

Isaiah's Servant Songs, Session 4: The Suffering Servant of the Lord (Part B)

Author: Dr. Robert Chisholm

Session Number: Session 4

Source: *Biblicalelearning.org* by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Substitutionary Atonement, Isaiah 53, Net Bible, Harry Orlinsky, Ideal Israel, Rich Man's Tomb, Sanctification, Apologetics, Gethsemane, Philippians 2

Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Robert Chisholm focuses on the detailed exposition of Isaiah 52:12–53:12, illustrating how the fourth Servant Song depicts the Messiah's suffering, death, and ultimate vindication. Chisholm explores textual ambiguities, such as the Servant's burial in a rich man's tomb and the theological debate over substitutionary atonement, defending its presence against critics. He also provides a three-step apologetic framework to show how the Servant's identity cannot refer to national Israel or the prophet himself, but is uniquely fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Finally, he argues that the Servant combines royal, prophetic, and priestly roles, synthesized in Isaiah 61 as a 'fifth' Servant Song.

Outline

I. Textual Ambiguities and the Servant's Death (Isaiah 53:8)

- A. Translational challenges of 53:8a: Net Bible notes highlight different Hebrew options, including 'He was led away after an unjust trial' or 'after a coercive legal decision' [1-3].
- B. Nuance of the word 'generation': Refers to the Servant's contemporary generation ('who among his contemporaries even cared?') [3].
- C. Meaning of 'cut off from the land of the living': Always refers to death (Sheol) in the Old Testament, indicating the Servant's suffering culminated in death [3-5].
- D. The causal construction: Cut off because of the rebellion of 'my people' (the covenant community of Israel) to whom the punishment was actually due [4-5].
- E. Pronoun variations: Qumran manuscripts read 'his people' instead of 'my people' (due to the visual similarity between Yod and Vav), though the theological focus remains Israel [6-7].

II. The Grave of the Servant: Criminals vs. Rich Man (Isaiah 53:9)

- A. Poetic parallel issue: 'Criminals' (Reshaim) and 'rich man' are asymmetrical as parallels, leading to various translation strategies [8].

- B. Re-evaluation of 'rich' (ashir): Some scholars attempt to amend the Hebrew to 'doers of evil' or appeal to Arabic roots meaning 'mob,' but Chisholm retains its ordinary meaning [9-10].
- C. The New Testament contrast: While enemies intended to bury the Servant with criminals, he ended up in a rich man's tomb (Joseph of Arimathea), signifying his complete innocence [9-11].
- D. Double meaning of 'because'/'even though' (ki): He was buried with the rich because/even though he had committed no violence and spoke no deceit [11].

III. The Lord's Will to Crush and Ultimately Bless the Servant (Isaiah 53:10)

- A. Divine purpose in suffering: It was the Father's sovereign will to crush him and make him ill as part of the redemptive plan (paralleling Gethsemane) [11-12].
- B. Reparation offering (Ashamah): The Servant offers his soul/suffering as restitution to appease God for the sins of those he represents [12-13].
- C. Healing metaphor: The sacrifice functions as a ritual purification (similar to a healed leper), demonstrating that God has not permanently rejected him [13-14].
- D. Divine blessings: Post-suffering blessings of seeing descendants, enjoying a long life, and completing the Lord's purpose are Old Testament poetic markers of rich divine blessing (similar to Job's restoration) [14-16].

IV. Justification, Sanctification, and substitutionary Atonement (Isaiah 53:11-12)

- A. Reflective satisfaction: The Servant reflects on the outcome of his work and is fully satisfied [16-17].
- B. By knowledge of him (or his knowledge): He makes many righteous either through their faith in him or by his own faithfulness to the task [17-19].
- C. Double meaning of 'make righteous' (causative of be righteous):
 - 1. Justification: Declaring them legally righteous and not guilty because the Servant bore their iniquities [19-20].
 - 2. Sanctification: Transformative purification of character and personal relationship with God (alluding to Psalm 51) [21-22].
- D. Rebuttal to Harry Orlinsky: Pushback against the claim that substitutionary atonement is absent or that declaring the guilty innocent is a perversion of justice, pointing to the beautiful irony where the Servant willingly satisfies justice [23-27].
- E. Battle spoils and exaltation: Military imagery is used to portray the Servant's final vindication, dividing the spoils of victory with the powerful because he submitted to death and bore the sins of rebels [27-28].
- F. Philippians 2 connection: Paul's Christological hymn closely mirrors the pattern of Christ stepping down to die in humility and being highly exalted [28-29].

V. Apologetic Checkmate: Answering Objections in Three Moves

- A. Move 1 (Is national Israel the servant?): No, because actual exiled Israel is depicted as blind and deaf, whereas the Servant's role is to deliver Israel from its sins [32-34].

- B. Move 2 (Is the prophet the servant?): No, because the prophet includes himself in the confession ('all we like sheep have gone astray'), whereas the Servant is entirely innocent [34-37].
- C. Move 3 (If it is the Messiah...): Accepting the messianic interpretation requires recognizing a suffering, dying, and resurrecting figure, which is perfectly fulfilled in Jesus Christ [38-40].

VI. Synthesis of the Two Messiah Portraits in Isaiah

- A. First Portrait (Chapters 1-39): Victory and glory focusing on the ideal Davidic King who subdues enemies and establishes justice (Micah 5, Psalm 2, Psalm 72) [41-43].
- B. Second Portrait (Servant Songs): Opposition, rejection, suffering, and death [47-48].
- C. Second Temple expectations: Intertestamental works like the Psalms of Solomon and Qumran texts looked exclusively for a conquering military Messiah [44-45].
- D. Spiritual before political: God addressed the deeper spiritual problem of sin before establishing the political kingdom, requiring hearts to be transformed first [49-50].

VII. The Fifth Servant Song (Isaiah 61:1-2)

- A. Parallels to earlier songs: References to Spirit-empowerment, divine choosing/anointing, encouraging the poor, and releasing prisoners [51-53].
- B. Dynamic offices: Rejects false dichotomies; the Servant is not exclusively a king or prophet but perfectly synthesizes both offices [55-56].
- C. Full-circle resolution: The Servant's work begins with a royal commission, progresses through suffering, and culminates in the proclamation of jubilee and ultimate restoration [56-57].