

# The Suffering Servant\*

JOHN CUNNINGHAM

The fifty-third chapter of the book of Isaiah is generally called the Fourth Servant Song, the first three of which are found in chapters 42, 49, and 50. The designation “Servant Song” was given to these passages by Bernard Duhm in 1892 and has generally been adhered to ever since, even though many scholars point out that there is no evidence that these passages were ever used as “songs.” Duhm was one of the first scholars to advocate the now common view that the second part of Isaiah, from chapter 40 to the end, is not from the hand of the prophet Isaiah who lived in the days of Hezekiah and whose writings form the first part of this book. The unknown prophet who wrote the second section is generally referred to as Deutero-Isaiah. Duhm also proposed that chapters 56-66 were from the hand of yet another unknown prophet whom he named Trito-Isaiah, and he has been followed in this by a number of modern scholars.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of the passage before us can scarcely be exaggerated. From the earliest times Christian writers have found here a detailed description of the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ and in this they clearly follow the New Testament. Within the last hundred years or so, however, many scholars have questioned this view and have identified others as the Servant. Some follow the modern Jewish view and say that the suffering servant is Israel. Others see the Servant as Deutero-Isaiah. Others, following the

---

\*Originally presented at the seventh Theological Conference at Atlanta Bible College, April 1998.

preterist method of interpretation, propose that the Servant in chapter 52:13 is the Persian King Darius II while the servant in chapter 53 is Zerubabbel!<sup>1</sup>

Time does not permit a detailed examination of such views.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, we will look at the context in which the passage is set and show its importance in the light of the New Testament teaching about the content of the gospel. Then we will attempt a brief exposition of the whole passage, concentrating on those verses which explain the meaning of the Servant's death and bringing out significant New Testament passages as we go.

### I. CONTEXT AND STRUCTURE

In his book, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, Tom Wright points out that Christians have generally failed to understand what the Bible means by "gospel" and "justification" simply because they have not grasped the background to these terms in the thinking of Paul.<sup>3</sup> The same can be said of Isaiah 53. To grasp its meaning we must fit it into its literary and prophetic context. One of the greatest failings of historic Christianity has been its failure to recognize the importance of eschatology in its proclamation of what it calls its "gospel." The message preached is usually only a message about the death of Jesus and, in such expositions, Isaiah 53 will be generously quoted. But its setting, that of chapters 40-66, will be ignored. We will now attempt an outline of the message of these chapters and examine the setting in which Isaiah 53 appears.

The following is a summary of the main features of the second half of Isaiah.

Because of its sins, the people of Israel have been taken into captivity. Many find themselves in prison. Others have been scattered throughout many nations and live in conditions of utter misery. The persecuting power is explicitly identified as Babylon (Isaiah 43:14; 46; 47).

Sometime during this period of captivity a group of people appear, bringing a message of good news, of deliverance to Israel and restoration to their land, forgiveness of sins and the appearance of a deliverer, sometimes said to be God Himself, and later identified with a person known as the Servant of the Lord. The Servant himself brings the gospel in Isaiah 61.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Isaiah* in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 2, 218ff.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the dating and identity of the Servant of the Lord see the article "Servant of the Lord" by R.K. Harrison in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4, 420ff. See also R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1969, 767-786.

<sup>3</sup> N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, Lion Publishing, 1997, 40ff.

The task of the Servant is to restore Israel and bring light and salvation to the surrounding nations. A time of prosperity and spiritual blessings ensues, called the new heavens and the new earth. God's Spirit will be poured out freely. Israel will send emissaries to its former captors and the world will unite in universal worship of God. Those who refuse to submit will be dealt with severely, and the book closes with a somber view of Gehenna where the wicked will be destroyed.

Now let us take a closer look at the more immediate context of Isaiah 53. Chapter 52 contains a prophecy of the preaching of the gospel. Verse 7 shows that it is a message concerning the Reign of God, in New Testament language, the Kingdom of God. The following verse describes the ending of the captivity when "all the earth shall see the salvation of our God." A striking feature of this section is that Paul quotes directly from it no less than four times in the letter to the Romans. Chapter 52:5 is quoted in Romans 2:24: "my name is blasphemed continually every day." Verse 7 appears in chapter 10:15 in order to prove that God has sent messengers to preach the gospel. Paul quotes verse 15 in Romans 15:21 and finally chapter 53:1 is quoted in Romans 10:16.

Romans opens with Paul's introduction to the subject of the gospel which he says "was promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by the Resurrection from the dead." Although other prophets do predict the preaching of the gospel, Isaiah has more to say about it than any other. Paul is here identifying his message with Isaiah 40, 52, 61 and other passages. Clearly the prophet Isaiah is for him supremely important. And Paul's teaching on the sacrificial death of Christ can only be derived from Isaiah 53.

It should be clear from what we have said that we believe that what has come to be called the futurist view of prophecy is the correct way to interpret Isaiah. New Testament fulfillments do not exhaust the meaning of any of these passages.

Attempts by commentators to interpret Isaiah as if it refers to the ending of the captivity in the time of Ezra are completely unconvincing. Preterism generally is the most unsatisfactory of all schools of interpretation as it frankly entails bending scriptural language completely out of shape.

## II. EXPOSITION

### **The Messiah and His Sufferings Revealed to the Nations**

The passage we are considering is divided into five stanzas consisting of three verses each. The first is found in chapter 52:13-15, the second in chapter 53:1-3, the third in chapter 53:4-6, the fourth in chapter 53:7-9 and the last in chapter 53:10-12.

The first stanza (52:13-15) forms a summary of what follows in chapter 53. The servant is introduced with the words “behold, My Servant shall deal prudently.” The word translated “deal prudently” primarily means to “act wisely” and also “prosperously” because prosperity is the result of acting wisely. The exaltation of the Servant predicted in the second half of the verse has been taken by some to refer to the resurrection and ascension of Christ but is more likely referring to his Second Advent. He is not now exalted as far as the kings of the earth are concerned; indeed the world generally despises the things of Christ, but the thrust of this passage is that the leaders of the earth will come to acknowledge him. We may note here the passage in Philippians in which Paul speaks of Christ receiving a “name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven and of those on earth and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11).

Verse 14 gives us a summary of the sufferings to be outlined in the following chapter, sufferings which cause astonishment to many. The verb which is translated “astonished” means to desolate or waste, to be thrown by anything into a desolate or bereaved condition; to be startled, confused — as it were to be petrified by paralyzing astonishment. Many will realize then for the first time the extent of the Servant’s sufferings as he is openly revealed in the sight of the nations. His sufferings were greater than that of any man and were not simply physical. Many men have undergone intense physical pain and even died heroic deaths, but the death of God’s servant was more than just a physical death, as the next chapter will bring out.

The sprinkling of many nations in verse 15 has overtones of the sacrificial system and the sprinkling of blood on the mercy seat and the altar of incense on the Day of Atonement. The term used here is also used in relation to sprinkling the water of purification on a leper (Lev. 14:7) and sprinkling the ashes of the red heifer on those defiled by a corpse (Num. 19:18). It is the Servant himself who sprinkles the nations, a hint of his priestly functions which are fully explained in the epistle to the Hebrews. Many have sought to render the word translated “sprinkle” as “startle” and this is reflected in some

translations, such as the RSV. Other scholars reject this opinion. Peake's commentary says that the word sprinkle "despite many contrary opinions, ought not to be excluded on grammatical grounds and in fact anticipates the central theme of the song."<sup>4</sup>

The kings of the nations so sprinkled will have nothing to say — which reminds us of Habakkuk 2:20: "But the Lord is in His holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before Him." The last part of verse 15 is a sober reminder of the ignorance that will exist at the time of Christ's Second Coming. This is also mentioned in Isaiah 60:1-2: "Arise, shine, for thy light is come and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth and gross darkness the people: but the Lord shall arise upon thee and his glory shall be seen upon thee."

### **The Messiah's Reception**

The second stanza, contained in chapter 53:1-3, continues and expands on the theme of ignorance and unbelief summarized in chapter 52:15. Verse one is quoted in John 12:38 and is linked with Isaiah's prophecy of unbelief in chapter 6. Paul quotes the same passage in the same sense in Romans 10:16 where it forms part of his explanation of why Israel has apparently not believed the gospel. The unbelief with which the Lord has been received down through the ages is something foreseen long ago and is part of the purposes of God.

As early as the time of Moses Scripture declares that "the Lord has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear, to this very day" (Deut. 29:4). Isaiah was told to proclaim the spiritual blindness and deafness of the people of Israel (Isa. 6:9-10). He was told that this condition would last "Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant, the houses are without a man, the land is utterly desolate, the Lord has removed men far away and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land" (6:11, 12). This plainly refers to a captivity which has not yet taken place, for the blindness of Israel and the nations in general continues to this day.

The speakers in verse one of chapter 53 are a group of believers at that time and what follows represents their confession as they look back at the sufferings of Christ now made plain to them for the first time. This is the time described in Zechariah 12:10-14 when Israel will look on him whom they have pierced and there will be a great mourning for him as the truth of the gospel is finally revealed to them.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, 527.

The “arm of the Lord” is a reference to divine power. The arm of the Lord is mentioned as part of the great promise of deliverance in chapter 40. The remnant of Israel prays for it to be manifested in chapter 51:9: “Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake as in the ancient days in the generations of old.” Chapter 52:10 says, “The Lord hath made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.”

The Servant of the Lord is therefore the arm of the Lord manifesting God’s power in deliverance and salvation. The Messiah stands as it were in the place of God, acting as His vice-gerent. Verse two recalls several passages where the Messiah is referred to as a Branch (Isa. 4:2; 11:1, 10; Jer. 23:5; 33:15). These terms refer to the origin of the Servant in the House of David in the land of Israel, which was characterized by barrenness. His people despise him, seeing nothing of beauty in him.

The Gospels amply testify to the truth of verse three. Jesus was despised by the leaders of the people and Jews have consistently down through the centuries considered that Jesus was an apostate who was smitten by God. The Christian Jewish writer David Baron has this to say about Jewish reaction to Jesus:

No person in the history of the Jews has provoked such deep-seated abhorrence as He who came only to bless them, and who even on the cross prayed, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” When on earth, at the end of His three-and-a-half years of blessed ministry among them, they finally rejected Him. Their hatred was intense and mysterious. “Away with this man; release unto us Barabbas. . . . Crucify Him, crucify Him” was their cry. And all through the centuries no name has provoked such intense abhorrence among the Jews as the name of Jesus.

I have known personally most amiable, and as men, lovable characters among the Jews; but immediately that Jesus was mentioned, a change came over their countenances and they would fall into a passion of anger. In the course of my missionary experiences these past thirty-five or forty years, how often has it been my lot to witness some of my people almost mad with rage — clenching their fist, gnashing their teeth, and spitting on the ground at the very mention of the name which to the believer “is as ointment poured forth”!<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> David Baron, *The Servant of the Lord*, London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, n.d., 74.

Baron goes on to detail some of the vile terms which are applied to the Lord in the Talmud.

It is likely that the term “rejected of men” has particular reference to men of high rank, leaders of the people rather than the generality of mankind. Paul can say that not many of the world’s mighty men or nobility have believed; God has rather chosen people who are generally despised by the world’s intelligentsia with the ultimate aim of shaming the so-called wise amongst men. “Have any of the rulers believed on him, or of the Pharisees?” was the contemptuous sneer of the leaders of the Jews, and it remains the attitude of the majority of opinion formers in our world today, many of whom are deliberately reviving ancient pagan beliefs under the guise of scholarship while they are at the same time attacking the Bible.

### **The Sin Bearer**

Verses four to six form the middle section of this chapter and of the entire prophecy. Their teachings are of central importance as they set out the reasons for the sufferings of the Servant. David Baron translates verse four literally as follows: “Verily they were our griefs (or sicknesses) which He bore, and our sorrows (or pains) with which He burdened Himself, but we regarded Him as one stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.”<sup>6</sup>

Baron goes on to state that “No plainer or stronger words could be used to express the thought of vicarious suffering than those employed in the original of this verse.”<sup>7</sup> Here we confront the important issue of what has come to be called “penal substitutionary atonement.” That means in plain language that Christ was punished for our sins and took our place so that by virtue of his sinless sacrifice God may forgive us our sins.

The idea of bearing sin or bearing iniquity occurs quite frequently throughout the Old Testament and it always means to be punished for the iniquity. It is used in this sense in Numbers 14:34 when the Israelites were told by God that they would bear their iniquity for 40 years. That is, their punishment for their unbelief would last for that period of time. Aaron was to “bear the iniquity of the holy things” (Ex. 28:38, 43), meaning that he would be punished for any sin committed in relation to the tabernacle ritual. A person would “bear his iniquity” if he witnessed an offense and refused to disclose it under oath (Lev. 5:1). The idea of bearing iniquities occurs in verses 4, 6, 11, and 12 of Isaiah 53.

---

<sup>6</sup> Baron, 83.

<sup>7</sup> Baron, 83.

If to bear sin means to be punished for the sin then it is clear that for the Servant to bear the sins of others he was punished for their sins. There seems to be no way of avoiding the conclusion that Christ died as a substitute for our sins. The substitutionary language of this passage is well recognized even by those who do not accept the idea of substitution. The apostle Peter quotes the fifth verse in 1 Peter 2:24, saying plainly, “He bore our sins in His own body on the tree.”

Further evidence for substitution is found in Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45. This important statement by Jesus reflects the language of Isaiah 53:11. Jesus said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” The substitutionary preposition *anti* is translated “for” in this passage. It is used in other passages in such a way as to indicate that its meaning is “instead of” or “in place of.” Thus, “Archelaus reigned over Judea in place of [*anti*] his father Herod” (Matt. 2:22). Jesus asked, “What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of [*anti*] a fish give him a serpent?” (Luke 11:11).

Another Greek preposition that is relevant to our subject is *huper*. This word can have several meanings and can often be rendered “on behalf of.” In some passages, however, such as 2 Corinthians 5:14 and Galatians 3:13, it clearly has the meaning “instead of.” This last passage is one of a number where a substitutionary interpretation is obvious even in English translations. Those who are of the works of the law are under a curse, but Christ has taken the curse upon himself so that the covenant promises to Abraham might come upon us. 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15 is likewise explicitly substitutionary: “If one died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.”

The word translated “smitten” or “stricken” at the end of verse four is used in 2 Kings 15:5 where King Uzziah was stricken with leprosy by God for his presumption in entering the Temple. Because of this connection some rabbis in ancient times called the Messiah “the leprous one.” There is certainly no need to follow this interpretation but a problem does arise in this verse in connection with disease and the Messiah. The words translated “griefs” and “sorrows” are the ordinary Hebrew terms for sicknesses and disease. Matthew quotes this verse in this connection to prove its fulfillment by Jesus in his healing miracles (Matt. 8:17).

Two different errors have arisen from a misunderstanding of these terms. One error, following the rabbis mentioned earlier, sees the Messiah himself as actually suffering from some unspecified diseases. According to this



view Jesus not only bore sin, but also was afflicted with disease himself. In support of this has been quoted Luke 4:23, where Jesus said to the synagogue audience, “You will surely say unto me, ‘Physician heal thyself.’”

A more common error is the belief that since believers can expect forgiveness of sins because Jesus has borne them, so they can also expect divine healing of all their illnesses because Jesus has borne them too. Healing is therefore as much a part of the atonement as is forgiveness of sins. Since it is obvious that believers do suffer illnesses and die, implicit in this view is that such people are lacking in faith to be healed.

It is therefore essential to understand why the words for sicknesses and diseases are used here. Throughout the Old Testament disease is often used as a synonym for sin. One of the best examples is found in chapter 1 of Isaiah:

Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away backward. Why should you be stricken again? You will revolt more and more. The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faints. From the sole of the foot even to the head there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; they have not been closed or bound up or soothed with ointment (1:4-6).

It is obvious from the context here that literal diseases are not in view since the subject matter concerns the body politic of the whole nation. David also in some of the Psalms speaks of his sins as if they were diseases. In the great penitential Psalm 51 he refers to God having broken his bones — something that did not literally happen (verse 8). Healing is sometimes used as a synonym for forgiveness (Is. 57:19).

David Baron has this to say about Jesus’ miracles of healing:

The miracles of healing not only served to certify Him as the Redeemer, and as “signs” of the spiritual healing which He came to bring, but were, so to say, pledges also of the ultimate full deliverance of the redeemed, not only from sin but from every evil consequence of it in body as well as in soul. Hence our full salvation included not only the perfecting of our spirits, but the “fashioning anew of the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of His glory.”<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Baron, 86.

The second half of verse four graphically describes the terrible suffering as the believing remnant continues to look back at the sufferings of Christ. The word *nagua* means one stricken or smitten with a dreadful, shocking disease, and is particularly applicable to leprosy as we noted earlier. He was “smitten by God” and afflicted, i.e., he is one bowed down by suffering.

That Jesus was so punished is true but the punishment was for our sins and not for his own. Yet the Jewish people, in striking fulfillment of this prophecy, have taught for centuries that Jesus deserved to die the death he did. They have called him *poshe* — the transgressor — who well deserved the violent death he suffered. The Talmud puts Jesus in hell along with Titus and Balaam.

Those who adhere to more modern versions of the view that Jesus deserved to die should consider carefully what they are teaching in the light of this passage. It is contrary to the whole thrust of this passage to claim, as do the Christadelphians, that Christ died for his inherent sin nature. They have God punishing Jesus for something that was inherent within himself. Talk of a “sin-nature” in Christ is foreign to this and all other Scriptures. Verse 5 reiterates the substitutionary nature of Christ’s sufferings. It was for “our transgressions,” “our iniquities.” The chastisement, which resulted in our peace, was upon him.

We note here the important word “peace,” a common theme in this section of Isaiah. “There is no peace to the wicked” is the message of Isaiah 48:22 and 57:21. Isaiah 57 foresees a time when God will speak peace “to him who is far off and to him who is near” (v. 19). Paul refers to this verse in Ephesians chapter 2 when he explains that God has made Jews and Gentiles as part of the one body of Christ through the cross. Surely Isaiah 53:5 is in the forefront of his thinking here.

The sixth verse shows the necessity of the vicarious sufferings of Christ. Mankind in general, both Jew and Gentile, has become totally alienated from God. There is no thought here or elsewhere that man by his own efforts can turn back to God of his own accord. The image of a flock of sheep without a shepherd graphically illustrates what men have done in relation to the things of God. Sheep will wander all over the place without a shepherd to guide them, and such has been the experience firstly of the Jews, but also of Gentile so-called believers.

All of these iniquities have been “laid on him” by God. The term rendered “laid on him” is more literally “caused to alight on him” and is in Hebrew a term of some violence. It is used in 2 Samuel 1:15: “Go near and fall upon him; and he smote him that he died.” B.W. Newton comments on this

expression: “In other passages our iniquity is spoken of as resting on the Holy One, and He bearing it. Here it is spoken of as coming upon Him like a destroying foe and overwhelming Him with the wrath that it brought with it.”<sup>9</sup> The word *avon*, rendered “iniquity,” denotes firstly the transgression itself, secondarily the guilt which arises as a result, and thirdly the punishment which it incurs.

### **The Messiah’s Gentleness, Death and Burial**

Verses 7-9 set forth the attitude of the Messiah towards his sufferings, stressing the voluntary nature of them, and describe the judicial process by which he was executed and the nature of his burial. It is the passage which the Ethiopian eunuch was reading when Philip was directed to join him and from which he preached the gospel. The New Testament always applies this chapter to Jesus — something which modern liberal commentators are loath to do.

Verses 7 and 8 are beset with translation difficulties beginning with the first part of verse 7. The Hebrew term *niggas* (rendered “he was oppressed”) sometimes means the rigorous exaction of debts. It is used in this sense in Deuteronomy 15:2, 3. “Every creditor that lendeth ought to his neighbor shall [on the seventh year] release it; he shall not exact it of his neighbor or his brother, because the Lord’s release hath been proclaimed. Of a foreigner thou mayest exact it again.” The word is also used of the Egyptian taskmasters exacting the full quota of bricks from the Israelites (Ex. 3; 4). The oppression then is oppression of a judicial nature and was amply fulfilled in the trials of Jesus before Caiaphas and Pilate.

All of this suffering was entered into voluntarily by Christ as emphasized by the second half of verse 7: “Yet He opened not His mouth.” The Gospels record that Jesus did not make any replies in his defense and only responded to the High Priest’s questions when he was put under oath to do so. He was completely non-resistant. We should point out that the apostle Peter clearly brings out the non-resisting character of the Lord and urges Christians to follow the same example (1 Peter 2:21-25). Suffering and persecution should be borne patiently following Christ’s own example. The Sermon on the Mount enjoins the same attitude on disciples (Matt. 5:38-42) as does the Apostle Paul (Rom. 12:17-21). A violent Christian is a contradiction in terms. We simply must not offer violence or hostility of any kind when we meet with persecution.

---

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Baron, 96, note 1.

Commentators emphasize the difficulties of translating verse 8, which reads in the KJV, “He was taken from prison and from judgment.” The NASB reads “By oppression and judgment He was taken away” while the NEB has “Without protection, without justice, he was taken away.” The same version adds a footnote: “After arrest and sentence, He was taken away.” David Baron comments:

The idea that is most prominent in the word *luqqach* (“taken away”), is that of being snatched or hurried away. The word *otser* (rendered “prison”) primarily means a violent constraint. Here, as in Psalm 107:39, it signifies a persecuting treatment which restrains by outward force, such as that of prison or bonds. The word *mishpat* (judgment) refers to the judicial proceedings in which He was put on trial, accused and convicted as worthy of death — in other words, to His unjust judgment. . . . Hostile oppression and judicial persecution were the circumstances out of which He was carried away by death.<sup>10</sup>

The phrase “and who will declare His generation?” is also difficult and is variously rendered by different translations. The NASB renders this “and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due?” The word translated “generation” usually means “an age” or “the men living in a particular age,” and by extension a group of people bound together by similarity of circumstances or moral character. In this latter sense a generation can be coeval with the present evil age. Baron points out that the word rendered “declare” in the KJV can also mean “speak,” “complain,” or “lament” and is used in a few passages to describe prayer (Ps. 55:17). He suggests that the meaning of this passage is “As for His generation — who (among them) poureth out a complaint” (i.e. at his treatment) or “who among them uttereth a prayer?” (i.e. on his behalf). This could be an allusion to a Jewish custom in capital trials of calling upon all who had anything to say on behalf of the accused to come forward and “declare it” or “plead” on his behalf. If this is the case, it means that no one was called upon to speak for Jesus at his trial, as would normally be the case, and it ties in well with the first part of the verse.<sup>11</sup>

The substitutionary nature of his death is again mentioned at the end of the verse. The stroke that was properly due to the people fell on him. To be “cut

<sup>10</sup> Baron, 102-103.

<sup>11</sup> Baron, 105.

off” is a biblical expression meaning to be executed. It is found in Daniel 9:26 where it is again used of the cutting off of the Messiah.

The burial of Christ is the subject of the first part of verse 9. The word “grave” here is not the Hebrew word *sheol* meaning the general grave of mankind but rather refers to a sepulcher or tomb. It was the custom of the Jews to give criminals an ignominious burial as Josephus records: “He that blasphemeth God let him be stoned, and let him hang upon a tree all that day, and let him be buried in an ignominious and obscure manner.” Since the Jews condemned Jesus as a blasphemer this would no doubt have been his fate had not God miraculously intervened. The time of Christ’s humiliation and sacrifice were now over and God honors His Son by providing a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, to arrange for his burial in his own new tomb.

The sinless nature of Christ is the subject of the last part of verse 9. Peter quotes this verse, giving it a different rendering. “Because he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth” becomes in 1 Peter 2:22 “Who committed no sin, nor was guile found in his mouth.”

### **The Messiah’s Exaltation**

The last section of this great prophecy begins with a review of his sufferings and sacrifice. The word translated “bruise” literally means “crush.” “Put him to grief” means to afflict with sickness and reminds us again of verse 4. Two translations of the phrase “When you shall make His soul an offering for sin” are possible. The first is to translate as above and take the phrase as a statement made to God. The second view renders it as “When His soul shall make an offering.” The NASB prefers this rendering and in addition takes the word “soul” as equivalent to the personal pronoun “himself.” Readers of this JOURNAL will not need to be reminded that this is a legitimate and common use of the word *nephesh* throughout the Old Testament. *Nephesh* refers to the whole person and not to a supposed immortal substance which survives in a conscious state after death. It is closely connected with the blood in Leviticus 17:11, and Isaiah 53:10 links the idea of the blood of the sacrificial animals with the common New Testament references to “the blood of Christ.” The offering for sin referred to here is the trespass offering, the *asham*, the law concerning which is found in Leviticus 5:1-13 and 7:1-10. The verse provides the important basis for the common New Testament doctrine that Christ was a sacrifice.

“He shall see His seed” has been taken by some Jewish interpreters in its natural sense of posterity or offspring and used to refute the idea that it is fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth who had no natural offspring. This section of

Isaiah, however, recognizes the important theological concept of the seed of Abraham (41:8; 43:5; 44:3; 48:19), and the fulfillment of the covenant blessings. Paul shows in Romans 9 that Abraham's seed does not mean descendants according to the flesh; rather those who have the faith of Abraham are the children or seed of Abraham. Christ himself is the seed, as Paul states in Galatians 3:16. This is a truth which is also found in the Old Testament. Psalm 72 applies the wording of the Abrahamic covenant to the Messiah (verse 17). Those who have been baptized into Christ are the seed of Abraham.

Seeing his seed occurs after he became an offering for sin, in other words after his death. The seed then does not refer to literal descendants but to the spiritual seed of Abraham. Psalm 22:30 is parallel with this verse in describing his seed as one of the blessings following his sufferings and death. The last part of verse 10 could only refer to the resurrection. It is reminiscent of Psalms 16 and 21:4: "He asked life from You and You gave it to him, length of days forever and ever." Jewish writers have commented that the phrase length of days refers to the life of the age to come. Following his resurrection God's Kingdom will prosper in his hands.

The Jewish commentator Abrabanel paraphrases the first part of verse 11 thus: "He shall see the travail of His soul, i.e. His seed; He shall be satisfied, i.e. with length of days." One of the results of his travail is found in the second part of verse 11. David Baron translates this as follows: "By His knowledge shall make righteous (or, bring righteousness) the Righteous One (My Servant) many." It is possible to take "his knowledge" in both the subjective sense of the knowledge that he himself has, or in the objective sense of the knowledge of him on the part of others. If the former is correct then it could well mean that those who are made righteous are made so through the knowledge that Jesus himself had; in other words, they will believe what he believed. This seems incorrect, however, and more likely refers to the fact that the righteous must know him. Knowledge then would be synonymous with faith, a meaning which it seems to have in a number of passages (Hosea 4:6, John 17:3).<sup>12</sup> The construction "the Righteous One, My servant" is unusual in placing the adjective before the noun, contrary to normal Hebrew practice. The definite article is also omitted from both words, the whole construction emphasizing the unique character of the servant.

We have already referred to Baron's translation of verse 11. Contrary to the impression given in most translations, justification is not the subject

---

<sup>12</sup> Baron, 130.

here. It is the righteousness which springs from that justification and forgiveness which is being spoken of. The Bible requires that God's people are actively righteous. Indeed, as Paul says in Romans 8:4, it is in them alone that the righteousness of the Law can be fulfilled. It is clear that this verse was in Paul's mind as he was writing Romans as he virtually quotes it in Romans 5:19: "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one man's obedience many will be made righteous."

The "many" referred to here are the mass of mankind and not just the Jews. We encountered this word in chapter 52:14, 15 and it appears in significant New Testament passages bearing on the atonement. The Lord uses it in Matthew 20:28 in what is really a commentary on this passage, and Paul uses it extensively in Romans 5:12-21.

The word "many" occurs again in the Hebrew of verse 12 where it is rendered "great" in English translations. They are those who share with him in his inheritance as described in Psalm 2. "Ask of Me and I will give you the nations for Your inheritance and the ends of the earth for Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (vv. 8, 9). The application to Christ is clear but he himself makes this same promise to those who overcome (Rev. 2:27). They will be partners with him in the glory of the Kingdom of God. This is because "He poured out His soul unto death and bore the sins of many." The blessings of the Kingdom would be impossible without the death of Christ.

The final statement of the chapter returns to the priestly theme hinted at in chapter 52. There the Messiah sprinkled all nations. Now he makes intercession for transgressors, standing between them and God. The priestly function of the Messiah is mentioned also in Psalm 110:4 and Zechariah 6:13 and is fully developed in the letter to the Hebrews.

### III. SUMMARY

In conclusion, the message of this chapter is closely intertwined with the gospel of the Kingdom. A summary of the gospel preached by the apostolic church is given in Acts 8:12 and Acts 28:23, 31 as the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. We could paraphrase this as "The Kingdom and the Cross." This must be the message that we preach to the world, for until the sin question is dealt with, none of God's blessings are remotely possible. Only the sacrifice of Christ can deal with our sinfulness and give us a right standing with God so that we can inherit the blessings of the Kingdom.