

The Servant Exalted, Part 4: Substitution (Isaiah 53:1–12)

By Pastor Jeff Alexander (2/24/2019)

Introduction

1. Isaiah 53 opens with an enigma, a mystery. *“Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”* Isaiah and Israel cannot understand where God is in their troubles. They read His promises (Isaiah 51:3–5). They observed how God demonstrated the strength of His arm in their history (Isaiah 51:9, 10). Where was He now when they needed His holy arm so desperately? His response is the passage before us (52:13–53:12). In this way Yahweh flexed His mighty arm but in a way that none expected. Note Acts 8:30–35 and 1 Peter 2:22–25.
2. This is the fourth and final Servant Song in which the Servant is clearly identified as the Lord’s Messiah (42:1–9), coming in a powerful work none could imagine. His own generation did not understand (Isaiah 53:8, 9; John 12:36–39).
3. In this passage “I” specifically refers to the Lord. “He” refers to the Servant. “We” refers to the prophet and the Servant’s people (*“my people”*). The text clearly reports on how, why, and for whom the Servant suffers. It is clear that His suffering is not for His own sin.

This morning, we are considering this work of vicarious atonement—the sinless Christ taking the wrath of God in the place of the guilty. First, we will look at the passage, then we will consider the theology taught in it.

V. Exegesis

1. The prologue introduced the Servant in exaltation because He acted wisely to success (52:11).
 - a. At the same time, those observing were astonished at His condition (*“his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance and his form beyond that of the children of mankind”*). What does that mean, and how does that lead to His exaltation?
 - b. Nevertheless, the success of His work cannot be questioned: *“he shall sprinkle (apply redemption to) many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him.”*
 - c. Chapter 53 looks at this enigma from the perspective of Israel, particularly that of His own generation.
2. The chapter opens describing Israel’s utter disregard for and rejection of the Christ who came to them. They saw nothing to commend Him to them.
 - a. Their rejection was necessary to His success; thus, it was He who hid His glory from them (v. 3; *“as one who hides his face [glory] from us”*).
 - b. The prophet conjectures that since He was a man of sorrows or pains and acquainted with sickness (grief), He would take them away (v. 4). This is a very probable reference to His extensive healing ministry that stood as an irrefutable sign of His divine appointment (Matthew 8:16, 17).
 - c. How, then, does this fit with the conclusion that He was reckoned by His generation as one *“stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted”*?
 - d. This question is answered when we know that He was suffering, not for Himself, but in the place of those who deserved to suffer (John 12:36–41).
3. The prophet explains that Christ came to be cursed, not for His own failings, but for the iniquity of His people.

- a. Adam's curse was broken by the *obedience* of the Last Adam, an obedience that earned righteousness for His people in the same way Adam's fall affected all his offspring (Romans 5:16, 17). Christ's life of obedience earned righteousness for His people, and His sacrificial death paid their sin debt to divine justice (Colossians 2:13, 14).
 - b. This truth is stated in verse 5. Iniquity is defined as willful refusal to follow the Lord's instruction (Torah). This is what brings the curse (Galatians 3:10). The *peace* that His work brought us is full reconciliation with our offended God.
 - c. Our condition before God is stated in verse 6, which defines iniquity as our having all gone astray, everyone turning to his own way. God laid on Christ the iniquity of His people to remedy the situation. In this, Jesus also patterned for us what willful submission to the will of God looks like, even when it is painful and not pleasant (v. 7).
 - d. Verse 8 reveals that His generation did not understand that their oppression and judgment of Him was the means God used to remedy the transgressions of His own people. They treated Him as wicked (v. 9) even though He did nothing wrong. Yet, it was in the will of God to do this (v.10).
4. The Lord put His Servant to death as a substitutionary offering, fulfilling the Levitical sacrificial system; it was the type and Christ the fulfillment.
 - a. The Lord "*put Him to grief* (the term can mean to become *sick*, but it can also mean to be *wounded*, which makes better sense in the passage)."
 - b. The resurrection of the sacrificed Lamb is assumed in the next phrase, "*he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days.*"
 - c. This takes us back to the Lord's acting wisely to success (52:13) because the Lord's will prospers in His hand.
 5. The final verses (vv. 11, 12) describe the outcome or effects of Christ's sacrifice.
 - a. Divine justice is satisfied, leaving God the opportunity graciously to declare the many (the holy remnant) righteous, because He bore the curse of their iniquity.
 - b. The Lord shares the spoils of His conquest with the many and the strong (better, the multitude) because he bore the penalty of their transgressions.
 - c. Nevertheless, He lives as their Great High Priest to make intercession for them before the throne of God.

What Can We Take Away?

1. The theology of this chapter is very clear. Christ's death was not a general offering for any who may wish to accept it. Such a sacrifice is not a redemption at all, for the key element is left to the will of the sinner.
2. It is far more honoring to the saving success of the Lamb of God to believe that He died for His people—in the place of specific individuals—thereby purchasing their salvation. Christ did not purchase only the possibility of salvation, but His death actually saved certain individuals, which is then evidenced by their believing.
3. All the terms used clearly argue for a particular redemption, which is then applied by grace through faith.