

The Perfect Servant as the Suffering Servant

Isaiah 52:13-53

Isaiah 52:13-15 - *“Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently; He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high. ¹⁴ Just as many were astonished at you, so His visage was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men. ¹⁵ So shall He sprinkle [startle] many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths at Him, for what had not been told them they shall see, and what they had not heard they shall consider.”*

Background Notes

This is the fourth of the well-known “Servant Songs” of Isaiah.

Evidence of the Servant’s deity was given in verse 13: *“He shall be exalted and extolled [or lifted up] and be very high.”* The phrase *“high and lifted up”* is the same phrase used to describe God in Isaiah 6, when Isaiah had the wonderful and awesome vision of the glory and holiness of the Lord. This predicted Perfect Servant will be God Himself!

And indeed He will be highly exalted - but that exaltation will only come after suffering. His physical and spiritual sufferings will be very great (v14), but the sufferings will result in worldwide effects (v15).

Doctrinal Points

1. The Suffering Servant would have humble beginnings.

Isaiah 53:1-3 - *“Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? ² For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness, and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. ³ He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him. He was despised, and we did not esteem Him”.*

Let me paraphrase verse 1: Who would believe that God’s power will be revealed through a humble Suffering Servant? Not many will believe that message!

The coming Messiah would not grow up as a stately, well-cared-for tree, but as a small tender sprig coming out of the dry ground (v2). He would have no special appearance - no majestic halo and no glamour like a movie star (v2). In fact, He would be shunned and despised because of His sorrow and grief about the condition of the nation and people. He certainly wouldn’t be esteemed as a leader – in fact, he would hardly be given a second look (v3). The Suffering Servant would have humble beginnings.

2. The Suffering Servant would die as our substitute.

Isaiah 53:4-9 - *“Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows - yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*

⁵ But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.

⁶ 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.

⁷ He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. ⁸ He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken.

⁹ And they made His grave with the wicked— but with the rich at His death, because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth.”

When we read this passage about the sufferings of the Perfect Servant, it's hard to miss the obvious fact that this prophecy described none other than the Lord Jesus, our Savior.

In an effort to avoid the obvious truth that this passage is about Jesus, the official interpretation of Judaism today says that the “servant” here is not an individual - they say it is *the nation of Israel*. However, notice that the Suffering Servant is definitely distinguished from the people of the nation in verse 8: *“For the transgressions of My people He was stricken.”* Clearly the individual Suffering Servant is distinguished from the people of the nation of Israel.

Furthermore, throughout the passage the Suffering Servant was portrayed as an **innocent** victim. That could never be said of the nation of Israel, which was denounced for her sins throughout the rest of Isaiah's prophecy.

In these verses, the predictions of the sufferings of Christ were clearly evident. His scourging and the piercing that was associated with crucifixion were prophesied in verse 5. He was led as a silent Lamb to the slaughter (v7). He was cut off in death (v8). He was illegally executed as a criminal along with two thieves. He was buried in the grave of a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea (v9).

How can anyone miss the truth that this is a Messianic prophecy about the sufferings of Jesus of Nazareth?

One of my colleagues at Emmaus Bible College, Dr. Jack Fish, was saved along with some of his high school friends at a Billy Graham Crusade in New York City in 1957. The next week these new believers asked their high school homeroom teacher if they could read a passage from the Bible each day before classes began. Back then Bible reading was a common practice to start the day in public schools, and permission was granted. So the teens began to read passages

from the New Testament. After a few days, the Jewish students complained. They said that they didn't mind Scriptures being read, but they didn't want to hear readings from the New Testament because they didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

Okay, no problem. The Christian kids said they would read from the Old Testament. What do you think was the first Old Testament passage they picked? You guessed it! They chose Isaiah 53 – but they didn't give the reference. After the reading the Jewish students complained again, saying that they thought there was to be no more readings about Jesus from the New Testament. Were they surprised when they were shown that the reading came from the Hebrew Bible – their own Bible! It was obvious that Isaiah 53 was speaking of the sufferings of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah – the Savior of the world

Notice that the sufferings of God's Servant were substitutionary in nature.

Verse 4: *"Surely He has borne our grief and carried our sorrows."*

Verse 5: *"But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed."*

Verse 6: *"And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."*

Verse 8: *"For the transgressions of My people He was stricken."*

And verse 11: *"He shall bear their iniquities."*

This is clearly the language of *substitution*.

Did the term "My people" (v8) mean that the substitutionary sufferings of Jesus Christ were only for the Jewish people? No. The rest of Scripture teaches that Jesus Christ suffered and died on the cross as a Substitute for *all* people. John 3:16 says, *"Whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life."* The Suffering Servant would die as our substitute.

3. The Suffering Servant would be resurrected - bodily.

Isaiah 53:10-12 - *"Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand.*

¹¹ He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the

strong, because He poured out His soul unto death. He was numbered with the transgressors, and He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

For the Suffering Servant to see His “*offspring*” or “*seed*” - meaning believers - and “*prolong His days*” (v10), and see “*the labor of His soul,*” or the results of His sacrificial death (v11) – that would necessitate His bodily resurrection from the dead.

A great and plain statement of the way of salvation was made in the second half of verse 11: “*By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities.*” We are justified before a holy and righteous God when we come to know God's Righteous Servant as the One who bore our sins and iniquities when He suffered as our Substitute.

Verse 12 predicted that the Suffering Servant would be exalted, because He was willing to be falsely accused, and go to the cross to die for our sins. His present ministry of intercession began while He was on the cross, “*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.*”

Notice that we will share in our Lord's exaltation! “*He will divide the spoil with the strong*” - that's us! We're strong only because **His** strength has made us strong. All of these benefits are possible only because the Suffering Servant is alive today! The Suffering Servant would be bodily resurrected.

Practical Application

Don't claim Isaiah 53:5 for physical healing now.

At the end of verse 5 we read, “*And by His stripes we are healed.*”

Does that verse promise physical healing for the believer today - if you have “enough faith”? After all, we know the Lord can heal people physically. The Hebrew word here has the meaning of restoring back to normal, and can refer to more than physical healing. It can even be used for bad water being “healed” or restored back in nature.

In the specific context of Isaiah 53:5, it appears that our spiritual healing from the consequences of sin was primarily in view. Notice the emphasis on “*our transgressions*” and “*our iniquities*” in the first part of the verse. So it's healing from the effects of sin that is especially in view in Isaiah 53:5.

It is true that all disease and sickness is a result of the fall of mankind and mankind's sin. And we know that Jesus died for sin - and all the bad fallout of sin. And we know that the believer's resurrected body will not be subject to disease and sickness. So in the *ultimate* sense, Isaiah 53:5 does include physical including as well as spiritual healing. But don't claim Isaiah 53:5 for *physical* healing now.