

Isa 53:3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

4 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten 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 upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isa 53:10 Yet it was the LORD'S will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days,

1. Great Achievement through Great Suffering.

Amid the human suffering, carnage and judgement that marked the nations of his own generation, Isaiah pointed forward in his prophecies to the great purposes which God yet had for blessing and restoring humanity. These were nothing less than bringing justice and salvation to the very ends of the earth and embracing both Jew and Gentile alike. The one who was to bring about this worldwide restoration was referred to by Isaiah as the “Servant of the Lord”.

However, the ultimate triumph of this servant in fulfilling these purposes would come only through a very bitter pathway of suffering. The first intimation of this theme of suffering in the Servant Songs is found in Isaiah 49:7 where the prophet, referring to the great things the servant would achieve, speaks nonetheless of “him who was despised and abhorred by the nation”. This short reference to suffering is taken up at greater length in Isaiah 50:5ff with the servant himself making a statement that “I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting”. Finally in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 we are given a detailed and graphic picture of the servant’s sufferings that makes clear for us not only their extent but also their purpose.

These passages on suffering are, therefore quite extensive. They serve both as an astonishing prophetic validation of the sufferings of Jesus and as an insight of great clarity concerning the reason for those sufferings.

2. The Appalling nature of the Suffering

The servant depicted by Isaiah was to have a lifetime of rejection and despite. He was a “root out of dry ground”, having “nothing of majesty or personal appearance that was attractive” (53:2). The servant was a person from whom others would turn away, and they had the lowest possible estimation of him. The leaders of his day dismissed him as a “rabbi” from Galilee! He was far too ordinary to be considered of note. He spoke with the wrong accent, and lacked the schooling of Jerusalem, being merely self-taught.

However the servant was to see even this rejection take a turn for the worse and become bitter and implacable hatred. Eventually it would lead to an appalling and vicious death. Isaiah spares no words in describing the agony of his death. He states starkly that “his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond that of any man” (52:14). Such a statement of comparison – marred and disfigured *beyond any man* – is not loose exaggeration but sober matter of fact. This was to be the end of the servant who was “led like a lamb to the slaughter” (53:7), was “smitten”, “afflicted” and “crushed” (53:4-5), and was “cut off from the land of the living (implying sudden, unnatural death)” (53:8). It was the hideous end to “mocking and spitting”, beatings and torture (50:6). It was a death as horrific as could be conceived, and it was the result of “oppression and judgement”, in other words gross miscarriage of justice. In this manner the servant upon whom so much would depend for the nations would meet his death.

Whilst crucifixion is not specifically mentioned by Isaiah, there is so much here that is foundational to the crucifixion narrative as we know it. Certainly all the horrors depicted here belonged to Roman crucifixion. One of the most suggestive words used in the descriptions of his suffering and death is the word “pierced”. (53:5). This takes us immediately to the crucifixion story where the piercing of his side is a matter of great significance to the gospel writers. There are, however, some other very clear pointers to the story: his “wounds”, “the mockery and spitting”, the “assignment of a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death”.

It is in this suffering that we see more perhaps than anywhere the essential humanity of the servant. The bleeding, broken body succumbing to intense pain and death links the servant unmistakably with humanity. The servant actually was to die just as surely as he was actually to be born, and thus as a human being was to fulfil God’s purposes.

3. Suffering for a Purpose.

Isaiah, therefore, clearly portrays the servant’s suffering, and just as clearly he gives the reason for it. This is spelt out in no less than seven separate statements in the course of this particular song. They are all variations of the simple theme that “The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (53:6)

The first thing of note on this statement is that the suffering and death were initiated by God himself: it was **The LORD** who “laid on him the iniquity of us all”. It was God personally making the death consequential by personally laying

**Satisfaction
follows
Suffering**

sin on him. Isaiah goes on to repeat the point: “It was the LORD’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer” (53:10). God was bringing about his intended purpose. When “we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted” (53:4), thinking that God was punishing him for his own sin, we failed to see that there was a much deeper purpose of God in the suffering the servant was bearing.

The idea that God was laying sin on the servant is clarified further by the expression, “The LORD makes his life a guilt offering” (53:10). God was fashioning the earthly life of his servant so that it became nothing less than an offering for sin. The “guilt offering” was a form of sin offering and we need to be clear what happened to such an offering in the temple rituals of Isaiah’s time. The sacrificial animal chosen for the guilt offering was brought to the altar, hands were laid on it as sins were confessed, and the sins were transferred symbolically to the animal. It was then killed, its blood poured out around the altar, and its carcass burned, not on the altar for it was a carcass polluted by sin, but outside the camp. The imagery is only too plain. The person’s sin is confessed and transferred to the animal through the laying on of hands. The animal is killed, its life (the blood) is poured out making clear that death has taken place, and the carcass is destroyed by burning, indicating the wrath of God on the sin. The animal took the sin of the offerer and died in his place. We are clearly meant to understand that this is precisely what was to happen to Jesus as the servant of the LORD.

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All the different statements about the purpose of the suffering of the servant fit into this essential imagery of a guilt offering. So Isaiah 53:5 says, “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed”. Here is transference of sin. He was not dying for his own sin but for our transgressions and our iniquities. They were to be transferred to him, and because they were transferred he would be pierced and crushed, but we would be spared. Clearly he became a substitute for us, and suffered what we ought to have suffered for our own sin.

Isaiah 53:5 also makes it plain that the servant “was punished”. Sin is seen to bring a punishment of suffering. The punishment was that he was “crushed”, “stricken”, “cut off from the land of the living” and tasted death. The word “crushed” is absolutely pregnant with meaning. There may have been inner crushing of the body in the process of crucifixion, but the main import would seem to be of the crushing of the inner person, the spirit and heart of the man. Such “crushing” would be reflected in the imagery of the sacrifice being burnt outside the camp, being banished from a holy place and from the presence of God. It was the image of the final effect of sin for humanity.

A further important feature of the guilt offering imagery was that the guilt offering was to be without blemish. Isaiah makes it clear that though he was “assigned a grave with the wicked” the servant had “done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth”. He was without sin himself so that he might properly bear the sin of others. The implications of this fact of the servant’s innocence are enormous for our understanding of the nature of the servant. For what human being born in the normal human process could properly become sin for another human being? For all who were ever born (or would be born) were tainted with sin. By implication, this servant, though he was to have a human birth could not be born in the normal way, for that would mean he would be tainted with sin like the rest of mankind. The servant could never be born of two human parents like the rest of mankind. Obviously there would be some radically different factor in the birth of the servant. The factor could only be a virgin birth.

His innocence, which made it possible for him to be a victim, meant also that his sacrifice would be a willing gesture. He could not be compelled to make himself a sacrifice, but the purpose and desire of his Father, which he shared, was that he should take the “body prepared for him” and replace the ineffective sin offerings of the Temple ritual with his own body (see Heb. 10:5-7). Thus Isaiah in recording that the servant “poured out his life unto death” speaks clearly of the fact that Jesus himself made the sacrifice willingly and of his own volition.

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3. Beyond the Suffering.

There is nothing more characteristic of the prophetic writings than the fact that they do not leave us at the point of death and judgement, and devoid of hope. They point to restoration. Certainly the Servant Song of Isaiah 53 does not leave the servant in death and judgement. Two great statements stand out toward the end of the message which speak of resurrection: “he will see his offspring and prolong his day ” (53:10) and “after the suffering of his soul he will see the light of life and be satisfied” (53:11). They are, no doubt, the statements that enabled Jesus to embrace the suffering, and to “endure the cross, scorning its shame” (Heb 12:2). He knew of the glory beyond the cross. He knew the prophetic word about his death.

Beyond the resurrection statements lies a great ascension statement: “I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong” (53:12). As Paul the apostle, referring to Jesus, was later to express it: “having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col: 2:15). The victory of the cross and the spoils of victory were received as the servant was made to sit at his Father’s right hand.

Following the suffering would come satisfaction for the servant (53:11). The satisfaction would come from the fact that he would make many “just” as they came to know and accept what he had done for them in bearing their iniquities. As Isaiah puts it, “by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities”. It was in this way that the servant would start his great worldwide work of bringing justice to the nations, and restoring the Jewish nation. There could be no justice or righteousness without forgiveness of sin and a radical inner change of humanity. This could only be accomplished through a death for sin. There was no other way and there could never have been success in the servant’s commission without his suffering.