

Dr. Robert Chisholm, Servant Songs, Session 4, Audio Overview Podcast

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to the Deep Dive. We're your shortcut to getting genuinely well informed. We dig into compelling ideas, pull out those key nuggets from, you know, a whole stack of sources.

That's the goal. And today we're looking at something pretty amazing: the power of ancient texts, especially when they seem to, well, shed light on deep truths or even foreshadow events way off in the future, sometimes in really startling detail. It really is remarkable, isn't it, how words written thousands of years ago can still hit home, still feel relevant.

They offer perspectives that just, well, they transcend time. Absolutely. So our mission today is to take you deep into one specific, often debated passage from the Old Testament, Isaiah 52.1, running through 53.11. Often called the suffering servant of the Lord.

Exactly. We want to peel back the layers, maybe confront some of the tricky bits, the ambiguities, and really show why it's resonated for so long. The idea is to get you really well-informed on a truly foundational text.

And we're drawing heavily on solid scholarship here. Folks like Dr. Robert Chisholm and his work on these servant songs in Isaiah. That expertise helps illuminate the nuances in the Hebrew and the bigger theological ideas.

Right. Because this passage, while it's a cornerstone, it's actually the climax of a whole series, isn't it? It is. You've got these servant songs scattered through Isaiah.

Starts back in chapter 42, then you see it in 49, chapter 50, and then boom, this section in 52 and 53. And each one builds on the last. Yeah.

It paints a progressively clearer picture of this mysterious figure. Who is he? What's his mission? It sort of unfolds gradually. Okay.

And as we go through this text today, expect some surprises. There are little linguistic puzzles, things that unlock deeper meanings, and, well, a prophetic picture that almost feels like it jumps off the page. Hence, it's something much bigger.

Okay, let's unpack this. Where are we starting? Verse 8? Yeah, let's pick it up in Isaiah 53, verse 8. And right away, we hit one of those interesting ambiguities in the Hebrew, that first sentence. It can be translated a few ways.

It can. You might see he was led away after an unjust trial, or maybe something like after a coercive legal decision. Or even unfairly, with no one to defend him.

So what does that flexibility tell us? What's the core message there? Well, I think it tells us that however you slice the Hebrew specifics, the main point is crystal clear. The whole judicial process against this servant was fundamentally unjust, stacked against him. So not just a technicality.

No, not at all. It was a perversion of justice, really, leading to his condemnation. And that subtle choice of words, it's not just grammar; it really drives home the servant's innocence, even though he's facing criminal charges.

It's quite powerful. Then the text asks this question: for his generation, who even cared? And you mentioned the source material points out that generation means his contemporaries. Right, the people living at the same time as him.

Who among them even gave it a second thought? But then comes this really critical statement. Indeed, he was cut off from the land of the living. How significant is that phrase? Oh, it's absolutely crucial.

Throughout the Old Testament, being cut off from the land of the living? Yeah. Well, it doesn't mean jail time or exile. No.

It means death. Unequivocally. When you're cut off from the land of the living, you've gone to Sheol.

That's the Hebrew idea of the grave, the realm of the dead. So the servant dies, period. He dies, yes.

And then the text asks, why? Why did he die? And the Hebrew construction points to a specific reason. Because of the pesha, the rebellion of, and here's another nuance, right? My people. What's going on with my people? Yeah, pesha first, that's a strong word.

It's not just a slip-up. It's deliberate, defiant rebellion against God. Okay.

My people, that's key. Yeah. It could mean Isaiah's own people, Israel, or some ancient versions read it as his people, meaning the Lord's people.

No, but either way. Either way, the focus is on Israel, the covenant community. The point is, the servant died because of their rebellion, their pesha.

Not because of anything he did. So the servant died because of Israel's rebellion. The very people who deserve the punishment, he took it for them.

That sounds an awful lot like substitution, doesn't it? One person taking the place of another. Is that reading too much into it, or is that the natural sense? I'd argue it really is the most natural reading. I know some scholars push back on substitutionary atonement here, but honestly, when you look at everything the passage says.

Like what? Like he carried their iniquities. He died because of their rebellion. He bore their sins.

When you pile all those statements up, the case for a substitutionary death becomes, well, incredibly compelling. It really lays out a transfer of guilt and consequence. Okay.

Okay. Moving to verse 9, there's another really interesting linguistic detail. The Hebrew says something like, They intended to bury him with criminals, but he ended up with a rich man in his death.

Right. And on the surface, rich and criminals, they don't seem like a perfect poetic match, do they? They don't, do they? And that contrast is actually quite powerful. It highlights his innocence again.

Well, think about it. Criminals would get a disgraced burial, probably unmarked. The rich, they'd get an honorable tomb.

So even though he went through this unjust trial, executed like a criminal, his burial in a rich man's tomb underscores his true nature, his blamelessness. Ah, it's a subtle sign. A subtle, but I think profound indicator that he wasn't actually guilty of the things they killed him for.

And the verse drives it home, saying it was because he had committed no violent deeds, nor had he spoken deceitfully. So that absolute innocence in word and deed is why he gets the unexpected honorable burial. Precisely.

It's his purity that sets him apart. Then verse 10 reveals an even deeper layer. It says, Though the Lord desired to crush him and make him ill.

Just pause on that. The Lord desired to crush him. It's staggering, isn't it? It wasn't random.

It wasn't just evil men. It was somehow the Lord's will. This suffering was part of a divine redemptive plan, a necessary step.

And the next line is profoundly significant. If his soul offers a reparation offering, that phrase, a sham in Hebrew, is technical. It comes right out of the sacrificial system.

The guilt offering, right? Exactly. It implies a priestly function almost. The servant's suffering acts like a restitution, a payment, a way of making things right with God for the sins of others.

It's a massive statement about the atonement he achieves. But the key thing maybe is that even though the Lord allows this crushing, he doesn't abandon him completely. The text says he will see descendants and enjoy a long life, and the Lord's purpose will be accomplished through him.

Right. Now, that doesn't mean he doesn't actually die. It's more like Old Testament poetic language for ultimate vindication and blessing from God.

So despite the death. Despite the death, his suffering wasn't the end. It actually achieves God's ultimate purpose.

And he is, in a sense, richly rewarded and his legacy lives on. OK, verse 11. Having suffered, he will reflect on his work.

So the servant looks back satisfied. And then this phrase, by knowledge of him, he will make many righteous, and because their iniquities he carried. Yes, that by knowledge of him is interesting.

You mean a couple of things. Right. It could mean by people's knowledge of him, their recognition, their faith in what he did.

Or it could mean by the servant's own knowledge, which in the Old Testament often implies faithfulness, loyalty, allegiance. So either by people believing in him or by his own faithfulness to God. Right.

Either way, he achieves this result. He will make many righteous. And that verb, make righteous, is huge.

Help us unpack that one. OK, this gets us into some really significant theological territory. The Hebrew verb here is wuduk; it means to cause someone to be righteous.

Cause them, not just declare them. Well, that's the thing. It seems to encompass both.

It's not just the legal declaration, what theologians call justification, like an acquittal in court. It also seems to imply an actual change, making them righteous in character, what we call sanctification. So God doesn't just like clear your cosmic rap sheet.

Exactly. He also starts changing you from the inside out, making you more like him. It seems both dimensions are wrapped up in this one powerful Hebrew word.

And this really bumps up against a major objection, doesn't it? You mentioned the Jewish scholar, Harry Orlinsky. He argued strongly against substitutionary atonement here. He did.

His point was, essentially, how can a just judge declare a guilty person righteous? Isn't that a perversion of justice itself? It sounds like an abomination in legal terms. It's a powerful critique. How does the text or maybe the broader biblical picture answer that? Well, that is the profound mystery and, frankly, the essence of the gospel, isn't it? The normal legal standard is overturned, but not perversely.

It's overturned because the servant carried their sins. Ah, the transfer. Exactly.

There's a divine transaction. The servant takes the penalty and then his righteousness is credited, imputed to those who believe. As someone like the apostle Paul understood, steeped as he was in the Old Testament, if everyone has sinned, if no one meets God's standard.

Which Paul argues forcefully elsewhere. Right. Then God's solution isn't just wiping everyone out.

It's providing this way through the servant for people to be declared righteous because justice has been satisfied by the substitute and then to be made righteous progressively. It's an astounding gift, but one that has to be received. So the song wraps up with this imagery of the servant's ultimate vindication.

He uses military language, right? I will assign him a portion with the multitudes. He will divide the spoils with the powerful. Yeah.

It's like he went into battle against sin, seemed to lose his life in the process, but ultimately emerges triumphant. He willingly submitted, was numbered with the rebels, took on the sin of many. And if you connect that to the New Testament, you can't help but think of Philippians 2, can you? Jesus humbling himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

And therefore God highly exalted him. Exactly. It feels like Paul is drawing directly on Isaiah 53.

This passage, penned centuries before Jesus, it just lays out the gospel so clearly. Humanity needs rescue. God provides it through this servant.

It really hammers home that message found all through Moses and the prophets. The path to redemption was there even before the New Testament explicitly spelled it out. Which brings us to the big question: who is this servant? If you're in a discussion, maybe someone says, " Oh, that's not about Jesus.

Our source material lays out a kind of logical progression, right? It does. Option one, maybe the servant is the nation of Israel. What? But as we've seen elsewhere in Isaiah, particularly in the earlier servant songs, Israel, often called Israel Jacob, is portrayed as sinful, blind, deaf, needing deliverance themselves.

They're exiled because of sin. They aren't the deliverer. They're the ones who need to be delivered by the servant.

Even some Jewish scholars would agree Israel needs saving here, not is the savior. Precisely. They need the deliverance.

They don't provide it in this context. Okay. So if it's not the nation, what's option two? Maybe the prophet himself, Isaiah, or whoever wrote this section.

Some have suggested that. Maybe Deutero-Isaiah, suffering to get his message across. But the text itself says, all we like sheep have gone astray; that we is inclusive.

Isaiah includes himself. Absolutely. Remember back in chapter six, Isaiah cries out, " Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.

He knows his own sinfulness and that of his people. He doesn't claim the kind of absolute righteousness needed to be this servant, the one who bears the sin of all. Okay.

So if it's not the nation, Israel, and it's not the prophet Isaiah, what powerful implication does that leave us with? Well, it points directly towards the Messiah, doesn't it? It seems to. And if you accept that, then you're looking at a Messiah who is rejected by his own people, who suffers immensely, who is cut off from the land of the living. He dies, but then against all odds is vindicated by God, lives on in some sense, gains numerous followers, sees his offspring, and is ultimately exalted and blessed.

When you lay it out like that. It sounds an awful lot like Jesus, doesn't it? Why would we expect someone else to come along and try to redo what Jesus seems to have fulfilled so perfectly according to this ancient blueprint? That does raise a key point, though. Why were so many people in Jesus's time, and even before, expecting a conquering king? Why did they struggle so much with a suffering Messiah? That's a critical question.

And the fascinating thing is Isaiah actually gives us both pictures of God's ideal king. It seems many people just focus on one side of the coin. Okay, what are the two sides? Side one is the victory and glory king.

You see this clearly in places like Isaiah chapter 11. This Messiah is like a new David, has a special status as God's son. He'll subdue God's enemies, extend God's rule, establish universal justice and peace.

That's the kind of figure many in the Second Temple period were eagerly anticipating. Right, and you still hear that today, don't you? People say, well, Jesus didn't bring world peace. The lion isn't lying down with the lamb.

Exactly. And the Christian answer is typically, well, that's his second coming. But Isaiah also gives us the second portrait: opposition and suffering.

Okay. This is where the ideal king, acting as the Lord's servant, faces intense opposition, endures suffering from the Lord, as we saw in verse 10, specifically to atone for the sins of his people, both Israel and the nations. And crucially, it's because of this willingness to suffer that the Lord ultimately exalts him to that glorious kingship.

So Isaiah 53 doesn't contradict Isaiah 11. Not at all. Isaiah 53 actually anticipates and enables what happens in Isaiah 11.

The suffering isn't the end goal. It's the necessary path to the ultimate victory and exaltation. You don't get the glory without the suffering first.

That makes sense. Think about the context. God's people in Isaiah's time didn't just have an external political problem.

They had a deep spiritual problem, that pesha, that rebellion. History shows us political liberation alone doesn't change hearts. Right.

You just swap one set of problems for another sometimes. Exactly. So this section of Isaiah powerfully reveals God's ultimate solution isn't just political.

It's dealing with the root of human brokenness through the servant's suffering. That transforms hearts first, and then the glorious kingdom comes. Jesus fulfilled both portraits, the suffering servant and the exalted king.

And just as a final thought on these servant songs, our source material suggests there might even be a fifth one often missed because of how we divide up the book. Isaiah 61, verse 1. Ah, yes. The spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me.

Sounds familiar, right? The spirit of the Lord is upon me echoes the very first servant song in chapter 42. It does. And that word anointed me, the Hebrew is mashak.

It's where we get the word Messiah. So someone is speaking here who is anointed, who is the Messiah. And in the Old Testament context, being anointed with the Spirit like this often has royal connotations.

So you have someone speaking as a king chosen by God to do what? To proclaim good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, and to release from darkness for the prisoners. Which lines up perfectly with the servant's mission of bringing justice and release described in the earlier songs. And of course, famously, Jesus reads this very passage in the synagogue in Luke chapter 4. He reads up to the part about the year of the Lord's favor.

And then sits down and says, Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. It really sounds like the servant speaking. Now, some might argue, oh, but he's acting as a prophet there.

But why create that false choice? As our source points out, he can be both. He's anointed like a king. He's concerned with justice like the servant king.

He's proclaiming and decreeing like a prophet and a king. He embodies all these roles. So if you include Isaiah 61, the whole sequence of servant songs kind of comes full circle.

It seems to. You start with a royal figure chosen for justice, 42, move through intense suffering and atonement, 50, 53, and then return in 61 to his messianic mission, empowered by the Spirit, fulfilling all the roles: ideal king, ultimate prophet, and suffering servant. It's a remarkably complete picture.

OK, so let's recap our deep dive into Isaiah 53. We've really seen how meticulously it describes this suffering servant figure. Yeah, someone who dies a substitutionary death, taking the hit for the rebellion, the peshav, my people and the many.

And crucially, this servant isn't just crushed. He's then vindicated, exalted by God. And the passage uniquely weaves together what people expected, the victory and glory of God's king, with what they didn't expect or didn't want to see.

The opposition and suffering. And the connection that jumps out. I mean, it's hard to miss.

It really is. This ancient prophecy written hundreds of years before Jesus walked the earth lays out with incredible precision what Jesus actually did. It shows the Messiah isn't just a conquering king, but also, and perhaps first, a suffering servant.

Jesus fulfills both portraits perfectly. So for you listening, what does all this mean? We'd really encourage you to think about the implications of this ancient text. It's a powerful reminder that the gospel, God's plan for rescuing and transforming people, isn't just a New Testament idea.

It's deeply rooted right there in Moses and the prophets. And maybe a final provocative thought to chew on. Understanding this full picture of the Messiah in Isaiah, the king and the servant, the glory and the suffering.

It gives us a really powerful framework for thinking about life's deepest problems, not just back then, but right now, today. How so? If the transformation of individual hearts has to come before the real transformation of society, then this ancient text focused on the servant's atoning work points directly to God's ultimate solution for the brokenness we see all around us, and maybe inside us too. It starts with dealing with the pasha, the rebellion through the servant.