

What's the Message – Lesson 71

Today we look all too briefly at Isaiah chapter 53, often called “The Gospel According to Isaiah.”

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. We pray that the confidence of the Easter season will remain strong in your hearts, and that with the words we study today you will have a greater understanding of the sacrificial role of Jesus, our Messiah. Amen.

Last time we began the study of The Servant, and claimed that this role Isaiah was speaking to Judah about would be culminated with the words we will now hear concerning the Suffering Servant. Recently, a group calling themselves the “Chosen People Ministries” – an organization of former Jews – ran several full-page ads in the Dallas Morning News inviting “believers, doubters, and seekers” to come to a conference on Isaiah chapter 53.

Their headline proclaimed that this chapter “is the most powerful prophecy in the Jewish Scriptures predicting the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.” And the body of the “invitation” was occupied by the words of chapter 53. It is well that we should begin our lesson the same way. It is also pertinent that we remember these words were written at least 400 years before the time of Jesus. One last thought before we begin: since these words are so familiar to many of you, in an attempt to make these words sound new and fresh, I have chosen a translation that few hear today. So Dale, let's begin reading the words of the prophet, as paraphrased in the Living Bible.

But, Oh! How few believe it! Who will listen? To whom will God reveal His saving power? In God's eyes He was like a tender green shoot, sprouting from a root in dry and sterile ground. But in our eyes there was no attractiveness at all, nothing to make us want Him. We despised Him and rejected Him – 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 didn't care.

Yet it was our grief He bore, our sorrows that weighed Him down. And we thought His troubles were a punishment from God for His own sins. He was chastised that we might have peace; He was lashed – and we were healed. We are the ones who strayed away like sheep! We, who left God's paths to follow our own. Yet God laid on Him the guilt and sins of every one of us!

He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He never said a word. He was brought as a lamb to the slaughter; and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He stood silent before the ones condemning Him. From prison and trial they led Him away to His death. But who among the people of that day realized it was their sins that He was dying for – that He was suffering for their punishment? He was buried like a criminal in a rich man's grave; but He had done no wrong, and had never spoken an evil word.

Yet it was the Lord's good plan to bruise Him and fill Him with grief. But when His soul had been made an offering for sin, then He shall have a multitude of children, many heirs. He shall live again and God's program shall prosper in His hands. And when He sees all that is accomplished by the anguish of His soul, He shall be satisfied; and because of what He has experienced, My righteous Servant shall make many be counted righteous before God, for He shall bear all their sins.

Therefore I will give Him the honors of one who is mighty and great, because He has poured out His soul unto death. He was counted as a sinner, and He bore the sins of many, and He pled with God for sinners.

What words can be added that have not already been written in multiple commentaries on this prophecy? Could one spend hours on going through these verses line by line and comparing them with the events that occurred centuries later, as recorded in the Gospels? Yes, and it would benefit you if you get the opportunity to participate in such a class. But that is beyond the scope of this course. So what lessons can we draw that apply to us, and how should we understand these words today?

First, let us remember the vision the people of Israel had about the promised Messiah. He would be a king, of the line of David, and would rule on the throne of David forever.

Their expectation was it would be an earthly kingdom. And such a king would not be a servant; he was the master. Never could they accept the idea that this king would have to suffer and die. Such an idea was beyond comprehension. So Isaiah's concept of a Suffering Servant was put aside, this chapter was ignored and forgotten and their focus was put on keeping the Law as perfectly as man could. Recall that after the Resurrection, just before Jesus was taken up to heaven, the disciples asked Him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) Even after His death and resurrection, they still did not understand. Would you have been any different?

As for summarizing this chapter, I cannot think of a paragraph so loaded with meaning for us than this one from John Bright in his book, **The Kingdom of God**.

"We cannot but conclude that the prophet was given, by the inspiration of God, to gaze into the very mystery of the Godhead. It befits one to have his shoes from off his feet, with the recognition that he stands at one of those places where logical analysis does not suffice, where one is brought into the presence of the Mystery. Here we learn that it is God's purpose to rule a world-wide kingdom, which men of all nations are invited to join. But the victory of that kingdom, sure as God is sure, will be procured not by force or spectacular power, but by the sacrificial labor of God's Servant. . . . Here we see a God who provides as the instrument of man's redemption no ritual atonement or external law, but the suffering of that same Servant. . . . Here the Old Testament faith leaps forward quite beyond itself and walks arm in arm with the New."

And how do we apply this message to ourselves today? Do we really understand our calling as a servant of God? Again, we turn to Dr. Bright for his comments: "As for the cross of the Servant, it is not strange to us. We own to a crucified Savior. In that we stand with the mainstream of Christian faith from the beginning onward, and we do well to do so. . . . To that cross we look for salvation. But we want that cross not at all. Indeed we would have it the chief business of religion to keep crosses far way. We want a Christ who suffers that we might not have to, a Christ who lays himself down that our comfort may be undisturbed.

The call to lose life that it may be found again, to take up the cross and follow, remains mysterious and offensive to us. . . . Can it be that we are seeking to build the Kingdom of the Servant – without following the Servant?”

To put it in the terminology of God’s covenant with Abraham, “Do we really understand what it means to be a blessing to others?” Have we learned what our responsibilities are as a child of God? Is this learning a process that will take our full lifetime? Can we ever stop studying God’s Word?

Next time we look into four of the often neglected Minor Prophets.