

## Prayer

We see the Cross at a distance, Almighty Lord and Holy God; we can only look at it from afar because of our sinfulness and weakness. We hold our heads in shame, awesome, everlasting and redeeming Lord, for even though we deserve no favours, You have done all this for us. Then, if we dare to look on the Cross, change us forever, for why should we ever be the same again? So be it, Lord God Almighty: AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

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

### Prayer ideas

*Set up a cross in your living room, and let it remind you of what Jesus has done for you. It is not an 'image', it is something God can use to help you appreciate the full extent of His love for you on this special day*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray against the evils within your society.** *Pray against those evils that crush faith, hope and love. Pray against the devil's attempts to stifle godliness, goodness, compassion and friendliness within society, and pray knowing that your example is Jesus. He defeated all evil on the Cross*
- *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.*
- *Give thanks to God for the precious gift of the Word of God. Pray that you will use it well.*

## Meditation

What a risk! My Saviour, You died to set us free!

What a risk! My Lord, You died to save us!

What a risk! My Redeemer, You paid the price of sin!

You died for the ungodly so that sinners might be saved.

You died for the unrighteous, so that all might have peace.

You died for the weak, so that all might know Your love.

You died to sin, so that we could live with You forever.

You died to self, so that we might be united in You.

You died to the world, so that heaven might be richer.

What glory! My Jesus will be raised to the highest!

What glory! My Jesus will be crowned King of Kings!

What glory! My Jesus will be with the Father for ever!

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## Bible passage - Isaiah 53:4-9

- <sup>4</sup> But surely, He has borne our sickness  
and carried our suffering;  
yet we thought that He had been beaten,  
struck down by God, and depressed!
- <sup>5</sup> But He was pierced because of our rebellions,  
and crushed because of our wrongdoing;  
He bore the punishment that brought us peace,  
and by His bruises we are healed.
- <sup>6</sup> All of us have gone astray like sheep;  
All of us have turned to our own way,  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

- 7 He was oppressed and afflicted,  
but he did not open his mouth;  
Led like a lamb for slaughter,  
and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,  
He did not open his mouth.
- 8 After an arrest and court hearing he was removed.  
Who could imagine what would happen?  
He was cut off from the land of the living,  
For the sins of my people  
For whom He was stricken!
- 9 They made his grave with criminals  
In his death, He was with the rich  
although he had done no violence,  
and no deceit was in his mouth.
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## Bible Study

### Review

In these words, scripture combines its finest poetry with its most powerful prophecy, and gives us God's most important and emotional message. His Servant will suffer and die for our redemption. At long last, Isaiah pours out his vision of the Servant's suffering, and the words of this prophecy are like a body blow to human selfishness, rebellion and sin, for it all contributes to the suffering of the Servant. Moreover, in these extraordinary words, the Servant accepts the punishment of these sins on behalf of each of us who has done wrong, '*He was pierced because of our rebellions and crushed because of our wrongdoing*' (53:5), and He accepts this punishment as from God, '*the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all*' (53:6). What can we say to this? We can criticise these ancient texts as incomprehensible and keep them at arm's length from the soul; we can ignore them and chose to read only the 'nice bits' of Scripture, or we can accept the eternal truth of the text; the Servant has changed our relationship with God, forever.

It is hard to know how to study this passage because its poetry affects those who read it in so many ways. The passage begins with a question, begging the hearer to respond to the vision and accept the message; '*surely He has borne our sickness ...?*' As far as Isaiah is concerned, too many people misunderstand the nature of suffering and say 'it is all God's fault' (see 43:4), instead, they must understand that the Servant suffers for the sins of God's people. This message is clear but it goes further, and drives the message home almost unbearably; '*He was pierced because of our rebellions ... crushed because of our wrongdoing ...*' (53:5). Sin has an abiding impact upon God, and although we may like to think that He just takes it and absorbs the pain, the prophecy tells us that the effects of our sin on God are profoundly physical; it is as if Isaiah had said that every time a sin is committed, it nails Jesus to the Cross,.

Yet in the midst of this dreadful message, Isaiah's vision reveals a quite mind-boggling truth about God's redemption; if our sins affect God, then the punishment of the Servant affects us. His punishment brings our healing; '*He bore the punishment that brought us peace, and by His bruises we are healed*' (53:5). Isaiah provides no explanation for this mystery of salvation, and no rationale for the Servant's acceptance of punishment. He simply says that this punishment is born undeservedly for the sake of unrepentant sinners. '*All of us have gone astray like sheep ... and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all*' (54:6)

The heart of the message has now been set before us, and it is hard to take in. The words that come next (53:7-9) give us a further description of the Servant's suffering, saying that He did not '*open His mouth*' (53:7 – emphasised twice). Next, we hear about an arrest and a court, and this is not surprising in a prophecy about about sin and punishment. People commonly reckon that this refers to the court at which Jesus was tried when He fulfilled this prophecy (Matt 26:59f.). This may be so, but more significantly, this is the court of God's judgement which finds the Servant guilty, so that eternal redemption is won for sinners; as Isaiah says, '*He was cut off ... for the sins of the people for whom He was stricken*' (53:8).

And here we have the Gospel in a nutshell; the Old Testament tells us the truth about the New Testament Gospel! Through the Servant, Jesus Christ, our rebellion and sin against God has been turned into our healing and redemption! There is more to come, especially about the allusion to the death penalty found in verse 9, but the power of these verses is unparalleled in Scripture, and we need to dwell on them.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at:

- Verse 4
- Verse 5
- Verse 6
- Verse 7
- Verses 8&9

## Notes on the text and translation

### **V4 'Sickness' and 'Suffering'**

The two words 'sickness' and 'suffering' are the same words used in verse 3, and this indicates that this pair of words is very significant – see study.

### **V5 'Pierced because of our rebellions ...'**

The word used for sin here is often translated 'transgression', but it is also the one word which describes the most heinous of sins against God, that is rebellion.

### **V5 'He bore the punishment that brought us peace'**

People have struggled for centuries to find a good English way of saying what in Hebrew is 'the chastisement of our peace was on Him'. In context, this means that the Servant took on Himself the burden of our sins and took the punishment – see study.

### **V8 'after arrest and court hearing he was led away'**

This is a new translation, but it stays close to the Hebrew. The Hebrew says 'from coercion and from justice he was led away'. I have interpreted the 'coercion' as meaning some kind of arrest, and the justice (Hebrew 'mishpat') as meaning a court hearing.

### **V8 'Who could imagine what would happen.'**

The Hebrew implies what might be thought in future 'generations', but the Hebrew is not clear, and most translations have very different ways of conveying this idea.

### **V8 'for the sins of the people for whom He was stricken!'**

Again, you will not find this in most Bible versions, many of which leave out the final words of the Hebrew 'for whom' because it seems almost impossible to fit them into the meaning of the sentence. The translation I have given takes less risks with the text than many translations, and has the merit of making sense at a place in scripture where many translations do not.

## Going Deeper

But there is so much more for us to discover within the secrets of some of these words. Each verse contains extraordinary poetry and each line adds to our understanding of these truths, so as we look at the passage in detail, we can be sure to discover much more, and as before, the textual and translational notes help explain why the passage is translated as it is. This, itself, is an invaluable translational tool.

### **Verse 4**

The enigma of this verse lies firstly in the two words 'sickness' and 'suffering' at the end of the first two lines. These words are the same in Hebrew as those used in verse 3; 'a man of *suffering*, familiar with *sickness*'. The pair of words links the two verses, and between them these words define humanity. Throughout the Bible, from Genesis 3 onwards, scripture accepts that suffering and sickness are inescapable facts of earthly life for all people. The poem therefore tells us that the Lord's Servant bears our humanity and suffers as we do; but although the Servant 'bears' this humanity, the verse does not clearly say whether He bears this 'for' us in the way we find out later on in the poem (see verse 5).

The verse continues by telling us about a misunderstanding which arises about the Servant's suffering; people think that it is merely God's fault, 'yet we regarded Him as smitten, struck down by God, and afflicted.' People have the impression that God has struck down the Servant simply because He is human, just as God inflicts suffering on all who live in the world through sickness and eventually death! No, the suffering has more meaning than this, and there is a world of difference between those who believe that Jesus died because He was human like everyone else, and those who believe that there was a divine reason and a purpose behind His suffering.

### **Verse 5**

Verse 5 now reveals the true spiritual reason for the suffering, and as we who know about salvation will expect, it tells us with stunning directness that 'He was pierced because of our rebellions ...'. We are used to the translation, 'He was wounded for our transgressions', but there is every good reason for the Hebrew to be translated firstly as 'pierced' instead of 'wounded', and secondly as 'rebellions' instead of 'transgressions'. What difference does this make? The word 'pierced' reminds us immediately of Jesus, and the way the New Testament speaks about Jesus being 'pierced' at His death (John 19:34, 20:24f. Rev 1:7). The link with Jesus is powerful, and we immediately think of what Jesus did for us on the Cross by bearing the consequences of our sin. Next, the second word from this line is the Hebrew word for 'rebellion', which is the worst kind of sin possible; rebellion is the sin lying behind idolatry and Israel's outright rejection of her God for generations past. Our passage is not talking about mere casual or habitual acts of sinfulness, but deliberate rejection of the Lord and rebellion against His authority.

In this way, the Servant bears the most heinous of sins on our behalf, in order to bring us peace with God, or as the Hebrew says here 'shalom', or 'wholeness'. The whole poem then speaks shockingly to us, explaining in powerful language all that we have learned in this verse; 'by His bruises we are healed!' In a mysterious and yet divine way, which we cannot account for, God will allow the suffering of the Servant to heal us and make us whole; both by His suffering on our behalf and also by His suffering because of our sins! The message is at the same time both scandalous and fantastic! The price of suffering paid by the Servant is sufficient for our redemption and for restoration of peace with God!

### **Verse 6**

The poem goes further to explain the truth of what has just been announced. In verse 6, we hear Isaiah's voice break through, as it were, accepting responsibility on behalf of humanity; 'all of us have gone astray like sheep ...and the Lord has lain on Him the iniquity of us all.' Sin has been taken by God from people and placed on the Servant, so that the Servant might remove the penalties of sin and suffering forever. However, the vision of all humanity as wandering like sheep in their own way is a powerful and enigmatic picture. We might imagine that Isaiah would save the picture of the wandering sheep until He could speak of a shepherd who would bring the wandering sheep back again. However, as we now know, this privilege was given to the real Servant, Jesus Christ, who said 'I am the Shepherd', and who promised to gather in the sheep!

### **Verse 7**

Some scholars have complained that the metaphors become all mixed up in this passage, because immediately after reading about humanity as like wandering sheep, the poem picks up the picture of the Servant as a sheep! What is going on? We should not be perturbed or surprised, however, because the Servant is a man like other people, but one who comes from God as prophesied by Isaiah (7:14; 9:6, 11:2, 42:1f.). If we have followed the whole of the poem, then it is quite natural that the Servant is likened to a sheep, just as we are! However, He is a sheep with a difference, and Isaiah's great poem describes the Servant as like a sheep led silently to the slaughter; 'as a sheep that is dumb before its shearers'. Arguments have raged over whether sheep are indeed silent before they are sheared or killed, and whether they are silent when killed only if they are tricked into thinking that they are just being sheared, when in fact they are to be slaughtered! All of this misses the point.

Silence may well be an entirely unnatural phenomenon when it comes to sheep, but it is a sign within this poem of the lack of complaint by the Servant at what the Lord is doing to Him. Immediately we recognise this, we are taken forward in time to the life of Jesus and His trial before Caiaphas and Pilate. If you read any of the stories of the Passion in the four Gospel, you will find that nowhere is Jesus entirely silent. He is silent at times before His two accusers, but he either speaks or retains silence only to stand in dignity, confronting His accusers and refusing to submit to any taunts or temptations to deny God. Personally, I find His silence before the ugly words 'come down if you can' to be the most powerful silence of all. Jesus did not reply to such words because He accepted what God was doing to Him. This fulfils what verse 7 means here.

### **Verses 8 and 9**

In a further amazing prophecy, Isaiah explicitly reveals the next consequence of the suffering of the Servant, something that has been implied in verse 7 but has not yet been said openly. The Servant does indeed die as a consequence of His burden of suffering; 'who could imagine what would happen? He was cut off from the land of the living for the sins of my people!' (53:8). You will not find that this part of the text is as clear as this in most translations, but as I read the Hebrew, this is exactly what it says, and it repeats and reaffirms the message. The Servant dies to bring salvation and redemption!

We cannot but be amazed at the way in which the poem speaks about an arrest and a court hearing (first line of verse 8 – though many translations cover up this plain meaning with alternative translations). This seems to prophesy what happened to Jesus as He walked the pathway of Isaiah's words in real life, many

centuries later. The connection with Jesus is sustained with the talk about the death of the Servant in verse 9.

This last verse appears somewhat difficult in Hebrew, and I have translated it fairly literally because this gives us maximum room for interpretation. This great prophecy probably indicates in the first two lines of verse 9 that the death of the Servant is as much for the sinner (criminals) as for the rich and therefore (as understood in Isaiah's day) those blessed by God. No-one would escape the consequences of the Servant's death. As it is, we can say that when Jesus died, He died with criminals by His side and He was placed in the tomb of a rich man. The match between these is hardly exact, but there is enough for us to say that Isaiah's prophecy asks us to think carefully about the meaning of these elements within Jesus' death, and perhaps view them in a different light. Those who died with Jesus may not have been 'just criminals' and the importance of the tomb made available for Him by Joseph of Arimathea may be underestimated.

## Application

It is frankly difficult to pick one's way through this passage to find the sequence of the revelation, filled as it is with emotive and powerful expressions that inspire faith in the heart of the Christian believer. The full extent of the nature of God's redemptive work gradually unfolds before us; the suffering of the Servant is not just a suffering like ours, it is taken on for us, for the sake of redemption from our sins (53:4,5); moreover, this suffering 'heals' us, even though we have wandered, like sheep, away from our God (53:6). Then the truth is revealed that we are not simply talking about suffering, but suffering to the point of death. What can we say? This prophecy reveals a work of God for us, and it involves our own redemption and salvation at the cost of someone else's life, and that someone else is the Servant of God Himself!

You may well feel, as I do, that there is not a great deal we can do except stand in awe of this revelation. However, we stand in awe not just of its power to speak about the heart of God the Father for our redemption and salvation, and not just because of what it reveals about how this happens, but because the details of the prophecy speak to us of the life of Christ. Even if we have studied this passage without taking its completion in Christ into account, we cannot read it with faith and ignore the connection. The reason is simple, if there were no particular connections between this great revelation and the life and experience of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament, then we would be entitled to ask whether the prophecies about God in the Old Testament had anything to do with the saving work of Jesus in the New. If the connection were not there, then the two halves of our Bible could be cut adrift! But the fact is that Isaiah's words are prophecy, and they have been fulfilled in Christ, and the saving work of God is eternal, forever. And for that, we must give thanks and stand in awe.

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## Discipleship

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

1. As you read this passage, what are the main points of revelation that you see, and how do they connect together?
2. What does it mean for people that God is willing to send His Servant to take away the punishment of their sins?
3. In what ways do you see verse 9 connect with the passion of Christ?

### **Personal comments by author**

*This text is influential because there are no other passages of scripture quite like it. The connections between the eternal purposes of God and the prophecies of Isaiah, and the revelation of the Servant and the connection with Christ, all come together in an extraordinary way. In writing this, I feel that there are many ways I could have approached the text, but I can only write what the Lord leads me to see, and this is what you have read. I strongly suspect that almost everyone who reads this complex and astonishing passage will gain from it in different ways.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *In common with yesterday's task, read this passage several times, and seek to learn as much of it as you can. Build up your knowledge of this amazing part of scripture by memory, and give yourself plenty of time to work at this.*

- *Pray for those who read this text and find it hard because they cannot see the way in which the revelation works. Pray that God's Spirit will bless the reading of this word.*
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## **Final Prayer**

Lord God, Your marvellous presence empowers us to do things beyond our normal capabilities! May we be humble enough to give You the glory for all the great things You do through us, and give us hope that nothing can ever stop us from receiving a glorious inheritance from Your hand. Thank You Lord God, AMEN.

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