

### Call To Worship

Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant ... becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phillipians 2)

### Prayer

Gracious Father, as the Christmas celebrations came nearer, I remember and thank you for not turning your back on humanity, indeed, for not turning your back on me. Instead you chose to "do something" and interrupted the affairs of this world, just like you said you would. You took upon yourself the weakness of human flesh and became a Man of Sorrows, but conquering death, for my redemption.

Accept my thanks and praise in Jesus' Name. Amen

### Scripture Readings:

- Isaiah 53:1-6
- Matthew 2:13-18
- Luke 2:22-35

### Hymn: *by Graham Kendrick*

1. From Heaven, You came helpless babe entered our world, your glory veiled  
Not to be served but to serve and give Your life that we might live

*This is our God, The Servant King, He calls us now to follow Him  
To bring our lives as a daily offering of worship to The Servant King*

2. There in the garden of tears my heavy load he chose to bear  
His heart with sorrow was torn "Yet not My will but Yours", He said ...

3. Come see His hands and His feet, the scars that speak of sacrifice  
Hands that flung stars into space to cruel nails surrendered ...

4. So let us learn how to serve and in our lives enthrone Him  
Each other's needs to prefer for it is Christ we're serving ...

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### Isaiah 53 fulfilled

One day, quite unexpectedly, an evangelist called Philip was required to explain to a complete stranger the meaning of a few words from the prophet Isaiah, words that we read in our Old Testament reading. We are told that in explaining this passage, Philip told him the good news about Jesus.

We read from Matthew and Luke that the coming of Jesus was definitely not all tinsel, presents and good food. There were the sobering words of Simeon that Mary would be

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greatly disturbed, then the symbolic gift of myrrh, then the killing of the young by Herod when Jesus was still a baby. The coming of our Saviour was accompanied with portents of anguish and actual violence.

In our Call to Worship we read that Jesus became obedient to death on a cross. Why? I think as Philip spoke to that Ethiopian stranger he would have answered that question.

We will need to backup a little to understand this passage from Isaiah.

We are told quite clearly that there is something very wrong with human nature. Even though we want to think people are inherently good, or especially that I am inherently good, and indeed many people do try to do the right thing, there is something inside each one of us that has a natural tendency to evil. We know it, try to deny it, but the discomfort remains. The cover-up, the 'white lie', the failure to help, the self-centred motivation right through to the supposedly more serious matters of stealing, cheating and even violence. Ultimately, the rejection of God himself. There's something ugly about human nature that when the restrictions are gone, when no one is watching, humans behave in a manner which, if exposed, bring shame.

Jesus knew this and pulled no punches when it came to talking about such things. "What a person says comes from the heart. Out of the heart comes all manner of evil." Jesus was actually referring to Scripture when he said that. Centuries before, Jeremiah said "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"

Deep down we know it's true, and deep down we know we've blown it. This truth stands out so obviously in an incident involving Jesus and a group of religious leaders who were out to trap him. The leaders brought to Jesus a woman "who had been caught in adultery". Such behaviour was punishable by stoning to death, and Jesus knew it. "Well," they asked Jesus, "what should happen to this woman". After a moment's thought, Jesus replied "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone". One by one the men left until there was no one left. These were the religious leaders who in their arrogance looked down on "sinners" as being beneath their righteous dignity. Deep down they knew. They failed the test of being without sin. So does every one.

CS Lewis, quoting John Henry Newman, wrote with respect to our natural relationship with God: "We are not merely imperfect creatures who must be improved: we are, as Newman said, rebels who must lay down our arms."

But the immovable presence of rebellion against God, otherwise known as original sin, is very difficult for some to admit to. In fact some resolutely refuse to. "I have nothing to repent of" is a not uncommon turn of phrase. Or "I see no reason why I (or more often she/he) should not be allowed into heaven".

For those who see no reason to repent, God in Jesus Christ has nothing to offer. Jesus said so himself: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

Or maybe theirs is the misguided hope that God will forgive anyway. As Heinrich Heine said "Of course God will forgive me; that's his job". Or maybe there's an appeal to God being all love, (love is love, you know!) and therefore He would never punish. How we love to create God in our own image.

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As an aside it is a worthwhile exercise to read up on how the Bible defines love. Check out Romans 12:9ff and 1 Corinthians 13.

From time to time we hear of terrible incidents that cause death and horrible injury. A hit-run driver that killed two or three children. A gunman who ambushed and killed two police officers and a neighbour. A judge who said “This court finds you guilty. But on the basis of my compassionate feelings toward you, you are free to go” would cause outrage. Why? Because justice has not been actualized. We rightly demand punishment.

And God is a God of justice. He says so himself: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”

Our rebellion needs to be punished. Justice demands it.

And now we get back to Philip and the Ethiopian (We’d almost forgotten about them!)

The Ethiopian was reading from what we now refer to as Isaiah chapter 53 verses 7 and 8, part of the section often referred to as ‘The Suffering Servant’. All we know of what Philip said was that he “told him the good news about Jesus”. But we can be confident that Philip would also have referred to the preceding sentences as well, for here is a treasure trove of life changing truth:

“He was pierced for our transgressions,  
Crushed for our iniquities,  
Punished to bring us peace  
Wounded so that would be healed”

And “The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all”

This gem of truth permeates the whole of Scripture, both Old and New Testament. You see it in verses like this: “The blood of Jesus purifies us from every sin ... he will purify us from all unrighteousness”. Why? To bring us peace and healing.

The Jesus-event, as some call his life, death and resurrection, is unique. The events of his time here were astonishing enough, but there’s something else that makes it not just unique but wonderful, as John Bowring wrote, “towering o’er the wrecks of time”.

It’s that single idea from Isaiah 53—we can legitimately add an extra ‘all’—: “The punishment that brought us peace was upon him... The Lord has laid on him all the iniquity of us all”.

Jesus is not called the Saviour of the world for no reason. Anyone and everyone who wants that sort of peace that is immovable in this world of shallowness and artificial everything can find it through the simple but profound confession that Jesus Christ is Lord, asking for and receiving God’s mercy and knowing his forgiveness.

You have memories of shame, guilt, regret. You know that before a holy God you really don’t have a chance. Well that’s true. That’s the bad news of the gospel. The good news is that to rely on Jesus Christ turns it all around. The impossible becomes a reality, and as time goes by you become surprised at just how good it is.

This is a comprehensive salvation. It deals with the punishment of the rebellion and all the associated wrong at the heart of every person, regardless of its

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magnitude, by transferring that punishment from the individual to Jesus Christ. And it provides what is necessary—peace, hope, a foundation for life—for a challenging and worthwhile future.

This is all possible because “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all”, or as we are told elsewhere, Jesus “became a curse for us” thereby freeing us from that condemnation.

So there it is, the Suffering Servant as spoken about by Isaiah, read about by an Ethiopian government official and explained by Philip, and as true today as it ever has been, a prophecy fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and realized by all who put their hope in Him and his word.

Grace and Peace to you in Jesus’ name.

### Prayer for Suffering Christians: (Barnabas Prayer for 17/12/2023)

Lord God, the righteous Judge of all the world, we pray today for Christians facing hostile questioning by earthly authorities, whether in law courts or under torture, and for those who expect to experience this in the future. Please keep them from all worry about what to say. May the Holy Spirit give them the right words, and may our brothers and sisters have the assurance that it is He who is speaking. May their witness and testimony work powerfully in the hearts of their accusers and all who hear. We ask in the Name of the Christ. (Mark 13:11)

### Hymn: *by Charles Wesley*

1. Let earth and heaven combine, angels and men agree,  
To praise in songs divine the incarnate Deity,  
Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made Man.
2. He laid His glory by, He wrapped Him in our clay;  
Unmarked by human eye, the latent Godhead lay;  
Infant of days He here became, and bore the mild Immanuel's Name.
3. Unsearchable the love that has the Saviour brought;  
The grace is far above or men or angels' thought:  
Suffice for us that God, we know, our God, is manifest below.
4. Made perfect first in love, and sanctified by grace,  
We shall from earth remove, and see His glorious face:  
His love shall then be fully showed, and man shall all be lost in God.

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### Benediction

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your heart and establish you in every good work and word. Amen

[This service was prepared by Warren Mack for HopeNet SA](#)