

Robert Vannoy, Major Prophets, Lecture 18
Servant of the Lord Theme (Isa 53) Continued

Isaiah 53:4 Healing Ministry of Christ

We just finished Isaiah 53 verse 4: “Surely he has borne our griefs, carried our sorrows.” We discussed the translation of that and more properly understood it is a reference to the healing ministry of Christ. Then in spite of these healings, those who saw his miracles did not understand who he was; we esteemed him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted when he was crucified.

Isaiah 53:5 Why He Was Afflicted

Let’s go onto verse 5 that gives the explanation. Here is the explanation of why he suffered, why he was stricken, why he was smitten. “He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement for our peace was upon him, with his stripes we are healed.” Verse five is the answer to the question of why this one was afflicted and why he suffered.

It’s in verse five that you have the description of the atonement. 1 Peter 2:24 refers back to this as the atoning work of Christ. So verse five presents the idea of substitutionary atonement, and you get four parallel statements of that idea included in this one verse. “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.” Those four parallel lines all present the idea of substitutionary atonement.

Isaiah 53:6 Substitutionary Atonement

That flows on into verse six, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” This is probably the most familiar verse of the passage where this idea of substitutionary atonement is continued, and it’s made clear that the guilt of our iniquities were what were laid on Christ. “The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” So verses five and six

teach the substitutionary atonement.

Isiah 53:7 Not Israel

Verse seven, “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 before shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.” You have the similar idea as in the previous passage in Isaiah 50 verse 6: “I gave my back to the smiters, my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair.” It’s voluntary submission. Here again is an indication that the one who is described in these verses is not the nation Israel. Now you get back to that issue of who is the servant? Is it Israel, or is it one distinguished from Israel, an individual? Clearly, this doesn’t apply well to Israel. “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth. He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter; as a sheep before his shearers is dumb, and so he opened not his mouth.” That statement contrasts with the involuntary suffering of Israel in the exile. In previous chapters in Isaiah you find the complaints of Israel that hardly fit with the silent submissiveness statement of this verse.

Isaiah 53:8 Hopelessness of His Death

Verse eight speaks of the seeming hopelessness of his death: “He was taken from prison and from judgment; who shall declare his generations? For he was cut off out of the land of the living. For the transgression of my people was he stricken.” The seeming hopelessness of his death is seen in the rhetorical question: “Who shall declare his generations?” He died young; he had no descendants and no posterity. There were a small group of disciples that had been with him during the time of his ministry, but they all deserted him at the time of his death. And “he is cut off from the land of the living.” It seems hopeless. “He was taken from prison, from judgment who shall declare his generation? He’s cut off out of the land of the living.” The NIV says, “Who can speak of His descendants.” I think the point is, here’s a person who’s put to death and he doesn’t have any descendants. It seems like that’s the end.

Then in the last phrase, the question is asked: Why? Why did this happen? The last

phrase answers with substitutionary atonement again. It's "for the transgression of my people that he was stricken."

Isaiah 53:9 Grave Assigned with the Wicked Men (pl.) and a Rich Man (sg.)

Many Jewish people would probably see in these verses their whole history as being one of persecution and anti-semitic actions of one sort or another as they had been subjected to all kinds of abuse. Let's go onto verse nine. Verse nine in the King James, the first phrase, reads, "And he made his grave with the wicked and with the rich in His death." Look at your citations, page 32, again. I've taken a couple more paragraphs from MacRae. He has a very interesting discussion of verse nine that I think really helps understand, or bring out, the point that's being made in verse nine relating it to the work of Christ. "The first half of verse nine is a remarkable prediction of an unusual circumstance that would occur in connection with the crucifixion of Christ. Here the translation of the King James Version is somewhat inaccurate. When the words are precisely translated, their relation to what occurred at the death of Christ becomes much clearer. This is particularly true of the first clause. Here the King James Version reads, 'He made his grave...' That should be grave, 'with the wicked.' However, the verb used is not ordinarily rendered as 'make.' Its most common translation is 'give.' It's *natan* a very common Hebrew word. Its most common translation is 'give'; it's often used for appointing or assigning. As rendered in the King James Version it sounds as if the servant himself made his grave. So it says "he made his grave with the wicked." Actually the phrase is impersonal. This is a usage common in many languages but not usually expressed this way in English. Our idiom would be 'they assigned his grave' or 'his grave was assigned.' The word rendered 'the wicked,' in 'He made his grave with the wicked,' the word rendered 'the wicked' in the King James is in the plural but has no article. That is in the Hebrew; it is in the plural but has no article. It's *resha'im* in its plural form. It is more accurate to translate it as 'wicked men' and to render the whole clause 'his grave was assigned with wicked men.'

"You see the way that flows. Since Jesus was crucified between two thieves, it

would naturally be expected that he would be buried with them. The Roman custom was either to leave malefactors unburied or to disgrace them by burying a group together in an unclean place. In the King James Version, the verse continues ‘and with the rich in his death.’ The conjunction translated ‘and’ frequently means ‘but,’ or ‘yet.’ And is often so translated in the King James Version. The idea could be expressed by ‘and’ but it is brought out more clearly if the word is translated ‘but.’ The word translated ‘the rich’ in the King James Version is the in the singular and has no article. It would be more accurately translated as ‘a rich man.’ It was a normal expectation that the body of Jesus would be buried with the wicked men who were crucified beside him, yet his body, instead of being buried with them, was placed in a rich man’s tomb. This is something that could not have occurred except as the result of an appeal by a rich man to Pontius Pilate (Matthew 27:57-60).

When the verse is precisely translated it is easy to see that this prediction was exactly fulfilled in connection with the death of Christ. But you see it’s better translated as MacRae suggests “His grave was assigned with wicked men, but with the rich man in his death.”

MacRae continues in these next two paragraphs. “Interpreters who desire to take Isaiah 53 as referring to something other than the sacrifice of Christ find a great stumbling block in the words ‘rich man.’ They say they make no sense in the context and suggest the substitution of some other word such as ‘evildoers.’ Yet all of the manuscripts agree in reading ‘a rich man.’ The reference in the plural to the malefactors, with whom he was killed, is followed by the singular of the word for ‘a rich man.’ In the complete copy of Isaiah found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Hebrew word for ‘a rich man’ was first written in the plural, and then the plural ending was erased. You can see that on the manuscript. In the Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, Professor Millar Burrows of Yale pointed out how easily this could happen. The scribe evidently first wrote the word in the plural under the influence of the preceding plural word for ‘wicked men.’ And then the scribe noticed that the manuscript from which it was copied had ‘rich man’ in the singular. And therefore erased the plural. Thus the Dead Sea Scrolls

provide additional evidence of the accuracy of the reading ‘a rich man’ rather than ‘evildoers.’ This may be called an ‘inorganic prophecy.’”

Inorganic Prophecy

MacRae talks about “inorganic prophecy.” Now what he means by that is: An “organic prophecy” is one that predicts how God will accomplish his great purposes. An “inorganic prophecy” is the prediction of an incidental feature that does not seem directly to further a divine objective but merely serves as a proof that what occurs is actually the event that has been predicted. Burial in a rich man’s tomb would not increase the accomplishment of the servant in burying the guilt of sinful humanity. It’s an incidental point, and in itself it doesn’t have any significance as far as the atoning work of Christ is concerned. It’s an incidental point mentioned 700 years in advance pointing to this particular execution as the one predicted in Isaiah 53. In the providence of God, the fact that Jesus was buried in a fine new tomb was a divine means for making available convincing evidence of his resurrection. If his body had simply been cast into a felon’s grave, the situation might have been quite different. The fact of the empty tomb is one of the great proofs of the resurrection. So again, it is an incidental thing that Christ was buried in a rich man’s tomb, and yet the amazing way in which this prophesy anticipates precisely what happened in connection with the death of Christ is a significant confirmation of the fact that fulfillment is to be found with the death and burial of Christ.

MacRae’s observations made in connection with the first part of verse nine are helpful in understanding both what is meant and how it relates to the New Testament. MacRae says, “As rendered in the King James it sounds as if the servant himself made his grave. Actually, the phrase is impersonal; this is the usage found in many languages, but not usually expressed this way in English. Our idiom would be ‘they assigned his grave.’ In other words, in order to make good sense of the way in which that’s used in English, you almost have to put it into a passive: ‘his grave was assigned.’”

More important is the plural idea. It doesn’t have an article, in the Hebrew. So his grave was appointed with “wicked men.” His grave was appointed with wicked men by

virtue of the fact he was crucified with two other criminals. As far as the situation goes, you would expect that he would then be buried with wicked men. “His grave was appointed with wicked men but with the rich man in his death.” It switches to the singular. You don’t really have the article with either.

Let’s go onto the last part of verse nine. The last phrase of verse nine really goes more with verse ten than it does with verse nine. The word translated “because” is the Hebrew word *‘al*, which really has the idea “concerning the fact,” or “with regard to.” So, “concerning the fact” that he had done no violence, the King James there says “because,” but it’s better translated “concerning the fact that he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth, but it pleased the Lord to bruise him.”

Now, when you read “it pleased the Lord to bruise him,” I think the word “pleased” there is the word that speaks of God’s purpose as foreordination. It was God’s pleasure in that sense. This is what he had ordained before the foundation of the world. Salvation will be attained in this way. “But concerning the fact that he had done nothing wrong: there was no violence, nor any deceit in his mouth; nevertheless, it pleased the Lord--it was the Lord’s purpose--to bruise him. He had put him to grief.”

That word “grief” is the same word that occurs up in verse four: “Surely he has borne our griefs.” It’s that idea of physical pain. “He has put him to grief.” You notice that phrase, “it pleased the Lord to bruise him,” occurs at the end of the verse. “When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see a seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.” So you get that word “pleasure” again. God gave his son to die on the cross so that his purposes would be accomplished in his death. “The pleasure of the Lord” means in the sense of his purposes shall prosper in his hand. In English that word “pleasure” is the idea that there was some sort of enjoyment out of it. The emphasis is not that; it’s the idea of the eternal purposes of God, his good pleasure.

Isaiah 53:10 The Sin Offering

In the middle of verse ten there’s an interesting translation question here. It

doesn't affect greatly the meaning, but let's look at it. Let's compare the King James, the NIV, the New American Standard, and the Berkeley versions. For example, the King James says, "When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin." The NIV says, "And though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering." The NASV says "If he would render himself as a guilt offering." Berkeley says, "When his soul shall constitute an offering for sin." In translation that's where the differences arise for the most part. The question is: what is the subject? You have to insert it. You see in the NIV, "Though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering." So if it is second masculine singular, then you assume "the Lord" is the subject. The King James says "when thou," second masculine singular. The Lord, "when Thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin," the servant's life an offering for sin. But if it is third feminine singular—see you can't distinguish second masculine, third feminine singular form in Hebrew; they're identical. So it could equally be third feminine singular. If it's third feminine singular, then the Hebrew word *nephesh* is the subject. See, like the Berkeley, "When His soul," soul is feminine. *Nephesh* is feminine. So if you take this verb as third feminine, then the *nephesh*, or soul, is the subject. "And when his soul shall constitute an offering for sin." The question is, you take the *nephesh*/soul/life as subject or you take it as second masculine singular and have "the Lord", thou the Lord, as the subject. I don't think the conclusion is a whole lot different, you still have substitutionary atonement clearly taught however you render it. The second masculine singular view of the King James and the NIV is certainly possible. But here's the real question about that translation, this causes a change in subject from third to second person in the context. You see "it pleased the Lord to bruise him. He hath put him to grief." Are you going to change then from third to second person? If you take the third feminine singular imperfect then you don't have that change in subject to second person. When you continue on as it has been, "It pleased the Lord to bruise him. He has put him to grief. When his soul shall constitute an offering for sin, he shall see his seed prolong his days. The pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his name." So just an interesting question of ambiguity really that arises because of the verbal form as far as questioning what is the subject. I would prefer the "his soul" as being the subject, or "his

life.” That brings up another interesting matter.

Let’s take a paragraph of the BDB Hebrew Lexicon there under ‘*asham*, “sin offering.” The lexicon comments, “This offering seems to have been confined to offences against God or man that could be estimated and so covered by compensation. An ordinary trespass-offering was a ram, together with restitution and a penalty of a fifth of its value.” And then I won’t read all that, but notice the last line. “The Messianic servant offers himself as an ‘*asham* in compensation for the sins of the people, interposing for them as their substitute. Isaiah 53:10.” That’s page thirty-one in your subpage.

The Messianic servant offers himself as an *asham*, a sin offering. Notice the relation to Leviticus 17:11, as well. Leviticus 17:11 is a key verse in Leviticus. It says, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood,” and that’s the word *nephesh*. That word “life.” The life of the flesh is in the blood. I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls [your lives]: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.” The word *nephesh* in the singular or in the plural occurs three times in Leviticus 17:11. And here in Isaiah 53 you see it is *naphesho*, “his life” shall constitute an ‘*asham*, a sin offering. So the life of this servant constitutes a sin offering. That’s, I would say, one of the clearest statements of substitutionary atonement in the chapter. You have a number of them in the chapter, but that’s a forceful one: *his* life, his *nephesh*, constitutes an ‘*asham*, a sin offering.

The next phrase is “he shall see a seed.” That gives a statement about the results of the servant’s sacrifice. Verse 8 said, “He was cut off from land of living. Who shall declare his generation? He had no descendants.” Yet here it is said that as a result of the offering that he shall make, “He shall see his seed. He shall prolong his days.” So he will have a posterity. His days seem to be cut off, but here it says he shall prolong his days. I think here you have a hint of the resurrection. That even though he was put to death, he will live again. So he shall see his seed; there will be a posterity. Now of course, I think that what that is referring to is the redeemed people, those who were the benefitters from the work that he did, those who put their trust in his work.

Isaiah 53:11 Objective Genitive: Knowledge about Him

Verse eleven. “He shall see the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied. By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many, for he shall bear their iniquity.” You can ask a question about that second phrase, “By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many.” Is that the knowledge the servant possesses, “By his knowledge”? Or is it the knowledge about the servant that others possess? In other words, it’s the question of the objective versus the subjective genitive. I think most likely the ‘his’ is to be taken as an objective rather than subjective genitive. So the phrase means, “By the knowledge about him,” It is *their* knowledge of what *he* did. By that knowledge they have, the servant will declare many righteous.

Isaiah 53:12 He Shall Be Triumphant

The last verse of Isaiah 53: “Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide his spoil with the strong.” Then you get several summary statements “because he has poured out his soul unto death. He was numbered with the transgressors. He bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors.” I think that last phrases are quite clear: there is a repetition of ideas that have been already expressed in the chapter.

The first part of the verse is one that’s often caused difficulty in understanding. “Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong.” Look at page 29 of your citations; I’m inclined to read this the way Alexander suggests in his commentary. Alexander says, “It is better, therefore, to adopt the usual construction sanctioned by Calvin, Gesenius, and Ewald, which supposes him to be described as equal to the greatest conquerors.” In other words, you have an idiom here in which the servant is pictured as a conqueror. “If this is not enough, or if the sense is frigid, as Martini alleges, it is not the fault of the interpreter who has no right to strengthen the expressions of his author by means of forced constructions.” Here’s what Alexander suggests, “The simple meaning of the first clause is that he shall be triumphant; not that others shall be sharers in his victory.” You know when it says “he

shall divide the spoil with the strong,” the simple meaning is “He shall be triumphant; not that others shall be sharers in his victory, but that he shall be as gloriously successful in his enterprise as other victors ever were in theirs.” You often get a question of interpreters that try to take this in a more detailed literal way. They ask: Who is the strong that he is going to divide his spoils with? And you get into all kinds of discussions on that. Alexander sidesteps that by saying, “The imagery used in the first clause of verse twelve is simply that Christ is going to be successful and victorious in the work that he has been given to do, and the imagery that’s used is that of a conquering leader or king. The simple idea is he is triumphant.

Isaiah 53 is a great chapter. That brings us, as I mentioned, to the end of the servant passages. From this point on you read of “servants” in the plural, but not again of “the servant” in the singular. Next we’ll look at the results of the servant’s work. After the midterm I’ll probably spend one session on finishing Isaiah 54, 55, and 56.

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