

The Suffering Servant

A Study of the Servant Songs



“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” (Isaiah 53:5)

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Introduction

- I. Before partaking of the Lord's Supper brethren will often read from fifty-third chapter of Isaiah and contemplate the suffering Christ endured on the cross (Isa 53:1-12).
 - A. This beloved chapter in Isaiah is often called the *Suffering Servant* passage.
 - B. The passage is actually the fourth of Isaiah's *Servant Songs*—a series of passages dealing with “the Servant” or “the Servant of the Lord.”
- II. New Testament writers, and even Jesus Himself, repeatedly applied the words of the Servant Songs to the life and work of Jesus.
 - A. “The NT rests its doctrine of atonement on this prophetic concept of the suffering servant. Thirty-four times we find various NT writers referring to Isaiah's proclamation as fulfilled in Jesus (e.g., Acts 8:32-35; 1 Pet 2:22-25).” (Morris, L., “Atonement,” *Dictionary of Bible Imagery*, 55)
 - B. As Jesus healed the sick at Capernaum, Matthew says He “took our infirmities” as Isaiah prophesied (Matt 8:16-17; Isa 53:4; cf. 1 Pet 2:24).
 - C. When the Pharisees plotted to kill Jesus, Matthew, in his longest quotation from the Old Testament, showed how their rejection was a part of Isaiah's prophecy concerning the Messiah (Matt 12:14-21; Isa 42:1-4).
 - D. Mark reminds us that “it is written” that the Son of Man “must suffer many things and be treated with contempt” (Mark 9:12; Isa 53:1-12).
 - E. John tells us that the people who rejected the signs Christ performed fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy (John 12:37-38; Isa 53:1).
 - F. On the night of His betrayal Jesus told how He would be arrested as a criminal, in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (Luke 22:34-37; Isa 53:12).
 - G. Peter reminds us that Christ's sinless example was the subject of Isaiah's ancient prophecy (1 Pet 2:21-25; Isa 53:9).
 - H. As the Ethiopian eunuch read Isaiah 53 he was confused about the identity of the Suffering Servant (Acts 8:29-35).
 1. “His confusion was understandable, since contemporary Jewish thought was divided on the interpretation of this passage. Some held that the slaughtered sheep represented the nation, others that Isaiah spoke of himself, still others that he referred to the Messiah. There was no doubt in Philip's mind, however, of whom Isaiah wrote.” (MacArthur, *Acts 1-12*, MNTC, 257)
 2. “Of all the passages in the Old Testament that the Ethiopian could have been reading, there is no single chapter more appropriate for explaining the work of Christ than Isaiah 53. Although many Jews thought of their own experience as fulfilling much of the suffering and martyrdom themes of the passage, Philip declares that the passage finds its decisive fulfillment in one person—Jesus.” (Arnold, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, 2:287)
 3. Prior to the story about the Ethiopian, the book of Acts had already referred to Jesus four times as the *servant* of God (Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30).
 - I. In the Suffering Servant passages we are given a dramatic view of our Lord's life in the days of His flesh, we see His compassion, humility, power, and the salvation He would bring to all the world (John 3:16).

- III. The prophet Isaiah began his ministry about 740 B.C. and ended in 680 B.C.
- A. God, through Isaiah, gives us a clear picture of what was to happen, not only in the immediate future for Israel, but how God would bring the Messiah, His Suffering Servant, into the world.
1. About 150 years before it happened, Isaiah predicted that the Jews in the southern kingdom would be taken into Babylonian captivity (Isa 6:11-12; 11:12).
 - a) Micah also foretold of the Babylonian captivity (Micah 4:10).
 - b) Jeremiah proclaimed that the captivity of the Jews would last for seventy years (Jer 25:1, 11-12).
 2. Isaiah's topic in chapters 40-66 was the Babylonian captivity, the reasons for it, and ultimately the deliverance from it.
 - a) The first deportation of the Jews from Judah to Babylon took place c. 597 B.C. (2 Kgs 24:12-16; Jer 52:28).
 - b) The destruction of the temple and a second deportation took place c. 586 B.C. (2 Kgs 25:8-21; Jer 39:8-10; 40:7; 52:12-34).
 - c) A third deportation took place c. 582 B.C. (Jer 52:28-30).
 3. Jehovah would use Cyrus, the king of Persia, to deliver His people from Babylonian captivity and the means by which the Jews would be able to return Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1-4; 5:13-17).
 4. God referred to Cyrus, as "My shepherd" and His "anointed" (Isa 44:28; 45:1).
 5. "Cyrus entered Babylon on October 29, 539 B.C., and presented himself in the role of the liberator of the people. He allowed the images of the gods to be transported back to their original cities and instituted a kindly policy of repatriation for captive peoples. His policies of moderation naturally extended to the Hebrews, whom he encouraged to return to Judea to rebuild their temple (2 Chron 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-6)." (Gates, "Cyrus," *NIBD*)
 6. "In his decree to the Jews (Ezra 1), Cyrus referred to 'Jehovah, the God of heaven' as the one who had given him 'All the kingdoms of the earth,' and who had charged him 'to build him a house in Jerusalem' (Ezra 1:2 ASV). How did Cyrus know this? Probably not through dreams or visions, but rather through confrontation with the prophecies of Isaiah written 150 years before. It seems highly probable that Daniel who lived at least until the third year of Cyrus (Dan 10:1), and who was greatly concerned about the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy of the return of Israel to her land after seventy years (Dan 9:2; cf. Jer 25:11, 12), was the one who presented a scroll of Isaiah's prophecies to the Pers. monarch. Josephus, who had access to many historical records long since lost, states that 'when Cyrus read this, and admired the Divine power, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfill what was so written' (*Antiq.* XI, i, 2)." (Whitcomb, "Cyrus," *ZPEB*)

- B. However, in the Servant Songs, Isaiah tells of a *greater deliverance* than that from Babylon and of a *greater deliverer* than Cyrus.
1. “In the Suffering Servant the Messiah is seen making vicarious atonement through his passion and death, which has a positive purpose in the plan of God for the salvation of sinful men. The Messiah as the Suffering Servant sums up the entire prophetic movement and constitutes a climax in OT prophecy. The progress of prophetic revelation in history leads up to the idea of the innocent Suffering Servant of God, who in the redemptive purpose of his death reconciles men to God. In the Messiah’s sacrifice of himself as an expiation for sin his priestly office is revealed and combined with his work as prophet and king.” (Schultz, “Messiah,” *NIBD*)
 2. The Suffering Servant is introduced long before the beloved fifty-third chapter of Isaiah and is mentioned in four separate sections of the book.

Discussion

I. The Servant Has A Mission (Isa 42:1–4)

- A. After Jesus healed the man with the withered hand, Matthew applied these verses to Christ (Matt 12:15–21).
- B. The Servant was chosen by God (Isa 42:1).
 1. Not just anyone could perform this task.
 2. God would delight in this One (cf. Matt 3:17; 17:5).
 3. God demonstrated His delight in His Servant by sending the Holy Spirit upon Him (John 1:29–34; Luke 4:16–21; Isa 61:1–2).
- C. The Servant stands in vivid contrast to worldly conquerors (Isa 42:2).
 1. The Servant’s conduct is different from that of ordinary men.
 2. Jesus did not enter into violent disputes with false teachers, but rather used the power of His words (John 7:46; Matt 7:28–29).
- D. The Servant would have pity on their low estate (Isa 42:3; Matt 9:35–38).
 1. He would not crush men nor quench their spirit.
 2. “These people would take a bowl of oil, put a piece of flax in it to act as a wick and it would be their lamp for light. When the oil burned low and the flax began to smoke and irritate those in the house, it was immediately snuffed out. The servant wouldn’t do that. He carefully replenished the oil and preserved the feeble flickering until a bright flame returned. This servant will not just talk good religion, he will speak in genuineness.” (McQuiggan, *The Book of Isaiah*, 212)
 3. He would not bind burdens hard to bear (Matt 23:4; Acts 15:5, 10).
 4. The Beatitudes are a wonder expression of this (Matt 5:1–12).
 5. Think of our Lord’s kind and tender invitation (Matt 11:28–30).
- E. There is an implied difficulty, i.e., the possibility of the Servant growing weak or becoming discouraged (Isa 42:4).
 1. His mission is to the *coastlands* or the *islands* (Isa 42:1, 4).
 2. Christ was a light to the Gentiles (Matt 12:21; Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47).

3. The kingdom of Cyrus was limited and the Law of Moses was only for the nation of Israel—but the Servant has a universal mission and message!
4. “As God’s Servant, Jesus did what Israel could never do. He perfectly carried out the will of the Father so that people everywhere may believe in the Holy One of Israel.” (Martin, *BKC*, comments on Isa 42:1–4)

II. The Servant Has Great Difficulties In His Mission (Isa 49:1–7)

- A. The Suffering Servant is the speaker in these verse.
 1. He did not take this duty upon Himself (John 6:38–40).
 2. The Lord *called* Him into this service (cf. Heb 5:4, 9–10).
- B. Again, the *coastlands* (Gentiles) are invited to listen (Isa 49:1).
- C. The Servant was to “restore the preserved ones of Israel” and be a “light to the Gentiles” (Isa 49:6).
 1. The Apostle Paul was among this remnant (Rom 9:1–8; 11:1–5).
 2. Christ is the light to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46–48; Matt 4:12–16; Isa 9:1–2).
 - a) When the disciples were sent out on the Limited Commission they were explicitly told not to go to the Gentiles (Matt 10:5–6).
 - b) However, in the Great Commission, the apostles were sent to “all the nations” (Matt 28:19).
 - c) The message of Christ would go “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).
- D. Though the Servant has been chosen by God, the nation of Israel would despise and abhor Him (Isa 49:7; John 1:11–12).
 1. In time, all men would bow before Him (Phil 2:10–11).
 2. He is indeed “the ruler over the king of thee earth” (Rev 1:5; 21:24).
 3. Christ is “the King of kings” (1 Tim 6:15; Rev 17:14; 19:16).

III. The Servant Will Suffer (Isa 50:4–9)

- A. One part of the Servant’s commission is to teach (Isa 50:4).
- B. The Servant would not flee like Jonah (Isa 50:5; Jonah 1:3).
- C. Isaiah speaks of the suffering of our Lord on His journey to the cross (Isa 50:6).
 1. This was fulfilled by Christ (Matt 26:67–68; 27:26–31).
 2. Servants of God have always faced difficulties (cf. Matt 5:10–12).
- D. In this section of Scripture there is no reason given for His suffering—we are left to wonder *why* He had to suffer.
 1. While others may desert Him, the Father who vindicates Him is always near (cf. John 16:32; Matt 27:42–43).
 2. Jesus was “declared to be the Son of God with power ... by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:3–4).

IV. The Servant Suffers For Sin (Isa 52:13–53:12)

- A. “It is generally acknowledged by students of the prophets that in this the fourth of the Servant Songs is attained the loftiest height of prophecy. It was pointed out in the third song (50:4–11) that the Servant will suffer in obedience to the word of God, but the purpose of His suffering was not explained. This final song deals with both purpose and achievement. The Servant is to conquer as a sufferer, not as a warrior (cf. Rev 5:4–6). From His shameful suffering and inhumane treatment He is to emerge in triumph and glory. In this song the Servant neither appears in person nor speaks, but He is the central figure in the message of both Jehovah and the prophet. No time factor is found in the song. It deals with the past, present, and future; its theme embraces the whole of time. A question may be posed as to whether 52:13–15 is a conclusion to 52:1–12, which deals with the deliverance of Israel, a transition from 52:1–12 to chapter 53, or a part of chapter 53, serving as the introduction. Although the three verses build upon 52:1–12, they are best regarded as the introduction to the following chapter, the first of five stanzas in the final Servant Song (52:13–53:12).” (Young, *A Commentary on Isaiah*, 434)
- B. The Servant will be “exalted and extolled and be very high” (Isa 52:13), which speaks of three stages of His exaltation:
1. His resurrection from the grave (Rom 1:3–4).
 2. His ascension into heaven (Acts 1:6–11).
 3. His being seated at the right hand of God (cf. Acts 2:33; Heb 1:3).
- C. “His visage was marred more than any man” (Isa 52:14).
1. Pilate ordered Christ to be *scourged* (Matt 27:26).
 - a) A *scourge* was a “Roman implement for severe bodily punishment. Horace calls it *horrible flagellum*. It consisted of a handle, to which several cords or leather thongs were affixed, which were weighted with jagged pieces of bone or metal, to make the blow more painful and effective. ... The victim was tied to a post (Acts 22:25) and the blows were applied to the back and loins, sometimes even, in the wanton cruelty of the executioner, to the face and the bowels. In the tense position of the body, the effect can easily be imagined. So hideous was the punishment that the victim usually fainted and not rarely died under it. ... It usually preceded capital punishment (Livy xxxiii.36).” (Dosker, “Scourge; Scourging,” *ISBE*)
 - b) The Romans called a scourging “halfway death.”
 2. Christ was stripped of all clothing, His hands were tied above His head, and then He was scourged with a *flagellum*.
 - a) A *flagellum* was a leather whip made up with thongs of leather, and each thong had a piece of bone or lead tied to the ends so it would cut deeper into the flesh.
 - b) Josephus speaks of a man named Ananus who was “whipped until his bones were bare” (Josephus, *War*, 6:304).

3. Isaiah would later tell us that “by His stripes we are healed” (Isa 53:5).
 - a) The soldiers hit Jesus and smote Him with the a reed, which served as a mock scepter (Matt 27:27-31).
 - b) The terrible beating of His thorn-crowned brow caused His facial features to be hidden.
 - c) “I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me” (Psa 22:17).
4. The servant will not remain in humiliation (Phil 2:9-11; Acts 3:13, 26).
- D. He would *sprinkle* many nations (Isa 52:15).
 1. The word *sprinkle* was a technical word used of the cleansing by the priests under the Law of Moses (Lev 4:6; 8:11; 14:7).
 2. The purpose of sprinkling was to obtain ritual purity; consequently, the one who does the sprinkling had to be pure (John 1:29; Heb 12:22-24; 1 Pet 1:2).
- E. The “arm of the Lord” (Isa 53:1) is a phrase Isaiah often uses to describe the power of God (cf. Isa. 40:10; 51:9; 62:8).
- F. Men would entirely misjudge the Servant (Isa 53:2).
 1. There was no physical beauty that drew others to Him—He did not look like a royal person.
 2. Men hid their face from Him—they regarded Him as nothing.
 3. One of the reasons Judas betrayed Christ with a kiss was to identify who Jesus was in the Garden—Jesus looked like an ordinary Jew (cf. Mark 14:43-44).
- G. Men of the world saw nothing special in Him (Isa 53:3).
 1. “Jews and Gentiles alike treated him as no one special. The proof that he was just another dirty little Jew (to foreigners) was the way they mistreated him and mocked him. And the proof that he was just another Jew (to Jews) was that he suffered with ‘all the other sinners.’ And so, they esteemed him not.” (McQuiggan, *The Book of Isaiah*, 269)
 2. “Is this not the carpenter’s son?” (Matt 13:55).
- H. “We esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted” (Isa 53:4).
 1. At the foot of the cross the Jewish leaders looked upon His sufferings as the punishment for His own sins (Matt 27:39-43).
 2. However, the reason for His sufferings is *our* sins (Isa 53:6; 1 Pet 2:21-24)!
- I. The words *wounded* and *bruised* (Isa 53:5) are the strongest terms to describe a violent and agonizing death.
 1. There is a stress on the *our* in both statements.
 2. By His *stripes* (trans. *wounds* in the ESV) we are healed (1 Pet 2:24).
 3. The procession of Christ and the two thieves was led by a Roman Centurion towards the place of the crucifixion.
 - a) A Roman Centurion compelled Simon to carry the cross part of the 650 yards from the Fortress Antonia to Calvary (Luke 23:26; Matt 27:32).
 - b) Even in the midst of such great agony, our Lord was concerned about those in Jerusalem (Luke 23:27-28).
 4. At Golgotha, the “place of the skull,” Jesus is thrown back onto the rough wood and spikes are driven into His hands (Matt 27:33-37).

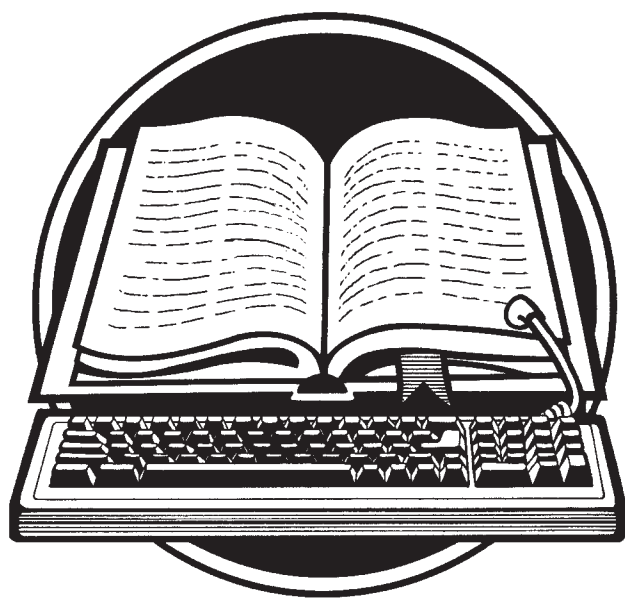
5. “Crucifixion was a Roman, not a Jewish, form of punishment. It was usually preceded by scourging, which, carried out thoroughly, left the body a mass of swollen and bloody flesh ... All who cared to witness the horrible spectacle were free to do so; the Romans, who thought it necessary to rule by terror, chose, for capital offenses by other than Roman citizens, what Cicero called ‘the most cruel and hideous of tortures.’ The offender’s hands and feet were bound (seldom nailed) to the wood; a projecting block supported the backbone or the feet; unless mercifully killed, the victim would linger there for two or three days, suffering the agony of immobility, unable to brush away the insects that fed upon his naked flesh, and slowly losing strength until the heart failed and brought an end. Even the Romans sometimes pitied the victim, and offered him a stupefying drink.” (Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, 572)
- J. There is an emphasis on how helpless we all are (Isa 53:6).
1. “This verse is perhaps the most penetrating of all descriptions of sin and atonement, uncovering the fecklessness which is second nature to us and the self-will which isolates us from God and man alike; but also the divine initiative which transferred our punishment to the one substitute.”
 2. Matthew reminds us how when Jesus saw the multitudes, “He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd” (Matt 9:36).
- K. Notice His voluntary endurance (Isa 53:7-9).
1. He would willingly lay down His own life (John 10:15-18).
 2. “They made His grave with the wicked—but with the rich at His death” (Isa 53:9) refers to the intention of the government to give Him a state burial, but Joseph of Arimathea was granted His body (Matt 27:57-60).
- L. The Lord was pleased with His suffering (Isa 53:10-12; cf. John 10:11; Heb 2:9).
1. “He shall see His seed” (Isa 53:10; cf. 2 Sam 7:12-16).
 2. This was fulfilled in Christ on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:29-36).

Conclusion

- I. Because of His suffering, He is able to aid those who are tempted (Heb 2:14-18).
- II. We are redeemed by “the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet 1:19).
- III. At this very moment Jesus is “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev 19:16).
- IV. “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone” (Heb 2:9).

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