Isaiah 53 *53: The Bible in Miniature*

***The Whole Story of Salvation in a Chapter of Prophecy***Today we are starting a new series that is going to focus on one chapter of the Bible. Isaiah 53.

Isaiah 53 is a remarkable chapter of scripture. Written centuries before Jesus Christ entered the world, it still manages to give remarkably accurate descriptions of what would happen to Him—especially in the manner of His death. More than that, it gives one of the clearest explanations in all of scripture—Old Testament and New—for the meaning of His death. And so, as we begin the season of Lent and the approach to Good Friday and Easter, we are going to spend time in this amazing prophecy.

If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you will be familiar with some of the verses in Isaiah 53. It gets quoted a lot in Christian settings, as well as in many of our songs. Isaiah 53 contains lines like: “a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering” (v. 3); “he was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities” (v.5); “we all, like sheep, have gone astray” (v. 6); and “by his wounds we are healed” (v. 5).

For many years, Bible commentators have remarked on the astonishing nature of this chapter. St. Augustine, back in the 5th Century, called Isaiah 53 “the Fifth Gospel.” Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell the story of Jesus in the New Testament. We call them those books the “Gospels.” But Augustine said this chapter deserves to stand with them as the 5th gospel.

St. Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin, famously said that Isaiah “should be called an evangelist [that is, a Gospel writer] rather than a prophet, because he describes all the mysteries of Christ and the church so clearly that one would think he is composing a history of what has already happened rather than prophesying what is to come.”

John Calvin, the Reformer, left a series of sermons on Isaiah 53 that he called “The Gospel According to Isaiah.” Martin Luther said that “every Christian ought to be able to repeat it by heart.”  A couple of German scholars writing in 1866 said, “It looks as if it had been written beneath the cross of Golgotha.”  They further said, “Many an Israelite has had it melt the crust of his heart… This chapter is the most central, the deepest and the loftiest thing that Old Testament prophecy, outstripping itself, has ever achieved,”

And Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher of the 19th Century said this—**and we’ll put this quote on the screen:**

This is one of the chapters that lie at the very heart of the Scriptures. It is the very Holy of holies of Divine Writ. Let us, therefore, put off our shoes from our feet, for the place whereon we stand is specially holy ground. The fifty-third of Isaiah is a Bible in miniature. It is the condensed essence of the gospel.

A Bible in miniature. The condensed essence of the gospel. As we spend the next 6 or 7 weeks in Isaiah 53, we are going to be able to reflect on all the crucial themes of Christianity.

So let’s read the chapter in its entirety.

But, before we do, I need to point out a quirk in our Bibles. You need to know that chapter and verse notations are not part of the original manuscripts. The numbering system we use to find different sections of scripture was not added until about AD 1550. For the most part, this system is incredibly helpful. Imagine having to say to someone: “As it says in the first 10% of the Gospel of John.” We don’t say that. Instead we say: “As it says in John 3:16.” It’s very helpful.

And, for the most part, the chapter and verse divisions make logical sense. Most verse marks set off a complete thought. Most chapter divisions contain a clearly identifiable story or thematic unit. But sometimes, the divisions fall in strange places. In seminary, we used to joke that the guy who first created the numbering system must have been riding in a carriage when he did it. Because sometimes it seems like his hand must have slipped—like the carriage hit a bump—because some of the verse marks end up in the middle of a sentence and some of the chapter breaks come in strange places.

And that’s the case with Isaiah 53; because Isaiah 53 is clearly one thematic unit, but it begins with the last three verses of Isaiah 52. We don’t know why the people who created the chapter divisions missed that, but the numbering is so well-known it is too late to go back and change it now.

For convenience’s sake, I am going to refer to this section of scripture as 53. Isaiah 53. But when we study it and read it, we need to begin at Isaiah 52:13. **So, let’s do that now. Isaiah 53:**

**13**See, my servant will act wisely;
    he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
**14**Just as there were many who were appalled at him—
    his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being
    and his form marred beyond human likeness—
**15**so he will sprinkle many nations,
    and kings will shut their mouths because of him.
For what they were not told, they will see,
    and what they have not heard, they will understand.

**53**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.

**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.
**8**By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
    Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
    for the transgression of my people he was punished.
**9**He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
    and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
    nor was any deceit in his mouth.

**10**Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
    and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
    and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.
**11**After he has suffered,
    he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
    and he will bear their iniquities.
**12**Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
    and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
    and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
    and made intercession for the transgressors.

This is a wonderful chapter of scripture; and we’ll spend the weeks through Easter going through it in detail. For today, I want to take a broader view. I want to give some background on Isaiah; then I want to look a little more closely at the immediate context of this chapter; and then I want us to consider who this chapter is really about.

***The Lord is My Salvation***Let’s start with Isaiah’s background.

Isaiah was a prophet in Jerusalem from the years **740 BC to about 680 BC**. We can date Isaiah’s ministry with some precision because he makes reference to 4 different kings of Judah as well as foreign rulers—such as the king of Assyria—whose dates we can verify from non-Biblical sources.

We don’t have a lot of biographical information about Isaiah, but he was evidently a well- educated student of international affairs, who spent most of his time rubbing shoulders with royalty and giving advice on foreign affairs. He recounts several conversations with kings, and spends much of his book warning against entangling alliances with foreign powers. His name, Isaiah, means “the LORD saves” and it is often remarked that this is the overall theme of his book.

With a public ministry that spanned 60 years, Isaiah clearly had a lot to say. His book is one of the longer books in the Bible. And it can be pretty easily **divided into two sections.** The first section, what we’ll call “Book I” covers chapters 1 through 39. It contains a mixture prophetic sermons and historical narrative; and the overall theme of this section is judgment and captivity. Isaiah sees Judah moving farther and farther from the Lord and warns of the coming exile to Babylon. In fact, in chapter 39 verses 5 and 6, right at the end of this section, **Isaiah warns King Hezekiah:**

**6**The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. **7**And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”

As a matter of fact, that is exactly what happened. If **we go back to the timeline**, we will see that about 75 years after Isaiah’s ministry ended, the Babylonians did come into Jerusalem, carry the best and brightest away, and eventually destroyed the city. Now, keep in mind, Isaiah predicted this long before the Babylonians were major players on the world stage. The Lord told him it would happen, and it did, even though Isaiah was no longer around to see it.

The second section of Isaiah, then, is **chapters 40-66.** The theme of this section is grace and salvation. It is written from the perspective of the exile, and is really one single, glorious vision of hope and renewal for people who feel forgotten and abandoned by God. This section famously **begins with the cry**:

Comfort, comfort my people,
    says your God.
**2**Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
    and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
    that her sin has been paid for,

Now, an interesting detail I should point out. Remember what I said earlier about the chapter and verse divisions being added later? I think something very intentional was done in dividing up the chapters of Isaiah. The **first section of Isaiah has 39 chapters**, and it just so happens that the Old Testament has 39 books. **The second section then**—40 through 66—has 27 chapters. And it just so happens that the New Testament has 27 books. This was clearly done intentionally; the people who assigned the chapter divisions saw the parallels between the first part of Isaiah and the storyline of the Old Testament; and they saw the parallels between the second part of Isaiah and the storyline of the New Testament.

This becomes even clearer when you realize that early in chapter 40 is the verse that says “A voice of one calling: ’In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord’.” (40:3) That is a verse applied to John the Baptist at the beginning of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Likewise, the final chapters of Isaiah are about “the new heavens and the new earth” (66:22); which is precisely where the New Testament ends in Revelation 21 and 22. Isaiah really is a Bible in miniature.

***The Center of the Good News***Now, let’s narrow our focus a bit and talk some more about that second section. Chapters 40 through 66. I’ll call this **The Good News of Isaiah**. This is the section that focuses on grace and salvation.

**Let’s put the timeline up again.** One of the unique things about this second section of Isaiah is that it is clearly written for those who are enduring the exile. With or without chapter divisions, you can clearly see the change of tone when you get to chapter 40. And that’s sort of a problem because—by the time the exile starts—Isaiah is obviously dead. So that raises a question: who wrote the second part of Isaiah?

One theory is that Isaiah wrote this part. He predicted the exile. He knew it was going to be bad. But he also knew that God wanted him to give the people hope. So, even though he wasn’t going to be around for it, he sat down and wrote a message for those who would—sort of like you might write a letter to your future great-grandchildren. Some of the things Isaiah predicted are remarkably accurate. But, if you believe in Divine Inspiration, as I do, it’s not that hard to believe he could have anticipated some of these things.

The other theory is that Isaiah wrote down some messages—there are references to secret scrolls (8:16, et al)—and some **of his followers preserved his message** and wrote in his style in the midst of the exile—some 100 to 150 years after his death.

We’re not really sure, and for our purposes studying chapter 53 it doesn’t really matter. Because either way, the things in chapter 53 will still have been written centuries before Jesus.

Another thing I want to note about this Good News section of Isaiah is that it neatly divides up into three **sections of exactly 9 chapters each**. And that’s not just an artificial insertion of numbers; each section ends with a clearly repeated refrain. And generally speaking, each section focuses on a different theme. The first 9 chapters focus on Israel’s eventual deliverance from Babylon. The next 9 chapters focus on deliverance for sinners. And the final 9 chapters focus on the grand final deliverance of all of creation as the new heavens and the new earth are issued in.

The key, then, is the middle section; because deliverance of sinners is the ultimate need of humanity. And if you zero in on chapters 49 through 57 you’ll find that the center is chapter 53. And if you narrow in even further, you’ll find that the very center verse of chapter 53 (remember, we need to include the last three verses of chapter 52) is **verse 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.

So: middle section of the good news portion of Isaiah, middle chapters, middle of the chapter, middle verse.  The key to salvation...the key to deliverance…focuses in on this concept of substitution. The way that sinners are saved is when the righteous takes the place of the unrighteous. The loving shepherd stands in for the lost sheep. The exalted king substitutes himself for the rebel subjects.

One more thing from this good news section. Sprinkled throughout this section are what are known as the **“Servant Songs.”** There’s one in chapter 42. One in chapter 49. And one in chapter 50. These Servant Songs make reference to one who is going to be instrumental in bringing about deliverance. The usual Israelite word for a hero like this is “Messiah.” But these servant songs are a little different: instead of a conquering king, this hero is pictured as a slave. Gentler, and weaker than you might expect.

And that’s especially true in the fourth servant song, which, of course, is **Isaiah 53**. The servant isn’t just gentle and humble; he actually suffers. It is the suffering servant who is pierced for our transgressions and bruised by our sins. It is by the wounds of this servant that our healing comes.

***Do You Understand What You Are Reading?***Which leads to our third section this morning: **Who is the servant?** If the second half of Isaiah is about the good news of salvation, and the central chapter and the key verse in that section is all about the substitution of a servant for our sins; then the crucial question is: who is this passage talking about? Who is the suffering servant who takes our place?

The answer, of course, is Jesus. For those of us in the church who know the story of the cross, it is virtually impossible to read this chapter without applying it to Jesus. But what I want you to see today is just how precisely this chapter describes our Savior.

One way to do that is to see how the New Testament writers used this chapter. For example, Acts 8 tells the story of Philip, one of the first Christian missionaries. One day the Spirit instructed Philip to go to a desert road. There, he encountered a dignitary from the court of the Ethiopian queen who was on his way home from a visit to Jerusalem. Apparently this man—who is described as a eunuch—was something of a scholar, because he had taken an interest in the holy writings of the city he had just visited.

So Philip comes upon him and—I’m not sure exactly how this works, **the Bible makes it sound** as though he is running alongside the chariot, maybe the Holy Spirit gave him some super speed—but he comes upon the Ethiopian Eunuch and hears him reading from the prophet Isaiah. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asks.

**The guy says: “How can I,** unless somebody explains it to me?” He invites Philip to take a seat. And, as it turns out, the part of Isaiah he is reading is from **the part we know as Isaiah 53**:

**32**This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
    and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
    so he did not open his mouth.
**33**In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.
    Who can speak of his descendants?
    For his life was taken from the earth.” (quoting Isaiah 53:7,8)

What does Philip do? Open door, share the gospel. **Acts 8:35**:

 **35**Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Isiah 53 is about Jesus. When the Ethiopian Eunuch hears the story and sees the connection, he immediately stops his chariot at the next body of water so that Philip could baptize him into the Christian community.

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, it became impossible for His followers to read this part of Isaiah without thinking of Him. Of the 15 verses in Isaiah 53, at least 7 of them are quoted directly in the New Testament. Always in reference to Jesus. In addition, more than 50 allusions are made throughout the New Testament to words or concepts that come from this chapter.

As we work our way through the chapter we’ll see the amazing detail with which Isaiah predicted features of Jesus’ life. There are references to disfigurement that might come from scourging (52:14); to piercing that might be caused by the nails and spear of crucifixion (53:5); and even references to “seeing the light of life” after suffering that is clearly a hint of the Resurrection (53:11).

But as I wrap up today I want to point out a line in the chapter that is so unique—and so unusual—that it can only possibly apply to Jesus. It is also the kind of detail that has to be divinely inspired. The line is in **verse 9:**

**9**He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
    and with the rich in his death,

This is such a strange line, because it is asserting two very opposing ideas. On the one hand, the person this prophecy is about is supposed have a grave with the wicked. That implies he will die a shameful death. The grave of the wicked is often an anonymous pit. Those who were executed as criminals were often left to rot in the garbage piles, or be carried away by carrion.

The rich, on the other hand, were considered blessed by God. The rich were able to prepare for their death. They purchased burial sites and the kind of spices that were used for the embalming practices of the day. The graves of the rich were much different than the graves of the wicked.

And yet this verse asserts that this servant of God will experience both. What could that possibly mean?

It didn’t make any sense until Jesus came along. He died a criminal’s death, executed with two rebels on either side of him. “Assigned a grave with the wicked.” And then, something incredibly unusual happened. A rich man stepped forward to claim his body. Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish council who was secretly following Jesus. He prepared Jesus’ body for burial. He volunteered his own tomb, in a garden, where the wealthy of Jerusalem were buried. “With the rich in his death.”

A single line of prophecy that for centuries made no sense, that appeared to be impossible for one man to fulfill. Circumstances that no one could engineer to happen.

And yet it describes Jesus perfectly. It is an exact description of what happened to Him. And it was written centuries before He came on the scene.

There can be no doubt that Isaiah 53 is a prophecy of Jesus. Jesus is the Suffering Servant who was bruised for our iniquities.

***Application***Very quickly then, what is the take away from all this information about Isaiah? We’ll get into the specifics of the chapter in the weeks ahead, but what should you take home with you today. Two points of application:

**1. Take confidence in God’s Authorship of the Bible**

Whether you believe both parts of Isaiah were written by the same man, or you believe his followers wrote the second part a century and a half later; that doesn’t change the fact that these Servant Songs were written centuries before Jesus came on the scene. And yet, the details that match up to the circumstances of Jesus’ life and death are astounding.

No man could know that kind of information in advance; and no man could read a chapter like Isaiah 53 and then intentionally arrange for his death to happen in such a way. Therefore, this chapter had to be authored by the only One who knows the future, and that’s God. More than that, He not only knows the future, but also but determines it.

One of the strongest arguments that God inspired the Bible is the way Isaiah 53 matches the life and death of Jesus.

**2. Pay Attention to Isaiah’s Explanation of Events**It’s not just that Isaiah 53 gets the events of Jesus life right, it also explains the meaning behind those events. That’s the thing that makes Isaiah 53 so remarkable. It helps us understand why Jesus died, and how it benefits us.

The central verse, the one that the whole structure of the Good News of Isaiah is designed to highlight, is focused on substitution. Jesus suffered in our place. He took our transgressions upon himself. The punishment that brings us peace was placed upon Him.

The message of Isaiah 53 is the Good News of the Gospel: a sinner can be right with God and escape eternal hell and enter eternal heaven because the Suffering Servant became a substitute and suffered the judgment of God in the sinner’s place.  That’s the message of Isaiah. That’s the Good News of the Gospel. By His wounds, we are healed.