

The Suffering Servant

Introduction. Isaiah 53 is the very heart of Isaiah 40-66 and it takes us to the cross. There are four Servant songs in this section of Isaiah: 42:1-17; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12. That these verses apply to Jesus is proved by John 12:38, Matthew 8:17, Acts 8:32-35, Mark 15:28, Luke 22:37, Romans 10:16, and 1 Peter 2:24. Isaiah 53 is quoted or referred to at least eighty-five times in the New Testament. The prophecy begins with 52:13-15. Christ will rise up, he will raise Himself still higher, He will stand on high. The climax was reached when Christ was raised from the dead and exalted to God's right hand (Acts 2:32-33; Philippians 2:5-11).

I. ***His Rejection (53:1-3)***

- A. There was a threefold rejection: words, works, and person. This first question is answered by the apostles John and Paul (John 12:37-41; Romans 10:16-21). The arm of Jehovah is a metonymy for the power of God which is revealed in the message and exerted in the salvation which results from believing it.
- B. The words "tender plant" literally means "a little bush." In other words, Christ was not a great tree, but a humble bush. When He appeared, the nation was barren and dry spiritually (Isaiah 11:1).
- C. Verse 2b implies that his true intrinsic beauty was hidden from people because they looked at Him entirely from a human standpoint. There will be no regal adornments such as the people desire. The principle that human appearance is irrelevant to God's choice is more radically applied here than in the choice of David (1 Samuel 16:5-13).
- D. In v. 3 the onlookers move from failure to desire the Servant to despising and rejecting him, refusing even to look at him. The words translated "sorrows" and "suffering" really mean "pains" and "sickness." These might suggest either a sick person or one sick at heart (Jeremiah 15:18).

II. ***His Redemption (53:4-6)***

- A. The Servant willingly took these burdens upon Himself. Verse 4a views our punishment figuratively in terms of the visitation of disease, while v.4b shows the onlookers coming to the grievously wrong conclusion that the Servant was suffering for his own sins at the hand of God. He was smitten by God only in the sense that God allowed Him to suffer, God provided Him as an offering for man's sin. Verse 5 shows that they have now accepted for

themselves the objective fact declared in vs. 4 (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24).

- B. Piercing and crushing are both appropriate terms for the Crucifixion, the first literal and the second figurative; and both are aptly summed up as "wounds" later in the verse. Peace and healing view sin in terms of the estrangement from God and the marring of sinners themselves that it causes. "Iniquities" is derived from a verb meaning "to bend, twist, distort;" hence, iniquities are perversions or violations of what is right.
- C. Verse 6 may well derive its language from the Day of Atonement ritual (Leviticus 16:21-22); for as God was the Author of the ritual (Leviticus 17:11), the high priest was simply his agent for transferring the sins of the people symbolically to the scapegoat. This verse is also an excellent commentary on the word "iniquity," for it indicates the character of the action as well as the action itself -- rejecting God's way for man's way.

III. ***His Resignation (53:7-9)***

- A. The term "oppressed" was appropriate in relation to the trials and death of Jesus; for all those who tried him had a measure of human authority and misused it when they condemned him, or, washing their hands of him, allowed others to take him to the place of death. In it all, he was quiet and uncomplaining (1 Peter 2:23), which suggests not only comparison but also contrast with Jeremiah (Jeremiah 11:18-20; 12:1-3).
- B. He was not treated justly. He was taken violently from prison and was not permitted to have justice (Acts 8:33; Matthew 27:22-31). The trial was "rigged" and the whole thing was illegal. Yet His generation did not protest; His disciples had forsaken Him and fled. The people of His generation saw Him as a blasphemer deserving of death. He was "cut off" like an unclean leper cast out of the city. Barabbas the criminal was treated with more kindness than was Jesus the Son of God.
- C. We are forced to conclude that the parallelism in this verse is not synonymous but antithetical, the first line indicating the human intention in his death and the second the divinely ordained intervention. This in fact was fulfilled in the burial of Jesus (Matthew 27:57-60). He had committed no criminal act and had not failed in His work and mission; therefore, His Father saw to it that the faithful Servant received an honorable burial.

IV. ***His Reward (53:10-12)***

- A. Verse 10a is almost shocking in its apparent presentation of

- arbitrary disregard for personal righteousness, until we recall the substitutionary nature of those sufferings. God is therefore not seen as harsh but as astonishingly gracious. He experienced emotional delight or was "pleased" with what Christ experienced.
- B. Verses 10b-11 remind us of 52:14-15; for after suffering comes vindication, suggesting the completion of the Servant's atoning work in His death and the opening of a new life beyond that death. The "guilt offering" may have special overtones of completeness, for it involved restitution as well as an offering to God. Nothing then remained to be done; the work was complete (Acts 2:23).
 - C. Not "by his knowledge" does He justify us, but by bearing our iniquities. The sinner is justified by his knowledge of the Servant and His sacrifice and work. As they come to knowledge of Him, the righteous Servant will justify many by bearing their iniquities.
 - D. Christ's righteousness and therefore his innocence of sin furnished a basis for his substitution. The final clause of vs. 11 states the objective grounds of this justification, which is a new position before God, the righteous Judge, on the basis of what the Servant has achieved in his sufferings, not of what we have ourselves done or will do.
 - E. The opening statement of vs. 12 shows God honoring the Servant for his faithful work and the Servant in turn distributing the spoils of battle to others. In fact, it introduces a new note into the passage, for nowhere else is there military language. Christ's work is presented as a victory over spiritual foes, resulting in a distribution of spoils to those made strong in him (Ephesians 4:8; 6:10-17). Now He is ranked with "the great." Kings will bow to Him (Revelation 19:14-21).
 - F. The last three clauses of vs. 12 sum up the matter. The Servant was numbered with the transgressors, not only in the outward circumstances of His death, but as a general description of the meaning of His sufferings (Luke 22:37). Innocent, He was charged with human sins and so bore their penalty.

Conclusion. Jesus ever lives to make intercession for all transgressors who draw near unto God through Him (Hebrews 7:22-25). For all who want to take advantage of the graciousness of God, we offer an invitation for you to trust and obey Jesus.