

## Prayer

You bring compassion into a lost world of loveless selfishness, Lord Jesus. Forgive us when, as members of Your church, we forget the sheer strength of Your compassion for the lost, the poor, the weak and the disadvantaged, and especially the sinner. Like little children, may we believe that all things are possible through You; and may we live to demonstrate Your compassion in this world. Thank You, Lord Jesus. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

*(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)*

### Prayer ideas

*Reflect on your own failings and difficulties. Submit them to the Lord and receive His blessings. This is not a spiritual trick, but the truth of God's love for you.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray against the evils within your society.** *Pray against those forces of evil which pull down all that is good. You may perceive these in almost any area of life, but they are most pernicious when found in public life, for example, where people use their positions for personal gain.*
- *Give thanks to God for the precious gift of the Word of God. Pray that you will use it well.*
- *Pray for whatever items of local news are dominating your local press today. Try to explore the truth of the reports you read before praying*

## Meditation

Every day, Lord Jesus, is a gift of Yours containing many possibilities:

The gift of time to use to the full for what is right;  
The gift of opportunities to grasp, and explore;  
The gift of space to fill with what is right and good;  
The gift of love which longs to share and be shared;  
The gift of light to see things as the Lord sees them;  
The gift of fellowship to share and enjoy with friends;  
The gift of care by which we act upon concern for others.

Every day, Lord Jesus, is a gift of Yours containing many possibilities:

Providing unique opportunities which, all too often, are not repeated.  
May we never leave them unattended, to fade through lack of care;  
May we open every gift and make them fruitful by our constant use.

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## Bible passage - Isaiah 52:13-53:3

- <sup>13</sup> See, my Servant will succeed!  
    he will be raised and lifted up,  
    and will be greatly exalted,  
<sup>14</sup> even though many were appalled at Him  
    because He looked like a man disfigured,  
    and His form was barely human.  
<sup>15</sup> He will startle many nations;  
    and Kings will be silenced because of Him;  
    for they will see something  
    they were not told about

and consider what they have never heard.  
53:1 Who has believed our report?  
And against whom  
has the arm of the LORD been bared?  
2 For He grew up before Him like a sapling,  
and like a root grown in dry ground;  
He had no form or splendour about Him for us to see,  
no appearance that we should want him.  
3 He was despised, rejected by men;  
a man of suffering, who knows about sickness.  
Like one from whom we hid our faces  
he was despised,  
and we counted Him as nothing.

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## Bible Study

### Review

This is surely the most extraordinary and dramatic passage of scripture in the Old Testament, and we read it now on Christmas Day, the day when we remember Christ's birth in Bethlehem. Why should we read a passage such as this, today? The answer is simple. We honour Christ most fully when we recognise why he came into the world. He came to die for us and do the work of God's Servant, and this dilemma is presented for us perfectly in this passage of Scripture.

In a stunning sequence of prophecies, Isaiah tells us the truth about the Servant. Yes, victory is guaranteed (see 52:7-12), but the price paid by the Servant for this great achievement is awful beyond description (52:14, 53:2f.). As we read what Isaiah had to say about the terrible suffering of the Servant, we can only wonder at Isaiah's courage and faithfulness in recording the vision. How could anyone perceive these things and not be affected by them? So Isaiah said with incredulity (53:1); 'who will believe our report'? At the time he wrote, he did not know that a man named Jesus would fulfil his vision, and die a terrible death on a Cross for the sake of all people and their salvation.

There is incredible drama after the opening line of our passage. The Lord announces the success of His Servant (52:13), but the prophecy immediately explains that this heavenly victory is not something that either has or will be understood on earth; it is a divine mystery! The figure of the Servant upon whom all our hopes have rested throughout twelve chapters of prophecy, is someone who will be battered and abused (52:14) to the point of being unrecognisable. It will be meaningless to people on earth; they will not understand how God can 'lift high' (52:13) one who they will reject and abuse!

As Isaiah's prophecy continues to describe the Servant, we who read find ourselves drawn into a deeply mysterious vision, some of it is understandable, and some is virtually unexplainable. Firstly, the Servant is one who 'grows up!' People thought that God's Messiah would come as a fully grown man ready to do His will, but Isaiah says God's servant will 'grow up' (53:2); in a powerful illustration of a growing plant, Isaiah uses a word that usually describes the growth of a child (52:2). Throughout his ministry, Isaiah had been given prophecies about the coming of a child (7:14, 9:6f.) to be 'God with us', to rule over us. Here, his vision describes this regal child, growing up in 'dry ground' (53:2), a metaphor explaining that the sustenance He needs for His work will come from heaven, not from earth.

But then there are two dreadful and almost unbearable features of the prophecy. Firstly, despite the Servant's divine call and sustenance, the 'arm of the Lord' (meaning the might of God's justice) will be wielded against Him (53:1) if He is to do what God requires. We can hardly fathom this mystery, but we must wait because Isaiah says more about it in coming verses of this chapter. Secondly, He will be rejected, abused and despised by all humanity (52:3), and 'counted as nothing', and this is more understandable. Israel has already rejected God's ways, so it is indeed likely that people will reject God's Servant.

It is impossible to read all this and not feel that we have been drawn into a maze of unknowns and impossibilities, captured by a divine mystery of immense proportions. It will take a little time for Isaiah's full vision to unfold, but we must stay close to the text and work through it slowly, however deep and unfathomable it appears at times. The Servant of God will come into the world to do a work that will seem unbelievable to us and even tax our understanding of the goodness of God. However, if we are to receive the salvation God wants to give us, we can only receive it His way.

On this Christmas Day, we must submit to the fact that the child Jesus came to earth to save us through His death on a Cross. This is the mystery of God's grace; it seems incomprehensible, but it is God's way.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- The world turned upside down
- The arm of the Lord
- The human reaction to the Servant

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V13 'See, my Servant will succeed.'**

*This crucially important statement is well known from many Bible versions as 'Look, my servant will prosper.' However, the term 'prosper' implies wealth, and frankly, wealth has nothing whatsoever to do with this text. Grammatically, the Hebrew verb suggests that which makes for a good result, in other words, success.*

### **V14 'even though many were appalled at Him.'**

*Most Bible translations have difficulty with this because the Hebrew is unclear and complex. The word at the beginning of the verse is a common connecting word frequently translated 'just as'. However, it makes much more sense to translate in the manner I have done because it makes a complete sentence out of the verse which follows on from verse 13.*

### **V15 'He will startle ...'**

*These opening words in this verse have been argued over for centuries, with many scholars insisting that the verb here is 'to sprinkle', that is, the same verb used in describing what the priests did to 'sprinkle' blood around an altar (Lev 14:7f.). However, the form of the verb is not found elsewhere and could equally well be a little used form of a different verb meaning 'startle' or 'shake'. I prefer this traditional translation because it makes sense in this context.*

### **V1 'against whom has the arm of the Lord been bared?'**

*Some translations have 'to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?' The fact is that this line links with the baring of the Lord's holy arm (52:10), and it is entirely correct to translate the Hebrew as saying that the Lord's 'bared arm' has come against the Servant – this, however strange it seems, is the very nature of God's redemption plan – see notes. The common translations simply do not allow us to see this fundamentally important point.*

### **V2 'like a root grown in dry ground'**

*The Hebrew says literally 'like a root from dry ground' and most translators interpret this as meaning 'from out of dry ground', as if it was uprooted. However, there is no reason why we cannot read 'from' as meaning 'grown in', making the far more sensible sentence I have given.*

### **V2 'No appearance that we should want Him.'**

*The words 'want Him' at the end sound coarse, but the sense of the sentence is very coarse and this is better than the traditional translation 'no appearance that we should desire Him'; which begs a pointless question about what it might mean to 'desire' Him.*

### **V3 'Like one from whom we hide our faces'**

*The Hebrew is difficult, and literally reads 'one who hides face from him'. The context is used by all translators to add the pronouns to this which give it sense in the sentence, and my translation does this differently from some, but the sense of what is said is very similar to most versions.*

## Going Deeper

Undoubtedly, even with this general understanding of the text, there is much more for us to consider in each verse. Every sentence presents us with challenges, and I recommend that you look carefully at the translational notes I have provided. By explaining my translation, I have also indicated some of the most important features of the text.

***The world turned upside down!***

There is no doubt about the meaning of verses 13 and 14, even though many translations contain punctuation in verse 14 indicating uncertainty about how the two verses relate to each other (as in the NIV and the NRSV). The Lord pronounces the Servant 'lifted up' three times in verse 13, using three different expressions; 'raised', 'lifted up' and 'exulted'. There is no higher honour afforded to any earthly or heavenly being in the whole Bible, and of itself this indicates the divine nature of the Servant. This exultation happens because the Lord says with absolute conviction that the Servant 'will succeed' (52:13). Then, as if suddenly moved in time to look back at the actual work of the Servant (notice the change of verb tense from 'future' in verse 13 to 'past' in verse 14), we are shifted away from this success to the reality of what happened and the price paid for it. The prophetic vision then shows us three horrific pictures of the person of the Servant whilst doing His work. He is offensive to people, disfigured and barely recognisable as human (52:14)!

This is a startling turn around, but this stark prophecy boldly faces us with the facts, and we cannot escape the clear connection between this and the life, ministry and death of Jesus. We are told that the Servant's work will draw on Himself the most awful of human experiences. The Hebrew expression 'many were appalled at Him' means in effect that what the Servant says and does will be an offense to those who hear His words and see His work; and as we read this, we remember the great offense Jesus caused the official guardians of the Jewish faith in His own day. This, of course, was not His fault, but the fault of the Pharisees and scribes who could not come to terms with the truth of what He taught. Then, the words 'he looked like a man disfigured' (52:14) describes the mental and physical torture of the human body inflicted by others on the Servant. This is a reminder of Jesus' agony at the rejection of His own people in the Garden of Gethsemane, and also of the beating and cruelty meted out to Him by the Sanhedrin and the cohort of the Temple Guard (Mat 27:1f.). Finally, the words 'His form was barely human' are an awful description of a man tortured to the point of death; in the case of Jesus, death on a Cross.

Prophetically, Isaiah saw in his vision the consequences of all this; he said 'it will startle many nations' (52:15) and indicated that the authorities and rulers of this world will not know what to do because of what has happened! This same verse describes the panic of a royal court that has been shocked; what can explain this extraordinary phenomenon? Amazingly, this prophecy of Isaiah's anticipates the world wide significance of the death of Jesus, and it is a fact of life that the whole world has changed because of what happened to Jesus, the one who was 'lifted up' and rejected so that God's redemption and salvation might come into the world.

But we are still left with the questions: 'What is going on?' 'How does this bring redemption?' 'Why?' It is Isaiah 53 which begins to answer these questions, slowly at first, but in a profoundly moving way.

### ***The arm of the Lord***

Gradually in Isaiah 53, we are introduced to the awesome fact that in the pursuit of redemption, the Servant will suffer at the hands of God Himself (from whom He came) as well as at the hands of other people. This fact lies at the heart of the divine mystery within the prophecy of Isaiah 53. People have argued for a long time about what this means and some have insisted that it is impossible, but scripture is clear that redemption has been won for us because the Servant was willing to take on Himself both the sins of humanity and also God's punishment of those sins. It is not clear whether we can ever fully understand this mystery, though we are right to try and find out what we can about it.

We are told about this new aspect of redemption at the beginning of Isaiah 53. The phrase 'who has believed our report?' does not look back to the previous verses in chapter 52, however important they are, it is a powerful call to the reader to believe what they are about to hear, even though it seems utterly incredulous. In the light of what has been seen and heard (52:13-15), the prophecy asks, 'against whom has the arm of the Lord been bared?' and the answer is clear. The Servant is in an appalling state because the Lord God has acted against Him, the very one He has nurtured (52:2) and anointed to do His work!

Yet we are still not told why this is so. In the next verse (53:2), we can almost hear Isaiah's voice behind the text, saying something like this; 'Why do you insist upon this, Lord? You are the One who has raised the Servant to do Your work in the most unpromising of circumstances (the 'root grown in dry ground'), and we did not ask for Him to be like this!' (see 'He had no form about Him ... that we should want Him.' 53:2). The question about why the Lord has punished His Servant still haunts many people, even now, but we must be patient, and let the vision proceed in order to gain some understanding of how and why the Lord achieves salvation and redemption in this apparently horrific way.

### ***The rejection of humanity***

With this massive question mark raised in our minds about God's work, the last verse of our passage today powerfully raises the other essential aspect of the Servant's suffering and appalling condition (52:14). He is rejected by people, the very men and women He has come to save and redeem.

Isaiah 53:3 is one of those great verses of scripture often quoted by Christians, because it is the first verse to speak about the 'suffering' of the Servant. The verse is a powerful reminder of the responsibility all people

share in the rejection of the Servant and the suffering we have inflicted on Him. A series of short phrases reveals the truth about the way in which humanity rebels against the Servant; 'He was despised, rejected by men; a man of suffering, familiar with sickness ...'. As we read these verse we think of the rejection Jesus suffered and the manner in which He was despised. In this sense, we can think of Him as a 'man of suffering'.

However, the last part of this phrase; 'familiar with sickness' is a little more difficult. Indeed, the Hebrew of this part of the sentence is a little unclear, and many translations have 'acquainted with grief' or 'acquainted with infirmity'. At its simplest, this does not mean that the Servant is someone who was personally ill, but He is someone who knows what it is like to suffer and be ill. This, of course, tallies with what we know about Jesus. He may well have known what sickness was like personally, but this was not a major issue for the Gospels, which never report Jesus as 'ill'; but the important fact about Jesus and 'illness' was that He cared for those who suffered and cured the sick! He knew how important illness and sickness was to humanity and He did His best to heal and deliver people from demons. We will find out in the coming verses of chapter 53 that it is not his own sickness and disease which is significant (53:4f.) but those of humanity as a whole.

Nevertheless, as one who was both a victim and also one who understood people and cared for them, the Servant had to accept rejection from those He loved and who 'counted Him as nothing' (53:3). This, too, is a great mystery of our faith.

## Application

In writing this study, I have only occasionally written about Jesus, aware that we must understand the prophecy for what it says about the Servant before we apply it to Jesus. For Christians, there is no explanation of this passage which makes sense except that it describes the work of Jesus. We are presented with a mystery in these verses, and it is the mystery of the redemptive acts of God; for how and why does God bare His arm against the Servant? How and why does God punish Jesus through death on the Cross, so that our sins may be accounted for and we might be set free? It is important that we ask this question if we are ever to understand what Jesus has done for us, and although this part of Isaiah 53 does not give us an answer to the question, it is nevertheless important.

Our passage raises this important question so that it might be answered, but it does so in a moving poetic manner, describing the appalling suffering of the Servant (Jesus) in a powerful way. Some of the arias and hymns at the heart of Handel's great masterpiece, 'The Messiah', use words from this passage, and the choral effect of his music has amazingly helped many people to understand something of the passion of Christ. Handel used virtually no words which were not part of the scriptural text, and the combination of poetry and music speaks of the divine mystery of the 'suffering servant' in beautiful ways that mere prose cannot always reflect.

Many have been moved to tears when reading these words, and although this study is intended to stretch the mind, it accepts that there are times when words transcend human emotion and thought and speak of mysteries of grace in a way that is beyond analysis. This is unquestionably true of this great text, and all of Isaiah 53.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Victory and tragedy are both found side by side within this text. Why are both required for redemption and salvation?
2. What are the main stumbling blocks which make this text difficult for people to understand?
3. Discuss in your group what you feel as you read this text and think of Jesus. Be prepared to speak freely about your feelings.

### **Personal comments by author**

*This extraordinary passage is one of the treasures of the Old Testament, and it is impossible to reflect the enormous range of scholarship available on these verses. In reading before writing this study, I have found almost no connecting points between the various books I have consulted, and therefore feel at liberty to try and present what I believe to be a fairly 'classical' understanding of the text. There is certainly no current scholarly consensus about it. In a way I am not surprised, because I truly feel that this poetry touches on the*

*mystery of the heart of God our Father and the truth of salvation. We must all make of it what the Lord reveals to us through it.*

### ***Ideas for exploring discipleship***

- *Read this passage several times, and as we study the rest of the text, continue to read it over and over again. You will be greatly blessed by becoming familiar with words which express the mystery of God's grace.*
  - *Pray prayers of blessing for those who feel that they do not understand this passage and therefore feel that they do not understand God's salvation.*
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### **Final Prayer**

Lord Jesus, You have loved us whether we are rich or poor, and whatever part of the world we come from. Help us to see past the divisions of wealth and culture which society places upon us, and value each other as You value us, as people who are loved. This we ask in Jesus' name; AMEN

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