

Unit 1: Major Messianic Prophecies

Lesson 6 | January 5, 2025

The Suffering Servant

Study Text

Isaiah 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–7; 52:13 through 53:12; Acts 8:26–35

Central Truth

Christ suffered to free us from the bondage of sin.

Key Verse: Isaiah 53:5

He [Jesus] was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed (KJV).

He [Jesus] was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will recognize the many ways Jesus willingly suffered for us.
- Students will consider the significance of Jesus' suffering.
- Students will commit to sharing the gospel of the Suffering Savior with those who have not yet experienced the depth of God's love.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: You've probably heard the saying, "No pain, no gain." It dates back to the 1980s when instructors on aerobics videos would try to motivate their students to push a little harder, move a little faster, and "feel the burn." Only then would they see the results they were hoping for.

Discussion Starter—No Pain, No Gain

Say: Tell us about a time you had to make a sacrifice to receive something better. (*Examples: spending less to save for an upcoming vacation, cutting back on busyness to focus on rest, letting go of friends with ungodly lifestyles, postponing plans to care for a family member, etc.*)

Say: "No pain, no gain" may be a catchphrase from the '80s, but the concept of sacrifice and reward is much older. The Scriptures make it clear that our salvation is a free gift from God (Ephesians 2:8), but that doesn't mean it cost Him nothing. Today, we'll look at the pain Jesus suffered so we could gain everlasting life.

Following Jesus brings incredible joy and hope, knowing that "if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness" (1 John 1:9). But our forgiveness and restoration are free and effective only through His suffering and death. As we recall the sacrifices Jesus made for us, the natural response is gratitude and praise. With a deeper understanding of the price Jesus paid for our

redemption, we are motivated to resist temptation, love one another, and serve Him with the devotion He deserves.

Part 1—Despised and Rejected

No Outward Beauty

Isaiah 53:1–2

Say: Many worship songs and hymns mention the beauty and majesty of our Savior. Our love for Jesus and our gratitude for His grace make Him beautiful in our eyes. But Isaiah 53 tells us the incarnate Christ was not outwardly beautiful. Instead of being admired, He was despised and rejected. (***Play the Lesson 6 video about suffering. You can download it for free at radiantlifecurriculum.com/resources.***)

Isaiah 52:7–12 focuses on the authority and exaltation of the Messiah. But a shift occurs in verse 13 with the introduction of the Suffering Servant. Instead of enjoying acclaim and celebration, the coming Messiah would be despised and misunderstood. “Kings will stand speechless in his presence. For they will see what they had not been told; they will understand what they had not heard about” (52:15). Even the greatest rulers in the world would be incapable of grasping His true identity.

Isaiah describes the emergence of the Servant to be a matter of divine revelation (53:1). The phrase “the arm of the Lord” (KJV; “his powerful arm,” NLT) refers to God’s presence and action (Deuteronomy 7:19). God’s power would be manifested through the Messiah, but this revelation would be rejected by many—even the Jewish people whom God had chosen to be set apart for Him (Acts 13:46).

Under God’s protective presence, the Servant would grow up as a “tender green shoot, like a root in dry ground” (Isaiah 53:2; see 11:1). Isaiah’s readers would have connected with the concept of a barren, dry, hopeless place where nothing could naturally grow. It was from this kind of environment that the Messiah would emerge. Yet there would be nothing attractive, much less spectacular, about Him. Nothing about His appearance would cause people to think of Him as royalty.

We see the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in the New Testament. Jesus was born in a nondescript location to a humble family. He spent the first thirty years of His life mostly in obscurity. Although He eventually drew crowds because of His miracles, He was widely mocked and rejected, especially by religious leaders. Paul quoted Isaiah 53:1 referring to Jesus (Romans 10:16–17), and John wrote in his Gospel, “Despite all the miraculous signs Jesus had done, most of the people still did not believe in him. This is exactly what Isaiah the prophet had predicted: ‘LORD, who has believed our message? To whom has the LORD revealed his powerful arm?’” (12:37–38).

Discuss

? Since Jesus’ earthly ministry was not based on outward attractiveness, majesty, or charisma, why do you think certain people were so drawn to Him that they left everything behind to follow Him?

? What can this teach us about effective evangelism?

A Man of Sorrows

Isaiah 53:3

Say: When we think of Jesus' suffering, we often picture the cross—and rightly so. But His suffering began long before the crucifixion. Jesus can identify with our heartbreak, because He has felt it himself.

Isaiah next described the Servant as “despised and rejected” (53:3). Again, his words were fulfilled in Jesus, who was hated by the religious leaders (Mark 11:18) and scorned by the Jewish people (John 1:10–11). He was discriminated against because of His hometown (1:46). Many people who had heard His teaching and seen His miracles eventually turned away from Him (6:66) while others followed Him in secret (John 12:42–43; 19:38). Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) and the people's rejection of Him: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn't let me” (Matthew 23:37).

Days later, Jesus was betrayed by one of His disciples (Luke 22:21). When He was arrested, all His disciples ran for their lives, leaving Him utterly alone (Mark 14:27, 50). Then Jesus was mocked and beaten (Matthew 27:27–30). When Pilate offered to release Jesus rather than crucify Him, the crowd rejected the offer and chose a criminal instead (John 18:40). And He died on the cross, bearing the weight of humanity's sin.

Isaiah also said the Servant would be “a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief” (53:3). The word *sorrow* in this context refers to physical pain, while *grief* refers to sickness or injury. When He took on human flesh, Jesus also took on human pain, dealing with sickness and injury in His earthly life and bearing unimaginable physical suffering at His death.

The end of Isaiah 53:3 focuses on how the Servant would be perceived. People would turn their backs on Him, just as they naturally hide their faces from anything difficult or upsetting to look at. Not only would Jesus' physical suffering be unbearable to watch, but unrepentant human hearts would be unable to see any beauty in the One who offers them grace and hope.

Resource Packet Item 1: Expectations of Jesus

Jesus' life and ministry were very different from the Jewish people's expectations of who the long-awaited Messiah would be. Students will divide into small groups to discuss questions about fame and popularity, and then reflect on their own expectations of Jesus.

Discuss

? What does Isaiah's description of the Suffering Servant teach us about Jesus' ability to identify with us when we suffer rejection or pain?

? Do you think Jesus would have been despised and rejected if He had been born at some other time in history? What if He had been born in our time?

Part 2—Wounded and Bruised

Crushed for Our Sins

Isaiah 53:4–5

Say: After the Servant’s suffering in Isaiah 53:1–3, the reader might expect God to come to His aid, relieving His pain and punishing His oppressors. But instead, Isaiah continued to describe His anguish.

Both Matthew and Peter overtly connected the messianic prophecies of Isaiah 53:4–5 to Jesus:

- “Many demon-possessed people were brought to Jesus. He cast out the evil spirits with a simple command, and he healed all the sick. This fulfilled the word of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah, who said, ‘He took our sicknesses and removed our diseases’” (Matthew 8:16–17).
- “God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. . . . He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed” (1 Peter 2:21, 24).

Jesus bore the griefs and carried the sorrows of all humanity. Because of His incarnation, He dealt with the kinds of weaknesses we are familiar with. He understood pain, sickness, discomfort, and sadness. In fact, He physically suffered more than most of us ever will. Isaiah explained that the horror of the Servant’s death would cause spiritually blind onlookers to think He was being punished by God for His own sins. But the truth is, He was suffering for them—and for us.

- He was pierced for our rebellion against God and His commands.
- He was bruised and crushed for our sinful guilt. The terms translated “pierced” (NLT; “wounded,” KJV) and “crushed” (NLT; “bruised,” KJV) both refer to suffering that leads to death.
- The punishment laid on His body brought us peace or *shalom*, which carries the idea of wholeness, well-being, and joyful fellowship with God.
- By His wounds, we are healed. This includes not only physical healing but reconciliation with God.

All of history leading up to Jesus had proven that people were incapable of keeping God’s law, so “God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin’s control over

us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins” (Romans 8:3). What marvelous grace we have been given!

Discuss

? Why do you think so many people in Jesus’ time failed to acknowledge Him as the Son of God and Savior of the world?

? How does Jesus’ suffering illustrate God’s love? What is your reaction to knowing that He suffered for *you*?

The Sins of Us All

Isaiah 53:6

Say: To this point in Isaiah 53, sin has been on full display: rebellion, self-centeredness, pride, disobedience, hatred, moral weakness, lack of faith. The prophet has made a solid case for our judgment. And the only solution, the only remedy, is Jesus.

People are often compared to sheep in Scripture. They are vulnerable to predators (Ezekiel 34:5) and in desperate need of a Shepherd’s guidance and care (Psalm 23; Matthew 9:36; John 10:11–16). When Isaiah painted this word picture of straying sheep (53:6), he was describing our inadequacy to care for our own spiritual needs. Sheep tend to wander, and so do we. Our rebellion against God’s commands began with the very first people (Genesis 3) and has been going strong ever since. Rebellion ends in God’s judgment, which leaves us desperately in need of a Savior. As the Psalmist wrote, “I have wandered away like a lost sheep; come and find me” (Psalm 119:176).

Through Jesus, there is a remedy for this hopeless state: “The LORD laid on him the sins of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). This emphatic statement places the focus squarely on God. He created the solution for our sinfulness. Isaiah uses terminology that calls to mind the scapegoat released into the wilderness each year on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:20–22). After the priest laid his hands on the goat’s head and transferred all the people’s sins onto it, the goat would “carry all the people’s sins upon itself into a desolate land” (verse 22). In His suffering and death, Jesus is the Passover Lamb, the sacrificial offering, and the one who removes our sins “as far from us as the east is from the west” (Psalm 103:12).

Resource Packet Item 2: We Are His Sheep

Sheep are mentioned over four hundred times in the Bible, more than any other animal. This handout will help students understand this common biblical analogy and reflect on their relationship with the Good Shepherd.

Discuss

? What are some ways you have strayed like a sheep, leaving God’s path to follow your own?

? Why do you think God responds with such mercy to our unfaithfulness?

Part 3—Oppressed and Silent

Unjustly Condemned

Isaiah 53:7–12

Say: The imagery shifts between verses 6 and 7 of Isaiah 53. After comparing people to wandering sheep, the prophet describes the Messiah as a sacrificial lamb, silent and submitted to the Father’s will.

Lambs were important elements of the Old Testament sacrificial system (Exodus 29:38–41; Leviticus 23:9–14). In that context, the animals did not comprehend what was happening and walked unknowingly to their slaughter. But not so with our Savior. He willingly and silently endured suffering (Isaiah 53:7; John 10:18). He submitted himself to physical torment and engaged in a spiritual battle more intense than we can imagine.

His silence stands in stark contrast with the reality of the situation: Jesus is God. He could have called an army of angels to rescue Him (Matthew 26:53). Instead, He selflessly chose suffering because of His compassion for us. Only Jesus fully comprehended how Isaiah’s prophecies were being fulfilled as He was arrested and led away without just cause (Isaiah 53:8; Matthew 26:50), crucified with criminals, and buried in a rich man’s grave (Isaiah 53:9; Matthew 27:38, 57–60).

Isaiah 53:10 is shocking: “It was the LORD’s good plan to crush him and cause him grief.” The suffering Jesus endured was part of the Father’s strategy to redeem us and reconcile us to himself. Only through the Savior’s perfect sacrifice could our sins be permanently atoned for (Hebrews 9:12).

Isaiah explained that the Servant’s death would not be the end of the story. He would live on, seeing many spiritual children made righteous through Him (53:10–11). Because of Jesus’ willing sacrifice, God’s plan of salvation would prosper (verse 12).

Resource Packet Item 3: Our Suffering Savior

Students will read Luke 22:63 through 23:46 and prayerfully reflect on Jesus’ suffering. This handout would work best as a take-home page for personal devotions.

Discuss

? Why do you think Jesus stayed silent instead of defending himself to Pilate and Herod (Matthew 27:12–14; Luke 23:8–11)?

? What clues in Isaiah 53:7–12 point to Jesus’ resurrection?

The Gospel Spreads

Acts 8:26–35

Say: Just as Isaiah had foretold, the work of the Suffering Servant made it “possible for many to be counted righteous” (53:11). In fact, the Book of Acts includes a powerful story in which a royal official from Ethiopia came to believe in Jesus based on the prophecy of Isaiah 53.

Acts 8:4–8 describes Philip’s success in spreading the gospel in Samaria and the joy that filled the city because of all God was doing there. Then an angel directed Philip south toward Gaza (verse 26). There in the barren, isolated desert, Philip met the entourage of a high-ranking official from Ethiopia (Old Testament Cush, modern-day southern Egypt and northern Sudan). The official had been in Jerusalem to worship, implying he was either a convert to Judaism or a God-fearer.

As he was riding along in his carriage, the official was reading aloud from a scroll containing writings of Isaiah (verse 28). Clearly eager to learn, the official had likely purchased the handwritten scroll in Jerusalem. It would have been extremely expensive. Often, entire Jewish communities would pool their funds to purchase scrolls for worship and teaching, and they would be locked carefully inside their synagogues.

In God’s providence, the official was reading from Isaiah 53, one of the clearest messianic prophecies in the entire Old Testament (Acts 8:28). When Philip overheard him, the Holy Spirit directed him to ask the official whether he understood the passage. “How can I, unless someone instructs me?” the official responded (verse 31), and he urged Philip to join him in the carriage. This opened the door for Philip to describe how the Messiah Jesus had suffered a sacrificial death and miraculous resurrection. The Ethiopian official immediately became a believer. As soon as they passed by a body of water, which would have been rare in that region, he asked to be baptized. Perhaps as a Gentile, he was used to being excluded from Jewish worship and rituals, but Philip baptized him with no hesitation. As soon as the baptism was over, the Spirit “snatched Philip away” (verse 39), taking him farther north to another town. The official “never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing.”

Discuss

? How does Jesus’ suffering draw people to believe in Him?

? Think about the many details that fell into place so the Ethiopian official could hear and believe the gospel. How can you ensure you’re following the leading of the Holy Spirit in your day-to-day life—ready to share the gospel when a door opens?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: The parallels between the prophecies of Isaiah 53 and the suffering of Jesus are unmistakable. Not only does this passage of Scripture strengthen our faith, but it reminds us of the magnitude of Jesus’ love and His willing sacrifice for us. “We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us” (1 John 3:16).

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Stay open to the leading of the Holy Spirit this week and look for opportunities to share the gospel.
- Think about the significance of Jesus’ suffering. Then ask God to fill you with His compassion and selfless love.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Suffering with Christ.

Philippians 3:7–11

Tuesday:

God Delivers Us from Trouble.

Psalm 34:15–20

Wednesday:

Afflicted for Our Good.

Psalm 119:65–72

Thursday:

Do Not Lose Heart.

2 Corinthians 4:7–18

Friday:

Restored After Suffering.

1 Peter 5:6–11

Saturday:

The End of Suffering.

Revelation 21:1–7