



Isaiah 42-53

The Servant Songs of Isaiah

In our journey through the master theme of the Bible we have arrived at a series of mountain ranges that include the "loftiest peak of Messianic prophecy."

In no passage in the Old Testament is the message of the Lord God's sovereignty over history clearer than here in a series of four Servant poems. Isaiah reveals with a loud piercing trumpet sound, "The Lord God omnipotent reigneth!" No where is this clearer than in our salvation through the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. Calvary was no accident (Acts 2:22-24).

In the ever growing clear vision of the Messiah, the Hebrew prophet introduces Yahweh's Servant (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). It is a message of God's saving grace. God's eternal purpose is redemption, and He works out that eternal purpose in history. The climax to these poems and history itself comes in Isaiah's "Rhapsody of Redemption," and "the Song of the Suffering Servant." Isaiah chapter fifty-three has been called "the golden passionate" and "the most important text in the Old Testament."

As you proceed through the servant poems, a careful reading reveals the clear image of a person. There is a growing connection and transition between the nation and a person as an innocent, substitutionary sufferer. The ancient Jewish Targum takes the view here that the Servant is the future Messiah. He is an individual, and not the prophet, or a personified collective personality such as the nation of Israel.

Many scholars have noted the comparison between these poems and Jesus' ministry. Jesus began His public ministry by meeting the needs of hurting people and preaching the good news of the kingdom of God. As time passed and he was rejected he concentrated on teaching His disciples. After Peter made his great confession of faith in Christ, he began to make a steady emphasis in His teaching on His coming rejection, death and resurrection. The life of Christ comes to a grand fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy in His vicarious, substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of Israel and the world and His resurrection. Let's begin our loft climb with the first poem.

The Introduction of the Chosen Servant in (42:1-4)

Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;
My chosen one *in whom* My soul delights.
I have put My Spirit upon Him;
He will bring forth justice to the nations (42:1).

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Yahweh introduces His Servant. The stress in this introductory poem is on the character, method and mission of the Servant of Yahweh. The Servant is divinely chosen, called, anointed, equipped and commissioned. The LORD sustains Him who is to be a prophet, priest and teacher.

The humble, gentle Servant willingly assumes His responsibilities. He is characterized as gentle, unobtrusive in manner, yet strong and resolved (vv. 2-3). A silent spiritual influence is at work until the mission is accomplished. He will keep at the task until it is finished. "He will not be disheartened or crushed, Until He has established justice in the earth" (v. 4a,b).

Matthew quotes verses 1-4 with slight variation in Matthew 12:18-21 attributing it to Jesus' ministry in Israel. Jesus did the Father's will and obeyed Him fully. He could do something Israel could never do because He was completely under the control of the Holy Spirit all the days of His life. God has placed His Spirit on Him, which is clearly a Messianic characteristic (cf. 61:1; Matthew 3:16; 4:1; Luke 4:14, 18-21; 3:22).

The task of the Servant is to establish "justice in the earth." This is the task of Immanuel, God with us. Only God could accomplish such an awesome responsibility given to the Servant. When Jesus returns at His Second Coming, He will bring justice to all the nations of the earth. Israel's achievements were never at such a high level. Indeed, she was characterized as unrighteous. However, the heavenly Father declared, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17; 17:5). There are sufficient arguments in the New Testament for maintaining that Jesus Christ, the Anointed of the Lord, fulfills these opening verses in the Servant poems.

The Mission of the Servant (49:1-6)

In the second poem, the Servant is seen as a prophet addressing His call and commission for the restoration of Israel and the redemption of all mankind.

The "LORD called Me from the womb," before I was born, as He did Jeremiah (v. 1). He has equipped Him with wisdom from God's Word (v. 2), and protected Him. The Rabbis had a saying concerning the names of the six persons who were named before they were born: Isaac, Ishmael, Moses, Solomon, Josiah and the name of the Messiah. Jesus Christ existed long before the angel told Mary that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and bear a son and call His name Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25; John 1:1-3).

Why is the Servant called "Israel" in this passage (v. 3)? We know from the context that the nation is not being referred to because it will be the Servant who will bring the people back to God. The Messiah is called "Israel" here because He fulfills all of God's expectations for the nation. His mission is to restore Israel and to bring light to the Gentiles (v. 6). The Messiah-Servant will receive the worship He deserves when He returns at His Second coming (v. 6; cf. Philippians 2:9-11).

I will make You a light of the nations
So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth (v. 6).

The apostle Paul and Barnabas witnessed the rejection of the gospel by a Jewish audience. Paul said to these individuals, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). Then he quoted to them the words of Isaiah 49:6. Furthermore, "when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). Paul uses this verse to support his identification of the Servant as the Messiah Jesus Christ. The Servant of the Lord is the "light of the world," and the One who brings salvation to the end of the earth (John 8:12). People all over the world, Jewish and non-Jewish, walk in darkness until Jesus Christ comes into their lives. He alone is salvation to all who believe on Him (Acts 4:12).

The devout man named Simeon, filled with the Holy Spirit, saw the infant Jesus in the Temple, took Him into his arms, and "blessed God." He said, "For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, Which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, and the glory of Thy people Israel" (Luke 2:30-32). Simeon and Luke understood this poem to be fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

A Steadfast Obedient Servant (50:4-9)

In the third poem, we encounter the suffering of the Servant for the first time in these poems. He experiences unbroken fellowship with God. The desire of His heart is to do the will of God. In spite of suffering, He will remain unfaltering in His faith in God. He is set as a flint to do God's will, although He will be rejected by His people.

The Lord God has opened My ear;
And I was not disobedient,
Nor did I turn back.
I gave My back to those who strike Me
And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard;
I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting (v. 5-6).

The people of Israel would be rebellious toward God's chosen Servant and treat Him cruelly. This is the consistent treatment of criminals in those days. Is this not the way in which God's Servant was treated before His enemies crucified Him? "Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him . . . Jesus he scourged . . . And they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. And after weaving a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they kneeled down before Him and mocked Him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' And they spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head, . . . and they led Him away to crucify Him" (Matthew 26:67; 27:26, 30). The scourging was terrible torture. They stripped the victim, tied his hands behind him, bent the victim double and tied him to a short post. The lash was a long leather thong, studded at intervals with sharpened pieces of bone and pellets of lead. The body of the victim was reduced to raw, bleeding flesh of inflamed and bleeding welts. Men often died under scourging and lost their reason. Few remained conscious to the end of a scourging. These words of the poet were fulfilled in the suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 22:63; John 19:1-3).

How does the Suffering Servant remain faithful? The Lord comforts, sustains and strengthens Him. He is a willing obedient sufferer who leans upon Yahweh.

For the Lord God helps Me,
Therefore, I am not disgraced;
Therefore, I have set My face like a flint,

Therefore, I have set My face like a flint,
And I know that I shall not be ashamed.
He who vindicates Me is near. . . (v. 7-8a).
Behold, the Lord God helps Me;
Who is he who condemns Me? (v. 9a,b).

The Suffering Servant (52:12-53:13)

These Servant poems reach a climax in the last poem. How can a person possibly miss the vicarious, substitutionary, suffering of this pure and righteous innocent Servant? Isaiah sees Him wounded, bruised, chastised, pierced, plagued and cursed for *our* sins. The LORD God provides this perfect Substitute as an atonement that results in full redemption of the guilty sinner. When we study this passage in the light of history –the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ –it becomes quite evident that He is the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. Verses 4-6 read like an eyewitness account of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ at Calvary.

John R. Sampey well said: "The New Testament application of this great prophecy to Jesus is not an accommodation of words originally spoken of Israel as a nation, but a recognition of the fact that the prophet painted in advance a portrait of which Jesus Christ is the original."

No where else in Hebrew thought do we find the idea emphasized of the innocent suffering vicariously for the guilty sinner. Israel is never said to suffer for others; she only suffers for her own guilt. She suffered captivity and exile because she was guilty. Here we find the innocent suffering for the guilty sinner. The Suffering Servant is the Suffering Savior.

Please allow me to paraphrase this last servant poem by substituting the pronouns in the poem that refer to the divine Sufferer with the name of Jesus of Nazareth. See if you do not agree that this poem comes alive with full meaning of the identity of the Suffering Servant. Please read it aloud to yourself.

Behold, My servant will prosper,
Jesus Christ will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.
Just as many were astonished at you, *My people*,
So *Christ's* appearance was marred more than any man
And His form more than the sons of men.
Thus *Christ* will sprinkle many nations,
Kings will shut their mouths on account of *Jesus Christ*;
For what had not been told them they will see,
And what they had not heard they will understand.

Who has believed our message?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
For *Jesus* grew up before Him like a tender shoot,
And like a root out of parched ground;
Jesus has no *stately* form or majesty
That we should look upon Him,
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.
Jesus was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
And like one from whom men hide their face
Jesus was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

Surely our griefs *Jesus Christ* Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed *Jesus* stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.
But *Christ* was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being *fell* upon *Jesus Christ*,
And by His scourging we are healed.
All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on *Jesus Christ*.

Jesus was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet *Jesus* did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So *Jesus Christ* did not open His mouth.
By oppression and judgment *Jesus* was taken away;
And as for His generation, who considered
That He was cut off out of the land of the living
For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke *was due*?
Jesus' grave was assigned with wicked men,
Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Because *Jesus* had done no violence,
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

But the Lord was pleased
To crush *Jesus Christ*, putting *Him* to grief;
If He would render Himself *as* a guilt offering,
He will see *His* offspring,
He will prolong *His* days,
And the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand.
As a result of the anguish of His soul,
He will see *it and* be satisfied;
By His knowledge the Righteous One,
My Servant, will justify the many,
As *Jesus* will bear their iniquities.
Therefore, I will allot *Jesus Christ* a portion with the great,
And He will divide the booty with the strong;
Because *Jesus Christ* poured out Himself to death,
And was numbered with the transgressors;
Yet *Jesus Christ* Himself bore the sin of many,
And interceded for the transgressors.

Have you put your trust in Jesus Christ as your substitute who died in your place on the cross? Are you enjoying His peace and assurance that all your sins have been covered by the death of Jesus Christ? Ask Jesus Christ to be your personal savior today. Here is [A Free Gift for You](#).

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