

# The Saving Work of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 52:13—53:12)

The poem about the suffering and restoration of God’s “servant” in Isaiah 52:13—53:12 has played a major role in the history of Christianity. The message is straightforward: God’s appointed servant endured suffering on behalf of others for their forgiveness and restoration. The New Testament frequently connects this servant with Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection (Matt. 8:17; 26:23; Luke 22:37; 23:32; 24:26-27, 44-45; John 12:38; Acts 8:32-33; Rom. 10:16; 15:21; 1 Pet. 2:22). Christians today almost automatically read this passage as a specific prediction of Christ.

However, if we jump too quickly from Isaiah to Jesus, we risk missing the real power of this passage and the greater significance of connecting it to Christ. Just like the rest of Isaiah, this passage had an initial context and audience, and it communicated a message from God to ancient Israelites living in a particularly difficult time. Even some of the earliest Christians recognized that identifying the servant in this passage with Jesus required a further step of interpretation (see the story in Acts 8:26-40 of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch). The passage is complicated to read, especially when trying to sort out changes in speaker (cf. 52:13-15 with 53:1-9) and whom the servant figure would have signified to the earliest Israelite audience.

## The Servant and the Exile

The poem about the servant in Isaiah 52:13—53:12 is the last and longest of four poems in Isaiah about a “servant” chosen by God to bring justice and restoration to the nations. Ancient Israelites living hundreds of years before the New Testament was written might have seen the servant as an individual figure from their own time or from their history—maybe one of the prophets, or Moses, or a Judean king—or perhaps as a group of some kind—maybe the collective city of Zion/Jerusalem, or a group of returnees from exile. Several places in Isaiah actually identify God’s chosen servant as “Israel,” especially the servant poem in 49:3 (see also 41:8; 44:2, 21; 45:4; 48:20). In its original context, then, 52:13—53:12 likely presented Israel as God’s chosen servant who had suffered destruction and exile as part of God’s work to bring redemption to all nations, and who would then receive restoration.

This passage originated in the same historical circumstances as chapter 43. The Babylonian Empire had destroyed Jerusalem, decimated the country of Judah, and forced many Israelites into exile in Babylon. Israel had suffered military occupation, war, deportation, destruction, and death. The exiles sat as those who were wounded, marred, oppressed, rejected, and crushed. Against these circumstances, God’s message proclaimed that Israel’s suffering and death

in exile was not the end, nor was it in vain. The poem casting Israel as a suffering servant reinterpreted the people’s exile as something they endured not only because of their own actions but also on behalf of the nations as an offering for them and as a means by which God could redeem all people. Israel had been called to bring blessing to the nations and serve as a priestly kingdom (Gen. 12:1-3; Exod. 19:6). Suffering, destruction, and death didn’t cancel the covenant people’s calling but became the vehicle by which “many nations” would “see” new things and God would “justify many” (52:15; 53:10-11).

## A Tribute to the Servant

The passage begins with God’s first-person public announcement of the suffering servant’s (“my servant”) ultimate restoration and its effect on the nations. The nations had misunderstood Israel’s (the servant’s) hardship, thinking wrongly that it rendered Israel one to be rejected and abandoned. Although marred by destruction and exile, Israel would be exalted. More importantly, Israel’s restoration would affect the nations. Depending on the translation of verse 15, the restored servant would “sprinkle” (perhaps “cleanse”; NIV) the nations, or “startle” (NRSV) them—either way—so that they would finally “understand” that Israel’s suffering in exile was for the sake of all people.

Isaiah 53:1-10 changes speakers from God to a group (“our,” “us,” “we”) who collectively testify to having gained a new understanding that Israel, the servant, suffered on their behalf and thus allowed them to share in peace, healing, and justification before God. The speakers of verses 1-10 may be the nations themselves—the very ones God said would gain a new understanding in 52:15. The nations first confess their misunderstanding of Israel’s plight: They viewed God’s suffering servant as insignificant, undesirable, someone whose bad condition made them one to be spurned (vv. 2-4). Now the nations declared a new understanding that Israel’s afflictions, often inflicted by the nations themselves, actually served the nations by bearing their sins so they could be made whole in relationship to God through Israel (v. 5). Notice the nations’ repeated confession that Israel’s suffering was for “our” pain, affliction, transgressions, iniquities, and healing (vv. 4-6).

In verse 7-10, the nations introduce an unexpected perspective, especially in verse 8: Israel unjustly suffered more than it deserved in “oppression” and not just as “judgment” from God (“By a perversion of justice he was taken away,” NRSV). This theme of Israel suffering more harshly than its sins warranted or than God intended,

especially at the hands of the Babylonian Empire, appears elsewhere in Isaiah (see 40:2; 47:6; 54:6-8). The feeling expressed resembles that found among the so-called lament prayers in the book of Psalms in which worshipers honestly raise questions to God about unfair things they have endured in life (for example, Pss. 13; 88). While we don't know everything the prophet had in mind, the point of verses 7-10 is to contrast the violent mistreatment of God's servant with his innocence, acceptance, and silence before his oppressors (v. 7, 9), once more emphasizing that the servant's suffering became an "offering for sin" that brought others to God.

After another promise of the servant's restoration in 53:10 (see earlier in 52:13), verses 11-12 conclude the passage by switching back to God speaking in first-person about the servant ("my servant," "I will give") that matches God's introduction in 52:13-15. God declares the servant's ultimate destiny: Though Israel seemed dead in exile, it would be brought back to life. Moreover, the intercession provided by the servant's suffering would extend into the future, where "many" will find right-relationship with God because the servant "poured out his life" and "bore the sin" of others.

### **Jesus and the Suffering Servant**

Jesus fulfilled the prophet's words about God's suffering servant who bore the sins of others and reconciled them to God. As noted above, however, if we jump too quickly from Isaiah to Jesus, we risk missing the real power of this passage. The words in Isaiah 52:13—

53:12 had a purpose in their own day and to their first audience, but they also have a larger meaning in light of the fullness of God's work over time.

How does this passage about Israel's suffering in exile find its ultimate meaning in Jesus? Originally, the prophet gave Israel's exile a new and redemptive meaning for the nations. Then, as God's work unfolded in the world over time, a new aspect of how God would bring redemption out of Israel and its suffering became clear. Israel's own Messiah would pour out His life to bear the sins of all people and bring them to God. In the fullness of time, God's word to Israel in exile took on a meaning that extended beyond its original purpose. Jesus, Israel's Messiah, embodied Israel's identity as the suffering servant in a new and ultimate way. The prophet's words to Israel in exile were more than a simple prediction of a person to come; they released into the world God's promise that a decisive life-giving act could alter the fate of all nations—an act that began in the suffering of the people of Israel in exile. As Christians, we can see in Jesus' death and resurrection the fulfillment of that promise. We are able to recognize that meaning in Jesus precisely because the prophet witnessed to Israel that God could redeem suffering for God's purposes on behalf of the whole world. What began in Israel for the sake of all people culminated in Israel's Messiah.

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