Studies in Isaiah

Study 5

The Triumphant Servant – Isaiah 52:13-53:12

(The sin-bearing, dying, living and victorious servant)

Introduction

After the challenge to respond to the 3rd song of the servant, the servant motif disappears for a while (51:1 – 52:11). The 4th and last song of the servant is 52:13 – 53:12 – often called Isaiah 53.

Some years ago there was a poster campaign in Israel with the slogan, "Why aren't we allowed to read Isaiah 53?" Of course it drew a great deal of attention to that chapter!

The Structure

A. The Enigma: the exaltation and humiliation of the servant (52:13-15)

- God's witness to His servant (v. 13)
- a description of the servant's suffering and reactions to it (v. 14)
  - ✓ a reaction of revulsion:
    - ✦ appearance so marred
    - ✦ form so dehumanised
    - ✦ suffering that 'sprinkles'/startles
  - ✓ a reaction of submission (v. 15)
    - ✦ something never told
    - ✦ something never heard

B. The Revelation: witnessing to the fact and meaning of the servant's suffering and death (53:1-9)

- suffering observed and misunderstood
  - ✓ the servant's birth: unimpressive and unpromising (53:2)
  - ✓ the servant's life: popular rejection
  - ✓ the servant undervalued by those who later believed (53:3)
- explanation: the servant's vicarious suffering, our sin and the Lord's will (53:4-6)
- the servant's final act: his voluntary and undeserved death and the mystery of his burial (53:7-9)
  - ✓ procession: the servant led out to die – his willingness
  - ✓ execution: the servant's death – thoughtless contemporaries (53:8)
  - ✓ burial: the mystery surrounding it (53:9)

C. The Solution: exaltation through sin-bearing suffering (53:10-12)

- an explanation of the servant's suffering (53:10-12)
  - ✓ the servant's death as a guilt offering (53:10)
  - ✓ the servant's death as personal suffering (53:11)
  - ✓ the servant's death as voluntary (53:12)

D. The Great Climax (v. 12)

"Therefore I will give him a portion among the great and he will divide the spoils with the strong."

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Introduction

After the challenge to respond to the 3rd song of the servant the servant motif disappears for a while – 51:1-52:11.

The 4th and last song of the servant is 52:13-53:12 – often called Isaiah 53.

[There was a poster campaign some years ago in Israel. Posters were put on public transport and in other places reading, "Why aren't we allowed to read Isaiah 53?"

A. The Enigma: the exaltation and humiliation of the servant (52:13-15)

- The shadow of suffering appeared in the 2nd song. (49:4)
- Suffering was the heart of the 3rd song. (50:6)
- As a result of the servant suffering:
  - ✓ The remnant of the People of God is called into a covenant of peace. (54:10)
  - ✓ The whole world is opened up to an everlasting covenant (55:3) – i.e. everything set as the goal is accomplished. He did not fail!
  - ✓ He accomplishes for us peace with God. (54:17)
  - ✓ All the world is summoned to pardon (55:6-7) and pilgrimage (55:12)

  There are many lovely promises in 51-52:12 – universal and righteous salvation.
  See Eden promises of 51:3.
- Who is going to do all this? The arm of the Lord (52:10) – i.e. God himself in action.

1. The servant's exaltation (v. 13)

The threefold exaltation! Notice again, "Behold my servant!" Link this with 52:6:

"Therefore My people shall know My name; therefore in that day I am the one who is speaking, 'Here I am' ".

- This is the one who is lovely on the mountains!
- This is the one who is the arm of the Lord (v. 10)

  "The Lord has bared His holy arm in the sight of all nations, that the ends of the earth may see the Salvation of God."
- He will prosper – act wisely.

Then the threefold exaltation!

Raised … Lifted up … Highly exalted

Are there clues to the identity of the servant?

The resurrection – the Ascension – the heavenly exaltedness of our Lord Jesus

2. The servant's humiliation (v. 14-15)

This servant's suffering aroused revulsion! The "many" are all those who benefit from the servant's act – i.e. you and me etc.

We are "appalled", shocked and shattered and what is happening to the servant.

- He was disfigured and marred.
- This was so great that he was de-humanised.

- It isn't that the servant suffered more than other people. He did, but it was that he suffered disfigurement from being a human.
- If you saw him, you would step back in horror and say, "Is this a human being?"
- ***"So will he sprinkle many nations."*** (v. 14) – sprinkle or startle.

The Arabic root is 'to spring up' *(hizza)* used in an emotional sense – "you made me jump" "you startled me".

Both meanings are possible!

Note: the servant's role is universal – to many nations

- The kings of the earth are silent from shock – overwhelmed by this servant – his amazing exaltation and horrifying suffering.
- Something – some truth – about the servant has dawned on them!
- His unique exaltation and unique suffering are the subject of a unique truth.
- What is this awe-inspiring truth?

B. Revelation: **witnessing to the fact and meaning of the servant suffering and death**

1. Suffering observed and misunderstood (53:1-3)

The true understanding of the servant is dumbfounding. We can only ever understand it by revelation – the message (v. 1)

This "arm of the Lord" – i.e. God himself – his birth and his early life and his unimpressive appearance – meant that we, the "many", did not esteem him!

1st question: ***"Who has believed our message?"*** (v. 1) – answer: absolutely no one!

2nd question: "Why not?" There can be no belief without divine revelation. Human observation won't help.

Notice: This "Arm of the Lord" is the supreme revelation of the power of God.

- This is the Lord Himself in all His power.
- Before (in Deut. 7:18-19) the arm remained invisible, but you can see the effects.
- But now the Lord Himself had come in mighty power!

This is real **power evangelism**!

It is interesting to do a study on the arm of the Lord in Scripture.

What about the servant?

- He seemed to have a wholly earthly or natural origin. The imagery of growth out of the soil speaks of a human family tree. ***"Is not this the carpenter's son?"*** (Mt. 13:35) Can a mere man be the "Arm of the Lord"?
- ***"He grew up before Him*** (the Lord)." How can the "arm of the Lord" – a distinct person – grow up in the presence of himself?
- There was no evidence of any speciality or distinctiveness. People blandly dismissed Jesus as the servant because he was born in Nazareth. So the truth was there, but no attempt was made to see it.

Isaiah compares the servant's appearance with beauty and majesty. Both these words are used of Rachel in Gen. 29:17, ***"She was lovely in form and beautiful"***. The servant wasn't well-built or impressive or handsome. How could this be the Lord who had come to save?

So what did they do to the servant? They shunned him (53:3).

- He was despised, dismissed, mocked and forsaken by men.

- The human eye saw an ordinary man of human ancestry and of no special dignity. He was the object of scorn because he had no influence, no followers and no 'wasta'.
- He was a man of sorrows not because of his constitution, but because he took our sorrows and weaknesses as his own.
- He had a personal experience of grief.
- Not only did we not follow, we went the other way!
- All we could understand as human beings with our human eyes is that this man was a zero – a waste of space!

Isaiah diagnoses our condition from our perspective of the servant:

- To see the servant and see no beauty in him reveals the bankruptcy of our emotions.
- To refuse to follow and to despise him reveals our misguided wills.
- To conclude that he is nothing reveals our sinfulness!

Every aspect of human nature is hopelessly inadequate to appreciate him!

2. The explanation: the servant's vicarious suffering; our sin and the Lord's will (53:4-6)

The servant is characterised by grief and sorrow, but not his own. These verses are the revelation. They are the heart of the passage.

Preliminary comments

1. The servant is alone in his sufferings. We had no part in it at all.
    - He deals with our moral and spiritual needs and our broken personhood. We only contribute our sin which caused him pain.
    - He suffers while we are straying! The Lord, acting as a high priest, loads him with all our wrongs.
    - He suffers in isolation from humanity under our sin and under the Lord's hand.
2. He acts by means of substitution drawn straight from Leviticus 16.
    - The servant (v. 4) lifts up and loads our needs on himself.
    - His suffering was the penalty that he paid for our transgressions.
    - The chastisement which is essential for our peace with God fell on him.
    - It is at the price of his wounds that we are healed.
3. The servant dealt with every aspect of our need.
    - All the infirmities and sorrows that blight our lives (v. 4)
    - All the moral and spiritual wrong
    - All the guilt that alienates us from God (v. 5)
    - He brings us healing. (v. 5)
    - He brings us peace. (v. 5)
4. His work of suffering fulfilled the will of God.
    - Willingly he was our sin bearer. All that merits God's wrath was laid by God on him.
    - The servant is the Lamb of God.

A brief look at each verse

v. 4: The servant took on himself all that blights our lives – all that mars our lives – griefs and sickness.

- We wish for more than we are able to achieve.
- The good life always eludes us – blocked by sorrow, bereavement, disappointment and tragedy.

- But he made our burdens his!
- 'Stricken" is used 60 times in Leviticus 13-14 – the "blow" of catching leprosy (not the disease itself but being brought low, humbled and humiliated).

v. 5: The servant went deeper in his work for us. He dealt with:

- Our sinful state – transgressions
- Our alienation from God – iniquities
- Our broken personhood – lack of shalom

➢ He was pierced fatally – see 51:9, the 'Arm of the Lord' pierced the dragon. Now the 'Arm of the Lord' himself is pierced to death.

➢ "Crushed" = people being trampled to death – crushing agonies ending in death.

➢ "Transgression" = the wilfulness and rebelliousness of sin – deliberate flouting of God's Word.

➢ "Iniquities" = to bend. It reflects the 'bentness' and the 'pervertedness' of human nature – the result of the Fall and the ever-flowing fountain of sin.

The servant stepped forward precisely because the wicked cannot enjoy peace, but need someone to bring them back to God. The servant has done this by his substitutionary, penal death.

- "Wounds" is only used of open, untreated lacerations.
- We are healed – healing in a total sense – the healing of the person restoring fullness and completeness – the mark of the Messianic day (30:26).

v. 6: The picture of straying sheep summarises our inadequacy and the waywardness of our nature. It also shows the danger we are in for the Bible stresses the danger of sheep without a Shepherd.

- "To lay iniquity on" is a summary of the servant's substitutionary death.
- "We all – each" expresses common culpability and individual responsibility. We can't blame the Lord even though we are all implicated.
- "And the Lord laid" each sin of every sinner would be like a separate wound in the heart of this man of sorrows and the Lord himself superintends the priestly task of transferring the guilt of the guilty to the head of the servant.

This is how I know that this is indeed his considered an acceptable satisfaction for sin.

C. The Solution: exaltation through sin-bearing suffering – the servant's final act

a) The procession – the servant led out to die (v. 7)

- He submitted to being struck down.
- There is a clearheaded, self-restraining voluntariness with which the servant approached and accepted what happened.
- The servant is not caught in the web of circumstances, but fully and consciously he is masterfully deciding, accepting and submitting.
- The tongue and mind are totally disciplined to say and unequivocal "Yes" to this terrible death that he didn't deserve.
- Animals go uncomprehendingly to slaughter. The servant knew well what was happening. He went to his death with a calmness that reflected not an ignorant mind, but a submitted mind.
- The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins. That was the fatal flaw in the Old Testament substitution sacrifices.
- Animal sacrifices failed at the point where sin is so serious.
  - ✓ Sin as failure needs no more than pity.
  - ✓ Sin as a moral defect is distressing, but what can't be helped can't be blameworthy.

- ✓ But sin is wilful rebellion and God cannot overlook this.

- The very heart of our sinfulness is that we sin because we want to!
- ***"We do not want this man to reign over us."*** (Lk. 19:24) So an animal merely <u>pictures</u> substitution.
- The only real substitute is a consenting will for a rebellious will.
- The servant had no sin. (v. 9)
  - ✓ He was acceptable to God. (vs. 6 and 10)
  - ✓ He willingly accepted and submitted to the substitute's role!
- The word "oppressed" is used of physical brutality.

b) Execution: The Servant's Death (v. 8)

- The implication is that without restraint and without justice he was taken out to die.
- What about his contemporaries? They didn't think anything. They were completely indifferent to the fact that he died "for my people's rebellion"
- "Cut off": this has an unbroken record of violence in the Old Testament. The same word is used for:
  - ✓ cutting a child in two (1 Kings 3:25)
  - ✓ cutting down a tree
  - ✓ sudden death (Lam. 3:54)

  Cut off from the land of the living – i.e. the servant died!

  This "blow" was for my people (the Lord is speaking!). It fell on the servant.

c) Burial: the Servant's Burial – a mystery (v. 9)

- 'Rich' is used to distinguish from the social class 'the poor'.
- ***"His grave was assigned with the wicked ones <u>and</u> with a rich <u>one</u> in his deaths."*** (plural)
- The implication is that in the burial of the servant, wicked people and a rich man were somehow involved.
- The plural is odd. It implies a supremely magnificent death.

So the servant was condemned as a criminal. The natural expectation was that he would be buried in a criminal's grave. But surprisingly, after a superb/real/violent death he was found "with a rich man".

This is an enigma! On top of, 'How can the servant, by the arm of the Lord, be so very human and die?'. Clearly the enigmas are written so that when we see these things, we know we stand in the presence of "the servant of the Lord".

"Violence" = 'Hamas' in Hebrew – a characteristic of life in this world – deceit – wickedness of heart. Neither in the outward or the inner person was the servant guilty.

d) The servant's triumph (vs. 10-12)

- The meaning and effects of the servant's death (v. 10)

The heart of God is revealed in his delight – even at such huge cost – in finding and providing a guilt offering!

- A guilt offering was made for compensation – see Leviticus.
- The servant's death – satisfied the requirements of God in relation to His broken law and His offended holiness.
- The Lord alone knows what compensation/reparation was required both towards God and towards men.
- But clearly the Lord was pleased – i.e. more than satisfied – with the compensation that the voluntary death of the servant accomplished.

- If you are a beneficiary of the servant's "compensation" you become his "offspring" – his children!

The Old Testament People of God ask, ***"Who bore me these?"*** (Is. 49:21)

The answer is, "the servant". **We stray as sheep. We return as children! This is amazing!!**

"He will prolong his days."

- This is often used in the Old Testament of a long earthly life.
- It is never used for someone after his death! So the implication is resurrection!
- Why doesn't Isaiah say so? It is hard for us to say!
- It is clear that a life terminated on earth continues in reality and effectiveness.
- "The servant" lives on! Not as a watcher (like the dead) but as one who is making history.
- Is. 14:9-17 says that dead 'royalty' are in Sheol. In death they were dethroned, weak and powerless.
- This "servant" has power and dignity. He is the victor taking the spoil. (v. 12)

The servant's death as personal suffering

(v. 10) the Lord's perspective – He is really pleased!

(v. 11) the servant's perspective: his suffering – his resultant satisfaction – his reward.

The servant is satisfied:

- with the Lord's delight
- with this family he has generated
- with the authority given to him to provide righteousness to "the many"

"He who was delivered up for our transgressions, was raised for our justification." (Rom. 4:25)

- "The many" includes us whom the servant clothes in his righteousness sharing with us his own perfect acceptability before God.
- In 51:1 we are seeking righteousness. Now we have found it! Clearly the provision of righteousness arises from the servant bearing sin.
- He was a perfect substitute. His perfect sin-bearing brings us perfect righteousness before God.

D. The Great Climax (v. 12)

"I will give him a portion among the great and he will divide the spoils with the strong."

The Lord gives the servant all those "many" he died to save – i.e. the whole company of the redeemed.

- "The strong" – i.e. all powers – are in the presence of a stronger! They are his spoil at his disposal – the fruit of victory.
- Total supremacy is his by right of conquest.
- He is not given "the strong" as if they had been captured by some other power and given to him. It is by his own superior power that he disposes of them according to his own pleasure.