

Have you ever had a problem and, once you saw the answer, you couldn't believe it? That the solution was so unexpected that, even though it was right, you struggled to come to grips with it? I read an article this week on the 80th anniversary of a significant discovery. You may know the story. Sir Alexander Fleming was a scientist who was trying to come up with something to solve the problem of staph bacteria. He had a reputation of being a careless lab technician, kind of a slob. Once, as he left for a two-week vacation, he left a culture plate out in his lab. When he returned, he found that mold had grown on it. But upon investigation, he discovered the mold had stopped the growth of the bacteria. The world was shocked that the solution for the problem of bacteria and infection came from the unexpected, and unappealing, mold spore known as penicillin.

There is another problem that has an interesting solution, and it's one every person who has ever walked the earth is faced with. It is the problem of a spiritual infection brought on by the bacteria known as sin. Many ideas have been given to solve it, **but there is only one that will actually do so.** That solution, though, was as much of a surprise as mold solving the problem of bacteria and infection to those who first heard it, and it continues to be difficult for many to accept today.

We continue this morning in our study in the book of Isaiah, and we have finally arrived at Isaiah 53. Of the nearly 80 Isaiah references found in the New Testament, around 50 come from this chapter alone. **It is the central passage in the book because it expresses the central message of the Gospel.** It tells us what the problem is, what the unexpected solution is, and the result of that solution. We are going to unpack this chapter over the next several weeks, between now and Easter, and see the problem, the solution, and the result.

Last week, Gary walked us through the end of chapter 52, which is an introduction of chapter 53. In it, we learned about this Servant of God who will accomplish something significant, at a great cost to himself, but for the blessing of many. He will become the unexpected solution to the problem we all have.

[Isaiah 53:1-3] Who has believed what he has heard from us? 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, and no beauty that we should desire him. ³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

As we read the words of Isaiah 53, it's important to know who is saying them and when they are saying them. Remember in the first week we talked about the challenge of studying the Prophets; that some of what they say has already been fulfilled and some will be fulfilled in the future. The first several verses of Isaiah 53 are the believing remnant of Israel. We know that, one day, a remnant of Israel will become true followers of Jesus. So these words are the confession of that yet-future believing remnant looking back at the time when Jesus came, and their confession tells us several things.

God's promised Servant comes as God's expected Savior.

V1 asks two questions, and they speak to the identity of this Servant and Israel's response to him. It says "Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" What it's saying is "Who has believed the message that **this Servant** is the arm of the Lord?" It will be so astounding and unexpected that it will be difficult to believe he is the arm of the Lord when God reveals him.

That's because, in Hebrew, the "arm of the Lord" is the Lord himself come into history to do something concrete. It is the manifestation of his power for the salvation of man. Isaiah speaks of the arm of the Lord being at the right hand of Moses to part the Red Sea. Throughout the Old Testament the nation of Israel is constantly reminded of the Exodus as the example of God's saving power. In the New Testament, Paul does not use the phrase "arm of the Lord", but he does talk about God's power in Romans 1:16 when he says, "the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." And just before Isaiah mentions the Servant at the end of chapter 52, he says:

[Isaiah 52:10] ¹⁰ 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.

This Servant is the arm of the Lord. He will break into history as the power of God to accomplish the will of God. It is more than what he does. It is more than a characteristic of this Servant, like we would say someone is funny or assertive. This is saying more than "This Servant is powerful." It's saying he is power. It is essential to who he is. And those who believe will allow that power to work in their lives for their salvation. But who this Servant is and what this Servant is sent to do is so far outside of what the nation is looking for that they will struggle to believe. We see evidence of that in the Gospel of John, where this verse is quoted.

[John 12:35-39a] ³⁵ So Jesus said to them, "The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. ³⁶ While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." When Jesus had said these things, he departed and hid himself from them. ³⁷ Though he had done so many signs before them, they still did not believe in him, ³⁸ so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" ³⁹ Therefore they could not believe.

Jesus is waving his hands, pleading with his people to recognize him for who he is. The light, the power of God, the arm of the Lord, is in their presence. The solution to their problem has come. Immanuel, God with us, has broken into time and space and been revealed by God to bring salvation to man, but they don't see it. If they did, they'd rejoice. The Messiah has come. But they don't. And John, as he's writing his gospel, looks back to the book of Isaiah and sees his words being fulfilled here. The nation does not see it, so they don't believe. Why is that?

God's expected Savior comes in an unexpected way.

Imagine you're a Jew reading Isaiah. You get to chapter 9 that there is someone to come who will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. You read in chapter 40 that there is a coming King. You read in chapter 42 that this Servant will bring justice to the nations, and you read in chapter 52 that the salvation of the Lord will be revealed to all the nations. This is the arm of the Lord, the power of God who split the Red Sea and defeated Pharaoh to deliver the nation. Here he comes! And then reader leans in and gets to verse 2.

And then, in v2, Isaiah describes him in this way: A young plant, which refers to a sucker branch an olive vine that does damage and is usually removed. A root out of dry ground. Think of summer when it's 110 outside and your grass is dying but a plant shoots up in the crack in your sidewalk. It is not cultivated, it is worthless, and it is unwanted. He has no form or majesty or beauty that we should notice or desire him. This one who is to be King doesn't have a regal and majestic presence, come from a rich family, or grow up in the halls of power. And for a nation that already had two kings whose physical traits attracted people, taller-than-everyone Saul and ruddy handsome David, this guy had no physical beauty. And for one who was to rule, you would expect to see conquest and success in his life, yet Isaiah said his life would be characterized by sorrow and grief. Huh?

And 700 years later, this guy named Jesus came along, and he could be described in one word: Ordinary. His place, his pedigree, and his purpose were all wrong. He had none of the worldly markers one would associate with majesty, power, status, stature. If Jesus were alive today, his LinkedIn profile wouldn't generate a lot of excitement. He grew up in a town called Nazareth. It was thought so little of that someone in Jesus day asks, "Can anything good come from Nazareth." He grew up in a working-class family whose earthly father was a laborer. One day Jesus went back home to teach in the synagogue there and someone asked, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" The implication was that he was nothing special because he came from nothing special. One commentator of that passage said, "they could not penetrate the veil of ordinariness around Jesus Christ." He was a man of sorrows and grief. That has a couple different meanings. He experienced sorrow and grief. Time and again in the Gospels you see Jesus sorrowful. He wept at the death of his friend Lazarus, wept over the city of Jerusalem, and had compassion on the people who had no shepherd to guide their steps. He was a man of sorrows because he saw the brokenness of the world. It was not the way it was supposed to be. And I believe that, even today, Jesus continues to observe our circumstances and is sorrowful. A global pandemic is not the way it's supposed to be. He is not indifferent to what is happening today. **The world is broken by sin and his heart continues to break for those he loves.**

He was also a man of sorrows acquainted with grief because **others connected his life and reputation to great suffering**. He was an outcast and sorry loser when he was alive, and it ended in a miserable death. The one who was supposed to overcome injustice appeared to be overcome by injustice. And in seeing all this, the Jews decided this just couldn't be the one who had been promised, and they couldn't believe. Their struggle is the same struggle you and I face.

The God we think we want is oftentimes different than the God He knows we need. The reason Jesus was so unexpected was because they were looking for the wrong characteristics to

solve the wrong problem. They thought their biggest concern was the Romans. In John 6, after Jesus miraculously fed the 5,000, the people “this is the guy!” and tried to make him king by force. But in Jesus, God turns the wisdom of the world on its head. His power is manifested in the ordinary. Jesus said, “I am gentle and lowly of heart.” Those are hardly the characteristics we think of in terms of a conquering king, but those are the characteristics necessary for Jesus to solve the problem he came to solve; not a political problem, but a spiritual one. He did come to establish a Kingdom, but if any of us were to be citizens of that Kingdom, he had to take care of that initial problem first, the problem of sin.

Because he is unexpected, he is ultimately unaccepted.

Think about the last time your high expectations weren't met. How do you react when you are really disappointed? Consider a recent trip to the grocery store. You expect the shelves to be full, but they are empty. You get angry at viruses and hoarders. I was on a college visit trip last week and Thursday evening we got an email from the school we are supposed to visit the next morning that told us they were cutting half the program. We had driven many miles and spent several days, and I got angry and started blaming! What about disappointments in your relationships?

The nation of Israel had certain (wrong) expectations of their Messiah, and those expectations were not met in the person of Jesus. V3 tells us how they reacted: He was despised and rejected and considered worthless. This is not some passive indifference. He was loathed, and “rejected by men” is an expression that literally means “ceased, stopped”. And that rejection of Jesus ultimately led to him being hung on a cross, and it appeared he had failed.

That's a tough place to stop, so I'll give you a sneak peek of what is to come. Just as God turns the wisdom of the world on its head, he turns the wickedness of the world on its head. The rejection did not stop him from fulfilling his purpose but, instead, led to it being fulfilled. **Because Jesus was rejected, we can be accepted.** That's where we'll pick it up next week, but there are two things I want to challenge you with this week.

Decide Jesus is the Savior you need. We are no different than Israel. We are tempted to try and morph God into the God we want: the provider of comfort, excess, ease, or indifference. But that is not who he is. He is the arm of the Lord, the power of God who broke into history for our salvation. He died on the cross for your sins, he rose three days later, and when you believe in him you will be given eternal life. And in return he asks for your devotion.

I believe we have been given an incredible opportunity right now. Psalm 46 tells us to “be still and know that I am the Lord”. Sometimes we must force ourselves to be still, but times like these give us very little choice. This week, would you take this forced-upon-us margin, be still before God, and **ask him to show you how the God you think you want doesn't match up with the God he is?** I believe the answer you get will expose idols in your life, and now is the perfect time to do some spiritual spring cleaning. The more we clear out, the more space we make for him to move in, and the more deeply and intimately we can know him. Use our daily devotionals. Use Right Now media. Stay connected with your Life Group. Use Dwell or some other Bible app. Or just pick up a Bible and ask God to show you himself through his Word. Do not waste this time.

Believe God uses the ordinary to accomplish the extraordinary. While the Servant, the person of Jesus, exposed the wrong thinking of Israel, I believe God also uses him to show us what he can do with ordinary. **There is only one qualification you need on your spiritual resume to be used by God: “Follower of Jesus”.** Some of you are convinced that you don’t have much to offer or you don’t measure up, so you take yourself out of the game. Others of you believe you have to be extraordinary for anything to happen. I fall into this trap at times myself. There are moments where I believe I need to be extraordinary, and when I do that, I begin to rely on my own power, my own smarts, my own abilities. Rather than letting God’s extraordinary power work through me, I let my very ordinary power work for itself, and the results show it.

Both of these are wrong thinking, but here’s the good news: The more ordinary you are, the more extraordinary God is shown to be. If you are a follower of Jesus, you just need to be you and let God do the rest. You have been filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, the arm of the Lord in you, and he will accomplish the extraordinary through an ordinary you.

In speaking of his discovery, Sir Alexander Fleming said, “One sometimes finds what one is not looking for.” Penicillin was discovered by accident from the most unlikely of sources, and many have been healed because of it. In our sin, we didn’t know what we were looking for, but finding our solution was no accident. By the grace of God, he has revealed to us the solution to our problem, and his name is Jesus. He is the unexpected answer, but because of him, many have been healed. He may not be the God we thought we wanted, but he is the God he knows we need.