

A SONG FOR THE SUBSTITUTE Isaiah 53:1-6

The Prophecy of Isaiah consists of sixty-six chapters. The Bible consists of sixty-six books. The Bible is divided into Testaments – thirty-nine books in the Old, twenty-seven in the New. Similarly, Isaiah is divided into two sections. Chapters 1-39 warns the stubbornly rebellious people of judgment to come. Chapters 40-66 offers hope that God will restore his people by his sovereign grace and power. Isaiah 53 is at the center of this message of comfort. Moreover, it is the heart of the gospel. The centrality of this chapter to the good news of salvation through faith in Christ is indicated by the fact that portions of it are quoted or referred to at least eighty-five times in the New Testament. I repeat: This chapter is the heart of the gospel. If you want to know the facts of the life and death of Jesus, read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If you want to meditate on the meaning of his life and death, read Isaiah 53.

There are four so-called “SERVANT SONGS” in Isaiah about him the Lord will bring redemption. These songs are recorded in Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11, and 52:13-53:12. In these songs, the identity of the *Servant* is shrouded in mystery. But Isaiah 53 makes it clear that this *Servant* is not a reference to Israel’s role among the nations. The *Servant* is a person, not a people. This person is identified by his SUBSTITUTIONARY WORK on the behalf of those guilty sinners. Isaiah 53 celebrates the substitutionary atonement accomplished by the *Servant*. What is called an ENCOMIUM – an ode to the greatness of a heroic figure. Isaiah 53 uses this poetic form ironically, as it celebrates this *Servant* whose life and death would be considered unheroic.

Isaiah 53:1 says, *“Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?”* These questions introduce the theme of the unheroic nature of the one who was sent to be a mighty deliverer. The first question is an exclamation: *“Who has believed what he has heard from us?”* This question is to and for and about the people of God. Isaiah 52:15 says, *“So shall he sprinkle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.”* But while the kings of the nations see and understand the true identity of the servant, the people of God did not believe what they heard. In Isaiah 6:8, Isaiah heard the Lord say, *“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”* Isaiah answered, *“Here I am! Send me.”* In Isaiah 6:9, the Lord instructed Isaiah say to his people, *“Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.”*

At the beginning of his ministry, the Lord told Isaiah that his message would not be received. As he reflects upon this, Isaiah asks incredulously, *“Who has believed our report?”* Answer: very few. This sad indictment continued after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Romans 10:16 says, *“But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’* This sin of unbelief continues today. Millions have trusted Christ as Savior and Lord. Yet billions do not believe, including many who have heard the gospel and refuse to believe. *Who has believed what they heard from us?*

The second question is an explanation: *“And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?”* The *“arm of the LORD”* refers to the saving power of God. Psalm 8:3

says the heavens are the work of the Lord's fingers. Exodus 13:3 says the Lord delivered the children of Israel out of Egypt with a strong hand. But to redeem sinners, God flexed his mighty arm. Romans 1:16 says, "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.*" But Isaiah asks, "*And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?*" The arm of the Lord saves. But it is not recognized unless it is revealed. The people of God looked for the arm of the Lord in the form of a conquering military and political hero. It came in the form of a carpenter from Nazareth. They missed it. Isaiah explains that few believe the message of salvation because you cannot recognize the arm of the Lord without divine revelation. Romans 10:17 says, "*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*" In Isaiah 53:1, Isaiah laments that the unbelieving heart is blind and deaf and cannot understand or receive the way of salvation. Then verses 2-6 calls on those of us who believe to praise God for the life and death of our suffering substitute, Lord Jesus Christ.

I. PRAISE GOD FOR THE *LIFE* OF THE SUBSTITUTE.

In Matthew 16:13, Jesus asked his disciples, "*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*" They answered, "*Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets*" (16:14). This answer was the truth but not the whole truth. To honor Jesus, the disciples conveniently omitted the negative things the people were saying about him. But Isaiah honors Christ by focusing on the negative response to the life and ministry of Jesus. Verses 2-3 contrast the divine reality and human response to the life of Christ.

A. THE MIRACLE OF CHRIST'S LIFE

Verse 2 says, "*For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground.*" This is why many do not believe the message. The people were looking for the arm of the Lord to deliver them. But verse 2 says this arm of the Lord had to first grow up, which indicates that the arm of the Lord was a human being. This is further indicated by the fact that he grew up *before him*, distinguishes this one who is the arm of the Lord from the Lord himself. Yet he grew up under the full approval and careful supervision of the Lord. Jesus grew up to be the Savior of the world. But the world did not accept him for two reasons.

HIS BIRTH WAS UNIMPRESSIVE. Verse 2 says, "*He grew up before him like a young plant.*" *Young plant* can refer to a little child on his mother's breast or to a tender plant in the initial stages of development. Isaiah uses the agricultural metaphor here. But both renderings convey the frail, normal, unimpressive way Jesus was born. He was born to a teenage virgin from in a Bethlehem barn, because there was no room in the inn. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes – grave clothes. The baby Jesus dressed to die. When we think of Christmas, we think of the virgin birth, shining stars, angelic announcements, astonished shepherds, and worshipping Magi. But consider that beyond these initial phenomenal events, there was nothing special

about the infancy of Jesus. He was just another child who had to learn how to walk and talk like every other baby.

HIS BACKGROUND WAS UNLIKELY. Verse 2 says he grew up before the Lord like “*a root out of dry ground.*” If a seed is to grow and bear fruit, it must be planted in fertile soil. Roots that try to grow out of dry ground will wither and die. Yet Jesus grew up like a root out of dry ground. He had a traceable ancestry. All the circumstances of his background indicated that he would not be anyone the world would pay attention to. In John 1:45, Philip told Nathaniel, “*We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.*” Nathaniel responded, “*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*” (1:46). Jesus had an unimpressive birth and an unlikely background. Yet God was at work through these realities to flex his mighty arm for the salvation of sinners.

B. THE MISUNDERSTANDING OF CHRIST’S MINISTRY

Humans beings are uniquely created in the image of God. We bear the marks of divine personhood. We have a mind, a will, and emotions. But these attributes have been perverted by the Fall. Rather than using them to reflect the image of God, we use them to rebellion against God. This is seen in how sinners reject Christ.

SINNERS REJECT CHRIST *EMOTIONALLY*. Verse 2b says: “*he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.*” These statements tell us three things about how Jesus would be perceived emotionally. First, he had no *form*. Military heroes, political figures, and social movers-and-shakers typically look the part. Jesus did not. He had no form. Likewise, he had no *majesty*. A king ought to look and act and talk like a king. His appearance, trappings, and company should reflect his royalty. Jesus did not. He had no majesty. And he had no *beauty*. King Saul was a handsome man who stood head and shoulders above the men of Israel. And King David was known for his good looks. Jesus was not. He had no beauty. We call Jesus the Rose of Sharon, the Lilly of the Valley, and the Fairest of Ten Thousand. Isaiah 53 describes the Lord from the viewpoint of the unbelieving heart that deems him to have no form or majesty or beauty. Of course, he was beautiful within. In Matthew 11:29 Jesus says, “*I am gentle and lowly in heart.*” But the unbelieving heart does not see past the superficial and thus rejects Christ.

SINNERS REJECT CHRIST *WILLFULLY*. Verse 3a says, “*He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.*” *Despised* means that he was not wanted. This is more than just a negative attitude toward Christ. It is an act of the will that deems Christ to be unworthy of attention, affection, or allegiance. *Rejected* means to cease or cut off. This is sinner’s willful rejection of Christ. The unbelieving heart sees Jesus coming and says, “*Stop! Don’t come any closer. I don’t want to have anything to do with you.*” Christ was rejected by his family, who thought he had lost his mind. He was rejected by his disciples, who fled when he was betrayed by Judas and arrested by the soldiers. He was ultimately rejected by the whole nation. John 1:11 says, “*He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.*” This was the experience of Jesus. “*He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows and*

acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not." Isaiah describes the life and ministry of Jesus, as it is were a tragic car accident that was so gruesome that onlookers hide their faces, rather looking at the carnage. But we were the ones who needed the Jaws of Life to save our souls. God sent Jesus as our insurance agent to cover the damage our broken vehicle and unsafe driving produced.

II. PRAISE GOD FOR THE DEATH OF THE SUBSTITUTE.

There are some who claim that Jesus manipulated the circumstances of his life and ministry to deceive people into believing he was the Messiah. That's impossible. But suppose Jesus did set up the circumstances of his life. How did he control the details of his death? He could not, unless he is God. This is what Isaiah 53:4-6 claims. Jesus controlled the details of his own death. Seven hundred years before the crucifixion, Isaiah predicted with exacting detail how Jesus would die. In these verses we see the meaning of the death of Christ. There are three facts about the death of the Christ for which we should praise God.

A. CHRIST DIED AS OUR SUBSTITUTE.

Verse 4 says, *"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted."* In this verse, Isaiah presents the true meaning and the twisted meaning of the sufferings of Christ.

THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS. Verse 4 begins with the word *"Surely,"* which introduces an affirmation with an element of surprise. Isaiah's assumption was that the meaning of the cross would be misunderstood. So he writes to clarify what really happened when Jesus suffered and died on the cross: *"Surely he has born our griefs and carried our sorrows."* These two words – *griefs* and *sorrows* - state the sad reality and bitter result of our fall into sin. Life hurts. It's inevitable. No one can hang a sign over your front door that says, "No hurt here." Your money and education and accomplishments cannot exempt you from the *griefs* and *sorrows* of life. What are you to do with life's *griefs* and *sorrow*? Give them to Jesus. Isaiah says, *"Surely he has born our griefs and carried our sorrows."* Jesus can handle your hurts! In Matthew 11:28, Jesus extends an open invitation: *"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."* It is a good thing to have people who love you enough to go with you through life's painful experiences to help you carry the load. But only Jesus can carry the load for you.

THE TWISTED MEANING OF CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS. Verse 4 says, *"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted."* Christ suffered to bear our *griefs* and carry our *sorrows*. But this is not how the unbelieving heart views the sufferings of Christ. The natural man concludes that Jesus was *stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted*. This faithless perspective gets one thing right. God smote Jesus. Jesus died at the hands of wicked men. But God was behind it all. The unbelieving heart is right about that. But it is wrong about

why God did it. The unbeliever is one of Job's friends. When Job suffered, his "friends" concluded that he was being punished for some great, unconfessed sin. This is how unbelievers misunderstand the sufferings of Christ. Without faith, one concludes that Jesus was stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But surely he has born our grief's and carried our sorrows. He did it for us. He suffered for us. He experienced the agony of the cross for us. Christ died as our Substitute. 1 Peter 3:18 says: *"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit."*

B. CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS.

Verse 5 answers two questions about why Christ died.

WHY DID JESUS DIE ON THE CROSS? First, Verse 5 says, *"He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities."* These verbs describe what happened to Jesus on the cross. Physically, he was *pierced*. Literally, he was pierced-through with a deathblow when they nailed Jesus to cross. Spiritually, he was *crushed*. On the cross, Jesus was crushed under the burden of our guilt. The physical suffering of crucifixion was so great that a word was coined to describe it: EXCRUCIATING. But it was nothing compared to the spiritual agony Jesus suffered on the cross. It was so heavy that Jesus cried out, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* MARTIN LUTHER meditated on Matthew 27:46 for hours. Then he gave up, declaring, "God forsaking God, who can understand it?"

We will never understand how it happened. But we are told why it happened: *"But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities."* Notice the two ways Isaiah describes our sin. We have sinful ways called transgression. It means to break the law, exceed the limit, or go beyond the boundary. When I was a boy, we had a neighbor who told us boys not to play on his grass. Of course, we played on his lawn anyway, just because he told us not to do it. That's transgression. Likewise, we have a sinful nature called iniquity. It means to be twisted or bent. We have an inward perversion that makes me inclined to do wrong. There is a virus in our software that causes our hardware to malfunction. We have iniquity. We have committed transgressions. But here is the good news: *"He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities."*

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THE DEATH OF JESUS MAKE? Verse 5 says, *"But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed."* This verse has been hijacked to say something that it does not mean. *"And with his wounds we are healed"* is taken to mean that the atonement guarantees physical healing for believers. Matthew 8:17 is misinterpreted to argue for this position. But Matthew 8:17 declares that Isaiah 53:5 is fulfilled through the healing ministry Jesus performed during his life, not the atoning sacrifice he performed during his death. This is not to say that Jesus is unwilling or unable to heal the sick. But the primary emphasis of verse 5 is on the spiritual sickness, not physical sickness. We are sin sick. No hospital can address it. No medicine can relieve it. No doctor can cure it.

Only the mortal wounds Jesus suffered on the cross we can heal us forever from the sickness of our souls. 1 Peter 2:24-25 says: *“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”*

C. CHRIST DIED BY THE SOVEREIGN WILL OF GOD.

A little boy thumbed through a book of religious art. When he came to a picture of the crucifixion, he became sad and muttered, “If God had been there, he wouldn’t have let them do that to Jesus.” But God was there. God saw everything that happened to his Son on Good Friday. God orchestrated it all. On more than one occasion, the Father affirmed Jesus by declaring from heaven, *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”* If God was pleased with the life and ministry of Jesus, why did he ordain that Jesus die on a cursed tree? Verse 6 answers: *“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.”*

This verse confronts us again with our sinfulness. CONSIDER OUR SINFUL NATURE: *“All we like sheep have gone astray.”* Scripture describes the Lord as the Good Shepherd. Conversely, it describes us as rebellious sheep. This is our sin nature. We have a feral instinct that makes us prone to wander away from shepherd at any moment. Like sheep, we get lost when left to our own devices. Likewise, CONSIDER OUR SINFUL WAYS: *“we have turned – every one – to his own way.”* The key word here is *“turned,”* which indicates deliberate rebellion. There are times when we try to go the right way, but we wander off like sheep. Worse, there are times when we have no intentions of going the right way. We consciously determined to go our own way. This verse declares our collective culpability: *“we have turned”* to our own way. It also declares our individual responsibility: *“we have turned – every one – to his own way.”* Romans 3:23 says: *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*

All of us are guilty sinners who fully deserve the holy wrath of divine justice. There is nothing we can say or do to merit the favor of God. Our only hope of salvation is that a substitute would take our place. This is what God did for us when he sent his Son into the world to die on the cross. Verse 6 says, *“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.”* Who did it? *The Lord.* What Jesus did, God did. The cross of Jesus was God doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. What did he do? *The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* Under the law, the sheep died for the shepherd. But under grace, the shepherd laid down his life for the sheep. God will not allow us to shift the blame when we sin. But what he will not permit, he performed. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, *“For our sakes he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”* The Lord placed our iniquity on Christ so that he could place the righteousness of Christ on us. He who was righteous was treated as unrighteous so that we who are unrighteous may be

treated as righteous. On the cross, God treated Jesus as if he had committed our sins so that he could treat us as if we have performed the righteousness of Christ.

Note one more thing. Verse 6 begins with the word *“all.”* It ends with the word *“all.”* It begins with a word of condemnation. It ends with a word of salvation. It begins with bad news. It ends with good news. One day, D.L. MOODY rushed to catch a train. As he passed by, a young man chased him down and asked, “What must I do to be saved.” In a hurry, Moody simply answered, “Read Isaiah 53:6. Go in at the first ‘all.’ Come out at the last ‘all.’” Moody later received a letter from that young man that said, “Mr. Moody, I did what you said. I read Isaiah 53:6. I went in a sinner. But I came out a brand new man by the blood of Jesus.”

**ALAS, INDEED, MY SAVIOR BLEED.
AND DID MY SOVEREIGN DIE
WOULD HE INVOKE THAT SACRED HEAD
FOR SUCH A WORM AS I.**

**WAS IT FOR CRIMES THAT I HAD DONE
HE GROANED UPON THE TREE
AMAZING PITY, GRACE UNKNOWN
AND LOVE BEYOND DEGREE**