

The Book of Isaiah

Lesson 21: Awake, O Zion; the Suffering Servant -- Isaiah 51:1–53:12

There is a moment in the book of Acts when a man riding home in a chariot is reading aloud from a scroll, and he stops, baffled, at one passage. Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. The Ethiopian official turns to Philip and asks the question that hangs over the whole of Isaiah 53: About whom does the prophet say this? Of whom? And Philip, beginning with that very passage, told him the good news about Jesus. We come now to the chapter Philip opened, the mountain peak of the entire book, and perhaps of the entire Old Testament.

Before we climb that peak, Isaiah 51 and 52 sound a great trumpet blast of awakening. Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord. Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion. The God who comforts His people calls them up out of the dust and despair of exile to lift their eyes. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace. These are the words Paul will later borrow to describe the preaching of the gospel itself. Zion is told to wake up because salvation is coming, and it is coming through a Servant.

And then the ground shifts beneath us. Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up. But this exalted Servant is also marred beyond human likeness, despised and rejected, a man of sorrows acquainted with grief. Here, centuries before a Roman cross was ever raised on a hill outside Jerusalem, we are given the clearest portrait of the crucified Christ found anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities. The chastisement that brought us peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed.

We will move slowly and reverently through this chapter, because every line of it cost our Lord something. 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. That is the heartbeat of the gospel, and it is the heartbeat of this lesson. As we study, let us not merely analyze the suffering Servant. Let us look at Him, the way the eunuch looked, until the question About whom does the prophet say this? finds its only answer in the wounded, risen Lord Jesus, and until that answer begins to reshape our own lives.

Group Discussion: Isaiah 53:6 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. As a group, talk honestly about both halves of that verse: the universal truth that every one of us has gone our own way, and the staggering remedy that God laid that iniquity on His Servant. How should holding both of these together shape the way our congregation treats sin and treats grace?

Personal Reflection: Isaiah 53 says the Servant was pierced for your transgressions and that by his stripes you are healed. Sit quietly with the truth that He bore your specific sins in His own

body. What is one sin or burden you have been carrying as if it were still yours to bear, and what would it mean to lay it at the foot of His cross this week?

Read Isaiah 51:1–53:12

Study Questions

1. In Isaiah 51:1–8 God calls His people to look to the rock from which they were hewn, to Abraham and Sarah, and promises that His righteousness and salvation will be forever while the heavens vanish like smoke. What does this passage teach about the permanence of God's salvation compared to the things of this world, and how does looking back at how God has worked steady our faith for the future?
2. Three times in chapters 51 and 52 comes the call, Awake, awake. Where in your own walk with God have you grown drowsy or settled into the dust, and what would it look like for you to heed the call to awake and put on strength this week?
3. In Isaiah 52:7 the prophet exclaims, How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness. Paul applies this in Romans 10:15 to the preaching of the gospel. What does this verse teach us about the value God places on those who carry the message of salvation, and on the message itself?
4. Think about the people who first brought the good news of Jesus to you, and about your own opportunities to carry it to others. Whose feet were beautiful in bringing you the gospel, and to whom is God calling you to carry that same good news?

5. Isaiah 52:13–15 opens the fourth Servant Song by declaring that the Servant will be high and lifted up, yet his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, that many were astonished at him, and he will sprinkle many nations. How does this passage hold together the exaltation and the disfigurement of the Servant, and how is this paradox fulfilled in the suffering and glory of Jesus Christ?
6. Isaiah 53:1–3 describes the Servant as one with no beauty that we should desire him, despised and rejected, a man of sorrows from whom men hide their faces. Have you ever found yourself overlooking or turning away from Jesus, perhaps because He did not match what you wanted Him to be? What does it stir in you to know He was despised and rejected, and still went to the cross for you?
7. Isaiah 53:4–5 says, Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 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 stripes we are healed. What does this passage teach about the substitutionary nature of Christ's suffering, that He bore what was due to us, and why is the little word for (for our transgressions) so crucial to the gospel?
8. Isaiah 53 says we esteemed him stricken by God, that is, we badly misjudged what was really happening at the cross. Where have you misjudged or underestimated what Jesus did for you, and how does a deeper grasp of His suffering change the way you respond to Him today?
9. Isaiah 53:6, 10–12 declares, 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; and that it was the will of the Lord to crush him, that out of the anguish of his soul he shall make many to be

accounted righteous, for he shall bear their iniquities. What does this heart of the chapter teach about how lost we are apart from Christ, what God accomplished by laying our iniquity on His Servant, and how the many are accounted righteous through Him? Drawing on Acts 8:32–39, where Philip preached Jesus from this very passage and the eunuch was then baptized, how do we today come to receive what the Servant has done for us?

10. Having gazed at the suffering Servant who was pierced for your transgressions and bore the iniquity of us all, name one specific way that looking at Christ crucified is reshaping you, your attitude toward your own sin, toward grace, toward others, and one concrete step you will take this week to live as one for whom He suffered and died.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Acts 8:26–39, Philip begins with Isaiah 53 and preaches Jesus to the Ethiopian eunuch, who then asks to be baptized; 1 Peter 2:21–25, Peter unfolds Isaiah 53, He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, by his wounds you have been healed; John 1:29, John the Baptist calls Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; Romans 10:11–17, Paul applies Isaiah 52:7 and 53:1 to the preaching of the gospel and the response of faith; Philippians 2:5–11, the humiliation and exaltation of Christ, the pattern of the Servant; Hebrews 9:24–28, Christ offered once to bear the sins of many, fulfilling the Servant who bore the sin of many.

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