

The Suffering Servant

Introduction. Isaiah 53 is the very heart of Isaiah 40-66 and it points us to the cross of Christ. 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 several times in the New Testament (Matthew 8:17; Mark 15:28; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Acts 8:32-35; Romans 10:16; 1 Peter 2:24). Isaiah 53 is quoted or referred to at least 85 times in the New Testament. It is rightfully considered to be the highest point of the Old Testament.

The prophecy begins with 52:13-15. These verses contain a brief summary of what is enlarged upon in the next chapter. The deepest possible humiliation of the Servant of God shall be followed by His exaltation to the highest glory. 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). Because of this prophecy's importance and its beauty on the terrain of biblical literature, we will examine the chapter in this lesson.

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

- A. There was a threefold rejection of Christ: His words, works and person. This first question is answered by John and Paul (John 12:37-41; Romans 10:16-21). The question does not imply an entire rejection, but only expresses astonishment at the small number of believers. The "arm of God" is a metonymy for His power 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). From the human vantage point, it appeared quite unlikely that Jesus could accomplish anything.
- 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 vs. 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 "grief" really mean "pains" and "sickness." They are figurative designations of the sufferings of body and soul.

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 vs. 4b shows the onlookers coming to the 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 (Matthew 8:17). 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. "Wounded" and "bruised" are both appropriate terms for the crucifixion, the first literal and the second figurative; and both are aptly summed up as "stripes" later in the verse. "Peace" and "healed" view sin in terms of the estrangement from God and the marring of sinners themselves that it causes (cf. 1:5-6). "Iniquities" is derived from a verb meaning "to bend, twist, distort;" hence, iniquities are perversions or violations of what is right. As the punishment of sin and suffering are often represented under the image of a disease, so is deliverance from them under that of healing.
- 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.
 - 1. The universal sinfulness of man is affirmed (Romans 3:23). Without Jesus, the human family is void of hope (Ephesians 2:1-2, 12).
 - 2. This deplorable condition is our personal responsibility. We were not "born astray" rather, we have "gone astray" (cf. Romans 3:12).
 - 3. The remedy of Jesus' death is available potentially for all. This declaration is in contrast to the Calvinist's concept of "limited atonement."

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

- A. The term "oppressed" is 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). He demonstrated perfect meekness and patience.
- B. He was not treated justly. He was taken violently "by oppression and judgment" and was not permitted to have justice (Acts 8:33; Matthew 27:22-31). The trial was "rigged" and the whole proceeding 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 de-

serving 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. It is interesting to note that the verb "cut off" never occurs of a peaceful and natural death, but always of a violent and premature death.

- 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 and transference. This in fact was strikingly fulfilled in the burial of Jesus (Matthew 27:57-60). Not satisfied with His sufferings and His death, they sought to insult Him even in death by burying His corpse among criminals. 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 but God here is not seen as harsh but as astonishingly gracious. Because these sorrows would result in the pardon of an innumerable multitude of lost sinners, God experienced emotional delight or was "pleased" with what Christ experienced.
- B. Verses 10b-11 reminds 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 "offering for sin" is often referred to as a "trespass offering" in the Old Testament. When Christ, the perfect sacrifice, became the propitiatory sacrifice for our sins, nothing then remained to be done; the work was complete (Acts 2:23; Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10).
- C. Jesus sowed in tears but now reaps in joy. When He perceives so much good resulting from His great sorrows, He will be satisfied or satiated. This can be likened to a husbandman who labors in preparing his soil for the seed, and who waits for the harvest and then is satisfied when he sees the abundant sheaves.
- D. The sinner is justified by his knowledge of the Servant and His sacrifice and work (John 1:12; Philippians 3:8-11). As they come to knowledge of Him, the righteous Servant will justify many by bearing their iniquities. This proves that our salvation is based on God's mercy, not on what we have ourselves done or will do (Ephesians 2:8).
- 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 prophecy. The Servant was numbered with the transgressors, not only in the outward circumstances of His death (Mark 15:27-28), 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. It is if the prophet stood on a hill top outside Jerusalem and looked across the centuries, riveted upon the various elements of the Savior's death. What a magnificent galaxy of prophetic luminaries! No one can dismiss these matters as mere coincidence.

Jesus ever lives to make intercession for all transgressors who draw near unto God through Him (Hebrews 7:22-25). Jesus will come again, but He will not come to judge the world; not to suffer, bleed, die and intercede, but to judge the world (Hebrews 9:26-28). For all who want to take advantage of the graciousness of God, we offer an invitation for you to trust and obey Jesus.