

JESUS CAME TO SERVE

(Isaiah 53.1-3 and Mark 10.44-45)

Introduction

There was a survey carried out on the streets of Tel Aviv some years ago. The survey asked, "Who do you think the 53rd chapter of Isaiah describes?" Most people answered that they did not know who, but a significant minority said it sounded a lot like Jesus.

Written over 700 years before Jesus' death, Isaiah 53 describes his afflictions and death so unerringly, and in such detail, that some have speculated that it was altered by unscrupulous Christians after Jesus died.

But in 1947, 900 parchments, dated at about 100 BC, were discovered in a deserted cave. We know them as the Dead Sea scrolls.

How would the Isaiah parchment compare with the oldest manuscript available until that time (dated about 700 years later)? It was practically identical. Any doubts about the authenticity of Isaiah 53 were settled there and then.

Who is the tragic figure that Isaiah 53 describes? The Jews tend to see it as a personification of Israel. And certainly, who can deny that they have suffered greatly as a people down the years?

But there's a problem. Verse 5 says, "*He* was crushed for *our* iniquities." Verse 8 says, "For the transgression of *my people (the Jews)*... *he* was punished."

The song itself presents the servant as an individual who suffers in the place of others, including the nation of Israel.

It is in fact the clearest and most stunning portrait of Jesus we have in the entire Old Testament. If I was washed up on a desert island, if I could have only one chapter of the Bible with me to pass the time, I would choose this one.

I'm sure that, even after years of meditating on this song, I would still not have unearthed all its treasures.

In Hebrew, this is not just a poem; it's a song. It actually starts in chapter 52, verse 13; (the chapter divisions are in the wrong place). We don't have the music now, but the poetic form is that of a mournful lament. And Christians have always seen it as a vision of Jesus and his death for us. What does it say about him?

1. He Will Be Exalted

'My servant', says God in 52.13, 'will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted'.

For centuries, the Jews had imagined that their Messiah king would be revered. No one imagined that he would be humiliated and crushed. God says that he *will* be raised up - but only *after he has suffered*.

2. He Will Look Quite Ordinary

Isaiah 53.2 says that there was nothing about Jesus that would cause you to take a second look. He was no handsome Hollywood star blessed with beauty or majesty.

Since there is no physical description of Jesus in the New Testament, we don't know if he was tall or short, blue eyed or brown eyed, clean shaven or bearded, curly haired or bald. His face and physique weren't what you noticed about him at all. People flocked to him, not because he was fine-looking, but because he made them new.

3. He Will Be Humiliated

Verse 3 describes one who will be turned upon and rejected.

*He was despised and rejected by others,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.*

Have you been rejected? Maybe in the school playground? By a girlfriend, boyfriend, or a spouse? By work colleagues? By one of your children? I know people who, as children, were told by their parents, "We wish you'd never been born." The pain of rejection is a devastating experience.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus was rejected by his own siblings. He was deserted by his band of followers, he was disowned by his most loyal spokesman, and betrayed for money by a trusted friend.

4. He Will Suffer Injustice

Jesus was manifestly innocent of every charge laid against him. Pilate couldn't find a single fault in him. Just as Isaiah says in v9.

*He had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth. (Isaiah 53.9)*

His trial was a joke. The witnesses couldn't even get their testimonies to agree. They kept changing the charges against him, making it up as they went along. Isaiah foretold that his trial would be a miscarriage of justice in v8.

*By oppression and judgment, he was taken away
yet who of his generation protested?*

Nobody objected, did they? No one could be bothered. Everyone passed the buck. Pilate appealed weakly to the crowd, but then washed his hands of him.

5. He Will Be Disfigured

What of the physical details of his death? What did Isaiah see 700 years before the cross?

He saw that the gruesomeness of his beatings would be so savage that people wouldn't recognise him. Isaiah 52.14 says:

*Many... were appalled at him -
his appearance was so disfigured
beyond that of any human being
and his form marred beyond human likeness.*

His flogging was an unrelenting tearing of his back, his arms and legs. His crown of thorns masked his face in blood.

Isaiah in v5 saw that his death was going to be, not from strangling or poisoning or a blow to the head – but from wounds punctured in his flesh.

He was pierced...

6. He Will Stay Silent

What of Jesus' attitude to his suffering? Luke's Gospel confirms that Herod plied him with questions but Jesus gave him no answer. At no point did Jesus try to argue his way out of trouble.

Isaiah saw a man who went quietly and willingly to his execution. Verse 7 says:

*He was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.*

John's Gospel tells us that Jesus died as Passover lambs were slaughtered in the temple to symbolically take away sins for another year. But Jesus was the Lamb of God slain to *actually* remove sins forever.

7. He Will Be Assumed as Guilty

Beyond his rejection, Isaiah (in v4) goes further saying that, in his distress and crucifixion, people actually believed that he was getting his just deserts.

We considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.

The irony is that they were right. Verse 10 says it will be no tragic misfortune but God's plan from beginning to end.

Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer.

8. He Will Pray for His Oppressors

What did his executioners think when Jesus began to pray “Father, forgive them” as he hung there dying? Isaiah foresaw that too in v12.

He made intercession for the transgressors.

9. He Will Actually Die

Isaiah also makes it absolutely clear that his suffering servant will die of his injuries. Verse 8:

For he was cut off from the land of the living.

The Gospels describe how Jesus’ death was certified beyond doubt. Tests have proved that the flow of blood, followed by the flow of water described in John’s Gospel are clinical proof of death by cardiac rupture.

10. He Will Be Abnormally Buried

The Gospels explain that Jesus died between thieves but was buried in the tomb of a wealthy man called Joseph of Arimathea. The Romans disposed of crucified criminals by throwing their bodies in a mass grave. But v9 shows that, though Jesus will die with criminals, his lifeless corpse will be laid to rest in a wealthy man’s tomb. Isaiah saw that too.

He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death.

11. He Will Die on Behalf of Others

But the main emphasis of this vision is the spiritual meaning of it all.

No less than ten times between v4 and v12, Isaiah says that in his death, the suffering servant will somehow take upon himself all our sicknesses, sorrows and sinfulness. He himself will bear the punishment of death that our sin fully deserves.

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering... (v4)

He was crushed for our iniquities... (v5)

By his wounds we are healed... (v5)

The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (v6)
For the transgression of my people he was punished. (v8)
The LORD makes his life an offering for sin... (v10)

This is what it's all about. Sin is ruin! It cuts us off from God and spoils our relationship with others. Even our good works cannot save us, they are filthy rags and only the blood of Christ washes the guilty clean.

Think of it: We all thoroughly deserve to perish for our sins - but he died in our place. 1 Peter 3:18 puts it like this:

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.

12. He Will Rise Again in Triumph

Is this song just an appalling vision of undeserved suffering? Is there anything more? Did Isaiah predict anything else? Yes, there is one last thing.

700 years before the events, Isaiah saw that after his trial, his suffering, his death and burial, this servant will rise.

*Though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days. (v10)*

After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. (v11)

*Therefore I will give him a portion among the great...
because he poured out his life unto death (v12)*

Ending

As I close, and as we come to the Lord's Table this morning, let's ponder the excruciating agonies Christ endured. Let's thank God that he went through it willingly for us. He himself said, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many."

Let's give our lives to him - or back to him - in humble service. Draw near to God - and he'll draw near to you.