

## Text Study & Notes - Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Entire volumes have been written on these verses — their meaning, significance, and application. Obviously it is not necessary to exhaust this text in the same way in order to preach it — I will therefore limit my comments to that which I feel is most significant for the development of the sermon.

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52:13

הִנֵּה יִשְׁכַּל עֲבָדַי יְרוּם וְנִשָּׂא וְגִבָּה מְאֹד:

*Look! My servant will do well — he will be exalted and he will be lifted up and will be very high.*

52:13-15 draw the contrast of the Messiah's humiliation and exaltation and thus serve as both a summary and an introduction to all of chapter 53. Isaiah here "overdoes it" in expressing the Messiah's exaltation — each verb intensifies the idea. The first phrase shows that the Messiah will accomplish what the Lord wills.

52:14

כַּאֲשֶׁר שָׁמְמוּ עָלַי רַבִּים  
כִּמְשֵׁ מִיֵּשׁ מִרְאֵהוּ וְאֶרְ מִבְּנֵי אָדָם:

*Just as many people were appalled at you (him), so his disfigurement was more than any man's appearance, and his form more (appalling) than (that of) the sons of men.*

There's a textual variant/question in the first line ("you" or "him"), but really not important here. The point is that God's servant — who will exalted and lifted up — will shock people with what happens to him. Such damage to his appearance and abuse to his person will astound, even appall those who see him — so that he's hardly recognizable as human. This is, of course, a strong contrast to the "exaltation" of v. 13 and therefore grabs the attention of the reader in a big way.

52:15

כִּי יִהְיֶה יָם רַבִּים עָלָיו יִּי וּמִלֵּי יָם יִהְיֶה  
כִּי אֲשֶׁר לֹא רָאוּ לָהֶם רָאוּ וְאֲשֶׁר לֹא שָׁמְעוּ הֵבַּ נְנוּ:

*Thus he will sprinkle many nations: on account of him, kings will close their mouths, because what had not been told to them (before) they will see, and what they did not hear they will understand.*

What happens to the Messiah will not be limited only to Israel in its significance — all nations will be affected, and the message will be brought even to kings, who will not be able to gainsay it. This verse also shows again that the Lord was concerned not only with his chosen people Israel, but with all people on earth, regardless of their nation or ancestry.

53:1

מִי הָאֱמִי לְשִׁמְעַ נְו וְרַע יִהְיֶה עַל מִי נִגְלָה:

*Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?*

It's not certain who is speaking here — God's people? God's messengers, i.e. Isaiah and other prophets? — but these are rhetorical questions anyway. If the questions were answered, the response would be "No one, or at least not many." The point is that God's people do not recognize his Messiah or believe what is preached about him, which certainly was the case with Christ — indeed, is why he was crucified on this Good Friday instead of being acclaimed as Savior and Messiah.

"Arm of the LORD" is another expression used of God's servants, here, in context, it's another term for the Messiah.

נֶעַל כִּי נִלְגַּם וְרֵשׁ מֵאָרֶץ.  
 לֹא אֵר לֹא הִדָּר וְנִרְאָהוּ וְלֹא מִרְאָה וְנִ מְדָהוּ:

*And he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty of form and no majesty that we should look upon him, nor an attractive appearance that we should desire him.*

The "him" must refer to God, and provides a strong contrast to "us" — the Messiah was always under God's watchful eye, even though his people pay him no attention. "Young plant" introduces an idea which is made kind of ironic by the parallel thought of "root out of dry ground" — a plant growing usually draws no great attention, since that's what's expected by the one who plants it. But a plant growing from a root (not a seed) out of dry, parched earth is unexpected and should draw the attention of observers — but doesn't. It's likely that the "dry ground" is a reference to the royal family of Judah — the line of David, which had long since faded into insignificance.

"No beauty", "no majesty", etc. serves as a corrective to all those who picture, paint, sculpt and cast Jesus as a handsome man. While we certainly wouldn't expect him to have been ugly, God here is explaining that his Messiah is not going to accomplish his work or gain a following for earthly or fleshly reasons — what's special about him is not his appearance but his identity, work and message.

3

נִבְהָה וְנִדְרָסוּ אִישִׁים אִישׁ מֵאֵב וְיָדוּעַ לִי  
 וְנִ מְרִיבִים מִנוּ נִבְהָה וְלֹא שְׁבִנְהוּ:

*He was despised and rejected by men — a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief — and as one from whom faces are hidden he was despised, and we gave him no thought.*

A key verse. If the disciples had known this passage and realized that it applied to their Master, they would not have been surprised by the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, nor would they have looked for an earthly reign of their Messiah. If Christians today would understand this passage, they also would be forced to give up any semblance of a theology of glory, any thought of a "health and wealth" gospel. Clearly, Jesus' purpose in coming as a man had nothing to do with exaltation on earth and everything to do with humiliation, suffering, and death.

This verse also helps inform our Christology, showing that Jesus was indeed true man. Were he not, he would know neither sorrow nor grief.

The picture here is a striking one. Many of us have likely seen a similar scene in a public place at one time or another — maybe with someone horribly handicapped, someone arrested in a most embarrassing fashion, maybe a bleeding, gory accident victim. As he passes through the crowd, or is brought through it, everyone avoids eye contact, maybe they even turn their heads away, keeping the avoidance so extreme that they pretend there wasn't even anything there to ignore — and they strive to give it no more thought.

4

אֵל לִינּוּ הוּא נִשָּׂא וּמִ אֲבִינוּ בְלֵם  
 וְאֵן נּוּ שְׁבִנְהוּ נְגוּעַ מִכָּה אֱלֹהִים וּמְעֵנָה:

*Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, but we considered him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*

A statement of the vicarious atonement that is clearer than that of vv. 4 & 5 would be hard to find, especially in the Old Testament. These are not his own griefs and sorrows he is carrying, but ours, and still we fail to appreciate it — we consider him as one punished by God for his own wrong-doing. The "surely" אֵן is somewhat ironic — we're taken aback by what we see here — everything in him that repulses us is us — our sin and our failings have caused all this.

The three synonymous terms at the end of this verse provide a good hymn title (!) and express the completeness and intensity of his condition. He's not only down on his luck, but he's been struck down, pushed down, and made miserable.

5

וְהוּא מִן לָלַם שָׁעֲנוּ מִדְּכָא מַעַן יָנוּ  
 מִזֶּרַע שָׁל מִנּוּ עָלָיו וְבִּבְרַךְ אֵל לָנוּ:

*But he was pierced for our transgressions — he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and in his stripes there is healing for us.*

This verse must truly make the non-believing "scholar" squirm, since it so clearly describes both what happened to Christ and what Christians claim that means. No wonder that this is one of the first passages for which the negative critics claim not only post-exilic, but perhaps even post-Christ-ian authorship.

The piercing easily and quickly points us both to the nails that held Jesus to the cross and to the spear in his side after his death. The "crushing" pictures the incredible pressure he was subjected to — physically, with the weight of his own body compressing his lungs and internal organs as he hung there on the cross, unable to shift his weight or relieve the pressure; and spiritually, bearing the inestimable weight of the sins of the entire world — of his time and all time. We cannot underestimate the burden that he bore for us on the cross, and yet we have no choice — no man can even begin to appreciate what he did on our behalf.

The second half of the verse makes this significance clear. All this God's servant did for us. Outside of an understanding of the vicarious atonement, this really makes no sense at all — how could someone else's punishment bring us peace? How could we find healing when someone else is whipped? Only by understanding that the punishment he bore was in fact our punishment, only by realizing that the stripes he received should have been our stripes does this verse — indeed this whole passage — begin to speak to us. There really is no other possible explanation or application.

6

כָּנוּ כִּי אֵין עֵינוּ אִישׁ לְדַרְכּוֹ נִינוּ  
 וַיְהִי הָיָה יַעֲבֹד אֵין כָּנוּ:

*All of us like sheep have gone astray, each (of us) has turned to his own way, and the LORD has caused the iniquity of all of us to fall upon him.*

Dumb sheep. That's what we are — we wander off without concern for our own safety, we go where we will, do what we will, follow our desires instead of our shepherd. But our shepherd does not leave us alone in our straying — he comes after us, and takes the consequences of our wandering upon himself.

Another beautiful statement of the substitutionary nature of Christ's atonement. It also states an important truth that some Christians are uncomfortable with — it was the LORD himself who placed the weight of our iniquities on Jesus. At first that sounds like a terribly unjust act of a malicious or capricious God — punishing the innocent for the sins of guilty — but in fact it's the wonderfully loving act of the gracious God. The punishment that we could not bear, the payment that we could never make, was entrusted to the only one who could take care of it, the God-man Jesus Christ, God's Son. In love and grace he submitted himself so that we might have life instead of death.

7

נֶשׂוּ וְהוּא נֶעְנָה וְלֹא יָאָר  
 כְּשֶׂה לְבָב יוֹבֵל וְרָל לְנִי גִיָּה נֶאֱלָמָה  
 וְלֹא יָאָר יוֹ:

*He was oppressed and afflicted, and yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb being led to the slaughter and like a sheep before its shearers is silent — and yet he did not open his mouth.*

Once again we see a picture of Christ's passion here — how Jesus did not speak, did not argue, did not contend with the High Priest, with Herod, or with Pilate. This time we see a more positive image of a sheep — this time an image of quiet, willing submission in the face of pain, suffering, or death. We need to remember that Jesus

did not have to die, in the sense that at any moment, as the almighty God himself, he could have stopped everything, struck down his persecutors or called on legions of angels in his defense. But he knew that in order for mankind to have salvation it was necessary that he die, and so he meekly, quietly allowed himself to be led to the slaughter.

8

מֵעַרְוָה וּמִשִּׁפְּטֵי לְוַאֲדָר מִי יֵשׁ  
כִּי נִגְרַר מֵאֶרֶץ חַיִּים מִשִּׁעַ עַיִן נֹגַע לָמָּה׃

*By oppression and judgment he was taken away — and of his descendants who would speak? — because he was cut off from the land of the living — for the transgression of my people he was struck down.*

The judgment spoken of here, paired with oppression, refers not to God's judgment on sin but to the false, malicious sentence of death passed on Jesus after his sham trial, without a trace of the "due process" of law. He was sent to his death in the prime of his life, and who would know the outcome of his shortened life and death? But let us remember, Isaiah adds, that this injustice, this strike against Christ, was for our sake — it was in payment for our transgressions.

9

וַיִּטְּ אֶתְרֵשָׁעִים בְּרֹאֲשֵׁי וְאֶתְעֹשֵׂי רֵשָׁעִים  
עַל לֹא מַעֲשֵׂה וְלֹא מְרֻמָּה בִּי׃

*And they placed his grave with the wicked, and [placed him] with the rich in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.*

Once again we see such a clear picture of what happened to Jesus that one can't help but wonder how any of the Jews of his time could pretend to believe that Jesus was not the promised One. This is so clearly a prophecy of the crucifixion between the two criminals and the burial in Joseph of Arimathea's new grave — but without the presupposition of faith perhaps it's not so clear.

We are also reminded anew that the Messiah would be guilty of no crime or sin, not even of speaking misleading statements. He was absolutely pure and innocent.

10

וַיִּהְיֶה נֶפֶס לִי אֶם שִׂים אֲשָׁם נִשׁ  
יִרְאֶה רַע יֶאֱרִי יָמָיו וְיִהְיֶה בְיָד יְיָ׃

*But the LORD was pleased to crush him — he put him to grief. If you make him an offering for sin, he himself will see his seed; he will prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.*

The God of love and justice was pleased to crush the only wholly pure and innocent man ever to walk the earth? Yes, he was — because it was his good pleasure to save all of mankind through that act, in order to make children of God out of the children of men. This is not to say, however, that putting his Son to grief gave him pleasure, for God takes pleasure in the death of no one.

There's nothing conditional about the closing statements, despite the previous **א**, because God will accomplish what he wills. This agrees with the "foreshadowing" of 53:13 and tells us of Christ's exaltation following his humiliation — he will succeed, he will be raised up, he will accomplish what the LORD desires.

11

מֵעַמְלֵל נִשׁ יִרְאֶה יִשְׁבַּע בְּדָעַ

יְהוָה יִּדְּוֶה עַבְדֵי לְרַבִּים וְעַן הוּא יִּבְלֶה:

*From the trouble of his spirit he will see; he will be satisfied with his knowledge. The Righteous One, My Servant, will make righteous (justify) the many, and their sins he will bear.*

The One God has just crushed is called "Righteous" and considered his Servant — clearly this Messiah is someone special. The most important thought of this verse is the one that puts the lie to the Calvinistic teaching of double predestination: justification is for "the many", not the elect few, and he bears the sins of the many, so there is no limit to the atonement.

12

לְאֵלֵי אֲנִי לְבָרְבִים וְאֵן וּמִים יִּשְׁלַל  
אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱרָה לִּי וְנִשׁ וְאֵן שְׁעִים נִמְנָה  
וְהוּא אֵן רַבִּים נִשָּׂא וְלִּשְׁעִים יִּיעֶ:

*Therefore I will assign a portion to him among the great, and he will divide the spoils along with the strong, because he poured himself out to the death of his spirit, and was numbered with the transgressors. And he himself bore the sin of the many, and for the transgressors he made intercession.*

First we have a picture of a battle won. In the triumph, God's servant, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, is pictured as a victor — not because of some great burst of battlefield heroism, not because of his fighting prowess or rash bravery, but because he allowed himself to be "poured out" to death, and to be counted as a criminal. The contrast to the normal scheme of things, the irony, drives home the truth of the atonement and clearly preaches the theology of the cross over against any theology of glory.

The section ends with a wonderful comforting, summarizing statement reminiscent of Romans 5:8 — Jesus Christ, the Messiah, God's great Servant, died for sinners — not for the righteous, not for just some sinners, but for the many, for all of us sinners.

The malady addressed in these verses is that we don't know how to solve our problem of sin — witness the "not told" and "not heard" of 53:15, as well as the "irony" throughout which shows that what should have been obvious never was, and that we reject that which is given for our good.

The virtue is found in God/Isaiah telling us about how the Messiah pays the price of our sins — as witnessed by "for our transgressions" and "for our sins" in vv. 5, 12, etc.

There is no specific sin here that the Law is brought to bear upon — instead it deals with the great weight of all accumulated sin, the sins of all people. The Gospel is general in that it addresses atonement for all sins, but specific in that it applies to each and every human being.

There are not that many preachable points of contact with the propers for the day. The Gospel gives background and details for the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecies, but almost any of the Gospel accounts would serve the same purpose. The Epistle lesson focuses on Jesus as High Priest, although the point of v. 15, that Jesus has been tempted in every way, might merit mention in the body of the sermon.

Propositional Statement:

The Holy Spirit wants sinful men to know and understand their Savior and their salvation from sin.

Theme & Parts :

"See him Dying On the Tree!"

**I. Who is He?**  
**II. Why is He there?**  
**III. What does it mean?**

The theme is taken from the hymn "Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted" (CW Hymn 127), which is based on Isaiah 53 and to which I will probably make numerous references in the sermon.

Text Analysis:

Part I covers primarily vv. 1-3, but also 52:13,14, and deals with the meaning of the Incarnation — what it means that God is suffering and dying up there on the cross.

Part II covers primarily vv. 4-10 (also 52:15) and is basically a presentation of the Law — we, with our sin, put Christ on that cross — we killed him.

Part III covers primarily vv. 11-12, but also refers back to 52:13, 15, and numerous phrases from 1-10, and is basically a presentation of the Gospel — it explains that this terrible thing we see happening on the cross is for our eternal benefit — our sins are taken away, our burdens borne, Christ is exalted, etc.

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**Propers for Good Friday, Series B**

**Epistle**

**Hebrews 4:14-16 & Hebrews 5:7-9, NIV**

“14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. 16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

“7 During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered 9 and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him”

**Gospel**

**John 19:11-19, NIV**

“ 11 Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." 12 From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."

13 When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Aramaic is Gabbatha). 14 It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour. "Here is your king," Pilate said to the Jews. 15 But they shouted, "Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!" "Shall I crucify your king?" Pilate asked. "We have no king but Caesar," the chief priests answered.

16 Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. So the soldiers took charge of Jesus. 17 Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). 18 Here they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle. 19 Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.”