

## Isaiah and the Suffering Servant

In the book of Isaiah, chapters 1-39 describe judgment, hope, and a future messianic King. God's promise to David was offered to each and every generation of David's descendants. One by one they all failed to be faithful, so they did not inherit the fulfillment of the promise. Their unfaithfulness resulted in Israel's exile to Babylon, a catastrophic event that shook Israel's faith to the core. Isaiah 39 left us with very little hope for Israel or the lineage of David. But as we turn to Isaiah 40 we step into a new world of hope. Out of the gates we hear a voice announcing:

*Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her service has ended, that her guilt is expiated, that she has received from the hand of the LORD double for all her sins. (Isa 40:1-2)*

The vantage point of this prophetic voice is positioned after the exile, which is described here as a period of "hard service" that came about as a result of Israel's "sins." Now that Israel has paid its dues, God announces "comfort" (in Hebrew, *nakham*) that a new day has dawned. What follows is a very famous biblical poem:

*In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God! Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and hill made low; The rugged land shall be a plain, the rough country, a broad valley. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isa 40:3-5)*

God is going to return to his land by crossing the great tract of wilderness that lay between Babylon and Jerusalem. His glorious presence is going to take up residence in the temple once more, as it did in the days of Solomon. This is when the great promise to Abraham of blessing for all nations (remember Genesis 12:1-3) will come true. Not only this, but God's going to lead the Israelite exiles back to their land:

*Here comes with power the Lord GOD, who rules by his strong arm; Here is his reward with him, his recompense before him. Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, Carrying them in his bosom, leading the ewes with care. (Isa 40:10-11)*

After this great announcement, our hopes are very high. We're expecting the return from exile, for God to come back and dwell in the temple again, and for all nations to come and participate in the glories that will follow.

But that's not where the poem goes. Instead, it focuses on the response of the Israelites to this great announcement of hope.

*Why, O Jacob, do you say, and declare, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"?" (Isa 40:27)*

It appears that the Israelites are still bitter about the exile, and they think they've been ignored and abandoned by their God. God's response is what we find in Isaiah 41-47. All of these poems are designed to be a poetic courtroom. God launches his case, claiming to be the Creator of the world and Lord of history.

"**Exhibit A**" is the fact that just as he promised through Isaiah (see Isa 13:17).

"**Exhibit B**" is the exile itself. This tragedy was not the result of God's neglect! Rather, it came about as a result of the Israelites' idolatry and unfaithfulness (see Isaiah 43:22-28).

“**Exhibit C**” is the downfall of Babylon itself, which is the focus in chapters 46-47. This is a demonstration of God’s justice on behalf of Israel, as he brought down their former oppressor.

All of this evidence should have an effect on God’s covenant people. Experiencing the power, grace, and providence of their God should motivate the Israelites to become God’s “servant” who will bear witness to God’s justice and mercy before all of the nations. This is what the poem in Isaiah 42 is all about. The idea was that the exile would have chastened and purified Israel (as Isaiah spoke about in Isaiah 1) so that they would become “a light to the nations” (42:6) and unleash God’s justice into the world. But that’s not what happened, and chapter 48 is wholly dedicated to making this point.

In Isaiah 48, God accuses the post-exile Israelites of continuing their hollow allegiance and idolatry, which ultimately disqualifies them from being God’s servant to the nations. Instead, God says he’s going to do “a new thing, hidden and unknown to you” (48:6), and then, like a bolt out of the blue, we hear a new voice speak up in Isaiah 48:16: “*Now the Lord GOD has sent me, and his spirit.*”

Who is this?! We have heard of Spirit-empowered leaders before in Isaiah, the messianic King from the line of David, described as the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” in Isaiah 11:1. He was endowed with God’s Spirit seven times over (see Isa 11:1-3). And now it appears, he’s showing up on the scene after the exile. However, now the story is more complex; he doesn’t just have a job to do among the nations, as Isaiah 11 described. He also has a job to do among the Israelites themselves, who are as hardened to their God as ever. This is the main point of Isaiah 49-55, which describes this new servant’s mission, first to Israel and then to all nations.

Isaiah 49 describes how this individual “servant of Yahweh” is given the title “Israel” (49:3) and given Israel’s job of bringing justice and good news to the nations. Then in Isaiah 49:7, we discover that this servant is “*despised and abhorred by the nation.*” This ambiguous little description is developed in the following chapters. The servant tells us that his message is rejected by his fellow Israelites, and he’s beaten and forsaken (Isaiah 50). Nonetheless, the servant has a message of good news: God is going to fulfill his great promises and bring his kingdom over all nations (ch. 51-52). But it’s going to happen in a surprising way. We’re told that God is going to send messengers with good news!

*Break out together in song, O ruins of Jerusalem! For the LORD has comforted his people, has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm in the sight of all the nations; All the ends of the earth can see the salvation of our God.* (Isa 52:9-10)

That sounds awesome! How will it go down?

Not how you’d expect. The poem that follows this dramatic announcement is the famous “suffering servant” poem of Isaiah 53, and how God is going to lift him up high in exaltation by allowing him to be rejected and beaten.

### **The Suffering Servant**

The center of the poem is put in the mouths of a group called “we,” who tell the story of the servant. They say he at first appeared to them as an insignificant low-life, god-forsaken and rejected by people. There was nothing about the servant that looked impressive or important (Isaiah 53:1 3b). However, they now acknowledge that they couldn’t have been more wrong (Isaiah 53:4-6). In reality, the servant was suffering and dying on behalf of Israel’s sin and unfaithfulness. It was Israel who rejected God’s servant, and they led him to his death and killed him (Isaiah 53:7-9). But just like Joseph and his brothers who planned evil to destroy him, God orchestrated their evil to result in good (remember Genesis 50:20!). It was actually God’s mysterious purpose that the servant would die at the hands of Israel, because of their

sin and on behalf of their sin (Isaiah 53:10). His death would play the role of a sacrificial guilt offering (remember Leviticus 5-6?), providing atonement for their evil.

Thankfully, this isn't the end of the servant's story. After his rejection and death, we all of a sudden read that the servant will "look upon descendants and live long days" and "see the light and be satisfied" (Isaiah 53:10-11). We hear that his death was actually the opposite of failure. It was his way of "bearing the sins" of his people so that the guilty "can be pronounced righteous" before God (53:11b). Guilty Israel, who not only ended up in exile for their sins, but also killed God's servant sent to them, is pronounced "righteous," not for anything they have done, but because of what the servant did on their behalf.

### **Isaiah: the most quoted of the Prophets**

Now you can see why the book of Isaiah, along with the Psalms, are the most quoted Old Testament books by Jesus, as well as the apostles who wrote the New Testament!

The rest of Isaiah shows how the servant then forms a group of "descendants" (literally in Hebrew, "seed"), who will listen to his voice and follow him into God's new creation. They will face persecution in the dark days that lie ahead (described in Isaiah 56-59 and 63-65a, but ultimately they will inherit the new Jerusalem that God has in store (Isaiah 60-62). The story ends with God bringing final justice and a renewed creation (Isaiah 65-66), where all nations are invited into the Kingdom of God's servants.

The book of Isaiah is truly remarkable. The entire story of Israel and the Bible itself is summed up and projected into the future. The poetry and narratives in this book were foundational for Jesus and his understanding of his Kingdom of God mission. You can see why he picked the book of Isaiah to read aloud when he finally went public with his mission in Nazareth (see Luke 4). Isaiah was included in the books of the Hebrew Bible that Jesus surveyed with his disciples after the resurrection, showing them that everything had been anticipated in the "Torah, the prophets, and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44-49). The book of Isaiah was foundational for the early followers of Jesus and helped motivate their mission to bring good news to the nations (see Acts 13:47).

Ultimately, Isaiah's portrait of the suffering servant king as the true victor over human evil didn't come from nowhere. It's a profound development of that strange, poetic image we were introduced to all the way back in Genesis 3:15, about the suffering seed of the woman who would destroy the serpent: "*And I [God] will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.*" (Gen 3:15)

This, we discover, is how God would overcome the horrific evil that has duped humanity into thinking they are God. This is how God will become the victor over the human evil that resulted from that tragic error. God would send a son of Eve to conquer evil by allowing evil to conquer him, then overcoming its power of death by his love and eternal life.

There's a reason why the poem of Isaiah 53 is introduced with the phrase "good news," and there's also a good reason why all four stories of Jesus in the New Testament were eventually called "The Good News" or "The Gospel." It's the strangest good news you will ever hear, but also the best news. It's the story of God's defeat of evil so that you and I can be rescued from the human condition, the death we see all around us, and that which we find inside ourselves. In this story of the servant's death and resurrection, we discover the love of God that leads to true life.