

The Four Songs of Isaiah

There are four “Servant Songs” of Isaiah that describe the service, suffering, and exaltation of the Servant of the Lord, the Messiah. All four songs show the Messiah to be God’s meek and gentle Servant. He is a royal figure, representing Israel in its ideal form; He is the high priest, atoning for the sins of the world. Isaiah predicts that this Servant of the Lord would deliver the world from the prison of sin. In the royal terminology of the ancient Near East, a servant was a “trusted envoy,” a “confidential representative,” or “one who is chosen.” The Servant Songs are found in Isaiah 42:1–9; Isaiah 49:1–13; Isaiah 50:4–11; and Isaiah 52:13—53:12.

Isaiah initially identifies God’s servant as **Israel** (41:8; 44:1–2), who serves as God’s witness (43:10) and as a light to the Gentiles. Yet Israel could not fulfill this mission: Israel was deaf, blind (42:19), and in need of God’s forgiveness (44:21–22). Israel failed again and again. By contrast, God’s Servant, **the Messiah**, faithfully completes all the work He is given to do (cf. Luke 13:32; John 17:4). The Servant of the Lord is God’s faithful and true witness to humanity.

In Acts 3:13 Peter calls Jesus the “servant” of God. That verse says, in part, “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus.” Peter’s description of Jesus as a “servant” is accurate for at least four reasons:

- 1) Jesus always did the will of the Father (John 4:34; 6:38).
- 2) Jesus never sought to please Himself but always to please the Father (John 5:30).
- 3) Jesus finished the work that God had sent Him to do (John 17:4).
- 4) Jesus came to glorify the Father (John 13:31; 17:4).

Additionally, Peter’s reference to Jesus as the “servant of God” would have brought to the minds of his Jewish hearers the passages in Isaiah that describe the Messiah as the “Servant of the Lord.” Here is a brief look at the four Servant Songs in Isaiah:

Isaiah 42:1–9. This first of the four Servant Songs introduces us to the Servant of the LORD:

“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.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope” (verses 1–4).

According to this song, the Servant of the Lord is chosen by God, and God delights in Him. The Servant has the Spirit of God abiding on Him. The first three verses of this passage are specifically applied to Jesus in Matthew 12:18–20.

When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan, the Spirit of God descended upon Him, and a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” This was a divine allusion to Isaiah 42. The clear teaching of the New Testament is that Jesus Christ is the Servant in the Servant Song prophecies.

Isaiah 49:1–13. This second of the four Servant Songs speaks of the Messiah’s work in the world and His success. The Servant’s statement that “before I was born the Lord called me” (verse 1) uses language similar to the call of the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5). The reference in Isaiah 49:2 to the mouth of the Servant of the LORD being “like a sharpened sword” is a prophetic image that crops up several times in the New Testament (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12; Revelation 1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15).

In the second Servant Song, the Messiah displays God’s splendor (verse 3), restores God’s people (verse 6), and is honored in God’s eyes (verse 5). Significantly, the Messiah feels a great loss: “I have labored in vain; / I have spent my strength for nothing at all” (verse 4), yet He receives worldwide acclaim in the end:

“To him who was despised and abhorred by the nation,
to the servant of rulers:
‘Kings will see you and stand up,

princes will see and bow down” (verse 7).

The Servant of the Lord will oversee the restoration of the land and the establishing of a peaceful kingdom (verses 8–13). The Messiah will be the agent of the Lord’s comfort to His people (verse 13).

In addition to being the One to restore the land of Israel (verse 8), the Messiah is chosen to redeem the Gentiles:

“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 my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (verse 6).

In this way, God’s salvation is brought to all people. Christ Jesus is “the light of the world” (Luke 2:30–32; John 8:12; 9:5) and the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies. On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas bring the gospel to the Gentiles in Antioch, and they quote Isaiah 49:6. The response of the Gentiles in Antioch is pure joy: “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord” (Acts 13:48). In Christ both Jews and Gentiles are made one (Ephesians 2:11–18).

Isaiah 50:4–11. This third Servant Song contrasts Israel’s sin with the Servant’s obedience. We also see that the Messiah will be persecuted yet vindicated. The verses preceding this song (Isaiah 50:1–3) liken Israel to an immoral wife; only God has the power to ransom her back. Starting in verse 4, the Servant responds to the instruction of God. He is not rebellious (verse 5), even when His obedience to God results in suffering:

“I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting” (verse 6).

The Servant of the Lord expresses His confidence that God will help Him and that He will be found innocent (verses 7–9). In this confidence, the Messiah resolves to see His task to completion, no matter how difficult the road becomes (cf. Luke

9:51).

Some 700 years later, Jesus fulfilled this prophecy, too. Abuse and insults were heaped upon our Lord as He was thrown to the Roman soldiers. His back was beaten, His face was hit, and He was spit upon (see John 19:1–3; Matthew 27:30). The Lord Jesus was obedient unto death (Philippians 2:8), and the Father vindicated His Suffering Servant by resurrecting Him. “Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, / I will not be disgraced” (Isaiah 52:7).

Isaiah 52:13—53:12. This climactic fourth Servant Song describes the suffering and triumph of the Servant of the LORD. It is also one of the most detailed passages in the Old Testament concerning the death and resurrection of the Messiah.

The song begins with a promise that the Servant will be exalted (Isaiah 52:13), but then immediately turns to a description of extreme violence:

“His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness” (Isaiah 52:14).

The Messiah will be “despised and rejected by mankind” (Isaiah 53:3). When He is brutally punished, people will assume that He is being afflicted by God (verse 4). But the fourth Servant Song makes it clear why He endures such persecution:

“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” (verse 5).

It is *our* iniquity being placed on *Him* that explains His suffering (verse 6). Verse 7 predicts that the Messiah will be silent before His accusers (cf. Matthew 27:14). Verse 9 says that, although the Servant of the Lord is innocent, He will die with the wicked and be “with the rich in his death.”

Isaiah 53:10 tells us why the Servant dies:

“It was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and...the Lord makes his life an offering for sin.”

This is the substitutionary atonement. His life for ours. The death of the Messiah accomplished the will of God concerning our salvation.

Immediately following the prophecy of the Servant's death, Isaiah makes a startling prophecy of the Servant's victory:

“[The Lord] will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.
After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied. . . .
Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong” (verses 10–12).

So, in the fourth Servant Song, death is not the end for the Servant. *After* He suffers, He will “see the light of life.” He will “divide the spoils.” His days will be prolonged. What we have here is a prophecy of the resurrection of Christ.

The whole of Isaiah 53 is a poignant and prophetic picture of the gospel. Jesus was despised and rejected by men (Luke 13:34; John 1:10–11); He was stricken by God (Matthew 27:46) and pierced for our transgressions (John 19:34; 1 Peter 2:24). By His suffering, Jesus received the punishment we deserved and became for us the ultimate and perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 10:10). Although His Son was sinless, God laid on Him our sin, and we became God's righteousness in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus was silent in front of His accusers (Matthew 27:12, 14; 1 Peter 2:23). Jesus was crucified between two thieves yet buried in a rich man's tomb (Matthew 27:38, 57–60). In the Suffering Servant's humiliation and final exaltation, He reconciles humanity with God (Matthew 8:17; Acts 8:30–35; Romans 10:15–17; 15:21; 1 Peter 2:24–25).

As the Ethiopian eunuch is traveling home in his chariot, he is reading from one of the Servant Songs (Acts 8:32–33). The eunuch was unsure of whom Isaiah was speaking—was it the prophet himself, or another man? Philip the evangelist had the privilege of using Isaiah 53 to point the Ethiopian to Christ: “Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35). Without a doubt, the four Servant Songs in Isaiah are about Jesus. Our Lord is the theme of Scripture.

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