

LESSON ONE

The Mysterious Servant

*“Behold, My servant will prosper,
He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.”*

—Isaiah 52:13

Life’s burdens weigh down even the strongest. Whether you’re weakened by sorrow and grief, laid low by suffering and hardship, or failing under the weight of your own sin, you know the weight of life. You know it. I know it. Everyone knows it. Deeds done that cannot be undone. Words spoken that can never be called back. Wrongs committed in fleeting moments that sear consciences for a lifetime.

The 53rd chapter of Isaiah, a writing common to both the Jewish Tanakh and the Christian Bible, describes a mysterious figure who provides the solution for the human condition by carrying griefs and sorrows, healing brokenness, and bearing sin. He is the Servant of the Lord!

But who is this person? Who is this Servant of the Lord? In this study, we’ll look closely at Isaiah 53 to answer this question for ourselves. As we start off, though, let’s put ourselves in context by examining the final words of Isaiah 52.

FYI:

If You’re in a Class

Begin **Week One** together on your first day of class. This will be a great way to start getting to know one another and will help those who are newer to Bible study get their bearings.

CONSIDER the WAY YOU THINK

We all come to Bible study with different views and experiences. Before we get started, let's consider some of those together.

What is your view of the Bible? Do you think it is a work of man? A work of God? A little of both? Or are you not quite sure? Why?

FYI:

Letting the Text Speak

As we study together, it is my prayer that to the best of our ability we will drop our presuppositions and allow God's Word to speak for itself. There so much freedom in this, isn't there? You don't have to come up with clever ideas and remotely possible "what if?"s. You simply pay attention and learn from what God has clearly revealed.

When we do this it's called *exegesis*. Exegesis literally means "to lead out." When we deal in presuppositions and subjectivism we're falling into the trap of eisegesis (literally "to lead into")—taking the text of Scripture and tailoring it to our agendas. Eisegesis molds Scripture to fit man; the Word accurately handled calls man to submit to the plumb line of Scripture. My goal in this class is to handle accurately the Word of truth and have God speak to us and change *us* through it.

Do you think your view of the Bible impacts how you respond to what you read? Explain.

Are you familiar with the prophet Isaiah? What about Isaiah 53 specifically? If so, what do you know about it? (If not, don't worry. You'll be familiar with it soon!)

GETTING THE BIG PICTURE

This week we'll be looking at the Servant Song in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 for a general overview. So, if you start feeling confused or overwhelmed at any point, just take a second and breathe. The first part of inductive Bible study—observation—is all about slowing down, reading the text carefully and asking questions. We wouldn't need to ask questions if we already knew the answers, right?

In upcoming weeks, we'll look much more closely at the text to determine if and how the prophecy was eventually fulfilled. Right now, though, as we overview the text, we will focus on some of the unique features of the servant described in Isaiah 53 and the verses leading up to it. We'll want to keep a couple of questions in the front of our mind as we read: *Who **could** this be referring to?* and *Who could this not be referring to?*

OBSERVE the TEXT of SCRIPTURE

READ Isaiah 52:13–53:12 and **MARK** every reference to the *servant* including pronouns. You'll be marking mostly pronouns (*He, Him, His* with reference to the *servant*).

Isaiah 52:13-15

- 13 *Behold, My servant will prosper,
He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.*
- 14 *Just as many were astonished at you, My people,
So His appearance was marred more than any man
And His form more than the sons of men.*
- 15 *Thus He will sprinkle many nations,
Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him;
For what had not been told them they will see,
And what they had not heard they will understand.*

Isaiah 53

- 1 *Who has believed our message?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?*
- 2 *For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,
And like a root out of parched ground;
He has no stately form or majesty
That we should look upon Him,
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.*
- 3 *He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
And like one from whom men hide their face
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.*
- 4 *Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.*
- 5 *But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.*
- 6 *All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.*
- 7 *He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.*
- 8 *By oppression and judgment He was taken away;
And as for His generation, who considered
That He was cut off out of the land of the living
For the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due?*

FYI:**Start with Prayer**

You've probably heard it before and if we study together in the future, you're sure to hear it again. Whenever you read or study God's Word, first pray and ask His Spirit to be your Guide. Jesus says that the Spirit will lead us into all truth.

INDUCTIVE STUDY:**What is Inductive study?**

When we study the Bible inductively, we simply use the Bible as our primary source in studying the Bible. While it sounds beyond obvious, much of what people term "Bible study" today is more of a compilation of others' opinions about the Bible, rather than biblical truth direct from the source.

In inductive study, we seek to allow God to speak for Himself as we discover truth directly from His Word.

FYI:

The Backstory of Isaiah's Audience

The Bible's opening book of Genesis lays the foundation for all of the accounts that follow. In it we learn that God created everything that has ever existed including mankind. When Adam and Eve, the first created people, rebelled against God sin and death entered the world, but it did not catch God off guard. He already had a rescue plan in place that would come through Adam's line.

Adam and Eve had children who had children. Some of the more notable names in the Genesis account include Noah (who God delivered along with his family from a worldwide flood), Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jacob was the father of the nation of Israel that Egypt enslaved for 400 years.

God delivered the Israelites from Egypt by the hand of Moses and eventually used Joshua to lead them into the Promised Land (what we know today as the land of Israel). After Joshua died, Judges ruled the land until the people called for a king.

Isaiah wrote toward the end of the time of the kings. Israel, the united kingdom of 12 tribes, had already dissolved.

The one country has become two. In the Northern Kingdom which retained the name "Israel," non-Davidic kings rule over 10 tribes. In the Southern Kingdom of Judah, descendants of King David lead the remaining 2 tribes.

Isaiah's ministry is primarily to these southern tribes.

Lesson One: The Mysterious Servant

9 *His grave was assigned with wicked men,
Yet He was with a rich man in His death,
Because He had done no violence,
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.*

10 *But the LORD was pleased
To crush Him, putting Him to grief;
If He would render Himself as a guilt offering,
He will see His offspring,
He will prolong His days,
And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.*

11 *As a result of the anguish of His soul,
He will see it and be satisfied;
By His knowledge the Righteous One,
My Servant, will justify the many,
As He will bear their iniquities.*

12 *Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great,
And He will divide the booty with the strong;
Because He poured out Himself to death,
And was numbered with the transgressors;
Yet He Himself bore the sin of many,
And interceded for the transgressors.*

DISCUSS with your GROUP or PONDER on your own . . .

WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, and HOW

Who recorded these words in Scripture? (If you're not sure, don't stress. Move on to the next question.)

Approximately when was this written? If you're not sure, read Isaiah 1:1.

Who was this written to? Where did the initial recipients live?

Who is the subject of Isaiah 52:13–53:12? Is He specifically identified? Explain.

What basic information do we learn about Him? (This is where you'll want to look at every place you've marked either *servant* or a pronoun—*He, His, Himself*—referring to the servant and make a simple list.)

Which of these facts did you find most interesting or significant? Why?

Although Isaiah doesn't name the servant, what title does he give Him in verse 11? What is significant about the title?

Why do you think so many consider this an important text?

How do you think we can find out who the servant is . . . and isn't?

FYI:**Historical Information**

According to Isaiah 1:1, Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of four kings of Judah: Uzziah (also known as Azariah), Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. His ministry began in the year that King Uzziah died (c. 739) and he prophesied during the reigns of the subsequent three kings of Judah. During this time, the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC. Tradition holds that Isaiah died at the hands of Hezekiah's son Manasseh, having been sawn in two (Hebrews 11:37).

Isaiah warned the people of coming judgment during tumultuous and rebellious days, but he also offered comfort and hope of God's ultimate salvation.

FYI:**Isaiah's Call**

1 "In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple."

8 "Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

—Isaiah 6:1, 8

ONE STEP FURTHER:

Servant: *ebed*

"Servant" translates the Hebrew *ebed*, a common word that appears 800 times in the Old Testament. If you have time this week, explore how it is used throughout Isaiah and the rest of the Old Testament.

Also, see if you can find which biblical character is most often referred to as "the servant of the Lord." Record your findings below.

THE GREATER CONTEXT and DIFFERING VIEWS

While the servant described in Isaiah 53 is an innocent sin bearer, the near context of Isaiah also talks about other less than perfect servants. Let's take a brief look at the use of the Hebrew word *ebed* in Isaiah and consider how this might affect interpretation. If you want to look at this further, check out the **One Step Further** option in the margin!

OBSERVE the TEXT of SCRIPTURE

READ the following verses from Isaiah and **MARK** the word *servant* in each. Then record what the verses say about: 1) who the servant is, and 2) who the servant belongs to (if applicable).

Isaiah 14:2

- 2 *The peoples will take them along and bring them to their place, and the house of Israel will possess them as an inheritance in the land of the LORD as male servants and female servants; and they will take their captors captive and will rule over their oppressors.*

The servants are . . .

Isaiah 20:3-4

- 3 *And the LORD said, "Even as My servant Isaiah has gone naked and barefoot three years as a sign and token against Egypt and Cush,*
4 *so the king of Assyria will lead away the captives of Egypt and the exiles of Cush, young and old, naked and barefoot with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt.*

The servant is . . .

Isaiah 22:20-21

- 20 *"Then it will come about in that day, that I will summon My servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah,*
21 *And I will clothe him with your tunic and tie your sash securely about him. I will entrust him with your authority, and he will become a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah.*

The servant is . . .

Isaiah 37:35

35 *'For I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David's sake.'* "

The servant is . . .

Isaiah 41:8-9

8 *"But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham My friend,*

9 *You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called from its remotest parts and said to you, 'You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you.*

The servant is . . .

Isaiah 42:18-22

18 *Hear, you deaf! And look, you blind, that you may see.*

19 *Who is blind but My servant, or so deaf as My messenger whom I send? Who is so blind as he that is at peace with Me, or so blind as the servant of the LORD?*

20 *You have seen many things, but you do not observe them; your ears are open, but none hears.*

21 *The LORD was pleased for His righteousness' sake to make the law great and glorious.*

22 *But this is a people plundered and despoiled; all of them are trapped in caves, or are hidden away in prisons; they have become a prey with none to deliver them, and a spoil, with none to say, "Give them back!"*

The servant is . . .

FYI:**Resources**

There are so many tremendous online resources for studying the Bible today!

Here are a couple of my favorites:

- blueletterbible.org

- biblehub.com

- thebible.org

If you have some favorites, jot them down below and be sure to share them with your classmates!

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ONE STEP FURTHER:

The Tanakh

Before we wrap up our study this week, take the time to read Isaiah 52:13–53:12 once more, but this time from the Tanakh—the Hebrew Bible.

On your internet browser, simply search for “Isaiah 53 JPS.” This will take you to the Jewish Publication Society translation of Isaiah 53.

Did you notice any significant differences in the translation? List what you observed and note how it compares with the NASB.

DISCUSS with your GROUP or PONDER on your own . . .

Summarize the different ways you’ve observed “servant” used in Isaiah.

Do you think that any of the “servants” you looked at this week could be the One referred to in Isaiah 53? Why/why not? Explain your answer from Scripture.

Digging Deeper

More of the Story

If you’re looking for more this week, take some time to read Isaiah 40–54 to see the greater context of Isaiah 53 and the other Servant Songs first hand! As you read consider the following questions:

What is the main content of Isaiah 40–54?

How does Isaiah 53 fit into this context?

How is the word “servant” (and its pronouns) used in these chapters?

What else did you observe about this section of Isaiah?

What other questions do you have?

@THE END OF THE DAY . . .

What a promise Isaiah 53 offers—a sin bearer for those weighed down by their own offenses, a healer for the broken and sorrowful. What pains are you carrying today? What griefs can you no longer bear? There is hope in the One the prophets of Israel pointed to. There is hope in the Righteous One!

NOTES

Lesson Two: **The Mysterious Servant**