

Sermon Transcript from May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016  
The Suffering & Supremacy of God  
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The past few weeks we've been discussing the role in Scripture of these people known as the prophets. And, right in the middle of most of your Bibles, if you have one like mine, there's an entire section dedicated to these remarkable people. There's the major prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Daniel, and then there's the minor prophets like Amos and Jonah and Zachariah among others. For the past several weeks we've been unpacking what the words of these people meant to Israel and how it was looking forward and setting our gaze into the New Testament.

So, it is both an opportunity to see and understand what Israel would have heard and how they would have received these words from the prophets, and it's also a window into what is to come and how to read the New Testament rightly. In week one of this short series that we've been in with the prophets, we talked about the pain and the anger of God, that He is lamenting through the prophets of what He had hoped for in this relationship with Israel and how it had fallen apart and in His sorrow in that and His frustration and His anger in that.

Then, in week two, we talked about the hope that begins to drip from the prophets that God would do something, that He wasn't finished with Israel and with His story and that He had a plan. And this week, we come to the conclusion in this time of looking at the prophets. And we're going to talk specifically around the suffering and the supremacy of God. The suffering and the supremacy of God as we hear it through, specifically, the prophet Isaiah.

So, with that, we're in Isaiah 52:13. We're going to all the way through the end of 53. Twenty-five verses. We can do it together. Alright? Hang with me.

Isaiah 52:13 and it says, "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 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.

"Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

"Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows; yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray; each of us has turned his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and who can speak of his descendants, for he was cut off from the land of the living, for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

"Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer; and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days; and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hands. After the suffering of his soul he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors; for he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."

This is God's Word. Let's pray.

Lord, we come before You and I want to say, Lord, with my brothers and sisters, the

weight of this is more than we can carry. The mystery of this is more than we can understand. By Your Spirit, Lord, would You awaken in us, God, what You have for us tonight? The words You have, the encouragement, the truth, the hope and, God, the realization of Your radical, long-suffering love for Your people. Would You clear my mind and, God, would You cleanse my mouth and would You make ears open to hear and hearts open to receive tonight by Your grace? In Jesus' name, amen.

The prophets, as we've been saying for the last couple of weeks, played this really incredible role in the life of God's people. They were part priest, part guardian, part cultural commentator. Dave Lomas mentioned a couple weeks ago that one of the roles of the prophets was to guard these covenants, these things called the covenants, these promises of God. He called them the covenant watchdogs. So, it's appropriate for us, before we dive into all that God is doing in the passages we just read, remember why He's doing it. He had made these three specific promises to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament.

There was the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12 where He chose one man and He said, "Through you, Abram, I am going to make a nation who will be a blessing to the entire world. I will reveal myself to all of humanity through this man who becomes a nation and blesses the whole world." That was His first covenant and He makes a covenant with Abraham.

Then there's the covenant at Sinai in Exodus 19 where God makes – it's like a wedding. He makes these promises to Israel as a nation and tells them who they are, gives them an identity and tells them how to live; how to live into that identity as His people. He makes the promises to be with them as a nation. Then, finally, the Davidic covenant, which was in 2 Samuel 7. That there would be a king that would come one day through the line of this man, Jesse, and he would establish a kingdom that would reign forever. And God would be with His people.

These are the covenants and the promises that God gives, and it's important we start there just to remember those, because these are like the wedding vows that God makes to Israel. Now, I'm a pastor. I do a lot of weddings. Maybe, if you've been at weddings, you've seen some good ones and you've seen some not so good ones. For me, the whole reason we gather at a wedding – I was at a wedding just yesterday, okay? The whole reason we made the trek out – and they got married in the middle of nowhere, honestly, but we love them and we were excited. So, we went to go witness the promises that were being made. That was the purpose. It wasn't the wine, it wasn't the dancing, it wasn't – I mean, that stuff's fun too, but the purpose wasn't the party, the purpose was the promises that were being exchanged between these two people before the Lord.

And sometimes people do these promises right and sometimes they don't do them justice. When I'm counseling pre-marital counseling with couples who are getting married, I always talk about the vows. Like, "Please, don't mess with the vows. Don't say things like 'I promise to make you laugh every day. I promise that as long as we're together you will always be happy. I promise to make you breakfast every Saturday.'"

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Like, don't do that with the promises. First of all, you can't keep those promises. You have no control over most of those things. Don't mess with the promises. They are actually what hold the entire marriage together. Those promises are what holds this relationship together. It's not your feelings and all the other stuff. It's these promises that you make. So, Noelle and I, my wife, we will have been married sixteen years this July. Sixteen years. Come on. I feel like we've earned it. Come on.

Sixteen years this July. And listen, in that sixteen years, six pregnancies, three miscarriages, three beautiful, talented, headstrong daughters, just like their mom. Eight housing moves, two dogs, one epic trip to Europe and the loss of one parent each in those sixteen years.

Now, when Noelle and I were 23 years old, July 1st, 2000, and we stood in front of the people we loved and we made these promises to each other, we had no clue about any of this. We had no clue. You don't make the promises guaranteed on what's going to come down the road with a foresight into that. You make the promises despite whatever comes down the road. And why that's important is because this is what holds all of what we're about to read together. It is the driving force of why God does what He does. It's because He made these promises to His bride, Israel, and through Israel to you and to me. It's a beautiful thing.

And, if you've ever experienced this kind of covenantal love – and it doesn't have to be marriage. It can be a friendship, it can be a parent or a family member. Someone who makes this statement to you that I will be to you as I should, even if you are not to me as

you should. My covenant, my promise, my relationship with you goes beyond how you treat me, what our circumstances are or any of that. If you've ever experienced that kind of love, I want you just to pause for a minute and sit with that. Have you experienced that? Can you think of a time, a place, a season, someone you have in your life who has shown you just unmerited grace? Just generous love and grace?

If you have, I would argue that that experience is as close to heaven on earth as you will have. Hold on to it. Sew into it. It's the most heavenly experience we have is to be unconditionally cared for and loved by another human being. It's this great gift that God gives us. And that is the context, that is the power, that is the driving force of everything we just read in Isaiah 52 and 53. It should set the course for us. And, here's the deal with this passage. It's the fourth of what are called "The Servant Songs" in Isaiah. They start in Isaiah 40, and they're these little poetic glimpses of a gift that God is giving; this work that He's going to do; this movement of His love that's going to happen. And this is like the pinnacle.

As we were even praying tonight, there was this word, and I think it's true and it's really good, that this passage that we just read is the true north of all of Scripture. It's like the compass that keeps the trajectory of where everything is going on course. It's the goal, it's the bridge that takes all of this, this whole book, and takes everything on the front end and it pulls it forward to restoration and reconciliation, to answer those questions. How is God going to deal with us? How is He going to resolve the mess we're in? How is He going to fix all the things we've broken?

It's a bridge that carries Israel and the whole story on the front end forward. And then it's the lens through which Jesus talks about Himself, what the Gospels use to decode what has happened in Christ's life is this passage, and everything that Peter and Paul talk to the Church about in the epistles. It's this reckoning with what has happened, what is promised in Isaiah 52 and 53.

So, this is our true north. This is our Golden Gate Bridge. Sorry, that was kind of cheesy. But, I couldn't resist. And listen, I don't know how to do justice to this. I'm going to do my best, but this is sacred ground that we're on. This is heavy, weighty, theological, intense stuff that there's no way in the short amount of time we have that you can unpack everything that's being done and said here.

I'm going to do my best, and the way we're going to try to do that together is to look at three thoughts, three movements that kind of progress us through this servant song in Isaiah. The first movement, the first thought, is to be confident even in confusion. Confidence in confusion. First thought.

Second: that we should be moved by the magnitude of what's happening. We should be moved by the magnitude of this passage. And, finally, we should be committed to the completion of what this begins; this movement. We should be committed to the completion of it.

So, first, let me explain what all of these mean. First: be confident even in confusion. If this passage in Isaiah is confusing for us, which it can be. The language is poetry. It can be really confusing. I'm having a hard time even putting words to it. If it's confusing for us, imagine how it must have been for Israel. Remember the context. When they're hearing these words of Isaiah, this is a nation that has been overthrown, pulled into exile, scattered from their homeland, oppressed, wrestling with identity, who they are, and where's God? What happened? How did we get here and how will this be resolved? Are all those promises to Abraham at Sinai, the David covenant, all those things, where's that? Where are those promises, Lord?

So, this is a nation wrestling with all of these things. And then you get these words. And, in the very beginning, the first two verse we read, you get a little taste of the Christian life. You get a taste of the Christian life. Is it joy or pain? Yes. Is it sunshine or rain? Yes. Anybody know Rob Base? Anybody? Okay. There's like 10 people here. Awesome. Never mind.

So, Isaiah 52:13. This is where we begin. The first words that Israel would hear in this movement, this servant song, it says, "The servant of the Lord will be highly exalted, will be raised and lifted up. This servant will act wisely. They will be successful."

That word "wisely," they will act successfully. These are victorious words, right? These are good. If you're a nation in exile, in slavery, in oppression, the loss of your homeland and you hear this, you're like, "Alright. We're on the right track."

It sounds like that king is coming. It sounds like the rescuer is on his way. "This is good and we're just in verse one. It must get so much better from here."

Not so fast. Next verse. Isaiah 52:14, Israel hears, "When they look on him, they were appalled."

What? What just happened? That word "appalled," that's a strong word. When's the last time you were appalled by anything? Appalled. Like, moved to vomit. When's the last time you experienced that? What just happened to the highly exalted one? The servant is so disfigured by violence and torture, they're not even recognizable as human. What is going on here? What does this mean? How's Israel supposed to take this news? Is it good or is it bad? They don't know. And here's the deal: God doesn't seem very concerned with explaining Himself. Welcome to the Christian life.

God doesn't seem very concerned with explaining Himself here. Herein lies this lesson of the walk with Christ. It is "get confident in the confusion." I've heard people say, "You know, I thought God brought me to San Francisco to do something great and, ever since I got here, it's just been trouble. Just trouble after trouble."

People will sit in my office and they say, "Listen, I did everything I thought I was supposed to do. Like, everything my youth pastor told me, that's what I did. I did my life right. I can't find a spouse. I can't find that loved one. What's the deal?"

I hear people say, "You know, at our startup, we pray every morning. We gather in there and we pray for the business. We pray the business would be blessed to be a blessing and that God would prosper us so we can bless the city. We want to do all these great things, and it's not happening. What's the deal?"

There seems to be, in my experience, this cultural expectation in the Christian world that as we mature as Christ-followers, at some point, we figure this thing out. I'm here to pop your bubble. Not true. Not true. As a person who's been following Christ most of my entire life, to varying degrees of enthusiasm, the more I learn about God and who He is and what His word says, the more and more I realized how little I understand who this God is. I hope that doesn't scare you. If your definition of a mature Christ-follower is someone who ascends to this level of knowledge and understand where everything makes sense now, I'm sorry to tell you that hasn't been my experience.

I'd like to recalibrate that definition. To me, a mature Christ-follower, a mature follower of Christ is one who is continually filled with wonder of who God is and has built the capacity to sit in the unknown. I believe that's a maturing process. As a Christ-follower, when you can continually be in wonder. In wonder. "I know the character of God is good. What's happening to me right now, I don't understand."

I can sit in the wonder, be filled with the wonder of who God is and be comfortable to sit in the unknown. Now, hear me rightly, please. I'm not saying you should not read your Bible. We're in The Year of Biblical Literacy, for goodness sake. Read your Bible. It's a good thing. I'm not saying you shouldn't be in community group wrestling with Scripture and with your circumstances. Yes. That's a good and healthy thing to do. Those are healthy disciples and exercises. Just don't expect to graduate. Don't expect a diploma at the end of this ride. There's no promise of that.

In fact, in Matthew 18, there's this scenario where these children come around Jesus and the disciples are like, "Come on. We're super busy. Get out of here."

And Jesus says, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. I tell you this, if you want to enter my kingdom, you have to be like these."

Now, what does that mean? To be like a child with God; with Christ? What does that mean? My kids have this innate trust when they get in the car with me that wherever we're going is a good destination. When they get in the car in the morning, they're not like, "Are we going to Vegas? Are you sure? Let me see the GPS. Do you know where you're headed? Are we going to get there on time?"

My wife does that, but my kids don't do that. My kids have this innate trust in who I am that we're going to get to the destination and we will get there safely. Buckle in. That seems to be this call of Christ is like, "Will you just trust me? I know where I'm going. Just get in. Buckle up. You can trust where I'm taking you."

If we can do this, get this confidence, even in the confusing circumstances, it will help in the rainy seasons. It will help make them more bearable. As I've said, by the time people

get to my office, they're usually in despair. By the time they make an appointment and they get to my office, typically, not always, but people are like in a despair situation and it's this theme of, "I thought God loved me, but then this thing happened. I thought God was with me and then this thing happened. Where's God? What's the deal?"

And, with those statements is this underlying belief, whether it's implicit or explicit, there's this statement of belief in the person that bad things are not supposed to happen to God's people. I'll pop your bubble again. I'm sorry. This is a rough night. You picked a tough night to be here. Welcome to church.

When you're talking that way, "Bad things aren't supposed to happen to God's people," we're basically talking about karma at this point. You might as well carry a rabbit's foot or something. You're as good off with that. There is no paradigm for that in what we just read. Actually, this paradigm of the suffering servant should actually blow up that whole question. Like, "I thought God loved me. Why are these bad things happening?"

Those two things are not mutually exclusive. I know so many families, just in our church alone, who've gone through terrible suffering. Three-month-old babies die of cancer. Spouses lost to sickness. Terrible circumstances. Watching your loved ones deteriorate in front of you. Terrible suffering. Here's the remarkable thing. What I have seen, what I've experienced as a pastor is those people who invite Christ into that circumstance, that does not mean they put on a happy face and, "Isn't everything so good?" No. They weep and they lament and they cry out to God and they're angry with Him and they voice all of it and there's a place for that.

And yet, Christ is with them in that. I have heard people say, "It was worth it." That makes no sense. I've heard people say, "It was worth it." I have heard people say, "I would do it again. I would have that baby again, even it was only for three months."

How do we reconcile that? It seems to be that God is bigger than the measure of our circumstances. Like, God's character and His ability to move in our life is bigger than our circumstances. And, actually, we could look back on suffering and say, "It was worth it."

It's a remarkable thing. But, it's what we should be okay with. I'm not saying, "Go home and pray for suffering." I'm not saying to you like a masochistic, "Yes! We are going to be the church that suffers, because we really love God."

I'm not saying that. But, it is coming. You guys, it's coming at some point. Some time you will come across this place of suffering. And, when you do, I hope that you know this suffering servant can identify with where you're at, has walked in that place. That's who our God is. And, remarkably, God can take these circumstances sometimes beyond even what we're able to see and do things in incredible ways.

As I was reading this, I'm reminded of the story of Joseph that we read in Genesis, which seems like forever ago. And Joseph was a good man and Joseph, he wasn't wicked. He was maybe a little prideful, but he wasn't a beast, you know. He wasn't wicked; he wasn't evil. And he lived through incredible suffering. Sold into slavery by his own family, arrested on false charges and spent the vast majority of his adult life in prison. Just one thing after another. And then he's forgotten in prison. After he helps other people he's just forgotten there.

And it isn't until the very end of Genesis, Genesis 50, right before Joseph dies, he says these words to his family: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done; the saving of many lives."

Joseph could see, just at the end of his own life, God was doing something in these really difficult circumstances. And that was just the window of his own existence. You guys, we live in this fraction of the big story. This blink is our life. Joseph wouldn't know that over generations that move that God did through his life establishes all of Israel as a nation. He had no idea God was doing that and he wouldn't see it. So, this life, this confidence, it has a word, it has a name. It's called "faith," and it is a pillar of our life with God.

Hebrews 11 says that faith is being sure of what we hope for; certain of what we don't see. Confidence in confusion and difficult circumstances. And it's worth asking why do we need that? Like, from the very two first verse out of the gate in Isaiah, we're met with

victory and death together. What are we supposed to do with that? Why faith? Why do we need that? It's to reconcile. To sit with that conflict and be assured of the person behind the promise. Be assured of the person behind the promise.

So, as we enter that life of faith, we begin to see, as we even unpack this passage, the magnitude of what God has done. The magnitude of this movement of His love and of His grace. That question. Israel's sitting in exile. "How is God going to make this right? How is He going to restore all things? We were supposed to be the servant of God and we've blown it. Now what?"

We get the answer. Isaiah 53:4-6 say this: **"Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted."**

Isn't that what we just talked about? Like, "Oh, that bad thing must have happened. He must have been stricken by God."

That's our context. Isaiah 53:5: "But he was pierced..." – there was a purpose for it – "...for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us [shalom, oneness back with God] peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

He took up our pain and suffering and transgressions. He lifted them off of us and took them on Himself. The picture I got of this – and I know every analogy breaks down, so take it with a grain of salt – is a picture of a coat that you're wearing. Just imagine this. This coat that you're wearing. And, on this coat, kind of like a trench coat down to the floor, it is inscribed with every terrible thing, every wicked, every malice, every evil intent, every thing that you have brought into this world, just in your own hands. And you're carrying this coat and, through the course of your life, this coat becomes like a fur coat and it's getting bigger and it's actually taking over. This coat is like out of Harry Potter. It begins to shout to everyone the things that you've done, the shame that you carry. All of your transgressions are just being yelled out to the world. So much that this coat begins to become more of who you are than you. Your identity gets lost.

This is the picture I got of this passage. It says that Christ comes and He reaches over your shoulders and He takes that coat from the willing giver. He takes it off of them and He puts it on Himself and it is still covered in filth. But, He will silence it. He will restore it. He will clean it. He will make it right again. This is kind of the idea of what Christ is doing; what He has done. These transgressions He takes off of us and He puts onto Himself. And, lest we think that Christ was a victim here, remember what He says in John 10. Jesus says, "No one takes my life from me. No one takes my life from me. But, I lay it down on my own accord. At the right time and the right place, I lay my life down. And I have the authority to lay it down and I also have the authority to take it up again. Praise the Lord. This command I received from my Father."

Jesus didn't have to die. Jesus didn't have to go through with this. There's this picture in that Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus is wrestling with all that He knows is coming. He knew Isaiah 52 and 53. He knew what was coming. He was intimately familiar with it and He's wrestling through it and He makes this statement: "Lord, not my will but Yours be done. I lay down my life."

Do you see the magnitude of what God is doing here? The prophets had been asking for this and calling for this from the early stages of Israel's turmoil; crying for justice and righteousness to come into the world. And they were supposed to be that. Israel was meant to be that. And when they blow it they're like, "How, Lord? When? How long?"

And God, in His faithfulness, He takes the burden of sin, the brokenness and all the injustice, and He turns it in on Himself in Christ. And this is foretold, you guys, from the very beginning. From the very beginning this was His plan. How do we know that? If you go back to Genesis 15, God makes that covenant, that promise, to Abraham. "I'll make you a nation. I'll bless you so all the other nations will be blessed."

He makes that promise in Genesis 12. And then He acts out in that promise. He makes a covenant ceremony with Abraham. And this was not uncommon. This is what would happen at weddings in this day and age. It was like one father and another father would say, "Would your son like to marry my daughter?"

"Yes. Daughter, she's going to marry your son."

Kids don't get a choice. I really like that idea at this point in my life. I'd like to reinstitute that. But, two fathers would make this promise, this marriage covenant, and part of the wedding ceremony, they would take an animal and they would cut it open from neck to the bottom and they'd flay it and lay it down. Imagine this at your wedding. All these people are standing around watching as they're making this promise and the father says, "If my son does not fulfill his portion of the covenant, let me be like this."

And then he walks through the body. "If my son doesn't fulfill his promise in this covenant, let him become like this." And then the daughter's father would do the same thing. "If my daughter doesn't fulfill her promise in this covenant, let me become like this."

And there are witnesses to it all. And that is the picture. This is what happens. God's making this promise with Abraham, and then He acts it out and they get a heifer and these different animals and they cut them open. And it says that Abraham is filled with dread. Why? He can't keep that promise and he knows it. He can't keep that promise. And God, in just this incredible move of grace, He puts Abraham to sleep and then God Himself goes through those cut open animals. And He knows that Isaiah 52 and 53 are coming. He knows that Jesus is coming. He says, "I will be like this. I will be disfigured. I will be despised. I will be completely broken open. I will be that and I will keep that promise."

God knew this. Do you see the magnitude? It should move us, you guys, when we think about the magnitude of God's grace and His love extended to us. That He makes this path flat and smooth and He lays it out in front of us. "This is who I am and this is what I'm doing for you."

It's this incredible and powerful move of God. So, there can be a temptation, as we go into this last thought. This last thought is that we should be committed to completion. Committed to completion. There can be a temptation for us to think that now that I know what Christ has done, that Jesus paid it all, so, my role now becomes "go be a good person. Go behave rightly."

That can be the temptation when you hear about the atonement of what God has done. And I want to tell you that it's so much more than that. What we've just read, this sacrifice of the servant, this movement of God, this extension of grace in love, this fulfillment of promise to us, to Israel, this is called God's atonement. It is this "at-one-ment" that God does. "At-one-ment." It's this state of being. It's like refreshment is being in a state of being refreshed. Atonement is this state of being at one again with God. He has made shalom. What He intended in the Garden. When it says "in the cool of the night He would walk with Adam and Eve," that was God's heart and His desire in relationship with you and with me.

So, He makes a way where there is no way and He puts us back into "at-one-ment," atonement, with Himself. And it is not so that we can say, "Jesus paid it all, that's my ticket into eternity. I'm just going to be a good person now."

It is so much greater than that. It's a commitment to completion. Both a completion of yourself and a completion of the work God is doing in this world. Remember, at the end of Jesus' time with His disciples, He gives them this charge. It's called the great commission. He says, "Now, go into all the nations and make disciples. What I have done with you, do with the people of all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I'll be with you always."

"Go into all the nations and make disciples. Do what I have done with you for the past three years."

And what was that? He walked with His people. This call to completion, this commitment to completion, is not just going out and serving the poor. It is that. It is just just bringing reconciliation to your apartment building through loving your neighbor. It is that. But, it's a completion of who you are that is worked out all of your life. You are Christ's disciple and He wants that relationship with you. So, you will go through suffering seasons and you will go through joyful seasons and you will go through prosperous seasons and you will go through dry seasons, and Christ wants in on all of it with you.

It is how He forms you into Christ's likeness. It is not just a stamp of a ticket. Please don't treat those wedding vows that way. It is this commitment God has made to you. And, when we receive that and we say, "Yes, I am Christ's disciple. Yes, I receive what Christ has done for me and now I allow it to work out in every area of my life," you are saying back to God those vows of commitment, those wedding vows. You're saying them back to Christ.

"I'm in. Thick and thin. Unconditional."

And you work that out. The rest of your life you work that out. And, when you do, then there is this completion that happens in your family and there's this completion that happens in your neighborhood and there's this completion that happens in the way you understand work. It reforms everything. And that is exactly what Christ came to do. Now you are that servant that He always intended to be the light to the world.

Let's pray.

God, I just recognize tonight that there is a whole spectrum of experience that is hearing these words in this room. There are some that may have never heard this testimony of Your grace and Your love before. I pray that You would meet them in all of the swirling thoughts and even the hopes and even the confusion. There are some, God, that have heard this a thousand times and that just want to pick it apart theologically. I thank You, Lord. Would You meet those people? Remind them of Your deep love; of Your abidingness with them. They would be okay to not understand sometimes.

There would be some, Lord, in this room that have been running from You. Would You remind them of Your wide open arms, God? That Father who watches on the horizon for His son or daughter to come home. That's the picture that You give us in the Gospels, Lord. Would they experience that kind of love from You tonight? God, there are the self-righteous, Lord, that feel like they've been living rightly. They've been doing good. Lord, I pray for humility in this room tonight to say we don't have it figured out and our righteousness is filthy rags, Lord. That's what You tell us.

So, in all of this, God, and everything in between, I pray for just a great exchange tonight between Your sons and daughters and their good and loving Father. Would You meet us, God, in our response to You? As we sing words, God, would they connect with our heart and our spirit? Thank You that You are not far off from us and Your arm is not too short to rescue us. Would You meet us in this time of response? In Jesus' name, amen.