

“Through What He Suffered”

Isaiah 53:4-12 • Psalm 91:9-16 • Hebrews 5:1-10 • Mark 10:35-45

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“Appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” That was the request James and John asked of Jesus. These are two of the twelve apostles making this request: James and John, the sons of Zebedee, former fisherman. Walking along the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw these brothers in their boat repairing their fishing nets. He called them to follow him, “and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.” That was a while ago; they’ve been hanging around Jesus for a considerable length of time by now. Both of them would be remembered *long* after their deaths. James became the first Christian martyr, executed by order of Herod Agrippa around the year 44. John, according to Christian tradition, outlived all the other apostles, and wrote one of the Gospels. To this day, these men are commemorated for their *outstanding* service to Jesus.

But in this story they’re not exactly demonstrating outstanding service. They’re demonstrating a lot of self-centeredness. They say to Jesus, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” “We want *you* to do *for us*.” At this point, they’re not interested in *servicing* Jesus. They want to be served *by* Jesus. “Give us what we want.” “Put us on the most important seats in heaven.” Their *egos* are getting in the way. They care more about what they’re going to get *out* of this than what they’re going to put *in*. We all know people like that, people who step forward not so much to *serve* but more to be *admired*, to be put up on a *pedestal*. That’s vanity; it’s narcissistic; these are not the right goals.

How does Jesus respond? “You do not know what you are asking,” he says. “To sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to appoint, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” To all the apostles, he says: “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.” Lovingly, he tells his disciples that following him isn’t about gaining glory for yourself; it’s about serving God. Lovingly, he tells *us* to stop asking, “what I am getting out of this?” and to start asking, “Jesus, what do you want me to do?” The example we are to follow is Jesus himself, who “came not to be served but to serve” and who “gave his life a ransom for many.”

How did Jesus “give his life as a ransom for many”? Today’s reading from Isaiah is helpful here; it is one of four very special songs that speak of a “servant” who has been “chosen” by God for a special purpose – and who ends up suffering terribly. These are known as the “servant songs,” and the servant as the “suffering servant.” Jews interpret the “servant” as either the Messiah who is yet to come, or as the nation of Israel itself; we Christians see these songs as prophecies about Jesus. “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases”: Jesus healed many people who were seriously ill. “Yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted”: Jesus was beaten, stripped, and crucified;

many people who witnessed those events figured God had abandoned him. “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”: Jesus’s sinless death on the cross atones for *our* sins, enabling us to stand righteous before God, despite all our sins. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way”: isn’t that the truth! “And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all”: Jesus is the sacrifice that ends all sacrifices; he is the ultimate scapegoat, “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” “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”: from the moment of his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane all the way to his death on the cross the next day, Jesus never once protests; he does not ask to be released; he goes silently to his slaughter. “By a perversion of justice he was taken away”: he had been found guilty of blasphemy, yet he spoke the truth of God. “Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people”: Jesus was executed when he was only about 33 years old. That’s a lot younger than most of the people in this room. “They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich”: Jesus was crucified between two convicted criminals, and he was buried by a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, in Joseph’s own tomb. “Although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth”: Jesus carried no sword; he never shed anyone’s blood; no falsehood ever came out of his mouth. “Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with affliction”: Jesus repeatedly said that it was *necessary* that he be arrested and killed. There was a divine *plan* at work to bring about our redemption and salvation. “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”: Jesus never had children, but we *all* become children of God through Jesus. “Out of his anguish he shall see; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge”: dying on the cross, Jesus looked up to heaven and said, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” Jesus had accomplished his mission. “The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities”: the righteousness of Christ lifts away our sins and makes us righteous in the eyes of God. “Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong”: Christ rose from the grave and ascended into heaven, paving the way for the rest of us to join him. “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”: Jesus was faithful unto death, and that faithfulness brings us *life*. And there you have it. *Every single verse of this song* points to Jesus.

The passage from Hebrews is equally rich. The author of this letter uses the concept of the Jewish high priest to illustrate who Jesus is. Here’s the simple version. You remember the story of the Exodus, when God sent Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery to freedom. Moses had a brother named Aaron. Aaron was the first high priest of the Jewish people. He wore special clothing, made from colorful yarn and fine linen; there was a checkered tunic, a blue robe, a breastpiece, an ephod, a turban, and a sash; and in his breastplate were twelve precious gems: carnelian, chrysolite, emerald, turquoise, sapphire, moonstone, jacinth, agate, amethyst, beryl, onyx, and jasper, all set in gold filigree. Tiny golden bells hung from the bottom of his robe, so that every footstep would cause the bells to jingle. This was an *incredibly* ornate outfit, for a *very* important person. There was only one high priest at any given time, and the role was hereditary, passed down from father to son, with a few exceptions here and there. During the time of Jesus the most important high priests were Annas, from 6 to 15 AD, and his son-in-law Caiaphas, from 18 to 36 AD. Caiaphas was the high priest during the ministry of Jesus; the Gospels indicate that he was one of the leaders of the Jews who plotted to have Jesus killed.

What did the high priest do? The high priest supervised all the other priests who carried out the ritual sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem. The high priest alone carried the Urim and Thummin, a pair of stones used for divination; he alone offered a special offering twice a day to atone for the sins of all the priests, including himself; he alone went into the Holy of Holies, the most sacred chamber in the temple, on the Day of Atonement, every year, to atone for the sins of *all* the people, including himself.

Why does the author of Hebrews talk about the Jewish high priest? He says: “Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness, and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honor but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.” That’s the *ordinary* high priest. But Jesus was an *extraordinary* high priest. He didn’t belong to the priestly tribe, though, so how could he be a high priest? Because, the author argues, there was *another* order of priests, *older* and *greater* than the Jewish high priests. Way back in the book of Genesis – centuries before Moses and the Exodus, long before the Israelites existed as a people – there was a king named Melchizedek, “the priest of God Most High.” He offers bread and wine – the same food that Jesus offered at the Last Supper – and he blesses Abraham, the biological ancestor of the Jews, and the *spiritual* ancestor of us Christians. Abraham, in return, gives Melchizedek one-tenth of his wealth, thus creating the practice of tithing, giving God 10% of our income. (Bear in mind Abraham’s wonderful example of tithing when you turn in your pledge card!) Why is Melchizedek important? The author of Hebrews quotes from Psalm 110: “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.’” Christians understood that verse – indeed, that whole *psalm* – to be speaking about Jesus. Jesus was a high priest in the order of Melchizedek, which was *older* than the high priesthood of the Jews, reaches a much *broader array of people* than the high priesthood of the Jews, and *endures forever*, unlike that of the Jews, which came to an abrupt end in the year 70 when the Romans destroyed the temple. So Jesus is a high priest of a *dramatically different order* than the high priests of the Jews. The high priest of the Jews could only atone for the sins of the *Jews*. Jesus can atone for the sins of *everyone*. “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.” And there you have it. Jesus is the one – the *only* one – who is able to bring *all* people forgiveness and redemption through his sacrificial death on the cross. Jesus, the suffering servant, is the great high priest of us *all*.

How does this help James and John, who were so caught up in their desire for glory that they lost sight of their purpose? How does this help *any* of us? James and John were falling prey to their own sinfulness, the sin of *pride*. Every one of us struggles with our *own* sinfulness, of one sort or another. Jesus not only helped James and John *see* their sinfulness; he also died to *atone* for their sinfulness. The same is true for us. Jesus not only helps us *see* our sinfulness; he also died to *atone* for our sinfulness. Jesus, the great high priest, wiped away *their* sins, enabling them to become *stellar* followers later on, *outstanding* examples of Christian faithfulness. Jesus, the great high priest, wipes away *your* sins too, enabling *you* to become a *stellar* follower of Jesus, an *outstanding* example of Christian faithfulness. That’s what you are able to become, thanks to the great high priesthood of Jesus Christ, who takes all your sin, and burns it all away on his sacrificial alter. It goes up in smoke, and *you* are *free*.

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