

Bible Studies for Life Series for December 2: Recognizing the Savior

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Recognizing the Savior

- Isaiah 53:1-12

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The suffering servant is one of the most powerful and influential images in the Bible. Its influence carries from its inception in Isaiah through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and into the image of the church. The servant is portrayed in what are called "The Songs of the Suffering Servant," found in Isaiah 42, 49, 50, 52 and 53. These songs introduce the theme of vicarious suffering and are among the most remarkable in the Old Testament.

The earlier servant songs identify the servant as Israel, and then later, the prophet. In Isaiah 50, in which the prophet is identified as the servant, the servant's suffering was not due to his sins but was the result of his faithfulness to the mission God had given him.

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If you do much study on the servant passages, you will find there is some argument over the nature and identity of the servant. Perhaps the best way to approach these songs is to see them as a progression. Israel was formed to be God's people, to be a light unto the Gentiles, to bring salvation to the nations, but Israel was in need of being saved as well. The prophets were sent to call Israel back to God, and they did call out a remnant. The servant of Isaiah 53 is the one through whom salvation is accomplished.

The servant songs reach their climax in the text for this week's lesson, Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12. If we look at the pronouns in this passage—"we," "our," "us," "he," "him," "his"—we can get a clue as to the identity of the servant. Isaiah 53:4-6 indicates the servant is neither Israel, the remnant nor the prophet.

The Servant does for them what they cannot achieve in themselves. He takes their suffering upon himself and becomes the means of their salvation. It is important that we recognize the suffering of the servant because it is the means by which we know peace and healing.

The first question to ask of this passage is, "For whom did the Servant suffer?" If we look at the passage, we see the Servant's suffering is on behalf of others. In verses 4-5: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, ... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities." We see again in verse 8, "... for the transgression of my people he was stricken," and in verse 12, "he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors." All of these carry the implication that servant is the substitute for us all. This idea is made

explicit in verse 6: “the Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all.”

The second question to ask is, “For what end did the Servant suffer?” Examining the passage with this question shows the Servant’s suffering was for the purpose of redemption. Verse 5 says, “the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Isaiah goes on to say the “servant will justify many.”

Suffering for the sake of suffering serves no purpose at all; it is without meaning. The Servant’s suffering accomplishes redemption. We can undergo a great deal of suffering and torment if we know it serves a purpose or achieves a goal. Redemption is the goal toward which the Servant suffered.

We also can ask, “What brought the Servant to endure this suffering?” The Servant is not merely a servant; he is the obedient servant. The Servant’s suffering was in keeping with the will of God. Verse 6 says, “The Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all,” and verse 10, “It was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer The Lord makes his life a guilt offering ... the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.” For us to say suffering is God’s will means we also must recognize it is part of God’s work to conquer sin.

Suffering is not the end of the story. Beyond suffering, the Servant knew the victory of God. Verses 11 and 12 tell us: “After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. ... Therefore, I will give him a portion among the great.” It is not clear whether this specific passage implies the resurrection, but it is clear suffering does not have the last word.

The relationship between the Suffering Servant and the Messiah is not made clear until the New Testament. Israel’s misconceptions as to the nature of the Messiah make this clear. Jesus fulfills the roles of the Davidic

Messiah and the Suffering Servant in his own person and work. He is the King of the Jews, and he takes his throne by suffering on the cross.

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