

Jesus in Isaiah 53

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Isaiah 52:13 through 53:12, is often called “The Servant’s Song”. This song or poem is unique because most of the verb tenses are in the future, but some of it lies in the present. Therefore it has a timeless quality of it as if this servant will affect everyone whether they live in Isaiah’s time around 700 BC or in the future. It presents the future servant as a certainty as if he is already history. There is a timelessness about the work of the servant. To God, his work is already done, but certain factors were still to be accomplished. Some theologians refer to this as “the already but not yet” promises of the Messiah.

Isaiah 52:13-15 is actually the prologue of Isaiah 53. These three verses contain in short form what is taught in length in ch.53. God’s servant will be greatly exalted after being deeply humiliated. God graded the work of His servant with three verbs in 52:13, “be high, and lifted up, and greatly exalted.” Nevertheless, men will misunderstand who this servant is. They will be startled and surprised at his disfigured appearance (after the scourging at the crucifixion), so his exaltation will be a greater surprise.

Isaiah 53

In verses 1-3, the servant will be totally misunderstood. Who could believe that a king could be so humble? How could a great man look so ordinary, hang out with sinners, and be willing to die for sinners? In these verses we have a picture of Jesus from the cradle to the grave. He lived a life of humility and suffering, and in the end he was despised, shunned, and rejected.

Verses 4-6 give us a sharp contrast to v.1-3. In v.4-6, we are told from God’s perspective, “But in fact” he was a willing substitute for the guilty. Nothing was wrong with him, but all was wrong with us. He appeared to be smitten by God, but nothing could have been further from the truth—it was our transgressions he died for, not his own. The question is why did the servant do this for us, or why did we need him to do it? Here in v.6 we read an often used biblical image of sheep to represent humanity. It must be an analogy that fits since it is the most common metaphor for human beings in the Bible (about 44 times). Here’s a tip, this is not a compliment. Sheep are among the dumbest, and most defenseless animals on earth. They are too slow to run away, and too dumb to hide, so God is not trying to increase our self esteem here. He is saying that sheep need a Shepherd, and are defenseless without one. If, as v.6 depicts us, we wander off like dumb sheep thinking we are self reliant, we will be food for wolves. Yet, that is what the human race has done in verse 6, “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.”

Let’s face it, when someone tells us what to do, we swell up, and our desire is to assert ourselves. But here is a valid question, “Can you find your own way to heaven? Do you know where God is? Can you keep yourself from dying? Are you perfectly safe, secure, and free of guilt? You should answer all those questions with a “NO”, because we can never have a Shepherd until we admit that we are sheep that need a Shepherd to show us the way.

In Isa.53:7-9, the servant (Christ) is totally innocent, but totally submissive to his affliction on our behalf. He did not defend himself, but like a sheep led to the slaughter, he did not open his mouth. Tried by an unjust court, he would be “cut off from the land of the living”. The purpose statement for willingly suffering death for others is that he took the punishment that others deserved so that they could be saved. In verse 9 we have another strange event that was fulfilled by Jesus. Even though he died the death of a loathsome criminal, he was given an honorable burial in the tomb of a rich man (Matt.27:57-60).

In verse 10, we find out that it was God who was at work all along, and “the Lord was pleased to crush him, putting him to grief.” Why would God be pleased to do this to his own Son? Because it was God’s eternal plan to offer the Christ as a “guilt offering” for mankind. Christ was falsely convicted of crimes, scourged like a criminal, humiliated, spat on, taunted, and executed, but none of this was accidental. It was God’s divine plan, and it accomplished salvation for the human race. Just as Paul wrote in Phil.2:9, the pain in God’s service would lead to his exaltation and glory. I believe that in v.10, where it says “He will prolong his days” it is referring to the resurrection.

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In verse 11, we read a theological statement of what was accomplished, “the Righteous one, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities.” As a result of what Christ did on the cross, we receive justification that satisfies God. Then in v.12 we read a summary statement beginning with “Therefore”. In this verse God used the language of conquering heroes who are distributed the spoils after a great victory. The Servant will receive the exaltation that He is deserving of because He made the sacrifice.

Let’s get real, we are all sheep desperately in need of a Good Shepherd. Isaiah 53 passionately cries out to us to embrace Jesus Christ as our Shepherd while He is available. A man once asked his pastor, “When is the best time to receive Jesus as my Savior?” The pastor answered, “It would be the day before you die.” The man looked puzzled and asked, “How do I know when that is?” The pastor answered simply, “Exactly my point, you never know how soon it will be too late.”

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