

Psalm Sunday: What God in Christ Finally Has Done for You and Me

The four Servant Songs: Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-11, 52:13-53:12

During this Lenten season we have been looking at the book of Isaiah and what it means for us. We come finally to the four Servant Songs in Isaiah 42, 49, 50, and 52/53. Many of you will recognize them from Handel's Messiah, especially Isaiah 53: "All we like sheep have gone astray . . . and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all . . ."

On the one hand, the New Testament frequently quotes Isaiah 42 and 53 and uses images from these great chapters. For example, in Mark 10:45: "He was a ransom for many." And 1 Peter 1:18: "You know that you were ransomed..." these verses are referring to Isaiah 53. Also 1 Peter 2: 23-25: "By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your soul."

On the other hand, it is important to realize that just as Matthew 16:17-19 (You are Peter, on this rock...) is the most disputed text in the New Testament, Isaiah 53 is easily the most disputed chapter in the Old Testament. What do we do with it?

First, it is important to talk about prophesy. Someone has said that all problems in theology are summed up in the question of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. There is some truth in that. How does the New Testament use the Old Testament? A basic principle is that Old Testament texts have some meaning originally for the people who were there. It was not just material that they would not understand.

We then also have astonishing uses of Old Testament texts, such as Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:9-12. He takes a verse from Deuteronomy 25:4 and says that verse was written for the future, for Paul's day:

"It is written in the law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.' [Paul then asks:] Is it for oxen that God is concerned? **Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake. . . .**"

What then of the original use of the text?

In 1 Peter 1:10-12 it says that the prophets sought to understand what God was doing to redeem his people. That raises real problems. Yes, the prophets speak about the future, but what about the original use, the original setting? It is important for us to realize that what we call prophesy is mainly what we today call preaching.

And what did the prophets preach? They recalled the great event of the Old Testament, the Exodus, and said because of the Exodus, therefore God will always be this way, and you must remember that. That is the way he was in the beginning, and that is the way he is going to be. Prophesy is three things: It is forth-telling [proclaiming or preaching], and also retelling, and fore-telling. But first of all and most of all, it is forth-telling or preaching.

But what about prophesy and the future? One way to describe this is that there is a shadow and the reality. Or there was the promise and then the fulfillment. Or imagine driving west across the country and you begin to see the Rocky Mountains. From a long way out what you see are really just the

foothills, and later, as you get closer, you see that there are some really high mountains yet to come and they are a long way away.

The prophets are looking at something that is there but also at something that is much farther distant. For example, Isaiah 7:14: "Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." Then Isaiah 8 says there was one named Immanuel. Then in 9:6: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'" This verse had some reference to the immediate situation, although we also then want to bring it to the New Testament.

How do we sort this out? We must remember basically that there is a difference between Judaism and Christianity. And the difference is found first of all and most of all in what we call the Trinity. There is no way Jewish people would say God has an equal who is a Son. That would be impossible for them to think. They are very strong about the unity of God, and there is no way in which they would accept a Trinity as we do.

Nor does Judaism accept the cross. There is no cross in the Old Testament. People try to do something about this by saying that wherever there is suffering there is a cross, such as in Lamentations, in Job, and in the four Servant Songs in Isaiah. But not **the** cross. The cross is a particular event in which God himself came and died, and that is not found and not expected in the Old Testament.

Even though we hold a lot in common with Judaism, there is a basic difference. And with that we come to the suffering Servant Songs.

First: A word about "servant." It is a common word. And yet "servant" was used in Isaiah and throughout the Old Testament in various ways as a title. There were prophets, priests, kings, and patriarchs, and they were all called "servant of the Lord," as a title. Israel, or Jacob, is called "the servant." For example, in Isaiah 44 three times (44:1, 2, 21) it says "Jacob, my servant." There is a way in which this title is well known.

And, as we have noted before, even tyrants like Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 43:10) are called, "my servant." The title "servant" is used variously and also with other titles, like the Messiah, the "anointed one," and "my shepherd."

Therefore, when we get to the story of the baptism of Jesus described in Matthew 3:17, where it says: "The voice said this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," it is picking up not only Isaiah 42:1: "Behold, my servant, whom I uphold," but also Psalm 2:7: "I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you.'" The New Testament writers mix these titles together and use them together.

Second: Was the servant an individual or the whole people of Israel? And that is, of course, the whole question of singular and plural, the individual and the collective. In the second and third Servant Songs everything is either in the second person singular, except in the 49:3 where it is in the third person singular, where it says: "'You are my servant, Israel.'" There is a way in which it is an individual. In fact, in 49 as it describes this individual it talks about his defeat and his problem: How do I deal with the fact that I did not manage to carry out my mission? It was an individual, a very concrete, specific, historical person. And yet, when it says: "my servant, Israel," that is obviously talking about the people of God.

We see this in ways in the first and the fourth of the Servant Songs. To be sure, they often use the part for the whole, and between the individual and the collective there is a lot of going back and forth.

Third: What was the Jewish background? In the New Testament as we have it there were ways in which the Messiah and the suffering Servant were brought together. The Messiah was the suffering servant. Did the Jews make that connection? Because it is not that way in the book of Isaiah.

There is only one tiny text, one reference, in the Psalms of Solomon, Psalm 17, and that can be dated so closely that it is probably about 40 B.C. That is really late, long after the book of Isaiah. And all the other texts which bring “the Messiah” and the “suffering servant” together are either questionable in terms of their date or how they got to be what they are.

It is very evident that the Jews who were outside of Palestine understood the suffering servant was the people of Israel, and that has been the way it has been for most of the time in Jewish history since that time.

Fourth: In Isaiah 53:10 is the famous problem where it reads: “He makes himself an offering for sin.” That phrase, “offering for sin,” deals with one Hebrew word. What does that word mean?

Again a lot of ink has been spilled trying to say what does it mean. And the best and most recent thinking about this is that is not a good translation. The Hebrew word means something different; it means in a situation which is not religious that somebody pays someone else’s fine. That for some misdeed you have gotten a fine, and then somebody else pays for it. Sometimes this word for “offering for sin” is translated “ransom.” You see that in Mark 10:45 and first Peter 1:18.

But that is not correct either. When you pay somebody else’s fine, you are not paying a ransom. It is not the same as a word used quite often in the New Testament that we translate “redeem,” which means “to buy out of the marketplace.” What does the word mean? It can be mean “ransom,” but also as in Isaiah 53:6: “the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.” That brings it back into the sacrificial context. That may be what it is about here.

Finally, there has been a lot of discussion about Jesus’ self-consciousness in relationship to these texts because these texts are used in the New Testament and people will ask: What about what Jesus thought?

The answer to this question is helped by remembering the Council of Chalcedon in 451. There was a battle over the relationship between Jesus’ divine nature and his human nature. How do you relate the two? After a lot of discussion they came to this conclusion: He is unmixed and undivided. The two natures are not mixed, but they are not divided either. In other words, **don’t go there**. You cannot and must not try to speculate about Jesus’ inner self-consciousness. If you do, you get in trouble.

The same is true here about the suffering servant. What Jesus might have said and thought we cannot and do not and dare not know what that is.

Finally, what is it for us? First of all, we see the way this all works out. There was an individual, we do not know who, and we do not know exactly where, but we know there was an individual who was somebody who suffered and helped for the sins of the people and who died because of it.

This was also something they viewed as having wider reference to the whole people of Israel. Then in the New Testament, it means something new. Recall the two uses of the word “new.” There is something that is new, which means it is restored. And there is new, which means something that is brand new and different.

We have a newness here that is different, and that is that God himself comes. God does something that is far more than the suffering servant; he dies, but he dies on the cross for all people as a ransom and as a sacrifice “for many,” and that means “for all.”

In the second place it does mean for everybody. The way this works out if you look at the 66 chapters in Isaiah, in the first 39 chapters they continually say the future is in the restored kingdom of David, the Messiah, the anointed one.

After chapter 39 that disappears except for one reference in 55:3. After chapter 39 you have the suffering servant. And the suffering servant is this individual and then the people of God, but then it turns out in a remarkable way in 49:6, where it says: “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” It reaches to everybody, or as we looked at last week in 66:23: “All flesh shall come to worship me.” Or in 60:4: “They all gather together, they come to you.” Again there is a newness, but it is a newness that is radically different. It is a really new new.

Finally, it comes down to the word in Isaiah 53:10 that means “sacrifice for sin” or “offering for sin.” What does it mean for us?

It does not mean the same as “the scapegoat,” the scapegoat who was chased out into the wilderness, which was a symbolic way of annihilating sin. It means he is the one who paid the ransom; he who is innocent gave himself for us. But it also means that he was the one who was the sacrifice, the way he did this was by dying, giving his blood because no human being can do anything that is adequate about sin. There is no way that sin can be handled except that the Lord does it.

The word that is used in the Old Testament discussion of how God is acting, is his loving kindness, as in Psalm 103:8: “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Then in 103:11-12: “For as the heavens are as high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.” This is not because we deserve it, but rather that he in his mercy and his loving kindness is the one who does this.

He does this by coming himself to die in our place. He does not die “instead” of us, but rather “ahead” of us. He identifies with us, putting to death our sinful self so that his death is our death. As Paul writes in Romans 6:3-4: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” His life, death, and resurrection are ours.

He comes to us not in any way that is *quid pro quo*, but beyond anything that we can think, and for anything that we need, he comes and gives us life with him. Amen.