



Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Have you ever heard a sermon where the preacher described in agonizing and perhaps gory detail the horrors that Jesus endured during the last day of his life? If you have ever seen *The Passion of the Christ* then you know how bloody these scenes must have been. But have you ever asked yourself if these descriptions and depictions are accurate? Where do they get their information?

They get some details from historical accounts of actual Roman crucifixions. It is well documented that the Romans used a scourge or cat-o-nine tails which was a leather whip with



multiple strips and every leather cord ended with barbed metal spikes such as these found in an ancient trash heap. A plain leather whip tears through human skin but an implement of torture such as the scourge

would also rip muscle and tendon to shreds.

We get some information about Christ's suffering and death from modern medicine. In 1986 the Journal of the American Medical Association, the prestigious medical journal, [published an article](#) which detailed the probable causes of Jesus' death using modern medical knowledge. Here is an illustration of the scourging from that article.

Here is the concluding paragraph from the article.

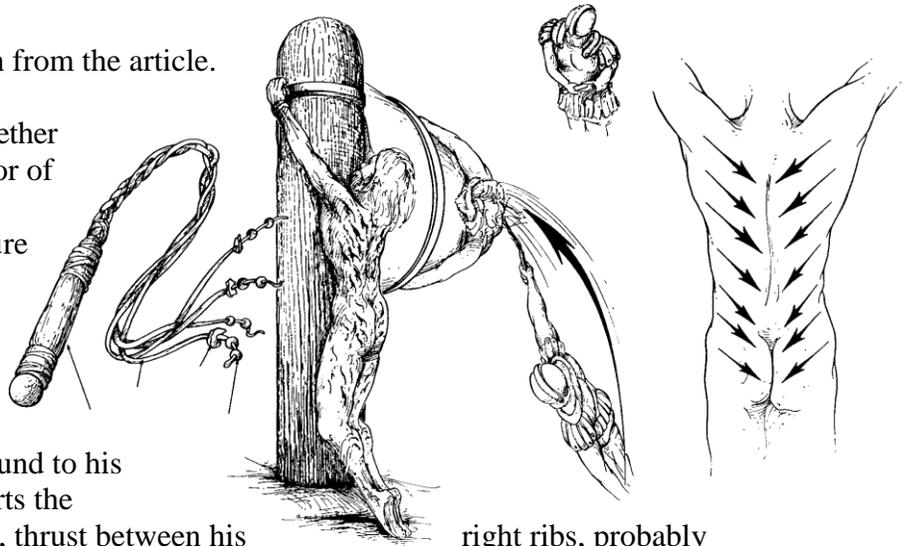
Thus, it remains unsettled whether Jesus died of cardiac rupture or of cardiorespiratory failure.

However, the important feature may be not *how* he died but rather *whether* he died.

Clearly, the weight of historical and medical evidence indicates that

Jesus was dead before the wound to his side was inflicted and supports the

traditional view that the spear, thrust between his right ribs, probably perforated not only the right lung but also the pericardium and heart and thereby ensured his death. Accordingly, interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge.¹



That last sentence is very important since opponents of Christ's atonement and resurrection always claim that Jesus didn't actually rise from the dead because he didn't really die. They falsely claim that Jesus was merely reconstituted but not resurrected.

We get information from some of the descriptions of the gospel writers but they don't give very specific details. They mention the flogging, crown of thorns and crucifixion but leave the rest to our imaginations. These are all helpful sources of information and they are certainly relevant for the most part but if you really want to know what happened to Jesus you do not need to look any further than Isaiah 52:12.

As many were astonished at you—his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—

That is all the information you really need to understand what happened to Jesus. These other sources of information such as the history of crucifixions, etc. are helpful, but there is sufficient information in the Scriptures to understand the level of physical suffering that Jesus endured. Unless you are a police officer, a paramedic or a trauma physician or nurse, most of us will probably never see anyone with the kind of injuries that Jesus sustained. He was marred beyond human semblance. He was beaten so badly—he was so bloody, swollen and disfigured that he no longer looked like a man. Verse 12 says “many were astonished at you.” That's a descriptive word—astonished. His body was so disfigured that when you saw him, you would have reacted as if you just witnessed a horrible tragedy—you know the kind of thing where you audibly gasp, put your hand over your mouth and turn your head away in disgust.

You don't have to see *The Passion of the Christ* or read about Jesus' injuries in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* to understand what happened to him. If these other sources help you to grasp the full weight of the torture, then by all means do so, but we really have all we need right here.

The end of Isaiah chapter 52 and all of chapter 53 is known as *The Suffering Servant* text and prophecies the death, resurrection and exultation of Jesus Christ. I have chosen this text for this Resurrection Day service.

Chapter 53 begins with the life and ministry of Jesus.

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.
- ⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.

Before we jump into this text let me say something about Biblical interpretation. One of the most important principles to help you understand the Bible is to compare one part of Scripture with all of the other parts. This will prevent you from pulling a verse or a section out of context and making it say something that it was never intended to say. If I was careful and subtle, I could make the Bible say just about anything I wanted it to say. Of course this is the technique that all of the cults use. Moreover, this is why you all need to be good Bereans and check what I teach you against the rest of Scripture. Jesus, Paul and Peter all quoted from this chapter.

And by far the best way to compare Scripture with other Scripture is when the New Testament authors directly quote the Old Testament and this happens with about half of the verses in this Suffering Servant passage. Therefore, as we work our way through the passage, I will take the time to compare it with its New Testament counterpart.

This happens with verse one of chapter fifteen. Who has believed what he has heard from us? This verse is directly quoted by Jesus in John 12:38 and by Paul in Romans 10. This famous passage in Isaiah 53 appears in famous passage in Romans.

¹⁴ *How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?*

¹⁵ *And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"* ¹⁶ *But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?"* ¹⁷ *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*

This is Paul's famous quote—*How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!* This quote has been used since the beginning of the church to ordain pastors and missionaries and send them out into the harvest field. This verse is always used to ignite one's passion to share the gospel. However, we tend to skip over the quotation from Isaiah 53—Who has believed what he has heard from us? Paul quoted this verse from Isaiah to show that not everyone would believe and Jesus quoted this same verse with the exact same meaning. Yes, faith does come by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ, but countless will not heed the message of faith, resurrection and forgiveness. Isaiah 53:3 says that Jesus was despised and rejected by men so if they rejected the Messiah how much more will they reject the message brought through you and me.

However, we are not finished with this first verse. Careful Bible study not only requires comparing Scripture with other Scripture but also understanding the immediate context and that is one by seeing what came before, namely 52:15.

so shall he sprinkle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.

This verse speaks of spreading a knowledge of the Lord with a purpose to—*that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.* Isaiah wants a knowledge of the Lord to be shared with those who don't see and don't understand. This gets even more interesting when you consider Paul also quoted his verse in Romans chapter 15.

and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation,²¹ but as it is written,

*“Those who have never been told of him will see,
and those who have never heard will understand.”* (Romans 15:20-21)

Paul used this verse to explain why he was compelled to preach the gospel in places where Christ has never been preached.

Now let's take a step back and look at 52:15 and 53:1. Paul used 53:1 to testify to the fact that not everyone would accept the gospel message but Paul used the prior verse from Isaiah to explain why he was so driven to preach the gospel to those who have never heard. This is not exactly a contradiction but it is something of a paradox because I want to ask Paul, “Should the gospel be preached everywhere even though most people will not accept it?” I am convinced that Paul would give a resounding YES to this question. Jews rejected Paul's message so he went to the Gentiles and then the vast majority of Gentiles also rejected his message. But he never stopped. He preached until his dying breath.

So here we have this beautiful and powerful prophecy of Jesus' death and resurrection and so far we have established two things—that Jesus was mutilated beyond recognition and that we are to proclaim the gospel whether or not people believe our message. How are these two big ideas linked together? The simple answer is that they don't hang together—at least not yet. We do not yet have the complete gospel, do we? Otherwise all we have is this—Jesus was disfigured for you and now go and tell others? That's not much of a message, is it. I guess we could alter one of our Christmas songs.

Go tell it on the mountain

Over the hills and everywhere
Go tell it on the mountain
That Jesus was disfigured for you.

Please understand that I am in no way mocking Jesus' sacrificial death but merely pointing out that some Christians think that this really is the core of the gospel. For example, in the Philippines, on Good Friday they practice a ritual of self-flagellation where they literally beat themselves on the back with a wooden scourge. Some of the most devoted will also allow themselves to be literally nailed through the hands onto a cross. They have not only reduced the message of the cross to a bloody religious display but they have also turned the thing inside out by believing that they have to imitate much of Jesus' sufferings to receive forgiveness. This is a grossly distorted message of Christian belief that turns the amazing grace of God into an exhibition of good works.



I know that no one in this church would ever fall into this kind twisted Christianity but neither do I think all of us have a sufficient grasp of the cross. There is something that comes between Jesus' disfigurement and the global proclamation of the gospel. We need to fill in this missing gap, to which we return to Isaiah 53.

Verse two begins to speak of Jesus life and ministry.

*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.*

A root out of dry ground is a poetic way to express his humble beginnings. Jesus was not born in a palace but a stable.

The second phrase helps us understand that Jesus' ministry was not driven by his charm and good looks. As a man, Jesus was not a head-turner. There was nothing about his physical stature and appearance that drew people toward him. Men did not wish they looked like him and women did not fawn over him. At best, he was probably what we might call of average looks.

The Bible occasionally speaks of the physical appearance of Old Testament characters. In genesis we are told that Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. In other words, he had rock hard abs and a square-faced jaw. Potiphar's wife could not keep her eyes off of him. Likewise, King David was "ruddy and handsome." Among the women we learn that "Rachel was lovely in form, and beautiful" (Gen. 29:17)). Bathsheba was "very beautiful" and Sarah was so drop dead gorgeous that everywhere Abraham traveled he lied and said, "Don't kill me—she's only my sister."

As a society we obsess over physical beauty and this obsession rules from pornography to the pew. Yes, even people in church get caught up in this obsession. Do you know what the hottest ticket on this precious resurrection day is? The really big event of the day is taking place at Celebration Church in Galveston, Texas where Tim Tebow is the special guest.



Here is what their pastor said about the big event where they are expecting 30,000 people to show up.

Obviously it's our Super Bowl," said Joe Champion, pastor at the Celebration Church. "Easter is the resurrection of Christ, which we celebrate in our faith. We feel like it's going to be a testimony to the community. We want it to be a family event.

This is nothing against Tim Tebow because I happen to be very impressed with his humility and consistent Christian testimony. We should pray his testimony get even stronger and that he does not get caught up in his celebrity status, but I can guarantee you this—If Tim Tebow had a face like a frying pan, he would not be getting all of this attention.

Tebow and the good looking men and women in the Bible were attractive to so many, in part, due to their physical beauty. Jesus could have come down as the most studly, good-looking guy you could ever imagine but instead he took on human flesh that was not physically attractive. And the cool thing is that he still looks like this. The Bible plainly tells us that he is not handsome but when we see him face to face, he will always and forever be the most beautiful person we have ever seen. He will appear beautiful in our sight but in such a way as to redefine the very word *beautiful*. Just as those who looked on his disfigured body on the cross were astonished by his beaten form, so will we be even more astonished by the beauty of his glory and majesty. Seeing him will literally be a breathtaking event. As Isaiah 52:13 reads, *Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.*

Jesus is breathtaking because he was pierced for our transgressions. Jesus is beautiful because he was crushed for our iniquities. Jesus is astonishing because he rose from the dead and defeated the grave. Christ is risen!

Rich Maurer
April 8, 2012

¹ On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ, William D. Edwards, MD; Wesley J. Gabel, MDiv; Floyd E. Hosmer, MS, AMI, (JAMA 1986; 255:1455-1463).