

THE MESSIAH WILL SURPRISE YOU**ISAIAH 52:13-15**

Irony is one kind of surprise. The dictionary defines irony as “a set of circumstances or a result that is opposite of what might be expected.” Here’s an example of irony. Beverly Hills, California is one of the wealthiest communities in the U.S. in terms of per capita income. It’s known for multi-million dollar homes, movie stars, and pricey shops along Rodeo Drive. Here’s what’s ironical. Here’s the surprise. Some years ago, oil was discovered underneath property belonging to Beverly Hills High School. An old field with estimated reserves of 25-30 million barrels is right under the high school! For leasing a vacant plot of school property under one acre, an oil company paid the Beverly Hills Unified School District about \$100,000 a month or \$1.2 million a year in oil royalties. The city of Beverly Hills got paid the same amount. Apparently, this oil well has been plugged up recently for various reasons. But off all the places in the world that could benefit from a cash flow windfall that an oil well provides, Beverly Hills might be the least deserving of all. How ironical, yes?

Over the next five Sundays I want to explore with you a passage in the Bible that’s full of surprises, full of irony. Who could have guessed that a Jewish prophet named Isaiah who lived some 700 years before Jesus would so accurately describe His suffering on the cross? Who could imagine that an OT document written to fellow Jews would so clearly present the central message of the NT. I’m referring to Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12. Because it so forcefully, compellingly, and precisely evokes the experience of Jesus on the cross, some Jewish people dismiss it as inauthentic. Now, people of the Jewish faith accept and believe the Old Testament, but they reject the New Testament. They don’t believe Jesus is God’s way of salvation. One orthodox Jewish rabbi said this about these verses in Isaiah, “If I accept the Old Testament as I should, I must confess that you (meaning Christians) are right. It does portray many facets of the life of Jesus Christ. But since I do not believe in Jesus, I do not accept this portion of Isaiah.”

Let’s read all of this remarkable passage this morning, but then drill down on the last three verses of Isaiah 52. I suggest that’s a portrait of Jesus before He even came into this world. Not a literal portrait, to be sure, but a Holy Spirit-inspired description of what happened to Jesus on the cross and its significance. Now, the word “Messiah” is a biblical title for Jesus. The Hebrew form of it means “the anointed one.” It’s very close in meaning to a more familiar word based on the Greek language – “Christ.” Jesus Christ is the same as Jesus Messiah. In the centuries before Jesus, the Jewish people looked for their Messiah to come to them and deliver them from their enemies. Christians believe Jesus was and is the Jewish Messiah. He’s the fulfillment of all the Old Testament predictions and prophecies. The very first Christians were ethnically Jews. There are ethnically Jewish Christians today all over the world who recognize Jesus as their Messiah and worship Him accordingly. But the majority of Jewish people have rejected Jesus as their Messiah over the past 2,000 years of human history. In fact, some conservative or orthodox Jews would tell you they’re still waiting for their Messiah to appear. They don’t believe Jesus fulfilled the expectations of what the

Messiah is supposed to be and to do. Irony is “a set of circumstances or a result that is the opposite of what might be expected.” Jesus is too surprising and His claims are too ironical for some people to accept as legitimate. Those last three verses in Isaiah 52 point to at least three surprises found in Jesus the Messiah.

THE SURPRISE OF THE SERVANT

Isaiah never used the word “Messiah” in these verses. But he describes the Messiah as a servant there in v. 13. Assuming the voice of God, Isaiah wrote, “See, my servant will prosper; he will be highly exalted.” (NLT) Hearing Jesus described as a servant may not be a big surprise to us. Now, that may be just the problem! We can be so familiar with a great truth that it no longer surprises us. We can easily miss the amazing irony that God has become the servant of human beings. How so? The Son of God gave up all the perks and privileges of Heaven in order to enter this world as a human being. Do you remember how resistant Peter became when Jesus wanted to wash his feet? It was something only a servant performed for his or her superior. Peter was beginning to understand just who Jesus was and is. That this amazing man would stoop to wash his dirty feet was just mind boggling to Peter. “Oh, no, Lord, you must never wash my feet!” The fact Jesus wanted to be a servant left Peter dumbfounded. Do you think we’re a little too comfortable with it? “Yeah, OK, Jesus is a servant. Big deal.” It doesn’t surprise us. Or take our breath away. We miss the irony of it.

Let’s see if we can recapture it. The Son of God – the King of kings and the Lord of lords – who has never known a beginning and will never know an end, absolute in His holiness, limitless in His power, willingly took upon Himself all the limitations of a poor Jewish carpenter – one, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus even defined Himself as a servant. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mk. 10:45 NLT) The ultimate proof of His desire to be a servant was Jesus’ willingness to die on the cross. The cross wasn’t a tragic accident. It was tragic, yes, but it was no accident. It was infinitely more than a really bad thing happening to a really good person. The cross was Jesus’ destiny. It’s why He came. By the cross and through the cross, Jesus revealed Himself as the ultimate servant. Jesus served His Father because the cross was the only way God could ever restore a broken relationship with you and me. Jesus also served you and me because only the cross could ever provide us with the opportunity to know God as our Father. Jesus is the servant – the good shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep voluntarily.

If you’re a follower of Jesus today, did you know you’re called to be a servant, too? Talk about a surprising irony! You’d think if a person identifies with Jesus and wants to be like Him, being a servant would seem obvious. Instead, we can sometimes give the impression we think God exists to serve us, to make sure we get and stay happy, to make us healthy and prosperous at all times, and to shoo away any problems. Now, the Bible makes it only too clear that you and I are here to serve God. What does that look like? It means to serve people. Being Jesus’ servant means the loving choice to

make life better for others around us in the name of Jesus and for His sake. Husbands serve their wives. Wives serve their husbands. Parents serve their kids. Kids serve Mom and Dad. The street you live on, the place you work, the school you attend are all places where you can serve Jesus by serving people. Here's a question for us all to think about: whose life am I making better in the name of Jesus and for His sake?

The local church is another great place where you can serve Jesus. Some years ago, it became popular to talk about doing so much at church you got "burnt out." Is that really possible? Sure. It happens when you serve in an area God hasn't gifted you to serve in or you just don't manage your time well. But there's a far greater threat than getting "burning out." It's "rusting out." "Rusting out" is the result of being overly protective of your time, your talents, your money, and your energy. You end up doing precious little for Jesus or His Kingdom. Most Christians don't "burn out" from doing too much. Instead, they "rust out" from doing too little for the Kingdom of God. I now we've been very limited during this pandemic, but things are beginning to open up, praise the Lord!

Steadfastly reject the excuse that it's somebody else's job to be a servant. Let someone else tithe... work with our kids on Sunday... usher... be a part of our AV and livestream teams... pray faithfully... develop a relationship with a non-believer and seek to share the message Jesus with him or her... or serve the poor in our community in some way. Christians run the risk of rusting out long before they burn out. If you're a follower of Jesus, you, too, must become and be a servant because He was and is one.

During World War 2, a group of coal miners approached Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister. They wanted to leave their coal mines and join the army. They didn't feel like they were contributing to the war effort just by digging coal out of the ground. The following day, Churchill addressed 4,000 coal miners. Here's part of what he said to them that day. "Gentlemen, they say Hitler is coming. They say he has 100,000 on the sea, 100,000 on the land, and 100,000 in the air. But I say to you that one day we are going to be victorious...." And then he began describing how when that day of victory came he would ask different kinds of people to describe what they had contributed to the war effort: a soldier, a wife and mother, and yes, even a coal miner. "And I will ask some of you where you were in Britain's finest hour and you will say, 'I was down in the pit of the mine with my face against the face of the coal, fulfilling my responsibility, doing my part for my country.'" Everyone's service mattered.

God has given you different gifts than me or the next person, but He has called each and every one of us to serve Him in this place and beyond this place. Whatever God has called you to do for Him, it's significant. There will come a day when Jesus will ask "Where were you in the Kingdom of God's finest hour?" I hope you will be able to say, "I was doing thus and so, Lord Jesus, and fulfilling my responsibility to You and for Your Kingdom." I love an observation credited made by Mother Teresa, "God doesn't expect big things. What He expects from us is small things done with great love – ordinary things done with extraordinary love." Let me mention a second surprise.

THE SURPRISE OF THE CROSS.

Does the cross make you uncomfortable? It should, because it's really a terrifying and utterly surprising thing. Isaiah predicted here that those who actually witnessed what happened on the cross were appalled by what they saw. It's human nature to believe that a person gets what he or she deserves. Death by crucifixion was utter humiliation; therefore, it might have been easy to conclude Jesus was some great criminal. Those who watched Jesus die on the cross were paralyzed by the sheer degradation of what they witnessed. Isaiah said, "But many were amazed when they saw him. His face was so disfigured he seemed hardly human, and from his appearance, one would scarcely know he was a man." (Is. 52:14 NLT) The cross turned Jesus into a physical wreck. Bones out of joint. Tongue dry and stuck to His inner jaw. Wrists and ankles spiked. Back cut to ribbons by the whip. A crown of thorns pressed into His scalp. Blood everywhere. Spit upon. Insulted. Taunted. Cursed. There was nothing to admire that day. It was a nightmare. The worst horror movie ever. Except for a very few, no one wanted to be identified with Jesus or that scene on that day.

The cross still offends people today. Some years ago now, I read about a priest at a Catholic church who on Good Friday put out several crosses draped all in black on the front lawn of his church in North Myrtle Beach. Father Ed got a call from the Chamber of Commerce. The person said, "Look, we've been getting complaints about those crosses in your churchyard. Now inside the church, who cares? But out front, where everybody can see them, they're offensive. The retired people don't like them. They find them depressing. The tourists don't like them either. It'll be bad for business. People come down here to get happy, not depressed." The cross can discourage, anger, and depress some people. They have no use for Jesus and so the cross offends them. But other people find the cross to be wonderful and beautiful. They love Jesus and so the cross itself blesses and enriches them every time they see it. Right there is the irony of the cross. The surprise of the cross.

But the surprise of the cross doesn't end there. The irony of it just gets greater. How could anything as humiliating as death by a cross become the means of supreme exaltation for anyone? But that's what happened to Jesus. "(He) then died a selfless, obedient death – and the worst kind of death at that – a crucifixion. Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created things in heaven and on earth – even those long ago dead and buried – will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father." (Ph. 2:8-11 MSG)

Did you know Jesus said His followers are given a cross, too? "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me." (Mt. 16:24 NLT) What does that mean? It's yet another example of the sheer surprise – the irony – surrounding the cross. Jesus wasn't referring to a literal, physical cross. Instead, He meant that when you follow Him in life, it will demand self-denial.

When you first commit your life to Jesus, it means rejecting the idea you can save yourself through your own morality or sincerity. When you refuse to trust in yourself and transfer that trust to Jesus, you take up your cross. But it doesn't stop there. It means allowing Jesus to have access to every area of your life that needs to be changed – every attitude and behavior that dishonor God or hurts you. That means self-denial. It's a lifelong process. Parts of it will be painful – like dying on a cross. But it doesn't stop there either. It might mean learning to want God's will for your life even more than wanting to do life your way. Here's the irony – the surprise. In God's hands, your self-denial is the pathway to real and lasting joy both in this life and the next one. In the end, godly self-denial is saying "No" to anything in your life that will ultimately harm you and saying "Yes" to everything that brings eternal joy. And, here's yet another surprising irony. If you allow the cross to do its work in your life, it will do for you what it did for Jesus. What's that? Exaltation. Somehow the experience of Heaven will be richer and more rewarding for you because you carried your cross. A third surprise....

THE SURPRISE OF THE GOSPEL.

That word "gospel" simply means "the good news about Jesus." Look with me at what Isaiah said in v. 15 (NIV), "So he will sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand." That word "sprinkle" referred to the practice of sprinkling the blood of a lamb sacrificed to pay for the sins of God's people. By killing an innocent animal as payment for their sin, God was teaching His people that one day He would provide the real and adequate payment for our sins: the life of His own Son. Isaiah implied there that the Messiah's blood wasn't shed to pay for His own sins, but instead to over or atone for the sins of many people all over the world.

I'm surprised by something else in that verse. 700 years before Jesus, Isaiah knew the Messiah's salvation would be offered to everyone. Many of the OT people of God – the Jews – had concluded God only loved and cared about them. Most of the first Christians were ethnically Jewish. It took them awhile to understand what Jesus did at the cross and empty tomb was available to everyone on the planet. God was creating a whole new chosen people made up of folk from every tribe, nation, culture, and ethnic group under the sun. It's called the Church – the Bride and the Body of Christ. It's made up of everyone past, present, and future who has put their trust in Jesus to restore their relationship with God. No one could have thought this up on his or her own! I believe that's what Isaiah was alluding to when he said, "For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand." (Is. 53:15 NLT)

The surprise of this gospel should make you eternally grateful. Salvation has been offered to the likes of you and me! We're included! Also, the surprise of the gospel should encourage you to reach out and share this message of God's love with others personally. Jesus didn't die and rise again just for you or members of your family. Jesus also died and rose again for people who curse and reject Him this morning.

Jesus died and rose again for the child born in an inner city dump already addicted to drugs – and He for that baby’s mother, too. Jesus died and rose again for the homeless people asking for a handout at some of the intersections near this church. Jesus died and rose again for the people our society wants to forget, or ignore, or push to the margins: the elderly, the disabled, the immigrant, the poor, and the unborn. Everyone has as much right to hear, understand, and receive this surprisingly good news as you and I do. And here’s the most surprising information of all! God entrusts you and me – messed up, broken, imperfect people – with the best news in all the universe. What are we doing with it? Are we keeping it to ourselves? Or sharing it with others?

Most of you have heard of the late Chuck Colson – the Watergate “villain” who was converted to faith in Jesus and then went on to become a godly leader. He also started Prison Fellowship, a ministry to prisoners. He told a story about doing ministry with several other volunteers among inmates on death row at a state prison in Indiana. Colson’s schedule was very tight that day. He had a meeting set up with the governor of Indiana, so he really needed to leave on time. One of the volunteers in his group had stayed back and was talking with a prisoner on death row named James Brewer. Colson went to get this volunteer because the warden had to usher out all the volunteers together. “I’m sorry, we have to leave,” Colson said, looking nervously at his watch. The volunteer, a short white man in his early 50s, was standing shoulder to shoulder with James Brewer. Brewer was holding an open Bible while the older man – the volunteer – read a verse. “Oh, yes. Give us just a minute, please,” said the volunteer. He added softly, “This is important.” Colson became impatient, “No, I’m sorry. I can’t keep the governor waiting. We must go.” “I understand,” said the volunteer, “but this is important because I’m Judge Clement. I’m the man who sentenced James to die. But now he’s my brother in Christ and we want a minute to pray together.”

Chuck Colson said he stood frozen in that cell doorway. It no longer mattered who he kept waiting – not even the governor of Indiana. Before him were two men: one powerless, the other powerful; one black, the other one white; and one had sentenced the other one to death. Anywhere except in the Kingdom of God that inmate might have killed that judge with his bare hands – or wanted to. But now they were one in Jesus Christ. Their faces reflected an indescribable expression of love as they prayed together. On the way out of that prison, Judge Clement told Colson he’d been praying for James Brewer every day since he had sentenced him four years earlier.

A portrait of Jesus before He came. A surprising portrait. The Gospel – the good news about who Jesus is and what He has done – is surprising. Aren’t you glad that it is?