

THE SERVANT'S SUFFERING

“Hi! I hope you are having a nice day.” The two employees of the convenience store did not acknowledge Juanita’s words. They just stared at her. Juanita thought they may not understand English well.

I have to hurry or I’ll miss my bus, she said to herself.

“Can you point me to the cold drinks?” The gray-haired attendant waved at the back corner.

Juanita quickly went to find something to quench her thirst. All she saw at first was soda. *I can’t have all that sugar like I used to,* she thought to herself. Then she spotted two bottles of something healthier and grabbed one.

Juanita remembered she had no cash and went straight to the ATM. She noticed one of the employees was walking around and had the distinct impression he was watching her closely. It wasn’t the first time something like this had happened in a store.

Juanita slid her bottled drink to the cashier. “I just want this. It sure is hot today.” She handed him a twenty.

“Your money is counterfeit and I don’t want it!” he said as he tossed the bill back at her.

“I just got this money out of your ATM! It can’t be counterfeit!” Juanita was furious.

“I don’t take fake money!” The cashier waved his hand dismissively for her to leave.

“Fine! I will tell all my friends about this store!” As Juanita left, she felt her face flush with anger about what happened. She understood the real issue.

1 When have you faced rejection and hostility?

2 The Bible is full of stories of devoted people who suffer. How does that influence our view of God?

3 How can we remain faithful when we suffer unjustly?

¹ Who hath believed our report?
and to whom is the arm of the
LORD revealed?

² For he shall grow up before him
as a tender plant, and as a root out
of a dry ground: he hath no form
nor comeliness; and when we
shall see him, there is no beauty
that we should desire him.

³ He is despised and rejected of
men; a man of sorrows, and ac-
quainted with grief: and we hid
as it were our faces from him; he
was despised, and we esteemed
him not.

¹ Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the LORD
been revealed?

² He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us
to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should
desire him.

³ He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with
pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low
esteem.

Rejected and Despised

Verse 1 of this poetic text poses a question that challenges the faith of those who hear the words of the prophet: “Who has believed our message?” (Isa. 53:1). God’s servant, who has been endorsed by God in the previous verses (Isa. 52:13–15), is revealed as God’s way of salvation for Israel. But not *only* for Israel.

The unnamed servant is also a way of salvation for the nations. Isaiah 52:15 says, “He will sprinkle many nations,” and Isaiah 49 calls this one “a light for the Gentiles,” with the result that “salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Isa. 49:6). But despite being chosen by God and “highly exalted,” the servant has a marred appearance that doesn’t attract people to follow or credit him (Isa. 52:13–14; 53:2).

The servant even suffers, and this challenges any expectations that he could be a deliverer or savior. His suffering makes it look as if God is not supporting him at all. Yet, “the arm of the LORD” is with him (Isa. 53:1). This phrase typically denotes God’s great power to save or deliver. Can a suffering servant really be accomplishing anything? Is that believable?

In verse 2, the language of “a tender shoot” and “a root” recalls

Isaiah 11:1: “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.” Because Jesse was the father of an unexpected king, David, this language pertains to the promised Messiah, an everlasting king from David’s family line. It pertains to the one who will reign on David’s throne forever (see 2 Sam. 7:16; Isa. 9:7). Here, the language is applied to the suffering servant, making him a suffering servant who is also a king. Again, this challenges every expectation of what a king would look like.

Verse 2 exposes the gap between what God esteems and what people find desirable. The servant is ordinary, perhaps even unattractive. No beauty. No majesty. Nothing about his mere appearance gives his identity away. Whoever the servant is, he does not meet with the approval of human standards of beauty. Why should he meet with God’s approval either?

Verse 3 paints a bleaker picture, again exposing the gap between what God esteems and what people find impressive. Now the servant is despised and rejected. He is “a man of suffering, and familiar with pain” (Isa. 53:3). Suffering and pain are not impressive to sinful humanity, not like power, influence, and charm. Suffering and pain are the kinds of things most people would rather avoid! We might assume that suffering is the result of poor decisions or mistakes. Observers think that the servant suffers because God is punishing him for his sin, but Isaiah 53:4–6 makes it clear that is not the case. At any rate, Isaiah reveals that the servant is despised for his suffering, “like one from whom people hide their faces” (Isa. 53:3). How can this possibly be someone who meets with God’s approval?

1 Why is the servant despised and rejected by people?

2 What do these verses tell us about the servant’s identity?

3 What qualities does God value in a person?

⁴ Surely he hath borne our griefs,
And carried our sorrows: Yet we
did esteem him stricken, Smitten
of God, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was wounded for our
transgressions, He was bruised for
our iniquities: The chastisement of
our peace was upon him; And with
his stripes we are healed.

⁶ All we like sheep have gone
astray; We have turned every one
to his own way; And the LORD hath
laid on him the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed, and he was
afflicted, Yet he opened not his
mouth: He is brought as a lamb to
the slaughter, And as a sheep be-
fore her shearers is dumb, So he
openeth not his mouth.

⁴ Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was
on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is
silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

The Great Exchange

Beginning in verse 4, Isaiah begins to answer why the servant suffers: he suffers on behalf of the people. The verse of poetry says, “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering” (v. 4). The first-person plural pronoun “our” in verses 4–5 stresses that the servant is participating in an exchange. He is taking up the suffering that rightly belongs to a group of others. Despite what anyone may think, the servant does not suffer because God is punishing or afflicting him. It is instead “our” pain that he bears. Yet those who in the previous verses rejected and despised the servant still refuse to accept the truth and regard the servant as stricken by God.

But verse 5 reiterates that the servant suffers on behalf of others, in their place. The servant is taking on a punishment to provide peace. He is wounded so that others might be healed. He suffers to redeem and cleanse the people from their sin, for “he was pierced

for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities” (v. 5). The words “pierced” and “crushed” denote great suffering—suffering which leads to death. Can anyone survive being crushed? Again it challenges preconceived notions of a messiah. Could a king suffer and die, and still be the chosen one?

Verse 6 suggests that none of the people of Israel are without sin, including the writer himself. The verse says “we all” have sinned, and the servant bears iniquity belonging to “us all.” The people are like sheep who wander astray, turning this way or that, desperately in need of a shepherd to guide them.

Israel, who is also referred to as God’s servant in the book of Isaiah, has acted blindly and deafly, stubbornly refusing to listen, obey, or keep God’s covenant (Isa. 42:18–25). This stubborn “servant” (Israel) needs a more faithful servant—a truer Israel—to bear the iniquity and restore Israel to fellowship with God. And so, in His mercy, God lays the iniquity of His people on the shoulders of a faithful servant. But who is the servant? Who else could stand in place of God’s people to redeem their iniquities?

In verse 7, the faithful servant’s suffering becomes more remarkable: it is *voluntary*. Though he is “oppressed and afflicted” and “led like a lamb to the slaughter,” he accepts his unjust treatment. He willingly bears the violence inflicted on him by wicked and oppressive powers. He is like a sheep—not one who wanders astray—but one who is silent before its shearers. He does not even protest. Instead, he quietly bears the pain and suffering, the iniquity of “us all.” He is the sacrificial lamb who cleanses people of their sins. But who is the servant who can serve this unprecedented role?

1 Why does the servant suffer?

2 How does the servant suffer?

3 What does verse 6 tell us about the condition of Israel and humanity as a whole? What is God’s response?

The “Suffering-With” Servant

What does the word compassion mean? Perhaps we imagine it as feeling sorry for someone, pitying them or relating empathetically in some way. While these are related to compassion, they don’t completely explain the word. Each instance mentioned above imagines remaining separate and detached from the other person: *I’m over here, and I have sympathy for the suffering person over there.*

Compassion comes from a Latin compound word, *compassio*, which means to “suffer with.” To have compassion leaves no room for staying at a safe distance. It requires drawing close, taking the burden of someone else’s pain as your own, literally sharing in the experience of distress so that the other person doesn’t carry it alone.

Sometimes our deepest experiences of suffering are when we feel alone in our difficulties, where no one can reach us. And yet Christ, the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, shows what it truly means to have compassion. Jesus made our suffering *His suffering*, our iniquity *His problem*, and our despair *His burden*.

Paul says, “We share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Rom. 8:17). In other words, the pathway to our sanctification is forged by taking up the cross of Jesus in our everyday lives. As Isaiah 53:5 tells us, the suffering servant died for the sake of others, “pierced for our transgressions,” and “crushed for our iniquities.”

If we wish to be like Jesus, we too must become suffering servants, not simply having sympathy at a distance, but entering into others’ struggles and making them our own. This is the only pathway to transformation, allowing Jesus to make us His hands and feet, willingly bearing the wounds of others to leave no one alone in suffering. They can be embraced and redeemed in the love of Christ.

1 What are examples where someone showed compassion to you?

2 Are there limits to how far our compassion might go?

3 If someone doesn’t seem likely to respond to compassion, is the effort still worth it?

Give Thanks to the Servant, Who Suffered for Us

Not all suffering is for the sake of others. Becoming like Jesus does not mean that we invite unnecessary hardship. But whenever we stand up for others, give from our excess, and shoulder the burdens of one another, we are following His example.

Circle one characteristic of the servant as described in Isaiah 53, and write a brief thanks to Jesus that mentions this word.

Unattractive Rejected Submissive Misunderstood Redemptive

Key Text

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.
—Isaiah 53:6 KJV

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
—Isaiah 53:6 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of September 29 through October 4

- Mon.** 2 Chronicles 34:1–7—Passion for God's Law.
- Tue.** Hebrews 4:12–16—The Piercing Word of God.
- Wed.** Jeremiah 3:12–19—Return to the Father.
- Thu.** Jeremiah 4:5–14—Cleanse Yourselves and Be Saved.
- Fri.** Hebrews 12:3–17—God's Discipline Proves God's Love.
- Sat.** Hebrews 12:18–29—God Is a Consuming Fire.

Next Week: Jeremiah 1:6–10; 26:8–9, 12–15

We will examine God's call of the prophet Jeremiah. Has anyone very young ever shown you an important truth about God?