

FPFWC Christian Development



Prophets of Restoration

April 2021

Spring Quarter

April 3, 2021

Lesson #1 –The Suffering Servant

Scripture Focus – Isaiah 53:4-11a

ICE BREAKER –

1. How would you respond to an unbeliever who claims to have no sin?
2. What is the single-most important practice Christians could adopt or improve on to eliminate deceitful speech patterns?

Key Verse: 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.—Isaiah 53:5

LESSON BACKGROUND

The Lord’s “servant” is one of the most striking figures in the book of Isaiah. The term *servant* is sometimes a reference to the entire nation of Israel, describing the special relationship the covenant people have with the Lord (example: Isaiah 41:8). In other places, *servant* appears to describe a remnant of God’s people, referring specifically to those who remained following captivity in Babylon (example: 48:20).

There are still other passages where the word *servant* points to one individual who was assigned a very special role to fulfill. Four passages in Isaiah—often called Servant Songs—function in this way to point to the Messiah: Isaiah 42:1–9; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; and 52:13–53:12. (Isaiah 61:1–4 can also be included since Jesus applied it to himself [Luke 4:16–21].) This servant would carry out his tasks in a way that neither the nation of Israel nor the remnant could ever do.

The servant passage studied today is the fourth in the list, beginning, “Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high” (Isaiah 52:13). The passage then describes the astonishment and rejection that many would experience at the servant’s lowly and repulsive appearance (52:14–53:3). It seems so inappropriate for someone “exalted and extolled” not to also have a striking physical presence! But nothing in the servant’s background speaks of greatness at first glance. Our printed text begins with an explanation of the servant’s sorrows and griefs that are introduced in Isaiah 53:3.

Christians have long and rightly interpreted the prophetic Servant Songs as fulfilled in Jesus alone. For instance, Isaiah 53:7–8 (see below) makes up the passage that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading when Philip approached his chariot. The Ethiopian asked whether the prophet was speaking of himself or someone else. And Philip “began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus” (Acts 8:35). No other figure appears in Scripture who claims to be the

servant, and only Christ fulfills all that was written about that servant in these passages. The importance of today's text is seen in the fact that the New Testament quotes from the song in which it occurs seven times.

LESSON COMMENTARY

53:4–6. *Israel states that He was punished for His own sin.* The despised Servant bore **our griefs** (better translated “suffering”; see comments on 53:1–3) and carried **our sorrows**. The words may contain the idea of sickness, leading some to believe that faith in the Servant guarantees immediate healing of all diseases. However, this does not mean that all sicknesses will immediately be cured because of the Servant's vicarious suffering. Rather it is promising that the Servant's death would ultimately provide deliverance and healing for all who believe in Him. The Servant did indeed take the punishment for sin and therefore would provide immediate forgiveness to someone who trusts in Him. However, removing the penalty for sin will not remove the presence of sin in a believer's life until after the resurrection. In the same way, the forgiveness of the sins that cause sickness does not guarantee healing from diseases until the presence of sin is removed at the resurrection at the end of days.

Israel now confesses that upon viewing the Servant's suffering, the nation had concluded that the Servant was undergoing divine punishment. He was **stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted** (v. 4), all terms that indicate punishment for sin. The word **stricken**, meaning “to smite with disease for sin,” was used when both Miriam (Nm 12:9–10) and Uzziah (2Kg 15:5) were stricken with leprosy for sin.

Penitent Israel now recognizes that while the Servant was indeed being punished for sin, it was not for His sins but theirs. The Servant's suffering included being **pierced through for our transgressions** (v. 5). The Hebrew word translated **pierced** (*mekholal*) means “wounded to death” and conveys a violent and painful death (Dt 21:1; Is 51:9). The Servant was **crushed for our iniquities**. Although the word **crushed** means “broken” or “shattered to pieces,” it is not generally used in a literal way but with a metaphorical sense, as in a “contrite [lit., “crushed”] spirit” (Is 57:15) or “contrite heart” (Ps 51:17). Israel now understood that the Servant took the punishment (**chastening**) they deserved, that He was flogged (**by His scourging**) in order to bring their spiritual healing. The substitution of the Servant for the people certainly foretells the sacrifice of the Messiah Jesus as a sacrifice for the sickness of sin (1Pt 2:24).

Penitent Israel now summarizes what they have learned: They are the ones who have strayed from God **like sheep** and followed their own desires. Consequently, the Lord has caused the punishment for the **iniquity** (guilt) **of us all to fall on Him** (v. 6).

53:7–9. *Israel states that the Servant was too passive to be innocent.* The Servant's silence at His trial and His submission to death demonstrates His acceptance of suffering and His willing participation. The Servant did not proclaim His own innocence, making those who observed Him mistake His behavior for passivity and acquiescence brought about by His own guilt. But the real reason for the Servant's acceptance of His suffering was that He understood that His suffering was coming upon Him to fulfill God's purpose. As Goldingay notes, “He ‘bore’ and ‘carried’ not because he had to but because he agreed to. So there was no basis

for or logic in protest ... he was at every point a victim, but he maintained a form of control of his destiny, not letting anyone else determine his reaction to it" (Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40–55*, 506).

Additionally, the Servant submitted to a crooked trial (v. 8). The phrase **by oppression and judgment** is a hendiadys, two separate words describing just one subject; they are better translated "oppressive judgment," indicating a corrupt legal procedure. As a result, His contemporaries (**His generation**) considered that He brought His death upon Himself by His own sin rather than understanding the real reason for His death: to bear the punishment **for the transgression of the people** of Israel.

After His death, the Servant's grave was assigned with wicked men (v. 9). The implication is that even after the Servant died, His innocence was not recognized and He would be buried as a common criminal. Instead, however, **He was with a rich man in His death**. This was because the Servant was genuinely innocent (**He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth**); It was as if God had said, "This far and no farther," and spared His Servant the final humiliation of a dishonorable burial. The Servant's innocence caused the Lord to place Him in the tomb of a rich man (cf. Mt 27:57–60).

(3) God Speaks: The Servant Will Be Exalted because of His Humiliation (53:10–11)

The final stanza of the Song serves as an epilogue. The Lord is once again the speaker, just as He was in the opening stanza. Just as the first stanza depicted the Servant's exaltation, this one does as well. The difference is that in the first stanza the Servant is promised exaltation despite His humiliation but now He is promised exaltation precisely because of His humiliation.

53:10. *The Servant will be restored because of His humiliation in serving as a substitutionary sacrifice for sinners.* Just before the oracle proper where the Lord begins to speak, the prophet Isaiah states that the will of the Lord will be accomplished through the Servant's sacrifice and ultimate exaltation. Although the NASB states that **the LORD was pleased to crush Him**, the Hebrew word translated "pleased" may also be used to indicate will or purpose (cf. Jdg 13:23) and therefore translated "willing." That this is so here is indicated by the active voice (lit., "The Lord willed") and the grammatical construction (to be precise, an active voice verb ["willed"] followed by an infinitive ["to crush"] with a pronominal suffix in the accusative ["Him"], these elements typically expressing purpose). God took no pleasure in the death of His Servant but He "willed" to crush (cf. 53:5) Him for the ultimate purpose of providing salvation.

The Servant's exaltation would come as a result of His making Himself **a guilt offering** (v. 10). This is a reference to the restitution offering (cf. Lv 5:14–6:7) when one wronged God or other people. A sacrifice was offered to God providing atonement for the wrong done (Lv 5:15, 18; 6:6; 19:20) along with a restitution or fine to the offended human party. Regardless, this sacrifice did provide expiation for sin. The use of this term in relation to the Servant identifies His death as an atonement for the damage and injury done by sin.

As a result of His atoning death, the Servant will experience restoration as the first aspect of His exaltation. The Servant's restoration has three components. First, He will have followers, not rejecters. Although He was despised and forsaken of men (53:3), the Servant is promised that **He will see His offspring** (lit., "His seed"). Normally this term refers to physical progeny, but the context about rejection and the timing of this after His death indicates that the word "seed" should be taken figuratively for "followers" (as it is used in Is 57:4).

The second aspect of the Servant's restoration is that He will have life, not death. Despite the gruesome death described previously (52:14, 53:8–9), here He is promised prolonged days (v. 10), indicating an indirect reference to the resurrection. Third, the Servant's restoration will include God's pleasure and prosperity in His life rather than suffering and sorrow.

53:11. *The Servant will be satisfied because of His justification of sinners.* The Servant's exaltation will also include His own satisfaction with what He accomplished. He will not consider His death as a sign of failure, but rather **be satisfied** with the forgiveness He provided. From His anguish, **He will see it**, but the object *it* is not in the Hebrew text. In fact, there is no object to the verb **see**. Both the Septuagint and the Qumran scroll of Isaiah do have the word "light" as the object. This reading, which is more likely, indicates that after **anguish** the Servant will see light. The NIV translation correctly translates this as a reference to resurrection: "he will see the light of life."

It is **by His knowledge** that the Servant will **justify the many**. This should more likely be read in the objective case ("knowledge of Him"), indicating that many people will come to know (believe in) the Servant. As a result, God's righteous Servant will provide justification. This is a play on the words, as both **righteous** and **justify** have the same Hebrew root word. The **Righteous One** will "declare righteous" (**justify**) those who know Him. As a result, **He will bear their iniquities**. This is what brings the Servant satisfaction—knowing that His suffering and death will bring forgiveness to those who turn to Him. It is almost universally recognized by Pauline scholars that Is 53:11 is what provides the theological basis for much of what Paul says about the atoning, justifying death of Jesus Christ (see Rm 3:21–29).

LESSON NUGGET – What was Jesus thinking as He suffered and died? Isaiah wrote that He would "see His seed." In other words, He would see His offspring, those who would be saved by His selfless act. He was thinking of us. And thinking of you and me, and knowing that he was purchasing our redemption, knowing that we could now spend an eternity with Him. He saw us and was satisfied.

Sources: *Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary*