

The Suffering Servant

Isaiah 53

By Scott Huckaby

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Isaiah 53:1-9 – Atoning suffering of the Messiah (NIV)

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? ²He 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. ³He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. ⁴Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷He 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 its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. ⁹He 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.

v1 – What report is not believed?

The Messiah will be rejected by Israel and will thus suffer death. But that death was by design because it is why the Messiah came, to pay the sin penalty of those who know Him.

To whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

To all who recognize Jesus as Savior.

- In this context of the Messiah's suffering and agony, this line seems out of place. The arm of the LORD is a picture of His strength, power, and might. Yet we will see a Messiah weak and suffering. But the strength, power, and might of God will be expressed in the midst of this suffering, seemingly weak Messiah.

v2 – What does it mean, *He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant?*

Jesus did grow up in God's presence and He increased in wisdom, stature, and in favor with God and men (Luke 2:52). But, He was as a tender plant — of seeming weakness and insignificance, not like a mighty tree.

How was Jesus as a root out of dry ground?

Jesus grew up in the Galilee region of Roman occupied Palestine. In respect to spiritual, political, and standard of living matters, it was indeed dry ground. God can bring the most wonderful things out of dry ground.

John 7:52 – *They answered and said to him, “Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee.”*

What does it tell us that the Messiah *had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him?*

Prophetically, Isaiah gives a more compelling description of Jesus than we find anywhere in the gospel accounts. Jesus was not a man of remarkable beauty or physical attractiveness (comeliness). This doesn't mean that Jesus was ugly, but it does mean that He did not have the “advantage” of good looks.

How does this speak to efforts to make the gospel more attractive?

It is totally unnecessary and actually counterproductive... when we try to attract people to Jesus through comeliness or beauty, we are using methods that run counter to the nature of Jesus.

v3 – Why was Jesus *despised and rejected by men*?

Pride – men preferred their own way to heaven, not God’s provision. They lifted up human reasoning over God’s revelation. They willfully forget:

Isaiah 55:8-9 – *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.*

People expected the Messiah to be a conquering deliverer like Moses, not a Suffering Servant...

Deuteronomy 18:15 – *The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear*

How was Jesus a Man of sorrows (NKJV)?

Most of our sorrow is really just self-pity. It is feeling sorry for ourselves. Jesus never once felt sorry for Himself. His sorrow was for others, and for the fallen, desperate condition of humanity.

How was Jesus regarded by men?

And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him: Because there was nothing outwardly beautiful or charismatic about the Messiah, mankind’s reaction was to withdraw from Him, to despise Him, and hold Him in low esteem.

- This shows that men value physical beauty and charisma far more than God does, and when we don’t see it, we can reject the ones God accepts.

How did the Messiah take up our pain and bore our suffering?

This is not necessarily the Messiah taking our guilt and God’s wrath upon Himself. Here, the Messiah took our pain upon Himself. He made our griefs His own, and our sorrows as if they were His.

- The image is that He loaded them up and carried them on His back, so we wouldn’t have to.

Why do people carry around pain, griefs and sorrows that Jesus really carried for them?

He took them from us, but for it to do us any good, we must release them.

Why did we consider Jesus to be punished by God?

Because God is in control... He was smitten and afflicted by God. The problem was not in seeing that, but in only seeing that. Man saw the suffering Jesus but didn’t understand the reasons why.

v5 – Why was Jesus *pierced for our transgressions*?

It was for our benefit, because of our transgressions...for our iniquities. It was in our place that the Messiah suffered.

How are we healed?

By His stripes (wounds, NIV). Here, the prophet sees through the centuries to know that the Messiah would be beaten with many stripes...

Mark 15:15 – *So Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he delivered Jesus, after he had scourged Him, to be crucified.*

The prophet announces that provision for healing is found in the suffering of Jesus, so by His stripes we are healed...

Hebrews 9:22 – *And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission (of sins)*

Is this spiritual healing or physical healing?

Matthew 8:16-17 – *When evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed. And He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: “He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses.”*

Certainly, physical healing was in mind here; but then there is this referring to spiritual healing...

1 Peter 2:24-25 – *who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

We can safely say that God has both our physical and spiritual healing in mind.

So, why do Christians have health problems as often as unbelievers?

Physical healing is not promised to every believer right now, just as the totality of our salvation is not promised to us right now. The Bible says that we have been saved (Ephesians 2:8), that we are being saved (1 Corinthians 1:18), and that we will be saved (1 Corinthians 3:15).

- Even so, there is a sense in which we have been healed, are being healed, and one day will be healed.
- God’s ultimate healing is called “resurrection,” and it is a glorious promise to every believer.
- Every “patch-up” healing in this present age simply anticipates the ultimate healing that will come.

v6 – Why do we need spiritual healing?

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way: Here the prophet describes our need for the Messiah’s atoning work.

- Sheep are stupid, headstrong animals, and we, like they, have gone astray. We have turned — against God’s way, every one, to his own way.

How have we each turned to our own way of sin?

The constant temptation is to condemn your way of sin, and to justify my way of sin. But each way that is our own way instead of the LORD's way is a sinful, destructive, damned way.

What does it mean, *the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all*?

Here we see the partnership between the Father and the Son in the work on the cross. If the Messiah was wounded for our transgressions, then it was also the LORD who laid on Him the iniquity of us all. The Father judged our iniquity as it was laid on the Son.

v7 – What does it reveal that the Messiah was *oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth*?

Despite the pain and the suffering of the Messiah, He never opened...His mouth to defend Himself. He was silent before His accusers never speaking to defend Himself, only to glorify God ...

Mark 15:3-5 – *the chief priests accused Him of many things, but He answered nothing. Then Pilate asked Him again, saying, "Do You answer nothing? See how many things they testify against You!" But Jesus still answered nothing, so that Pilate marveled.*

How was Jesus led as a lamb to the slaughter?

We should not take this as indicating that Jesus was a helpless victim of circumstances and was helpless as a lamb. Quite the contrary; even in His suffering and death, Jesus was in control (John 10:18, 19:11 and 19:30). Isaiah's point is that Jesus was silent, not helpless.

- The reference to a lamb is significant. Jesus fulfilled the Passover for us. He was the ultimate Passover Lamb.

v8 – What does it mean the Messiah was *taken away*?

The oppression and human judges ended His ministry. Of course, none of this was a surprise to the Lord and God is not limited in any way... His ministry continued through His disciples by design.

John 16:7 – *It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.*

What does it mean, *yet who of his generation protested*?

Certainly, once the disciples learned of His resurrection, they understood why Jesus had to go to the cross.

What does it mean *He was cut off from the land of the living*?

This is a euphemism for saying that the Suffering Servant Messiah would die. The land of the living is the world of the mortals.

- Up to this point, we might have thought He would only have been severely beaten. But there is no mistaking the point: *cut off from the land of the living*.
- The phrase '*cut off*' strongly suggests not only a violent, premature death but also the just judgment of God, not simply the oppressive judgment of men.

Why was the Messiah *cut off from the land of the living* for the transgression of my people he was punished: He paid the sin penalty of all who would trust in Him.

How does this verse dispute the idea that the suffering servant passages refer to Israel?

As badly as Israel has suffered through the centuries, she has never been cut off from the land of the living. She has always endured, even as God promised Abraham and the prophets proclaimed...

Malachi 3:6 – *For I am the Lord, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.*

v9 – How is it the Messiah was *assigned a grave with the wicked*?

Jesus died in the company of the wicked...

Luke 23:32-33 – *There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death. And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left.*

It certainly was the intention of those supervising His execution to cast Him into a common grave with the wicked.

How would the Messiah be *with the rich in his death*?

Despite the intention of others to make His grave with the wicked, God allowed the Messiah to be with the rich at His death, buried in the tomb of the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:50-56, Matthew 27:57-60).

What does it mean *He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth*?

It shows that even in His death, even in His taking the transgressions of God's people, the Messiah never sinned.

Hebrews 4:15 – *For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.*

He remained the Holy One, despite all the pain and suffering.

Isaiah 53:10-12 – Suffering Servant’s Victory (NIV)

¹⁰ Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. ¹¹ After he has suffered, 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. ¹² 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.

v10 – Why did the Messiah have to suffer and die?

The prophet gloriously, and emphatically, states that the suffering of the Servant of the Lord was ordained by the Father, even for His pleasure!

- Jesus was no victim of circumstance or at the mercy of governing authorities. It was the planned, ordained work of the LORD God, prophesied by Isaiah hundreds of years before it happened.
- This was God’s victory, not Satan’s or man’s triumph.

Was it the suffering of the Son that pleased the Father?

No, but it accomplished the work of reconciling the world to Himself, which what was completely pleasing to God the Father.

- Though Jesus was treated as if He were an enemy of God, He was not. Even as Jesus was punished as if He were a sinner, He was performing the most holy service to God the Father ever offered.

How was the Messiah’s life an offering for sin?

The idea of a substitutionary atonement for sin cannot be more specifically stated.

What offspring will the Lord see?

The death, the burial, the offering of the Messiah does not end the story. He lives on! He lives to see His seed, His spiritual descendants. He shall prolong His days, and not be under the curse of death.

What is the will of the Lord that will prosper in the hand of the Messiah?

John 6:40 – *this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day*

Everyone who embraces God’s provision for eternal life will have it... having eternal life is as simple as that! Why wouldn’t everybody accept that free gift from God!

v11 – What will satisfy the Messiah?

He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied: The Messiah will look upon His work including the travail of His soul and in the end, He shall be satisfied. The Messiah will have no regrets. Every bit of the suffering and agony was worth it and brought about a satisfactory result.

What does it tell us that He will see the light of life?

The Messiah will be resurrected! His being cut off from the land of the living is not His end.

Why is the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ so important?

1 Corinthians 15:16-17 – *if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!*

Jesus is the firstfruits of the resurrection. He demonstrated to us what we can look forward to. He is proof that there is life after death. His resurrection is the basis for our faith in Him!

What knowledge is it that many will be justified?

It is in knowing the Messiah, in both who He is and what He has done, that makes us justified before God.

What is the difference between knowing the Messiah versus knowing about Him?

There is a big difference between knowing facts about someone and having a relationship with them.

Matthew 7:21–23 – *Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’*

It can be easy to substitute religion for a real relationship with Jesus. We often think that, if we are doing “Christian things,” that’s all that counts. The greatest commandment is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength” (Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). It’s hard to love someone you don’t know.

- Loving Him starts with surrendering to His plan for your life. That’s what it means to make Him Lord (Matthew 6:33; Romans 10:9–10; Psalm 16:8).
- Life is about continually seeking Him, learning more about Him, and enjoying His fellowship (Jeremiah 29:13; Philippians 3:8).
- Persons in a relationship communicate with each other.

v12 – What is the triumph of the Messiah?

Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong: The Messiah's glorious work will be rewarded. With the image of dividing the spoil after a victorious battle, we see that the Messiah ultimately triumphs.

Philippians 2:10-11 – *That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

(This is the Messiah's ultimate triumph!)

When will every knee bow before Jesus?

At the Great White Throne Judgment at the beginning of the Eternal State...

Revelation 20:13-14 – *Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.*

No one will be justified on the basis of their works... whoever didn't trust in God's provision for eternal life during your mortal life, will end up in the lake of fire. The second death is spiritual death.

Who does the Messiah divide the spoil with?

With the strong; those strong in Him. We can share in the spoil of Jesus' victory!

Romans 8:17 – *If children, then heirs; heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.*

What does it mean the Messiah poured out His soul unto death?

This speaks of the totality of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Poured out means that it was all gone. There was nothing left, nothing more He could give.

How was the Messiah numbered with the transgressors?

Jesus could never become a sinner, a transgressor Himself. Yet willingly, loving, He was numbered with the transgressors. Is there a rollcall taken for transgressors? Jesus says, "Put My name down with them."

Romans 8:29 – *For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.*

What does it mean the Messiah bore the sin of many?

Over and over again, the prophet emphasizes the point. The Servant of the LORD, the Messiah, suffers on behalf of and in the place of guilty sinners.

What does it mean the Messiah made intercession for the transgressors?

We know that presently, Jesus has a ministry of intercession...

Hebrews 7:25 – *He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.*

Jesus makes it possible for us to pray to the Father and He is our advocate making intercession for us when the Evil One accuses us.

1 John 2:1 – *if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous*

What applications come to mind from our discussion?

- Looks are superficial, the attractiveness of Jesus is who He is, not what He looked like... we should remember.
- All healing comes from the Lord; physical healing may be delayed to serve His purpose but it will come.
- The Suffering Servant and Conquering Messiah are one and the same... and He is coming back!
- Knowing about Jesus is not the same as knowing Him... getting to know Him is our greatest mission.