

Isaiah 53 has captivated the hearts and imaginations of those who study the Bible like few other texts in Holy Scripture.

Kyle Yates, Old Testament Professor at Southern Seminary called it, “The Mt. Everest of Old Testament prophecy,” Polycarp, “The golden passion of the Old Testament evangelist,” Spurgeon, “A Bible in miniature, the gospel in its essence,” Delitzsch – “The most central, the deepest, and the loftiest thing that the Old Testament prophecy, outstripping itself, has ever achieved.... It looks as if it had been written beneath the cross upon Golgotha.” Engnell adds “Without any exaggeration, [it is] the most important text of the Old Testament.”

The text, which actually begins at 52:13, is the 4th and climactic of the Great Servant Songs of Isaiah (cf. 42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-9). It is divided into 5 stanzas of 3 verses each, with each stanza being longer than the previous one. By means of creative contrast and regular repetition, the twin themes of exaltation and humiliation are woven into a beautiful tapestry of theological truth. Interestingly exaltation is prominent in stanzas 1 & 5, while suffering and humiliation dominate stanzas 2, 3 and 4.

Because priestly and sacrificial imagery permeate the passage, some, such as S. Lewis Johnson, believe the 5 stanzas are intentionally structured to match the 5 Levitical offerings:

- Burnt offering – 52:13-15
- Meal offering – 53:1-3
- Peace offering – 53:4-6
- Sin offering – 53:7-9
- Trespass (guilt) offering, – 53:10-12

The first verse of each stanza captures the theme of that stanza and summarizes beautifully its content. [Read the first of each].

As we prepare to enter this Holy of Holies and bask in its glories a crucial question must be addressed: “Who is the Suffering Servant?” While many suggestions have been put on the table, 3 main interpretations have eclipsed the rest. Some say the text should be understood:

1. *Corporately*: the Suffering Servant is national or remnant or ideal Israel (cf. 49:3). This view developed in medieval Jewish thought, but fails on (1) the historical tradition of interpretation, and (2) the work accomplished by this Servant. Israel could not atone for her own sins, much less the sins of the nations.
2. *Individually*: *the Suffering Servant* is Isaiah himself, Hezekiah, Jeremiah, Zerubbabel (John D. W. Watts view) or Moses. Yet what is said of the Servant scarcely fits the life or ministry of any of these, nor could what is said in 53:9b be said of even one.
3. *Messianically* : the suffering Servant is the coming Messiah, the royal Davidic King, the ideal Israelite who is totally committed and consecrated to Yahweh’s will and work, plan and purpose for His life. The German scholar, Gerhard von Rod, Professor at Heidelberg, catches a glimpse of what the chapter is all about

when he writes, “We may rule out those interpretations – some of which are grossly fanciful – that see in the Servant a figure in the past ... the Servant embodies all that is good in Israel’s existence before Yahweh ... the expressions used go far beyond biography, indeed they go far beyond the present. The picture of the Servant of Yahweh, of His mission to Israel and to the world, and of His expiatory suffering, is prophecy of the future ... [and] belongs to the realm of pure miracle which Yahweh reserved for Himself.”

However, the New Testament reveals, as does the intertestamental period, that prior to the cross, Isaiah 53 was not uniformly interpreted or identified with the Messiah. Support for a suffering Messiah from the prophetic literature finds support in only 2 books: Isaiah and Zechariah. Indeed, the idea of a suffering Messiah was rejected outright by the followers of Jesus as Peter’s perspective in Mark 8:31-34 makes abundantly clear.

Yet following the cross and resurrection, a New Interpretative Key was provided which opens the eyes of the early church and us to the true identity of the Suffering Servant. Jesus Himself, as well as Paul and Peter, Matthew and Mark, Luke and John are in agreement as to who the servant is. Philip the evangelist likewise joins their chorus when in Acts 8:35 he makes plain to the man from Ethiopia, the Suffering Servant is Jesus. This text is directly cited no less than 7 times in the New Testament with more than 40 allusions.

It is my strong conviction that Jesus, in Mark 10:45, weds Isaiah’s Suffering Servant to Daniel’s Son of Man (Daniel 7:13-14) and thereby redefines for us who and what Messiah would be. He is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:

- Who bore our griefs (v. 4)
- Who carried our sorrows (v. 4)
- Who was wounded for our transgressions (v. 5)
- Who was bruised for our iniquities (v. 5)
- Who was chastised for our peace (v. 5)
- Who heals us by His stripes (v. 5)
- Who borne our iniquities (vs. 6, 11)
- Who was oppressed, afflicted (v. 7)
- Who was slaughtered (v. 7)
- Who was cut off (v. 8)
- Who was stricken for our transgressions (v. 8)
- Who was bruised by the Lord (v. 10)
- Who was put to grief (v. 10)
- Whose soul was made a sin offering (v. 10)
- Who poured out His soul unto death (v. 12)
- Who was numbered with the transgressions (v. 12)
- Who bore the sin of many (v. 12)
- Who made intercession for the transgressors (v. 12)

This is Isaiah's Suffering Servant. This is the Lord Jesus.

As we survey the 5 stanzas, we shall see 5 significant facets of the Servant's career.

I. See the Servant's Exaltation (52:13-15)

This stanza serves as the prologue to the song. In fact it serves as a summation of the entire prophecy. Von Rad is again on target when he notes, "It is unusual in that this great poem begins with what is really the end of the whole story of the Servant's glorification and the recognition of His significance for the world." The initial song of chapter 42 gave us the *origin* of the Servant's mission, while this text provides the *culmination* and *exaltation*.

1. He is exalted because of His success (52:13). The text begins with "Behold" or "see" (NIV)—look, take notice, pay attention (cf. 42:1 for the same introductory word). Who do we see?

"My Servant," the Lord's Servant and our Savior! Interestingly, the Servant never speaks!

"He shall deal prudently," or "will act out wisely" (NIV), will accomplish His purpose. He will act so wisely that He will certainly succeed in His mission. He shall be (1) "be exalted" (raised, high); (2) "be extolled" (lifted up); and (3) "be very high" (highly exalted).

"Exalted" and "extolled" (high and lifted up) are used in combination 4 times in Isaiah and no place else in the Old Testament (cf. 6:1; 33:10; 57:15). In the other 3 instances they describe God.

Some scholars find in these 3 terms Christ's resurrection ("raised"), ascension ("lifted up") and session ("be very high/exalted"). There is little doubt that this text was in the mind of Paul when he penned his great Christological hymn in Philippians 2:5-11, especially verse 9.

God knows and the world should know, the Servant will not fail. He will succeed.

2. He is exalted because of His suffering (52:14).

People are astonished, appalled, shocked at His appearance. "Exalted" in verse 13, the Servant is "humiliated" in verse 14. This word *astonished* is used in Ezekiel 27:35 to describe men's reaction to the ruins of Tyre.

His "visage" (appearance) and "form" (outward features) are "marred," "disfigured" (though some believe the word could be "anoint.") Peter Gentry of Southern Seminary translates the verse, "Just as many were astounded at you, so His appearance was a super human anointing; His form more than humanity." If this is correct, He is exalted not because of His *suffering*, but because of His *splendor*. Oswalt's translation in contrast is, "Such a disfigurement! His appearance is hardly human!" Thus people are paralyzed with wonder (1) at the horror of His suffering and at the extent of the cruelty inflicted upon the Servant, or (2) at the magnificence of His splendor.

3. He is exalted because of His service. (52:15).

There is debate concerning the Hebrew verb *yazzeḥ*, translated "sprinkle" in most English translations. Contextually there is support for this translation. Priestly and

sacrificial currents run throughout the song. However, rhetorically there appears to be something of a comparison with verse 14. In verse 14 they are shocked at the Servant's *abuse*. In verse 15 they are shocked at the Servant's *accomplishment*. Indeed they are so surprised that the mightiest, "kings shall shut their mouths," an utterly unimaginable thought. Furthermore, what was previously hidden to the Gentile nations will be revealed to them. They had never heard or considered "that it was through the loss of all things that the Savior will conquer all things." Paul made such an application of this verse in Romans 15:21 as he carried the gospel to those who did not know.

II. See the Servant's Rejection (53:1-3)

Isaiah 53:1 flows naturally out of 52:15. The speaker appears to be the redeemed eschatological community, led no doubt by redeemed Israel through the voice of her prophet. They "look back" and lament and mourn over the fact they misjudged the Lord's Servant and did not believe the message about Him. The nations did not believe because they did not know. Israel knew and yet she did not believe because she failed to recognize the "arm of the Lord" when it was revealed in the Suffering Servant. Both John (John 12:38) and Paul (Romans 10:16) saw in the unbelief of Israel a fulfillment of verse 1. English translations which use the past tense throughout these verses accurately reflects that 700 years before Christ, the work of the Servant was a signed, sealed, and settled reality. Men may misunderstand Him, but God is made known by Him.

In what way did they misunderstand Him?

In what context did they reject Him?

1. He appeared to be insignificant, not important (53:1). Two rhetorical questions are put forth:

Who has believed our report? Answer: very few. The emphasis is on human responsibility.

To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? Answer: Now many. Here the emphasis is on divine sovereignty.

The message about the Servant impressed few. But their evaluation will spiral further down.

2. He appeared to be a nobody, not a somebody (53:2). He is like a "tender plant" (better "tender sprout or shoot"). This recalls Isaiah 11:1 and connects the servant to the Davidic Messiah. All of this takes place "before Him", before God. The Lord directs the entire course of His earthly life and mission. The world may think He is a nobody but God's estimate is something all together different. He is "a root out of dry ground" – unimpressive; it appears he will not even make it. He has "no form" (beauty) or "comeliness" (splendor, majesty); "when we see Him, no beauty" (appearance) "that we should desire Him."

The Servant lacked the regal splendor necessary to attract the nations. He arose out of humble circumstances and lowly conditions (Poor nation, impoverished parents, stable for His birth, a carpenter for His vocation). The verse is not saying he was

ugly, just unimportant. His was the stuff of a nobody not a somebody! This is not what “the arm of the Lord” should look like!

3. He appeared to be a loser, not a winner (53:3). “Despised” means to be considered worthless (repeated for emphasis, forming an inclusio in the verse). He is quickly dismissed. “Rejected” literally is “a ceasing by men”. He is a loser, so why waste any time with Him? “A man of sorrows” addresses both physical and mental pains. “Acquainted with griefs” he is familiar with sickness.

What can such a weakling do for us? This is “the arm of the Lord?” “We hid our faces from Him”; we would not even look on such as He. We “despised ... did not esteem Him.” We loathed Him and paid Him no attention. He is a loser not a deliverer. This man has His own problems. What could He possibly do for us?

He’s insignificant, a nobody, a loser. See the Servant’s rejection.

III. See the Servant’s Passion (53:4-6)

These verses involve a dramatic turn revealing a new perspective all together. Now we discover why the Servant had pain and sickness. We find out it was all for us. At least 10 times in these 3 verses the personal pronouns “our,” “we,” or “us” appear. The suffering of the Servant was not His fault, it was ours.

1. He bore our sorrows (illness) (53:4 cf. Matthew 8:17). “But surely expresses not only certainty but also contrast. Do you wish to get an accurate picture of how things really are? Clearly “He bore” (took up) “our griefs” (sicknesses) “and carried our sorrows” (pains) looks back to verse 3.

“We esteemed” (reckoned, considered) “Him stricken.” “Stricken” is sometimes associated with the disease of leprosy. It may be the basis for the tradition in the Babylonian Talmud that described the Messiah as a leper (*Sanhedrin 98a*).

“Smitten by God, and afflicted” tells us they thought this is the Lord’s doing. Many in ancient Israel believed suffering was the result of one’s own sins and therefore they assumed (wrongly!) that the Servant was getting what He deserved. The griefs and sorrows He carried were indeed deserved, but not by Him, but by us.

2. He bore our suffering (53:5). He was “wounded” (pierced through) “for our transgressions” (rebellions), “bruised” (crushed, broke into pieces, pulverized, ground into dust) “for our iniquities” (twistedness). “The chastisement” (punishment) “for our peace” (*shalom*) “was upon Him, and by His stripes” (welts, wounds, blows that cut) “we are healed.”

- He takes our disease and gives us health.
- He takes our punishment and gives us peace.
- He takes our wounds and gives us healing.

3. He bore our sin (53:6). H.A. Ironside called this “the most wonderful text in the Bible.”

“All we like sheep” informs us that none are excluded (Romans 3:23). We have gone astray like dumb sheep: prone to get lost, ever unaware of the danger that is about us, oblivious to the consequences of wrong choices.

“We have turned, everyone, to his own way.” Each of us has chosen our way over God’s way. “And the Lord has laid on Him” (caused to land, caused to fall) “the iniquity of us all.”

Jesus in John 10 taught us that “the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.” Could Isaiah 53:6 provide, at least in part, this image to explain His ministry?

Since verse 4 we have been immersed in the language of sacrifice and atonement, of substitution and salvation.

- 1) Recall the contrast between *He* and *our*.
- 2) Examine the words descriptive of our sin: griefs, sorrows, transgressions, iniquities, gone astray, his own way.
- 3) Meditate on the words of His work: borne, carried, wounded, bruised, punishment, stripes, laid on Him (and by the Lord!).

The language of substitution, of penal substitution could not be clearer. I am convinced that theologians, myself included, should jettison the language of “the theory of penal substitution.” There is nothing theoretical about it at all. It is biblical through and through.

Feminist theologian Delores Williams could not be more wrong when she says, “there is nothing divine in the blood of the cross.”

John Spong is without hope when he says, “I do not want a God who would kill His own Son.”

No, Calvin saw it correctly when he wrote, “In order to interpose between us and God’s anger, and satisfy His righteous judgment, it was necessary that He [the Son] should feel the weight of divine vengeance.”

Theories of Example, Moral Influence, Governmental, and *Christus Victor* all have their place in a holistic theology of atonement, but as Paige Patterson well says, “neither good example nor moral influence ever gets men to God and to heaven. Sin and its penalty must be addressed. The primary significance of the atonement from which all other meanings draw their dynamic is that of penal substitution” (*CTR* 3-2, 1989, p. 326). He suffered in my place. He paid the penalty I owed.

*What grace, O Lord, and beauty shone around Thy steps below!
What patient love was seen in all Thy life and death of woe!
Forever on Thy burdened heart a weight of sorrow hung;
Yet no ungentle, murmuring word escaped Thy silent tongue.
Thy foes might hate, despise, revile; Thy friends unfaithful prove;
Unwearied in forgiveness still, Thy heart could only love.*

IV. See the Servant’s Submission (53:7-9)

Here is the exemplary dimension of the Servant’s work. The Apostle Peter accurately draws upon this aspect of Christ’s work in I Peter 2:18-25.

1. He was submissive in His silence (53:7). He was “oppressed” (harsh, physical treatment at the hands of others) and “afflicted” (or “He was humbling Himself”), “yet He opened not His mouth.” He does not protest His treatment. He does not resent His destiny.

“He was led as a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep ... is silent.”

“So He opened not His mouth” is repeated for emphasis. The theme of “the lamb” runs from Genesis to Revelation (Isaac, Genesis 22; Passover, Exodus 12; Jesus, John 1:29; the Warrior Lamb, Revelation 5:6).

No doubt this is the verse that formed the basis of the declaration by John the Baptist, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

2. He was submissive in His suffering (53:8). “Taken from prison and from judgment” teaches that an unfair and unjust trial was His. His treatment was wrong from beginning to end.

“Who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living.” The Servant of the Lord is executed with no offspring left behind. In that day to die childless meant you were cursed by God and your life was virtually useless. Has anyone given a second thought to what this terrible injustice means?

But again we need to see “the rest of the story.”

“For the transgressions of My people He was stricken” (the blow is His, cf. v. 4). For the transgressions of the people, a blow has fallen on the Servant. That which should have hit me hit Him. That which should have hit you hit Him.

3. He was submissive in His shame (53:9). “He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in His death” is a form of Hebrew parallelism and carries the idea that “He was buried among the wicked rich.” He was a good man yet He is buried with the wicked. He was a poor man yet He is buried with the wealthy. It should not have ended this way. “He had done no violence. Nor was any deceit found in His mouth.” Both by word and deed His life should have turned out differently. This is how we, from our human perspective, would see it. Oh, but how different is the perspective of heaven! “He died like a criminal but was buried like a prince.” Here is a hint that things may not be as they seem.

Why Was He Silent?

Why is He silent when just a word would slay His accusers all?

Why does He meekly bear their taunts when angels await His call?

“He was made sin,” my sin He bore upon the accursed tree.

And sin has no defense to offer at all, His silence was for me!

V. See the Servant’s Salvation (53:10-12)

The death of the Servant was not a murder or a martyrdom. It was nothing less than a divine appointment! Spurgeon was exactly right, “the blood stained Scriptures were written by the Lord as much as any other!” Who killed Jesus? Pilate, Herod, the Jews, the Romans, you and me? We all played our part, but ultimately it was God who sacrificed His Son.

1. It is purposed by the Lord (53:10). The servant was the *right person* at the *right time* at the *right place* following the *right plan*. “It pleased the Lord to crush Him,” better “it was the Lord’s will” (NIV). God wanted this to happen. It was no accident, it was a divine appointment.

It was His Father who “put Him to grief” (sickness) “making His soul a guilt offering for sin” (Leviticus 5:1-19). It was God’s will that the Servant become an atoning sacrifice for sin.

Now we see that His death was not the end. If verse 10b does not teach resurrection, its glorious shadow looms large just behind us. The Servant's life and sacrifice was not a waste, a loss, after all. In fact, "He will see His seed (offspring), His days will be prolonged" (lengthened) and the best of all: "the pleasure" (will, desire) "of the Lord shall prosper" (be accomplished) "in His hand." Yes He was "bruised" by God, but He is also "blessed" by God. This is purposed by the Lord.

2. It is pleasing to the servant (53:11). Verse 11 should read, "From the anguish of His soul, he will see light, and be satisfied by His knowledge. My righteous Servant shall justify many, bearing their iniquities." It thematically links with Jeremiah 23:5-6 and the righteous Davidic branch, a king who will reign, prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. The Servant can rejoice. Though the cost was great the outcome is greater still. Anguish is replaced by joy. Darkness is vanquished by light. The Servant is satisfied by the knowledge of what has been achieved. The Servant, by what He did, will make guilty persons righteous. And what did He do? He bore their iniquities.

3. It is provided for many (53:12). The picture in verse 12 is that of a victory parade with the Servant marching out front in the role of conqueror, bringing home the spoils of battle. God will give the Servant those He redeemed as well as those who rejected Him. Indeed, every knee will bow! (Philippians 2:10-11). Why does He deserve such honor? Isaiah brings it to a beautiful and appropriate summation:

- Because He poured out His soul unto death.
- He was numbered (listed) with sinners.
- He bore the sin of many.
- He made intercession for the transgressors.
("For their rebellions He intervened" Oswalt, 399).

He died not just *with* sinners. He died *for* sinners.

Dan Block wonderfully puts it all together, "the messianic hope is a single line that begins in broadest terms with God's promise of victory over the serpent through "the seed of woman" (Genesis 3:15), then is narrowed successively to the seed of Abraham (Genesis 22:18), the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10), the stem of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1), the house/dynasty of David (2 Samuel 7) and finally the suffering and slain servant of Yahweh (Isaiah 53)."

Rejection was His. Acceptance is ours.

The wounding was His. The healing is ours.

The stripes were His. The salvation is ours.

The price paid was His. The forgiveness is ours.

The death was His. But life is ours.

Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Conclusion

“O Sacred Head Now Wounded”

by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153)

O sacred Head, now wounded,

with grief and shame weighed down.

Now scornfully surrounded, with thorns your only crown.

How pale you are with anguish, with sorrow, abuse and scorn!

How does your visage languish, which once was bright as morn!

What you, my Lord have suffered, was all for sinners' gain.

Mine, mine was the transgression, but yours the deadly pain.

O, here I fall, my Savior! It's I who deserve your place.

But you showed me your favor! It is all because of grace.

I thank God for Isaiah's Suffering Servant. I thank God for Jesus!

What a Servant. What a Savior!