

Why Would Anyone Believe in Jesus?

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

ISAIAH 53:1

Isaiah 53 is arguably the greatest chapter in the Bible. Charles Spurgeon (1834–92) called it "the Bible in miniature, the Gospel at its essence". It is the leading messianic text of the Old Testament and is referred to by the early church more than any other passage. It points to the person and mission of Jesus – his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession – more than any other Old Testament passage. It also lays the theological foundation for the Gospel like no other. It points both to the crucifixion and the atonement of Christ in a manner that sounds as though Isaiah 53 were written as history rather than prophecy. Indeed, it is as if Isaiah was an eye witness to what was going on between Good Friday and Easter – and even to Christ's intercession!

And yet Isaiah 53 is prophecy - proclaiming with infallible accuracy seven hundred years in advance what Jesus would be like and what he would do. One of the greatest proofs of the divine inspiration of the Bible is prophecy. How could anybody know the future? Nobody knows the future. The devil does not know the future. Angels do not know the future. You and I do not know the future. But God knows the future – perfectly. And when, by the Holy Spirit, he gives information about the future to his chosen servants and it is written down, you can count on the reliability of that word. "Above all, you must understand," said Peter, "that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21). Indeed, said Paul, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

An angel of the Lord said to Philip: "Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza" (Acts 8:26). Philip had no idea why he would be given directions like that, but he went. He came to a chariot where a man happened to be reading from Isaiah 53. The Holy Spirit told Philip to go to the chariot, and Philip asked the man in the chariot (an Ethiopian eunuch) if he understood what he was reading. The man replied: "How can I unless someone explains it to me?" Philip accepted an invitation to sit in the chariot to explain these words:

He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.

(ACTS 8:32-33; CF. ISAIAH 53:7-8)

Then Philip, beginning with that very passage of Scripture, told the Ethiopian "the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). I love the King James translation: Philip "preached unto him *Jesus*". That verse represents the tip of the iceberg of how the early church felt about Isaiah 53. It was *all about Jesus*.

Most modern Jewish writers (sadly) refuse to see the Messiah in this passage, although their predecessors for some reason weren't so biased. Many ancient rabbis understood Isaiah as referring to the promised Messiah. For example, the first-century rabbi Jonathan ben Uziel paraphrased his Targum (the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) to read: "My servant, the Messiah, will be great, who was bruised for our sins" (verse 5). That is the way the early church interpreted this passage. And yet the truth is that all attempts to explain Isaiah 53 as anything other than reference to the Messiah are palpable failures.

The name Jesus does not appear in Isaiah 53, but its

recurring themes - vicarious suffering, total obedience, utter willingness to suffer, the guilt of the people of God, the Lord laying on him our iniquity, being cut off from the land of the living, being numbered with the transgressors, the divine approval - all point to Jesus of Nazareth and what he did by dying on the cross. Prophecy rarely refers to a person's actual name in advance (as in 1 Kings 13:2 and Isaiah 45:1) but normally portrays the person or situation in a way that, once they have come to pass, leaves no doubt to the believer. This is a key: it is for the believer. Faith is a prerequisite in grasping prophecy in advance as well as seeing it clearly in its fulfillment. God never instructs his prophets to forecast the future in a way that removes the need for faith. Neither is the fulfillment of prophecy so definite that faith is no longer required. The exception to the latter would be the Second Coming of Jesus: "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen" (Revelation 1:7). There will be no doubting then! But all fulfilled prophecies in advance of the Last Day will require faith which is partly why the Jews missed their Messiah. They needed a "sign" and no sign was given; only the prophet's word (Matthew 12:39; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:22).

When I was the minister of Westminster Chapel in London we started a street ministry on Saturdays – called Pilot Lights – giving out Gospel tracts and talking about Jesus to passers-by in the streets of Victoria and Westminster. I did this in Buckingham Gate for the last twenty years of my ministry there. It so happened that, on the Saturday before I began my original sermons on Isaiah 53, we witnessed the most memorable conversion from our Pilot Light ministry. Charlie Stride, a London taxi driver, had been given my tract "What is Christianity?" by a member of the scheme the week before. He read it the same day and was "shaken rigid", he said. Charlie drove to the Chapel the following Saturday to find answers to the questions he had about the pamphlet. He said he had read it again several times over the previous week. He asked me: "Are you the one who wrote this tract?" "Yes." "I've never been so shaken in my whole life," he said to me. He invited me to sit with him in the back seat of his taxi (which I was very pleased to do on that cold January day). "I've had a thousand people in the last thirty years giving me tracts like this. I don't know why I didn't tear this one up as I did the others. But it made me see I am afraid to die. I never thought I would believe in Hell until now." It was a classic case of the convicting power of the Holy Spirit.

Two questions were on Charlie's mind. His first question was about Jews: "Will Jews go to Hell if they don't receive Jesus?" He asked this because many of his fellow taxi drivers were Jews. I replied: "I'm afraid that is true." The other question was: "According to this tract, if I don't do what it says for me to do then I am going to Hell – is that right?" I replied: "I'm afraid it is." Instead of being offended (as people often are regarding such matters), he was in tears. Like a ripe fruit waiting to be plucked, he was yearning to know what to do next. I presented the same Gospel to him as will be unfolded in this book. He received it with his whole heart. It was a thrilling day for him of course, but I have to say it was also one of the sweetest moments of my twenty-five years in London. I later baptized Charlie; he became a member of the Chapel and was one of the most beloved people ever to pass our way. On the night of my farewell to the Chapel in 2002 he gave his testimony. Since our retirement he has gone to Heaven.

Isaiah's opening word in this chapter raises the question: why believe in Jesus? "Who has believed our message?" You may want to ask: "Why would a *Jew* believe in Jesus?" But I ask: "Why would *anyone* believe in Jesus?" Indeed, why should they? There are actually two questions that open Isaiah 53: 1) "Who has believed our message?"; and 2) "To whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" That latter question implies that one needs a *revelation* in order for a person to believe the message.

A frequent question people often ask after their conversion is: "Why did I not see this before?" One of the most memorable converts from my old Lauderdale Manors Baptist Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, was a man named George Bellamy. He was fifty when he was saved. After a church service sometime later I saw him looking at the sky with tears running down his face. I said: "Is there anything wrong, George?" "No," he assured me. "I am only asking why I took so long to see all this." I looked at him and said: "But, George, some people sadly *never* see what you have come to see. Instead of regretting the wasted years just be thankful that you have come to see this even at your age!"

The faith that saves is a gift of God. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). One can believe only by the enabling and sovereign grace of the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit gives life" (John 6:63). God said to Moses: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.' It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (Romans 9:15–16; cf. Exodus 33:19). When a person believes, it is not a person "working up faith", because of the sheer mercy and compassion of God. There is nothing sufficiently good in any of us that would force God to show his mercy. But if he is pleased to show it, we can only thank him. We will never be able to thank him enough.

Why then does *anybody* believe? Answer: it is owing to the mercy of God. Not only that; when a person is given faith they are immediately ready to obey – and ask: "What next?" The Ethiopian eunuch believed and even asked to be baptized (Acts 8:36).

We may ask the question: "Why doesn't everybody see this truth about Jesus?" But another question is: "Why does *anybody* see it?"

The context of Isaiah 53

Isaiah had been describing Jesus in the closing verses of Isaiah 52, the immediate context for Isaiah 53:

See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness – so will he 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.

(ISAIAH 52:13-15)

This indicates not only the wisdom of Jesus – he "will act wisely" – but also his exaltation following his horrific crucifixion. Many would be "appalled", said Isaiah. If you saw Mel Gibson's film about the crucifixion of Jesus you were possibly shocked, horrified, and in disbelief. But it is very likely that what Jesus endured was even worse than what was portrayed in that film. According to Isaiah his appearance was "disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness". It was enough to put anybody off. He was almost unrecognizable. The disciples forsook him and fled (Matthew 26:56). His mother Mary and Mary Magdalene stayed through the ordeal however.

But something else happened as a consequence of that crucifixion. The Messiah would "sprinkle many nations" a reference to the sprinkling of his blood upon the many peoples of the earth. Isaiah saw this in advance: that the Messiah would suffer, die, be resurrected and exalted - and sprinkle his blood upon many. Not only that; kings would "shut their mouths because of him". Every mouth would be "silenced", said Paul (Romans 3:19; "stopped" in the KJV), but according to Isaiah even kings would be silenced. It means there would be nothing they could say. There is more: "that which has not been told them they will see" (Isaiah 52:15, ESV); that is, they will see things clearly eventually. Kings would be astonished at the unexpected happening within their nations. This also shows that all people will bow the knee to God's Messiah one day. And that which they have not heard, "they will understand". The question is: when? When would they understand? Would it be when it is too late - and "every eye sees" at Jesus' Second Coming? Or could it be that in God's mercy the Lord will lift their blindness by letting them *hear* – and heal their deafness in advance of that final day?

It is in this context, then, that Isaiah raises these two questions: "Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"

The name Jesus – the only name that makes sense of Isaiah 53 – was withheld from Israel generally for hundreds of years. It was first revealed to Joseph, the adopted father of Jesus. What an honour given to him by God: "Joseph,

son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and *you are to give him the name Jesus*, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20–21).

Isaiah 53 was written in such a way that those who do accept this message by faith inwardly know they have got it right. It is an earmark of true faith that you are assured and know you have not been deceived. As to the two questions, "Who has believed our message?" and "To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?", the answer is: "Those whom God is seeking." They are the ones who believed Isaiah's message and the ones to whom the arm of the Lord has been revealed. As a consequence of God seeking them, they are inwardly persuaded. This is also called the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit.

If God is on one's case, one is also known by different identities in the Bible: "his people" (Matthew 1:21), "his own" (John 1:11), "the church of God" (Acts 20:28), "the elect" (Matthew 24:24), "his own sheep" (John 10:3), "whom God has chosen" (Romans 8:33), "objects of his mercy" (Romans 9:23), "loved by God and called" (Romans 1:7). Jesus even said to certain Jews: "You do not believe because you are not my sheep" (John 10:26). But if you are one of his sheep – whether Jew or Gentile – you know his voice. "My sheep hear my voice," said Jesus (John 10:27, ESV).

The picture we also see in Isaiah is that of the prophet writing in language that, strange as it may seem, is designed to keep people from believing. This may give you pause but there are times when God keeps people from believing. The same Isaiah was told, after his vision of the glory of God:

Go and tell this people: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving." Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.

(ISAIAH 6:9-10)

Jesus applied this word in Isaiah to his own parables (Matthew 13:14–15). He also said that the devil may step in where the Word was sown, and "takes away the word from their hearts, *so that they may not believe and be saved*" (Luke 8:12). Do I understand this? No. But for some reason God uses the devil as his tool to keep people from seeing the truth. Like it or not – and I don't say I like it – God is not going to save everybody.

To put it another way, the context of this passage – Isaiah 52:14 ("his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man") refers to the offer of the Gospel to all people but in such a way that puts everybody off! This means that if this Gospel does not offend you or me there is hope for us! There was nothing attractive about the crucifixion of Jesus. Nothing. And yet Paul determined "to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him *crucified*"

(1 Corinthians 2:2). The very thing that – at the natural level – is designed to put people off is what Paul was preoccupied with when he came to Corinth. He reckoned that if anybody could accept something so offensive it would only be because God was sovereignly at work. Those who would be *unashamed* of the cross would be those that are variously called "his own", "his people", "his sheep", and so on.

Are you ashamed of the cross?

One of the first things you discover after your conversion is that God has been on your case for a long time. You can look back and see his glorious hand, his providence, his protection and guidance. So when God finds us we become aware that he is in control of everything and always has been! You realize that God is in control. You become aware that he was always aware of you. You once thought he didn't care; you now see that he cares more about you than you do yourself! You realize that God has known you from the foundation of the world.

He called me long before I heard, before my sinful heart was stirred;
But when I took Him at His word, forgiven He lifted me.
From sinking sand He lifted me, with tender hand He lifted me,
From shades of night to plains of light, O praise his name, He lifted me!

CHARLES H. GABRIEL (1856-1932)

And yet there is a paradox – if you can accept it: although not all will be saved, God has nonetheless made a provision for everybody. Jesus died for everybody who ever lived. The only way I can be absolutely certain that Jesus died for me is the knowledge that he died for everybody. This includes you. He died for you on the cross. If you want to be saved, transfer the trust you have had in your good works to what Jesus did for you on the cross. As long as you are trusting your good works, you are showing contempt (even if you didn't mean to) for why Jesus died. When you are truly broken – as Charlie Stride was – you will yearn for this Gospel. In a word: the good news is that you are saved by trusting Jesus Christ and his blood – not by your good works. Here is what Paul said:

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

(1 CORINTHIANS 1:21-24)

God's Messiah – also called God's Son (Isaiah 9:6) – was not revealed after all as a great political, economic, social or military leader (which Jews anticipated), but rather as the Lamb of God who was to die on a cross for our sins.

Have you ever noticed – or wondered why – Jesus did not try to get people to believe in him? Jesus had the power, if he chose to use it, to save every person he met. But he was not trying to add numbers to his following. Indeed, "the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it" (John 5:21). He was not going around trying to make converts. He knew that those very people the Father gave him would come to him (John 6:37). "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27, ESV).

Jesus' own brothers did not even believe in him - at least for a while. They were cynical about him despite knowing of his miracles. "You ought to leave here and go to Judea," they said disingenuously to him, "so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world" (John 7:3-4). Despite Jesus' miracles, they "did not believe in him" (John 7:5). Miracles do not convince if the Holy Spirit does not do the convincing. Even if you see them! You will still find something to justify unbelief! Some people even personally witnessed Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead but maintained a sceptical, cynical perspective. While some eve-witnesses were thrilled and amazed, others queried: "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" (John 11:37). This goes to show that miracles do not necessarily cause people to have faith.

Some sceptics often say they would believe in God – or in Jesus – if they saw a miracle. But this is not necessarily the case. God can – and sometimes does – use the miraculous to get one's attention (see John 4:29–30). But if the Holy Spirit is not present to create faith, any person – even in the face of a thousand miracles – will remain unconvinced, unconverted and in unbelief.

What makes faith faith?

Behind the entire account of Lazarus' being raised from the dead in John 11 is the answer to the oldest philosophical question in the world: why does an omnipotent and kind God allow evil and suffering? The answer is: in order that people might have faith. Does this surprise you? You perhaps thought that God's allowing evil was the very thing that lets them doubt his existence. I know what you mean. But there is another way to see it. For example, when Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus was sick they assumed he would go immediately to Bethany in order to heal Lazarus and therefore keep him from dving. But he didn't. He stayed put. This made no sense to anyone at the time. They all knew that it was within Jesus' own power to keep Lazarus from dying. Surely a loving God with all power would heal him! But Jesus remained where he was and allowed Lazarus to die. His immediate explanation to his mystified disciples was: "I am glad I was not there [in Bethany where Lazarus was], so that you may believe" (John 11:15). In other words, he needed to train his disciples – including Martha and Mary – what faith was and what makes faith, faith. In a nutshell: if one "believes" because he has the evidence, such "believing" does not warrant the title *faith*. What makes faith *faith* is that you believe without evidence – only trusting God who has spoken by his word. "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what *we do not see*" (Hebrews 11:1; "assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen", in the ESV).

To give another example, the Jews who mocked Jesus at his crucifixion said: "Come down now from the cross, that we may *see and believe*" (Mark 15:32). Note the order: first "see", then "believe". But this is not faith. When you "see" first, followed by "believing", such "believing" it is no longer true faith. Faith is to believe *without the tangible evidence*.

So why does God allow suffering? Answer: to make room for faith. If you and I had the answer to this immortal question, "Why does God allow evil?", we would never – ever – need faith! What makes faith a possibility is that you *don't* know the answer to this ancient question. *Be glad that you don't know* why God allows evil and suffering so that you qualify for faith. For example, when "every eye" shall see Jesus in his glory at the Second Coming, they will "believe" – oh yes, will they ever! But it won't be faith at work; it will be sight.

Jesus refused Mary and Martha's request because he wanted to teach everybody – his disciples, Mary and Martha, you and me – the nature of true faith. The people there at the time couldn't figure out why the loving Jesus who could have so easily healed Lazarus would let him die. It made no sense at the time. That is, until Jesus showed up four days after Lazarus' funeral and showed them that raising Lazarus from the dead was a better idea than keeping him from dying! You and I therefore can remember this principle: there is a reason God allows suffering. As *nobody* had the remotest idea what Jesus was up to when he did not heal Lazarus, so nobody knows what God is up to when he allows evil and suffering. Mark it down: when God reveals the answer to the question "Why does God allow suffering?", you will see essentially the same kind of scenario unfolding. Letting Lazarus die was a preview of how God will clear his name on that eternal day. No one had any complaints when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. And no one will have any complaints when God vindicates his name in the age to come. You and I can go to the stake for this principle.

Let's look at that question: why is it so amazing that *anyone* would believe in Jesus? His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man; it was "marred beyond human likeness". It was more than enough to put anybody off. If anybody needed proof that Jesus was no Messiah, the Jews could say: "Look to the cross!" Here is the irony: as believers in the Messiah we point people to the cross. The Jews, convinced he was *not* the Messiah, pointed people to the cross! It was – to them – the ultimate proof that Jesus of Nazareth was getting what he deserved when they crucified him. They believed that no Messiah of God could

be crucified; God would not let his Messiah die.

There is an ironic comparison between Muslims and Jews. Muslims do not believe that Jesus was ever crucified because Allah would never allow a true prophet to die on a cross. They believe that Allah delivered Jesus from the cross – that Jesus went straight to Heaven without being crucified. And yet this is a subtle way to avoid seeing Jesus' blood as the remedy for sin. In a rather different way the Jews, too, focused on their "proof" that Jesus was not the Messiah – that God would not allow the promised Messiah to die this hideous death. But this too kept Jews from seeing Jesus' blood as the remedy for sin. Both Muslims and Jews have in common a blindness to the reason Jesus had to die. Satan will always blind men and women from seeing the glory of the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.

The Jews therefore did not have the slightest problem with their consciences for nailing Jesus' hands to a cross. God would not allow them to proceed had Jesus been the Messiah. The sight of Jesus on the cross was the final straw that laid to rest any claim that this was God's Messiah. As I said above, I doubt if Mel Gibson's film went far enough in demonstrating how awful was his naked, bruised, bloody, swollen and disfigured body. He was forsaken by his followers, left to die alone despite all the miracles people saw. Those who witnessed Lazarus being raised from the dead had disappeared once Jesus was nailed to a cross. They scoffed and said: "Come down now from the cross" (Matthew 27:42). The question therefore follows: why would *anybody* believe in Jesus?

All that happened on Good Friday two thousand years ago is summed up in a "message" (Isaiah 53:1; or "report" in the AV). What is that message? It is unveiled through "preaching". It pleased God by the "foolishness of what was preached" (or "foolishness of preaching" in the KJV) to save those who believe (1 Corinthians 1:21). No Jew remotely imagined that the long-awaited coming of the Messiah would be made known by such a lowly, unspectacular and undignified method. They felt that the Messiah would be obvious – his very presence would speak for itself!

Isaiah saw this in advance – and asked: "Who will believe it?" He felt the burden in his soul, knowing how this Messiah would come and go and hardly be noticed.

But that was God's idea and plan: namely, that the Messiah would be made known by the foolishness of what was preached. This method need not be limited to a pulpit; anybody can bring this message. But it is imperative that we get it out. "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?" (Romans 10:14–15). It is done by word of mouth from one person to another. *You* can do it! And when you do you fulfill that ancient word, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:15; cf. Isaiah 52:7).

Moreover, to whom is the "arm of the Lord" revealed? The "arm" was a symbol of soldiers going to battle. The contrast was that women in those days never showed their arms, but a soldier's arm was free and it represented readiness, power and courage in battle. In Isaiah 52:10 the prophet said: "The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations." This was only a hint of God's strength and power. And yet God by his little finger could knock us all down in one stroke and we would be flat on the floor. God can raise the dead and heal anybody. He can cure cancer as readily as one could heal a common cold.

God's power was revealed in the weakness of his Messiah. His power was seen in the weakness of the Incarnation. Incarnation means that God became man, the Word was made flesh (John 1:14). The weakness of the Incarnation is seen in the Word ("*logos*" in Greek) inhabiting the womb of the Virgin Mary. It was God becoming vulnerable, and yet, "the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Corinthians 1:25). Christ was crucified in "weakness" (2 Corinthians 13:4), which showed his immense strength! He could have called ten thousand angels to stop the whole ordeal of wicked men putting him on that cross. He could have struck them dead or blind by his very word. But he chose to appear weak. Only a mighty man could do that.

How then does God show his power? By opening blind eyes and raising the spiritually dead. We are all born blind (2 Corinthians 4:4) but also spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1). Only God can heal the blind; only God can raise the dead. It is when the arm of the Lord is laid bare – as when Saul of Tarsus was struck to the ground on the road to Damascus and instantly converted (Acts 9:4ff) – that you know it is something only *he* could do.

To whom, then, is the arm of the Lord revealed? His arm – his power – is revealed to those God is seeking: to those who believe. Could that be you? Believing means to embrace this Messiah as he is revealed in the Bible. You may have to do it completely alone. Your best friend may not go along with you. Your closest relative – a parent or a child – may resent or reject you. It means transferring the trust you have had in your good works to what he has done for you on the cross.

Are you one who has believed this report? Has the arm of the Lord been revealed to you?