and humanity to function in a particular way—and sin destroys what we’re actually meant to be. We cannot be who God designed us to be. It also alienates us from each other. Nothing destroys human relationship faster than the reality of our sin—from person to person and at a societal level. Sin always gets in the way. And probably most importantly, it alienates us from God. That spark of divinity for which we all strive, that deepest most profound desire of our hearts, that sense of the supernatural that pulls us forward—it cannot be met because God is righteous, he is holy, and we are not. We cannot truly commune with God because sin is an unpassable barrier. Brothers and sisters, we are in need.

2. HOW?

And this brings us to the solution. How? How is it that God solves this problem of universal human depravity? Not through the overthrow of a race of people or a government. But through a sacrificial offering. It is violent. God’s full vengeance and the requirements of true justice are met. A life is required as payment, as propitiation, and so a life is taken.

But, it isn’t ours.

Even though we deserve the fullness of God’s wrath, the violence we too often humour, it is not charged against us. We are spared. The first two and last two stanzas of this magnificent poem in Isaiah paint a picture: “*See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.*”¹⁰ That is, there is a servant who steps forward to take our place. And he is

⁸ Rom 3:10b-12. He cites parts of Psa 14:1-3 and Psa 53:1-3.

⁹ From the introduction to Evening Prayer. See 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 53.

¹⁰ Isa 52:13.

lifted up—not exalted as a triumphant king, but as an object of ridicule: lifted up on a tree, marred in his appearance, beyond human semblance. And why?

It's right there in chapter 53, verse 1: *"To whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?"*¹¹ All people shall see, this servant, shall despise and reject this servant. For this servant is the arm of the Lord. He was not, in this moment, the sword of judgment, but the sacrificial lamb. He took upon himself our sins and suffered the penalty we deserve. The central stanza says it again: *"Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases... he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities... the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."*¹² This servant became the lamb, slaughtered for our sins, an offering (as verse 10 puts it). Again, why? Verse 11, in the final stanza, answers: *"The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities."*¹³ He interceded for us—taking the righteous wrath of God we deserve, and bearing the sins of many.

Brothers and sisters, this is what happened at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. What Isaiah so beautifully and poetically depicts here—this is the reality at that cross. As the Son of God, Jesus's right was to take vengeance upon us for our sins. And yet he gave his life for us. He didn't exert his rights, his privileges, his just prerogative, his righteous entitlement. He gave up his rights. He gave up his divinity. He gave up his life. *"Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani!"*¹⁴ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. This was no Hebraic cry of victory, but a distressed declaration of defeat... a defeat he took upon himself at the cost of his life, so that we might be granted hope of being reconciled with God.

CONCLUSION

If this reality is new to you, then I invite you to believe. We do not deserve this act of substitution, yet it is freely offered as the grace of Christ Jesus. Our is to believe. And if this is familiar theological ground, then I invite you once again to consider the state of your own life. Take an inventory. Consider what sins you still need to bring before Christ at the cross, so that you might find forgiveness. Consider what rights you might give up in order to be more Christ-like. Consider what evil remains, that it might be confronted. And consider how dark this Friday night truly is, that the first light of early Sunday morning may bring us hope—hope in the loving arms of our Saviour.

Let me pray: *Heavenly Father, help us as we meditate on our sin, and the right weeping that may linger this night, but also as we look to the joy of hope that comes with Sunday morning.*¹⁵ *In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

¹¹ Isa 53:1.

¹² Isa 53:4-6.

¹³ Isa 53:11.

¹⁴ Mark 15: 34.

¹⁵ Paraphrased from Psa 30:5.