

The Suffering Servant

Last week we saw one part of the Hebrew Scriptures' portrayal of their expected Messiah - the picture of a king reigning in justice and peace, a descendant of King David, born in Bethlehem, preceded by Elijah, bringing God's salvation to Israel and fulfilling all the covenant promises made to Abraham, to Moses, to David. It's a glorious, triumphant, hopeful picture of God's ruler coming to set everything right that had gone horribly wrong.

But it wasn't the whole picture of Messiah from the Hebrew Scriptures. They had some other texts to include in their study and, from what we can gather from the writings of the ancient rabbis, they did. Perhaps the most important and controversial text is the description of the suffering servant that starts in Isaiah 52 and runs into chapter 53. Let's start by reading the text and then let's consider the range of interpretations that this text has been given:

See, My servant will prosper; he will be highly exalted. Many were amazed when they saw him — beaten and bloodied, so disfigured one would scarcely know he was a person. And he will again startle many nations. Kings will stand speechless in his presence. For they will see what they had not previously been told about; they will understand what they had not heard about.

Who has believed our message? To whom will the LORD reveal His saving power? My servant grew up in the LORD's presence like a tender shoot, sprouting from a root in dry and sterile ground. There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him. He was despised and rejected — a man of sorrows, acquainted with bitterest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way when he went by. He was despised, and we did not care. Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God for his own sins! But he was wounded and crushed for our sins. He was beaten that we might have peace. He was whipped and we were healed! All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on him the guilt and sins of us all.

He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth. From prison and trial they led him away to his death. But who among the people realized that he was dying for their sins — that he was suffering their punishment? He had done no wrong and he never deceived anyone. But he was buried like a criminal; he was put in a rich man's grave. But it was Yahweh's good plan to crush him and fill him with grief. Yet when his life is made an offering for sin, he will have a multitude of children, many heirs. He will enjoy a long life, and the LORD's plan will prosper in his hands. When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied. And because of what he has experienced, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins. I will give him the honours of one who is mighty and great, because he exposed himself to death. He was counted among those who were sinners. He bore the sins of many and

interceded for sinners. (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)

School books in Israel today speak of this passage as referring, not to a Messianic King, but to the people of Israel as a whole. It is they who suffer on behalf of the nations of the world in order to atone, or pay for, their sins and grant them forgiveness. This is the popular view among many modern Jews, and is supported by the arguments of today's rabbinical schools. Other Hebrew schools leave out Isaiah 53 altogether, arguing that they must focus on weightier matters.

But that wasn't the view of the earlier rabbis. They saw the suffering servant of Isaiah as King Messiah. In the 11th century, a rabbi interpreted the passage as referring to Israel, because he was trying to protect the Jewish people from falling into a kind of degenerate Medieval Christianity. But other rabbis, both then and following, found his arguments were wrong on at least these three counts:

1. The majority of the ancient Jewish scholars who commented on Isaiah 53 had determined that it referred to the Messiah
2. The suffering servant is referred to, throughout this passage, in the singular.
3. Verse 8 says that "his life was cut off from the land of the living" - this has never been true of the whole Jewish nation.
4. I would like to add a fourth objection, which seems pretty obvious to me. In verse 9 Isaiah says, "He had done no wrong and he never deceived anyone." That can't be said of any nation or people group on earth.

As a result of all this evidence, Rabbi Moshe Alsheikh in the late 16th century said, "... our rabbis with one voice accept and affirm the opinion that the prophet is speaking of the King Messiah."

Now, let's work our way through the Isaiah text and draw some conclusions as we go. You can't have missed the jarring opening sentences: "See, my servant will prosper; he will be highly exalted. Many were amazed when they saw him — beaten and bloodied, so disfigured one would scarcely know he was a person." The one who is highly exalted and prospering is so beaten and bloodied that you can't even be sure he's human. What? How does that even make sense? The clue comes from the phrase in between the two texts: "many were amazed"! This is confirmed by the verses that follow: "He will again startle many nations. Kings will stand speechless in his presence. For they will see what they had not previously been told about; they will understand what they had not heard about."

What Isaiah is proclaiming is that this servant of the LORD will be a huge surprise to most who encounter him. Devout people, those who have long expected the Jewish Messiah, will be in shock to see him being beaten and tortured. Leaders of nations will be searching for the meaning of what takes place in this servant's life. None of what Messiah undergoes will be what's been expected; it will be surprising, even shocking.

And this sets the stage for the first verse of chapter 53: "Who has believed our message? To whom will the LORD reveal His saving power? In those two questions,

you see a prophetic understanding of the experience that Jesus Messiah would go through. “Who has believed our message?” suggests that it will be such an unexpected ministry that there will be few who accept it or embrace it. And the next question, “To whom will the LORD reveal His saving power,” suggests that salvation will depend on faith. God will reveal His saving power to those who trust in the Messiah, who put their faith in him.

And then the prophet turns his attention to Messiah himself. Notice what he says about the servant’s upbringing:

1. He grew up in the LORD’s presence, tender, vulnerable, needing protection.
2. He sprouted from a root - some prophets, including Isaiah, talk about him being from the root of David; maybe that’s in mind here.
3. He grew up in dry and sterile ground. This is not a picture of health and vitality, nor one of hope for great things to come from this person.
4. There was nothing physically attractive about him.

This is not the picture of a Messiah that would have inspired the Jewish people back then, or now. This would more likely evoke pity than praise. But then Isaiah builds on this introduction by describing how the people he came to help responded to him:

1. He was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, a man who would know the deepest and most profound grief possible
2. “We turned our backs on him and looked the other way when he went by”. Isaiah is saying that the Messiah will be a total reject, a misfit. No one of standing will want to be associated with him.
3. He was despised and we didn’t care.

The picture gets more and more depressing as the prophet pushes on with his description of Messiah King. He begins and ends this section with the word “despised”. The Messiah would be regarded as contemptible, as worthless, as unimportant, weak. How can this be? Other passages portray him as a victorious king, bringing righteousness and truth to his people, a conquering warrior, a great leader of the children of Israel. How can he also be despised, rejected, ignored, not cared for, strongly disliked? When you try to interpret prophecy and figure out exactly what it’s pointing to, you can get horribly muddled - it doesn’t make sense! But then, when it’s happened, you look at ancient prophecies about a Messiah and you say, “Oh, I see. Jesus was wildly popular with the people on the streets, with the poor, the outsiders, the sick and demonized. But with the powerful insiders, he was rejected and despised. He did wonderful things for the common person, but was hated by those who felt their power base being threatened. He brought healing and hope and peace and forgiveness to many who were among the “unimportant”, but aggravated those who felt themselves more important than He was.” That’s the way it works - prophecy is seldom a clear roadmap of all that lies ahead, but it gives us markers that we can look to along the way, that help us understand better the process we’re going through.

The next part of Isaiah’s prophecy is very clear as we look back on it - again, not so clear when he wrote or when the first century rabbis tried to interpret it.

1. He carried our weaknesses and it was our sorrows that weighed him down.
2. We thought God was punishing him for his sins.
3. He was wounded and crushed for our sins. We are the beneficiaries of all his sufferings - peace, forgiveness and healing.
4. We are all guilty of going off track (like sheep), choosing our own way instead of God's way.
5. The Servant carries our guilt (the LORD laid on him the guilt and sins of us all).

I'm going to return to the rabbi Moshe Alsheikh from the late 16th century for his comments:

It is right to see the Messiah in the Suffering Servant of the Lord. "There are sufferings which are the result of sin and others which arise from love, when a righteous man suffers for the sins of his generation ... and here the innocent righteous man, who has committed no sin, is forced to carry the sins of all the evildoers, so that they might rejoice but he will be filled with sorrow, they will be preserved in health but he will be crushed and stricken ... and this testifies to the Messiah-King, who will suffer for the sins of the children of Israel, and his reward will be with him."

The rabbi clearly perceives the reason, the purpose, of Messiah's sufferings - they are the fruit of his love for human beings. Humans who caused Messiah to suffer will be the ones who benefit from his suffering.

Notice also that the rabbi gives two reasons for suffering. The rigid religious personality might give only one - that people suffer because they are being punished by God. The prophet says as much: "We thought God was punishing him for his sins." But the rabbi was right - there is another reason for suffering and that is love. It would be Messiah's love for lost people that would enable him to endure such intense suffering. It was love that would make him willing to be crushed for our sins and to carry our guilt.

How did the Suffering Servant of the LORD handle his shameful treatment?

1. He never said a word; didn't open his mouth, made no defense, allowed himself to be arrested, tried and wrongfully accused, then allowed himself to be led away to his death.
2. He went along with the plan because it pleased the Lord to allow all this to happen to His chosen One.

It was Yahweh's good plan to crush him and fill him with grief.

The fruit of that plan is seen in the rest of that last paragraph:

The LORD's plan will prosper in his hands. When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied . . . I will give him the honours of one who is mighty and great, because he exposed himself to death.

Three times in that final paragraph the Messianic Deliverer is described as bearing the sins of the people. Let's look at them:

1. *When his life is made an offering for sin* (v. 10)

2. (He) *will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins* (v. 11)
3. *He bore the sins of many and interceded for sinners* (v. 12)

Who could this Messiah possibly have been during all the history of the Jewish people through the 2700+ years since Isaiah delivered his prophecy? What person claimed to have been sent to free the people from their sins, to offer his life as an atoning sacrifice, to be the fulfillment of this prophecy and many others as well?

It's interesting to me how John the Baptist introduced Jesus to the crowds when he first saw him approaching in John 1:29:

The next day John saw Jesus toward him and said, "Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

This was Jesus' mission, prompted by His love for us and carried out in the midst of great suffering and sacrifice.

I was touched by the testimony of another Jewish rabbi, named Josef Rabbinowitsch, who lived in Russia in the late 1800's. He fled to Palestine to escape the pogroms of Russia in 1881, intending to found a colony there. He had received a New Testament from one of his relatives as this book was "one of the best guides to the Holy Land". One day he climbed up the Mount of Olives and looked over the Kidron Valley at Jerusalem on the other side and a question came into his mind: "Why has the city of David been desolate all these centuries, and still is?" Why have my people lived so long in their dispersal? Why do we go through these persecutions again and again?" While reflecting on these things his gaze rested on the hill of Calvary. The words of the prophet Isaiah rose to his consciousness. He repeated by heart: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted." In the same instant it dawned on him that Jesus was the promised Messiah who suffered and died for the sins of his people. This realization changed his whole life. On returning to Russia he preached everywhere that, "The keys to the Holy Land are in the hands of our brother Jesus, and His words are rooted in our hearts, where they bring forth the fruits of righteousness."

Isaiah 53 has been a turning point in the lives of many Jews as they realize just who Jesus is.

Back in January, Brian brought a message about expectations and how our expectations can blind us to the reality of what God wants to accomplish among us. The Jewish expectation of what their Messiah would do was so influenced by their oppression at the hand of the Romans that they missed the Suffering Servant of Isaiah when He stood among them and, like a lamb, was silent before His accusers. Because they were the accusers, they missed the obvious fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. It's easy to have blind spots, to miss the obvious. One of the main blind spots that we miss in the West has been the call of Jesus to follow Him, in sacrifice, in obedience, even in suffering. There hasn't been much cause in the West to embrace suffering because Christianity has been the dominant force in Western culture. Those days appear to be over - at least for now. Maybe when the Lord revives His church and

pours out the Spirit in power again we will be given another opportunity to bless our culture rather than use our influence for our own political ends. Maybe we will have learned to walk humbly with our God instead of walking proudly in front of the rest of society.

In the meantime, we may very well have to embrace some degree of suffering. You may notice that most of what the media has to say about the church has to do with Residential Schools, a very painful issue, for sure, but an old one that people have invested in resolving for decades. On the other hand, the media will give positive attention to other faiths and to other modes of spirituality. These are portrayed as novel and interesting, while Christianity is often portrayed as institutional, irrelevant, archaic or worse. These editorial choices are not made by accident and often are forerunners of policy changes in government. So, be ready to follow Jesus, the Suffering Servant, who gave His life so that we could truly live.

Near the end of the letter to the Hebrews, the author writes to us, “Jesus suffered and died outside the city gates in order to make His people holy by shedding His own blood. So let us go out to Him outside the camp and bear the disgrace He bore. For this world is not our home; we are looking forward to our city in heaven, which is yet to come.” (13:12-14)