

# God Justifies

## Isaiah 53: 1-12

The recent celebration of Veteran's Day and the approach of Thanksgiving are particularly applicable to this week's lesson in Isaiah. We honor those who came before us who served as well as those who gave the ultimate sacrifice of their lives for the benefit of others. I believe it is the recognition of something greater than oneself that drives that willingness. Certainly, God is deserving of that recognition and soldiers have often faced hardships or death while serving their country but it can also be smaller honorariums. Imagine what you might sacrifice for your children or your spouse. Lately, there has been significant recognition of the sacrifice made by front line workers such as firefighters, law enforcement, emergency medical responders, doctors, and nurses in caring for others during a pandemic. While appreciated, I find that the "hype" can be overplayed and seem insincere. Most of the people in these fields don't consider themselves "heroes". Rather they are doing what they signed up for when identifying their chosen career. But, as a nurse, I also know that there are certain aspects of a person's character that make them good or poor choices for fields of service.



In previous songs in Isaiah, Israel is depicted as the servant, with possible references to the prophet Isaiah himself. But Isaiah 53 speaks specifically of a Messiah who would come for the sole purpose of paying for our sin so that we could have peace with God. It is our faith in this

Servant of God where we find forgiveness and restoration of our relationship with God. This suffering servant insures that the exile would never need to happen again.

### ***Despised***      ***Isaiah 53: 1-3***

In these scriptural passages, Isaiah immediately describes the rejection that the "arm of the Lord" will face. Some have asserted that the "past tense" nature of the writing points to the idea that this chapter does not refer to Jesus at all. But Biblical scholars note that, while modern Hebrew has tenses, biblical Hebrew when this chapter was written does not. In fact, there are many examples of this writing which is described as "the perfective" or perfect tense, written not in relation to time but in certainty of accomplishment.

As we've learned in all prophecies of the Messiah, His humble arrival as a baby and life as a common person were not what the people expected or wanted. Perhaps this is part of why He wasn't well received or accepted. Ironically, the scripture describes how the Messiah will be hated and despised yet, in other scripture presented by those experiencing Jesus, we are

described throngs of people and massive crowds just trying to get a glimpse or to touch his garments. These are not false tales. Could the disparity in these descriptions suggest that there is significant disagreement in how people in Jesus' day accepted Him: despised and hated by those in power but loved by the common people? Imagine such a gap in ideals and ideology!

**Have you ever felt rejection or undeserved hatred? Have you ever rejected someone only to find out later that your anger was misplaced? How does the memory of that feeling affect your response to the plight of the Servant?**

***Substitute*            *Isaiah 53: 4-6***

As much as verses 1-3 describe a rejection of the Servant, verses 4-6 present the prophecy of His physical suffering. While we all know the fallacy of the old adage of sticks and stones and understand that words can indeed hurt, no one disputes that sticks and stones can cause tremendous injury. Just as the rejection was undeserved, so was the abuse. Imagine the shock of the people hearing these words from Isaiah! They must have seemed incredible.

An important element from this passage is that this Servant is a substitute for our sins. At this time of writing, Israel had been punished for their sins and would soon be led out of slavery. This prophecy informs us that God will not punish in this manner again but will send a Servant to suffer in our place for our transgressions. In verse 6, Isaiah summarizes by stating that we are all sinners and have all gone astray. The role of the Servant, to suffer and die willingly in our place, is God's way of breaking the cycle of sin and punishment. It takes a lot to grasp the entirety of this message and its weight. Though rejected and beaten by the people, the Servant was abused BECAUSE of the people by the hand of God. There is purpose to this prophecy.

**Why would a just God punish an undeserving person in such a way?**

***Willing*                *Isaiah 53: 7-9***

In verses 7-9, Isaiah emphasizes the willingness of the Servant to serve as a sacrifice for others. Think about the animals that are sacrificed on the altar; often described as unblemished or perfect. They, too, were undeserving of their suffering. Isaiah describes how the sheep goes silently to the altar. The Servant would silently and willingly stand as a sacrifice in the place of those who did deserve the fate.

In verse 8b, Isaiah writes "and who shall declare his generation?" This question implies that none from those who are alive to witness the torture and death of the Servant Jesus will recognize his act for what it was. As I presented earlier, there were huge crowds of people who followed the Messiah and a group of believers as well as disciples who ministered with Him. We know now from the New Testament writing, that even they did not initially realize that Jesus' suffering and death was for them. He would be buried with the wicked and the rich, representing that they were people who served themselves rather than sacrificing themselves for others.

**Who would you sacrifice yourself for? Are there people who you would be willing to help even if it meant a personal cost to you? Would you take the punishment for someone you don't know?**

### ***Sacrificed*      *Isaiah 53: 10-12***

Verse 10 can take us aback as we wonder how a just God can be pleased to punish an innocent and perfect individual in such a horrendous way. What the passage confirms is that the Servant was sent as an offering for sin. With the previous comparison of the Servant to the sacrificial lamb, the notion is confirmed here as He is not only *like* a guilt offering, he *WAS* the guilt offering. His death paid for the guilt of others and restored our relationship to God.

#### Sin Offering & Guilt Offering

- The sin offering and guilt offering were mandatory for God's children to live in harmony with Him and with one another.
- The sin offering represented the purification of the people before God.
- The guilt offering served to "repair" the damage caused by sin and cleanse the offender's conscience.



By the offering of Himself as a guilt offering, the Servant would "see his seed". What does that mean, considering the Servant was sacrificed and we know of no children who were born of Jesus? I believe this passage refers to the resurrection and those that were, and are, led to repentance becoming an offspring of the Servant. We know that death was not the end for the Servant. His resurrection resulted in many finally understanding His message and having access to salvation through "knowing" Him. Knowing, in this sense, is more than an acquaintance. It is having a relationship with Jesus as our Savior. We are justified through our saving knowledge of Christ.

But what of the message in verse 12? God shares with the Servant the portion who have accepted Him as Lord: we are the Servant's reward. Perhaps ***the strong*** refers to those who are not yet saved or who rebel against God. The scripture reads that even they are subject to His authority, giving the Servant all the people for whom He gave Himself as a willing sacrifice. Through His act of self-sacrifice, God's plan as presented in Isaiah was accomplished. When we study the New Testament, the parallels between the songs of Isaiah and the ministry of Jesus become profoundly obvious. I know I am personally thankful for God's plan and the sacrifice Jesus willingly made for me but I am also grateful to have the Holy Bible in its entirety. What seems clear to us today may not have seemed so clear in Isaiah's time.

**What do you imagine biblical scholars will say about us in 3,000 years?**