



God Justifies

The one true God is forgiving; He justifies believers by taking their sin on Himself.

ISAIAH 53:1-12

We honor parents who work multiple jobs to provide a brighter future for their children. We place the names of public servants who died while on duty on bridges and buildings. We commemorate the sacrifice paid by soldiers who fought and died in battle. Most of us willfully celebrate the sacrifices made by a person for the benefit of others. Isaiah told of a Servant who would come for the purpose of paying for our sin so that we could have peace with God. Through faith in the sacrificing Servant, we find forgiveness and restoration.

How do you celebrate the sacrifice others have made for you? How does their sacrifice impact you today?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

ISAIAH 51:1–57:21

Isaiah delivered a message of hope and encouragement that focused on God's deliverance of His people. He began with an exhortation for the faithful to remember how God used Abraham and his barren wife Sarah to do what appeared impossible and bring forth the nation of Israel in fulfillment of His promise to them. In the same way, God promised the people in Isaiah's day that He would restore the ruins of Jerusalem and fill it once again with joy, thanksgiving, and melodious song. God's salvation would also extend to the nations (Isa. 51:1–52:12).

Isaiah 52:13–53:12 contains the last of the four Servant Songs in Isaiah. This song elaborates on the themes of the Servant's suffering and vindication, providing a detailed description of the Messiah's suffering. Isaiah begins with a promise of His ultimate triumph, as He will cleanse many people. In spite of this, the song reveals the people of God would reject the Servant because of His humble beginnings and unimpressive appearance. When the Servant suffered, the people would think God was inflicting judgment on Him because of His own sins. In truth, He would be suffering for their benefit as their substitute, bearing God's judgment for their sins and paying the price for their sins. Nevertheless, the Servant of the Lord would rise again to see the reward of His sacrifice.

Because of the Servant, Jerusalem had a bright future. God would protect it and bless it with beauty, peace, and righteousness (54:1-15). The Lord exhorted His people to come to Him and receive the blessings He offered while there was opportunity to do so. He desired an eternal covenant with the nation like the one He made with David. If the people would seek the Lord and turn from their wicked ways, He would compassionately forgive their sins. On the contrary, judgment awaited those who opposed God and persecuted His people. Only those who repent and turn to God, whether Israelite or foreigner, would be part of this future community of faith (55:1–57:21).

Underline in Isaiah 53:1-12 the things the Servant would endure. How do these experiences help us understand our sin?

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

DESPISED (ISA. 53:1-3)

¹ Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? ² He grew up before him like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground. He didn't have an impressive form or majesty that we should look at him, no appearance that we should desire him. ³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering who knew what sickness was. He was like someone people turned away from; he was despised, and we didn't value him.

VERSE 1

The questions that begin verse 1 are more exclamations of dismay and amazement than actual questions. The first question exposes hearing without believing, and the second question displays seeing without believing. People would hear the message and witness in person the saving power of the Lord's Servant, *the arm of the LORD* (see 52:10), and still not believe. The Lord rescued Israel out of Egypt with His outstretched arm, and He would use it to bring about an even greater salvation again.

Isaiah was articulating the general unbelief in the world and in Israel in particular concerning the revelation of the Servant. This Servant of whom Isaiah spoke is Jesus. John's Gospel records how Jesus performed many signs before a crowd, yet they refused to believe He was the Messiah (John 12:37-38). John indicates that what happened was the fulfillment of Isaiah's rhetorical questions here in verse 1. Additionally, much like Isaiah, when Jesus went to Nazareth to minister to the people, He too was "amazed at their unbelief" (Mark 6:6). The apostle Paul quoted this verse when speaking of those who reject the gospel (Rom. 10:16).

DID YOU KNOW?

Isaiah 53 is quoted or referred to in 41 verses in the New Testament. New Testament writers identified the servant of Isaiah 53 as Jesus of Nazareth. (See, for example, Acts 8:30-35.)

VERSES 2-3

Isaiah spoke of the future in the past tense. The New Testament clearly teaches Jesus is the fulfillment of this song. In Hebrew, *a young plant* refers to a shoot that grew and was usually cut off from the roots of an established tree. It may be a reference to Isaiah 11:10 that speaks of the Messiah coming from the “root of Jesse” and was thus a descendant of David. In the context, it points to His unimpressive appearance. The description, *a root out of dry ground*, emphasizes His frail appearance, His poor family background, and His struggles. The Servant did not fit the stereotype of a savior for His people.

In verse 3 Isaiah described how people viewed the Servant. They wanted nothing to do with Him and abandoned Him. Many considered Him contemptible and disgusting and consequently rejected Him. Pain and suffering were distinctive characteristics of His life, and it was so bad that people did not want to look at Him. *Sickness* refers to the consequences of sin as made clear in verse 4. Therefore, the Servant knew what it is like to live in a fallen world.

The gospels speak of these things. Jesus was sinless but pitched His tent among us (John 1:14). He identified with sinners. He knew what it was to live in a fallen world. His people rejected Him (John 1:11-13) and His family thought He was out of His mind (Mark 3:21). When soldiers arrested Jesus, His disciples deserted him (Mark 14:50), and one of His inner circle publicly denied Him (John 18:15-18,25-27). On top of all these rejections was the ongoing hostility of the political and religious leaders of His day, along with the fickle crowds.

SUBSTITUTE (ISA. 53:4-6)

⁴ Yet he himself bore our sicknesses, and he carried our pains; but we in turn regarded him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds. ⁶ We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the LORD has punished him for the iniquity of us all.

VERSES 4-5

Verses 4-6 are central to the song. They focus on how the Servant offered Himself as a substitute for others by taking the full

penalty of God's judgment of their sin on Himself. The idea of one suffering for another was not foreign to the ancient Near East. In Mesopotamia, a common person could take the place of a king and receive the suffering that a king rightfully deserved for his actions. In the end, the substitute was put to death. While there is no direct parallel between what the Servant did and this Mesopotamian practice, it shows the concept of substitution was understood at least by some in the ancient Near East. The irony is that with the death of Christ, it was the King of kings offering Himself as a substitute for commoners. The Passover and the sacrificial laws in the Old Testament also demonstrate the idea of substitution. They are examples of ways God prepared His people for the coming of the Servant. Unfortunately, most failed to connect these things with the mission of the Servant, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Four words in verse 5 describe the Servant's suffering. He was *pierced*, a verb used in the context of someone being killed. *Crushed* refers to oppression or a crushing that is fatal. *Punishment* refers to discipline or corrective reproof. *Wounds* refers to open bruises. Jesus incurred these from His beating (Matt. 27:26; Mark 15:15; John 19:1). The Servant endured all of these things because of our *rebellion* and *iniquities* against God. *Rebellion* refers to willful resistance to God's rule and *iniquities* is our perverted fallen nature. It is both our choice and our nature to sin against God. As our substitute, the Servant bore the punishment we deserve.

The Servant suffered these things for *our peace* and healing. Because of our sins, God was not at peace with us. Isaiah 59:2 says, "your iniquities are separating you from your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you." However, through His vicarious punishment, the Servant secured our peace with God. Paul wrote, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). In addition to this, the Servant's wounds healed us in that by His suffering, our relationship with God was restored and we are made whole.

KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Son*

Jesus honored the divine law by His personal obedience, and in His substitutionary death on the cross He made provision for the redemption of men from sin (1 Pet. 2:21-25).

VERSE 6

The bookends of this verse, *we all* and *us all*, and *we all* in the second line emphasize that this means everyone. Going *astray like sheep* means to wander off and reveals the foolishness of our sin and failure to recognize its danger. The phrase *we all have turned* points out the willfulness of our sin. There was nothing accidental about it. We chose to go our own way. Even so, the Lord *punished* His Servant *for the iniquity of us all*. The Servant did not become sinful like us but suffered the punishment we deserve.

What single phrase stands out to you the most in verses 4-6? Explain.

BIBLE SKILL: *Use a Bible dictionary to examine a term.*

Review articles about substitutionary atonement in a Bible dictionary. Read the Bible passages included in the article. How do the passages examined give you deeper understanding into Isaiah 53? Write a summary statement of how you would explain Jesus' substitutionary atonement.

WILLING (ISA. 53:7-9)

⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. Like a lamb led to the slaughter and like a sheep silent before her shearers, he did not open his mouth. ⁸ He was taken away because of oppression and judgment; and who considered his fate? For he was cut off from the land of the living; he was struck because of my people's rebellion. ⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked, but he was with a rich man at his death, because he had done no violence and had not spoken deceitfully.

VERSES 7-9

Even though He was mistreated with physical violence, like sheep going to *slaughter* or to the *shearers*, Isaiah emphasized the Servant quietly and willingly submitted Himself to His antagonists. Sheep do not realize what is about to happen to them, but the Servant knew and submitted to everything that was going to happen to Him. He not only felt the excruciating physical pain of it all, but before and during what He experienced He fully understood and experienced the emotional and mental anguish of it.

For he was cut off from the land of the living means He died. The word “pierced” in verse 5 indicates His enemies killed Him. Why did the Servant submit to this death? Emphatically, Isaiah wanted everyone to understand the Servant died as a substitute for the transgressions of His people.

Verse 9 speaks of the Servant’s burial. His executioners dishonored and disgraced Him by treating Him like a criminal. Nevertheless, the Servant was given an honorable burial after His dishonorable death. Matthew is the only one to mention that Joseph of Arimathaea was *rich* (Matt. 27:57). Jesus’ body would have most likely been taken along with the bodies of the two criminals who died alongside Him. However, Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus ensured Jesus received an honorable burial (John 19:31-39).

How does the willingness of the Servant demonstrate His love for people? How does it demonstrate His love for the Father?

SACRIFICED (ISA. 53:10-12)

¹⁰ Yet the LORD was pleased to crush him severely. When you make him a guilt offering, he will see his seed, he will prolong his days, and by his hand, the LORD’s pleasure will be accomplished. ¹¹ After his anguish, he will see light and be satisfied. By his knowledge, my righteous servant will justify many, and he will carry their iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will give him the many as a portion, and he will receive the mighty as spoil, because he willingly submitted to death, and was counted among the rebels; yet he bore the sin of many and interceded for the rebels.

VERSES 10-11

Verse 10 reveals God Himself not only caused the Servant to suffer but was the One who inflicted the suffering on the Servant. God was *pleased to crush him*. The Lord had had enough burnt offerings and rams and the fat of well-fed cattle. He had no desire for the blood of bulls, lambs, or male goats. (See Isa. 1:11.) The Servant was the only sacrifice acceptable to God, and the Servant's suffering and death provided the necessary sacrifice for salvation. A *guilt offering* was most concerned about restitution, paying what needed to be paid for an offense. What the Servant accomplished was exactly what needed to be done to make restitution to God for our sins.

To *see light* refers to life after death. Isaiah revealed the Servant would live again and see the rewards of His accomplishment—many spiritual children and God's pleasure. The Servant would know exactly what He needed to do to *justify many*. He would bear their sins so they might stand righteous before God. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul explained that God made the One who did not know sin (the Servant) to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. Everything is dependent on the righteous Servant's substitutionary work and the faith of those who believe in Him. Believers have been declared righteous because God sees those who respond to the good news of the gospel by repentance and faith in light of the righteousness of the Servant.

How does the cost paid by Jesus to secure salvation for all who place faith in Him support the idea that there is no other way to the Father? How does what the Servant did for you strengthen your love and commitment to Him?

VERSE 12

This Servant Song concludes with God's declaration that He would honor and reward the Servant when He accomplished the work of salvation. Having defeated sin and death, the Servant would enjoy the spoils of war because He *willingly submitted to death*. Jesus said, "This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own" (John 10:17-18a). Additionally, Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of being *counted among the rebels* when He was crucified

between two criminals (Matt. 26:55-56; Mark 15:27; Luke 22:37). God promised to exalt the Servant because of His willingness to bear *the sin of many*, and now as their mediator He intercedes for them to God (Rom. 8:34).

What impact should knowing that the Servant intercedes for those He has saved have on believers?

APPLY THE TEXT

- The Servant faced rejection to secure our salvation.
- The Servant bore our sin, taking the judgment in our place.
- The Servant willingly paid the price for our sin.
- The Servant provides salvation to all who accept His sacrifice.

Memorize Isaiah 53:5. Compare various translations to gain a deeper understanding of each phrase. How is this verse central to understanding the gospel?

Share about your spiritual pilgrimage. How did you come to know of your need for a Savior? What was your response to Jesus' offer of salvation? With whom can you share your story? If you have not trusted Jesus, review the information on the inside front cover and visit with your Bible study leader.

PRAYER NEEDS
