

# The Promise of a Saviour

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] So where I want to start is with this year's Glastonbury. I don't know if you caught any of it, but this year's Glastonbury ended with what was frankly a very powerful performance from Kendrick Lamar. He was wearing a diamond encrusted crown of thorns made by Tiffany and Co. Lamar finished his set with his song, Saviour. I wear this crown, he began. They judge Christ, they judge you, they judge Christ. As the song progresses, blood starts pouring down Lamar's face.

The ending is frenzied and passionate. Almost on a loop, Lamar raps, they judge you, they judge Christ, Godspeed for women's rights, a reference to the recent Roe v. Wade verdict in the U.S.

I want to start here because this performance I think is quite a helpful mirror onto how society sees Jesus on the cross wearing that crown of thorns. Here the horror of the cross has been lost and replaced really by parody. Lamar's crown is made with Tiffany diamonds and the response to his bloodied face, well it's adoration and it's applause. This is the cross as performance piece, not the cross of Christ. And this is the cross being used to further an agenda. Kendrick Lamar's performance of Saviour misses what the point of Jesus' death actually is and uses it to push a manifesto of its own. But the cross isn't an image to be used to defend our manifestos and our ideas.

The cross has a message of its own and frankly it's a much more shocking message. And the message is that Jesus actually died on a cross and his crown of thorns was made from thorns, not diamonds. His blood was his own. He was not adored as he died, but he was despised.

The soundtrack of Jesus' death oscillated between abuse and grim silence. He died instead of you and me. He died and here to be fair is where Lamar's title is on the money, to be your Saviour.

[ 2 : 2 0 ] So this is, as we said, the last of Isaiah's four servant songs, the songs that speak of the mission, the character and the suffering of Jesus and songs which prophetically anticipated the cross.

And here in this song explain exactly why Jesus had to come to suffer and die. Because Jesus' death was not a powerful performance piece. It was an execution. It was a routine killing by Roman authorities. It wasn't inspiring. It was weak. It was degrading. It was humiliating. It was bloody and nasty and cruel. It ended not in applause, but with a spear being thrust into the side of a limp corpse to check that the crucifixion had done its work and that Jesus was dead. And why? Well, because it should have been you and it should have been me. This is the real message of the cross of Christ. And we have it here in Isaiah in the most famous servant song of all. And it is in short a manifesto pledge from God himself to provide a Saviour for our deepest and our darkest need.

So I think it's fair to say that the shock of the cross has been somewhat dampened for those who believe and for those who don't. We see it in sanitized Renaissance paintings. We see it in the sort of twee images that kick around Easter time. We see it treated as a vehicle for comedy.

But Isaiah is helpful because when we read a passage like this, he brings us back to the reality of the cross. And God says at the start, see, my servant will act wisely. He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Now, it's only natural that God's servant should act in wisdom and be exalted by God, especially in the wake of the first three servant songs, which speak of the servant bringing global justice to the world and being honored as its perfect, humble king. But the twist, if you like, comes in verse 14. There were many who were appalled at him. His appearance was so disfigured beyond any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness. This introduces a kind of paradox.

Christ is both exalted beyond any other human, but his appearance is so disfigured and distorted from his suffering that he's barely even noticeably as human anymore. Now, Isaiah's language here is kind of hyperbolic, but his point is that there is something paradoxical going on here. Jesus would be both highly exalted and grotesquely abused. These two things are not natural bedfellows.

[ 5 : 10 ] And then it gets even stranger. Isaiah says, his form was marred so that he will sprinkle many nations and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were told, they will not see and what they have not heard, they will understand.

What's happening here is the song setting up questions. What does it mean for the servant to sprinkle many nations? Why are leaders across the globe going to be stunned into silence? And how can the Christ be both a figure that people are horrified by and a figure who is highly exalted?

And these are the questions that the rest of the song is going to pick up on. The point at the start, and I think it remains relevant today because it's so easy to forget it, is that the cross is shocking. It's paradoxical. It's horrific.

When we come to the cross afresh, well, words like these just make us stop and think. Because we mustn't miss the shock of the cross. Jewish readers coming to this song struggle to see how it could possibly be about the Messiah because they can't make sense of their deliverer suffering in this way. Jesus' first disciples, they were outraged when Jesus told them that he was going to suffer and die. And they abandoned him when the cross finally came. And Paul, when he was speaking to the Corinthian Christians, trying to get them to embrace the apparent weakness of the cross, well, that was something they struggled with because the cross in the eyes of a first century world was weakness.

So my point is that earlier believers were much more familiar with crucifixion, and that familiarity they had made it hard for them to deal with the suffering and weakness that it represented. When we think of the cross, we mustn't empty it of its scandal because it is scandalous.

[ 7 : 08 ] Christians and culture need to rediscover the shock of the cross. Because I think in that rediscovery, we'll see much more clearly why the cross stands at the center of the Christian life. And the shock actually helps us rediscover the sacrificial nature of the crucifixion and its implications. Now, when Isaiah uses language of sprinkling the nations, that's sacrificial language. It's recalling that the sprinkling of blood that's ceremonially cleansed in the Old Testament. It recalls the way in which blood was shed to deal with the sin of the Old Testament people. And it recalls the way in which death and sacrifice lay at the very heart of the Old Testament and the way in which God related to his people. What we mustn't forget is that actually death, sacrifice, and blood lies at the heart of the New Testament as well.

And it all happens at the cross. When Jesus began his ministry, John the Baptist spoke of him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And that's exactly the Jesus that we see here in this song. He is a sacrificial lamb, the man of sorrows. Listen to the experiences that the song tells it.

He, Jesus, grew up before him like a tender shoot and like a root out of dry ground. Isaiah here, he's recalling language that he's already used in the earlier part of his prophecy in chapter 11.

It's language of the shoot, which he earlier used to describe the kingly Messiah from the line of David. But here we see that the shoot is tender and fragile. It struggles. You're breaking out into the sunlight from dry, barren ground. And Jesus was, figuratively speaking, born out of dry ground, born in relative poverty. He saw and experienced the fragility of life firsthand. And as I continues to say, he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised and we held him in low esteem. He didn't have a Hollywood smile or the shopper's suit. He didn't look like a leader. He didn't look like the expected Messiah. And when the time of the cross came, he was despised, rejected and hated. He was abused and cruelly treated. And people didn't even want to look at him. You know how suffering can often make us awkward. Well, you can imagine how seeing Jesus hanging, bleeding on the cross, a shameful death, a criminal's death. Well, most would avert their eyes and stare at the ground. It's uncomfortable to look at Jesus as he hangs on the tree of curse.

[10:14] It's uncomfortable to meet the gaze of the dying son of man. He was in the world, writes John, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Jesus was rejected precisely by those who should have recognized him. The weak Messiah just didn't fit their box. The crucified Messiah didn't fit their manifesto of what they thought a Messiah should be. What's staggering about Jesus, and this is what his contemporaries really struggled with, is that he came precisely to be weak. He came precisely to be crucified. Verse 4, surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering. Yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. And so he came to be crucified, but not for his crimes, of which there are none, but for ours. His accusers and his executioners didn't realize it. They were blind to what was going on. They stumbled over the scandal of the cross, and they couldn't conceive of the crucified Messiah, because they didn't realize that a crucified Messiah was actually the only kind of

Messiah that we could possibly have, because it was the only way in which God could deal with humanity's deepest problem, which is our sin. Verse 5, but he was pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was on 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. And the image of the sheep there captures the sin problem so well, because I think it's fairly easy to recognize that there are problems out there in the world, and recognize the evil outside of ourselves. You know, we can see evil and recognize it exists, in the military aggression of dictators like Putin, in the cruelty of domestic violence, in the prevalence of sexual abuse. But it's much more painful to recognize that we might be part of that problem.

It's a much bigger hurdle to get over, isn't it? To come to terms with the fact that the problem's not just out there, but it's actually in here for all of us, because we're all, and we know this, messed up inside. Not one of us can make that claim to absolute innocence, no matter how hard we try, or how hard we might want to convince ourselves. We are like sheep who have wandered away from our shepherd. We are creatures who have wandered away from and rejected our creator. We are all part of the problem in the world. We are, to use the Bible's terminology, sinners. This is the beating heart of Isaiah's message here. On the cross, Jesus acted as our substitute, a sacrifice instead of us. It wasn't his transgressions he died for, no, it was ours. It wasn't his iniquities and sins he was crucified for, it was ours. Because, here's the thing, sin makes us all guilty. There's an interesting movement that sprung up in the past few years, and it's this idea that humanity ought to die out. You see this in some of the ecological activism and in anti-natalist philosophies that go around. The reasoning, in short, is that these people see humanity as responsible for almost everything that is wrong on this planet. And here's the thing, on that observation, they're kind of right. Human history is a history of violence, and humanity is responsible. Without humanity, there would be no mass killings, no torture, no wars. Human history is a history of selfishness. And looking out for number one almost always comes at the expense of others. And human history is a history of mistakes. Even when we think we might be doing the right thing, so often we still get it wrong, and people get hurt.

Now, the cop-out, of course, is to say that, well, that's other people, but not me. That's the cheap excuse, I guess, from the implications of history, to say that all the problems of the world are due to a few bad apples, but not me. But it just doesn't hold up logically, does it? The only explanation, really, for why the world is the way it is, is that we are all part of the problem. But I don't think the solution is that humanity has to die out. Because it's not humanity themselves that are actually the problem. It's the sin that we all carry around with us. And so, therefore, if our sin can be dealt with, well, then there's hope for us and for the entire world.

[ 15 : 38 ] And that is the good news of the cross. Peter writes, riffing on this bit of Isaiah, he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed, for you like sheep were going astray, but now you have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls. In summary, we are the problem in the world. Each and every human being is responsible for the mess that we see all over the globe. We are selfish, we are cruel, and the root cause of this is our wandering away from God.

The root cause is our sin. So, our sin needs dealt with. Now, one way to deal with it is that those who are responsible should pay the price. And that is why there is a punishment which falls on the doorstep of those who are responsible, which is you, me, and indeed everyone. But this is where the wonderful substitution of the cross comes in, because Jesus takes that punishment on the cross. Paul, I think, very helpfully describes the transaction using legal terminology. God forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us.

He has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And this is the gospel. This is the good news.

The first part is it's hard to come to terms with, because it means recognizing that we are sinners, and, well, we do deserve God's judgment. But the second part is experiencing the wonder of grace. Jesus takes our place and endures the judgment instead of us. Now, he wasn't forced. He wasn't pressed, ganged into it. No, he did it out of love. God is just, but God is also full of mercy.

Isaiah tells us in verse 7 that he, the servant, was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. If we're like the sheep that wander away and refuse to listen to the shepherd, just pushing ahead on our own steam with no regard for God, well, then Jesus is quite the opposite. Jesus is like the sheep that goes willingly to be sheared. He's like the lamb that would have been sacrificed by the priests in the Old Testament. Indeed, he is the perfect sacrifice, the one that all the Old Testament sacrifices were standing in for. They were all a shadow of the real sacrifice, and that real sacrifice is Jesus on the cross. And he went silently, and no one protested or even understood what was going on. That's the point being made in verse 8.

[ 18 : 39 ] By oppression and judgment, he was taken away, yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living. For the transgression of my people, he was punished.

No one stood up for him. No one recognized until much, much later that he was dying on behalf of humanity, on behalf of those who trust in him. And Jesus, well, he went silently because he wanted to show mercy to a broken world of sinners. But by contrast, the silence of his generation was shameful.

No one defended the innocent son of man. And through silence, well, he entered the silence of death as a criminal. He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. It's interesting that Isaiah speaks of him being buried with the rich. It makes little sense, really, until you discover that Jesus was actually buried in a rich man's tomb. But buried still, as Isaiah points out, as a criminal, executed under Roman law, despite his perfect innocence. In fact, it was only because of his perfect innocence that he could be that lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

And all of this presents us with two questions. And it's likely that most of us have encountered these questions before, but they're questions that are helpful to keep coming back to time and time again, because they're questions that help us to see the very heart of the gospel. The first is this, can you accept that you are a sinner and that your sin somehow needs to be paid for?

The second is, and the second very much relies on your answer to the first, the second question is, can you accept that Jesus is the one who has paid for your sin by suffering, and dying in your place? In many ways, the Christian life begins and continues with addressing these questions. We never, ever outgrow our desperate need for Jesus, because we never, ever outgrow our need for grace, to cover our sins and to deal with them. Now, his sacrifice, it continues to bring us healing, help, and hope. And his death, his death offers us a brighter future, untainted by our sin, which has marred all our lives in different ways, and marred this world, and all who have walked on it.

[ 21 : 27 ] Now, if you can accept Jesus as your substitute on the cross, well, then you're invited into a banquet of benefits, because believing in Christ and having faith that he died on the cross for you leads to even more gifts of God's grace. The cross is shocking, and the cross is a place of sacrifice, but because it is these things, it is also a success.

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, and he did so. The cross is a moment of surprising victory, and indeed, it's a monument to his surprising victory. The song continues in verse 10.

Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer. And though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. By his knowledge, my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. At first glance, it might look like Isaiah is basically just repeating things here that he's already said, but I think there's a new dimension here in these verses, and that is the success of the cross. Because Jesus has become the sacrificial offering for sin, because he has done that, he will now see his offspring, and the Lord will prolong his days. What does that mean? Well, it means that because Jesus has, in the words of verse 11, justified many and borne their iniquities, they are now children of God. Christians are, in a sense, the offspring of the cross. I feel like the phrase born-again Christian, just like the cross, has lost much of its potency in contemporary discourse. Indeed, it's more often, I think, a label of ridicule.

But if we let that image become fresh in our minds again, well, it speaks to this idea that, in Jesus, we are a new person, a new creation, a fresh start, and a clean slate. We are no longer, as Paul describes it, children of wrath and deserving of God's judgment, though now we are children of God.

We are children of God who can cry to him, Abba Father. We are the children of the cross. And because the cross is the place where the victory is won over sin, that scourge of all our race, and because faith in Jesus unites us to him, we receive with Jesus the spoils of the cross.

[ 24 : 20 ] Therefore, says Isaiah in verse 12, I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors.

The sacrifice of Jesus reaps rewards and spoils, and Jesus divides those spoils with those who know him, with those whose sin he has paid for. Isaiah ends his final servant song like this, for he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors. So just in case you were in any doubt whatsoever as to what the focus and heart of what this song was, as I was finishing with this reminder that Jesus, the servant, came to bear the sins of many, and he came to make intercession on the cross for sinners like you and me. Indeed, we can say constantly with Paul that in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us, knowing that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. And so as we come to a close, there are three implications of all this that I'd like us to leave thinking about. Three implications for those of us who know that Jesus has died in their place. The first is this, your guilt, your shame, your sin, all of that is dealt with firmly and finally at the cross. The debt has been paid, the judgment has been made. You are free because Jesus stepped in on your behalf.

And so never doubt that. Never doubt it. The cross was a death that has brought you life. The second is this, you have been adopted by God. You are a child of your heavenly father because Jesus, the son of God, has brought you back into a family relationship with the one who made the universe.

You are a child of your heavenly father. You are a child of your heavenly father. You are a child of the cross. Jesus' blood has been poured out so that you can cry every day in joy or in sadness. Abba, Father. He loves to listen to you because you are his child and you will always be his child in Christ.

And the third is this, you have a share in Jesus' victory. You are truly more than a conqueror through Christ who loves you.

[ 27 : 10 ] You have a future and a hope, a future without the terrible stains of sin. And now Jesus can't promise you that all things will be plain sailing when you follow him.

But life in Christ is a life knowing that sin has been defeated and no longer has any claim on you whatsoever. Life in Christ is a life of confidence, even when we are at our most shaken and worn down.

Life in Christ is a life of confidence, even when we are at our most shaken.

every single day with confidence. Because on the cross, Jesus saved you from your sins.