

# The Suffering Servant

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Shortly after I was baptized, I was invited to serve in the public worship for the first time. I had obeyed the gospel at a very young age, so I wouldn't have been more than 10 or 11 at the time, but the preacher asked me to read a passage from the book of Isaiah. I won't say that I was nervous about this, but I was apprehensive, mainly because I was concerned that on my way up to the pulpit, I was going to trip over my own big feet in front of the whole congregation.

Somewhat surprisingly, I got through the walk without disaster, carried out the reading, pretty well, I thought, and returned to my seat. After services, I asked my mother what she thought. She replied, "I thought that you did a good job, except that you announced that the reading was from Isaiah 33, when it was actually from Isaiah 53." She then assured me that it wasn't a big deal, that everybody knew where I was reading from anyway. At the time, I didn't know much about the Bible, and this really impressed me. I knew that there was a book of Isaiah, but I couldn't have identified the contents of any given chapter if my life had depended on it. I chalked my mother's comment up to her Bible expertise.

Since then, I've come to understand why my mother, and indeed any reasonably knowledgeable Christian, would recognize Isaiah 53. It is the most prominent Messianic prophecy in the entire book, and arguably in the entire Old Testament. In both its beauty and its specificity, Isaiah 53 gives us a powerful, poetic insight into the suffering and death of our Lord. From the very beginning, Christians have turned to this chapter to learn about and honor Him.

This morning, we're going to do the same in an extended preparation for the Lord's Supper. We're going to consider what Jesus did when He died for us. Let's reflect, then, on Isaiah 53 and its depiction of the suffering Servant.

## His Reception and His Work

Isaiah 53 opens with a description of the **RECEPTION** with which the Servant would meet. We find this text in Isaiah 53:1-3. From its beginning, the text strikes a plaintive, almost despairing note. In Isaiah 52, Isaiah had just gotten through predicting the day when the rulers of the earth would turn to the Servant for understanding. However, that didn't mean that the coming of the Servant would be anticipated. Instead, Isaiah rhetorically points out that no one would believe his prophecy, and that no one would understand what God was doing. Of course, the ministry of Jesus fulfilled this prediction to the letter. The Jews were looking for the Messiah, but they overlooked Jesus.

Isaiah then goes on to present the way that the Jews would receive Jesus. The Jews were expecting a Messiah who was physically impressive like the kings of old were. King Saul had literally stood head and shoulders above everyone else, and David was ruddy and handsome in appearance. However, there wasn't going to be anything physically attractive about Jesus at all. Nobody looked at Jesus and said, "Now there's a man who looks like a king!" He was physically indistinguishable from thousands of other beaten-down Jewish peasants. He didn't measure up to expectations.

Nor, as Isaiah prophesied, was this humble King well treated by His people. When we focus on the awe-inspiring teaching of Jesus, we easily forget how often that teaching was rejected. We think of Christ on the cross as a man of sorrows, but even during His ministry, that description is just as appropriate. He mourned as He watched God's chosen people repeatedly refuse God's salvation. He grieved because of His countrymen's hardness of heart. He had come with unparalleled wisdom and power to preach the gospel of the kingdom, but He knew all along that they wouldn't listen.

And, just as Isaiah notes, they didn't. All the gospels couldn't be more plain in saying that Jesus was a pariah. The people of Jerusalem gossiped about Him in whispers, but few indeed were those who dared to openly proclaim themselves to be His disciples. The people didn't understand who He was. They didn't understand what He was doing. They should have met Him with honor, but instead, He was welcomed with bafflement and contempt.

This same ironic contrast between what God's people should have done and what they did do continues through Isaiah's prophecy of the **WORK** of the Servant. We see this in Isaiah 53:4-6. The Jews of Jesus' day had a very straightforward view of God's interaction with mankind. They believed that God physically blessed all who were righteous and served Him, but if anyone faced tribulation, that was because they had been wicked and turned away from God. What would a Jew with that mindset think as they watched Jesus being arrested, tried, scourged, mocked, and ultimately crucified? They would have said to themselves, "Wow! He must have done something *really* bad for God to drop the hammer on Him like that!" To them, it would have been the final repudiation of Jesus' claims to be the Christ.

The problem, though, was that the Jews were missing one piece of the puzzle, and it was the piece that changed everything else. Jesus wasn't suffering the sorrow that He deserved. He was suffering the sorrow that we deserved.

There's a story that says that during the Middle Ages, when a tutor was given charge of a young prince or princess, he wasn't allowed to physically discipline his charges. That would have been disrespectful to the royal blood. What the tutor did, then, was choose one of the prince's playmates, ideally some commoner, and designate that common child the whipping boy. When the prince disobeyed, the whipping boy got the beating. We might almost say that Jesus was the whipping boy for us, except that what Christ did turns the old story on its head. When Jesus was scourged by

Pilate's guard, with a whip more fearsome than any tutor would ever use, that wasn't the common boy being beaten in place of royalty. That was royalty being beaten in the place of the commoner. And yet, that's what Jesus faced for us.

That strikes us as terribly unfair, but it gets even worse than that. As Isaiah observes, all of us have gone astray, wandered away from God like a flock of foolish, silly sheep. If God were to condemn every one of us for our sin, He would be completely justified in doing that. However, that's not what God did. He took the one sheep that hadn't wandered away, the spotless Lamb of God, and poured out the punishment that every other sheep had earned on the one sheep that didn't deserve it. Jesus didn't have to let God do that. He could have cried out to God and said, "God, this isn't fair! I want twelve legions of angels to rescue Me, and I want them now!" Jesus could have come down from the cross and left the rest of us to rot, and we would have deserved it, but He endured the pain because of His love for us.

### **His Judgment and His Triumph**

Of course, even though God was willing to allow Christ to bear our iniquities, He couldn't be a just God and condemn His sinless Son Himself. That was why Isaiah's Servant had to face a human **JUDGMENT**. Isaiah spells this out in Isaiah 53:7-9. In the first part of this context, Isaiah carries over his sheep metaphor from the previous context. This time, however, he applies it to Jesus rather than to us. I've heard it said that of all the domestic mammals, sheep are the dumbest. When a farmer takes the pig to the slaughterhouse, the pig is smart enough to know what is going to happen, and will sometimes put up a fuss. The sheep, on the other hand, is clueless. He is perfectly willing to amble quietly through the slaughterhouse doors, even though what is going to come out the other side is mutton.

Jesus knew precisely what was going to happen to Him, but He remained as silent as a poor dumb sheep anyway. First of all, He had to remain silent to fulfill this prophecy—which, even though His silence was technically something He could control, is still a pretty good proof that Jesus actually was the Son of God. Second, though, Jesus had to remain silent because of the likelihood that if He tried to defend Himself, He would succeed. Jesus was the most eloquent man ever to walk the earth, and the case that His accusers had constructed against Him was at best weak and at worst contradictory. Jesus could have picked a million holes in that case. He could have made His enemies look foolish, just as He had so many times before. However, He chose to remain silent, so that He would be condemned for us.

Even with that silence, though, there's no way that Jesus should have been condemned. Ultimately, Pilate sentenced Him to death because He was supposedly stirring up rebellion against the Roman government, even though Pilate knew perfectly well that Jesus was doing no such thing. This oppressive judgment was pronounced against Jesus because the Jews feared Jesus' threat to their power and Pilate feared the Jews' threat to his power. None of them, not even Caiaphas, who had prophesied about it only weeks before, realized that Jesus was dying to save His people.

Because Jesus had this great guilt arbitrarily assigned to Him, He wasn't given a decent death. He was handed over to be crucified, killed along with two other men, highway robbers who were evil by any standard. It was in upstanding company like this that Jesus breathed His last. However, one of Jesus' few defenders on the Sanhedrin, a wealthy man named Joseph of Arimathea, found the courage to ask for the body of Jesus and bury it in his own tomb, even though he invited ostracism by so doing. It was Joseph's way of saying that Jesus didn't deserve to die.

Thankfully, this grim narrative, in which the only consolation is provided by what happens to Jesus' remains, concludes with the **TRIUMPH** of the Servant. Isaiah describes what will happen in Isaiah 53:10-13. It was God's will to crush Jesus, but once Jesus had offered Himself for the sins of the people, it was also God's will to glorify Him. Though dead, Jesus was going to live again. Though unmarried, Jesus was going to bring many sons to glory. Though shunned by His own people because of His suffering, Jesus was going to exemplify God's will for all time.

Furthermore, the sacrifice that Jesus offered for others was going to be effective. As the book of Hebrews tells us, Jesus had to be perfected in His knowledge by His sufferings. His death made it possible for Him to save others from death, but His understanding of our mortality made Him willing to take that burden from us. Jesus' suffering was extraordinarily bad for Him in an earthly sense, but it is extraordinarily good for us in a spiritual sense. Now, God's justice, which demanded our death and could not be satisfied by any of our actions, has been satisfied by Him.

There are many different things that human beings may honor others for. We respect people for their athletic ability, for their talents in other areas, for their intelligence, for their goodness, for their accomplishments. We even honor those who die for others, as soldiers have done in America's wars for centuries. However, even when we put Jesus in that company, He is unique. Jesus didn't die a soldier's death, in what all of us would agree is an honorable calling. Jesus chose to die a criminal's death, in the company of criminals, and He did it not for the crimes that He had done, but for the crimes that we had done. He was dying for the sins of all mankind, and not one of the people who watched Him die had the slightest inkling of what was going on. It's hard to fathom the love that would make someone do that, for sinners, for His enemies, but that love is what drove Jesus. This is why we're here. This is why we're here every week, because remembering that sacrifice just once is hopelessly inadequate. For that matter, remembering it constantly is hopelessly inadequate. The suffering of Jesus demands more from us than we could ever give, but we're here now to do what we can, to keep His memory alive week by week, until we die or until He returns.