

## Studies in Isaiah      Servant Song 4      Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

### Introduction:-

Suffering throughout history has been a stumbling block to philosophers and has tested the faith of religious people since most do not see any profit or benefit coming from suffering. Ancient societies simply got rid of sufferers considering it a tragedy particularly for a society with little resources. If possible, suffering was something to be avoided therefore get rid of the source.

Suffering is not something we normally actively seek out and covers a wide spectrum of causes.

**For reflection:-** Share with your group an instance where you have undergone significant suffering. How did you feel at the time and now in retrospect?

For the Christian, the Bible presents a different picture of both suffering and the sufferer.

Consider the following references:-

2 Tim 3; Phil 1:29; 1 Pet 2:19-23; Col 1:24-25

Note the key points coming from these passages.

While we may not seek suffering, it is to be a part of the experience of faithful believers in this world. This suffering may take the form of actual persecution, slander, trials and testing, suffering with and for others in the body of Christ. Suffering is often done in the service of God, a path to faith development, a self sacrificing service to Him. It can be a way of taking up our cross, following Jesus and fellowshiping with His sufferings.

Here in this passage in Isaiah, the picture of the suffering servant is a very poignant one. In the earlier songs we have seen the ideal servant contrasted with the unfaithful servant Israel. The servant is not identified, but as we look back and see the way Jesus saw Himself fulfilling the prophecies in Isaiah, we see one who knowingly faces the results of being the faithful and suffering servant. This is a key to understanding Jesus and His mission.

**Notes and questions:-** The passage can be divided into five sets of three verses:-

### 1.      52:13 – 15      My servant shall prosper. His suffering leads to glory.

Vs 13    The servant will be exalted and raised to the highest since he acts with the greatest of wisdom. He will act according to the will of God and enjoy success.

Q. What wisdom will the servant display?

Vss 14 – 15    But the exaltation follows terrible humiliation the details of which will be spelled out in 53:1-9. Here in these verses **the contrast** is amazing.

Q. What is it?

Note that the word “sprinkle” in some translations appears as “startle” in others. This latter translation may help in your understanding. The point of his sufferings is that they have a practical purpose. He endures them not for himself but because they will bear fruit and bring him and God glory. The world’s wisdom would be that suffering in this way would equate with failure.

Q. The servant will be successful, but what then is true success?

## **2. 53:1 – 3 Who has believed? This suffering is offensive**

This second passage traces the development of the theme of suffering. Firstly it raises disbelief then thoughtfulness in those who are observing it.

Vs 1 This verse raises two questions. These questions express amazement, that is, who would have believed such a thing. Paul writing in Romans 10:16 explains this verse saying that not all (Israelites) who heard the message believed.

Vss 2 – 3 How true to life are these verses? His beginnings were considered insignificant but his sufferings offensive. There was nothing in his appearance which would make us think that he would amount to anything.

Q. How could such a one play an important role in God's plans? Reflect on this statement and Jesus' origins.

He was held in contempt and rejected.

Reflect on the way the religious leaders of Jesus' day reacted to him. (He was not esteemed because of the suffering he went through).

Reflect on the following statement by Dr Allen Ross in his article on "The Triumph of the Suffering Servant":-

"These words illustrate vividly a habit we all share, the habit of letting the eye cheat the conscience, of letting the sight of suffering blind us to the meaning. We dislike pain and suffering; we turn away from it, forgetting that it has a reason, a future, and a God. We look on things so superficially. We make snap judgments about suffering on the surface. Everyday we allow the dullness of poverty, the ugliness of disease, the futility of misfortune, the disappointment of failure, to prevent us from realizing that we share the responsibility for them. We allow suffering in others or ourselves to blind us to the fact of the reasons and purposes for sufferings. We consider the sufferer an unlucky person who is falling by the way".

## **3. 53:4 -6 Surely the suffering is for us!**

Vs 4 Often the first thought about why suffering is happening. Why is God angry with them? (Think about Job's visitors and their thoughts. Job 4:7 etc) In this case the first thought is that the servant is being punished for "our sins".

Vs 5 – 6 Yes, the hand of God was on the servant, but not for his sins. These verses amplify verse 4. The sins he bore were ours. Note the contrast. "He" and "Our". His suffering is because of our rebellion and sin. This is termed "vicarious suffering". The purpose of this suffering is redemptive; our redemption.

The way of his suffering is described in the first half of verse 5, and the purpose of his suffering is given in the last half of this verse.

Discuss in your own words the two parts of this redemptive purpose.

Note that we are the beneficiaries of his piercing and crushing, his pain.

Note the way that verse 6 begins and ends.

Q. Vicarious suffering has been a part of our history from the beginning. In what ways might this be true?

In the case of the servant here, his vicarious suffering is a service to God, to fulfil His purposes. It is based on absolute love, not a sense of adventure or for moral reasons.

Q. Is vicarious suffering unjust? Can you think of two reasons that it may not be?

As sinners, we share the cause of pain in this world and that is just. But to suffer in the service of God is to demonstrate love. The one who highlights this is the suffering servant who suffers voluntarily. His suffering goes way beyond even incredible examples of great heroes because his suffering is for all. His suffering brings peace with God.

**4. 53:7 -9 The servant accepts the suffering and humbles himself**

Vs 7 Note down the attitudes that the servant displays here.

Scripture is full of examples as is life of people who do not willingly accept suffering. Can you think of examples?

Q. Why does the servant suffer in silence? Refer to 52:13.

Vss 8-9

Q. What are these two verses saying about the servant? (If this was a court of law)

**5. 53:10 – 12 It was the Lord's will that he suffer**

On the surface it appears that a great injustice has occurred. The innocent was killed.

Vs 10

Q. Did God really gain pleasure from this?

Success with God is to do His will even if it means that we suffer. In this case, the servant willingly gives up his life to serve the purposes of God.

Vss 10b -11 His suffering has powerful results. What are they?

After his suffering comes vindication, his redemptive work is completed.

Vs11

Q. What is the promise for the servant hence us in this verse?

Vs 12 God is pleased with His servant and those who are justified by his obedient service.

Q. How do you interpret the first part of this verse?

So what ultimately do we learn about the servant and about our servant- hood from this passage? Is there a purpose in our suffering?