



Highlights From the Book of Isaiah

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The Fourth Servant Song (52:13 – 53:12)

- The announcement and description given in today's text of how God will save his people is ***both*** surprising and ***not*** surprising.
- It is ***surprising*** in the sense that much of the language given in prior chapters about God's power to redeem and to defeat the enemies of his people ***might*** make us expect something of that involves overwhelming power and might.
- So, when read ***instead*** about suffering, humiliation, and loss, it comes as a bit a surprise.

The Fourth Servant Song (52:13 – 53:12)

- But for the reader who has been paying careful attention from chapter 40 onward, the surprise is quickly replaced with a sense of recognition.
- The person being described here as “*my servant*” is the same “*servant*” who is described in the *previous* three “servant songs” (42:1-9; 49:1-6; and 50:4-9).
- What is said *here* about his work, his character, and his nature is very much in keeping with the things described in *those* passages.

The Fourth Servant Song (52:13 – 53:12)

- In a *sense* there is nothing *new* here, although many of the details given, particularly of his suffering, were only *hinted* at in the earlier servant songs.
- But everything that we see in *this* week's servant song were present in *embryotic form* in the earlier servant songs:
 - The worldwide consequences of his work after what *appeared* to be an initial failure
 - The lack of understanding that people had of him
 - His willingness to undergo undeserved suffering
 - The certainty of his success
- Here the "*LORD's power*" – the means by which Israel can become the servant of God – is revealed for all to see.

The Fourth Servant Song (52:13 – 53:12)

- The central thought of this passage is focused on *two* great contrasts:
 - The contrast between the Servant's *exaltation* and his *humiliation* and suffering.
 - The contrast between what people *thought* about the Servant and what was *actually* the case.
- The “*LORD's power*” here is not the power to crush the enemy, but the power, when the enemy has crushed the Servant, to give back love and mercy.
- The Servant takes on himself the sins of Israel and of the nations of the world, and, like the Old Testament scapegoat, bears those sins away from us:
 - *The goat is to bear on itself all their iniquities into an inaccessible land, so he is to send the goat away in the wilderness.* (Lev 16:22)

The Fourth Servant Song (52:13 – 53:12)

- It is *inevitable* that the Christian reader of this passage will read it in terms of the New Testament identification of the Servant as Jesus Christ – and rightly so.
- In the earliest interpretations of this text by the Jews, this text *was* understood to be a *Messianic* text.
- This understanding can be seen, for example, in the *Targum Jonathan*, an Aramaic paraphrase of the Old Testament Prophets written in the second century which identifies the Servant in Isaiah 52:13 as the Messiah.
- It was the early church's successful apologetic use of the passage to prove that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah that led Jewish commentators to develop *alternative* interpretations of the passage.

The Fourth Servant Song (52:13 – 53:12)

- While the modern reader approaches the text in the light of its *fulfilment*, it is still legitimate to ask how the passage would have been heard by Isaiah's *original* audience.
- We must recognize, first of all, that this is *poetry*, not dogmatic theology.
- It is *not* an analytical analysis like that given by Paul in his epistles, where, guided by the Spirit, he presents the significance of what has already taken place.
- What was revealed to the prophet was *true*, but not yet a *complete* presentation of the truth.
- However, there can be no doubt that Isaiah's audience was able to grasp that revolutionary, transforming claims were being made regarding the Servant's death, and that it played a key role in the outworking of the LORD's plan of salvation.

The Fourth Servant Song (52:13 – 53:12)

- Today's passage can be broken into *five* parts:
 - Through Suffering to Glory (52:13-15)
 - Despised and Rejected (53:1-3)
 - Radical Reappraisal (53:4-6)
 - A Lamb to the Slaughter (53:7-9)
 - He Will Be Satisfied (53:10-12)

Through Suffering to Glory (52:13-15)

52:13 Look, my servant will succeed! He will be elevated, lifted high, and greatly exalted – ¹⁴ (just as many were horrified by the sight of you) he was so disfigured he no longer looked like a man; his form was so marred he no longer looked human – ¹⁵ so now he will startle many nations. Kings will be shocked by his exaltation, for they will witness something unannounced to them, and they will understand something they had not heard about.

Through Suffering to Glory (52:13-15)

- The poem *begins* on a note of triumph: The servant “*will succeed*”.
- There is *no question* about the *outcome* of the Servant’s work.
- Some of the terms used here to describe the servant (“*elevated, lifted high, and greatly exalted*”) as are terms used *only* of **God** elsewhere in the book of Isaiah (6:1; 57:15).
- It is important to note that the poem that is today’s text *closes* on the same note of *triumph*: “*he will divide the spoils of victory with the powerful.*” (53:12)
- To the victor go the spoils, as the old saying goes.

Through Suffering to Glory (52:13-15)

- There is a *reason* why that point is made *both* at the *beginning* and the *end* of the poem.
- It's because nothing in between the beginning and the end looks at all like what we would *normally* think of as victorious!
- The Servant's *humiliation* is presented *immediately* after these opening words.
- The disfigurement of the Servant is utterly shocking.
- He hardly appears to be human.
- He is not the attractive figure that so many of the world's conquerors have been or pretended to be.
- Those to whom the Servant will bring justice are appalled that he will do so by means of his own injury and abuse.
- They have never "*heard*" of such a thing!

Despised and Rejected (53:1-3)

53:1 *Who would have believed what we just heard? When was the LORD's power revealed through him?* ² *He sprouted up like a twig before God, like a root out of parched soil; he had no stately form or majesty that might catch our attention, no special appearance that we should want to follow him.* ³ *He was despised and rejected by people, one who experienced pain and was acquainted with illness; people hid their faces from him; he was despised, and we considered him insignificant.*

Despised and Rejected (53:1-3)

- This second stanza continues a discussion of the *response* to the Servant.
- But now we move *beyond* the initial astonishment to *outright rejection*.
- Isaiah makes it explicit that this Servant is “*the LORD’s power*” that had been “*revealed*” (53:1).
- But clearly people did not believe this. Why?
- Three reasons are given:
 - He comes onto the scene in a quiet and unassuming way (53:2).
 - He has no extraordinary beauty or attractiveness to draw people to him; his “*appearance*” was quite ordinary.
 - Finally, he is rejected because he takes on himself the “*pain*” and suffering of the world (53:3).

Despised and Rejected (53:1-3)

- This suffering should not be restricted to *physical* suffering in the light of what else is said here.
- But neither should it be construed to *exclude* such suffering.
- We find such pain and suffering disturbing, both because we do not know what to say in sympathy and because it reminds us of our own vulnerability.
- So we try to ignore it (“*hide [our] faces*”) and dismiss it as unimportant (“*we considered him insignificant*”).
- The Servant has come to take away the sins of the world, but no one pays any attention to him!

Radical Reappraisal (53:4-6)

53:4 But he lifted up our illnesses, he carried our pain; even though we thought he was being punished, attacked by God, and afflicted for something he had done. ⁵ He was wounded because of our rebellious deeds, crushed because of our sins; he endured punishment that made us well; because of his wounds we have been healed. ⁶ All of us had wandered off like sheep; each of us had strayed off on his own path, but the Lord caused the sin of all of us to attack him.

Radical Reappraisal (53:4-6)

- If there were any question about *why* the Servant had to suffer, these verses answer the question once and for all.
- Despite what “*we*” thought, he is not suffering because God has inflicted deserved punishment on him (53:4).
- It is *our* suffering that he bore, and it is for *our* “*rebellious deeds*” and “*our sins*” that he suffered (53:5).
- The repetition of first-person plural pronouns (“*we*”, “*our*”, “*us*”) hammers home that the Servant has suffered in “*our*” place.

Radical Reappraisal (53:4-6)

- This passage makes it utterly clear that the people of Israel, while remaining the “servants” of God to bear witness to his saving power, are *not the* Servant of the Lord who will bring justice and deliverance to the earth.
- Verse 6 drives this point home with imagery:
- “*All of us*” – the blind, rebellious people of God – are like the “*sheep*” who has “*strayed off on his own path*”.
- And yet it is *the servant* is who gets *beaten* for *our* willfulness!

A Lamb to the Slaughter (53:7-9)

53:7 He was treated harshly and afflicted, but he did not even open his mouth. Like a lamb led to the slaughtering block, like a sheep silent before her shearers, he did not even open his mouth.⁸ He was led away after an unjust trial – but who even cared? Indeed, he was cut off from the land of the living; because of the rebellion of his own people he was wounded.⁹ They intended to bury him with criminals, but he ended up in a rich man's tomb because he had committed no violent deeds, nor had he spoken deceitfully.

A Lamb to the Slaughter (53:7-9)

- This stanza details the Servant's *innocence* and *submission* and the *injustice* of the treatment he receives.
- The *Servant* is now compared to a sheep, and with very different results.
- In *him* it is the mild, defenseless nature of the sheep that is the basis of comparison.
- Although his suffering is obviously unjust, he accepts it without protest (53:7).
- It is significant that the only extended metaphor in the entire poem deals with sheep, the animals of sacrifice.
- The injustice of what the Servant suffered is further emphasized in 53:8-9.
- He is deprived of justice, "*but who even cared?*"

A Lamb to the Slaughter (53:7-9)

- While it was his *enemies'* intention to heap *shame* upon him by casting his corpse into the common pit used for the remains of paupers or criminals (cf. 2 Kings 23:6; Jer. 26:23), and so to deny him an honorable burial "*with his fathers*" (cf. 1 Kings 13:22).
- Their plan was frustrated.
- In the overruling providence of the LORD, it was not to a *criminal's* grave that his corpse was taken.
- On the *contrary*, he was buried in circumstances of some *honor* and *distinction* "*in a tomb cut out of the rock, where no one had yet been buried*" (Luke 23:53).

A Lamb to the Slaughter (53:7-9)

- “*Because*” indicates that this did not happen by *accident*, but to signal the LORD’s *approval* of the Servant’s life.
- The servant is said to have had no “*violent deeds*”.
- Not only did he not *commit* such deeds of violence against others; he had pursued a positive policy of *avoiding* such conduct.
- Nor had the servant “*spoken deceitfully*” through word or action so as to mislead or trick others.
- The Servant was *totally guiltless* (conduct that Peter sets out as an example in 1 Peter 2:22).
- There is *only* one to whom such a description may justly be applied.

He Will Be Satisfied (53:10-12)

53:10 Though the LORD desired to crush him and make him ill, once restitution is made, he will see descendants and enjoy long life, and the LORD's purpose will be accomplished through him. ¹¹ Having suffered, he will reflect on his work, he will be satisfied when he understands what he has done. "My servant will acquit many, for he carried their sins. ¹² So I will assign him a portion with the multitudes, he will divide the spoils of victory with the powerful, because he willingly submitted to death and was numbered with the rebels, when he lifted up the sin of many and intervened on behalf of the rebels."

He Will Be Satisfied (53:10-12)

- Why have these things happened to the Servant?
- The answer is given in this final stanza.
- They were *not* accidental; they were *intended*.
- Moreover, it was *God's* intention.
- The opening lines of 53:10 *sound* terrible (“*the LORD desired to crush him and make him ill*”).
- What good father could wish for his son to be *crushed* or *made ill*?
- It is only possible if there was some unquestionably greater good to be obtained.

He Will Be Satisfied (53:10-12)

- And what greater good could *possibly* justify the *crushing* of the Servant?
- The answer is given in the second half of the verse.
- “*once restitution is made*” God’s purpose in bringing him to this place is then realized.
- At that point the injustice of the servant being deprived of children and a long life will be *rectified*.

He Will Be Satisfied (53:10-12)

- The Servant did not come (primarily) to *tell* people what God *wants*; rather, he came to *be* what *God wants for us*.
- But how can someone who has been cut off from the land of the living without descendants ever have these things?
- It certainly looks as though *resurrection* is the only answer.
- Verse 11 gives a more theological statement of what was accomplished in the Servant's death.
- It begins by recapping the previous statement, but this time from the *Servant's* point of view, saying that when his life has been offered up for others, "*he will be satisfied when he understands what he has done*"
- The hard struggle will have been worth it.

He Will Be Satisfied (53:10-12)

- But what does that struggle accomplish for people who accept it on their own behalf?
- The second half of verse 11 answers that question in a tightly connected statement.
- “*My servant will acquit many*”. How?
- Because “*he carried their sins*” which is clearly what the “*having suffered*” was about at the beginning of the verse.

He Will Be Satisfied (53:10-12)

- Everything is summed up in 53:12, as the opening “*So*” indicates.
- But it is as though the author does not want anyone to miss the reason for God’s (“*I*”) giving the Servant the spoils of victory, because even though the cause has been fully stated in 53:4-11, he restates it again in the closing verse.
- Why does God give his servant the victor’s wreath?
- “*Because*” he was *treated* like one of the “*rebels*” when he was *not*, and thus bore their punishment and “*intervened*” on their behalf.
- If there are any remaining questions about how the Servant brings God’s justice to the world, this verse should clear it up.

Next Time

I plan to look at the *New Testament citations* of **Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12**

Specifically we will be looking at these ideas:

- For what had not been told them they will see, And what they had not heard they will understand. **Isaiah 52:15** cited in **Romans 15:21**)
- Who has believed our report? (**Isaiah 53:1** cited in **John 12:38, Romans 10:16**)
- He bore our diseases (**Isaiah 53:4** cited in **Matthew 8:17**)
- By his stripes you were healed (**Isaiah 53:5** cited in **1 Peter 2:24**)
- Like a lamb that is lead to the slaughter (**Isaiah 53:7** cited in **Acts 8:32**)
- He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth (**Isaiah 53:9** cited in **1 Peter 2:22**)
- He was numbered with transgressors (**Isaiah 53:12** cited in **Mark 15:28, Luke 22:37**)

Class Discussion Time



Class Discussion Time

- One of my commentaries observed concerning people's reaction to the suffering of Christ:
 - We find pain and suffering disturbing, both because we do not know what to say in sympathy and because it reminds us of our own vulnerability.
 - So we try to ignore it (“hide [our] faces”) and not to think about it (“considered him insignificant”).
- Do you think this is true? Do you experience these feelings when you see intense suffering going on in the lives of others? Or have you had other people react in this way towards you when you were going through intense suffering?

Class Discussion Time

- We see that it was the intention of the Servant's enemies' to "heap **shame** on him" by casting his corpse into the common pit used for the remains of paupers or criminals (cf. 2 Kings 23:6; Jer. 26:23), and so to deny him an honorable burial "with his fathers" (cf. 1 Kings 13:22)
- As it turns out, their plan was frustrated – Christ was given an **honorable** burial.
- Reading this caused me to think about some of our modern attitudes towards burial.
- Do we feel shame about a "dishonorable" burial in our day?
- Do you think it is even important to **be** buried. Or is it no big deal. What about the idea of **cremation**?
- It used to be that only the **heathen** burned their dead. Nowadays many Christians seem to think it's okay. Is it?