

The Servant's Suffering

Devotional Reading: Matthew 12:14–21

Background Scripture: Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Isaiah 53:1–7

1 Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?

2 For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

3 He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

4 Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with 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 hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

Key Text

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.—Isaiah 53:6

Unit 1: Isaiah and the Renewal of the Temple

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the suffering servant.
2. Relate the servant's suffering to the concept of substitutionary atonement.
3. Write a prayer of gratitude for what the servant's suffering accomplished.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Three Discouraging Words
- B. Lesson Context

I. Servant's Appearance (Isaiah 53:1–3)

- A. Reported and Revealed (v. 1)
- B. Humble and Unattractive (v. 2)
- C. Despised and Rejected (v. 3)

II. Servant's Suffering (Isaiah 53:4–7)

- A. Stricken by God (v. 4)
- B. Punished for Us (vv. 5–6)

A Great Reversal

Jesus Died for Me

- C. Silent by Choice (v. 7)

Conclusion

- A. Three Encouraging Words
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Assyria	Uh-sear-ee-uh.
Babylon	Bab-uh-lon.
chastisement	chas-tize-munt or chas-tize-munt.
Corinthians	Ko-rin-thee-unz (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Ezekiel	Ee-zeek-ee-ul or Ee-zeek-yul.
Hezekiah	Hez-ih-kye-uh.
iniquities	in-ik-wu-teez.
Isaiah	Eye-zay-uh.
Leviticus	Leh-vit-ih-kus.
Nathanael	Nuh-than-yull (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Nazareth	Naz-uh-reth.

Introduction

A. Three Discouraging Words

The following scenario has happened to most of us, likely more than once. We're watching an hourlong television program that features high drama and lots of action. We can't wait for every commercial break to end. As the conclusion approaches, we're on the edge of our seats, waiting for the exciting finish. Then, three words appear on the screen: "To be continued." We'll have to wait for another episode to learn how the plot ends!

Scripture tells us that Old Testament prophets, like Isaiah, desired to know what their prophecies meant or how they would be fulfilled. But they were told that it was not theirs to experience the fulfillment of their words, only to proclaim them faithfully (1 Peter 1:10–12). The Lord, in His own timing and His own way, would see to it that their words would be proven true and their ministries would be vindicated. He alone would determine when the words "to be continued" would no longer be necessary or relevant—though in many cases, the waiting period would be much longer than one week!

B. Lesson Context

When we cross from chapter 39 to chapter 40 in the book of Isaiah, we enter what is commonly called “the book of comfort.” The chapters therein include some of the most significant prophecies of Jesus and the impact of His life and ministry. This section begins with a word of “comfort” to God’s people and assures Jerusalem that “her iniquity is pardoned” and that she has “received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (Isaiah 40:1–2). This likely describes how the captivity of the people in Babylon, predicted in Isaiah 39, was to end.

There was, however, another more serious and oppressive captivity affecting God’s people: the captivity of sin. This captivity was the primary cause for the heartbreak of exile experienced by both the northern kingdom of Israel (to Assyria in 722 BC) and the southern kingdom of Judah (to Babylon in 586 BC).

The solution to this spiritual bondage was described by Isaiah in terms of a “servant” raised up by the Lord to provide the needed deliverance. This is highlighted in what is often called Isaiah’s “servant passages” or “servant songs” since they are written in the style of Hebrew poetry. Four passages from Isaiah are usually included among the servant passages: 42:1–9; 49:1–7; 50:4–9; and 52:13–53:12. In some cases, the length of a given passage may be subject to some variation among Bible commentators. Some commentators include Isaiah 61:1–4 as part of the servant passages. Those verses do not use the word *servant*; however, the passage was read by Jesus in Luke 4:16–21 and declared by Jesus to be fulfilled in Him.

Isaiah 53:1–7 (today’s text) is found within what is perhaps the most powerful of the servant passages listed above. That passage of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is quoted seven times in the New Testament (Matthew 8:17; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Acts 8:32–33; Romans 10:16; 15:21; 1 Peter 2:22) and alluded to there in more than two dozen other places.

Some Bible commentators describe Isaiah as using what is called the “prophetic past tense.” This means that even though Isaiah was looking centuries into the future in foretelling these events concerning Jesus, Isaiah spoke as though they had already happened. This is a way of highlighting the certainty of the prediction.

I. Servant's Appearance

(Isaiah 53:1–3)

A. Reported and Revealed (v. 1)

1. Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?

The chapter opens with two rhetorical questions. The first question indicates that the *report* from God's people would be challenging to believe. Isaiah wonders whether this message will be met with acceptance.

The phrase *the arm of the Lord* is anthropomorphic language—attributing human characteristics to God in order to aid our understanding of who God is and what God does. Even though God is a Spirit (John 4:24), Scripture speaks of Him as having physical characteristics (example: Psalm 34:15–16). Writers of Scripture often refer to the Lord's “arm” to express His power, might, and eternity (Deuteronomy 4:34; 5:15; 33:27; Psalm 77:15; Isaiah 52:10; etc.).

This verse is quoted twice in the New Testament. The gospel of John quotes this verse to express amazement regarding the people's rejection of Jesus despite seeing the mighty acts of God revealed through Jesus' miracles (John 12:37–38). The apostle Paul quotes part of this verse to convey his disappointment regarding Jewish unbelief of the gospel (Romans 10:16). The thread running through these passages is that people disbelieve the servant of the Lord.

What Do You Think?

What are common barriers that prevent people from believing and accepting the message of Christ?

Digging Deeper

How can you help people address those barriers while trusting in the Holy Spirit's power to soften hearts?

B. Humble and Unattractive (v. 2)

2a. For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground.

Disbelief regarding the servant might be due, in part, to his humble and unattractive origin and disposition. The phrase *he shall grow up before him* shows a relationship with distinction between God the Father and His servant.

The text uses two botanical metaphors to express the servant's humble origin. *A tender plant* is delicate, ready to break under adverse conditions; *a root out of a dry ground* is in danger of dying without proper water (contrast Psalm 1:3). These two metaphors highlight the perceived weakness of the servant and his questionable origin in the eyes of the world (compare Isaiah 11:1).

This description may bring to mind Nathanael's comment when he hears that Jesus came from the town of Nazareth: "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). The Pharisees will be skeptical along this line as well (7:41–52).

2b. He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

Having identified the servant's humble origin, the text turns to describe his appearance and presentation. To arrive with *no form nor comeliness* predicts that the servant's physical appearance will not be the reason that anyone is drawn to him (compare Isaiah 52:14).

When we see the line *there is no beauty that we should desire him*, we remind ourselves that we are reading a form of Hebrew poetry that contains literary parallelism.

Therefore, we have one thought in this half-verse, not two: nothing about the servant's appearance will cause people to notice him, unlike the appearances of some of Israel's kings (1 Samuel 9:2; 16:12).

C. Despised and Rejected (v. 3)

3. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Despite outward appearances, the servant will indeed draw attention—negative attention. The treatment predicted will be far from welcoming. Two parallel thoughts

also occur in this verse: to be *despised* and to be *rejected*. As history bears out, this happens not only by individuals but also by nations (Isaiah 49:7).

During His earthly ministry, Jesus faced rejection by the world and His own people: “He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not” (John 1:10–11; compare Mark 6:1–5). Crowds gathered to hear His teachings and witness His miracles. But after He was arrested and crucified, most turned their backs on Him—even His own disciples.

The servant is to experience inner turmoil as described in the next parallel: to be *a man of sorrows* is to be *acquainted with grief*. This pictures the floods of emotional pain (example: Luke 19:41).

What Do You Think?

What are some ways we do not esteem Christ as we should?

Digging Deeper

How do the directives in John 14:15 and 1 John 4:20 help us correct this problem?

II. Servant’s Suffering

(Isaiah 53:4–7)

A. Stricken by God (v. 4)

4a. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.

We continue to see parallel ideas, with the phrase *borne our griefs* equivalent to the phrase *carried our sorrows*. The description of the servant’s great personal pain now includes an explanation for the suffering: he bears the weight of our griefs and sorrows. Matthew 8:17 quotes this verse following a description of Jesus’ healing ministry. It is clear that Matthew interprets the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in the healing work of Jesus. Thus, we see a connection between our sufferings and the servant’s.

What Do You Think?

What griefs and sorrows do you need to turn over to Christ today?

Digging Deeper

In what ways can you carry the griefs of other believers so that you love others just as Christ has loved us (John 13:34)?

4b. Yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

In an inexcusable interpretation of the servant's life and ministry, the people the servant comes to rescue end up being the very ones to pronounce him *stricken, smitten of God*. People believe that his punishment is deserved. They know that God never acts unjustly, so they naturally reason that the servant must have done something to deserve the punishment (Mark 14:64).

Witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion interpret that event as a test of the servant's identity as they cry, "If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him. He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God" (Matthew 27:42b–43; compare Psalm 22:8). This implies that if God did not deliver the servant, then the servant deserved whatever pain and suffering the crucifixion inflicted on him.

The servant is indeed *smitten of God*, but not in the sense that the onlookers to the crucifixion suppose. The crucifixion of Jesus fulfills God's "determinate counsel and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23; compare Luke 22:22; Acts 3:18; 4:27–28). Our next verse explains this further.

B. Punished for Us (vv. 5–6)

5a. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities.

The prophet turns to the physical punishment the servant experienced. This is also expressed through parallel thoughts: *wounded* is equivalent to *bruised*, and *our transgressions* is equivalent to *our iniquities*. The critics of the servant are right in seeing God's punishment at work in the crucifixion. However, they miss the point that in the crucifixion, the servant receives and accepts the punishment for humanity's sins.

5b. The chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

We now move to the result of the servant's suffering. Through it we can experience *peace* with God and be *healed* from our sins. Such peace and reconciliation are available because of the servant's sacrifice (Romans 3:24–26; 4:25; 2 Corinthians 5:18–19; Hebrews 9:28; 10:10).

This transfer of punishment is known as the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. Christ acted as a substitute on our behalf for the result of our spiritual healing. Being the sinless Son of God (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22, quoting Isaiah 53:9), only Jesus could pay such a price. The New Testament connects being healed by the servant's

stripes most directly in 1 Peter 2:24. Thus, the prophet Isaiah emphasizes—hundreds of years in advance—Jesus’ triumph over sin and its impact on humanity.

What Do You Think?

What is the significance of the New Testament connecting Christ’s work with our being “healed”?

Digging Deeper

What other phrases does the New Testament use to describe Christ’s work on the cross?

A Great Reversal

A few years ago, a dear friend invited me to help with a retreat for ministry leaders in India. Growing up as a missionary kid, my friend has a passion for supporting people doing ministry in challenging situations. She regularly takes teams of people overseas to pray for, listen to, and support local ministry workers. Having visited India before, I looked forward to visiting friends, ready to serve God and local ministry leaders.

Toward the end of the retreat, I fell ill, bedridden in my room. I reported my illness to my friend, and she asked others to pray for me. But they didn’t only pray; they put their prayers into action. Soon, two local leaders knocked on my door. I didn’t want to open it. I was a mess. *What if I got them sick? Wasn’t I supposed to be serving them?*

I felt vulnerable and embarrassed, but I opened the door. The two visitors had ordered me some soup and had called a doctor. After I stumbled back to bed, one of the visitors sat beside me, wiping my fevered forehead with a cold rag while we waited.

I vividly remember how this person was willing to “enter” into my suffering for my care! How very Jesus-like she was! When was the last time you served Jesus in this way? See John 13:1–17.

—N. H.

6. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

People are compared to *sheep* in numerous places in the Bible (examples: 2 Samuel 24:17; Psalms 78:52; 95:7; Ezekiel 34:11–12; Matthew 9:36; John 10:1–16). The

comparisons are not flattering. Sheep tend to go *astray*, and people inevitably do the same when they go their *own way* and live independently of God's guidance. Of course, the specific ways people describe their sinfulness change from culture to culture, but the fundamental problem has remained the same since Eden: we prefer our own way to God's.

Despite such rebellion, the Lord placed on the servant *the iniquity of us all*. Notice how the word *all* appears at both the beginning and the end of this verse. Everyone is guilty of sin; the sacrifice (substitutionary atonement) of Jesus, however, is provided for all by the Lord's grace and mercy. The fact that the Lord has laid on Jesus the iniquity of us all brings to mind the symbolic action carried out by Israel's high priest on the Day of Atonement. Once yearly, the high priest laid his hands on the scapegoat and placed upon it the sins of the nation (Leviticus 16:20–22); this symbolized and foreshadowed what Jesus was to do once, for all time.

We may also consider the prophet Ezekiel, who was commanded to “bear” the iniquity of the people through a series of symbolic actions (Ezekiel 4:4–6; 5:1–4; etc.). What Jesus carried out at the cross was not another symbolic act. He took upon Himself the complete punishment for human sin. In Paul's words, God “made him to be sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21). God did so “that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Romans 3:26).

Jesus Died for Me

About 18 years ago, I had a dream that changed my life. In the dream, I'm sitting on a grassy hill with Jesus; the shadow of the cross is in the distance. The air is cool and pleasant, and we are seated face-to-face. I'm fully aware that He is about to walk down that hill and give His life on the cross. And yet, He's amazingly calm. He lovingly looks at me and says, “It's time,” as He stands and walks toward the cross. There is no mistake that He's about to do this for me, for my sin and shame.

For a moment, it was as if I was the only person in the world. And the reality of His love was landing squarely on me. I was filled with sorrow over the cost of my sin and amazement at His willingness to pay that price.

That dream changed my view of the cross from being an abstract doctrinal idea to something deeply personal. Of course, Jesus died for all and not just for me. And, of course, we are not to claim dreams or anything else as adding to the Scripture (Hebrews 1:1–2; Revelation 22:18; etc.). But if I focus solely on the fact that Jesus died for all, I can forget how personal His love is for me. In what ways could your faith grow by seeing the cross more personally?

—N. H.

C. Silent by Choice (v. 7)

7. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, Yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

Two more parallels now present themselves. The first is easy to see, with *oppressed* being another way to say *afflicted*, as Isaiah returns to a description of the servant. Once again, the prophet focuses on the servant's suffering.

The second parallel is actually a parallel within a parallel. The writer combines these in the shape of an X. It looks like this:

The servant does not cry out in anger or vow to exact revenge upon those who afflict him, as the diagram reveals (compare Mark 14:60–61; 15:3–5; Acts 8:32). The servant being likened to a *lamb* may bring to mind the times Jesus is depicted as a lamb in the New Testament (John 1:29, 35–36; Revelation 21:22–23; 22:1, 3). But that isn't what's in view here. The idea, instead, is that of a sacrificial lamb (Exodus 12:3–6; 1 Corinthians 5:7).

The silence of Jesus during His persecution contrasts with how often He spoke during His ministry. He used words to command storms to cease, to cast out demons, to heal a wide range of diseases, and even to raise the dead. And ironically, His words silenced His enemies (Luke 14:2–6; 20:20–26). But when it came to speaking up for His own well-being, He said nothing. Jesus' silence in the face of bitter opposition embodied His determination to fulfill His Father's redemptive purpose. His was a "silent might." No doubt there are times when we, in silence, should reflect on how powerfully Jesus' silence still speaks.

What Do You Think?

In what ways does Jesus' powerful silence still speak to you today?

Digging Deeper

In what ways is Jesus' silence a model for your actions?

Conclusion

A. Three Encouraging Words

The Introduction called attention to the words *to be continued* as three discouraging words. In the sense of salvation history, the *to be continued* of the Old Testament has

been superseded by the *it is fulfilled* of the New Testament (Matthew 26:54–56; Luke 24:44; etc.).

As we consider Isaiah’s ministry to King Hezekiah (as seen in lesson 1) and compare it with the content in Isaiah 53, we see the twofold nature of a prophet’s ministry. One may be called *forthtelling*, in which the prophet proclaimed God’s message to those of his own surroundings. The other may be labeled as *foretelling*, in which the prophet looked forward in time to declare God’s plan for the future. This plan, which included the ministry of the suffering servant, impacted not only the original audience but also the entire world. In each role, God’s prophet was “moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:21).

It is instructive at this point to call attention to a New Testament passage cited in lesson 1: John 12:41. In that passage, the apostle John describes Isaiah as one who “saw [Jesus’] glory, and spake of him.” In that lesson, the focus was on the glory that Isaiah saw by means of his vision of the Lord “high and lifted up” in His heavenly temple (Isaiah 6:1). In Isaiah 53, Isaiah also foresaw Jesus’ glory, but in a completely different way. This was the glory seen when Jesus was high and lifted up on the cross (John 12:32–33).

This is the glory of both God’s love and His holiness (Romans 3:21–26), demonstrated in an act that was looked upon with disdain and disgust by the people of Jesus’ day. It was, as the apostle Paul put it, one of “the foolish things of the world” that God used to “confound” the wise and the mighty (1 Corinthians 1:27).

Some commentators have proposed that the cross reveals glory to God in the *lowest*. That is the glory of Jesus that Isaiah saw in our passage today. And as a result of the servant’s suffering, death, and resurrection, we worship Him in the highest (Ephesians 1:18–23).

B. Prayer

Father, after reading today’s passage, saying “thank You” hardly seems adequate. And it isn’t. We ask for Your help in offering ourselves in grateful service as ambassadors for Jesus, wherever we are and whenever You choose. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Jesus is the servant we serve.