

The Suffering Servant

Isaiah 53

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This morning, we are going to take a look at one of the most amazing Messianic prophecies in all of Scripture: Isaiah 53.

If you've been tracking our progress in Isaiah using the chart Ben passed out when we began looking at Isaiah, Chapter 53 is right in the middle of the section titled, "The Servant Fulfills God's Mission." Of course, we know the Servant this is referring to is the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Son of God whom God the Father sent to be our Savior.

Before we get to Isaiah 53, I'd like to point out another great Messianic prophecy in this section where God the Father said to the Son...

Isaiah 49:6 – *You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.*

This is why I've heard the Book of Isaiah called the Gospel of Isaiah. Not only will the Messiah restore the tribes of Jacob which is another term for Israel, He will also be a light to the Gentiles and the One who makes it possible for everyone to have salvation.

- The context here indicates that this salvation is the ultimate salvation, life after death which is also called eternal salvation.
- What is amazing about this passage is that it is a reference to the Church Age here in the Old Testament. The Church Age was essentially a mystery during Old Testament times.

Alright, with that introduction, let's take a look at the first three verses in Isaiah 53...

Isaiah 53:1-2 – *Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? ²For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. ³He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.*

v1 – The report that would not be believed is the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah would be rejected by Israel and thus suffer death. But His death was by design because it was why the Messiah came, to pay the sin penalty of those who know Him.

It also says, *the arm of the LORD [has] been revealed* to all who recognize the Messiah.

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

The work of salvation by the Messiah was even more significant than the original work of creation which was described in Psalm 8:3 as the work of God's fingers. Contrast that with the work of our salvation where God bared His holy arm:

Isaiah 52:10 – *The Lord has made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.*

v2 – says, *He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant...* As Jesus grew up before God, He increased in wisdom, stature, and in favor with both God and men (per Luke 2:52). But He was as a tender plant — of seeming weakness and insignificance, not like a mighty tree.

Jesus was also as a root out of dry ground...

Jesus grew up in the Galilee region of Roman occupied Israel. In respect to spiritual, political, and standard of living matters, the Galilee region was indeed dry ground. Jesus' critics told Him in John 7:52, "*Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee.*" God can bring the most wonderful things out of dry ground.

We also see here that the Messiah had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him

Jesus was not a man of remarkable physical attractiveness. This doesn't mean that He was ugly, just that He did not have the "special advantage" of good looks.

There is an application here in church efforts to make the gospel more attractive...

It is totally unnecessary and actually counterproductive...

- When we try to attract people to Jesus through worldly beauty, we are using methods that run counter to the nature of Jesus.

v3 – We see that Jesus was *despised and rejected by men*...

Men rejected Him due to their pride preferring their own way to heaven instead of God's provision. People generally put human reasoning over God's revelation and 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.*

The Jews wanted the Messiah to deliver them from the tyranny of Rome, just as Moses had delivered them from the tyranny of Egypt.

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*

So, the Jewish religious leaders expected the Messiah to be a conquering deliverer like Moses, not a Suffering Servant.

- The Messiah will deliver Israel from the tyranny of a Gentile government, but that will happen when the Messiah returns.

We see here that Jesus was a Man of sorrows...

Most of our human sorrow is really just self-pity; it is feeling sorry for ourselves.

- Jesus' sorrow was for others, and for the fallen, desperate condition of humanity.

Jesus was not esteemed by men; it says here...

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, status, and charisma far more than God does; and when we don't see it, we can reject the ones God accepts.

OK, let's read on in verses 4 through 6...

Isaiah 53:4-6 – *Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.*

v4 – The Messiah has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows:

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.
- That tells us we need to release our pain, griefs and sorrows to the Lord so that He can carry them for us.

Some may think that Jesus was punished by God...

Certainly, God is in control so Jesus would not have been smitten and afflicted outside God's will. The problem is not in seeing that, but in seeing only that.

- Men saw the suffering Jesus but didn't understand the reasons why.

v5 – Tells us why Jesus was *wounded for our*

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

Jesus was also *bruised for our iniquities*...

This brings to mind the Proto Evangelium, the first mention of the gospel where God told Satan:

Genesis 3:15 – *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.*

Satan would suffer a fatal injury at the hands of the Seed of the Woman, another term for the Messiah. And Satan would give the Messiah a non-fatal injury. Satan was indeed behind Jesus going to the cross, but He rose from the dead thus rendering it a non-fatal injury.

Notice that we are healed by *His stripes*... 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.*

Roman scourging was done with a whip having multiple leather thongs embedded with metal or bone designed to tear the flesh.

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

We naturally assume that this passage is referring to spiritual healing; but it also refers to physical healing as well:

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; and there is also reinforcement of spiritual healing in 1 Peter 2 where, speaking of Jesus...

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.*

We can safely say that God is the source of both our physical and spiritual healing.

So, with this promise, we may wonder why 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 (justification, Ephesians 2:8), that we are being saved (sanctification, 1 Corinthians 1:18), and that we will be saved (glorification, 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 – Tells us why we need spiritual healing...

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way: 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.

The constant temptation is to condemn someone else’s way of sin, and to justify our own way of sin. But each way that is not the LORD’s way is a sinful, destructive, condemned way.

It says here, *the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all...* This reveals the partnership between the Father and the Son in the work on the cross. Since the Messiah was wounded for our transgressions, then it was also the Father who laid on Him the iniquity of us all. And the Father judged our iniquity as it was laid on the Son.

Alright, let’s look at verses 7 through 9...

Isaiah 53:7-9 – *He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.* ⁸ *He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; For the transgressions of My people He was stricken.* ⁹ *And they made His grave with the wicked— But with the rich at His death, Because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth.*

v7 – Despite the pain and the suffering, Jesus 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.*

Jesus was also led as a lamb to the slaughter...

We should not take this as indicating that Jesus was a helpless victim of circumstances. 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 the Messiah would be silent, not helpless.

- The reference to a lamb is significant. Jesus fulfilled the Passover for us.
- Jesus was Himself the ultimate Passover Lamb.
- Indeed, Jesus died on the very day the Jews slaughtered their lambs for Passover.

v8 – Tells us that the Messiah was taken from confinement and judgment...

The oppression of human judges ended Jesus’ ministry. Of course, none of this was a surprise to Him and He was not limited in any way... Jesus’ 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.*

Those *who will declare His generation* were His followers. Certainly, once the disciples saw His resurrection and had the presence of the Holy Spirit, they understood why Jesus had to go to the cross.

Isaiah wrote that the Messiah would be *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 mortals.

- Up to this point, we might have thought the Messiah would only have been severely beaten. But there is no mistaking the point: *cut off from the land of the living* means to die.
- 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.

The reason the Messiah was *cut off from the land of the living* is also given here: *for the transgressions of My people He was stricken.* Jesus paid the sin penalty of all who would trust in Him.

Some people dismiss the Suffering Servant passages like Isaiah 53 by saying they refer to Israel. But this verse exposes the error in that interpretation. 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 – We also see here that the Messiah’s grave would be with the wicked...

Jesus did indeed die in the company of the wicked...

Luke 23:32-33 – *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.*

But the Messiah would 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, Matt 27:57-60).

Isaiah goes on to tell us the Messiah had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth...

This tells us that even in His death, even in His bearing 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.*

Jesus remained the Holy One, despite all His pain and suffering.

Let’s wrap up Isaiah 53 by reading verses 10-12...

Isaiah 53:10-12 – *Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand. ¹¹ He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because He poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors, and He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.*

v10 – Isaiah says here that the suffering of the Messiah was ordained by the Father, even for His pleasure!

- Jesus was no victim of circumstance 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.

It was not the suffering of the Son that pleased the Father... but it accomplished the work of reconciling the world to Himself, which was what completely pleased 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.

The Messiah’s mortal life was given as an offering for sin... The idea of a substitutionary atonement for sin could not be described any better.

And not only that but the death, burial, and offering of the Messiah does not end the story.

- It says here that the Messiah *shall prolong His days.* This prophesies the resurrection of the Messiah!
- His being cut off from the land of the living would not be His end.

The Messiah would live on to see His seed, His spiritual descendants.

The doctrine of the resurrection of Christ is critically 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. And His resurrection is the basis for our faith in Him!

v11 – Says... *He shall see the distress of His soul, and be satisfied:* The Messiah will look upon His work through the distress of His soul and will be satisfied. The Messiah will have no regrets.

- Every bit of His suffering and agony was worth it to bring about the satisfactory result of saving the multitudes who would trust in Him.

The knowledge that will justify many with their sins forgiven is... in knowing the Messiah, both who He is and what He has done; that is what makes us justified before God.

But, the Bible warns us: there is a difference between knowing the Messiah and just knowing about Him...

You can know a bunch of facts about someone but that is not the same as actually 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 should be about continually seeking Jesus, learning more about Him, and enjoying His fellowship (Jeremiah 29:13; Philippians 3:8).
- Persons in a relationship communicate with each other... we speak to Him in prayer and He speaks to us in many ways and especially through His Word, the Bible.

v12 – The triumph of the Messiah is this: *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.

The Messiah divides the spoil with... the strong; those whose strength is in Him. This means we can share in the spoil of Jesus’ victory! As it says in Romans 8:17...

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.*

It also says here that 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. And He did that for our benefit.

The Messiah was numbered with the transgressors... Jesus could never become a sinner, a transgressor Himself. Yet willingly, loving, He was numbered with us transgressors. As it says in...

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.*

And Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah bore the sin of many... Over and over again, the prophet emphasizes this point. The Servant of the LORD, the Messiah, suffers on behalf of and in the place of us guilty sinners.

And the Messiah made intercession for the transgressors... 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*

Alright, with that exposition of Isaiah 53, what observations have you made about this passage?

Do you have any take-away’s you’d like to share?

Some applications I have that come from this passage are:

- The Suffering Servant and Conquering Messiah are one and the same: Jesus Christ! He has already been here as the Suffering Servant and He will return as the Conquering King.
- Jesus literally fulfilled all the First Advent Messianic prophecies... so we should expect Him to literally fulfill the prophecies of His return.
- Knowing about Jesus is not the same as knowing Him... getting to know Him is our greatest mission.