

**The Mercy Tree**  
Isaiah 53:4-6  
Good Friday  
**Jarrett Stephens**

I first heard that song, *The Mercy Tree* in 2013. The great evangelist, Billy Graham was going to preach one last sermon at the age of 95. Because it would be preached on TV and marketed as his last sermon, it would be the largest audience that he would ever preach to.

I remember watching him...and I had been a fan of Billy Graham for as long as I can remember.

I recall watching him preach as a boy on television, and my dad saying something got the effect, “Now, that’s a TV preacher you can trust.” Amazing what sticks with you as a little boy.

In 1997, I along with my best buddy in college, got in the car and we made the trip from Arkadelphia, AR all the way to San Antonio, TX – it was an 8.5 hour drive. We had heard that this was going to be the last Billy Graham crusade, and I had never seen him, and I desperately wanted to!

And so, we made the drive (wrote Billy or Bust on our back window – we were really crazy college students, I’ll tell you!) and were literally the first ones at the arena. I think we got there two or three hours before they were to open the doors, and they actually let us in early because we agreed to be ushers and help take up the offering, so we could pick out our seats and got as close to the stage as we could.

I still remember listening to him preach and he preached for 30 or so minutes and it felt like five! I really think there was something spiritual to it where time slowed down...it’s totally different than me! I could preach for five minutes and it would feel like 30 – do NOT “Amen” that!

Fast forward to 2013, and this is going to be it...and it was it! His very last sermon. They called it, *My Hope America*.

Billy was extremely fragile at the time. I remember seeing him sitting in his house in North Carolina, and I was taken aback by his appearance.

I probably shouldn’t had been, but it had been years since he was in the public eye, and this evangelist that had such a presence...such a commanding voice...this man who stood behind his pulpit and preached fiery sermons for decades was preaching his last sermon from a chair in his living room.

The Billy Graham team of course had pre-recorded the message and edited in different testimonies which testimonies from famous athletes and singers and movie stars were ALWAYS a part of the Billy Graham Crusades.

And it...was amazing. Listening to these stories...hearing Billy preach one last time. He called his sermon that day, what was the entire theme of his preaching ministry.

He simply called it: The Cross.

That was his subject! Why the cross? What happened on the cross? I pulled 2 minutes of the opening of that TV special...just watch, and I'll share with you why I'm showing you this and how it relates to the song, we just lifted up, *The Mercy Tree* right after!

At the end of his message, it was beautifully told...you could actually see images in that clip of someone building a cross. And the show ended with that cross being lifted up, and put into place while Billy Graham shared the gospel and invited people to pray to receive Jesus as he did EVERY TIME he preached, and in the midst of it all, that song that we just sang, *Mercy Tree* was played.

Micheal Neale, who we recently brought on our team and just led us actually wrote that song! And he had no idea that Billy Graham would be using it in his very last sermon. He was watching it on TV like everyone else! Pretty cool surprise! It's the cross...The Mercy Tree that is of course where we are putting our focus this evening.

Why can we call it: **The Mercy Tree**

I want us to turn in the scripture to the Old Testament book of Isaiah, and I want us to look at a specific prophecy that was made some 750 years before it would ever take place.

We have in Isaiah 53 a picture of the cross before the cross – an instrument of torture and death was ever invented. It is mainly because of Isaiah 53 that this Old Testament book has been referred to as “the fifth gospel” ...it's been called it the “crown jewel” of messianic prophecy.

While we could read this prophecy of the cross beginning in Isaiah 52:13 and take it all the way through the end of Isaiah 53, for the purposes of this evening, I'm only going to read three verses and will refer to a few others throughout this devotional thought:

**Isaiah 53:4-6 – “Surely, he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. <sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”**

This figure that is being talked about in Isaiah IS the Lord Jesus Christ. However, in Isaiah's gospel and prophecy, he is referred to as the “Suffering Servant”.

We get this from (Is. 52:13) – he is “my servant”, God says...and then what follows is a detailed, graphic portrayal of what this servant will endure...what he will go through...and it is shocking!

Suffering really is the best word to use in describing the cross. It was meant to be an instrument of torture and death and it was regarded as a horror to both Jews and Romans.

No one really knows who invented crucifixion by way of the cross. It's attributed to the Romans, but in theologian, **John Stott**'s masterpiece of a book called, *The Cross of Christ*. He writes:

**“Crucifixion seems to have been invented by “barbarians” on the edge of the known world and taken over from them by both Greeks and Romans. It is probably the most cruel method of execution ever practiced, for it deliberately delayed death until maximum torture had been inflicted. The victim could suffer for days before dying.”**

There is not a better word to describe the cross, than the word suffer, and we shouldn't overlook OR minimize the suffering that came with the cross.

Without suffering, there would be no salvation. Without a crucifixion, there would be no resurrection.

Before we look in detail at this suffering though, I want us to stress right up front that this suffering was God's doing. The cross was not God's “Plan B”.

**Isaiah 53:6b – “...and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”**

**Isaiah 53:10 – “Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief...”**

Peter, in the New Testament at Pentecost when he stands to preach, in his very first sermon he highlights this aspect of the suffering of Jesus. He boldly proclaimed:

**Acts 2:23a – “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God...”**

As we talk about and highlight the suffering of Jesus on the cross, let it not escape us that this was God's will...this was God's plan...while it is all taking place, there is a divine hand that is behind it all, and we'll see WHY this is the case when we draw this message to a close.

So, let's go there to the cross...the “Mercy Tree”, and let's take a deep look at the suffering that took place there.

**Illus. Easter prep/Passion of the Christ** – it's hard to watch...it's not almost having to force yourself, I have to force myself to watch it. And the reality is as graphic as it is, it probably still didn't do the suffering Jesus experienced that day justice.

First of all, let's consider the: **Emotional Suffering** (Jesus endured)

I mean, we think on the physical suffering of the cross and we should...we'll reflect on that more in just a moment, but have you ever taken a moment to really think on the emotional suffering that Jesus went through?

**Isaiah 53:2-3 – “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. 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.”**

(v. 2) mentions that this “suffering servant” grew up like a young plant...like a root out of the dry ground.

Most commentators tell us that this “young plant” is what we call here in Houston a “sucker branch”. You cut these sucker branches off because they siphon off nutrients from the main branches. They are viewed as useless...it's a root out of dry ground – it's going nowhere!

There was nothing special about Jesus from an outward standpoint:

- Charisma – not this thing...
- Charm – Jesus was not out to impress...
- Style – he hung out with fisherman and tax collectors...he was a friend of sinners...

John clearly spells the rejection Jesus experienced out for us in:

**John 1:11 – “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”**

Jesus was despised. He was dismissed...unimpressive to the world. Here he is the King of the Universe, and rejected by the very ones he formed...made...knit together in their mother's womb. The biggest deal in the world considered no deal at all!

No wonder they describe him as a “man of sorrows”. The word “despised” here in the Hebrew, it means “disdain...contempt”.

When Jesus was on the cross, we are told in Matthew's gospel (Ch. 27) that the people surrounding the cross that day “derided him” ...they “wagged their heads at him”...they “mocked him”!

This is MORE than just NOT being thought of or considered, this is being scorned...and we see this in the gospels!

- He was not believed by his own family...
- He was hated by the religious leaders...

- He was abandoned by his closest followers...

**Mark 14:50** (during the Garden arrest) – **“And they all left him and fled.”**

Add on top of this all, the feeling of the HUMAN Jesus! I remind you Jesus was 100% God, but he was also 100% man...and just think of the emotional pain and suffering of the cross.

All Jesus had ever known was the affirmation of his Father. (2x) in his earthly ministry, once at his baptism and then again at what we know as the “Transfiguration” Jesus heard the audible voice of this Father – “This is my Son in whom I am well pleased.”

Here on the cross, it’s NOT affirmation but condemnation as God, the Father is SILENT when Jesus, the beloved son cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Consider for a moment the emotional suffering that Jesus endured! And now, let’s consider Jesus’s: **Physical Suffering**

There was NOTHING before or since that can compare to a crucifixion. Look at the words again from Isaiah’s prophecy:

**Isaiah 53:5a – “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities upon him...”**

(v. 7) includes that “he was like a lamb led to its slaughter.”

When looking at the cross, we look at the fileting of Jesus flesh. He would have been lashed with what was called a “cat of nine tails”. It was an instrument used to scourge and inflict as much pain as possible on the criminal at hand.

Most of these instruments of torture had a wooden handle with leather strips attached to it...and at the end of those leather tips were pieces of broken glass, metal or bone.

A “lector” - someone who was a professional at inflicting pain and using this instrument would have been the one to tie Jesus’ hands to a post to ensure that his muscles were stretched out and that his feet barely touch the ground.

It was not uncommon for a Roman scourging to be fatal in and of itself, and Jesus endured all of this BEFORE even going to the cross.

He was truly crushed. There is a reason (again, the divine hand of God behind this) that he is in the Garden of Gethsemane the night he is arrested...it’s incredibly picturesque.

The Garden of Gethsemane is filled with olive trees and how do you get oil from the olives? They must be crushed! This is Jesus in the Garden!

- He was being crushed under the weight of taking on the wrath of God, so much so that he sweats drops of blood...
- He was given a crown of thorns that crushed the crown of his head...
- He was flogged, his physical body crushed...
- He is forced to carry his cross...and it's weight crushes him to the point that Simon the Cyrene, a bystander is enlisted to help him carry the cross to his place of execution...

He is like lamb being led to the slaughter. He is then pierced – i.e. he is nailed to the cross. The pain of Jesus?! Listen to how **John MacArthur** describes the pain and suffering that surrounds a crucifixion in his book, *The Murder of Jesus*.

**“The Romans had perfected the art of crucifixion in order to maximize the pain – and they knew how to prolong the horror without permitting the victim to lapse into a state of unconsciousness that might relieve the pain. The victim of crucifixion would experience waves of nausea, fever, intense thirst, constant cramps, and incessant, throbbing pain from all parts of the body. Sleeplessness, hunger, dehydration, and worsening infection all took their toll on the victim’s body and spirit as the process of crucifixion dragged on – usually for three days or so. The feeling of utter hopelessness, the public shame, and the ever-increasing trauma to the body all intensified as the hours dragged on.”**

Jesus experienced emotional suffering on the cross. Physical suffering on the cross. But probably worse than all of those is the spiritual suffering.

Let's look briefly and reflect on the: **Spiritual Suffering** (Jesus endured on the cross)

What do I mean when I say spiritual suffering? Look again at Isaiah's prophecy.

**Isaiah 53:6b – “...and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of his all.”**

Jesus in drinking the cup of the wrath of God...he took on our sin. He (v. 4) “bore” our griefs...he “carried” our sorrows. It's an active verb!

Jesus, God's suffering servant, on the cross, took on himself...he bore in his body the full weight of mankind's guilt and sin AND the consequences (i.e. the judgment of God) that came along with it!

And in that moment of God “laying on him the iniquity of us all”, he experienced a spiritual suffering ...an abandonment...a separation in fellowship that he had never known! It’s impossible to understand it fully and certainly impossible to put into words.

**Erwin Lutzer** tries his best in his book *Cries from the Cross*: “Now we can better understand why it was midnight at midday. The physical darkness was symbolic of Christ’s separation (again, we don’t really know what the fullness of this separation means) from the Father, who is Light. Just as the wicked are thrown into ‘outer darkness,’ so the Son bore the darkness of our hell...Look at these hours on the cross and you are looking into hell: darkness, loneliness, and abandonment by God.”

So, just think about what we have reflected on up to this point. It was God’s will...God’s plan...that Jesus endure the emotional, physical and spiritual suffering of the cross.

What we haven’t reflected on is, “why?!” Why did Jesus HAVE to suffer in this way? Look at (v. 4-6) again.

**Isaiah 53:4-6** – “Surely, he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. <sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Anybody that studies this passage in detail will come to a one-word conclusion. Do you know what the word is: **Substitute**

Look at the passage again...this time notice the words in italics!

**Isaiah 53:4-6** – “Surely he has borne *our* griefs and carried *our* sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for *our* transgressions; he was crushed for *our* iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. <sup>6</sup> All *we* like sheep have gone astray; *we* have turned—*every one*—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of *us* all.”

Jesus had to suffer or else we would have. He had to experience the wrath of God and be crushed for it or else it would have been us! We should be eternally damned and separated from God because of our sin and our transgressions.

**BUT INSTEAD...**Christ submits to the Father’s plans and willfully and voluntarily goes to the cross **IN** our place...**FOR** us!

And in doing so, he paid for our sin, and the consequences (death and judgment) that came along with it, and totally and completely appeasing the holy wrath of God.

And as a result of this...see, the end of (v. 5)?!

**Isaiah 53:5c – “...upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”**

THIS is why we call it a “Mercy Tree”! It’s because of this tree...this cross...what took place on it that we have peace with God and are spiritually healed and restored.

It’s where God demonstrated his love and where we received grace and mercy. Just think on it! On that tree on Calvary’s hill all those years ago, God had no mercy on his son, so that he could have mercy on us.

Thank God on this Good Friday, for the “Mercy Tree”.

Will you bow your heads in prayer with me?

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