

Note: this reading is the 3rd in a 4-part series on Isaiah's portraits of the Messiah

Isaiah 52,53 – The Suffering Servant: Part 2

Isaiah's predictive portrait of the suffering Servant reaches its climax in Isa. 52:13-53:12. Here he explains why it was God's will for the Servant to suffer and die: He is "the Lamb of God," the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system. This system upheld God's righteousness and justice by insisting that "the wages of sin is death." But it also proclaimed God's unmerited love by appointing a blameless Substitute, whose death would pay sin's penalty. Isaiah 52,53 states that only a Person (God's Servant), rather than an animal, can pay this price. It was this very mission that Jesus embraced and fulfilled on our behalf.

Isaiah 52:13 Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted. ¹⁴ Just as many were astonished at you, my people, so His appearance was marred more than any man and His form more than the sons of men. ¹⁵ Thus He will sprinkle many nations, kings will shut their mouths on account of Him; for what had not been told them they will see, and what they had not heard they will understand.

This introduction presents the Servant as a victorious paradox. On the one hand, He will be uniquely famous and prosperous (vs. 13). On the other hand, He will be physically disfigured to an astonishing degree (vs. 14). Yet it is through submitting to this disfigurement that He will "sprinkle" many nations (vs. 15). This is the word used in Leviticus 16:14,15 to describe how the blood of the sacrificial bull was sprinkled over the Mercy Seat in the Tabernacle, covering (or making atonement for) Israel's sins. But while the bull's death did this only symbolically, the Servant's death would actually atone for not only Israel's sins, but also for the sins of "many nations" (vs. 15). So great was His voluntary



sacrifice that rulers will be humbled and speechless when they hear of it. Isaiah goes on in Isa. 53 to elaborate on this paradox . . .

Isaiah 53:1 Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? ² For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. ³ He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. ⁴ Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

What an irony that God’s mighty power in action (“the arm of the Lord”) should be revealed through the “weakness” of this Servant (vs. 1)! Even though He descended from David, He was fragile in infancy, like a new plant germinating in dry soil (vs. 2a). Even though He was a mighty King, he was physically unimpressive (vs. 2b). His personal acquaintance with human suffering did not endear Him to the Israelites to whom He was sent; rather, they despised Him for it (vs. 3). The irony is that they didn’t know that He had come to bear *their* griefs, to carry *their* sorrows. Instead, they interpreted these hardships as proof that God had cursed Him – so they cursed Him to the point of executing Him (vs. 4).

Isaiah 53:5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. ⁶ All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.

What Israel did not understand was that He had come to suffer and die for *their* sins (vs. 5). Yes, He was “pierced through” and “crushed” and “scourged” – but He endured God’s awful retribution on our behalf, taking our iniquity on to Himself so that condemnation would not fall on us (vs. 6).



Isaiah 53:7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due?

Sheep go uncomprehendingly to the slaughter, but He was aware of what was in store for Him (Isa. 50:5,6). Yet He voluntarily submitted to unjust accusation and condemnation and execution (vs. 7). His accusers saw His execution as proof that He deserved it, but He submitted to death on their behalf, even though they were the ones who deserved it (vs. 8)!

Isaiah 53:9 His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death, because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

Those who condemned Him to death also wanted to bury Him in a ditch with common criminals to emphasize that He got what He deserved. But God overruled them, providing Him with a rich man's tomb to emphasize His innocence (vs. 9).

*Isaiah 53:10 But the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. ¹¹ As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, **My Servant**, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors.*

It was not the will of His enemies that prevailed. Rather, He offered Himself up to the Lord as the payment for our guilt. And God rewarded Him richly for His sacrifice! He raised Him from the dead so that He



could see and rejoice in the fruit of His labor – our forgiveness through His death on our behalf (vss. 11,12)!

So obvious and striking is this prediction of Jesus' death and resurrection that His enemies later claimed it had been forged into Isaiah's writings after the fact. Yet a copy of Isaiah's entire scroll – including this very passage – was found among the Dead Sea scrolls that are scientifically dated no later than 150 years before Christ. God wants the whole world to know that He sent His Son to die for us so that we can be reconciled to Him!

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