

The Suffering Servant Brings Salvation

Isaiah 53:4-11

- ⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
- ⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
- ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
- ⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
- ⁸ By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
- ⁹ They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,

although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.

When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.

¹¹ Out of his anguish he shall see light.

Theme Statement

A sixth-century BCE prophet whom scholars call Second Isaiah saw the activity of God in the events of his day. The suffering of his people—the servant of the Lord—proved to be redemptive in ways that foreshadowed the suffering of Christ.

Exploring the Word

Biblical scholars generally associate chapters 40–55 of Isaiah with a sixth-century BCE prophet, Second Isaiah, who knew the oracles of the eighth-century Isaiah ben Amoz, but who was given a new prophetic word for his time. Declarations about the reliability of God’s word embrace all the promises of Second Isaiah (40:6-8; 55:10-13). Second Isaiah said, among other things, that with Cyrus the Persian on the horizon, deliverance by Yahweh was at hand. The fortunes of Israel would be restored!

Included among the many poetic promises are four poems, or “songs,” dealing with a figure called “the servant of the Lord” (*Ebed Yahweh*):

- 42:1-4. The servant brings a gentle justice to the nations and establishes justice in the earth.
- 49:1-6. The servant is a light to the nations.
- 50:4-9. The servant meets violent opposition.
- 52:13—53:12. The innocent servant is afflicted for the sake of others.

Because the servant suffers, especially in the third and fourth poem, he is often called “the suffering servant.”

Who is the suffering servant? Isaiah 49:3 makes clear that the servant is a literary personification of the nation of Israel: “And he said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’”

The poems, therefore, have to do with how the exiles understood their national suffering and loss, especially considering that God chose to return them to their homeland by the agency of Cyrus the Persian. A theme struck already in Second Isaiah’s “call” narrative reemerges. Jerusalem and her people shall be restored, and consequently, “the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together” (40:5). The suffering servant, Israel, would be redeemed and restored. An intended secondary result, however, would be to draw all nations to praise and glorify God.

And yet, the wonder of scripture is such that, in the course of time, prophetic texts are filled full of new meaning in light of subsequent events. So, for example, the early Christian believers, doubtless puzzled over the completely unanticipated fact of a crucified messiah, were led by the Spirit to see the servant songs—and especially the fourth one—as being *fulfilled* in Jesus. That is, those ancient songs were *filled full* of new significance in the light of the Christ event.

Isaiah 53:4-11 The fourth servant song

In the fourth servant song, 52:13—53:12, the prophet begins, in 53:1-3, with a pair of rhetorical questions (see 40:12-14; 50:8-10). The expected reply for each question is “no one.” No one could have believed the reversal of the servant’s fortunes. Nor could anyone have seen this coming, since the servant Israel’s background was unremarkable

and his experience characterized by rejection and pain. Indeed, the servant's suffering marked him as one whose existence was so miserable that people "[hid] their faces" (53:3) to avoid him. Job and the anonymous author of Psalm 22 graphically illustrate the pain of such isolation and torment (Job 19:13-19; Psalm 22:6-7).

Verses 4-9 ring a remarkable new note in the poem and in the whole witness of scripture. It was generally assumed that anyone with a disease or infirmity was "struck down by God." We find this attitude reflected in the New Testament in the question once put to Jesus: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Jesus' answer, however, echoes exactly the paradigm shift that left the prophet's people gobsmacked. Neither party sinned, said Jesus, but rather, the man "was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" (9:3). The servant was wounded, but only in order that God's will might be revealed (53:10). God's will was to restore the people and forgive their transgressions through the vicarious suffering of the servant. The wounds received were not for the servant's transgressions, nor were the iniquities his own, but rather the Lord laid all the people's iniquities upon him. The servant mediated "the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed" (53:5). The servant will, however, find satisfaction and be exalted (53:11-12).

The Word Today

Over the years, I have met individuals whose once robust faith was shipwrecked in the aftermath of personal tragedy and loss. "How," they wonder, "could a loving and powerful God allow my beloved family member to suffer and die?"

Such brave questions also emerge on a national level. Not a few people asked about the apparent absence of God on 9/11, September 11, 2001. In an age of pandemic, with a provisional worldwide death toll of 86,607 by mid-May, 2020, anyone could be forgiven for wondering about the meaning of mass suffering.

The people of ancient Israel wondered about their own national tragedy, including the destruction of Jerusalem, the accompanying slaughter of Judahites, and the Babylonian Exile. Yahweh's word through Second Isaiah was that the servant—and thus the people as a whole—had suffered punishment unto death as a consequence of sin, but now the Lord intended to transform that suffering into redemption. Not only "out of his anguish he shall see light" (53:11), but "he shall startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him" (52:15a). Through both the servant's suffering and redemption, God would be glorified and all people would see it together (40:5).

This does not mean, of course, that any suffering, whether personal or national, is tied to the redemptive will of God. It is difficult to believe that God decided to unleash a lethal pandemic on the world or that God decided to take the life of a loved one in an automobile accident. While some may subscribe to the idea that God has a mysterious and unknowable plan that includes suffering, it seems more likely that God created the world with sufficient autonomy that bad things sometimes happen. A deer leaps in front of a car. A virus mutates and human lungs become its welcoming home.

Nevertheless, we believe in a God who can take the *fact* of suffering, the reality of grief and loss, and work even those for good (Romans 8:28). That is, of course, the message of Easter: the bloody business of Friday was used by God to bring us to God (1 Peter 3:18).

In God's hands, therefore, even suffering that we cannot understand will lead us to grace. What we do in the meantime is to pray with the great writer Flannery O'Connor, "Give me the courage to stand the pain to get the grace, Oh Lord" (*Dear God: A Young Writer's Prayers*, <https://tinyurl.com/y2db99fl>).

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Share a time when you witnessed someone suffer.
2. Listening to Handel's music, what three words describe the way it makes you feel?

Exploring the Word

1. Read the entire servant song (52:13—53:12). Work with a partner to divide the poem into parts.
2. Did God cause the servant's suffering?
 Yes No Not sure
3. How might the servant's ministry have been "good news" to ancient Israelites?
4. Investigate how New Testament authors employ Isaiah in the following passages:
Romans 15:19-21 Matthew 8:16-17 1 Peter 2:22-25
John 12:38 Acts 8:32-35

The Word Today

1. Describe a time when you found grace while enduring pain.

2. Are believers called upon to take on the suffering of others?

Yes No It depends
on what
you mean
by that!

3. List ways the wider church acts to alleviate suffering.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we celebrate the resurrection of Christ, who was wounded for our transgressions in order to bring us to you. As we wait for the world's full salvation, give us courage in times of pain. Keep us confident that you are leading us ever into a fuller measure of your grace. Amen.

Further Study

Romans 5:1-9; Philippians 2:1-13; 1 Peter 3:13-20

Daily Readings

M. Isaiah 52:13—53:3 F. Luke 24:13-27
T. Acts 8:26-35 S. Luke 24:28-35
W. Luke 18:31-34 S. Isaiah 53:4-11a
T. Luke 24:1-12

Memorization

Isaiah 53:5

He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.