

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #76: AN ANALYSIS OF ISAIAH 53, PART ONE

By John Temples

Isaiah is called “the Messianic prophet.” That’s because he gave more details about the Messiah (Jesus) than any other Old Testament writer. The centerpiece of his treatise is chapter 53, a masterpiece of Messianic literature. Here are some facts about this amazing chapter:

- Isaiah so minutely and vividly portrayed the life of Christ that it’s easy to forget that he was writing over 700 years before the Lord walked the earth.
- Isaiah wrote so confidently by inspiration that even though the events he described would not take place for seven centuries, much of chapter 53 is in the past tense, as if it had already taken place. (This is known as “prophetic past.”)
- The importance of Isaiah 53 is seen in the fact that this single chapter is quoted from or alluded to some *85 times* in the New Testament.

Let us read and ponder this rich, mountain-top passage of Scripture:

“Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? 2 For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. 3 He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. 4 Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the

slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. 8 He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken. 9 And they made His grave with the wicked — But with the rich at His death, because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth. 10 Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand. 11 He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities. 12 Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because He poured out His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors, and He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”

In only 12 verses, this magnificent chapter lays out the whole life of Christ:

- Verses 1-4a speak of His birth, early life, and ministry.
- Verses 4b-9 deal with His trial, death, and burial.
- Verses 10-12 are concerned with His resurrection and exaltation.

The chapter begins with Isaiah expressing stunned disbelief: “Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” This verse, like many others in the Old Testament, is written in Hebrew poetic form. In our modern poetry, words rhyme (“The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain”). But in Hebrew poetry, thoughts rhyme. Notice how the second part of the verse repeats the thought of the first part. There’s another example in verse 5: “But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities.” The second part expresses the same thought as the first part, just in different words.

What “report” is Isaiah talking about? The good news that God has sent a Savior, His very Son. Isaiah is pictured as looking down the stream of time and seeing the paltry response of the Jews to the actual arrival of the Messiah. Notice Isaiah says

“our” report. He’s speaking of the other prophets, John the Baptist, and the apostles, all of whom reported the arrival of the Savior; yet the vast majority of the Jews rejected their testimony. We know this is the meaning of verse 1, because John 12:37,38 says, “But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him, that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke: Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” In our age, even fewer people have believed Isaiah’s report.

“The arm of the Lord” has been revealed, the second part of verse 1 says. “The arm of the Lord” is a metaphor for God’s power at work in the world. Your arm is your “doing” extremity, so when God does something in the world, it can be spoken of as “His arm.”

Verse 2a says, “For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground.” These words describe Christ’s humble entrance into the world. Trees are majestic, and the Bible writers used trees as symbols of great and mighty leaders. But Jesus did not come as a “mighty tree”; He came as a “tender plant.” He was born in poverty and grew up in a humble home in a despised town, Nazareth. Nothing about His early life fit the misconceptions of the Jewish leaders, who were expecting a strong “military Messiah.”

What is the “dry ground”? Many commentators consider this a reference to the nation of Israel, which was once a great power, but at the time of Christ was just another Roman province. And indeed, Israel had become “dry”--their spiritual vigor was just about gone, and their worship had become half-hearted ritual. The office of the high priest had become politicized, sold to the highest bidder. God had divorced Israel centuries before due to their idolatry. He only kept the Jewish nation intact because He promised Abraham that the Messiah would come through his descendants.

My view of the “dry ground,” though, is that it was THE WOMB OF MARY. This is another of Isaiah’s references to the virgin conception (see Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6). For a plant to spring forth from watered and fertilized ground is normal. But for a plant to spring forth and thrive in dry, sterile ground would be miraculous. For a

woman impregnated by her husband to give birth is completely natural; it happens every day. But for a virgin to conceive and bear a son--that is the work of God!

The second part of verse 2 is a continuation of Isaiah's description of the humble nature of the early life and ministry of Jesus. It reads, "He has no form or comeliness [pleasing appearance]; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him." This is not a reference to the physical appearance of Jesus. Certainly, as the Lamb of God, He was not deformed or defective in any physical way. In fact, He was probably a fine specimen of manhood. Isaiah means that He did not come with any of the trappings of royalty, and nothing about His demeanor distinguished Him from any other Jewish man. He had no long, stringy hair, no halo around His head--He did not "glow in the dark." Instead of hobnobbing with the elite, Jesus preferred the company of the common people, who loved Him in return.

The ministry of Jesus is still under discussion in verse 3: "He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him." This, I believe, is a reference to the latter part of the ministry of Jesus. Early in His ministry, He was well liked by the people and large crowds thronged to hear Him. But the relentless attacks of the Jewish leaders took their toll on His popularity. And when people found out what being a disciple actually meant, and heard Him say that His kingdom was not of this world, many of them fell away. John 6:66 is descriptive of that period: "From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more."

Verse 4a says, "Surely He has borne our griefs and carried [away] our sorrows." This is again a reference to the Lord's ministry, not His death on the cross. Isaiah is describing the healing miracles of the Lord. The "griefs" and "sorrows" were the sufferings of the people from disease and demon possession. Again, the New Testament confirms this interpretation: "And He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick; that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying, He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses" (Matthew 8:16-17).

Beginning with the latter part of verse 4, Isaiah turns to picturing the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. Verse 4b affirms the terrible misjudgment the Jews made as they viewed Jesus dying on the cross: “We esteemed Him stricken and smitten by God.” “Esteemed” means “reckoned, viewed, or regarded.” As they saw Jesus hanging on the cross, they assumed that He was suffering because He was a sinner, and therefore under the punishment of God. Verse 5 corrects that misconception: “But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.” Jesus was suffering for sin, all right; but not His--theirs! Albert Barnes paraphrased verse 5 this way: “We turned away from Him in horror and contempt. We supposed that he was suffering on account of some great sin of His own. But in this we erred. It was not for His sins, but for ours.”

The last part of verse 5 and all of verse 6 point out the true purpose of Christ’s death: “the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” Jesus did not come just to heal people, or to reform society, or to fight injustice--He came to be a legal sin offering. (Part Two next week.) --John Temples