

Study Outline

In many ways a 'chiasm' is easier for a group Bible study than for a sermon: once people have understood the structure, linking blocks of verses together makes lots of sense.

Launching Question

In pairs, as succinctly as you can, try to describe to one another why Jesus died.

Questions on 52:13-15; 53:10-12

READ 52:13-15; 53:10-12

On a large sheet of paper, get everyone to suggest phrases to write under one of two headings: 'a Victorious Servant' and 'a Suffering Servant'.

Why is this passage so odd after 52:1-10? why can't people believe it (53:1)?

What is the Lord's bared holy arm doing?

From these verses, what is the link between Jesus' suffering and his exaltation?
Or ... why is he exalted?

Thinking it through

Is the suffering of Jesus something weak and pathetic?

Questions on 53:1-3 and 7-9

READ 53:1-3 and 7-9

Which parts of Jesus' life might each phrase be referring to?

Is the cross something beautiful and attractive to you?

In what ways was he like a lamb? was he passive or active?

Why did he remain silent?

List all the words in these verses that describe Jesus' suffering. What is the effect of using so many different words (= 12 in all, through this passage)?

Thinking it through

What is/should be our reaction to this description of Jesus's sufferings?

Questions on 53:4-6

READ 53:4-6

What was the purpose of Jesus' suffering?

What do we receive because He suffered?

Thinking it through

Why is it good for us to focus on the sufferings of Jesus?

Look back at the *Launching Question*. With this passage open in front of you, try again to describe to one another why Jesus died.

Why is it important that we can explain the cross clearly?

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Isaiah at a glance

Isaiah prophesied around 740-680 BC when God's people had rebelled against him and judgment was imminent. 39:6 ends the first section of the book with the catastrophic news that Babylon will soon carry them off into exile.

But in ch 40-55, Isaiah looks beyond this coming punishment to a time when Babylon itself will be destroyed and God's people will return to Jerusalem. And then there will even be an entirely new kingdom to include all nations, enjoying unimaginable peace and prosperity. At four points in these chapters (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12), Isaiah describes a 'Servant', who is outwardly unimpressive and suffers terribly, through whom God will achieve these plans.

ADDITIONAL NOTE: when does the exile end?

Isaiah tells the exiles that there can only be return to their homeland if the true and sovereign God repeats the astounding redemption of the Exodus. He identifies Cyrus, a future Persian king, as someone with enormous significance as he will permit this return (cf 44:28ff; Ezra 1:1-4). But returning to the land will not put everything right (as the shabby stories at the end of Nehemiah will demonstrate): the sin that took them into exile needs to be dealt with too.

In fact the story of Israel's exile to Babylon is only one 'illustration' of the much more significant 'exile' that the whole Bible story tells. It was our sin that means humankind was exiled from Eden (Gen 3:22-24). All of creation now 'groans' to return there again (Rom 8:18-25). But we cannot return to our true heavenly homeland without another Exodus-style redemption: the blood of a substitutionary lamb must be shed, so that the Lord will pass over when he executes his judgement (cf Exod 12:1-32). And then the return to God is open.

Jesus came to save us from that true exile. He was the substitutionary lamb. And through his bloody death, redemption was bought for us. Exodus and Return are possible. Isaiah 52:13-53:12, with all its wider context of a promised salvation/return from exile, is not fulfilled in the events of 538/458/445BC, but as Jesus came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45).

Theme Sentence

God brings salvation to sinners as his despised Servant dies instead of them.

Application

- Our God achieves salvation for us: he is mighty!
- Jesus served us by being punished in our place. We ought to find it very heart-warming to think through the 'mechanics' of what he did at the cross.
- Keep the dimensions of salvation big: this isn't just about me and my sins, but about all of God's people, all of their sins and a new heavenly kingdom!

Commentary

This passage is a 'chiasm' (commentaries usually describe the structure of a chiasm as ABCBA): it's like going 'up a mountain and down the other side'. The crucial implication of a structure like this is that the middle point of the chiasm is the turning point of the whole passage: so, the meaning of servant's suffering and death (in 53:4-6) is the most important point of this passage.

There are twelve different words to describe the terrible suffering he endured.

The exalted-and-humiliated servant¹ (52:13-15)

This passage will answer the question: how can God do what he has promised? His voice is only heard at the beginning (52:13) and end (53:12) to give us his answer. He points to 'my servant' (cf 42:1) for he is the means of the world's salvation (that has been heralded since 40:1-11, and that the mighty arm of the Lord will bring about [52:1-10]). No wonder this Servant is 'exalted' (cf 'high and lifted up' is used elsewhere in Isaiah to describe the Lord 6:1; 57:15).

BUT ... the truly astonishing thing is that he is so 'marred' that we're not only asking 'is this the Servant?', but also 'is this even human?' How can this be? It looks all-wrong to the unbelieving world of 53:1.

The servant's birth and life (53:1-3)

These verses can be read as the start of the story of Jesus' life (continuing in 53:7-9. Agricultural metaphors link the paragraphs ['root' and 'shoot' in 1-3; 'lamb' and 'sheep' in 7-9]). It's almost a 'Let's examine the life of this Servant'.

And when we examine it, what do we discover? Somebody very unimpressive! Without revelation, who could ever accept that such an unimpressive servant was 'the arm of the Lord' (which is normally a symbol of might cf 52:10)? But even more, when it is explained to them, they still can't believe it! It is almost as if the Servant began with much promise, but that promise was not fulfilled: the more he grew, the less impressive he became. And yet, 'where has God's power ever been seen, but here?' (Clines' translation of 1b). It's truly weird!

The servant suffered & died ... for us! (53:4-6)

5 is the heart of this chiasm. What the eye missed is now going to be explained: we're told what happened to the servant, why it happened, and what happens to us as a result. Whatever people might be thinking about him and what was going on, this is the truth of what he was doing. What we saw (4) was the Servant at the mercy of hostile (even divine) forces, but the theologically-instructed eye (6) sees the death was intentional and sin-bearing.

In analysing how these three verses are put together, the key idea is the conjunction of the 'he' and the 'us'. The griefs and sorrows of verse 3 (that are ours) are the griefs and sorrows that he carries (in 4): ours, not his. It is not wrong to think that this suffering and death is an act of God's judgement (for that is exactly what it is). What is wrong is to think that this suffering and

death is caused by his own sins (for that is exactly what it isn't!). In other words, this is one of the clearest paragraphs in the Bible describing 'penal substitution': God gave himself in the person of his Son to suffer in our place, experiencing the death, punishment and curse due to us as the penalty for sin.

'Stricken' (4b) is used some sixty times in Lev 13-14 to describe the 'blow' that leprosy inflicts on the sufferer. What is subsequently needed is atonement. And when Lev 16 describes how atonement is achieved it uses the imagery of 'iniquity laid on' another (eg Lev 16:21-22) ... but only here in Isaiah 53 is iniquity laid onto a person. Isaiah already personally knew substitutionary sacrifice (cf 6:5-7): what he had experienced, he now extends to all.

8 may be saying that what Jesus experienced was the (true) 'exile'. Israel in Babylon was bad enough, but it was always only a picture of the far worse exile of being 'cut off from the land of the living'. Jesus was banished like that for us.

The servant's trial, death and burial (53:7-9)

These verses describe the Servant's continuing journey, led (7) to his death (8) and burial (9). His silence (further described in 1 Peter 2:21-23) is now interpreted here in 12: he was an active participant, who freely choose passivity, to remain silent, in order to do what was needed to remove sin. Jesus is a man who 'acts, does things, says things, makes things happen. But there comes a day when he lets things happen to him' (Patston).

How can the Servant's burial be both with the wicked and with a rich man? It only gets resolved – so that both are true – in the events of Jesus' life.

The exalted-because-humiliated servant (53:10-12)

God's voice is heard again (cf 52:13), as again he speaks of his exalted servant, who is now like a victorious warrior, laden with spoil.

In these verses, the tensions of the passage are finally resolved. The context in ch 52 told us that the Lord reigns, and that his strong arm will be victorious over the whole earth. It was a total shock (in this passage) to juxtapose the suffering of the Servant. But here is the resolution: the Servant will triumph, not despite his suffering, but because of his suffering (just as God therefore exalts the humbled-even-to-death Jesus, in Phil 2:9).

Consider the results! The Righteous One makes many righteous. The guilt offering has been made, and now the family gathers! The 'offspring' (10) are those of 54:1-3. This is how the Servant/will of the Lord will 'prosper' (52:13 [footnote]; 53:10): he may currently be crushed, marred, disfigured and in anguish, but there will be a massive expansion of the numbers of God's people.

Only in this section (and the one at the start 52:13-15) are 'the many' mentioned (52:14a, 15a; 53:11c, 12a, 12e): 'they start back from the sufferer only to find, once the truth has been revealed, that in his suffering lies their highest benefit' (Motyer).

The 'will of the Lord' begins and ends 10. What happens at the cross is exactly what God always purposed. Alongside that and at the same time, these verses clarify that the Servant voluntarily accepted the role (12b cf Heb 10:5-10).

¹ These headings match the sermon preached at Emmanuel Church, Bramcote on 06 Mar 2016: <http://resources.emmanuelonline.org.uk>