

Isaiah Part 33: “The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all...”

Isaiah 52 v 13 to 53 v 12

This is the fourth of the ‘Servant’ songs, which portray with such accuracy the mission, character and redemptive work of Jesus. The preceding three ‘Servant’ songs are in Isaiah 42 v 1 to 9; Isaiah 49 v 1 to 9; and Isaiah 50 v 4 to 9. This passage falls into three parts: (i) an introduction announcing the Servant’s exaltation after extreme suffering, and its effect upon surrounding nations and kings (52 v 13 to 15); (ii) the story of his life, suffering and death, told by his now penitent fellow countrymen (35 v 1 to 9); and (iii) the glorious outcome, both for himself and for others, of his sufferings and redemptive work (53 v 10 to 12).

“Behold, my Servant” (v 1) – Matthew (12 v 15 to 21) quotes Isaiah 42 v 1 to 5, and clearly states this is a prophecy fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus described himself as a servant in Matthew 20 v 25 to 28; Matthew 23 v 11, 12; Mark 9 v 35; and Mark 10 v 43 to 45. Peter, in the sermon recorded in Acts 3, gives the Lord the title “his Servant Jesus” (Acts 3 v 13, 26), and in Acts 4 the praying people of God speak of “your holy Servant Jesus” (Acts 4 v 27, 30). But Jesus isn’t just ‘a servant’; he is *‘the Servant’*, and everyone should “behold”, as God says, “my Servant”. The Ethiopian in Acts 8 v 24 asked a question about this passage: “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” This question is still asked today, and the answer is extremely important...

The Servant of the LORD brings salvation to many nations (Isaiah 52 v 13 to 15)

- How is Jesus portrayed in 52 v 13 to 15? Notice the depth of his suffering, his exaltation, and the effect of this upon the nations. See Isaiah 49 v 7; John 19 v 1 to 5; Ephesians 1 v 20, 21.

“He shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted” (v 13) – these first words declare his victory. Before any of his suffering is announced, the Messiah’s glorious triumph is assured. “His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance” (v 14) – Jesus was beaten so badly on his face that he barely looked like a man. The result was so shocking that many were astonished when they saw Jesus.

“So shall he sprinkle many nations” (v 15) – sprinkling is often associated with cleansing from sin (Exodus 24 v 8; Leviticus 16 v 14; Numbers 19 v 21; Ezekiel 36 v 25). Jesus is certainly Israel’s Messiah; yet he belongs to more than Israel: his saving, cleansing work will extend far beyond Israel to ‘many nations’. “Kings shall shut their mouths because of him” – though all will be astonished at his appearance, they will have nothing to say against him. His glory and his great redeeming work will stop every word...

The atoning suffering and victory of the Messiah (Isaiah 53 v 1 to 12)

- Consider the close parallels between verses 1 to 9 and Jesus’s life on earth, such as (i) how he appeared to the world; (ii) how the world received him; (iii) how he suffered, and what these sufferings meant; (iv) how he behaved when arrested; (v) how he died and was buried.
- Who are the ‘offspring’ (v 10), and what blessings are given to them as a result of Christ’s substitutionary atonement? See Hebrews 2 v 10 – are you one of these sons and daughters?

“Who has believed what he has heard from us?” (v 1) – prophetically Isaiah anticipates two things: (i) firstly, how seemingly contradictory that this suffering Messiah, whose appearance is marred more than any man, will be salvation and cleansing to the nations; (ii) secondly, he anticipates the rejection of the Messiah, that many would not believe Israel’s report. “And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” – this line seems out of place: the ‘arm of the LORD’ is a picture of God’s power and might; yet we see a Messiah weak and suffering. But the power of God will be seen in the midst of this weakness and suffering...

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“For he grew up before him like a young plant” (v 2) – Jesus did grow up, as “he increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man” (Luke 2 v 52). A young plant is weak and vulnerable, unless it is “before him”, that is before the LORD God Almighty. In God’s presence, that what seems to be weak is strong. “And like a root out of dry ground” – Jesus grew up in the Galilee region of Roman occupied Palestine. With respect to spiritual, political, and standard of living matters, it was indeed dry ground!

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (v 3) – Jesus was not always sad and morose; indeed, he showed great joy (see Luke 10 v 21), and it seems that children loved his company. Yet he knew sorrow and grief so intimately that he could be called a ‘man of sorrows’. This, among other reasons, made him despised and rejected by men. Most of our sorrow is self-pity; but Jesus never felt sorry for himself: his sorrow was for others, and for the fallen, desperate condition of mankind.

“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities...” (v 4, 5) – yes, the Messiah was stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted, but here Isaiah explains why. It was for us – for our transgressions, for our iniquities. It was in our place that the Messiah suffered.

“Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (v 5) – so did Isaiah mean spiritual healing or physical healing? In Matthew 8 v 16, 17, the view seems to be of *physical* healing, but 1 Peter 2 v 24, 25 seems to refer to *spiritual* healing. God surely has both aspects of healing in view, with both physical and spiritual healing provided by the suffering of Jesus. The Bible declares that we *have been* saved (Ephesians 2 v 8), we *are being* saved (1 Corinthians 1 v 18), and that we *will be* saved (1 Corinthians 3 v 15). Likewise, there is a sense in which we *have been* healed, *are being* healed, and one day *will be* healed. God’s ultimate healing is the ‘resurrection’, this it is a wonderful promise to every believer. ‘Temporary’ healing in this life simply anticipates the ultimate healing that will come.

“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” (v 6) – here Isaiah describes our need for the Messiah’s atoning work. Sheep are stupid, headstrong animals, and, like these sheep, every one of us has gone astray, turning against God’s way, to his own way. In this verse we see the partnership between the Father and the Son in the work of the cross. If Jesus was wounded for our transgressions, then it was the LORD (Jehovah God) who laid on him the iniquity of us all. The Father judged our iniquity as it was laid on the Son. By way of anecdote, the one who led me to Christ in 1969 explained the cross by reference to this verse, using the illustration of two hands and a book: “Where has my sin gone? On Jesus. How much of my sin has gone on to Jesus? All of it...”

“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted... like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (v 7) – Jesus was silent before his accusers (Mark 15 v 2 to 5). Jesus was silent, but not helpless – he was always in control (John 10 v 18; John 19 v 11, 30). “He was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people” (v 8) – this is the first indication that the suffering Servant of the LORD, the Messiah Himself, would actually die. This demonstrates that Isaiah cannot be speaking of Israel as the suffering Servant, for as badly as Israel has suffered through the centuries, she has never been ‘cut off out of the land of the living – she has always endured, as God promised Abraham. Isaiah brings the point home: the Messiah suffers, but not for himself, but for the ‘transgression of my people’ (see Daniel 9 v 25, 26).

“Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong” (v 12) – the Messiah’s work on the cross will be rewarded. With the image of dividing the spoil after a victorious battle, we see that the Messiah ultimately triumphs. Paul described this ultimate triumph in Philippians 2 v 10 to 11, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” “Because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors” – at present Jesus has a ministry of intercession, since Hebrews 7 v 25 speaks of intercession for the saints: this passage may also refer to Jesus’ prayers on the cross.