

Isaiah 53: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 53. Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth. Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. 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, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked, and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him. He has put him to grief. When his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring. He shall prolong his days. The will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied. By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous.

And he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors. Yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors. The fourth of the so-called servant songs of Isaiah, and the most well known, begins in chapter 52 verse 13. However the bulk of it is in chapter 53. The importance of this passage in New Testament and subsequent Christian thought is immense. It is referenced or cited on several occasions in the New Testament, sometimes in quite surprising ways. It was this passage that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading in Acts chapter 8, and from which Philip directed him to Christ. The apostle Peter develops an extended series of allusions to this passage in 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 19 to 25.

For this is a gracious thing, when mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if, when you do good and suffer for it, you endure? This is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls. After his allusions to Isaiah chapter 50, Paul likely alludes to this passage in Romans chapter 8, when he speaks of Christ interceding for us at God's right hand, and of Christians being regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. He then directly cites it in chapter 10 verses 14 to 17. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news! But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us? So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. In Luke chapter 22 verse 37, Jesus reveals that he sees the word of Isaiah concerning his being numbered with the transgressors as being fulfilled in his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. In John chapter 12 verses 37 to 41, the gospel writer connects the unbelief of the people in response to the many signs of Jesus and his teaching to verse 1 of the chapter. In chapter 8 verses 16 to 17 of his gospel, Matthew says that

Jesus' healings and exorcisms were in fulfilment of the servants' prophesied taking of our illnesses and bearing of our diseases. Likewise, fulfilments of Isaiah chapter 53 are clearly alluded to in Christ's silence in his trials and his burial in the tomb of the rich Joseph of Arimathea. While most Christian readings of Isaiah chapter 53 focus narrowly upon the crucifixion of Christ, the New Testament authors see far broader fulfilment of its words in both Christ and his church. In its original context in the book of Isaiah, we have already had intimations of the fact that the servant is one who will suffer and be rejected before he would be vindicated. Chapter 49 verse 4, But I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity, yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God. Chapter 50 verses 6 to 7, I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard. I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting, but the Lord God helps me, therefore I have not been disgraced, therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. It is in chapter 53, however, that the suffering of the servant, and the great reversal that will occur when the Lord vindicates him, finally come into a crisper and clearer focus.

[6 : 14] The chapters that follow will build further upon this. The two servant songs preceding this, albeit not the first in chapter 42 verses 1 to 4, were words of the servant himself, spoken in the first person.

Here, however, we have third person's speech concerning the servant. Earlier on, Israel was spoken of as the servant, but as a blind servant, who had failed to perform his task. In chapter 49, the servant called by the Lord, in a manner similar to the prophets, was described as the one by whom the Lord would restore Israel to himself. When the Ethiopian eunuch pondered the meaning of this chapter, he questioned whether the servant described within it was the prophet himself. There are certainly similarities that we might see between the figure of the servant as described in this chapter, and prophetic figures. For instance, Jeremiah's account of his experience in Jeremiah chapter 11 verses 19 and 20 recalls Isaiah's words here, But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying, Let us destroy the tree with its fruit. Let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more. But, O Lord of hosts, who judges righteously, who tests the heart and the mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you have I committed my cause. Jeremiah, a faithful prophet, is also a great sufferer. He is the weeping prophet. Like

Joseph, he is cast into a waterless pit by hostile brethren led by a vicious descendant of Judah. He is then brought down into Egypt against his will. In all of this, the destiny of his entire people is particularly concentrated upon him. The story of the assassination of Gedaliah and its aftermath has numerous allusions back to the story of the sale of Joseph. Recognizing the manner in which the servant is connected to Israel and to the prophet is important, even when we relate it primarily to Jesus. Jesus sums up Israel in himself, takes its burden upon himself, and as prophets like Jeremiah and others who preceded him, he bears the righteous judgment of the Lord upon a rebellious people as the innocent sufferer, albeit in a far more complete and perfect manner. In addition to being a prophet-like figure, the servant also has royal features, being like a king who will be vindicated and exalted after suffering. We might, for instance, think of the experience of King David during and after the coup of Absalom. Much of the importance of this passage in subsequent thought comes from the way that it has inspired thought concerning the nature and the logic of the atonement.

We must be cautious not to lay too much weight upon this passage for determining questions of the mechanics of atonement, or for deciding upon a particular theory of the atonement. As in the gospel accounts of the crucifixion, what we are given is a narrative of what will happen to the servant, not a theory of how it all works, something about which the scripture has surprisingly little directly to say. John Goldingay helpfully unpacks some of the terminology that has been used by commentators and theologians in order to understand what is going on here. Terminology like substitution, representation, participation, identification, persecution, martyrdom, embodiment, and vicariousness.

He writes, Most of the ideas conveyed by the abstract nouns and prepositions can be illustrated from the story of Moses, others from different Old Testament figures. Substitution, instead of, might be illustrated by Moses' suggestion that Yahweh should blot him, rather than Israel as a whole, out of Yahweh's book. He would take their place. Representation, on behalf of, is illustrated by the position the people ask Moses to occupy at Sinai when they ask that he should speak with Yahweh on their behalf. He then takes their place, in another sense, in acting as their representative.

[10:04] Participation, or identification, with, is illustrated by the strand of thinking in the Torah that sees Moses as sharing in the consequences of the Exodus generation's failure and as thus also unable to enter the land. It is more fully illustrated by a prophet such as Ezekiel sharing in the experience of deportation to Babylon, as if sharing in the people's unfaithfulness and as the price of fulfilling a ministry to them. Persecution, at the hands of, is illustrated by the stories of the people's attacks on Moses, and later by stories about Jeremiah, and by 2nd Isaiah's own testimony.

Embodiment, before, is illustrated by Ezekiel's living out before people's eyes, the grim implications of the fall of Jerusalem. Vicariousness, for, is illustrated by Job.

He is not his friend's representative, but his suffering embodies for them, and for readers, truths about a relationship with God, and possibilities about coping with suffering that can lead them on in a relationship with God, and in coping with suffering.

Goldingay rightly observes that Christian understandings of what is going on in Isaiah chapter 53 are often hampered by the narrowing of our theological frameworks that has occurred through the elevation of legal models for understanding salvation to the exclusion of others. Legal models are clearly appropriate, but they're not the only ones. There are many facets to the salvation that Christ accomplishes, and we will need several models of the atonement interacting with each other to do any sort of justice to the reality. One of the challenges that we face in reading Isaiah chapter 53 is the identification of the various characters and speakers. As Peter Lighthouse notes, there are at least three characters. There is the one who speaks of the central figure as my servant, which, given the way my servant is elsewhere used, is evidently the voice of the Lord. Then there is the servant himself, generally spoken of using third person singular pronouns. Finally, there is the more mysterious we.

At first glance, the we of verse 1 might seem to be a collective reference to the witness-bearing prophets. However, closer examination unsettles this interpretation, that we in the verses that follow hide their faces from the figure of the servant and don't esteem him. Most likely the voice here is that of Israel, the prophet being among them, bearing witness to the figure of the servant, who has acted on their behalf while being rejected by them. The fact that the voice is Israel's own evidence is the final success of the servant's mission. The expression the arm of the Lord was earlier used in chapter 51 verse 9, where the people called for the Lord's arm to awake and put on strength, acting in order to accomplish their deliverance. Verse 10 of the preceding chapter spoke of the Lord bearing his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations. Here we see the form that the Lord's answer to his people's cry and his saving work takes. The arm of the Lord is revealed in the work of his suffering servant. The origins of the servant are inauspicious. In the earlier chapters of Isaiah, there are several references to the chopping down of forests and great trees, as just a stump will be left of the former might of Judah and of the house of David. Indeed, we might see the servant as a new shoot coming forth from scorched earth, a new ruler arising from a house that seemed dead, as in chapter 11 verse 1. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his root shall bear fruit. While people might expect a new ruler to be marked out by peculiar charm, a handsome appearance, or elevated stature, the servant has none of these. His appearance is unprepossessing, and there is no manifest majesty to him, nothing about him that would single him out from anyone else for the beholder. He would be considered worthless and unworthy of any sort of particular attention. Indeed, as one marked by suffering and sorrow, people would distance themselves from him. If you are looking for a leader or a figure to redeem the nation, you would look to the powerful, the attractive, the popular, the charming, the confident, and the successful. The servant seems to have none of these qualities and is dismissed for this reason. Yet Israel's impressions of the servant are greatly mistaken, as we see in verses 4 to 6. The man of sorrows carries the sorrows of the people themselves. Like Job's friends, the people, looking at the servant, consider that the Lord has singled him out for judgment. His condemnation is evident from his suffering. However, the affliction with which he was struck was not on account of any sin on his part, but on account of theirs.

[14 : 40] John Oswald remarks upon the sacrificial overtones of terms such as bearing and carrying in verse 4, recalling the animals within the sacrificial system of Israel upon whom sins could be laid.

Imagery drawn from the sacrificial system will be strengthened in what follows. The servant suffers cruelly, pierced, crushed, chastised, and wounded. In the disfigured face of the afflicted servant, the nation should recognize itself, as they were described in chapter 1 verses 4 to 6.

Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly. They have forsaken the Lord. They have despised the Holy One of Israel. They are utterly estranged.

Why will you still be struck down? Why will you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds. They are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil.

The people, like a wayward flock, had all gone astray, rejecting the path of the Lord and bringing judgment upon themselves. However, through his redemptive action in the servant, the bearing of his holy arm, the Lord had placed the iniquities of his rebellious nation upon his faithful servant.

[15 : 59] The servant who bears the iniquities of the people is himself innocent of any wrong. He submits to the oppression and humiliation without protest or resistance, like a sheep meekly going to its slaughter.

He was a willing victim, not one merely taken by violence, nor, in contrast to the lamb with which he is compared, was he unwitting of what awaited him. In the Gospels we see this in Jesus' silence before his accusers and those who would condemn him to his death, in addition to the way that he purposefully walked the path to Jerusalem, knowing the fate that awaited him there. He also bore his cross on the path to Calvary and stayed on the cross, even when he could have summoned legions of angels to deliver him. The proper translation and sense of the first clause of verse 8 is unclear.

Was the servant taken away by oppression and judgment? Was he taken away from oppression and judgment? Or was he taken away having been deprived of judgment? The context, as Oswald argues, most supports the first option, that the servant was, unlike Israel, cut off through injustice. He was cut off out of the land of the living. This, as Goldengay recognises, could merely be a poetic way to refer to death. But even if it denotes death, it also connotes exile, and indeed could potentially refer to being expelled from human society. The death of Jesus, of course, was a sort of expulsion from human society. He was disgorged from the body politic, held up for rejection and ridicule, disowned and handed over by his people, forsaken by most of his disciples, and betrayed by one of those closest to him. Even before he went down into the grave. The servant seemed like one utterly removed and extinguished. To the eyes of others, he had no children to bear his name, and with his death, his memory would also seem to have died. This was a particularly terrible fate, for one's name to be completely blotted out. Yet all of this was on account of the transgression of the people. The innocence of the servant, the fact that he is without moral blemish, is seen in verse 9. Despite his innocence, those who killed him gave him a wicked man's death and set him apart for a wicked man's burial.

The connotations of the term rich, used in relation to those with whom the servant was buried, are difficult to determine. Is the term used more or less synonymously with the wicked, connecting the rich with the oppressors? Or does it have a less negative sense? Of course, in the Gospels, we read that Jesus was buried in the tomb of a rich man and a member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea.

Ironically, in his burial, he was placed in the tomb of one of the men of the ruling body that sought his death. The final verses of the chapter sum up the larger message of the passage, declaring the outcome of it all and the Lord's purpose within it. Judging by the appearance, the servant seemed to be condemned by the Lord, marked out for judgment. However, the Lord's will was being realised through the dreadful crushing of his servant. The Lord did not merely permit the suffering of his servant, but actively willed it. This, of course, is an important claim concerning Jesus in the apostolic teaching. In Acts chapter 2, verses 22 to 24, in Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, Men of Israel, hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God, with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know. This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

[19 : 32] God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. Also in Acts chapter 4, verses 27 and 28, For truly in this city they were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. The purpose of the servant's suffering is to serve as a trespass offering. Although the servant seems to be utterly cut off, the successful offering of his sacrifice will mark a turning point. The servant will have a generation, an offspring, and his name will not be blotted out. His life will be extended, and the purpose of the Lord, which would connect with the arm of the Lord mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, would prosper with him. While Christians rightly see the resurrection of Jesus in this verse, such a verse could also refer to an experience like that of Job, so we should beware of reading too much back into it. The servant, having passed through his bitter suffering, will be satisfied, having achieved his purpose on the other side. We should probably read the words, by his knowledge, in relation to the servant's being satisfied, rather than in connection with the justification that he achieves. The servant, here also described as the Lord's righteous one, the exemplary Israelite, would make many righteous through his offering. In the final verse, we see the Lord's vindication of his faithful and righteous servant. The servant is rewarded and exalted like a great victor. The one who was cut off from and by the people now stands at their head.

This is on account of his willing suffering with, and most importantly, for the transgressors. Suffering as he did, he bore the transgressors' sins, and now he makes intercession for them.

This is how the Lord will redeem his sinful people and achieve his great purpose, bringing Israel back into right relationship with him. A question to consider, how might the sacrificial system help us better to understand the work of the servant in this chapter?