

“The Suffering Servant”
Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12
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Today we have the privilege of taking a closer look at a powerful Messianic passage in the prophet’s scroll. As I continue to read through Isaiah, it is hard for me to imagine how people the world over deny the existence of the one true living God and His Good and Gentle Servant who fulfilled prophecy with amazing accuracy.

You will recall that in our previous lessons in chapters 42, 49 and 50, God’s Servant, whom was identified as the Messiah, would build a kingdom characterized by justice, restoration, and salvation. This vision of a Gentle Servant was contrary to the expectations and hopes of the Jewish faithful who for generations anticipated a Messianic royal descendant of King David, who through military force would destroy Israel’s enemies.

Can you imagine the surprise, disappointment, and even denial that may have been felt by many of God’s people when the Gentle Servant showed up bearing characteristics that were more like a lamb rather than a lion? Nevertheless, this Servant will bring "a light to the nations," rescue the oppressed, and establish a new covenant.

According to John MacArthur, “This last and most memorable of the four Servant Songs contains unarguable, incontrovertible proof that God is the author of Scripture and Jesus the fulfillment of messianic prophecy...Clearly this refers to Messiah Jesus, as the New Testament attests.”

As we dig into chapter 52, let me add that I appreciate the strategy that Dan used during his teaching of chapter 51 and the first part of chapter 52. I, too, will follow guiding questions that will take us through the last three verses of chapter 52. While there are only three verses, they are impactful to us as believers and significant in God’s redemptive plan.

Those questions follow:

- 1) Why will the Servant be raised, lifted up, and highly exalted? (52:13)
- 2) Why was it necessary for Jesus to suffer so intensely? (52:14)
- 3) Why is it important that the Servant will “sprinkle” many nations? (52:15)

This section begins with these words, “*See, my servant will act wisely, he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted*” (Isaiah 52:13). **The first question we might pose then, is why will the Servant be raised, lifted up, and highly exalted?** These are the words of the Lord declaring that His Servant will be successful in His mission to save sinners. Because of Jesus’ obedience to God in how He served others, even to the point of death, He will be exalted.

Perhaps like me, you have chosen Philippians chapter 2 as one of your favorite passages. Verses 6-9 are particularly relevant to our lesson. I hope that you can appreciate this description of our Savior more than you have ever done so before:

⁶ *(Jesus) Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
⁷ rather, having made himself nothing by taking the nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!
⁹ Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name. . . .“*

Verse 14 speaks of the cruel and vicious beating Jesus received at the hands of His adversaries. We read:

*“Just as there were many who were appalled at him –
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being
and his form marred beyond human likeness –“*

From verse 14, the next question that came to my mind was, **“Why was it necessary for Jesus to suffer so intensely?”** I found verse 14 to be so disturbing as I am sure that you did.

The link to the New Testament is found in Luke 22:63-64 which explains Jesus’ unrecognizable condition in these words, *“Now the men who held Jesus mocked Him and beat Him. And having blindfolded Him, they struck Him on the face and demanded Him, tauntingly, ‘to Prophecy! Who is the one who struck You?’”*

The disfigurement spoken of in Isaiah 52:14 may have been the reason why even Jesus’ closest friends could not recognize Him following His resurrection. Of course, there is always the possibility that those who authored the words of Jesus’ distorted appearance may have used poetic hyperbole to express the terrible beating that He experienced. We learn from both the Old and the New Testaments that Jesus received horrendous treatment. I believe that it is fair to note that our Savior may retain some or all of the scars He received during these beatings and that we may behold them when we see Him face-to-face, but that He will be as precious to us if not more so when we realize He experienced such horrific treatment because of His love for us.

These noteworthy words bring chapter 52 to a close:

*“so he will sprinkle many nations,
and kings will shut their mouths because of him.
For what they were not told, they will see,
and what they have not heard, they will understand.”*

The last question that came to my mind in chapter 52 was: **Why is it important that the Servant will “sprinkle” many nations?** Sprinkling has been associated with cleansing from sin in the Old Testament (See Exodus 24:8, Leviticus 3:8, Numbers 19:21, Ezekiel 36:25).

The imagery here is rich! When Moses was ratifying the covenant between God and the Israelite people . . .

“He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.”

Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.” (Exodus 24:4-8)

We cannot forget the second part of Isaiah 52:15. In Paul’s letter to the Romans, in chapter 15, verse 20, the Apostle writes:

*²⁰It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation. ²¹Rather, as it is written:
“Those who were not told about him will see,
and those who have not heard will understand.”*

These words come directly from Isaiah 52:15!

In other words, the Messiah would be “marred” beyond human likeness; but through His suffering, Jesus would cleanse many nations. While He is certainly Israel’s Messiah, He belongs to more than Israel. His saving, cleansing work will extend far beyond Israel to many nations.

In fact, Andrew M. Davis summarizes the importance of the outcome of the redeeming work of the Servant as prophesized by Isaiah in chapter 52 in the following words:

“Verse 15 gives us the outcome of the Servant’s suffering: “The sprinkling of many nations” speaks of the application of **atonement blood** to cleanse sinners from their impurity (Lev. 16:14-15). This term predicts the blood atonement by Jesus Christ for the elect from every nation, as Revelation 5:9 sings to Jesus in heavenly praise: “You are worthy . . .because you were slaughtered, and you purchased people for God by your blood from every tribe and language and people and nation. This “sprinkling” of the nations occurs by the verbal proclamation of the gospel all over the earth, including to kings, who are amazed and speechless at the message about Christ (v. 15). Envoys will travel over the earth and tell all nations a **saving message** they’ve never heard before, and they will “see” it (by faith) and understand it. Thus are they spiritually “sprinkled and forgiven.”

Chapter 53

Here are the main points we will cover in chapter 53:

1. Messiah's Suffering (Isaiah 1-3)
2. Messiah is Despised and Rejected and Substitutionary Atonement (Isaiah 3-6)
3. Spread the Gospel and Suffering and Death of the Servant – (Isaiah 7-9)
4. Messiah's Victory and Reward (Isaiah 10-12)

The substitutionary death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the greatest events in redemptive history. God's ability to predict the future comes to its pinnacle in Isaiah 53, and its clear prediction of the purpose and details of Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection shine like a miraculous beacon to us who accept the fact that we are sinners.

Verses 1-3 tells us:

*¹Who 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."*

In Chapter 53:1, Isaiah immediately turns to the content of this message and the need for all hearers to combine it with faith. He joins us in asking the next two questions: **"Who has believed what we have heard?"** And **"To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"**

This could be the age-old question that all of God's prophets ask of themselves and of the Lord - **"Is anyone listening to us God?"**

The second question, though, opens the door to what seems to be a contradiction as it gives us the impression of the Messiah's strength by referring to the arm of the Lord, but we will see a picture of a weak and suffering Messiah. In actuality, I believe the suffering Servant demonstrates His strength in His humility, suffering, and mercy rather than weakness.

In verse 2, we see the Messiah's humanity cannot be denied as He started small and weak like a young plant. He is one who grew up before God. Luke 2:52 tells us, *"Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."* We also know that He was *"a root out of dry ground."* As prophesied, Jesus was born into the house of David. According to Davis, this is a reference to the shoot that would grow from the stump of Jesse (Isa 11:1; Roman 15:12) and the dry ground may very well point to Nazareth. Jesus would be born in a time when being a

“son of David” meant little. It was a time when Romans dominated the Jews and a time when many Jewish hearts had grown cold and their worship was often ritualistic and not heartfelt.

Verse 2 also explains that Jesus had *“no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him.”* Andres Davis stated, “The glory of Jesus was visible only to believers, who saw it in his sinless life, his compassionate demeanor, his powerful miracles, and his matchless words.”

And so, Jesus, who descended from a noble family, who was the most compassionate, caring and selfless being in humanity, whose appearance was apparently unimpressive came from the driest spot and period of the world’s history. Jesus’ ordinary appearance as a man may have been the essence of the stumbling block He presented to the Jews marked Him as a blasphemer for making Himself God (John 10:33).

Jesus was *“despised and rejected”* (v. 3) not only by his own people (John 1:11) but also by the Gentiles. In this sentence, despised means to be grossly underestimated, and never has it been truer than when Jesus’ own people condemned Him when He was on trial before Annas, the former Jewish High Priest and again before Pilate.

Jesus knew that He would be despised and rejected; and yet, He would stand and physically heal people of every disease He encountered. But there was a deeper spiritual healing Jesus came to address. Jesus’ central mission was not to perform temporary healing for people who would later die anyway. Rather, Christ’s mission was to die on the cross as a substitute for the sins of His people.

In verses 4-6, we read:

*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.*

Jesus was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our sins. In verse 5 alone, there are four great assertions of substitution in one amazing verse! “He” and “we” are continually in view: our sins, His suffering. The transfer of guilt – this is the essence of substitutionary atonement and without it, we have no salvation!

Let's take one more look at verse 5!

*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.*

Verse 6 describes our continual sheeplike straying from our Good Shepherd's protection and into "our own way" in everything we do. Friends, Christ paid the penalty for our wandering. I don't know about you, but speaking for myself, I have much to be thankful for. I did a lot of wandering in my younger years and I am grateful that Jesus never gave up on me.

In Isaiah 53:7, the words *oppressed* and *afflicted* are descriptive of how Jesus was betrayed, ruthlessly beaten, spat on, mocked with the crown of thorns and purple robe, led through the public streets of Jerusalem, screamed at by the crowd, humiliated at being stripped, and nailed, lifted up, crucified, and suffering in agony has been named as the single greatest display of human injustice in all history.

Verses 10-12 inform us of how God the Father and His Son may have perceived the suffering that Jesus' endured:

*¹⁰Yet 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
¹¹After 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.
¹²Therefore 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."*

The New King James Version emphatically states in verse 10 that it pleased the LORD to bruise His Servant. In other words, the suffering of His Servant was ordained by the Lord even for His pleasure!

It is so difficult for us to understand how the Father could be pleased with the thought of His son having to suffer. And yet, Jesus was no victim. This was not Satan's victory. This was God's victory. In 2 Corinthians 5:19, Paul states, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to

Himself.” “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

There has never been a greater display of God’s justice in all history, nor of humanity’s injustice. In all of this human injustice, Jesus did not open His mouth. He remained silent because as our substitute, He accepted the verdict of “guilty” on our behalf even though He could have destroyed His accusers in an instant. Here the Prophet sees through the centuries. It was on our behalf that Messiah would suffer and be beaten with many stripes (Mark 15:15). The provision for healing is found in the suffering of Jesus, so by His stripes we are healed.

Scripture teaches us that the love God the Father has for His only begotten Son is intense. Perhaps we can best understand God’s attitude through Jesus’s own attitude toward the cross in Hebrews 12:2 *“For the **joy** that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame.”*

Isaiah points out so poetically, that though Messiah dies as an offering for sin, death isn’t the end of the story. Jesus didn’t stay dead in the tomb! He will live, and divide the spoils of redeemed humanity with the strong! It reminds me of Paul’s great poetry in his letter to the Philippians that we talked about at the beginning of this presentation.

Let me close this message by reminding you of the Ethiopian eunuch we read about in the New Testament. In fact, Acts 8:34 tells us the eunuch was reading from the Scripture that we studied this week. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship. Philip the Evangelist happened to be in the same area and he was prompted by the Holy Spirit to go to the chariot where the man was reading from Isaiah 53:7-8 which says:

*“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so, he did not open his mouth.*

*In his humiliation he was deprived of justice,
Who can speak of his descendants?
For his life was taken from the earth.”*

Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading the words written by the prophet Isaiah. Philip asked the eunuch if he understood what he was reading. The Ethiopian asked Philip to please tell him who the prophet was talking about, himself or someone else. “Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, ‘Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?’ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.”

Throughout our study of Isaiah, we have heard the same message repeatedly: God did not give us His Word simply to fill our minds—He gave it to change our hearts and to be shared with the world. Somewhere around us there is someone searching for truth, someone carrying a burden, someone longing for hope. God may not ask us to run beside a chariot to explain Scripture, but He faithfully places people in our path every single day. The question is not whether God is calling—He is. The real question is whether we are listening... and whether we are willing to go.

“So today, ask yourself: To whom is God prompting you to bring the Good News?”