

Prayer

Lord God, we can never fully know what You have in mind for tomorrow, but on this special day, we know that 'today' lies between Good Friday and Easter. Jesus has died, and is yet to be raised! Help us, we pray, to trust you for the future, and may we believe that You are indeed consistent, for Your intention has always been to bring good out of evil and victory out of defeat. We praise You, Lord God, for Your great salvation plan. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

(Offering alternatives that can broaden your experience of prayer)

Prayer ideas

Prepare yourself for Easter day by thinking about the disciples, and imagining what they must have felt like the day after Jesus died.

On-going prayers

- **Pray against the evils within your society.** *Pray against the evils of ignorance. Pray that people will engage with the truths of the Gospel, and seek what is good, right and true rather than what is bad, wrong or false.*
- *Give thanks to God for Jesus' death on the Cross and all this means to you. Ask the Lord to help you understand even more about it this Easter time*
- *Pray for the world, and for all those who will not look upon the Cross of Christ this day, for whatever reason. Pray that God's people will take the news of His death, and what it means, to all people.*

Meditation

On this strange unfathomable day;
we must keep our focus fixed on what is good.

For we are stunned, entrapped;
we sense a mystery too deep for words.

Our minds cannot work out
why death will all be overcome by death.

Our souls are deeply mystified
why love must fight to be victorious.

Our hearts struggle to embrace
why truth must prove itself to the uncouth.

Our spirits yearn to comprehend
why light must earn victory over darkness.

And then this; how can we know what to do
with a day between death and resurrection?

So even though we do not understand,
we await the Creator's promise of a brand new day!

Bible passage - Isaiah 53:10-12

¹⁰ Yet the LORD intended
to crush Him and make Him suffer.
For if His soul becomes a sin offering,
He will see His descendants,
and will prolong His days:

- moreover, the LORD'S intentions
will prosper in His hand.
- ¹¹ After the suffering of His soul,
He will see light and be satisfied;
By this fact my righteous Servant
will make many righteous,
and He will bear the weight of their sins.
- ¹² So I will give Him a share of many things,
And He will receive the greater portion of the spoil;
Because He poured out His soul even to death,
He was numbered with the rebels;
He, Himself, bore the sin of many,
And interceded for the rebels.
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Bible Study

Review

These powerful three verses conclude this amazing chapter of Isaiah, they are only a short section of the prophecy, but they contribute a great deal to its theme. Towards the end of yesterday's passage, we learn that the Servant was to suffer the penalty of death, but in these three verses we discover that God intends this death to have a redemptive meaning. Unbelievably, all this is indeed God's will (53:10), and the Servant's death will bring about the righteousness of 'many' (53:11). For this reason, and because the Servant has done this great work for many people, He will have a high place in heaven (53:12).

All this is highly emotional. For the Jewish people who first heard this, much would have seemed incomprehensible. However, they would have perceived that this was a parable of how the Lord brings good out of suffering, and this in itself would have helped them come to terms with the terrible experience of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile in Babylon. Yet these words spoke of a time yet to come when God's Servant would come, a 'Messiah' who would bring a more complete redemption.

When the Messiah did indeed come, He fulfilled Isaiah's prophecies; but unfortunately, the people of Israel did not recognise Him because they had become comfortable and self reliant. It was only after Jesus died that people were able to look back and perceive that He had indeed been misunderstood and yet loved those who insulted Him, to the point that He was eventually bound, tried, and killed on a Cross; just for doing God's will. Any Christian in the early years of the church who read these words '*He was despised, rejected by men ... He bore the punishment that brought us peace ... led like a lamb for slaughter ... He poured out His soul to death ... and bore the sins of many*' (53:3,4,7,12) knew that this described what Jesus had done. Salvation had been won through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet we are still faced with the question of why God allowed His servant to suffer and die; for this is what the whole of chapter 53 says, especially here. '*He poured out His soul even to death*' (53:12) is no opaque prophesy; the Servant will die for the '*sake of the sins of many*' (53:12). If we try to understand this by abstract Western philosophy, we will fail. We must appreciate the simple ancient theory of sacrifice, in which one life is lost but gives life to others. It seems odd to us, but we only have to look at the origins of most of the food we eat (being dead vegetable or animal products), to realise that the ancients did indeed have a point about life and death. To them it was simple, the greater the sacrifice, the greater the power; and what greater sacrifice than God's own Son. Only this could offer salvation.

The whole of chapter 53 is a paradox, because much of this is alluded to but not spelt out. However, if we imagine Isaiah seeing this in a vision, then we might understand that he could only reveal and write down what he could see and comprehend at the time; it is not a theological treatise. Today, we read all of Isaiah 53 knowing that the suffering of the Servant is suffering to death, and this is deeply emotional. In death, the Servant specifically identifies with those who rebel against God, whether they are the people of Israel or the people of the world. In this way, the Servant dealt with the awful sin and rebellion by which his own people had rejected their God for centuries. However, Isaiah also knew that he prophesied about something far more. Out of the experience of the Exile, God had shown Him a vision of the divine answer to the problem of human sin in general (6:9-13). It must have moved Him deeply.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- Verse 10 – death and resurrection?
- Verse 11 – suffering, resurrection and righteousness
- Verse 12 The death of the Servant, effective for the worst

Notes on the text and translation

V10 'For if His soul becomes a sin offering.'

The Hebrew text reads 'if His soul makes a sin offering'. The meaning of the word for 'sin-offering' is obscure, and therefore some Bible versions change this. It makes more sense to keep this meaning, simply because this is a good 'Old Testament' way of explaining what happens to the Servant.

V10 'He will see His descendants and prolong His days.'

The Hebrew speaks of seeing His 'seed', which is a common Old Testament way of talking about descendants. The verse appears to use traditional language from the 'Torah' (the first five books of the Bible) to speak about the consequences of the work of the Servant. For the significance of this, see the study.

V10 'moreover, the Lord's intentions ...'

I have spoken about the Lord's intentions here at the end of the verse as well as the beginning of the verse ('yet the Lord intended ...') to highlight the fact that the same Hebrew word is used at the beginning and the end of the verse. This emphasises the express will of God that all this should happen to the Servant.

V11 'By this fact my righteous Servant will make many righteous.'

Again, the Hebrew of this is not straightforward, but it is hard to make sense of the text unless the words consistently convey the themes in the text. Here, the Hebrew says, 'by this knowledge, the righteous One, my servant, will be just for the many.' These Hebrew words are relatively simple, but the English sounds complicated, so I am grammatically justified in reducing the sentence to its plain meaning. You will find many Bible versions difficult to follow at this point.

V12 'So I will give him a share of many things, and he will receive the greater portion of the spoil.'

I have taken a risk in this translation because the usual version speaks about the allotment of the spoil in a slightly different way; 'I will allot him a portion with the great, and he will divide the spoil with the strong' (NRSV). However, I believe that the language of the division of spoil is figurative and the intention is to glorify the servant, not merely to honour Him as one amongst many.

V12 'He, Himself, bore the sins of many.'

The Hebrew emphasises the fact that the Servant does this Himself as if to conclude the whole argument, so I have added emphasis to the unique nature of what the Servant does. No one else can do this work except the Servant.

Going Deeper

As with yesterday's study, we will look at each verse in turn to look closely at how this amazing prophecy develops, and explore what it means for us to speak about the death of the Servant for the sins of the world. It is imperative for us to understand however, that we will not find here some kind of complete theology of redemption through death (as we will find in some of the letters of Paul, for example). This prophecy is not about explanations, it is about revelation. God wants us to know what He is doing.

Verse 10 - Death and resurrection?

It seems incredulous to us that God should intend His Servant to die. In this verse, the poem begins by rehearsing what we already know, which is that it was the Lord's will to 'crush' (or 'bruise') Him and 'make Him suffer'. These words echo previous verses such as 53:4,6 and 7. It becomes obvious that the theme of death enters the prophecy when Isaiah says; 'if His soul becomes a sin offering ...' In the Old Testament, a 'sin-offering' was called a 'whole burned offering' in which a whole animal was killed and burned on the altar as a sacrifice to God (see, for example, Leviticus 4). Imagine Isaiah's shock to see the Servant prepared for slaughter (perhaps as a lamb – see verse 7) and to realise that God's very own Servant was to be killed and sacrificed to Him as a 'sin offering'! The book of Leviticus describes all kinds of offerings and sacrifices, but here, a specific word is used which only has this meaning!

Isaiah, however, is faced with a conundrum. The verse continues 'He will see His descendants and prolong His days: moreover, the Lord's intention will prosper in His hands.' (53:10). How can this be if the Servant

has been turned into smoke as a sin offering? Again, the prophecy does not give us an answer, it simply presents us with a scenario from which we can only presume that death is not the end! We are not given a theology of resurrection or an explanation of how or why resurrection will happen, and the word is not even mentioned, but it is impossible to read this from a Jewish perspective and not conclude that Isaiah prophesies life beyond death! The words Isaiah is given even use the enigmatic word used in Genesis to describe the descendants of Abraham; the Hebrew word for 'descendants' also means 'seed', as in the (somewhat old) expression 'the seed of Abraham', meaning the descendants of Abraham (Gen 15:5,18). Is there a hint here that the Servant will act like another Abraham who will establish a new Covenant relationship with the Father?

There is certainly more than a hint of God's approval in the whole plan. The whole verse is framed by a word in Hebrew which I have translated as 'intention' but also means 'delight' or 'pleasure'. Some people object to the whole theme of the death of the Servant in Isaiah 53, particularly when it is described as the pleasure and will of God to make redemption happen by the death of the Servant! How awful! It is important therefore to ensure that we have seen the element of hope and resurrection within this verse, for without this hope, the criticism of God's redemption plan would indeed be sharp. But this verse makes it clear that God's plans are long term not short term. The work of the Servant will extend far into the future, with many descendants and prolonged days.

Verse 11 – Suffering, resurrection and righteousness

The 'undercover' theme of resurrection continues in verse 11, which begins, 'After the suffering of His soul ... He will see light and be satisfied'. Clearly, this refers to the suffering of the Servant, but who is speaking in the second line of the verse, which says 'He will see light and be satisfied'? Certainly, by the time we enter the next line ('By this fact my righteous Servant ...') we are reading the word of the Lord directly, and it is likely therefore that the whole of verse 11 is the reported speech of the Lord, to the end of chapter 53.

If this is the case, then the phrase 'He will see light and be satisfied' is the Lord's promise to the Servant that beyond His suffering and death there is a light of life awaiting Him, in other words, a resurrection of hope and 'satisfaction'! The word 'satisfied' sounds a little strange to us here, for what does it mean for the Lord be 'satisfied' with what has happened? We respond emotionally to the whole idea of the Servant's death, and this word seems to paint God as a rather emotionless being; should He not shout for joy and be ecstatic? The truth is that the Hebrew word translated here means 'satisfied' in the sense of 'completely full', meaning that everything has been done that can be done. God is satisfied with what the Servant does because it is sufficient to do what He wants, which is to bring redemption and salvation into the world. What could be greater!

Verse 11 continues with a phrase which is contentious, but I have translated it as 'By this fact my righteous Servant will make many righteous' (see translation notes above). The Hebrew has no real word for what we would call 'fact', and I believe that this is what is meant by what you will find in other translations, for example, 'by this knowledge my righteous Servant ...' (NIV). The point is this; the prophecy is not trying to point us towards some knowledge about the Servant which will then empower us to receive the blessings of His redemption and salvation. It is merely asking us to accept the fact of what He has done so that we might participate in God's glorious work. We are not 'made righteous' (according to verse 11) by the mere knowledge that the Servant has suffered for us, but we are made righteous by the fact that He has done this and it is God's will! Not surprisingly, this is remarkably close to the Christian statement of faith 'you have been saved through faith...' (Eph 2:8 etc.).

And lastly for this verse, we are told that the Servant will 'bear the weight of their sins', referring to the 'many people' of the previous line. In other words, the Servant will be very successful! We can now say more clearly than at any previous time in Isaiah 53, that redemption through the death and resurrection of the Servant (Jesus Christ) is God's only and successful plan for the salvation of the world! The Servant is the key to all God's work.

Verse 12 The death of the Servant, effective for the worst

The Lord God continues to speak in the last verse of our passage, declaring that He will give the Servant a great reward. The language here is a little confusing, as are some versions of the Bible (see translation notes above). The point is not that once the Servant has done His work He will be given a place alongside other greats such as Moses and Elijah and others who God has pronounced great (an assumption easily arrived at from the translation 'I will give Him a portion among the great' – NIV). The whole world is the Lord's, and the spoils of the victory of the Servant belong to Him alone. The whole plan of redemption was His, after all. Verse 12 begins by saying that because of His glorious work, the Servant will share with the Lord God the glory of this victory. Spiritually, we could say that this is like the ascended Christ sitting at the 'right hand of the Father' (Acts 2:33),

We may only ever gain a glimpse of heavenly reality in the Old and the New Testaments of the Bible, but the fact that we do is because of what the Servant (Jesus) has done, in pouring out 'His soul even to death' for us and for our salvation. We have already looked at the significance of this phrase within Isaiah's prophecy, but now, it seems that the pouring out of the Servant's soul is an expression of just how far the Servant is prepared to go in order to fulfil His role.

Chapter 53 ends with a threefold expression describing the extent of the Servant's work; firstly he has suffered for those who have rebelled against God, which means God's own people. Secondly, 'He bore the sins of many', a phrase which in Hebrew means 'a very large number', perhaps even an indefinable number; but the phrase clearly implies that the work of the Servant is virtually limitless and He is able to bear an immeasurable quantity of sin. Thirdly, and significantly, 'He intercedes for the rebels'. Again, these are God's own people who have been rebellious, and in the previous chapter of Isaiah we learned that the Lord would continue to look after His people even though they could no longer do the work He originally gave them. The intercession of the Servant therefore indicates the on-going love of God for His own people in the midst of the amazing revelation of the work of the Servant and its amazing implications.

Application

There comes a time when each of us needs to consider carefully the fact that the Servant (Jesus) has died in order that our sins might be removed from being a barrier between ourselves and our God. The death of Jesus is not the whole story of our redemption and as we have seen in this passage of prophecy, because resurrection is more than implied in verses 10 and 11. However, the death of the Servant comes first, and it is by this sacrificial death that our sins are removed. This is the theology of the whole of chapter 53 of Isaiah, and it is made about as clear as it is possible to be that this is so.

We have to ask ourselves why the people of Israel did not realise the strength and meaning of this prophecy before Jesus came and proved it to be true, but we should not be too critical of them. There are many parts of scripture which people today do not understand (for example, parts of Revelation) and which we have to accept we may only understand in latter days when the Saviour comes again in glory; and until then, we read the scriptures and wonder at what we read. Perhaps it was like this for readers of Isaiah's prophecies before the time of Christ, though it is relatively easy to see how the exiles returning from Babylon could find solace in some parts of these prophecies. Unfortunately, the line taken by many scholars today tries to track only this ancient response to the text because they believe that the prophecies were written for the exiles and not by Isaiah. The conclusions of this approach are that the text has virtually no connection with Christ, even though the church has historically made this connection for nearly two thousand years. This is a tragic way to interpret this prophecy, which does in fact extend far beyond this narrow vision.

It is a deeply emotional and spiritual experience to realise that God loves us so much that He has worked throughout human history (as we know it) to ensure that we may have a means of salvation and restoration with our God. It is also amazing to think that the Servant (Jesus) takes our sins on Himself and has already died to take away the power of these sins to keep us away from our Maker, the God who loves us. All we can do is to read about it and let our spirits take in what God has clearly done for our benefit. Ultimately, it is life-changing.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss what it means to say that Jesus' 'soul becomes a sin offering' for us. How can this help us?
2. Where can you see elements of a belief in life after death within this passage of scripture?
3. Why does God love His people so much that He is prepared to account for their total rebellion against Him?

Personal comments by author

The death of Christ is the fulfilment of the work of the Servant, and in my own mind, the Servant and Jesus have become interchangeable as I have worked through this text. I was first taught about this prophecy of Isaiah by a scholar who deeply criticised any suggestion that it had any connection with Jesus. I have long agonised over why he felt it important to teach in this way, and some of my own thoughts reflect my own journey of faith with this text. For me, it was the Hebrew of the passage which most helped me to see the powerful connections with Jesus, though many of them can be spotted quite easily from the English text.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Follow the pattern of the last two studies and try to learn this great text of the Old Testament. If you build up a complete memory of Isaiah 53, you will find this a great and lasting blessing.*
 - *Pray for those who have been taught the Old Testament at College or University and have a sceptical view of the way that God works through history to connect prophecy with fulfilment in Christ. Pray for God's Word to speak clearly to all who read it.*
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Final Prayer

In peace, You fill my soul with the music of Your love; You feed my spirit with the stories of Your glory; You heal my body with the soothing balm of Your touch. Yes, Lord Jesus, You challenge me every day in a myriad ways, but minister to me so that I may sustain the work You have given me to do. I pray in Your Name: AMEN
