

CHAPTER 3

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

The most well-known prophecy connecting Yeshua to the Hebrew scriptures is Isaiah 52.13-53.12. This shows that His purpose in coming the first time was to fulfil the prophecy of the Suffering Servant Messiah to pay the price for the sins of the world:

‘Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 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. 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.’
(Isaiah 53.4-6)

‘For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken.’ (Isaiah 53.8)

Today most Jewish teachers follow the teaching of Rashi, who wrote in about 1050 that Isaiah 53 is about Israel suffering for the Gentiles. This is now considered to be the Jewish interpretation of this passage. However, before Rashi put forward this view, the majority rabbinic view was that Isaiah 52.13—53.12 describes the Messiah. Rashi’s view provoked a fierce debate among his contemporaries and was rejected by Rambam (Maimonides), who said that

Rashi was completely wrong and going against the traditional Jewish viewpoint.

The Targum of Isaiah 52.13, written by Jonathan ben Uzziel in the first century, clearly connects this passage to the Messiah. His Targums were often quoted by early Rabbis, and he was considered an authority on the Jewish view of the Bible. He wrote:

‘Behold my Servant Messiah shall prosper ...’

(Note the word ‘Messiah’ is not in the text of Isaiah, but is supplied in the Targum to show that this was considered to be a passage about the Messiah).

Alshech the Chief Rabbi of Safed, Upper Galilee, in the 16th century said of Isaiah 53:

“Our Rabbis with one voice accept and affirm the opinion that the prophet is speaking of the king Messiah, and we shall ourselves also adhere to the same view.”

Rabbi Eliyyah de Vidas wrote in about 1575 that not only is Isaiah 53 about the Messiah, but those who refuse to believe this must suffer for their sins themselves:

‘But He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, the meaning of which is that since the Messiah bears our iniquities which produce the effect of his being bruised, it follows that whoso will not admit that the Messiah thus suffers for our iniquities must endure and suffer for them himself.’

These rabbis are not saying that this Messiah is Jesus but they are acknowledging that Isaiah 53 is about the Messiah, a suffering Messiah, who is known as ‘Moshiach ben Yosef’ (Messiah son of Joseph) in some writings. According to this view, there are two Messiahs. One is Messiah ben Joseph, who suffers and dies before being exalted, as Joseph suffered at the hands of his brothers and was made a slave and imprisoned, before being exalted in the court of Pharaoh. The other is Messiah ben David, who reigns as a triumphant king, as David reigned.

Concerning Messiah ben Joseph, Rabbi Alshech wrote:

‘For they shall lift up their eyes unto me in perfect repentance when they see him whom they have pierced, that is **Messiah, the Son of Joseph**. For our rabbis of blessed memory have said that he will take upon himself all the guilt of Israel, and then shall be slain in the war to **make an atonement**, in such a manner, that it shall be accounted as if Israel **had pierced him, for on account of their sin he has died**, and therefore in order that it may be reckoned to them as a perfect atonement, they will repent, and look to the Blessed One, saying that **there is none beside him to forgive those that mourn on account of him who died for their sin**; this is the meaning of “They shall look upon me.” ’

The alternative view is to see these two roles of Messiah fulfilled in two appearances of one Messiah Yeshua, who has already come once and who is coming a second time to fulfil the prophecies of the reigning king Messiah.

Firstly, He came as the Suffering Servant who died as a sacrifice for the sin of the world, rose again and ascended to heaven. Secondly, He will return in power and glory from heaven, judge the world in righteousness and reign as the King Messiah after His Second Coming. More on how the prophecy of the reigning King Messiah will be fulfilled can be found in Chapter 4.

In the New Testament Yeshua is portrayed as the one who fulfilled this prophecy of Isaiah 53 (Matthew 8.17; John 12.38; 1 Peter 2.21-25). He explained to His disciples that He would go to Jerusalem and suffer and die as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, then rise again from the dead:

‘From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.’

He said on many occasions that He would come again, this time in the power and glory of heaven to judge the world in righteousness:

“Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” (Matthew 24.30)

Jesus’ sufferings on the cross are the fulfilment of Isaiah 53. Does this interpretation make sense of the text? We invite you to study this text and look up the references given in the New Testament.

Isaiah 52.13-15:

“Behold, My Servant shall prosper; He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high. Just as many were astonished at you, so His visage was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men; so shall He sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths at Him; for what had not been told them they shall see, and what they had not heard they shall consider.”

These verses introduce the Servant who is described in detail in the verses that follow. The servant will be exalted very high. Prior to His exaltation He was to be humiliated and physically abused to the point where He became almost unrecognisable. As a result He would ‘sprinkle many nations’ and kings would be silent before Him.

The crucifixion account describes Jesus' physical suffering at the hands of the Romans. He was scourged, had a crown of thorns placed upon Him before being taken away to be crucified. Anyone going through this level of physical abuse and humiliation would become almost unrecognisable as Isaiah prophesied. Yet despite this humiliation He was to be raised to life again and ascend to the highest place, just as Isaiah said He would be.

Isaiah 52.15 also speaks about the Servant 'sprinkling' many nations. The Hebrew word used for sprinkling is 'nazah' (נָזַח) which is used of the High Priest sprinkling of blood of the sin offering on the mercy seat in the tabernacle to cleanse and consecrate it from 'the uncleanness of the children of Israel' (Leviticus 16.14-22). The New Testament writers show how the blood of Jesus replaces the blood of the animal sacrifices as the atoning sacrifice whereby God can forgive our sins:

'But Messiah came as High Priest of the good things to come ... For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Messiah, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.'

(Hebrews 9.11-15)

'The blood of Jesus the Messiah, His Son cleanses us from all sin.'

(1 John 1.5-7)

Isaiah 53.1-3:

Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? 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. 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.

These verses speak of the rejection which would accompany the ministry of this Servant. His message would not be believed. His origin and appearance would

not meet the expectations of the people and therefore they would reject Him. This rejection would cause Him grief.

The New Testament records the rejection of Jesus throughout the time of His public ministry, for precisely these reasons. He was rejected by His own family and the people He had grown up with who said of Him, “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” (See Matthew 13.55, Luke 4.16-30). He was rejected by the religious leaders who objected to the miracles He did on the Sabbath (John 9.16), His association with people they considered to be sinners (Matthew 9.11, Luke 15), and above all because of His claim to be equal with God (Matthew 26.65; Mark 2.7; John 8.58; John 10.30). He was even rejected at His hour of need by the disciples who could not stay awake to pray with Him at the time of His arrest (Matthew 26.36-46), who ran away and left Him and denied even knowing Him (Mark 14.27-72).

In all of this, Jesus experienced grief, just as Isaiah said the Servant would:

‘And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, “My soul is extremely sorrowful even unto death.”’ (Matthew 26.37-8)

Isaiah 53.4-6:

‘Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 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. 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.’

These verses take the sufferings of the Servant further and describe the purpose of His suffering. His death would be misinterpreted by those who said He was stricken by God and afflicted (in other words He was suffering for His own sins). In fact the whole meaning of His sufferings was to atone for the sins of others. Because He experienced the worst sorrows life can throw at any one, He can sympathise and carry the griefs of those who are going through suffering now.

The universal condition of the human race, Jewish and Gentile, is to ‘go astray’ or to sin. The Lord has placed on Him the iniquity of us all so that we can be forgiven. In 2 Corinthians 5.21, Paul writes of the Messiah:

'We implore you on Messiah's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.'

Jesus, who was without sin, became the sin offering for us all, in order that we might be made righteous with God. This is exactly what Isaiah prophesies when he says that all of us have gone astray (sinned), but the Lord has laid on Him, the Messiah, the iniquity of us all.

Every person who turns to Jesus in sincerity discovers that He is able to forgive their sins and give them eternal life.

Isaiah 53.7-9:

'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. 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. 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.'

These verses tell us about the sufferings of the Messiah from a human point of view. He would be brought to trial and willingly accept the death sentence handed down to Him, despite its injustice. He would be literally put to death (cut off from the land of the living) and once again it is stated that His death would be for the sins of 'my people'. His death would be an atoning death for sin. As far as His body was concerned He would be expected to be put in a grave with the executed criminals (they made His grave with the wicked). However, there would be an intervention of 'the rich' at the point of His death.

Jesus' trials before Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate were both unfair and contrary to both Jewish and Roman law (for more on this see our article on the trial of Jesus <http://messiahfactor.com/page44.html>).

'Now the chief priests, the elders and all the council sought false testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none.'

(Matthew 26.59)

Jesus did not try to defend Himself, knowing that it was necessary for Him to go to the cross in order to redeem the world.

‘And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing. Then Pilate said to Him, “Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?” But He answered him not one word, so that the governor marvelled greatly.’ (Matthew 27.12-14)

The Roman soldiers who had witnessed countless similar executions were in no doubt that Jesus was dead before He was taken down from the cross (John 19.32-35). What happened next is very interesting in the light of Isaiah’s prophecy. The usual practice was for crucifixion victims to stay on the cross as a warning to others not to go against the power of the occupying Romans, or for their bodies to be taken down and thrown into a common grave in the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem. If either had happened to Jesus the next event, the resurrection, would have lost its force.

Isaiah says He would be with the rich at His death. In the Gospel we read how Joseph of Arimathea, who was a rich man and a member of the Sanhedrin, intervened and asked Pontius Pilate for the body of Jesus so he could bury Him in His own tomb (Matthew 27.57-60). Pilate agreed to this and the body of Jesus was placed in a sealed tomb with a stone rolled across it. As a result, when the resurrection happened, it was much easier to verify or discredit the story than it would have been if the body had been thrown into a common grave. This intervention was vital to what was to happen next – the resurrection. It meant that the body of Jesus was placed in a special tomb, not a common pit. A stone was rolled across it, so that it would clearly be a miracle when Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, as the Gospels record.

The reason given for this in Isaiah - *‘because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth’* - again testifies to the fact that Jesus was without sin, and therefore able to be the sin offering for the world at the crucifixion.

Isaiah 53.10-12:

‘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. He shall see the labour of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge my righteous servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities. 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.'

For the third time in Isaiah 53 we read of the Servant's death, which would be a literal death, and also an offering for sin. In the same way the goat for the sin offering on Yom Kippur was literally put to death, shedding its blood in order to atone for the sin of Israel (Leviticus 16-17). These verses tell us the purpose of the Servant's death and speak of His resurrection from the dead. He would be satisfied by seeing His 'seed' and bring justification to many by bearing their iniquities. God would highly exalt Him because He was willing to be considered a transgressor and die. He would make intercession for transgressors.

The ultimate responsibility for the death of Jesus is with God. Isaiah 53.10 tells us that *'it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief'*. The New Testament agrees entirely with this and places responsibility for Jesus' death on the sins of the world and the will of God (Acts 4.25-28). His death was to be literal, as Jesus' death was, and yet He would *'see His seed and be satisfied.'* How can it be possible for someone who has died to see anything? What does Isaiah mean by *'His seed'*?

The only answer to this is to be found in one who rises from the dead and, as a result of His death and resurrection, He will justify many by bearing their iniquities as Isaiah says. Those who experience this will be the 'seed', those who believe in Jesus and are reborn to eternal life through faith in Him. Because of this He would be satisfied, as Isaiah prophesies, seeing that all the pain of the cross was worthwhile because it would bring multitudes of people all over the world into the kingdom of God:

'Then He said to them, 'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me. " And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.'

'Then He said to them, 'Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things.

Behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high. ’ ’ ’

(Luke 24.44-49)

The Book of Acts records the spread of the Gospel beginning in Jerusalem and then going out to ‘Judea and Samaria’ and to the ends of the earth. In this way multitudes of people would be justified, put right with God:

‘But now in Messiah Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Messiah. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.’

(Ephesians 2.13-18)

Finally, to remind us that the idea that He wanted His followers to avenge His death was the very furthest thing from His mind, we read in Isaiah that He ‘made intercession for sinners’. Jesus’ words from the cross were ‘Father forgive them for they know not what they do.’ (Luke 23.34).

(For more on this, go to our article The Suffering Servant. Who is this prophet talking about? <http://messiahfactor.com/page31.html>)

Let us now look at some other prophecies which Yeshua fulfilled at His first coming . . .

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