

Jesus God's Servant

Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12

Turn to Isa 53 please. This sermon is about Jesus of Nazareth. It's about how bad it got for him, and then how high he went. It is about his suffering and death, then his glory and his greatness.

The second half of Isaiah has four "servant songs," four poems about God's special servant who's coming. We did the first three in a sermon just before Christmas, and I left this fourth one for the Easter season, which is now.

I want to mention another OT Scripture that helps us understand this, the story of Abraham offering Isaac, in Genesis 22. Our Isaiah Scripture today is similar, it describes God offering the servant as a sacrifice for sins.

God told Abraham to take his son, his only son, the one he loved, Isaac, to a particular mountain, and to offer Isaac there as a burnt offering to God. It was a three-day journey. Abraham led Isaac up there, tied Isaac up, put him on the altar, and raised his knife to slaughter his son Isaac. At that moment God stopped him, told him not to do it.

It is an indescribable scene. How could God ask such a thing of Abraham? How did Abraham manage to do this? The Scripture says nothing about Abraham's feelings or thoughts, so I won't either.

But this is Easter time. Our God did this for his own Son, and no one stopped him at the end. The Bible never says what this was like for Abraham, and it never says what this was like for God, either, to lead Jesus to crucifixion. It is left to our imagination. If you are a parent, you can feel this. And if you are not a parent, you can still feel this.

I will come back to that story. Now to Isaiah's servant song. Our text is 15 verses. It divides quite nicely into five stanzas of three verses each. God speaks in the first and fifth stanza, and people speak in the others.

One, A Puzzle: The Servant's Glory and Humiliation Isa 52:13-15 *See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. 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—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.*

52:13 God is speaking here: *MY servant*. We could paraphrase v13 this way: *my servant will do the right thing, therefore he will be raised, and lifted up, and highly exalted*. The first thing we learn is where this ends: the servant raised, lifted up, highly exalted.

At the end of Peter's Pentecost sermon, in Acts 2, 7 weeks after Jesus died and rose, Peter said that God had put Jesus on the throne at his own right hand. That's what this line is talking about - *exalted and lifted up and raised very high*. Php 2: *every knee will bow, every tongue confess, that Jesus is Lord*.

God says, *MY servant will do the right thing, and THIS is where he will end up - as high as it gets!* This is the first thing we learn.

52:14 People were appalled at Jesus, astonished, at how awful he looked. He didn't even look human any more. This might be a part of the beating Jesus took before he was crucified, but we are not quite sure how to understand v14.

What is clear, though, is the huge gap between v13 and v14. This is the puzzle. How could someone be so low, so disfigured, and distorted, and end up so high, so honoured?

52:15 *He will sprinkle many nations*. Who "sprinkles"? Priests sprinkle to purify, or to give something to God. This person, that was so low, so twisted and distorted so that he didn't even look human, became the priest of many nations!

This is what makes the kings speechless. The servant was so far beneath their notice, just human trash, not even looking human any more, and then he becomes priest of all the nations, becomes exalted higher than anyone. When kings see him go from one to the other, and finally understand it, they are speechless.

Two, Suffering Watched and Misunderstood (53:1-3) *Who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He 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. He 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.*

The speaker in stanzas 2-4, vv1-9, is "we," some group of people who saw it all. I picture it as the people who listened to Peter preach at Pentecost, Jews who knew about Jesus of Nazareth, but had not believed in him, people who mocked him when he was crucified.

Peter preached, and many believed. After they become disciples, they tell this story. That is the kind of group that Isaiah has in mind in this prophecy.

53:1 Who would of thought that Jesus of Nazareth was the LORD's own power and strength? That's our message now, the witnesses say, but who would believe that? Why is it unbelievable? Because Jesus was so completely unimpressive.

*No beauty, no majesty, nothing in appearance to attract us, or make us desire him.* The early church fathers always described Jesus as physically unimpressive, but since about 400, he has been healthy and strong and handsome.

Isa 53 is a problem for Jesus movies, where a good-looking actor with a kind face plays Jesus. Probably not at all true. Jesus certainly was kind. But let's imagine him as Isa 53 suggests. Picture Jesus as homely, a bit awkward, not tall, a nerd, the last one picked for the team: *No beauty, no majesty, nothing in appearance that we should desire him.*

The Gospels don't mention this one way or the other. But in Isaiah, to look at, to watch, Jesus was nothing, not attractive. That's what this Scripture says.

53:3 Because there was nothing impressive about Jesus, people despised him, rejected him. Jesus said once, "blessed is the one who does not fall away because of me." He knew that he was not at all what people thought the Messiah should be like.

He was a man who sorrowed, and who was familiar with suffering. his, plus the fact that he was not impressive, led people first to reject him, and then to actually shun him.

The next verse will say that Jesus took *our* sorrows. He was a man of sorrows, truly, not because his life was sad, but because he took on himself the sorrow of those around him. He was familiar with suffering, because he entered into the suffering of those around him, and took it on himself.

End of v3: Not sure if this is Jesus' life or death. It got so bad that it was painful to look at him, to notice him. It was awkward to be with him; easier to pretend he wasn't there, to actually just ignore him. He was despised, and we didn't think he meant anything at all.

Three, Suffering Explained: Our Substitute, by the Lord's Will (53:4-6) *Surely he took up our pain, and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But 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. We 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.*

This is the middle stanza of the five, and the most important. It is the center of this whole passage in every way.

53:4 This verse shows the huge mistake people at that time made about Jesus, the mistake of the watching crowds that saw him die. Jesus had taken up *our* spiritual sickness, and our sorrow. (Sickness or illness - in Isaiah that image is used of sinfulness, of spiritual illness - Isa. 1:5-6; 30:26; 5:18-19.)

That's the big mistake: we the witnesses saw that he had been injured by God. True. We thought he was punished for his *own* sins, because *he* had offended God. But it was *our* spiritual illness, and our sorrow. He was a man of sorrow because of *our* sorrows. *Our* sin. And that same image is repeated in the rest of this third stanza.

53:5 We must picture Jesus being beaten and whipped before the crucifixion, and then being crucified, as we read this words:

He was pierced for *our* transgressions, he was completely crushed for *our* iniquities. The punishment that brought *us* peace was on *him*, and by *his* wounds *we* are healed. Amazing words!

Don't miss the good news: *we* are healed from our sin-sickness, *we* have peace with God. *We* were lost, damned, without hope and without God in the world (Eph2,12). Now *we* are healed from this, and at peace with God.

53:6 The story has turned upside down. In v4, we thought *he* was the sinner. We looked at him, and saw how absolutely miserable he was, and we were sure God was punishing him because he had committed awful sin in his life. *We thought we were more righteous than he was, because he was so despised, so injured; and we were fine.*

No, *we* like sheep have gone astray, *we* have each turned from God and *we* went our own way. And *he* was rejected and struck and injured because God Himself put *our* sins on *him*. *God* put our sins on him, and *God* caused *his* punishment and wounds *for us*.

Lev 16:20, the Day of Atonement: *Aaron shall bring forward the live goat. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins— [get that? all our wickedness and rebellion, all our sins] and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness. Aaron with the goat, God with his servant, God the priest, this servant as his sacrifice.*

I will take a Detour: I wish to correct a misunderstanding. It is sometimes taught that when Jesus died, God poured out on Jesus his wrath against sin. That is, Jesus endured the punishing anger of God in our place. This is not true, at all.

Did Jesus die in our place, as our substitute? Yes. Did he endure the punishment and penalty of sin? Yes, the penalty was death, and Jesus died for our sin. Did Jesus at any moment experience God's anger or wrath or rejection? No. Does God have anger against human rebellion? Yes, for sure.

In the OT, does God ever express anger toward a sacrifice? No. That's not how sacrifice worked. Does any Scripture say that God's anger or wrath was aimed at Jesus, even for a short time? No, never. That's not how a substitutionary death works.

God was like Abraham, who must have felt something like this: "I need to do this, offer my son, but it is the worst thing ever, but I must do it." Jesus was indeed treated horribly by his oppressors. And it was necessary. But Jesus was no more the victim of God's judging anger than Isaac was the victim of Abraham's anger or rejection.

IF the Bible said that God poured out wrath on Jesus, we'd accept it, for sure. Since it does not, let us not follow that. Picture Abraham with his son Isaac. That's how God was treating Jesus the Servant. Detour is over.

Four, Suffering Described: Oppression, Execution, Burial (53:7-9) *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.*

53:7 Jesus was betrayed, then led to the Sanhedrin, then led to Pilate, led to Herod, led to Pilate again, and to Golgotha. He was mistreated and injured, did not complain, did not demand justice. He let it happen. He endured it humbly. He was led out, in the unfairest thing that has ever happened on earth, which has seen many very unfair things.

He knew all this, and said nothing. He was willing, said nothing, no complaint. It is important to understand that Jesus the Servant was willing, he endured by choice. Abraham bound Isaac, but God did not bind Jesus. Jesus listened to God and obeyed.

53:8 This is the Execution. He was taken away, cut off, was killed. But it was for the sins of my people that he was struck. God comes interrupts and speaks this line - *my people*, for the sins of *my people*. You and I are in that sentence.

53:9 Burial: *he was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death.* Crucified people would normally be thrown in some common grave for criminals. That was what Jesus was *assigned*. But when it actually came to his burial, he was *buried* with *rich people*. This is Joseph of Arimathea burying Jesus in his new tomb.

Why buried well? Because he had done no wrong, and he had said no wrong.

Five, His Suffering and his Glory (53:10-12) This is a summary. *Yet 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. After 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. Therefore I will give him as his portion the great, and he will divide as his spoils 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.*

53:10 *The Lord makes his life an offering for sin.* This is God acting like a priest again, and the servant is his sacrifice. Like Abraham and Isaac.

This verse has "the LORD's will" in it twice, which summarizes the verse, and actually summarizes the whole song. First, it was the will of the LORD to crush Jesus and to cause him to suffer. Second, the will of the LORD will flourish in his hands.

This is a pretty strong line. God's will is in the hands of Jesus of Nazareth, exalted to the throne, and God's will prospers there; God's will flourishes in the hands of Jesus. Jesus is the springtime of God's will.

53:11 *After the suffering of his soul (that's a powerful line, isn't it?), he will see the light and be satisfied.* This reminds me of Gen 1, where God saw all that he had made and it was very good. Once Jesus' suffering is over, he will see, and be very satisfied with what he has accomplished. He will make many people just.

53:12 In v10 we read first about Jesus' suffering, and then about his reward. V11 has the same order, first his suffering, then his reward. But v12 changes the order. First we learn about his reward, and then about the meaning of his suffering.

*Therefore I will give him the great as his portion, and he will divide the strong as his spoils, 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.*

Let's review the 5 stanzas: First, a puzzle, which is the Servant's glory and humiliation. Second, the Servant's suffering watched but misunderstood. Third, his suffering explained: our substitute, and by the Lord's will. Fourth, his suffering described: oppressed, executed, buried. Fifth, a summary, the Servant's suffering and glory, more or less where we began.

This Scripture, the fourth servant poem, is an invitation to fall in love with the gospel all over again, the story of Jesus, especially this explanation of his death. God urges us to take another look at this incredible story, and what happened for us all when Jesus was executed.

God says, "for the sins of my people he was struck." We are among those people. All our wickedness and rebellion, all our sins, were put on him, so that we could be healed, we could know God, be at peace with God, so we could have hope and a future with God. We all like sheep had gone astray, and the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Let's thank God that the greatest good fortune that could happen to anyone has come to us: we have heard that story, seen light in it, and we have put our trust in that God and that Servant, Jesus. We are now his disciples. We turned from our dead lives to the living God, to serve him and to wait for his Son Jesus, whom he raised from the dead.

PRAYER: God, thank you. Thank you that what Abraham did not have to finish, you did finish, so we could have peace with you, and be healed. Thank you for leading Jesus your Servant this way, for our sakes. Jesus our Lord, we praise you for your obedience to your Father, and your love for you people. We do not understand that very well, but we know that it has changed our lives. Thank you that you make intercession for sinners like us. We will praise you forever.

Doxology - *To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*

Benediction – God in God's peace, to love and serve the Lord.