

Isaiah is long. In the NIV Isaiah is 108 pages long. In comparison Ephesians is 6 pages long. Even seasoned readers don't tackle it all at once. It is one of the 16 most important books in the Bible that every Christian should dig into at least once in a lifetime. When you dig in, here's helpful hint. The book falls into two distinct sections: Isaiah 1-39 and Isaiah 40-66. Many themes unite the two sections, but Isaiah 40-66 has themes that set it apart from chapters 1-39 and from the rest of the Old Testament.

Isaiah was the gospel to the first Christians, because its language helped them to understand Jesus Christ better than any other Old Testament writing with the possible exception of The Psalms. An example of that is our haunting theme for today. The Servant of the Lord comes into Isaiah's story in chapter 41 and disappears after chapter 53. You think you know who the Servant of the Lord in the first half dozen or so times you read about Him. Then, you aren't sure. Then, you read Isaiah 53, and you are stunned to find such words 700 years before Christ. Let's take a closer look.

Israel My Servant

Let's start with Isaiah 41:8-9. **But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, "You are my servant"; I have chosen you and have not rejected you.** The Lord called the people of Israel "my servant." It clearly means the people of Israel.

Isaiah 42:1-3 is less clear. **Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.** Does that mean the people of Israel or an anointed representative of the people of Israel? It is worth asking, because New Testament writers applied these words to Jesus, as the anointed Representative of Israel. (See Matthew 12:15-21.)

But in Isaiah 42:19 Isaiah once again clearly called the people of Israel God's servant. **Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the Lord?** Fallible though they were, Isaiah 43:10 calls the people of Israel witnesses to the true God: **"You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, "and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.**

Isaiah 44, 45, & 48 continue to identify The Servant of the Lord with the people of Israel. Things change abruptly in Isaiah 49:5. **And now the Lord says – he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself. Jacob is a common name in Isaiah for the people of Israel. Here The Servant of the Lord is clearly distinct from nation Israel. Verse six: he (the Lord) says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."** Who was this mysterious figure, who restores Israel and brings salvation to the ends of the earth?

Verse 7 is ominous. **This is what the Lord says – the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel – to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation (by Israel), to the servant of rulers.** How could the one who was to restore Israel and bring salvation to the

nation be **despised and abhorred**? It prepares us for the only sustained description of The Servant of the Lord. Isaiah 53 takes your breath away.

Isaiah and Jesus

Isaiah 52:13 establishes the fact that chapter 53 is talking about The Servant of the Lord. **See, my servant will act wisely.** Verse 14 establishes the theme of chapter 53. **Just as there were many who were appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness.**

And so we come to Isaiah 53. I propose to all you teachers of the Bible in this congregation a question of interpretation. Does Isaiah 53 mean the chosen people Israel, or does it mean the anointed Representative of Israel, or could it mean both? Christians believe it foretells the anointed Representative of Israel, Jesus Christ, who will bring salvation to the nations and restore Israel. But could it also be a picture of suffering Israel? It is a serious question that deserves a serious response – but not from me today.

Today, we read Isaiah 53 with Jesus in mind. Let's do a reprise of our communal scripture reading for today. **He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering.** (*Isaiah 53*) **Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him.** (*Mark 15:19*) **We considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.** (*Isaiah 53:4*) **He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, "I am the Son of God."** (*Matthew 27:43*) **All we like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.** (*Isaiah 53:6*) **God, have mercy on me, a sinner.** (*Luke 18:13*)

Let us with our worldly wisdom not miss the meaning of His suffering. Verse 5: **He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that us brought us peace was upon him.** The last lines of verse 12 extol Jesus our Mediator. **He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.**

Yearnings of the Prophets

There is a remarkable statement in 1 Peter 1:10-12: **Concerning this salvation, the prophets** (Isaiah chief among them), **who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.**

Worship

As we now take in hand the visible representations of the sufferings of Christ and the glory to come, do you have longings for God? Does it fill you with awe that a divine purpose, running through Israel of old, coming to fruition in Christ, and spreading to the ends of the earth has gathered you into its elect?

Save yourselves from our wayward generation. Come to Christ. Run to Christ. Believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead. Say publicly in baptism and

in daily life, “Jesus is Lord.” Allow yourself to be swept into the suffering of Christ and His glory to come.

And now, come, let us adore Him. O come, let us adore Him. O come, let us adore Him, The Servant of the Lord, Christ the Lord. And be at peace.