

Dr. Marv Wilson, Prophets, Session 32, Isaiah's Suffering Servant

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This is Dr. Marv Wilson in his teaching on the Prophets. This is session 32, Isaiah's Suffering Servant.

All right, I'm ready to begin.

Let's have a word of prayer. This is the day you have made. We are glad to be your children this day.

We commit ourselves to you to the task of living the life of a student on this campus, a professor. Thank you that we are part of a community of faith here that cares for each other. We pray that this day we will have opportunities to lift up the discouraged ones on this campus, to speak a word of encouragement and hope.

We thank you that you never leave us, even when we may be down on ourselves or discouraged. Thank you for Isaiah that gives hope in God's good news, that even though history has setbacks and individually we have reversals and question marks and struggles and problems, that ultimately you are a victorious God and you lead your people ultimately from victory to the final victory. In that we rest this day with thanksgiving through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Do any of you have any questions from the last presentation I made on Ahaz, Isaiah, Emanuel, Alma, Petula, Parthenos, and the company? I hope I made that clear. If you are a classic, historic, orthodox, traditional Christian and accept the teaching of the virgin birth, which goes with such a label, then believe in it for the right reasons.

Don't believe in it because the word Alma is found there and there is more to it than that. Young women of marriageable age, but as I tried to show, those other kinds of qualifiers were necessary from the writers to give greater clarity. And that's why as Christians we accept the virgin birth, because those clarifying phrases are found in Matthew's Gospel, particularly concerning the Parthenos who would be with child.

Alright, if you have no questions or comments, I want to go on today to the suffering servant. That theme is a major theme in Scripture. And it again is a theme that immediately when it comes up illustrates not just the similarities between Christians and Jews but often the differences of interpretation.

You and I can see a guy at a pro football game hold up a sign that says Isaiah 53, and when Jewish readers say to themselves, what's Isaiah 53, and look at how Jewish commentators have understood the servant of the Lord, they typically see that as

referring to themselves as a people, corporately, suffering. And that's how the prophet is describing this concept of Ebed Yahweh, the servant of the Lord. And so, Israel was called to be God's servant but very often overrun by other powers.

Christians, on the other hand, that see the sign Isaiah 53, see it like Mel Gibson wanted Christians to understand it, as he opened his film with a quotation from Isaiah 53, to take you immediately to the passion of the Christ. The writers of the New Testament quote from Isaiah 53 extensively and interpret that suffering servant in a very clear manner, in referring not to the suffering of the nation but in this particular case, God's suffering servant, his unique son, who suffers through his death, and eventually his resurrection, which followed. This is a description, a predictive description of that.

Why the differences? The glossary at the back of the Old Testament, which we came to call the New Testament, is a theological interpretation for early believers of the Hebrew Bible. Our Jewish friends also have their midrash, their interpretive commentaries, and as the rabbis put various commentaries together, particularly in the centuries that followed the birth of the church, we see a distinct difference between the two communities. Some of this may have been a bit of oppositional defiance.

We do have some of that in Christian-Jewish discussion. Whatever you believe, as a Christian, I believe the opposite. And sort of from the word go, things are defined quite differently.

Jesus may be a Jew, but curiously, he's not only the very person, because he is Jewish, that brings Christians and Jews together, he's also the very person that divides Christians and Jews because we interpret him so very differently from our own individual perspectives, which derive, in our case, from Scripture. So we have our own built-in commentary to Isaiah 53, and nine of the twelve verses of Isaiah 53 are cited from the New Testament in seeking to make connections with the life, worth, work, and particularly the passion of Christ. The expression, servant of the Lord, or ebed Yahweh, is found not just in Isaiah 53, but it's actually used in a variety of ways throughout the Hebrew Bible.

The patriarchs in the Old Testament are referred to as servants of Yahweh. Moses is described in Numbers 12:7 as the servant of the Lord. Joshua, the same kind of language.

David, in the highly theological Davidic covenant passage in 2 Samuel 7, is referred to as the servant of the Lord. The prophets are also the servants of the Lord, as we saw that general term as we began this course. And even Nebuchadnezzar, the pagan king of Babylon.

Don't forget how far categories sometimes stretch if Cyrus could be called Mashiach, Messiah. That is, the anointed one to be an agent to allow Israel, through His decree in 538, to start coming home, which they began in 536 BC.

So, these expressions, which we may want to relegate to very specific in-house people of faith, God sometimes reminds us that God is the architect of history. The cattle on a thousand hills are His. The silver and gold are His.

The latter comes from Haggai, one of the prophets. He raises up nations, He topples nations. Even the wrath of nations, says the psalmist, has a way of praising Him.

While this stretches some of our theological categories when we read these kinds of things, we can see how God ultimately shapes the big picture of history and guides it providentially as He sees fit. He is the God of history, not just of Israel's history. And as Heshu would say, He's even the God of the enemies of Israel, but they just don't know it.

Think about that. All right, Ebed-Yahweh. People who fulfill God's purpose.

And the servant of the Lord, I'm going to suggest, may be used in four different ways in the book of Isaiah itself. I've given you some ways in which servant of the Lord is used outside of Isaiah. Looking at it from inside of Isaiah, is the word servant of the Lord ever used for corporate, national, or ethnic Israel? And the answer is yes.

It does apply to Israel in a number of places. Take chapter 41 of Isaiah, verse 8. You, O Israel, My servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants, plural, of Abraham, My friend, I took you from the ends of the earth. I called you, you are My servant, I have chosen you.

Referring to Israel, who was Jacob and his descendants, the B'nai Yisrael, the sons of Israel. And the covenant promises were given to God's chosen people. Another reference, 42:6. I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness.

I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles. That's an expression.

Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles. And indeed, that's why most of us are here today because Israel was called to be La'or Goyim, a light to the nations.

Now that same passage is picked up later in the New Testament and has another meaning of witness. But in its original context here, Israel was to be the witness in the Hebrew text of the most frequently prayed prayer in the life of a Jew, namely the Shema of Deuteronomy 6,4 and following.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. The Jewish scholars and scribes that copied the text intentionally highlighted verse 4 of Deuteronomy 6 as being the witness text of the Old Testament. The first word is Shema, which ends with an ayin, one of the Hebrew letters.

And then the final word, ehad, meaning one, ends with a dalet. And so, when you open any Hebrew Bible in the world, you always find, and this is very, very rare in the Hebrew Bible, to find letters that stand way out because they're much larger than the other letters on the line. And those two letters, ayin, and dalet, when you pronounce them together, they're the word aid.

Aid means witness. Adim, witnesses, plural. How did a Jew witness to his faith? Well, as the rabbis highlighted the first and the last word in the Shema with these two letters, you witness the oneness of God, as opposed to everybody else around you who is a polytheist.

And so, the great Rabbi Akiva, for example, in 135, when the Romans tore his flesh off him by heating iron claws until they were red hot, and he became a martyr. It is reported in early rabbinic sources that he recited this word ehad, the word for God being one, which was a little bit of, in your face you Romans, who have a multiplicity of deities, God is one. So strongly did the early church understand this point of aid or witness, even to the point of death.

The early Greek community used the Greek word martoreo, meaning to testify or to bear witness. Of course, our English word martyr eventually derives from that same root. Who was one who bore witness or testified? Read the New Testament, where that word martoreo has a prominent role, as 11 of the 12 apostles met their death by martyrdom, according to the early tradition of the church.

So, Israel was to bear witness, through revelation of the Holy Scriptures, to ethical monotheism to the whole world. You are my witnesses, my servant whom I have chosen. Israel was God's servant.

Isaiah 42:19 is just a reminder that not all these passages about the servant of the Lord are scattered through the so-called servant songs of Isaiah, and there are several of these servant songs scattered throughout the second half of Isaiah. These do not all specifically have reference to Jesus. 42:19 is an example.

It says, Here you deaf and look, you blind and see. Who is deaf and blind? It's Israel, not the Messiah, not Jesus in the New Testament. It says in 42:19, 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 Ebed-Yahweh, the servant of the Lord? So here is a bit of a rebuke by the Almighty to His own people, who are called to be a messenger, but they had forgotten the message, and had forgotten to live that out.

And so, God, in a sense, is punishing an unfaithful servant. Alright, I could give you other texts, but one way of understanding the servant of the Lord in Isaiah, then, is for Israel as a people. A second way of understanding Ebed-Yahweh, is seeing them as a righteous remnant.

There are places in the Hebrew Bible where Israel is mentioned as an ideal Israel or as an Israel who is other than, very often, the disobedient, sinful Israel that Isaiah himself always had to chide. But, in other words, it refers to a righteous remnant, 44:1, But now listen, O Jacob, my servant Israel, whom I have chosen. And he goes on, and he uses this interesting word for Israel, Jeshurun.

Jeshurun, whom I have chosen. Now, in Hebrew, Yashar means straight ahead. And so, some have seen this as a term of affection, Jeshurun, namely the upright one.

The one that's straight. The Septuagint translators didn't exactly know what to do with this. They render it Agapetos, the beloved one.

Sort of a term of affection by the Almighty for His people. But this upright one, a term which is used in Deuteronomy 32:15, and several times in Deuteronomy 33, Jeshurun. It is a term of some kind of affection for God's people.

And so, they are described this way in chapter 44. Don't be afraid, O Jacob, my servant Jeshurun, whom I have chosen. For I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground.

I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring and My blessing on your descendants. They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams. One will say, I belong to the Lord.

And another will call himself by the name of Jacob. Still another will write on his hand, the Lord's. And will take the name of Israel.

Even this willingness then of this ideal Israel, this Israel which is a righteous remnant, the Israel within Israel, even others will be attracted to that and want to identify with them. Even something prophetic perhaps that we see in the opening chapters of Genesis that talks about non-Jews entering the tents of Shem. Fascinating prophetic idea that the only way we non-Jews can explain or define ourselves is through Shem.

We have no definition or identity if we don't come from Israel. Galatians 3:29, if you belong to Christ, you are Abraham's offspring. And so that expanded version of Israel as the covenant expands and becomes more inclusive to include Abraham's other children.

Alright, there's a righteous remnant. And there are other passages where the prophet himself may be viewed. And while we all think of that interesting passage of Philip's encounter with the African, the Ethiopian eunuch as he's sometimes called.

Philip sees him with a scroll, struggling with, what are you reading, and do you understand it? And the Ethiopian says, no, I can't understand it unless somebody helps me. So, Philip pops up in the chariot. One of the questions that are asked is whether the prophet is speaking of himself or someone else. Actually, that's a very fair question.

It says in Acts 8:29, he's reading Isaiah. It says Philip, who was a Hellenistic Jew. His name means lover of horses, friend of horses. Philip was one of the first guys to leave Jerusalem, take the gospel out of the holy city, and move northward up toward the Samaritans because he was a little more open to cross-cultural influences.

Now he's engaging another out-of-towner from Africa, the Ethiopian eunuch, who was an official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. And Philip says, do you understand what you're reading? How can I unless someone explains it to me? So, he invites Philip to come up in the chariot and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture, says Acts 8.32. He was led like a sheep to the slaughter as a lamb before his shearer's silence, so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation, he was deprived of justice and so forth. The eunuch then asks Philip, tell me please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else? Well, in the very next verse, Philip gives him the midrash, the interpretation of that, which was part of the community already because Jesus himself, in his own tradition, identified with those words. And we have a baptism out there in the Gaza Strip somewhere.

I don't know where the water came from. Maybe it's the canteen. But we have a baptism.

Because he led him to faith in Christ because that text, he said, does not refer to the prophet. But there was that initial question: could it refer to Isaiah? Well, I think Isaiah 61 may be one of those places which, in its original context, refers to the prophet, and that is the prophet Isaiah. I will come back to this passage before we're done with the servant of the Lord theme.

But this passage Jesus identified with in the New Testament, but in its original context, I think this is the prophet himself. The spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me. And in some sense, even if it's a limited sense, prophets were anointed by the Spirit of God.

They spoke by the unction of the Spirit of God. They had that social consciousness to minister to the poor and the broken hearted. And maybe it was this prophet that would proclaim emancipation from slavery in Babylon, from captivity in Babylon, to proclaim freedom from the captives, release from the darkness of prison.

So, the initial context may have been one that spoke to that Isaiah 40-66 emphasis of we're coming home. Comfort my people. We are free.

But the way the Spirit of God wanted to use that more, to go back to where we began this course, the *sensus plenior*, the deeper meaning. Jesus identifies with this servant of the Lord because His ministry is parallel. It's a freeing ministry.

It's a prison ministry. It's a ministry among the poor, the lepers. It's a declaration of proclaiming good news, God's good news.

So, there's a third possibility of how the servant of the Lord may be used to have reference to the prophet himself. Now, the last emphasis here is seeing this as a reference to the Messiah, to the person of Jesus who came to this earth not to reign and rule in earthly regal splendor and in power, but He came to be suffering servant, to come in humility, or as the Gospels put it, He did not come passive infinitive in the Greek, to be served, but He came active infinitive, to serve, not be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. Now, our classic passage on suffering servant, referring to Jesus, is chapter 52, starting with verse 13, and running through verse 12 of chapter 53.

Now, I want you to see here that there's nothing inspired about verse divisions and chapter divisions. Here's another one of those examples in Scripture where you really have to dip into the back of chapter 52 to get the first of five stanzas because each stanza has three verses each.

And so, Isaiah 52:13-15 is stanza one, and then in chapter 53, you have the concluding four stanzas of the five that climaxes in a reference to the ultimate victory through Christ's resurrection from the dead. So, the suffering servant of Isaiah 52-53 is identified by New Testament writers as having reference to Jesus. And while this passage was used as part of the Haftarah readings, I mentioned this earlier, the selections from the prophets that emerged during the intertestamental years.

Remember, it's Maccabees that says Jewish people could not be found with copies of the Torah or women who have had their sons circumcised. And there were some very strict prohibitions that the Seleucid Greeks imposed upon the Jews. And so the Maccabees, from a priestly family, decided to fight back.

They were not going to sit there and take the Hellenization of the Jewish people. And with great joy, accept the eagle of Zeus on the temple. And so, during this time, not

wanting to be found with copies of the Torah in their hands, and so having to face death by these Greek persecutors, and of course, Hanukkah comes out of this, it's the festival of lights, but in many ways, it's the festival of religious liberty and freedom.

Namely, we're not going to be Hellenized to death, we're not going to be syncretized to death, we're not going to face acculturation so we become like all the rest of the nations. We will take a stand for religious liberty. And that valiant stand by Judas the Maccabee and his brothers resulted, of course, in the cleansing of the temple for eight days, and so that's why we have a John 12.22 in the Bible, I believe the reference, which refers to Jesus being in Jerusalem to celebrate Hanukkah, commemorating the overthrow of the Greek Hellenization of the people of the land.

During this time, then, since Jews did not want to have a copy of the Torah in their hand, they found coordinated readings from the prophets that were of the same basic theme, or a theme, that might have come up in the regular Torah reading portion. And Isaiah 53, for a number of centuries, was part of the Haftarah, H-A-F-T-A-R-A-H, but eventually got dropped because Jews were hauled in the dock and called through disputation, theological disputation, to have to answer who is the suffering servant? And since Jews were not always prepared to give the friendly answer to their Christian interrogators, we have a whole literature that deals with these interrogations. Eventually, this scripture was dropped from synagogue reading, and so has become rather widely unknown today in Jewish circles. It becomes a bit trait to many Jewish readers, that is, it's not proper or fit to read it.

It's what the Christians read, and since they have their own take on it, again, oppositional defiance. We will go somewhere else to keep things neat and clean. Looking at an outline for what we have here, I'm going to suggest four main points.

First of all, the renown of this servant's sufferings. That is the fame, the illustrious report of all of this. Actually, it's sort of like reading the last chapter of a book first, then you go back.

That's sort of what we have here. You'll notice he begins in stanza one, talking about the exaltation. There's no exaltation in the life of Jesus, if you look at it theologically until he triumphs from death.

After he triumphs from death, we have what Christian theology calls the three-fold stage of his exaltation: his resurrection, his ascension, and his session at the right hand of God. Those are the three parts of the exaltation.

But it only comes after suffering, death, and burial. But here, this servant here, who is mentioned in verse 13, says, the first thing we read about him is that he is going to prosper. Or, while in the NIV there was a debate among the committee members

whether to translate it prosper, and that's where the minority vote on the committee ended up in the footnote here.

But whether it is to prosper or to act wisely, the next line clearly says he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. A reminder of Adoniram, Judson Gordon. Adoniram, my Lord is exalted, is what Adoniram means.

My Lord is lifted high. Ram, or Rama, is a high place. And refers here to his exaltation.

As Paul in his great kenosis passage, which speaks of Jesus emptying himself in Philippians 2, who, being the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but he made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being found in the appearance of a man, he humbled himself, became obedient to death, even the death on a cross. Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him a name that is above every name. So, through humility, or emptying himself of, making himself of no reputation, or making himself nothing, that is, giving up the independent exercise of his divine attributes, he walked this earth as a servant, submitting to the humiliation of being a man, giving up the high prerogatives that were his, as the very Son of God.

So, this is the first thing we are introduced to. In verse 14, it says, just as there were many who were appalled at him, now we are coming to the Mel Gibson depiction of this one who is beaten and bruised, and we kind of have a snapshot of him, so that people are astonished at him because his appearance was so marred or disfigured beyond human semblance. So, many of his human features, and while the poetry is elevated, it's hyperbolic, it's figurative language, it's painting a verbal picture poetically, this does speak to the maltreatment he received at the hands of the soldiers because many of his human features were unrecognizable.

The next verse, so he will, RSV says, startle many nations. The NIV here opts for a different reading, so he will sprinkle many nations. Among various rules of which reading you take in the Greek or the Hebrew text, one of the rules is the more difficult reading is often the correct reading, as well as the shorter reading tends to be the more correct reading as opposed to the longer reading.

The latter point, because people tended to expand and to put a colophon, which is like a tailpipe on something, extended out some, and the original may have been more succinct, and so scribes could come along, and like in the Lord's Prayer, for thine is the kingdom, power, and the glory forever, Amen. That's a great ending, and there's nothing theologically wrong with it to recite that on a Sunday morning or every day if you wish. The theology is great, and it's just not part of the original disciples' prayer.

But some scribe in the 15th or 16th century thought it sounded good, so he threw it in. Expanding. An already very, very good Jewish prayer.

But every one of the ideas does derive from the Hebrew Bible. It's sort of a collage of things found in the Prophets and in the Torah. In this particular case, sprinkling of the nations may imply, because that's really what the Hebrew says, some kind of spiritual cleansing may be in mind.

Some kind of spiritual cleansing may come about eventually through the spreading of the Gospel and people responding to the water of life. But in any case, this figure is going to cause even kings to gawk, to turn their heads. Kings will, in fact, shut their mouths, the text says.

They will do this probably in wonder, unable to speak as they look at this spectacle of victory, of exaltation, of triumph that came out of this mangled piece of human flesh so marred beyond human resemblance. If there is a story of the two Ts, from tragedy to triumph, this is it in Scripture. Just a couple of things about the second stanza.

The second stanza is about getting into chapter 53. Who has believed what we have heard? That is the prophetic message from God to Isaiah, which is God's good news of salvation.

Who has believed what we, which includes the prophet, what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? There is a great anthropomorphism and Isaiah has quite a few anthropomorphisms and a few anthropopathisms attributing the form or part of the human body to God. The arm of the Lord. The arm of the Lord is a code word for power.

In fact, the New English Bible renders the arm of the Lord, takes that idiom, and rephrases it with that sense. Translates it as the power of God. The arm of the Lord is used throughout Scripture to speak of a special interposition in human affairs whereby God delivers people.

He often punishes enemies. For instance, Israel comes out of Egypt. We have the exodus.

We have Yeshua, deliverance, freedom, release, liberation. And in that context, it shows the strength of God. The arm of God is present.

In the Egyptian language, the picture of an outstretched arm is just like that. Egyptian is a pictographic language. And the outstretched arm, which is translated as power or might, is fascinating in Egyptian.

If you want to express that concept, you stick your arm out to express power or might. Finally, in John 12, starting with verse 37, Jesus is dealing with the question of unbelief. And it says, starting with John 12, verse 37, that even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they would not believe in Him.

This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet. Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? In the very next verses, he continues to quote Isaiah, referring to blinded eyes, deadened hearts, and inability to see and understand.

Yes, John 12:37-41. So, the ability to see with the eye of the heart, to see spiritual things in the inner man, is critical in really understanding the Gospel. And John here says that even in the midst of the powerful works of God's miraculous signs, people still did not believe.

These things, at the end of the day, have to be spiritually caught. They cannot simply be outwardly taught. With that, we will end today's class, and I will pick up more of Isaiah 53 in the next class.

This is Dr. Marv Wilson in his teaching on the Prophets. This is session 32, Isaiah's Suffering Servant.