

# THE PASTORS' PEN

articles from the elders of BBC

The Old Testament, we have seen, is filled with prophecies of the coming Messiah. Christmas truly has ancient origins, stretching back to the very dawn of human history. But of all the ancient prophecies of Messiah, perhaps the best known by Christian readers of the Old Testament, and one of the most powerful in all the Prophets, is the famed prophecy in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 of the despised servant.

We can imagine that this prophecy must have come as something of a shock to God's faithful people in the Old Testament who were looking for the coming Messiah. They could imagine the Messiah as a king, a ruler, a shepherd, and a peace-bringer. But one who would be greatly despised? Surely that is not what one might expect of God's chosen servant? And yet that is exactly what we find in the prophecy before us.

Isaiah appears to structure this prophecy in something of a stepped form. Ortlund observes that he really highlights three major aspects of the servant's ministry: his success, his suffering, and his significance. But he does so in something of a sandwiched fashion. The meat of the sandwich is the servant's significance (53:4–6). Surrounding the meat is the garnishing of the servant's suffering (53:1–3, 7–9). This is placed within the bread of his success (52:13–15; 53:10–12). The structure can be diagrammed something like this:

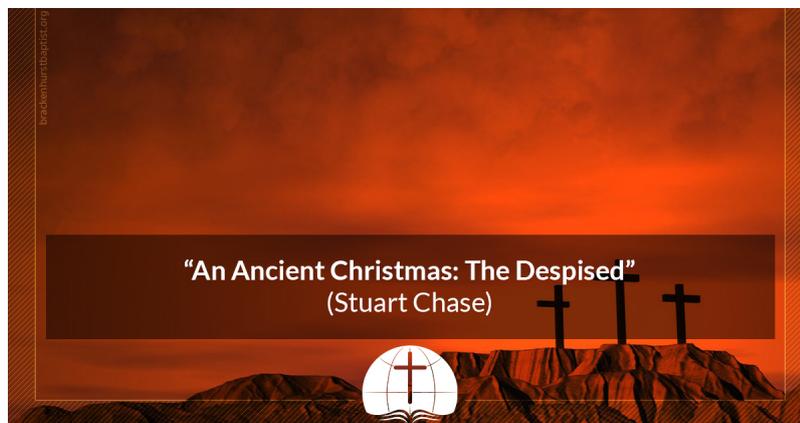
- The servant's success (52:13–15)
- The servant's suffering (53:1–3)
- The servant's significance (53:4–6)
- The servant's suffering (53:7–9)
- The servant's success (53:10–12)

As you can see, the heart of the prophecy is the servant's significance. Messiah would be sent as one who was substitutionally

redemptive (53:4–6). He would carry the "griefs" and "sorrows" of his people, being "pierced for [their] transgressions" and "crushed for [their] iniquities." It was through this "chastisement" that his people would experience "peace," and through his "wounds" that they would be healed. God's scattered sheep would be gathered together as "the LORD ... laid on him the iniquity of us all."

The idea of penal substitutionary

atonement—that God punished Jesus for our sins—is not popular today, but it is clearly taught in the Scriptures. Long before Jesus was born, Isaiah prophesied that the significance of Messiah would lie in his willing substitution for the sins of his



people.

What would it take for Messiah to accomplish this substitutionary redemption? He would need to be innocently rejected (53:1–3, 7–9). Messiah would be a man who was not outwardly spectacular. His physical appearance would not draw people to him. He would have "no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him." Indeed, so physically unimpressive would he be that he would be "despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." "As one from whom men hide their faces," he would be "despised" and unesteemed.

This rejection would not be his fault. He would not be rejected because he did

something to warrant rejection. "Oppressed" and "afflicted," he would not open his mouth. He would be like a sheep silently led to the slaughter. It would be by oppression that he would ultimately be cut off—and that oppression would be on account of the transgression of his people. "Although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth," he would not be afforded a place of honour by men. Instead, he would be buried as a common criminal in a borrowed tomb.

His suffering, however, would be the root of his success (52:13–15; 53:10–12). In his suffering, he would be "marred, beyond any human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind." He would be bitterly mistreated and ultimately killed, but by his death he would be "high," "lifted up," and "exalted." Those who had despised and mistreated him would "shut their mouths because of him." He would prove victorious in seeming defeat.

How could this be so? How could a despised, rejected, and ultimately slain servant prove victorious? Because it all happened to him according to "the will of the LORD." Yahweh was the one who would "crush him," but it was in this way that his "offspring" would be brought to him. A gruesome and painful death was the means by which God would accomplish the redemption of his people. "Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.... He poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors."

Christmas is a season in which we tend to focus on a baby in a manger, but there was far more to Messiah than that. There was nothing externally remarkable about the baby in the manger, and he remained externally unremarkable even as he grew to adulthood. But he was more than remarkable in the sight of God. He grew to be the sinless one who, despised by those around him, was ultimately condemned to die on a Roman cross. He died not for his own sins (for he had none), but for the sins of those he came to save. The sorrow of Calvary attended the joy of Bethlehem.

A friend once asked Jester Hairston to write a song for a birthday party, which would be attended by mostly West Indians. Knowing the audience, Hairston wrote a song with a calypso rhythm. The original song was never recorded, but when he was asked years later by a choir to write a Christmas song, he took the same melody, rewrote the lyrics, and presented it to the choir as "Mary's Boy Child." One of the most widely recorded Christmas songs in recent history, the chorus reads in part: "Man shall live forevermore because of Christmas Day." Technically, it is because of Easter, not Christmas, that God's people inherit eternal life, but the manger always lay in the shadow of the cross.

The baby sent at the first Christmas was destined to die on behalf of his people. He took their sins upon himself so that they could receive his righteousness. That truth lay behind the promise of Christmas from ancient times.

Famed Anglican pastor Charles Simeon once recalled the moment when he understood the significance of the cross:

In Passion Week, as I was reading Bishop Wilson on the Lord's Supper, I met with an expression to this effect—"That the Jews knew what they did, when they transferred their sin to the head of their offering." The thought came to my mind, What, may I transfer all my guilt to another? Has God provided an offering for me, that I may lay my sins on his head? Then, God willing, I will not bear them on my own soul one moment longer. Accordingly I sought to lay my sins upon the sacred head of Jesus.

The Offspring, the virgin's Son, the Child, the Branch, the Servant, the Ruler, the Shepherd was the despised and afflicted one—a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. All of these prophecies met in one man, predicted in an ancient Christmas, written in the pages of the Old Testament, hundreds—and even thousands—of years before he came as a baby in Bethlehem's manger. Praise God that he took our sins upon himself so that we could become the righteousness of God in him.

