

# **ISAIAH:** **THE GLORY OF GOD IN A WORLD OF CHAOS**

Part 10: “The Suffering Servant”

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

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## **Scripture Reading**

*“Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. As many were astonished at you— his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind— so shall he sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him, for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand. Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.” (Isaiah 52:13–53:12, ESV)*

*This is God's word. Thanks be to God.*

## **Introduction**

In the first century A.D., an African found himself traveling along a road in the Judean desert. Although he was a gentile by birth, he was a worshipper of the God of Israel. Now, he began his long journey back to his native land, where he served as a eunuch and a high-ranking governmental official who oversaw the treasury for Queen Candace of Ethiopia.

Having just worshipped at the temple and as he traveled with his entourage, the Ethiopian eunuch was reading a scroll out loud from the ancient Jewish Scriptures. But although he could read the words on the page, the meaning of these words eluded him.

Just then, as the Ethiopian eunuch wrestled with the mystery of the sacred text, a Jewish man named Philip came upon his chariot.

Philip asked the eunuch, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The Ethiopian responded, “How can I unless someone guides me?”

Then, Philip, who happened to be one of the very first deacons of the church of Jerusalem, unfolded the Old Testament in a way the Ethiopian eunuch had never before heard. Philip showed how the promises of the Old Testament were fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

As they spoke, they came upon some water [show 1“Saint Philip baptizing the Eunuch of the Queen of Ethiopia on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza” by Denis Abel de Pujol (1848)]. The Ethiopian, now a believer in Jesus, asked to be baptized. And there, alongside a wilderness road, Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch.

This is a story found in Acts chapter 8. It shows the power of the gospel to bring together people from different cultures and nations into the family of God. And it shows how Jesus brings such clarity and meaning to the Old Testament.

There is a reason I bring up this story today. The passage that so mystified the Ethiopian eunuch, but was clarified by Philip, was the very text we read this morning. It was the fourth and final Servant Song of Isaiah – the song of *“The Suffering Servant.”*

For those that know about the crucifixion of Jesus, the meaning of Isa 52:13-53:12 may seem fairly straightforward. But for Isaiah’s original audience, the meaning was not as clear.

What was clear is that this text was about a servant of the Lord, who was fully yielded to God’s purposes and would be used by God to bring rescue, redemption, and restoration to the people of God.

Today, I pray that I can show you some of the brilliant truth that Philip the Deacon showed to the Ethiopian Eunuch that day in the Judean desert. We will take a closer

look at our passage and show how it reveals the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## **Exposition**

### **1.) The Unexpected Redeemer**

The kingdom of Judah was conquered in the year 587 B.C. by the Babylonian Empire. The temple was destroyed, the monarchy was deposed, and the people were taken into exile in foreign lands. This time, known as the exilic era (the time of exile), was a time of national tragedy and pain for the Jewish people.

But there was a time after the exile when God's people were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. This was known as the post-exilic era, and it encompasses the time in which people like Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah lived.

This was a time of great hope. The Jewish people were restored to their Promised Land. The temple and the priesthood were restored. But there was one piece of the puzzle that never came back together. Even after empires rose and fell, the Jewish people, for the most part, lived under foreign rule. They did not have their own kingdom.<sup>1</sup> And they did not have a king from the line of King David.

As the Jewish people were longing for the return of the king, they looked to the words of prophets for hope. And in the words of Isaiah, they did find promises that an anointed Davidic king would rise and bring peace to the earth (remember our sermons from Isaiah 7, 9, 11, and 42). But they also found promises like Isaiah 53, in which a servant that would suffer and bring forth redemption.

Traditionally, the Jewish people have most often looked at the Suffering Servant as a personification of the nation of Israel. They thought Isaiah was saying that Israel would suffer. But that if they were faithful, God would give them the king that they so desired.

As such, the original audience of Jews who read and studied Isaiah would have been very familiar with both the Isaianic images of the Conquering King and the Suffering Servant. However, they would never have imagined that they referred to the same person. They would have never expected a king who would bring forth his salvation and kingdom by his own death.

But even Isaiah's own words show that there is something about the Suffering Servant that God's own people would find utterly surprising and unbelievable: *"Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him"* (Isa 53:1–2).

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<sup>1</sup> The brief period of the non-Davidic line of the Hasmonean dynasty following the Maccabean revolts the Seleucid Empire would be a qualified exception.

The people of Isaiah's day and the people of Jesus' day were looking for political salvation from a political savior.

They wanted a Davidic heir who would deliver God's people from the oppression of foreign empires. They wanted a general. They wanted a king. But what they needed was the Suffering Servant.

The true problem for God's people wasn't the tyranny of Babylon or Rome. The true people for God's people today is not the tyranny of Republicans or Democrats. Our true problem is the tyranny of sin and death.

And if we don't understand the true nature of our problem, we will keep looking to false messiahs.

But as Dr. Ray Ortlund Jr. has said so well, "[God's] answer to the bullies swaggering through history is not to become an even bigger bully. His answer is Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

## **2.) The Truly Innocent Victim**

Sometimes we are the architects of our own suffering. Sometimes our suffering comes as the consequences of our own sin and foolishness. But Isaiah is clear that the suffering of the Suffering Servant was not deserved or earned. He was truly innocent.

Through no fault of his own, this servant was "despised and rejected by men" (53:3). Look at verses 7 through 9 of chapter 53: "*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth*" (Isa 53:7–9).

In his life and ministry, Jesus was defined by his love for the unlovable. He touched the untouchable. He healed the diseased. He fed the hungry. He set free those who were spiritually afflicted.

Yet, he was a bold and powerful teacher of the truth, who was viewed as both a rabbi and a prophet. As such, he exposed religious hypocrisy and corruption with unflinching courage and boldness. Against the power of the elites, he championed the cause of widows and children. And for this, he was hated and ultimately murdered on a Roman cross as an enemy of the state.

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 99.

The gospels tell us the tragic story of how the Jewish religious leaders and Roman government officials worked together to bring about the death of Jesus. They said Jesus was a revolutionary who wanted to start an insurrection. And so, in a kangaroo court trial, Jesus was charged with treason and sentenced to death by crucifixion.

The crucifixion was not only designed for maximum pain but maximum humiliation as well. In the Roman Empire, crosses were placed in high trafficked areas like the highways, or in the case of Jerusalem, outside of the city gate. Dead and dying bodies were lifted up like billboards advertising the power of the Empire. In fact, a person's crimes were often nailed above a criminal's completely exposed body. Crucifixion was thus meant to be a public statement: "If you rebel, if you misbehave, this could happen to you."

For victims of the cross, the true cause of death on the cross was not blood loss, but rather, asphyxiation. Death on the cross was a slow and tortuous form of hanging, in which a victim would have to hoist their bodies upward in order to take a breath until they were so weak that they could no longer do so.

Death by crucifixion was so horrific and brutal and painful it gave us the new word "*excruciating*."

Why would Jesus be willing to undergo such pain?

Herein lies the brilliance of the cross. For in the cross of Jesus Christ, God has made a way to end the power of evil without ending us.

### **3.) The Willing Substitute**

The most shocking truth about the cross of Jesus Christ was not that it was horrific. It was that it was intentional. He suffered in our place.

In northeastern France, near the border with Germany, lies the small village of Isenheim. In the 1500s, a monastery in Isenheim named St. Anthony's served as a hospital for victims of the plague.

One of the most common diseases found at St. Anthony's at this time was a gruesome condition known as ergotism, which came from people eating grains that had been infected by a regional fungus.

Victims of ergotism – popularly known as St. Anthony's fire – first reported headaches and nausea. But eventually, the disease grew into spasms, skin disease, and gangrene, culminating in death.

The role of the monastery was to treat the suffering patients with dignity and love, to give them a good death, and to offer them the hope of everlasting life in Christ.

Inside the sanctuary, where the monks prayed and worshipped, there was a decorative altarpiece behind the table where communion was observed. This work of art, known as “*The Isenheim Altarpiece*” (1516), was painted by Matthias Grünewald [show image 2“*The Isenheim Altarpiece*”]. And in the realm of art history, Grünewald’s masterpiece is probably the most famous, the most memorable, and the most haunting painting of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Here the body of Jesus hangs on the cross. His limbs are stretched upon the beams of wood. His hands and feet are pierced. He is at the very moment of expiring death, as he bears the wrath of God and the sins of the world.

But one of the more fascinating and moving choices that Grünewald makes as an artist is to depict Christ with the very disease most often treated in the monastery. Christ himself burns with St. Anthony’s fire. As Jesus dies on the cross, boils and sores blanket his skin. His outer limbs, and especially his feet, are gangrenous and shriveled.

Grünewald shows us that Christ is not only bearing the suffering of all people in general. He is bearing the very personal, the very localized sickness of the people in Isenheim.

It is a visual reminder that, on the cross, Jesus does not just suffer. He suffers *with us*. He suffers *for us*. And his suffering accomplishes our redemption.

Jesus is the willing substitute: “*Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4–5, ESV).*

#### **4.) The Victorious Savior**

While this passage is very sober and dark, it does not end in defeat. The suffering of the Suffering Servant is not in vain. Verse 11 of chapter 53 tells us: “*Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities*” (Isa 53:11).

At the cross of Christ, the justice of God was satisfied. Jesus lived the righteous life we could have never lived in our place. He suffered the penalty of death for our sins. And for all who place their trust in Jesus, we are accounted righteous. We are *imputed* with and credited with a righteousness that is not our own.

*We are not saved because we are righteous. We are saved because Christ is righteous, and by faith, we have united with him!*

As the Apostle Paul says, “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” (2 Cor 5:21).

Even more, we have not been left alone and abandoned by Christ. The New Testament tells us that Christians have been granted the Holy Spirit, who is the down payment of

our eternal inheritance (Eph 1:13-14). And Christ, who has ascended to the right hand of the Father in heaven, now intercedes and prays for us. As I have studied the gospel in my adult life, this truth that the ascended Christ now sits at the right hand of God interceding, advocating for me, is one of the most comforting truths in moments of pain and temptation.

Look at Isa 53:12: *“Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors”* (Isa 53:12).

This final verse of chapter 53 presupposes that the Suffering Servant who endured death will not be conquered by death. He shall rise again. He shall be high and lifted up.

### **Conclusion**

That phrase “high and lifted up” (יָרוּם וְנִשְׁאָר) is, perhaps, the most important clue and phrase and in all of today’s Scripture reading. We find that phrase in Isa 52:13, the very first verse in the Song of the Suffering Servant: *“Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted”* (Isa 52:13).

Now, when we read that verse in context of Isaiah 53 and, especially, in light of the gospel, it would seem that we should interpret the phrase “high and lifted up” to refer to Christ being lifted up on the cross.

However, that is not what the phrase “high and lifted up” means in the book of Isaiah. In fact, there is one other place that we have already seen this phrase, and it was not referring to a man, but rather to the Lord in heaven.

It was the moment of Isaiah’s calling in chapter 6: *“In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”*” (Isa 6:1–3).

Herein lies the greatest surprise of the Servant Songs. Not only will the Suffering Servant be the same as the promised Messiah-King. The Suffering Servant would be God himself.

God himself would descend from the throne room of heaven to enter into the brokenness of his own creation so that he might bring forth redemption for his people.

I could think of no greater thought for us to ponder on the eve of what has been called the most important election of our generation.

And make no mistake: this election is important. You should vote. You should pray. Yet, you should not place your ultimate hope on any political outcome.

There are so many leaders beckoning people to grant them allegiance, passion, and hope. There are so many voices telling us to seek salvation in political leaders or political platforms. But today, the word of God invites our hearts to see a vision of the glory of God in the midst of this chaos.

We are reminded that the only one who is truly worthy to bear the government on his shoulders is the one whose shoulders first bore the cross in love.

We are reminded when so many in our world are crying out for Barabbas, to behold the salvation that comes and will come in Christ alone [show <sup>3</sup>“Ecce Homo” by Antonio Ciseri (1871)].

*Our hope is not a Powerful President, but a Suffering Servant.*

Jesus is our true hope. He is our true king. He is the one who will protect you. He is the one who will bring forth your justice. He is the one who will bring about our peace.

As a pastor once wrote: *“We need a suffering Savior. We need a Savior who has tasted the cup of horror we are being forced to drink. And that is how he came. He knew what this world needed. Not a comedian. Not a sports hero. Not a movie star. Not a political genius. Not a doctor. Not even a pastor. The world needed what no mere man could be. The world needed a suffering Sovereign. Mere suffering would not do. Mere sovereignty would not do. The one is not strong enough to save; the other is not weak enough to sympathize. So he came as who he was: the compassionate King. The crushed Conqueror. The lamb-like Lion. The suffering Sovereign.”<sup>3</sup>*

AMEN.

### **Discussion starters for Gospel Community**

- 1. Read Isa 52:13-53:12. Summarize the big ideas of this passage in your own words.*
- 2. Isa 52:14-53:2 suggests that there is something surprising and unexpected about the Suffering Servant. In what ways did Jesus defy the expectations of who people thought the messiah should be?*
- 3. According to Isa 53:4-5, what did Christ’s suffering accomplish for us? How might the cross of Jesus Christ bring comfort to pain in your life?*
- 4. What parallels can you spot in Isa 53 and in the accounts of Jesus’s crucifixion in the gospels?*

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<sup>3</sup> John Piper. “How does Jesus Come to Newtown?” *Desiring God*. December 14, 2012.



5. The phrase "high and lifted up" only occurs three times in Isaiah: Isa 6:1, 52:13, and 57:15. What is the significance of this phrase, and what does it tell us about the Suffering Servant in Isa 52:13-53:12?