

The Servant's Suffering

Devotional Reading: Matthew 12:14–21

Background Scripture: Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Today's Scripture: Isaiah 53:1–7

I. Servant's Appearance Isaiah 53:1–3

- ¹ **Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the
LORD been revealed?**
- ² **He grew up before him like a ten-
der 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.**
- ³ **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.**

1. The chapter opens with two questions. The first question indicates that the *message* 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 spirit, Scripture speaks of him as hav-

ing physical characteristics. Writers of Scripture often refer to the Lord's "arm" to express his power, might, and eternity.

2a. Disbelief regarding the servant might be due, in part, to his humble and unattractive origin and disposition. The phrase *he grew 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 shoot* is delicate, ready to break under adverse conditions; *a root out of dry ground* is in danger of dying without proper water. These two metaphors highlight the perceived weakness of the servant and his questionable origin in the eyes of the world.

2b. Having identified the servant's humble origin, the text turns to describe his appearance and presentation. To arrive with *no beauty or majesty* predicts that the servant's physical appearance will not be the reason that anyone is drawn to him.

When we see the line *nothing in his appearance 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.

3. 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. 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 suffering* is to be *familiar with pain*. This pictures the floods of emotional pain.

II. Servant's Suffering

Isaiah 53:4–7

- ⁴ Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished
by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
- ⁵ 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.
- ⁶ 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.
- ⁷ 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 shear-
ers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.**

4a. We continue to see parallel ideas, with the phrase *took up our pain* equivalent to the phrase *bore our suffering*. The description of the servant's 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. Thus, we see a connection between our sufferings and the servant's.

4b. 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 *punished by 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.

Witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion interpret that event as a test of the servant's identity as they cry, "He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Matthew 27:42b–43). 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 *stricken by God*, but not in the sense that the onlookers to the crucifixion suppose. Our next verse explains this further.

5a. The prophet turns to the physical punishment the servant experienced. This is also expressed through parallel thoughts: *pierced* is equivalent to *crushed*, 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. Through the servant's suffering we can experience *peace* with God and be *healed* from our sins. Such peace and reconciliation are available because of the servant's sacrifice.

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, only Jesus could pay such a price. The New Testament connects being healed by the servant's *wounds* 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.

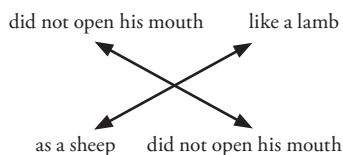
6. People are compared to *sheep* in numerous places in the Bible. The comparisons are not flattering. Sheep tend to go *astray*, and people inevitably do the same when they go their *own way* and live independently of God's guidance. Of course, the specific ways people describe their sinfulness change 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 *the iniquity of us all* on the servant. Everyone is guilty of sin; the sacrifice of Jesus, however, is provided 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 a year, the high priest laid his hands on the scapegoat and placed upon it the nation's sins; 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 the complete punishment upon himself for human sin. In Paul's words, God "made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21). God did this "so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26).

7. 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.

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. 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.

Involvement Learning

The Servant's Suffering

Into the Lesson

How would you describe Jesus to someone who had never heard of him or met him?

In today's lesson, consider how the prophet Isaiah paints a word picture of the servant and how this word picture describes the person and work of Jesus.

Into the Word

Read Isaiah 53:1–3. How does this passage describe the upbringing of the servant?

How are Matthew 13:54–58; Mark 6:3–4; Luke 2:39–40, 51–52; and John 1:10–14 related to Isaiah 53:1–3?

How did people receive and respond to Jesus?

How does Isaiah 53:1–3 describe the rejection the servant would face?

How are Matthew 23:37; 27:21–23; John 11:32–37; and Acts 2:22–23 related to Isaiah 53:1–3?

How did people receive and respond to Jesus?

Key Verse

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.
—Isaiah 53:6

Into Life

Reread Isaiah 52:1–7 and choose one significant attribute of the servant. Write a prayer of gratitude for that attribute and what the servant's suffering accomplished.

Thought to Remember

Jesus is the servant we serve.