

Isaiah's Servant Songs, Session 3: The Suffering Servant of the Lord (Part A)

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Robert Chisholm examines the transition of the Servant of the Lord from a champion of justice to a suffering figure in the third and fourth Servant Songs. Through an exposition of Isaiah 50:4-6 and 52:12-53:12, Chisholm explores how the Servant acts as a steadfast prophet who endures physical humiliation and rejection, prefiguring the trials of Jesus. The discussion highlights the literary structure of the fourth Song, including its framing 'inclusio' of vindication and the shock of global rulers at the Servant's ultimate exaltation. Ultimately, Chisholm illustrates how the community's realization of the Servant's substitutionary atonement shifts their perception from seeing him as cursed by God to recognizing that he bore their sins and purchased their peace.

Outline

I. Introduction: The Focus Shift in the Servant Songs

- A. Recap of the First Two Songs: The Servant portrayed as a champion of justice, a covenant mediator, and a 'new Moses' figure.
- B. Transition from Justice to Suffering: Minor hints of opposition in earlier songs now become the central theme of the third and fourth songs.
- C. Structure of this Session: Exposition of the third song (Isaiah 50:4-6) and the introduction of the fourth song (Isaiah 52:12-53:12).

II. Exposition of the Third Servant Song (Isaiah 50:4-6, 10-11)

- A. The Servant as Prophet and Spokesman (v. 4-5):
 - 1. Equipped with a 'tongue of a learner' to listen attentively and speak on behalf of the Lord.
 - 2. Commissioned to help the weary, echoing the gentle ministry of the first Servant Song.
 - 3. Absolute commitment to the divine commission without rebellion or turning back.
- B. Clear Portrayal of Humiliation and Rejection (v. 6):
 - 1. He willingly offers his back to attackers, his beard to be plucked out, and his face to insults and spitting.
 - 2. Strong parallel to the historical trials and physical abuse endured by Jesus prior to his crucifixion.

C. Divine Vindication and Steadfast Resolve (v. 7-9):

1. Confidence that the Sovereign Lord's help will prevent total humiliation and shame.
2. Resolution described as setting his face like a flint, certain of vindication.
3. Defiant challenge to accusers: the Lord is near to help, and adversaries will wear out like moth-eaten clothes.

D. Hearing and Obeying the Servant (v. 10-11):

1. The call to fear the Lord and obey His Servant even when walking in deep darkness.
2. Warning to those who construct their own path ('start a fire' / 'flaming arrows'): they will lie down in pain under divine judgment.

III. Structure and Introduction of the Fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-15)

A. Literary Inclusio/Frame:

1. The song begins (52:13-15) and ends (53:11-12) with God speaking.
2. Both sections focus on the exact same theme: the Servant's willingness to suffer followed by high elevation and vindication.
3. This framing confirms the late chapter 52 verses serve as the necessary introduction to chapter 53.

B. The Successful Wisdom of the Servant (v. 13):

1. The Hebrew root for 'demonstrate wisdom' is used as a metonymy where wisdom causes ultimate success.
2. Three Hebrew synonyms for elevation are repeated to show intense emphasis: elevated, lifted high, and greatly exalted (me'od).

C. The Shock of the Disfigured Servant (v. 14-15):

1. Horrified Onlookers: The Servant's form is so disfigured, marred, and beaten that he no longer appears human.
2. Literal Flogging Parallel: Mimics the brutal Roman flogging prior to the crucifixion, visually represented in modern depictions like 'The Passion of the Christ'.
3. Sprinkle vs. Startle:
 - a. 'Sprinkle': Represents a priestly, ritual purifying role (cleansing and reconciling nations to God with blood/water).
 - b. 'Startle': Supported by the Septuagint; reflects the shock and speechlessness of kings who shut their mouths at his sudden exaltation.
4. Unfathomable Vindication: Rulers who rejected or persecuted him will stand speechless before the exalted Servant as the King over all.

IV. The Confession of the Community: Shifting Perspectives (Isaiah 53:1-3)

A. The New Voice ('We'):

1. Shifts to a communal perspective representing God's covenant people (Israel/the prophet speaking on behalf of the nation).

2. Expression of deep shock and disbelief: 'Who would have believed what we just heard?'

B. The Absence of Divine Military Power (v. 1):

1. 'Arm of the Lord' in Isaiah conventionally refers to God's military, warrior strength.
2. The community is shocked because they expected a military Messiah and did not see God's warrior hand in this humble figure.

C. Unimpressive Origins and Appearance (v. 2):

1. Described as a fragile twig or a root sprouting from dry, parched ground.
2. Lacks majestic form, stature, or external attractiveness that would draw people to follow him.

D. Repulsion and RETRIBUTION Theology (v. 3):

1. Despised, rejected, and familiar with suffering and illness (leprosy-like imagery).
2. Retribution Principle: The ancient audience assumed that intense suffering was direct divine punishment for a person's hidden sins (similar to the arguments of Job's friends).
3. The community turned their faces away in disgust, considering him entirely cursed and insignificant.

V. Exposition of Substitutionary Atonement (Isaiah 53:4-7)

A. The Pivotal Shift in Understanding (v. 4):

1. Realization that he was not suffering for his own wrongdoing, but carrying our illnesses and pain.
2. Parallelism in Hebrew verbs: 'lifted up' and 'carried' apply to illnesses in verse 4, and are mirrored in carrying 'sins' in verses 11-12, showing illness is a physical consequence of sin.

B. Physical and Spiritual Healing through Suffering (v. 5):

1. Strong physical verbs: 'wounded' (lacerated) and 'crushed' because of our acts of rebellion (Pesha) and sins.
2. The punishment that brought us wholeness (Shalom) was placed entirely on him.
3. By his physical wounds, spiritual and relational healing has come to the community.

C. The Lost Sheep and the Predator Attack (v. 6):

1. Universal failure: 'All of us had wandered off like sheep, each strayed onto his own path.'
2. Vulnerability: Wandering, isolated sheep are defenseless prey for predators.
3. The Substitutionary Hit: The Lord caused our collective sin to 'attack' the Servant. He intervened and took the fatal hit to spare the sheep.

D. Gentle, Silent Submission (v. 7):

1. Harshly treated and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth to defend himself.
2. Similes of a lamb led to the slaughter and a sheep silent before her shearers.
3. Willing, uncomplaining submission to the divine plan of redemptive sacrifice.