

Isaiah 53

The suffering Servant

Background. The ‘Servant’ figure probably originally referred to an individual and was also probably a corporate/generalised figure of unjust suffering. In the NT there are a number of allusions (Mk. 10:45, [Mt. 20:28] and Mk. 14:24; [Mt. 26:28; Lk. 22:20]; and Mk. 9:12; Mt. 3:15; Lk. 11:22), and a direct quote of Isaiah (Lk. 22:37), all of which link the Servant with Jesus. Jesus seems to have seen his ministry as a fulfilment of the Servant ‘prophecy’. His suffering and unjust death follows the pattern of the Servant in Isaiah 53.

Vs. 1-2. The ‘arm of the Lord’ as Is. 51:9 and 52:10 show is **the Lord Himself**. This one is **revealed as Divine and yet also very human**. This passage could be paraphrased as ‘who would believe that this was the Lord Himself’ (i.e. coming to bring salvation). The Servant (Is. 52:13) is both ‘the arm’ i.e. the Lord, yet also distinguished from the Lord – ‘He [the Servant] grew up before Him [the Lord]’. He is clearly also to be recognised as a person who grows from childhood to adulthood. Yet in outward appearance his ordinariness masks who he is and what he will achieve.

Vs. 3. The Servant (Jesus) was ‘despised’, ‘rejected’, knew sorrow (vs. 4), and ‘suffering’, people were ashamed of him and he was considered as insignificant. Yet to those to whom it had been **revealed**, he was the arm of the Lord bringing salvation.

Vs. 4-6. The Servant’s (Jesus’) key role was to be our substitute. He took our infirmities (endured the suffering we should have) and took our sorrows (endured the pain that we should have). It is wrongly assumed (‘we considered’) that he suffered because God punished him. Rather he deliberately took our place and our just punishment. He was ‘pierced’ - ‘for our transgressions’ (sins), he was ‘crushed’ - ‘for our iniquities’(evil). The result of his willing substitution for us (enduring our punishment) is ‘our peace’ and ‘our healing’. We are all together and personally guilty, our evil was laid on him - by the Lord, but he willingly (12) substituted for us.

Vs. 7-9. The Servant (Jesus) willingly endured unjust suffering ‘oppression and judgment’. He suffered and was killed because of our transgression (sin).

Vs. 10-12. It is the Lord’s will that he suffered and died but not because of his own sinfulness. His death can be understood in three concurrent ways;

- i. he was made a ‘guilt offering’ (the guilt of others) by the Lord,
- ii. he made a pure guilt offering because he was fit to be the substitute,
- iii. when we make him our guilt offering we appropriate his substitution for us. His death is vindicated as a ‘glorious’ death which brings peace (removal of guilt) and healing so his life is restored (resurrected implied) (10b-11). He will know that his death will bear fruit in justifying many by removing the guilt of their evil.

Reflection/response. A terrible price was paid by Jesus, to die in our place to take the punishment we deserved. This is God’s grace. Do we know Jesus as the one who died for us, in our place? How do we show our gratitude for his death for us?