

April 4 Lesson 5 (NIV)

## THE SUFFERING SERVANT

DEVOTIONAL READING: Philippians 2:1–11

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Luke 24:1–35

### ISAIAH 53:4–11A

- <sup>4</sup> Surely he took up our pain  
and bore our suffering,  
yet we considered him punished by God,  
stricken by him, and afflicted.
- <sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.
- <sup>6</sup> We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to our own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.
- <sup>7</sup> He was oppressed and afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
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.
- <sup>8</sup> By oppression and judgment he was taken away.  
Yet who of his generation protested?  
For he was cut off from the land of the living;  
for the transgression of my people he was punished.
- <sup>9</sup> He was assigned a grave with the wicked,  
and with the rich in his death,  
though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.
- <sup>10</sup> Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,  
and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin,  
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,  
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.
- <sup>11a</sup> After he has suffered,  
he will see the light of life.

## KEY VERSE

*He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. — Isaiah 53:5*

## PROPHETS FAITHFUL TO GOD’S COVENANT

### Unit 2: Prophets of Restoration

LESSONS 5–8

### LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Restate what the servant of the Lord would accomplish through suffering.
2. Explain how Jesus fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy.
3. Write a prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord, using language from today’s passage, and use it as a source of family or personal devotions each day this week.

### LESSON OUTLINE

#### Introduction

- A. Climbing to the Summit
- B. Lesson Context: The Prophecies of Isaiah
- C. Lesson Context: The Servant
- I. The Servant’s Death (Isaiah 53:4–9)
  - A. Grief, Sorrow, Affliction (vv. 4–6)  
*Why Do We Suffer?*
  - B. Oppression, Slaughter, Burial (vv. 7–9)
- II. The Servant’s Delight (Isaiah 53:10–11a)
  - A. Sovereign Purpose (v. 10)  
*Aging Gracefully*
  - B. Sacred Success (v. 11a)

#### Conclusion

- A. Relishing the View
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

### HOW TO SAY IT

Arimathea *Air-uh-muh-thee-uh* (*th* as in *thin*).

Cyrus *Sigh-russ*.

HezekiahHez-ih-kye-uh.

IsaiahEye-zay-uh.

MessiahMeh-sigh-uh.

SennacheribSen-nack-er-ib.

## Introduction

### A. Climbing to the Summit

Kyle Yates, an Old Testament scholar who taught seminary for many years, once referred to Isaiah 53 as the “Mount Everest” of Old Testament prophecy. That analogy brings to mind the reality that mountain summits are not reached without first doing a lot of hiking up difficult terrain. Sometimes during our “hike” through the Bible, we may question the value or relevance of what we are reading. And so we struggle through the laws and regulations in Leviticus and rush quickly through the genealogies that fill the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles. As we do, we may wonder why we even began the climb in the first place!

But reaching a summit-passage like Isaiah 53 makes us realize that the climb is worthwhile. This is all the more so when we consider that the existence of the New Testament ensures that Old Testament summit-passages are clearer to us than they were even to the original readers. Specialized “guides” such as Acts 8:32–34 and Romans 10:16 assist us in our journey to understand Isaiah 53 specifically while the general guides of Romans 15:4 and 2 Timothy 3:16 establish the importance of doing so for the Old Testament as a whole.

### B. Lesson Context: The Prophecies of Isaiah

The importance of the book of Isaiah is seen in the fact that it is quoted over five dozen times in the New Testament. Isaiah prophesied in Jerusalem during dismal times for God’s people. His prophetic call came “in the year that King Uzziah died” (Isaiah 6:1), which would have been 740 BC. The latest historical event recorded (not prophesied) by the prophet is the death of the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib (37:37–38), which occurred in 681 BC. That makes for a lengthy period of ministry, so it is not out of the question to assume that Isaiah’s call came when he was a teenager or a bit older.

The span of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry included the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to Assyria in 722 BC. The southern kingdom of Judah was in danger of going the same route in 701 BC. However, the presence and the prayers of a godly king, Hezekiah (Isaiah 37:14–20), resulted in an outcome far different from what the north experienced. Isaiah assured the king that the capital city of Jerusalem would be spared (37:33–35), and it was—in a miraculous act of deliverance (37:36).

With Spirit-empowered insight, Isaiah spoke of a future day when Jerusalem would *not* be delivered; it would come under the control of the Babylonians (Isaiah 39:5–7). But Isaiah also promised that the Lord was not finished with Jerusalem or with his people. The Lord would rebuild the city through the efforts of a ruler whom Isaiah named: Cyrus (44:24–45:1). But Isaiah looked beyond even this restoration to someone far greater than Cyrus.

### C. Lesson Context: The Servant

The Lord’s “servant” is one of the most striking figures in the book of Isaiah. The term *servant* is sometimes a reference to the entire nation of Israel, describing the special relationship the covenant people have with the Lord (example: Isaiah 41:8). In other places, *servant* appears to describe a remnant of God’s people, referring specifically to those who remained following captivity in Babylon (example: 48:20).

There are still other passages where the word *servant* points to one individual who was assigned a very special role to fulfill. Four passages in Isaiah—often called Servant Songs—function in this way to point to the Messiah: Isaiah 42:1–9; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; and 52:13–53:12. (Isaiah 61:1–4 can also be included since Jesus applied it to himself [Luke 4:16–21].) This servant would carry out his tasks in a way that neither the nation of Israel nor the remnant could ever do.

The servant passage studied today is the fourth in the list, beginning, “See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted” (Isaiah 52:13). The passage then describes the astonishment and rejection that many would experience at the servant’s lowly and repulsive appearance (52:14–53:3). It seems so inappropriate for someone “lifted up and highly exalted” not to also have a striking physical presence! But nothing in the servant’s background speaks of greatness at first glance. Our printed text begins with an explanation of the servant’s sorrows and griefs that are introduced in Isaiah 53:3.

Christians have long and rightly interpreted the prophetic Servant Songs as fulfilled in Jesus alone. For instance, Isaiah 53:7–8 (see below) makes up the passage that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading when Philip approached his chariot. The Ethiopian asked whether the prophet was speaking of himself or someone else. And Philip “began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35). No other figure appears in Scripture who claims to be the servant, and only Christ fulfills all that was written about that servant in these passages. The importance of today’s text is seen in the fact that the New Testament quotes from the song in which it occurs seven times.

## I. The Servant’s Death

(ISAIAH 53:4–9)

### A. Grief, Sorrow, Affliction (vv. 4–6)

**4. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.**

In keeping with how *suffering* was often viewed in biblical times (both Old and New Testaments; examples: Job 4:7–8; John 9:2), those who witnessed the servant’s suffering saw it

as a punishment *by God*. The servant was deemed to be bearing the *pain* and *suffering* associated with his own sinful actions. No one would assume that he was suffering on account of the wrongdoings of others.

Followers of Jesus can readily see these words as a compelling description of Jesus' suffering on the cross. Those who mocked him there voiced their belief that God had abandoned him—that he was *punished, stricken, and afflicted* (see Matthew 27:43–44). There was a sense in which the servant was punished *by God*, in that Jesus fulfilled God's "deliberate plan and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23). But why he suffered matters tremendously. Being only partially right about Jesus' suffering means being terribly wrong about what it could accomplish.

Jesus' death was the ultimate example of substitutionary atonement. In the Law of Moses, atonement for sins was fulfilled through God's accepting the sacrifice of animals (Leviticus 1:4–5; Numbers 6:16; etc.). They were substitutes for the people who had sinned and so deserved to die (Romans 6:23). Jesus became the perfect sacrifice for others' sins (Romans 3:25; 1 Peter 2:24). For this reason, we no longer offer sacrifices of grain or oil or animals; Jesus is the last and perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 10:10–14).

While we usually focus on the impact of Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, we must keep in mind that this impact affects every aspect of our humanity, both spiritual and physical. Jesus died so that a complete reversal of the curse of sin could be accomplished (see Genesis 3:14–19; Isaiah 65:17; Revelation 21:5). The wholeness of body accomplished by Jesus' servanthood is illustrated in Matthew 8:14–17. Immediately following a description of Jesus' healing ministry and his power to cast out unclean spirits, Matthew wrote that all this happened "to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah" (Matthew 8:17).

During Jesus' earthly ministry, miracles and signs demonstrated that he possessed power to heal all brokenness, sinful or otherwise (example: Mark 2:1–12). His return will usher in new heavens and a new earth from which sin and its consequences will be banished (Revelation 21:1–4). Until that day, Jesus takes our infirmities and sicknesses, not by healing them immediately in every instance but by providing grace in those circumstances. His grace empowers us and enhances our testimony to others (see 2 Corinthians 12:7–10).

**5. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.**

The emphasis on how the servant suffered for humanity continues. We are guilty, but Jesus was treated as though he were. *Punishment* signals the consequence for sin, the consequence *we* deserved. *Peace* with God is the result (Romans 5:1); indeed Christ is our peace (Ephesians 2:14–17).

**6. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.**

Here human beings are compared to *sheep*, which are known for easily wandering *astray* into what is harmful to them. While we were all born inclined to sin (Psalm 51:5), we also choose sin (compare Romans 6:1–2). Humanity's descent into sin is not something we have no part in; we make choices to turn from God. Yet the one against whom we sin, whose law and standards we treat with contempt, placed our wrongdoings and their punishment on the servant. *All* is repeated to emphasize that every one of us has sinned, and the servant has given his life for each of us.

If we are sheep, who will shepherd us? At the risk of mixing metaphors (see Isaiah 53:7, below), we note that Jesus declared himself as our shepherd (John 10:1–18; 1 Peter 2:25). Like a shepherd, Jesus takes responsibility for our lives. If we are enticed by sin and so die, Jesus the shepherd takes the loss to heart and grieves over the consequences of our sinfully misguided actions (compare Luke 13:34).

## **B. Oppression, Slaughter, Burial (vv. 7–9)**

### **7a. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth;**

The servant would respond to his cruel treatment with silence. This may not seem very significant. But when we ponder who Jesus was and the power in his spoken word, such silence should produce a reverent silence within us. Jesus used his words to heal the sick (Matthew 8:5–13), raise the dead (John 11:43), calm storms (Mark 4:39), and work other miracles (example: Luke 4:31–36). Yet when it came to defending himself, he said nothing (Matthew 26:63a; 27:12–14).

Notably, however, Jesus did not remain silent when others were being harmed, especially by leaders who should have cared for them. He called out the enemies who would kill him—the teachers of the law and the Pharisees—for the ways their hypocrisy damaged the people of Israel (example: Matthew 23:13–36). His speech on behalf of others contributed to the hatred those powerful leaders felt for Jesus (26:3–5). Yet he did not argue on his own behalf to proclaim his innocence.

### **7b. 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.**

*Sheep* imagery links this concept to Isaiah 53:6. The comparison to *a lamb being led to the slaughter* emphasizes humility and (apparent) powerlessness. A lamb could not overpower the priest who would slaughter it for a sacrifice.

Such language did not become triumphal until the early believers began to understand Jesus as the Lamb of God. In that role, he fulfilled his Father's plan to be the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world (John 1:29). This same sacrificial Lamb is worshipped in Heaven and by every creature that exists: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Revelation 5:13).

### **8a. By oppression and judgment he was taken away.**

This verse prophesied the travesty of a trial that Jesus experienced at the hands of his enemies. In their bitter hatred of Jesus, they denied him any semblance of a fair proceeding. For example, a person could not be put to death except on the testimony of two or three witnesses according to Deuteronomy 17:6. The witnesses called to testify against Jesus did not agree in their testimony (Mark 14:55–59), but he was still found guilty and crucified.

### **8b. Yet who of his generation protested?**

This seems to be an indictment against Jesus' fellow Jews. They not only failed to protest his condemnation, they demanded it (Luke 23:21).

**8c. For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished.**

Jesus' life was *cut off from the land of the living* at about age 33 (compare Luke 3:23). Even so, the injustice that he, the servant, experienced and the shameful circumstances surrounding his execution fulfilled a high and holy purpose. Yes, he was *punished*, but only so that his death could serve as a substitutionary atonement for us (again, Isaiah 53:5, above).

**9. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.**

Jesus fulfilled this passage in two ways. First, Jesus was an innocent man who was convicted as if he were a notorious criminal; when a crowd was offered a choice between releasing him or a man guilty of murder and insurrection, it chose the latter (Mark 15:6–15). As a result, Jesus was hung between two criminals as if he were one of them. Jesus had engaged in violence to clear the temple (John 2:14), but he never committed a violent act that would call for Roman crucifixion.

Second, Jesus was buried in the grave of a *rich* man. Normally criminals at the time of Jesus who were executed were left unburied. Eventually, the beasts and the birds consumed their flesh. Jesus, however, was treated differently as two factors came together: a request by Jewish leaders to get the bodies off the crosses, which was followed by Jesus' interment in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy man (Matthew 27:57; John 19:31–42).

## II. The Servant's Delight (ISAIAH 53:10–11a)

### A. Sovereign Purpose (v. 10)

**10a. Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin,**

*The Lord* was at work in and through the servant's suffering, though not in the sense that God was punishing the servant for his own sins (see Isaiah 53:4, above). In truth, the servant's suffering and death constituted *an offering for sin*. The Hebrew term used here refers to the guilt offering (see Leviticus 5:1–6:7).

What made this offering distinct from others was the connection between the sin committed and the remedy stipulated in the law. Jesus' atoning death on the cross was exactly what humanity needed. And it was a sacrifice that needed to be offered only once (Hebrews 7:26–27; 9:24–28).

By Jesus' death he destroyed "him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14).

**10b. he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.**

The number of Jesus' disciples—*his offspring*—has continued to grow since the first century AD, when his church was established. That the servant will *prolong his days* likely points to Jesus' resurrection. That was by no means obvious to any Jewish interpreter before Jesus had actually been raised from the dead. Only then did his disciples begin to grasp how he fulfilled many

prophecies, including this one. The Hebrew word translated *will* is also translated “desire” in the Old Testament (2 Samuel 23:5; etc.).

### **B. Sacred Success (v. 11a)**

#### **11a. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied.**

Jesus was able to look at the suffering he went through and know that he did indeed accomplish the work given to him. Hebrews 12:2 says that “for the joy set before him [Jesus] endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Just as we cannot begin to understand the depth of Jesus’ suffering at the cross, we cannot imagine the joy that he felt after he uttered the words “It is finished” (John 19:30).

## **Conclusion**

### **A. Relishing the View**

As with many mountaintop experiences, it can be difficult to return to life below after leaving the magnificent scenery of Isaiah 53 behind. That is perhaps the most powerful of the Servant Songs in its prophetic depiction of the suffering experienced by Jesus at the cross as he died for the sins of others.

Jesus’ death was not an accident or random tragedy as we use those terms. Rather, his death was the fulfillment of a divine plan to rescue lost humanity. The study of a passage such as Isaiah 53 should not end with the lesson. We can return to it and scale its heights again and again, as often as we like—and we should.

Prophets like Isaiah yearned to know more about how their prophecies would come to pass (1 Peter 1:10–12). But it was not granted to those men to live in the era of fulfillment (Hebrews 11:39–40). That is our privilege as Christians, who possess the sacred Scriptures of both Old and New Testament. It is we who are able to see from the mountain’s summit what Isaiah could see only partially, from somewhere farther down. May we never take such a sacred privilege for granted.

### **B. Prayer**

Father, thank you that Jesus came in the fullness of time to fulfill prophecies such as your wonderful words recorded by Isaiah. Thank you for the amazing love demonstrated by Jesus in his undeserved suffering for undeserving sinners such as us. In Jesus’ name we praise you. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

Jesus makes both the prophecies of Scripture and our lives complete.<sup>1</sup>

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