

## A WORLD IN NEED OF LOVE: ISAIAH 53

**Focus Idea:** The griefs, pains, and sins of many people can be healed through the willing sacrifice of the Suffering Servant.

**The Context:** Our fourth study in this series provides a broad introduction to the prophecy of Isaiah. Chapter 53 appears in what is sometimes called "Second Isaiah," the portion of the book that begins either at chapter 34 or chapter 40. More pointedly, this passage is one of four "Servant Songs" – poems that describe a certain "Servant of the Lord" who leads and aids the nations. The other Servant Songs are located in Isaiah 42, 49, and 50.

**The Characters:** The prophet who gave his name to the book of Isaiah was a leader in Jerusalem around 750 years before Jesus was born. It is believed by many that he worked in the temple, perhaps as a member of the king's family. Isaiah was called to be a prophet and delivered a wide range of messages to the people. His career probably spanned decades. Many of his prophecies were delivered orally, others involved object lessons or dramatic deeds called prophetic enactments.

**The Core:** Perhaps no text in all of the Old Testament points so clearly to the sacrificial life of the Messiah as Isaiah 53 does. Christians find the correspondence between this prophecy and the experience of Jesus compelling; they are able to make better sense of the suffering and death of Jesus with Isaiah 53 as a backdrop.

The idea of *atonement* – one death in place/payment of another – is an ancient concept. It transcends cultures. In the Old Testament's temple system, animal sacrifices offered the most vivid example of atonement – bulls, sheep, or birds were offered on holy altars in order to cleanse people from their sins and shortcomings. Unlike other nations, however, human sacrifice was never part of the system.

In Isaiah 53, however, the Servant of God is presented (in excruciating detail) as the human being whose suffering brings healing and whose death offers forgiveness for other people.

The Servant lived as one rejected and scorned by others. People hid their faces from him (vs. 3) and assumed that he was under God's punishment (vs. 4).

This assessment was partly right. The Servant was receiving the due discipline for sin, but the sins were not his own. They were the iniquities of the many – the writer among them. Because of the unfaithfulness of the nation, the Servant received wounds, stripes, and piercings (vs. 5-6).

Though the Servant could have protested, he did not. He received the sufferings quietly and patiently. In the end, he died and was assigned a tomb with the wicked. God had made the life and death of the Servant to be an offering for sin (vs. 10 and 12).

Ultimately, though – and here is where the New Testament connection is strongest – the Servant will be vindicated (vs. 11). He will see the light of life and be satisfied.

Christians point to this text as an unmistakable anticipation of Easter, when Jesus was raised from the dead "according to the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:4). His atoning work complete, the Servant was raised to life and takes ultimate satisfaction in the forgiveness of the transgressors.