

Isaiah 53

Introduction

The 17th century Jewish historian, Raphael Levi, admitted that long ago the rabbis used to read Isaiah 53 in synagogues, but after the chapter caused “arguments and great confusion” the rabbis decided that the simplest thing would be to just take that prophecy out of the Haftarah readings in synagogues. That’s why today when we read Isaiah 52, we stop in the middle of the chapter and the week after we jump straight to Isaiah 54.

A recent informal poll of one hundred Jews on the streets of Tel Aviv were asked, “Who do you think the 53rd chapter of Isaiah describes?” Most were unfamiliar with the passage and were asked to read it before answering. After doing so, many conceded that they did not know to whom it referred.

Lets read the passage together.

Isaiah 52:12- 53:12

¹³ 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 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.

**¹ Who has believed our report?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?**

Isaiah 52:12- 53:12

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.**

Isaiah 52:12- 53:12

⁴ 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.**

Isaiah 52:12- 53:12

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.**

Isaiah 52:12- 53:12

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.**

Isaiah 52:12- 53:12

¹⁰ 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,
And He was numbered with the transgressors,
And He bore the sin of many,
And made intercession for the transgressors.**

Messiah's Exaltation

Isaiah 52:13

Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently; He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high.

This is a passage that deals with the first coming of Messiah. Notice that the passage begins with the word "Behold." This word calls special attention to something that is important. Messiah will succeed at His work.

The term "prudently" has several possible translations. It can mean "to act with intelligence or to act wisely." The best understanding is "prosper". In context, Messiah will act with such intelligence, wisdom, and skill that He will accomplish what He has set out to do. God is saying that in spite of the outward failure and the humiliation to come, the servant will accomplish what He set out to do.

Messiah's Exaltation

Isaiah 52:13

Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently; He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high.

Three words summarize the Messiah's post-resurrection experience and form an ascending climax. The word "**exalted**" simply means to rise and may be a reference to the resurrection, stating that the Messiah will rise out of death. When we look at this entire section of Scripture, we see that His resurrection is part of the message.

The word "**extolled**" means "He will be lifted up." This is to ascend higher than simply to arise. It is a reference to the ascension, where He is lifted up into Heaven. He will rise out from death. He will be lifted up in the ascension and then He will be "**very high**" or "greatly exalted." In the Hebrew, this means "to be exceedingly high." This is a reference to his present session in Heaven at the right hand of God. Raised out of death, ascended into Heaven, and seated at the highest point of glory in the universe – at the right hand of God. **The servant will succeed; the servant is going to be exalted.**

Messiah's Exaltation

Isaiah 52:14

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.

Men looked at Jesus and they were astonished by what they saw. This verse describes his appearance as so marred that He did not look like a human being. That is why they were astonished, He was so disfigured He did not even resemble a human being. All they saw on that cross was some swollen, writhing, fleshly form that only resembled a human being. His exaltation is contrasted with the humiliation He experienced. However, the reason for this mistreatment is revealed in the next verse.

Messiah's Exaltation

Isaiah 52:15

So shall He sprinkle 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.

In this verse, we come to the victory of the servant. Messiah will be victorious and He will complete a mission, a mission to “**sprinkle** many nations.” Sprinkling is done by priests in order to bestow spiritual cleansing.

An alternate translation of this word is to “**startle**” which is how it is translated in the Septuagint. Translators look at the context to determine which one would be the better translation. If the correct root is the one which means “sprinkle,” then the emphasis of the verse would be that the **Messiah is acting out His role as the great high priest** (Hebrews 10). If sprinkle is correct, He is the great high priest. However, if startle is correct, the emphasis is on the fact that He's the **King of kings and Lord of lords** suddenly exercising His authority over the nations of the world.

Though both ideas fit with God's Truth, I think the idea here is to startle many nations; the kings of the earth are going to shut their mouths as a sign of respect. They are going to realize that they have miscalculated Jesus' importance. The rulers of the world will be astonished and they will finally understand the significance of Jesus.

Rejection

Isaiah 53:1

Who has believed our report? and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

We begin with an exclamation of unbelief, bringing our attention to the scarcity of true believers among not only Israel, but the whole world. Who has believed this report people have been hearing for 2000 years? Only a small percentage. John picked up this concept of unbelief in the New Testament. He says in John 12:37-38,

John 12:37-38

But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him, ³⁸ that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke: “Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”

Humble Beginnings

Isaiah 53:2

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.

We start with his birth and early years in verse 2. It states that he grew up before him like a tender plant. In Hebrew the word is literally “suckling.” In horticulture, a suckling is a baby plant, a tender twig that grows out of the tree or bush and is going to be a new branch. However, if it is a fruit tree, these branches take the energy out of the tree and the tree will put all of its resources into building new branches instead of producing good fruit. These branch are “cut off” and discarded.

Isaiah goes on to state that there was no outward physical beauty to the Messiah; He was an average man and had nothing unusual about his stature. There is nothing in his outward appearance to attract men to him. This is contrary from the portrayals of Jesus in modern depictions. Isaiah’s point is that Messiah was a very common man.

Humble Beginnings

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We know Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but He grew up in Nazareth. Nazareth was a military town and did not have a good reputation. It is not where people expected Messiah to come from.

Jesus also was born into poverty. We see this from the offerings that Mary and Joseph offered.

Jesus was not what the people expected or were looking for.

Despised

Isaiah 53:3

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.

One key word in this verse is that he was **rejected of men**. The key word is “men.” The Hebrew word is often used when referring to “men of rank” or “great men.” In the Gospels we see that it was the religious leaders who led Israel to reject the Messiahship of Jesus – the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and even the political leaders the Herodians. He was rejected by men of rank.

He is also described as a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Throughout his ministry, we see that Jesus healed many from the pain and sorrow of serious disease. Healing is a key part of his ministry and is one of the many ways that he identifies himself as the Messiah.

Not only did he not attract men to him, men were also repulsed by him and his teachings. Men were not simply indifferent to him, they disliked him.

Substitutionary Sacrifice

Isaiah 53:4

Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten by God, and afflicted.

Now we come to the substitutionary suffering of the Messiah. Now we focus in on the crucifixion itself. We see that His sufferings were substitutionary. He bore punishment in place of others. However, while he bears these griefs and sorrows, Israel thought he was getting what he deserved. The word “stricken” means to be afflicted with shocking affliction. The crucifixion is a shocking affliction.

This identification of the Messiah, being associated with the griefs and sorrows is brought out in Matthew 8:17

Matthew 8:16-17

When evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed. And He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick, ¹⁷ that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: “He Himself took our infirmities And bore our sicknesses.”

Substitutionary Sacrifice

Isaiah 53:5

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.

The word “**wounded**” means “to pierce through” and is always used in reference to a violent death, not a reference to merely a flesh wound. Through this passage we know that this is a very serious injury. Looking forward from Isaiah’s vantage point, we know Jesus was pierced through by the Roman spear in his side and the Roman nails through his hands and feet.

The phrase “**bruised for our iniquities**” can be translated “crushed for our iniquities”. Jesus was literally crushed. In His body He was bearing the **punishment that led to our peace**.

Messiah was also scourged. The Hebrew word underlying that translation “**stripes**” means an injury caused by a stripe or a blow. It refers to a severe beating. We will see clearly that the physical “scourging” led to spiritual healing. The main point of His suffering was our spiritual healing. He was bearing the punishment that we deserve.

Substitutionary Sacrifice

Isaiah 53:6

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.

In this verse, we return to our condition. Here the faithful remnant realizes that we are the ones who are wrong. It is not the servant who is in the wrong, it is we who is in the wrong. Yet the Messiah, the suffering Servant, steps in and Israel's and the world's iniquity is credited to His account.

Peter depicts this idea of substitution very clearly in 1 Peter 2:24

1 Peter 2:24

who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.

Substitutionary Sacrifice

Isaiah 53:7

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.

Now we see the silence and quietness of the servant in verse 7. In spite of suffering unjust oppression, he remained quiet and is submissive to it. This does not mean that he never said anything to anybody; he did converse with the high priest and Pilate. However, in regard to the unjust oppression he was suffering, he submitted quietly. His submissiveness was remarkable in the eyes of Pilate. All the four Gospels agree and point out very clearly that Jesus suffered the injustice quietly.

Acts 8:32

**He was led as a sheep to the slaughter;
And as a lamb before its shearer *is* silent,
So He opened not His mouth.**

Substitutionary Sacrifice

Isaiah 53:8

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.

Here we encounter the trial and death of the servant. Here, He is taken from prison and judgment. In other words, He went through a judicial trial, was confined and then led away to be crucified. It says “**who considered**,” the Hebrew word “consider” there means to give thoughtful consideration to something, to think about something deeply. Who in his generation gave thoughtful consideration of what happened? Very few people did.

Substitutionary Sacrifice

Isaiah 53:8

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.

Then he was **cut off from the land of the living**, a reference to physical death. In fact, the term “cut off” means to be judged in a legal sense. So why did he undergo this legal punishment? It was “for the transgression of my people.” Whose people are these? Isaiah’s people, and it can only be Israel. He went through the suffering for Israel’s transgressions; it was upon Israel that the penal judgment should have fallen. Instead, it fell on Jesus. Again, this is the remnant’s great confession, they will realize the truth at the end of the Tribulation period.

Substitutionary Sacrifice

Isaiah 53:9

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.

In verse 9, we come to the burial of the servant. He should have died as a criminal, He should have been buried as a criminal but He was not. He was buried in a rich man's tomb. Then His sinlessness is brought out. The phrase "he had done no violence" refers to outward sin. He never committed outward acts of sin. "There is no deceit in His mouth" speaks of inward sin: sins of the heart, sins of attitude and thought. Both outwardly and inwardly, He had no sin.

Paul picked up this idea in 2 Corinthians 5:21.

2 Corinthians 5:21

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Matthew 27:57-60

Now when evening had come, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.

Then Pilate commanded the body to be given to him. ⁵⁹ When Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, ⁶⁰ and laid it in his new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb, and departed.

Substitutionary Sacrifice

Isaiah 53:10

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.

Now, what do these things mean? Firstly, this means that the Suffering Servant is an offering for sin. This whole section of Scripture describes an offering for sin. Here we learn that although it looked like the servant was suffering from the hand of man, the **One who was really in control was God**. It was God's will; the Father Himself is ultimately responsible for the Messiah's death. He was pleased to crush the Servant, to bruise him. This is again a reference to his death. The word "grief" means mental or physical anguish. God was pleased to put him through mental and physical anguish. Why? Because his death is a guilt offering. The Servant is a substitutionary sacrifice. And in spite of this sacrifice, he will see his seed. His seed are those who benefit from his death, those who receive Spiritual rebirth.

A common question is "how can a dead man see his seed?" The answer is resurrection. He will be resurrected and he will resurrect those who trust in Him. He will see his seed and prolong his days through resurrection. Now we have come full circle. The pleasure of the Lord will prosper in his hand. He will succeed in the mission, His suffering and death is not a failure but is a complete success.

Substitutionary Sacrifice

Isaiah 53:11

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.

These things mean that **He brings justification**. The first part of the verse refers to God. God will see the work of Messiah's soul and God will be satisfied. He will be satisfied by the death of the Servant. In other words, the sin offering will be accepted. This results in justification for many and the means of this justification will be the knowledge of him. "**Knowledge**" means experiential knowledge of Him. Not just the facts, the intellectual record of his suffering. But an experiential and personal relationship with the servant and his suffering. In other words, they receive him, they believe in him, they trust in him. So he becomes the substitute to all those who trust in Him. This is not limited to Israel. We know that the Servant's mission was to go to the entire world.

Substitutionary Sacrifice

Isaiah 53:12

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, And He was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.

In the final verse we see this Servant is rewarded. Since the servant did what he did, he will be greatly rewarded. Three statements summarized what he did: poured out his soul to death, he was numbered with transgressors, and he bore the sins of man. He is also described as making intercession for transgressors. This act started in the past but it continues on even today. His intercession started when he was experiencing the crucifixion, when he says "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Today he intercedes for us as our great high priest. Think about this Jesus is praying for you!

So What ...

In our study, we have seen the prophecies and “types” of Messiah. It was plainly stated that Messiah would suffer and die for the sins of the people. Not just the sins of Israel, but the entire world.

It was also clear that Messiah would not remain dead, but would rise again. He will also resurrect those who have placed their faith in Him.

What about you? Have you placed your faith in Jesus?