

“God’s Miraculous Love Letter”

// Isaiah 52–53 // *The Whole Story* #21

Isaiah 52–53 if you have your Bibles. I want to talk with you about **why I believe**—in God, Jesus, the Bible, the mission—all of it. Faith, as I’ve told you before, has **not always been easy** for me. Throughout my life, I’ve **wrestled with questions** of faith—Do I believe all these things **simply because this is how** I grew up? Is this just a **fairy tale** we made up so we could feel affirmed and secure?

I read this week in *The New Yorker* one atheist explaining why he did *not* believe:

“Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. It’s hard to imagine a more extraordinary claim than that some hidden intelligence created a universe of more than a hundred billion galaxies, each containing more than a hundred billion stars, and then waited more than 13.7 billion years until a planet in a remote corner of a single galaxy evolved an atmosphere sufficiently oxygenated to support life, only to then reveal his existence to an assortment of violent tribal groups before disappearing again.”¹

You read that and you think, “Does he have a point?”

Well, I believe there are **extraordinary reasons** to believe; in fact, I think they are **quite compelling** to those with ears to hear. You see, the problem people have with what I’m going to present today is **not**

¹ <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-fantasy-of-the-deathbed-conversion?>

that this stuff is not compelling in and of itself; it’s that **the implications if these things are true** lead to a number of conclusions they find objectionable. *I don’t like how God rules the world; I don’t agree with this or that moral approach, and etc.* So **from the beginning many people approach** these things with the attitude, “This just **can’t be true**. It would create too many problems.

- We’re all inwardly biased, so I would encourage you, as much as you can, to just hear this and consider it with an open mind. **I understand some of you doubt the message of the Bible** and that you feel like you have good reasons.
- My **question for you** is this, “Are you willing to **doubt your doubts** in the face of some pretty substantial evidence? Are you willing to **consider this evidence just for what it is** without a bias against it?”

Let me start this discussion with the CIA: When the CIA gives a double agent a way to identify themselves to the US, there’s usually several layers of identification involved, so that there is no chance that they get the wrong person. **For example, a Soviet double agent** who fled to Mexico and wanted to contact the U.S. embassy there was given six prearranged signs to identify himself, so that there was no possibility of misidentification.

“When in Mexico City, he was (1) to write a letter to the secretary signing his name as “I. Jackson.” After three days (2) he was to go to the Plaza de Colon in Mexico City and (3) stand before the statue of Columbus, (4) with his middle finger placed in a guidebook. When he was approached, (5) he was to say it was a magnificent statue and (6) despite his Russian accent, that he was only visiting from Oklahoma.”²

God’s ways of verifying his messenger was through layers of prophetic fulfillment. We saw what he had said when we looked at Deuteronomy 18:

² *Seven Reasons Why You Can Trust the Bible*, 102. Erwin Lutzer

²¹ And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?' — ²² when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. (Deut 18:21)

Nearly 25% of your Bible is prophecy, God foretelling things that had not happened yet, often in great detail. And they **almost all have to do with a rescue plan** he was commencing; **a Rescuer that he would send**, called, in Hebrew terminology, a Messiah. There are **322 direct prophecies** specifically about him, not to mention the **dozens of historical pictures** and analogies embedded in Scripture, many of which we've looked at over the last 6 months.

We're going to **focus on the work of primarily** only one prophet today—**Isaiah**—because I think he's a **great example** of all of them. His writings point us to the **main subject of prophecy**—Jesus; as well **give us a taste** of the miraculous nature of prophecies.

Now, I'm going to take us through Isaiah's prophecies today in a **different way**. I'm going to use the text of Sally Lloyd-Jones' *Jesus Storybook Bible*, where she **summarizes Isaiah's prophecies** in the form of a love letter that God wrote to Israel. **You say, "JSB... isn't that a kids' book?"** Why, yes it is. But I'm going to do it this way for **three reasons: First, I've encouraged you to read this book**—especially those of you in families, one story a week, along with me as I preach through the Bible. **Second**, I think she just does a great job of **capturing the whole** of Isaiah's message, and sometimes we can get so bogged down in the particulars we can miss the whole.³ **Third**, we're going to have her in as a guest in a few weeks, and I want any of you who see her to be able to say, "Sally, I loved your book."

³ C.S. Lewis said that if a kids' book is not worth reading as an adult, not worth reading, period!

JSB

We had Allie read it. Let me walk you **back through** a few parts of it and explain it, and I'll put the **references** up here so you can see where she's drawing from in Isaiah (literally **just about every word** comes from a place in Isaiah)

Dear Little Flock, You're all wandering away from me, like sheep in an open field. You have always been running away from me. And now you're lost. You can't find your way back. (Isa 40:11; 53:6)

- This is the **substance of the Bible's message** to us. From the garden of Eden, we've been **running**. And now, Isaiah, says, we are like sheep who each one believes he knows the best way and chooses his own way.
- Now, most of you probably don't have **a lot of experience with sheep**—I don't either. But those who do say sheep are a particularly unruly animal.
 - They are **notoriously dumb**—they walk right into harm's way, sometimes step directly off of cliffs, or into moving streams and drown...
 - They have **particularly bad eyesight** and can only see a few feet ahead of them, and their **heads hang down**. They are **not animals of forethought and keen insight**, they just think, "Where is the next bite of grass?" When **they look up** all they can see is the hiney of the sheep in front of them, and they follow that.
 - Furthermore, when sheep fall over, they often get **cast** (like a beetle), and can't get back up—and someone has to flip them back over or they'll die.
- There is **all kinds of symbolism** in there for us, and **while unflattering**, this is a picture of us that is pretty compassionate: We're confused, wandering.

But I can't stop loving you. I will come to find you. So I am sending you a Shepherd to look after you and love you. To carry you home to me. (Isa 40:11)

- The gospel is not that we went searching for God; he came searching for us. This book is not the record of man's attempts to find God, but God's attempts to find man.
- He did this, he says in *Isa 43:4*, "Because you are precious in my eyes, and I love you."
 - That word precious is not something I use for many things in my life. **Precious** means...
- So, he says, "I'm coming, like a Shepherd, to find you." Jesus was that Shepherd, and he described his attitude in Luke 15 by saying he was like a Shepherd who discovers that 1 of his 100 sheep was missing, and so he leaves the 99 to go over the 1.
 - Which doesn't make much financial sense to put yourself in harm's way when you're only talking about 1% of what you have.
 - But that's what you do when *each individual one* precious to you.
 - At Disney World one year I temporarily lost sight of one of my kids. Had this happen, parents? I didn't say, "Well, I got 3 more."
 - *Isa 49:15*, "Can a nursing mom forget her newborn child, and have no compassion on the child she has just borne?"
 - I've told you that my **wife developed this crazy X-man, Spidey sense** when we had our babies. At the slightest whimper she was out of bed and up the stairs.
 - One of the **dumbest things I ever said** in my marriage was, "That's amazing. Our baby is only 2 weeks old and I think she slept through the night." She said, "The baby was up 6 times last night. You slept through the night. She and I didn't."
 - "I am *more* in touch with you than a newborn mom is her baby!" "I know **how many hairs** are on your

head!" My wife, attentive as he was, didn't know that.

- **And then, God says through Isaiah, I will do more than just come after the sheep.** I'll give my life up for them, Isa 53:4.
 - What shepherd would do that? It's not really even smart, because the **life of a sheep** does not compare to the life of a human. What would you say to your kid if you saw your child putting himself in harm's way to try and save your dog? The dog goes running off across the interstate and your 12 year old goes tearing off after them... you wouldn't say, "That was brave and wise." You'd say, "The dog is not worth your life."
 - Why would God, the Creator, give his life for us, the creation?
- **This is crazy kind of love.** And he **has this love for people** who don't even love him back.
 - I've told you before that groupies are people who love somebody who will never love them back. Some of you ladies watch how teenage girls today swoon over **Zac Efron** or **Michael B. Jordan**... with their pictures up on their wall and you're like, "Sweetheart, give it up, he ain't ever going to even know who you are."
 - But you have a **hard time being judgmental** because you remember when you were convinced that you are going to marry **Donny from NKOTB**.
 - You **knew exactly how it was going to happen, too.** You were going to put on your **best pair of acid-washed Jordache jeans** and go to the concert and stand there on the front row with the other 1000 girls and scream **'I love you, Donny!'** and your scream was going to be just a little bit louder than all the other girls; screams, and Donnie was going to look over at you... and you'd have this split-second moment of enchantment, and later a bouncer would find you and hand you a personal note from Donnie that said, 'You got the right stuff

baby, you're the reason why I sing this song...' And then you were going to get married and live happily ever-after.

- But, unless your name is **Jenny McCarthy**, that never happened. Instead, you **married Phil from accounting**, a slightly overweight, balding man who wears penny loafers and drives a mini-van.
- As you get older, you just learn it's not wise to love people who will never love you back.
- The most amazing thing in Scripture is that we see **God loving people—giving himself** to people—who don't love him back. And coming after them. And then laying down his life for them.
- What **kind of love** is this? Are there any words we have to describe it?
- **Charles Spurgeon**: *"If there is one subject that makes me back away from this platform utterly ashamed of my poor feeble words, it is this subject. This love of Christ is the most amazing thing under heaven, if not in heaven itself."*

You've been stumbling around, like people in a dark room. But into the darkness, a bright Light will shine! It will chase away all the shadows, like sunshine. (Isa 9:1–2)

- That's from **Isaiah 9:1–2**, without God, our lives feel like they are in darkness.
 - Paul Tripp: Daughter crushed up against a wall by an unlicensed, drunk driver. She was in critical condition for 4 years, but by God's grace she survived. He said had we not known that behind everything was a loving God who promised to work everything for good, and who promised to ultimately heal all things in this life or the next, I'm not sure how we would have made it. To not know that would have been to have been in total darkness, not knowing where to turn, only despair.
 - Is there any purpose? Any hope?
- And so we stumble around, looking for happiness or diversion.

- Jesus would come into that darkness. He would show us what the problem was, and what we were missing. We we created for God, and our lives would always feel incomplete until he was a part of them. And death was not supposed to be a part of our lives. It was an enemy who should be destroyed.

A little baby will be born. His mommy will be a young girl who doesn't have a husband. (Isa 7:14)

- He'd be born, miraculously, to a virgin.

His name will be Emmanuel, which means "God has come to live with us." (Isa 7:14) He is (also) one of King David's children's children's children (Isa 9:7; 22:22)

- He's going to be both God with us and King David's son. King David represents both the best and worst of humanity.
 - For Jews, David had always represented this ideal man and king; even beyond Judaism, David pictures that (think, the statue of David)
 - But David also represents the worst. He shows us how even the best disappoint us. As we saw a few weeks ago, he betrayed a friend, slept with his wife, then murdered him and covered it up.
- The Messiah would be both son of God and the son of David. Son of Man, so he could die in our place; son of God so he could heal us.

Yes, someone is going to come and rescue you! But he won't be who anyone expects. (Isa 53:2) He will be a King! But he won't live in a palace. And he won't have lots of money. He will be poor. And he will be a Servant. But this King will heal the whole world. (Isa 53:2–5)

- Like David, the shepherd boy, everyone will overlook this king.
- This King will not be one who amazes us with his power or wealth. In fact, he'll posture himself as a servant and live like one poor. But that's going to enable him to heal us, which will help us see his true glory far better than any display of power or wealth could...

- Isaiah opens with this vision of God being high and lifted up (**Isa 6**). And the scene is like you'd picture it: the pillars shake; angels call out "holy, holy, holy." Glory fills that temple.
- The only other time he uses that phrase, "high and lifted up," is Isaiah 53, that describes the crucifixion.
- The cross, where God took our place and saved us, is where we see our greatest demonstration of the glory of God.
- God could have glorified himself through judgment... but instead he chose to humble himself and save us.
 - The early church father Athanasius said that you can measure the strength of a flame by its ability to burn downward. Even the weakest flames, like a candle, can burn upward. But take a blowtorch, or a rocket engine... that flame is strong enough to burn downward... so God's greatest glory would be found in how he crushed sinners, but how he saved them.
- Now, if you reject his offer, he'll come a 2nd time in judgment, that is clear in Isaiah. But he would prefer to be glorified by saving you, but he'll do it either way.

He will be a hero! He will fight for his people, and rescue them from their enemies. But he won't have big armies, and he won't fight with swords. (Isa 2:4)

- This **Messiah is not going to fight with swords**, because his aim is to **heal and save, not avenge**.
 - Scene from Les Mis
 - He could have avenged himself, but he wanted to save us, so when it came time for blood to be shed and punishment to be given, he took it.
- **Again, if you reject that**, the next time he comes, he will bring a sword

He will make the blind see (Isa 29:18; 35:5; 42:7), he will make the lame leap like deer (Isa 35:6)! He will make everything the way it was

always meant to be. But people will hate him (Isa 53:3), and they won't listen to him. He will be like a Lamb (Isa 53:7) – he will suffer and die. But he won't stay dead - I will make him alive again! And, one day, when he comes back to rule forever, the mountains and trees will dance and sing for joy (Isa 44:23)! The earth will shout out loud! His fame will fill the whole earth – as the waters cover the sea (Isa 11:9)! Everything sad will come untrue. Even death is going to die! And he will wipe away every tear from every eye (Isa 25:8).

- One day he'll heal the whole earth. And we'll get a glimpse of that in his resurrection. One day he'll do to the whole earth what we saw happen to his body.
 - 2/3 of evangelical believers don't think we'll have physical bodies in heaven.⁴ Jesus does, so of course we real.
 - Heaven is a real place, with mountains and trees and oceans... It's called the "new heavens and new earth" which means similar to what we have here just a lot better and without the curse of sin. Up there will be a heavenly version of all that we have and love here: music, food, nature... a heavenly Grand Canyon... heavenly version Hawaii.... That's going to be awesome.
 - I've told you I even expect there to be a **Heavenly Dean Dome** where the Tarheels win every single game. Who will they beat every time, you ask? The devils, naturally.
- **He'll wipe away ever tear** and make all the sad things come "untrue." Every broken heart is mended. Saying "every bad thing comes untrue" doesn't mean he'll make us forget them (like he **flashes us with one of those little sticks** in MIB), but he'll heal them and show us how he weaved them all together for a beauty and joy so great that we hardly even remember the pain!

What an incredible story! But, as Isaiah laments, nobody believed him! **Why?** Like Isaiah said, because they didn't want to hear God's promise.

⁴ Randy Alcorn, talk at TGC 2015.

Our hearts are sinful, and if these things are true, then **God is God**—and that means **his ways** are right. We are **not in charge**. And **to receive this testimony** means we would have to stop arguing with him about how *we* think things should be.

- Carolene and the Trinity
- **Faith is accepting what you cannot understand based on what you can understand.** Your issue may not be the Trinity. It may be why God revealed himself as he did. It may be why he lets bad things happen on earth. It may be why there is a hell. But if you can see sufficient evidence that Jesus is Lord, are you willing to doubt your doubts and follow him?
- Another favorite definition of faith is, **“Faith is when the unexplainable meets the undeniable.”** What is undeniable are that these prophecies are divine.⁵

They tell the story of the life of Jesus—both its purpose and the details of it, with **staggering specificity**. *Just think about it:*

Scripture tells us that the coming Messiah would be...

- ...born of a virgin (Isa 7:14)
- ...from the line of Abraham (Gen 22:18)
- ...a descendant of Judah (Gen 49:10)
- ...from the household of David (Jer 23:5)

He would be...

- ...born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2)
- ...presented with gifts at his birth (Psalm 72:10) and then forced to flee and evil king who wanted to kill all the children in the region of Bethlehem (Jer 31:15)
- ...he'd be exiled to Egypt as a kid and return home to Israel from there (Hos 11:1)

He would claim to be God with us (Isa 7:14)

He would function as...

- ...a prophet (Deut 18:18)
- ...a priest (Psalm 110:4)
- ...a king (Psalm 2:6)

He would...

- ...be a teacher of parables (Psalm 78:2)
- ...be preceded by a messenger crying out in the wilderness (Isa 40:3)
- ...he would begin his ministry in Galilee (Isa 9:1)
- ...perform many miracles (Isa 35:6)
- ...enter Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey (Zech 9:9)

And then, there are more than 20 prophecies that get fulfilled in his life in ONE day—

Scripture tells us the coming Messiah would be...

- ... betrayed by a friend (Psalm 41:9)
- ... sold for 30 pieces of silver (Zech 11:12)
- ... and that silver would then be thrown into God's house and used to buy a potter's field (Zech 11:13)

In the hours before his death, he'd...

- ... be abandoned by his friends (Zech 13:7)
- ... be accused by false witnesses (Psalm 35:11)
- ... stand silent before his accusers when they taunted him (Isa 53:7)
- ... be wounded and bruised (Isa 53:5)
- ... mocked (Psalm 22:7)
- ... be beaten and spat upon (Isa 50:6)
- ... have his garments be split up and be gambled for (Psalm 22:18)
- ... physically stagger under the weight of his affliction (Psalm 109:24)

At his death he would...

⁵ Josh McDowell, *New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, 164–202

- ... have his hands and feet pierced (Psalm 22:16)
- ... be executed together with criminals (Isa 53:12)
- ... experience great thirst (Psalm 69:21)
- ... pray for his persecutors (Isa 53:12)
- ... have his side pierced (Zech 12:10)
- ... despite great physical travail, not one of his bones would be broken (Psalm 34:20)
- ... He would die at mid-day, and during the hour of his death darkness would miraculously descend upon the earth (Amos 8:9)
- He would then be buried in a rich man's tomb (Isa 53:9)
- ...after which he would be resurrected to the Father's right hand and pour out gifts on his followers (Psalm 16:10 and 68:18).

Now, before you think, "Well, **maybe some of these things were just coincidences.**" Mathematicians say the odds of these things randomly coalescing on any one person is 10^{157} . That's 10 with 157 zeroes after it. To put that in perspective, 10^{16} would be like covering the states of North and South Carolina and Georgia in silver dollars 2 feet deep and painting one black and having a blind man pick out the right one. That's 10^{16} . Mathematicians generally agree that, statistically, any odds beyond 1 in 10^{50} have a zero probability of ever happening. It's called Borel's Law.⁶

- You say, "What about **other predictions** in history? Didn't **Nostradamus** seem to anticipate the rise of Hitler? **Have you ever read those prophecies?** They are vague and Nostradamus got a lot of things wrong. These are **given in great detail** and **not one of them** has even proven incorrect, which put these into an entirely different category than Nostradamus or anybody else."⁷
- You say, "Well, maybe the Gospel accounts have been doctored up to confirm these prophecies. Early Christians were like, "Hey, in my quiet time this morning I read where Zechariah says the Messiah would be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver, so let's make up this story about Judas getting that for betraying him."

- They might have been able to **get away with a few things** like that, but most of these prophecies were out of their control, and would have been easy to refute if they were not true.
- And **early Jewish and Roman leaders had a lot of motivation** to refute these things. They could have been like, "Hey, he wasn't born in Bethlehem. He didn't grow up in Nazareth. We never gave some guy named Judas 30 pieces of silver." But nobody ever refuted them.
- And the idea that the **early church just destroyed all the conflicting accounts of Jesus** assumes that the church had some kind of controlling power which it just didn't have, at least for the first 300 years. In the first 3 centuries after Jesus' life, Christianity's its enemies vastly outnumbered its followers, and they were the ones with all the power. *Yet **no one ever came forward** to challenge the validity of these things in a credible way.*
- Plus, you have to ask, "**Why would early Christians lie about these things if they weren't true?**" There **has to be a motive**.
 - **Typically, when people lie**, it is to get them power or prestige or escape harm or something. But the **opposite happened** with early Christians because of their testimony!
 - Their **confession got them persecuted**—many of them lost their homes, even their lives.
 - You say, "**Well, lots of people have died for a lie.**" Yes, but there's a difference between dying for a lie and something you know to be a lie.
 - Great historical example of this: **Illus. Chuck Colson**. "We all knew it was a lie, but covenanted together to lie and not talk. **3 days** is all we lasted. You're telling me a bunch of uneducated fishermen held out to their deaths?"
 - **Blaise Pascal**, "Witnesses who are willing have their throats cut become believable."

⁶ Emile Borel, *Probabilities and Life*

⁷ Erwin Lutzer, *Seven Reasons Why You Can Trust the Bible*, 91.

Implications:

1. Believe

- What if you were like my friend Carolene? *Are you willing to **doubt your doubts** in light of compelling evidence?*
- **Let me focus on that last line of SLJ's story**, "It sounds like a fairy tale, and everyone knows that fairy tales don't come true."
- C.S. Lewis wrote an essay on fairy tales⁸ in which he explained that *all of mankind's myths and fairy tales are expressions of a yearning deep in our hearts. This is the case, not because our hearts are making it up, but because they are hungering for the very thing they were created for.*
 - **E.g. Beauty and the Beast** (In last 12 mos – Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast!)
 - In *Beauty and the Beast* you have a man who is disfigured beyond human likeness because of selfish, proud decisions he has made.
 - Now, he is appalling to look at.
 - It's a picture of the human condition. Many of us feel like if people really saw what was on the inside of us, they would be appalled too. So we keep people at a distance. We don't want to let people in, or admit weaknesses. Or we really focus on trying to look good physically.
 - For many of us, that was never an option, so we have worked on talent, accomplishment, or making money as a way of becoming attractive.
 - We are desperately trying to get people to feel like we're attractive: We're trying to create beauty in ourselves.
 - **For the Beast to be saved, Beauty has to kiss him.** But WHY would she do that? Because she **loved** him.

- **Jesus goes a step farther** than Beauty ever did. He became the beast in our place, so that we can look like a beauty now.

- **Deep down, we yearn** for that to be true. We **know that kind of love exists** and we yearn for it, which is why that theme appears in so many of our fairy tales.

2. Persist

- Keep preaching, even when people don't listen.
- **In Isa 6, Isaiah gets the most ridiculous commission:** Go and preach. People mostly won't listen
- In Isa 53, he laments: **"Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" Isa 53:1**
 - **But he kept preaching, because**, he says, Isa 55:8–9, the world will not return void.
 - **And God had said, Isaiah 52:13 "Behold, my servant shall prosper!"**
 - Jesus would **not have gone to all the trouble** to die and not grant the power to save people
 - **Remember how many times** you had to hear the gospel before you believed? Keep preaching, like Isaiah did!
 -

3. Depend

- **"He [the Servant] will sprinkle many nations, kings will shut their mouths on account of him; for what had not been told them they will see, and what they had not heard they will understand." (Isa 52:15)**
- He would sprinkle his power on them and give sight! That's what we pray for—the sprinkling of his power. As I **told you a few weeks ago**, we should **not talk to people about God** without talking to God about those people!

4. Go

⁸ C.S. Lewis, "Myth Become Fact"

[7] How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (Isaiah 52:7 ESV)

- We get to go and proclaim this. We get to tell them, "Our God reigns!"
 - **SE Asia:** My neighbor's husband was killed in a car wreck. Ceremony where they sat and wept—cries of despair, "Who will tell them that they don't have to cry like this—Jesus will wipe away every tear!" I would go into the graveyards—and think, "Every stone represents someone who died without hearing that Jesus entered death and took its cure so we wouldn't have to stay dead, or fear it."
 - **Who will take the gospel to all these peoples of the world?**
- We **have good news!** God has taken the judgment we deserve. We **don't have to face the judgment** he'll bring one day—which he *is* bringing—if we **trust ourselves to**, and surrender to, Jesus!
- It's **why I'm going back this summer** for a few weeks—because it is what we are supposed be doing as a church, as a people.