



No 3

'The Suffering Servant'

Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12

This is one of the most moving passages in scripture as Isaiah points to the Saviour who is to come and for which the whole of Israel was expectantly waiting. Bearing in mind this was written around 700 years before Jesus, it is frighteningly accurate in its description of the suffering Messiah. In our last study we saw how Jesus' life and ministry was anticipated by many of the Psalms. The expectancy of the Messiah in the Old Testament grows as it gets nearer to his arrival.

It's often helpful to look at what precedes a passage you are studying. Isaiah 52:1 to 12 brings to a climax his teaching on God's comfort for his people. God promises them that, despite their sinfulness, they are not without hope. God's ability to restore his people is represented by his arm which will stretch out to bless them.

1. Read 50:2, 51:5 & 9, 52:10.

What does this say about how much God wants to restore his people in a new relationship with him?

Our passage describes how that restoration will be achieved. How will God restore the relationship with his people that was damaged by the fall in the garden of Eden? In 52:13 to 15 we are told that God will 'act wisely' and he 'will prosper'. The meaning of acting wisely is that God's plan will succeed.

2. This note of triumph is quickly followed by a shocking description of the one who is to be raised up. (v13 & 14). Did this have to happen – was there any alternative to the physical assault of Calvary? What does it mean when Isaiah writes God 'will sprinkle the nations'? Why will kings 'shut their mouths'? Verse 15b seems to imply that even people who have not heard about God before will understand his mission when they see the disfigured servant of verse 14. Do you think that is happening today and if not, why not?

Chapter 53 moves us from the hope that God will act at the end of Chapter 52 to a note of rejection. Verse 1 uses 'the arm of the Lord' idea to show that God will act to save his people but that he will be rejected. The reason for his rejection is expressed in 3 ways.

- a. He comes in a quiet and unassuming way. (verse 2)
 - b. He has no extraordinary beauty or attractiveness to draw people to him – his appearance was quite ordinary.
 - c. He takes on himself the pain and suffering of the world. (verse 3)
3. Does this seem like an unexpected way for a saviour to save the world? Could it have been done any other way? Why is Jesus rejected by many modern people? Is it for any of the reasons he was rejected at the time?

In verse 4 to 6 we see the servant carrying our sin – in doing that we can be sure that he suffered with such a burden. We must be clear that it was God's plan that he was 'stricken by God' (v4). But we must also see it was 'our transgressions' and 'our iniquities' (v5) that made him suffer. This section clearly shows us that it was 'our sin' that was covered by 'his sacrifice'.

4. There are a few descriptions of the human state here. We are described as those who sin and the suffering servant was 'stricken', 'smitten', 'afflicted', 'pierced', 'crushed' and punished.

Do we ever underestimate our own sin or the level of suffering endured by Jesus?

What should our response to this be?

How do we cope when it seems that our sin or his suffering is overwhelming?

In verses 7 to 9 we see the results of the servant carrying our sin. Isaiah uses the image of a sheep conveying the mild, defenceless nature of his suffering. His suffering is unjust but he accepts it without protest (v7). It should be noted that, at the time, sheep were the animals of sacrifice. He is deprived of justice and deprived of descendants and 'cut off' in the prime of life.

5. Here is a picture of the Son of God who came from the glory of heaven and was isolated in his moment of complete separation from all that was rightly his. It's a repeat of the loneliness we saw in the passages from the Psalms.

What is our response to this? Some engage in kind of self-degradation – even going as far as self-flagellation or going from Jesus' place of trial to the place of crucifixion crawling on their knees.

Do we treat Jesus' suffering as a given and move on?

How do we express our profound thanks for what he did?

In verses 10 to 12 we see why these things had to happen. Isaiah gives us a vivid description of what was accomplished by the suffering servant of God. It was intentional on God's part – to atone for sin there had always been a sacrifice. If you read Leviticus, you will see an ornate system of sacrifices performed to deal with sin. But Jesus is described as the 'once and for all sacrifice' (Hebrews 10:12) removing any need for the Jewish system. It's worth reading the whole of Hebrews 10.

6. Jesus did not come just to TELL people what God wants. He came to BE what God wants for us. God could look at the sacrifice of his Son and be 'satisfied' (v11) that sin had been dealt with by his atoning sacrifice.

Maybe as you close you could spend time in prayer praising and thanking God for his atoning sacrifice that makes us fit to join our Father in glory.

'He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in'

Verse 12 is a wonderful climax. It takes us to the conclusion of all things. The servant gets the crown of victory because he stood in the place where God's wrath was fully expressed.

His sacrifice is our victory and it means there is a place in glory

for those who believe on his name.

Hallelujah, what a Saviour !