

- ¹¹ As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see [light]² and be satisfied;
By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, As He will bear their iniquities.
will justify the many,
- ¹² Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong;
Because He poured out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors;
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors.

Who does that Servant sound like to you? This chapter contributes more direct quotes to the New Testament than any other chapter in Isaiah. But before we consider the connection to Jesus Christ, let's do our best to interpret the passage in the original context of Isaiah's message. That will be the whole focus of this lesson: what does this mean here in Isaiah? In our next lesson, we will address Jewish and New Testament interpretations of Isaiah 53.

The Structure of the Fourth Servant Song

This is the fourth and final Servant Song in the Book of the Servant. It is common to refer to this passage as "Isaiah 53" so I might do that, even though the Song really begins with the last three verses of Isaiah 52 and then takes up the whole of Isaiah 53.

The song has a chiasmic structure consisting of five stanzas. The stanzas are not of equal length according to the number of poetic verses or lines, but they are of equal length according to the verse numbering in our Bibles. Each stanza takes up three biblical verses: 52:13-15, 53:1-3; 53:4-6; 53:7-9, and 53:9-12. The first and last stanzas are the most strongly parallel. The last stanza also repeats language from the middle stanza. So in this chiasm, those two stanzas, the middle and the last, most powerfully emphasize how God accomplishes salvation through the Servant.

In both the first and last stanzas God calls the central figure of the song, "My Servant." The first stanza begins with God speaking. Then the song shifts to a narrator. The last stanza begins with the narrator, and then shifts to God speaking. Both stanzas present an enigma. In the first, the Servant is both exalted and disfigured. In last, the Servant is both crushed and made to prosper. The word "many" is important in both stanzas. The Servant will startle or sprinkle many nations in the first. He will justify the many in the last. If the interpretation "sprinkle" is correct in verse 14, then both stanzas present the Servant as an offering.

The inner two stanzas, stanza 2 and 4, provide poetic narrative. Stanza 2 is concerned with the birth and life of the Servant. Stanza 4 is concerned with His judgment, death, and burial. Each stanza describes the Servant with two similes. In stanza 2, He is like a tender shoot and like a root in dry ground. In stanza 4, He is like a lamb led to slaughter and like a sheep led to the shearer.

The middle stanza forms the heart of the song, and really, the heart of the whole Book of the Servant. The Servant takes our sin on Himself. That is the "how" we have been waiting for. How are our crimson hands washed as clean as white snow? How does the burning coal remove sin from Isaiah's lips? How are a sinful and wayward people redeemed? That is what we discover in the song, and it's going to be through the enigma.

That enigma of the first stanza is going to become more understandable by the end, though some mystery still remains. As Isaiah has said before about his prophecies, some things are made known ahead of time so when they happen, we'll say, "God is sovereign! God planned this and He spoke it!" But some things are kept in reserve so that when they happen, we'll marvel and we'll say, "This is new! Who could have imagined this?" Let's go through the song.

² J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 399. Oswalt provides this footnote concerning the word "light" in verse 11, "The Masoretic Text lacks 'light,' but the presence of the word in all the Qumran copies [...] and the LXX constitutes strong evidence. Also, the omission in MT may be explained as an error due to the presence of similar consonants in the word 'preceding' [...]" Alter also includes "light." Motyer holds to the MT.

The second Servant Song gave us a similar indication. The Servant's rejection and exaltation will be recognized by human royalty. That was in Isaiah 49:7,

Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and its holy one, To the One abhorred by the nation, "Kings will see and arise,	To the despised One, To the Servant of rulers, Princes will also bow down..."
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Future kings will come to understand the enigma. They will see a Servant whose humanity is degraded by His intense suffering and who is also somehow high, lifted up, and greatly exalted. And though some may see, we are also assured this Gospel of the Servant will not be easily received. The next stanza tells us His suffering will be observed and misunderstood. This second stanza is in Isaiah 53:1-3.

B. Suffering observed and misunderstood (1-3)

¹ Who has believed our message?	And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
² For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, He has no stately form or majesty	And like a root out of parched ground; That we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.
³ He was despised and forsaken of men,	A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;

Isaiah is speaking prophecy to Israel about future events. And he says, "Who has believed that message? To whom has the truth about the arm of the Lord been revealed?" The Song is the message. And embedded in the Song's prophecy about the Servant is the Song's prophecy that the Servant will be rejected. He will be seen with human eyes. Those human eyes will fail to discern anything special in Him and fail to understand the purpose of His suffering. The Servant can only be rightly understood when the truth about Him is revealed from God. Ironically, even though the truth about the Servant is revealed in this message of Isaiah's from God, and the truth of the Servant's rejection is revealed in this message of Isaiah from God, the prophecy is not going to prove enough for the human eye and for human reason to overcome human blindness in regard to the Servant. He will be rejected.

That phrase, "arm of the Lord," occurred in the middle of the eight oracles preceding this Song. Isaiah called Israel to wake up and listen. In the midst of that exhortation, Israel boldly turned that exhortation back on God with this request in 51:9.

⁹ Awake, awake, put on strength, Awake as in the days of old,	O arm of the LORD; the generations of long ago.
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The arm, as a member of the body, represents muscular strength. The phrase, "arm of the Lord," in that previous example referred to the mighty power of God. The arm of the Lord is the Lord Himself in action. Here, the Servant is the arm of the Lord. The Servant is somehow God's strength in action. That is what the word from Isaiah reveals. It is not what his contemporaries saw when they beheld Him with human eyes. We are told,

² For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,	And like a root out of parched ground;
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As all life begins, He begins as a tender green shoot; fragile, not strong. Not mighty God. His birth is somehow surprising. He will be as a root out of parched, or dry ground. The first simile indicates the fragility of human beginnings, like a tender shoot. The second simile suggests something incongruous about the context from which He springs, like a root out of parched ground. Roots do not normally succeed in growing out of parched ground, and they rarely become fruitful if they grow out of parched ground.

There is more here. The image of a shoot also appears in the Messianic passage that starts in 11:1.

Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,	And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.
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The Hebrew word for "shoot" is different in these two verses, but the idea is that same. The Hebrew word, "root," is the same word in both places. The root in 11:1 is the Messiah. He will bear fruit. This

root grows out of parched ground. How can such a root bear fruit? His context will not look promising. And He will not look like the expected Messiah. That's the idea in 53:2.

He has no stately form or majesty

No majesty. His appearance is not kingly. Not Messianic. On the contrary,

He has no stately form or majesty

That we should look upon Him, nor appearance
that we should be attracted to Him.

There is nothing about His appearance or His status in life that is going to make us go, "The Messiah! This is Him!" He is not going to be seen. He is going to be rejected.

³ He was despised and forsaken of men, A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;

Is He despised and forsaken because He is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, or is He a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief because He has been despised and forsaken? Which is cause and which effect? The two go together and build on one another. The next stanza will begin to explain the Servant's suffering. That's not what this stanza does. This stanza makes clear that the Servant comes as a normal man - and is rejected. Acquainted with grief is literally "acquainted with sickness." He is a normal man, familiar with the sickness and sorrow of human life. Maybe more than most. Certainly more than we would expect of a son of David born in a palace.

And like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

God says He will prosper. God says He will be high, lifted up, and greatly exalted. Isaiah then laments, "But who has believed our message?" Human evaluation of the Servant will end in rejection. Considering with the physical eye and with the human mind, He is found wanting. Whatever He is attempting, men and women of His generation will not only reject Him; they will turn away from Him. Like a leper or like a sinner, someone full of shame, they will not want to be associated with Him. They will hide their faces. They will shun Him. He will be despised. Isaiah makes it personal. We did not esteem Him. God may have. We did not.

The purpose of His suffering is explained in the third stanza. This is the central heart of the Song, Isaiah 53:4-6.

X Suffering Explained (4-6)

⁴ Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted.
⁵ But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.
⁶ All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused to fall on him the iniquity of us all

The Servant is characterized by sorrows and grief but they are not His own. What can only be known by revelation is stated here. The Servant suffers for us. He takes on Himself our griefs, our sorrows, our transgressions, our iniquities. He bore these. He carried them. He was pierced. He was crushed. He was chastened. He was scourged... for us.

The first verset declares, "Surely our griefs he himself bore." That's that Hebrew word that can also be translated as "sickness." It appears in verses 3, 4, and 10. Motyer translates the word as, "the weakness that comes from sickness." Coupled with sorrows in the next verset, he sees it as "all that mars our lives as human beings."³

The second line of verse 4a affirms the point from the previous stanza that we have failed to understand the importance of His sufferings.

Again Isaiah includes himself and draws all readers in with the first person plural. We esteemed him stricken. God esteemed Him high, lifted up, greatly exalted. We esteemed him stricken, smitten of

³ J. A. Motyer. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 430.

God, afflicted. So we who see with human eyes judge Him as at fault. This is His sickness, His griefs, His sorrows. He deserves this. God has afflicted Him. God has humbled Him. “No,” Isaiah says. This is how God sees it. Verse 5,

⁵ But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities;

We are alienated from God because of our own sin. Sin deserves punishment. The word, “pierced,” is only used one other place in Isaiah, in Isaiah 51:9 where the arm of the Lord delivers a death blow to the dragon of chaos. There, the dragon is pierced. Here the Servant is pierced. “Crushed” literally applies to people trampled to death. Here, the Servant is crushed on account of our iniquities.

The second line of verse 5 goes on to describe the piercing and crushing as punishment intended to bring about restoration, but not restoration for the Servant; restoration for us.

The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.

We are the sick ones. We are the ones who need healing. The word translated here as “well-being” is the Hebrew word, “shalom,” or, “peace.” He received in Himself the punishment necessary to make us whole, to bring us into a state of peace. The Servant has become a substitute on our behalf.

Verse 6 clarifies these two truths, the one about us and the one about the Servant. The first truth is about us.

⁶ All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way;

This is the truth. We are sick and sorrowful because of our own transgression and iniquities. We have done this. We are like sheep that have wandered away from our master into the valley of the shadow of death, into the jaws of the lion. And the second verset emphasizes that this is not unintentional. It does not just happen to us. Each one of us has willfully turned away from God to go his own way. “I will do what I will do. I will say what I will say. I will think what I will think.” Everyone of us has turned to his own way. We have turned from the goodness of God, from the glory of God. We have turned from our rightful Lord to create our own definition of what is good, and so we have embraced wickedness. Punishment is justly declared over us. That’s the first truth. That’s the truth about us. Here is what’s true about the Servant.

But the LORD has caused to fall on him the iniquity of us all

This is something Yahweh has done. We have sinned against Yahweh. As the One right and true judge, He has declared the just penalty of death. For iniquity to fall on us means that just penalty of iniquity falls on us. But it doesn’t fall on us. It falls on Him.

The fourth stanza clarifies: not only did He bear our sins for us, but He had no sins of his own to bear. His suffering was voluntary and undeserved.

B’ Suffering, voluntary and undeserved (7-9)

⁷ He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter, And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.

⁸ 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 For the transgression of my people, to whom
the stroke was due?

⁹ His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Because He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

As the second stanza spoke of the Servant’s birth (“a root out of dry ground”), and His life, (“we esteemed him not”) the fourth stanza speaks of His judgment, His death, and His burial, emphasizing both His willingness to suffer, and that He suffers undeservedly.

Even though He was oppressed and afflicted, He did not open his mouth. Isaiah develops that idea with the image of a sacrificial lamb following meekly behind the one who leads it to slaughter. He

repeats the same idea with the slightly different image of the sheep led to the shearers. In the same way, the Servant allowed Himself to be led. He does not resist.

⁸ By oppression and judgment He was taken away; And as for His generation, who considered
Once again the people his generation fail to understand what has happened. They failed to ponder,
failed to even try to arrive at a deeper understanding. They did not consider,

That He was cut off out of the land of the living For the transgression of my people, to whom
the stroke was due?

As if to emphasize the failure of God's people to consider the truth revealed about His Servant, Isaiah shifts from the point of view of the narrator to the point of view of God. They failed to consider that He was cut off out of the land of the living, (that is, He was killed), for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke is due, that stroke being death. His generation did not get that His death was what the people of God, they themselves, deserved. The just punishment for sin is death. God's people still sin. No matter how good they might try to be, they still go their own way; they still sin; they still deserve to be cut off from the land of the living. That is the stroke that is due. That stroke fell on the Servant.

⁹ His grave was assigned with wicked men, Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Because He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

He will be judged. He will die. And He will be entombed in a grave. But this is to be a sign that He died innocently. He will be with a rich man in His death, whatever that means. It is not clear what it means to be with a rich man in death. It is clear why God will connect Him to a rich man in His death.

Because He had done no violence, Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

He was innocent. He was put to death even though He was innocent. Isaiah confessed when God appeared to him, "I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." Isaiah did not argue his own innocence. Isaiah does argue the innocence of the Servant. Like an advocate for the defense, Isaiah proclaims, "He has done no violence. There is no deceit in His mouth. In my mouth, yes. In His mouth, no."

The final stanza restates the enigma of the first stanza, though now we can at least begin to put together the mystery. Exaltation and suffering are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The Servant is exalted through sin-bearing suffering.

A' Solution: exaltation through sin-bearing suffering (10-12)

- ¹⁰ But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief;
He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And He would render Himself as a guilt offering,
And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper
In his hand.
- ¹¹ As a result of the anguish of His soul,
He will see [light]
The Righteous One, My Servant, will justify
the many, As He will bear their iniquities.
- ¹² Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great,
Because He poured out Himself to death,
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And He will divide the booty with the strong;
And was numbered with the transgressors;
And interceded for the transgressors.

This final stanza summarizes all the themes of the song. First the enigma; "The Lord was pleased to crush Him." That's a strange way of putting it. "Pleased" does not need to mean the Lord enjoyed the Servant's suffering. He was pleased with the Servant's willingness to offer Himself up for the sake of the Lord's people. He was pleased with the Servant's willingness to render Himself a guilt offering.

In Leviticus 5 and 6, the guilt offering is made in conjunction with the language of restitution, or reparation, or compensation. When one party injures or takes from another party, compensation must be made. The guilt offering is used to make restitution when the sin violates the moral code of

Conclusion

How can a holy God dwell with a sinful people? Deliverance from external oppression is not enough. Remove all of our external problems, and we still carry the enemy within. As soon as God got His people out of Egypt, they began to grumble. A good and righteous law did not protect them. The Law condemned them. This was the point made at the end of chapter 48. "If you had paid attention to my commandments, then your well-being [your shalom] would have been like a river and your righteousness like the waves of the sea (48:18)." But they couldn't. And as it is, "'There is no peace [shalom] for the wicked,' says the Lord (48:22)." As it was after Sinai, so it will be after Babylon, and as it was after Babylon, so it will continue to the end of this heaven and Earth. Like wayward sheep, we will all persist in going our own way. We will all bring the righteous wrath of God on ourselves. We need someone who can save us. We need someone who can save us from us.

God has a plan. God has a way. The Servant is the plan. The Servant is the way. He is the righteous substitute for an unrighteous people. He has poured out Himself to death. He has carried the sin of the many. So that God might say, "Do not fear for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine."