

THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS

by Roy F. Lynn

Focus

In addition to the concept in the Bible of the Messiah as King of Kings and Lord of Lords is the profoundly moving image of the Messiah as Suffering Servant, suffering with and on behalf of His people. Indeed, the shadow of the Cross fell over the people of God, and the world, many centuries before Jesus was crucified on that lonely hill outside Jerusalem. This is our focus in this first lesson on the theme of Christ and the Cross—the Messiah as Suffering Servant.

Our Scriptural references will be the four Servant Songs found in Isaiah 49—55. We will linger for a while there in the shadow of the Cross, as those moving songs of eternal sacrifice point us to Calvary and the unspeakable love of God displayed there in the death of His Son for you and me.

In a world of “easy believism,” “cheap grace,” and a “me first” mentality comes the piercing message of the Bible that Christ’s disciples are called to serve and not be served. The image of the Suffering Servant on our behalf is one with which your young adults are probably familiar. But perhaps in their hearts they long to know the person behind that image more deeply.

So as you prepare to teach this lesson, allow God to minister His loving presence to you and your students, as you sit before the stirring poetry of this “Shakespeare” of Hebrew literature, Isaiah, and listen to God’s tender words about His Suffering Servant.

Blessings on your preparation and obedience.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13—53:12

COMMENTARY

Use the Commentary as background information and discussion material as you prepare and facilitate this lesson.

The Servant Songs

The prophet Isaiah wrote four so-called Servant Songs in approximately 704 B.C. These four songs were intended to give his contemporaries hope for the future. They give us (nearly 3,000 years later) a revitalized perspective of the ministry of Jesus, as God’s suffering servant.

The Character of the Servant

(Isaiah 42:1-9)

These great Servant Songs have been interpreted in various ways regarding the identity of just who the “Servant” is intended to be. Some scholars say the Servant is the prophet Isaiah himself, or the nation of Israel, while

many others say that the Servant described in these songs of sacrificial living is none other than Jesus Christ. What we have here in these four songs is an Old Testament portrait of Jesus Christ.

This first “Servant Song” describes the character of God’s chosen “Servant.” In the first four verses, God introduces His Servant Messiah. These verses describe the Servant’s gentle manner and worldwide mission. He is revealed as a person of lofty character and unfailing perseverance, a reflection of the very nature of God, who makes God’s work of redemption His own, and partakes of the divine compassion.

The Messiah's character is the central theme of these verses. His character is described in verse 1 as being called of God ("Here is my servant . . . my chosen one"); God-sustained ("whom I uphold"); God-pleasing ("in whom I delight"); and God-anointed ("I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations").

The manner of His work is unassuming (v. 2). His ministry will be the exact opposite of those false teachers who attempted to exalt themselves by noisy demonstration. What He brings in character requires no forced trumpeting. He will show tender pastoral care toward those who are in need (v. 3). And His primary task will be to establish justice on earth (v. 4).

Verses 5-9 form an antiphony of the first four—they reflect what is said in a new way. The eternal and creative God now addresses the Servant (v. 5). The Servant is divinely summoned to produce a covenant people and a spiritually renewed race (vv. 6-7). The meaning of these two verses is repeated by Isaiah in 61:1-2, which Jesus quoted in a very dramatic scene early in His ministry (Luke 4:18-19). "Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture [i.e., Isaiah 61:1-2] is fulfilled in your hearing'" (Luke 4:20-21).

God validates His authority over history in verses 8-9: "I am the Eternal One, jealous of My glory, scorning fabricated images, and successful in My predictions. I am *Yahweh*, that is My name, and it means the self-existent, eternal, self-sufficing, independent, omnipotent, living, and life-giving One, whose glory cannot be shared with any sham gods which are mere vanities and nothingness. My former predictions have come to pass, and now I tell you of new things before ever they come to light" (vv. 8-9 paraphrased).¹

The Calling of the Servant (Isaiah 49:1-7)

The second "Servant Song" here records the Servant's life: it relates His call, the effectiveness of His ministry, His rejection by His own, and His exaltation through His saving mission to the Gentiles. It is worded as if the Servant himself is doing the speaking.

He acknowledges that He was called even before He was born (v. 1). The very life of Jesus illustrates verses 1-4. His words were like a sword—they were able to cut to the core so that the whole truth was readily apparent to His hearers. His words were also like a sharp arrow, able to bring about conviction. He was concealed in the Father's "quiver" (kept from harm in Egypt) and in anonymity in Nazareth until it was time for His public ministry to begin (v. 2). And though to many it seemed He was spending His strength for nothing, He knew "what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God" (v. 4).

Verses 5-6 essentially prophesy that the Father has determined to enlarge His Servant's task: He would be a

Savior not only for the Israelites but also for all non-Jews; for the Gentiles. Isaiah portrays here Israel's final destiny. Israel is ultimately to be a light for the Gentiles and to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. This is not something new in God's plan for He had made clear His intentions in the original covenant (Genesis 22:18). But along the way, Israel and Judah's desire for political greatness had obscured their original calling.

The Work of the Servant (Isaiah 50:4-11)

The third "Servant Song" is a soliloquy. These verses take the form of the Servant who speaks about His accomplished task, even though the task would not actually occur for another 700 years.

There are three things here that are instructive for us. The Servant had an "instructed," or trained, tone (v. 4). He was not merely instructed in the "way" to speak but in "what" to speak, "to know the word that sustains the weary." The Servant also had a listening ear (v. 4). It is interesting that the listening ear is coupled with a lack of rebelliousness (v. 5). Finally, the Servant had an obedient will; "I have not drawn back" (v. 5). A worthy goal for our

The Centrality of the Cross

When the early Christians chose the cross as their symbol they knew that a universally acceptable Christian emblem would obviously need to speak for Jesus Christ, but there was a wide range of possibilities. Christians might have chosen the crib or manger in which the Baby Jesus was laid, or the carpenter's bench at which He worked as a young man in Nazareth, dignifying manual labor, or the boat from which He taught the crowds in Galilee, or the apron He wore when washing the apostles' feet, which would have spoken of His spirit of humble service. Then there was the stone which, having been rolled from the mouth of Joseph's tomb, would have proclaimed His resurrection. Other possibilities were the throne, symbol of divine sovereignty, which John in his vision of heaven saw that Jesus was sharing, or the dove symbol of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven on the Day of Pentecost. Any of these seven symbols would have been suitable as a pointer to some aspect of the ministry of the Lord. But instead the chosen symbol came to be a simple cross. Its two bars were already a cosmic symbol from remote antiquity of the axis between heaven and earth. But its choice by Christians had a more specific explanation. They wished to commemorate as central to their understanding of Jesus neither His birth nor His youth, neither His teaching nor His service, neither His resurrection nor His reign, nor His gift of the Spirit, but His death, His crucifixion.²

relationship with God is likewise to have instructed speech, listening ears, and obedient wills, all guided by the Father.

Note that verse 6 is a clear description of what happened to Jesus at His trial (Matthew 27:27-31; Mark 14:65; 15:16-20; Luke 22:63). And verses 7-9 are an expression of the Servant's faith in His Father. Philippians 2:6-11 is the apostle Paul's reflection on Isaiah 50:6-9. Likewise, the writer to the Hebrews sums up this passage in Hebrews 2:10-12.

Biblical scholars disagree as to whether verses 10-11 are part of this particular Servant Song. Those who believe it should be included as part of the Song state that these two verses are instructions to Jesus' followers who, along with Him, will face times of darkness. They are to remember that they nevertheless walk in the light. Those who are not willing to follow the Divine Light are like those who only light torches to show themselves the way. The result is they will be lost and will "lie down in torment" (v. 11).

The Destiny of the Servant (Isaiah 52:13—53:12)

This Servant Song is by far the best known of the four. The previous three Servant Songs focused on the prophetic ministry of the Servant. In this one He is pictured as a priest, vicariously suffering the sins of others. This is the clearest Old Testament statement of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice. It is composed of five stanzas with three verses each.

The first stanza (52:13-15) describes the Servant's **destiny**. He is to be lifted up and highly exalted, in spite of being deemed by the world as "disfigured beyond that of any man" (v. 14), and in spite of having "no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him (53:2).

The second stanza (53:1-3) describes the Servant's **career**. He grew up like a "shoot" on a tree stump, from a tree that had been cut down. This is a most unlikely place for such a Person of profound significance to begin His life, but that is the meaning of "like a root out of dry ground" (v. 2). In essence these verses say that Jesus would

come from an unlikely place called Nazareth, and grow up in God's sight in humble and lowly circumstances.

The third stanza (53:4-6) describes the Servant's **sufferings**. The key words in this stanza are "our" and "we." It was *our* sickness and *our* pains that He bore. Yet, we thought He was "stricken by God." We thought He was afflicted and smitten by God when all the time it was for *our* sin. The good news is that because He suffered in our place, it is *our* sin that is forgiven, and *our* illnesses that are healed.

The fourth stanza (53:7-9) describes the Servant's **submission**. Jesus was treated most unfairly by hypocrites who were violating the Jewish laws of jurisprudence. Any unfairness in our lives truly pales in comparison to His. And yet, he was submissive to those in authority. He did not attempt to justify what He had done; "He did not open his mouth" (v. 7). He spoke only when to remain silent before the Sanhedrin would have been a renunciation of His deity and His messiahship (Matthew 26:63-64). And because of His so-called "crimes" He was given a guilty person's funeral.

The fifth stanza (53:10-12) describes the Servant's **reward**. The Dead Sea Scrolls read, "But Yahweh was pleased to crush him and he pierced him." God did what is usual in Scripture, but unusual in our world. He permitted the outrage. He allowed His only Son to die in our place. He was given a criminal's funeral so that He would be even more glorified when He was given "a portion among the great" (v. 12). In this scheme of opposites He bore "our" sin so that He would be qualified to make "intercession for the transgressors" (v. 12). "Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (53:12). Paul grasped the full meaning of this as he declares: "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name" (Philippians 2:9).

N-SESSION COMMUNITY BUILDING OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to begin building bridges between students as you introduce today's subject.

1. What Do You Think?

Begin your class by writing the two words "SUFFERING SERVANT" on the chalk/marker board or flip chart. Then ask your students to respond by stating what those two words mean to them. Ask: **What do you think of when you think of those two words? Are there any suffering servants in the world today?** Allow several minutes for this to serve as a transition into the presentation of the Bible story.

2. My Lifelines

Part of the Commentary above dealt with the Suf-

fering Servant's "destiny," "career," "suffering," "submission," and "reward." The objective of this activity is to help your class members become better acquainted with each other through the application of those five categories to their lives. This community-building activity hopefully will help make this lesson more meaningful for your young adults.

Provide your students with paper and pencil, and using these five words as a guide, ask them to write five lines that describe their lives. Each line should be no more than one simple sentence in length. Ask for volunteers to share their "lifelines."

For example:

My “destiny” is to accomplish something significant for God.

My “career” is in Christian education.

My “suffering” is at the hands of those who do not understand.

My “submission” is to those who are in rightful authority.

My “reward” is the satisfaction of knowing that Jesus is pleased with me and my servanthood.

3. Your Song

This lesson is built around the four Servant Songs of Isaiah. As an introduction to the lesson, have your class members use a hymnal, or a chorus book, to choose one hymn or chorus that describes for them how they “feel” about salvation. For example: “How Firm a Foundation” might tell of one’s faith in God as the source of the victorious life.

Spend a few minutes allowing your students to “testify” according to what the hymns mean to them.

RESENTATION OPTIONS

Select one or more of the following activities to present today’s topic.

1. Responsive Reading

Make a copy of *Duplication/Transparency Master 1A* (based on Isaiah 42:1-9, a “Servant Song”) for each student. Divide your class members into two groups, “A” and “B.” After the responsive reading, ask the members of each group to counsel with each other, and determine the thoughts and feelings elicited by each phrase or sentence which was assigned to them. The two groups should then share their insights with each other. Then, with you as “leader,” have the class members read this “Servant Song,” as if this were being used as a responsive reading in a worship service. Use this as a transition into your presentation of the material in the Commentary above.

2. The Shadow of the Cross Falls Twice

Display *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1B* to help your students visualize how the cross of Jesus applies to the days of Isaiah (and before) and to us today (and in the future).

In the beginning of Israel’s history, the whole race was known as God’s people. But because Israel was so often disobedient, God allowed them to be taken captive by the Babylonians. Only a remnant was allowed to return to Jerusalem (see Ezra and Nehemiah). Relate how, in time, fewer and fewer people acknowledged the Lordship of God, until the time of Christ when there were only a few who followed God’s law.

Point out that after Jesus’ atoning sacrifice on the Cross, the reverse begins to occur. At first there were the apostles and then 120 who waited in the Upper Room. Then, after the day of Pentecost, when 3,000 were baptized, another 5,000 were added to the church. This was followed by the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 when

His followers were dispersed around the then-known world. Christianity has continued to spread since that time. Use this option as a way to supplement your presentation of the material in the Commentary above.

3. “Isaiah” Interview

This option will require some advance planning. Ask a responsible male to play the part of Isaiah. He should attend the class session dressed as Isaiah may have appeared (with robe, sandals, long hair, a quill pen, and so on). At least one week in advance, provide him with a copy of the material included in the Commentary section of this lesson, and encourage him to become thoroughly familiar with it.

Ask “Isaiah” a few questions that could be answered from that material. For example, ask him to elaborate on the meaning of certain passages from the four “Servant Songs.” Ask “Isaiah” to identify the Messiah in terms of the Commentary’s five words used in the fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13—53:13)—destiny, career, suffering, submission, and reward. Ask him about the paradoxes used in his songs; for example, the fact that the Messiah must suffer and die in order to become a Savior. (Why not have the Messiah have everything go His own way?) The Messiah was not known for His good looks. (Why not let him be “tall, dark, and handsome”?) The Messiah did not open His mouth in self-defense when falsely accused. (Doesn’t God help those who help themselves?)

Have another person be prepared to identify the New Testament passages that authenticate what Isaiah wrote about the Messiah. (Matthew 27:27-31; Mark 14:65; 15:16-20; Luke 4:18-21; 22:63; Philippians 2:6-11; Hebrews 2:10-12)

SUMMARY OPTIONS

Select one or more of these activities to summarize and to give opportunity for students to apply the truth learned through this lesson.

1. The Suffering Servant in Song

Some of Isaiah’s words about the Servant of God,

especially those in chapter 53, have been set to music in G. F. Handel’s powerful *Messiah*. Bring in a tape or

CD of part of the *Messiah* to play at the beginning of class.

2. Isaiah, a Microcosm of the Bible

Bring your class to a close by relating the following similarities between the Book of Isaiah and the Bible to your young adults.

There are 66 chapters in the Book of Isaiah, and 66 books in the Bible.

The first 39 chapters of Isaiah deal with history and prophecy, with a good intersprinkling of poetry. The theme is largely the application of God's law and judgment, together with a foreshadowing of the Messiah, and a period of grace to follow in the distant future. These things correspond closely with the 39 books of the Old Testament.

The last 27 chapters of Isaiah deal with teachings on a lofty spiritual plane. The central theme is the grace and mercy of God in providing a plan of salvation and the great events of the birth, ministry, and death of Christ. The preaching of the gospel and the final victory of faith in the revelation of the "New Jerusalem" are presented as if they

were occurring before the eyes of the prophet. These things correspond closely with the 27 books of the New Testament.

Just as the last 27 chapters of Isaiah speak primarily of the Messiah, the last 27 books of the Bible (the New Testament) speak primarily of Jesus the Christ.

3. John Wesley and Isaiah 53

Provide a copy of *Duplication/Transparency Master No. 1C* for each student. This is a statement by John Wesley concerning the Servant Song found in Isaiah 53. After reading it together as a class, allow time for questions and discussion. Close with a prayer of thanks for God's sacrificial love bestowed on us through Christ, His Suffering Servant.

4. Quiet Time/Prayer

You might consider ending your class with a prayerful reading of Isaiah 53. Have one of your young adults prepare ahead of time to read the passage meaningfully to the class. Allow it to serve as the closing prayer for your class.

Use **INTERSECT: College Chat Discussion Starters** to continue discussion on this lesson in a weekday Bible study session, as a take-home resource for further thought after today's lesson, or to supplement your in-session teaching of this lesson.

Notes

1. *Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1966), 4:177.

2. Adapted from *The Cross of Christ* by John R. W. Stott. © 1986 by John R. W. Stott. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press, P. O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515.

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