

Brad Jordan / General Adult

The Saving Work of Christ / Substitutionary Atonement; Penal Substitution Theory of Atonement; Atonement; Substitution / Isaiah 53:4–6

Isaiah 53:4–6 presents one of the clearest declarations of the gospel in all of Scripture, revealing Jesus Christ as the substitute for sinners. The prophet shows that the suffering of the Servant was not for His own sin, but for the sins of His people. Christ bore our grief, carried our sorrows, was pierced for our transgressions, and crushed for our iniquities. His suffering was not accidental, but the outworking of God's redemptive plan, as the Lord laid upon Him the iniquity of us all. Through this substitutionary work, Christ secured true peace with God and brought healing from sin. The passage also exposes the universal condition of humanity—every person has gone astray and turned to his own way. The central question remains: have you trusted the Substitute God has provided? Only through faith in Christ can sinners be forgiven, reconciled, and restored to God.

Introduction

In Paul's pastoral letters to Timothy he clearly defines for us the reality of scripture, that it is all profitable, literally every jot and tittle. As we read God's word it becomes very clear that there are some passages that are relatively clear and others that are harder to understand and take more of our time. Even among those that seem to be very clear there are still some texts that call us to slow down, to listen carefully, and to receive the Word of God with reverence. Isaiah 53 is one of those passages. It stands before us as one of the clearest and most glorious revelations of the gospel in all the Old Testament. Written roughly seven centuries before the birth of Christ, this chapter describes the suffering, death, and saving work of the Messiah with such precision that it reads like inspired eyewitness testimony.

As we begin moving toward Resurrection Sunday, preparing to celebrate the triumph of Christ we must seek to truly understand the cross of Christ. While it is true that this is the darkest moment in all of human history it is just as true that the resurrection cannot be rightly understood if the cross is misunderstood. However, if we are to truly understand the cross, we must see that Christ died, not merely as an example of love, not merely as a martyr for truth, and not merely as a victim of human cruelty, but as the

divinely appointed substitute for sinners.

That is the great truth Isaiah places before us in verses 4 through 6. The prophet is not simply telling us that the Servant will suffer. He is telling us why the Servant will suffer. He will suffer because the sins of His people will be laid upon Him. He will bear what belongs to them. He will endure what they deserve. He will stand where they should have stood. In other words, He will die in their place.

This is the heart of the gospel. Salvation comes through a substitute provided by God Himself. The Lord does not save sinners by ignoring sin. He does not set aside His justice in order to show mercy. He saves sinners by placing their guilt upon Another, by punishing sin in a substitute, and by reconciling His people to Himself through that finished work.

John MacArthur calls Isaiah 53 “the Holy of Holies of the Old Testament” and says that it contains enough truth about the death and resurrection of Christ “to lead a sinner to full salvation.” That is a fair assessment of this chapter. It is deep, rich, and inexhaustible. It shows us Christ as the suffering Servant, the sin-bearer, the substitute for sinners.

And so, as we come to this passage, there is one central truth that must govern our thinking from beginning to end: Jesus Christ died in the place of His people. He is the substitute for sinners, which brings us to our text for this morning from the writings of the prophet Isaiah in the 53rd chapter verses 4-6...

Text

Please join me in standing out of reverence for the reading of God’s holy, inerrant, infallible, authoritative, sufficient, complete and certain word.

Isaiah 53:4–6 LSB

Surely our griefs He Himself bore,

And our sorrows He carried;

Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,

Smitten of God, and afflicted.

But He was pierced through for our transgressions,

He was crushed for our iniquities;

The chastening for our peace *fell* upon Him,

And by His wounds we are healed.

All of us like sheep have gone astray,

Each of us has turned to his own way;

But Yahweh has caused the iniquity of us all

To fall on Him.

Heavenly Father,

As we come now before Your Word, we do so with reverence, knowing that what we have read is not the word of man, but Your very Word—true, sufficient, and powerful. And Lord, we confess that apart from Your grace, we would read these words and yet fail to understand them rightly.

So we ask now that You would give us clarity of mind and humility of heart. Help us to see what is truly here—that Christ is not merely a suffering Servant, but the Substitute for sinners. Guard us from superficial understanding. Keep us from reading familiar words without feeling their weight.

Lord, show us our sin as it truly is. Let us see that we are those who have gone astray, each turning to our own way. And in that, lead us not to despair, but to Christ—the One who has borne our grief, carried our sorrows, and upon whom You have laid the iniquity of us all.

Give us ears to hear, minds to understand, and hearts that are ready to receive and respond in faith.

We ask this in the name of Christ, our Substitute and our Savior.

Amen.

The Servant Bears Our Grief

Isaiah begins in verse 4 by correcting the false interpretation of the Servant's suffering. He writes, "Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried." That opening word, "surely," carries emphasis. It is as if Isaiah is saying, "Do not miss this. Do not misunderstand this. What appears one way is, in truth, something else entirely."

In the previous verse the Servant is described as despised, rejected, and afflicted. The natural human conclusion is that such suffering must be deserved. Men look at visible suffering and often assume personal guilt. But Isaiah overturns that assumption. The suffering of the Servant is not first about His own condition. It is about ours. "Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried."

That language is deeply personal and unmistakably substitutionary. The griefs are ours. The sorrows are ours. The burden belongs to us. Yet He bears it. He carries it. He takes it upon Himself.

The words "griefs" and "sorrows" include the misery sin has brought into the world. They include suffering, affliction, guilt, shame, and the painful consequences of the fall. Isaiah is not saying that Christ simply looked upon the human condition with compassion, though He certainly did. He is saying something far greater. He is saying that Christ took upon Himself the burden connected to the sin of His people.

Matthew 8:17 applies this verse to the ministry of Jesus and says that His healing miracles fulfilled Isaiah's words. But those miracles were not ends in themselves. They were signs. They pointed to the deeper reality that Christ came to deal not merely with symptoms but with the root cause. He came to deal with sin and all its ruin.

Calvin, commenting on this passage, says, "He took upon himself and bore the punishment that was due to us." That is exactly right. The Servant does not merely come near our misery. He bears it in a redemptive way. He takes responsibility for what is not His by nature.

This is where we need to be careful. In our day it is common to speak about Jesus simply as one who understands our pain, one who identifies with our suffering, one who knows our weakness. Those things are gloriously true. He is a sympathetic High Priest. He knows what it is to hunger, to be tired,

to be rejected, to weep, and to suffer. But Isaiah 53 is telling us more than that. Christ does not save merely by sympathy. He saves by substitution.

He bears what belongs to sinners. He carries the load that should have crushed them. He enters into the full reality of our need, not simply to feel it, but to remove it by taking it upon Himself.

A. W. Pink, writing on the death of Christ, says that the prophets foretold that Messiah would die “not only under a death of shame and violence,” but also under that death as one whose sufferings had saving significance for others. Pink is right to stress that point. The sufferings of Christ are never presented in Scripture as bare suffering. They are always purposeful. They are always connected to the salvation of His people.

So Isaiah begins by telling us that the suffering of the Servant is representative and substitutionary. He bears our grief. He carries our sorrow. The weight belongs to us. The burden is laid on Him.

And immediately that should humble us. It should humble us because it reminds us that our sin is no light matter. The grief and sorrow described here are not abstract things floating out in the world disconnected from us. They are the bitter fruit of human rebellion against God. They are ours. Our guilt. Our ruin. Our need. And if Christ must bear them, then they are more serious than we often imagine.

At the same time, this should also fill us with worship. For the Lord Jesus did not draw back from this work. He did not avoid the burden. He came to bear it. He came willingly. He came in love. He came in obedience to the Father to take upon Himself what belonged to His people.

The Servant Suffers Our Judgment

Isaiah goes further in verse 5. He writes, “But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities.” If verse 4 tells us that the Servant bears our grief, verse 5 tells us how deeply that bearing goes. It is not merely that He enters into human suffering in a general sense. It is that He stands under divine judgment in a substitutionary sense.

The language is unmistakable. “Pierced.” “Crushed.” These are words of violence, pain, and judgment. And once again the key term is the repeated possessive: “our.” He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for

our iniquities.

Isaiah leaves no room for confusion. The Servant suffers, not because of His own guilt, but because of ours. Calvin says on this verse, "He was wounded, not for himself, but for us." That is the doctrine of substitution in a sentence. Christ does not suffer as a private person. He suffers as the representative of His people.

Notice the words Isaiah uses to describe our sin. "Transgressions" points to rebellion, to our crossing of God's law, to our conscious violation of His holy command. "Iniquities" points to corruption, to moral crookedness, to the twistedness of the fallen heart. In other words, both our acts and our nature are in view. Our open rebellion and our inward depravity are both included.

And what happens to those sins? They are not excused. They are not minimized. They are not swept away without satisfaction. They are judged in the Servant.

"He was pierced." That language fits perfectly with the crucifixion. Nails through hands and feet. A spear through His side. But Isaiah's words go beyond physical detail. The deeper question is this: why was He pierced? Why was He crushed? The answer is because God was punishing our sins in Him.

That is why later in this same chapter we read, "Yahweh was pleased to crush Him." The point is not that the Father delights in pain as pain. The point is that the Father willed the saving purpose accomplished through the suffering of the Son. Divine justice was being satisfied. The holy wrath of God against sin was being poured out, not on the guilty, but on the substitute.

This is the heart of penal substitution. "Penal" because a penalty is being borne. "Substitution" because it is borne by One standing in the place of others.

Spurgeon, preaching on Isaiah 53:6, describes the sins of God's people as brought together into "terrible concentration" upon Christ, and says that "all the sin of his people was made to meet" upon the devoted head of the Redeemer. That is strong language, but it is faithful language. It captures what Isaiah is saying. The sin that belonged to the sheep was laid upon the

Shepherd.

And here we must be clear and careful in our hermeneutics. Isaiah 53 is not teaching a vague notion that Jesus suffered because suffering is part of redemptive love in a general way. Nor is it teaching that the cross merely demonstrates God's opposition to evil. It is teaching that the Servant Himself stands in the place of sinners and receives the judgment that their sins deserve. This is not one possible meaning among many. It is the meaning driven by the repeated language of "our" and by the judicial terms that describe His suffering.

This matters deeply because the gospel itself is at stake here. The 1689 Confession speaks of Christ, by His "perfect obedience and sacrifice of Himself," fully satisfying the justice of God and purchasing reconciliation and an everlasting inheritance for all those the Father has given Him. That is exactly what Isaiah 53 supports. Christ does not merely make men savable in an undefined sense. He actually bears the sins of His people and satisfies divine justice for them.

And that means the cross was not a possibility. It was an accomplishment.

Peter says the same thing in 1 Peter 2:24: "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree." That language echoes Isaiah 53 directly. Christ bore our sins. Not His own. Ours. And He bore them "in His body on the tree," meaning in His crucifixion He actually carried the guilt of His people as their substitute.

There is a great pastoral weight here as well. If Christ was pierced for our transgressions, then sin is never a small thing. We do not measure the seriousness of sin by how acceptable it looks in society. We measure it by the cross. If the Son of God must be crushed for it, then sin is dreadful beyond our ability to describe.

But if Christ was crushed for our iniquities, then the believer's salvation is sure. Why? Because the judgment has already fallen. The penalty has already been borne. God does not demand payment twice. If Christ has borne the wrath due to His people, then there is no wrath left for them. That is why Romans 8:1 can say, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." No condemnation remains because condemnation has already been exhausted at the cross.

The Servant Secures Our Peace

Isaiah continues in verse 5, "The chastening for our peace fell upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed." Having shown us the judgment that fell on the Servant, Isaiah now shows us the result of that judgment. Because He was punished, we receive peace. Because He was wounded, we are healed.

The peace spoken of here is not first subjective. It is not merely a sense of calm in the heart. It is objective reconciliation with God. It is peace in the deepest and most necessary sense: the end of hostility between a holy God and guilty sinners.

By nature, sinners do not stand at peace with God. Scripture says we are by nature children of wrath. Paul says in Romans 5 that apart from Christ we are enemies. Colossians says we were alienated and hostile in mind. That is our condition outside of Christ. We are not neutral. We are under judgment.

But Isaiah says, "The chastening for our peace fell upon Him." The punishment that secures peace was placed on Christ.

MacArthur, commenting on the work of Christ in Isaiah 53, emphasizes that this chapter explains the death and resurrection of Christ with saving clarity. That is important here because peace with God is not something produced by our efforts, our sincerity, or our religious activity. It is accomplished through the atoning work of the Servant.

Paul says it plainly in Romans 5:1: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice the order. Justification leads to peace. Once guilt is dealt with, peace is established. Once righteousness is counted to the believer in Christ, hostility is removed. Once the substitute has satisfied justice, reconciliation is secured.

Spurgeon says of this verse that where sorrow reached its climax, there "a weary soul finds sweetest rest," and that "the Saviour bruised is the healing of bruised hearts." That is exactly the gospel logic of Isaiah 53. The place where judgment fell becomes the place where peace is found.

"And by His wounds we are healed."

Again, we must interpret carefully. This is not a promise of physical healing in the present age. The immediate context is sin, guilt, chastening, peace,

and iniquity. The healing in view is spiritual healing. It is the healing of the soul. It is forgiveness, cleansing, restoration, and reconciliation.

Calvin says on this line that in Christ alone "is life and salvation," and that "he alone hath pacified the Father, he alone hath reconciled us to him." That is exactly right. The wounds of Christ are not the wounds of a defeated martyr. They are the wounds through which sinners are restored to God.

This is why the gospel must never be preached as mere moral uplift. Christ did not come simply to inspire better living. He came to secure peace by His blood. He came to heal by His wounds.

And think of the comfort this gives to the believer. Peace with God does not rest on the strength of our feelings. It does not rise and fall with the quality of our day. It does not depend on whether we feel spiritually warm in the moment. It rests on the objective work of Christ. If the chastening for our peace fell upon Him, then peace is grounded in His finished work, not in our changing experience.

That does not minimize the experiential side of peace. There is indeed a peace of conscience, a peace of heart, and a peace that guards the believer's mind. But all of that grows out of this deeper peace: peace with God secured by the substitute.

The Servant Carries Our Sin

Verse 6 brings the argument to a glorious climax. "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but Yahweh has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him."

Isaiah begins with a universal confession. "All of us." There are no exceptions here. No naturally righteous. No spiritually healthy. No one who stayed on the path by his own wisdom or strength. All of us have gone astray.

The image of sheep is fitting. Sheep wander. Sheep drift. Sheep are prone to leave the safety of the fold and the guidance of the shepherd. And Isaiah says that this is humanity in its fallen state. We have all wandered from God.

Then he makes it even more personal: "Each of us has turned to his own way." That is the essence of sin. Sin is not only breaking rules. It is self-direction in defiance of God. It is choosing our own way over His way. It is

the creature claiming autonomy before the Creator.

Spurgeon is especially helpful here. He says the confession is both general and particular: all are sinful, and yet "each one with some special aggravation" can say, "We have turned every one to his own way." That is well said. Sin is universal, but it is also personal. We do not merely belong to a sinful race in the abstract. Each of us has sinned. Each of us has turned. Each of us is guilty. Isaiah is describing the universality of sin and the helplessness of man in himself. This accords with total depravity rightly understood. It does not mean every person is as wicked as possible in every respect. It means every part of man is affected by sin, and no one can recover himself by his own ability. All have gone astray.

But then comes the glorious gospel turn: "But Yahweh has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him."

This is one of the clearest statements of imputation in all of Scripture. The iniquity of God's people is caused to fall upon the Servant. Their guilt is laid on Him. Their debt is charged to Him. Their sin is made to meet on Him.

Spurgeon, in the same sermon, points to the marginal rendering "Jehovah hath made to meet on him the iniquity of us all," and then uses the image of many rays brought into one burning focus upon Christ. That image is memorable because it captures the reality well. What was scattered among all the sheep is gathered onto the Shepherd.

This is not fiction. This is not mere symbolism. This is covenantal representation and real imputation. Christ is counted as bearing the sins of His people, though He Himself is personally sinless. Paul says the same in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." There is the great exchange. Our sin imputed to Christ. His righteousness imputed to us.

And notice that Isaiah says, "Yahweh has caused" this to happen. Salvation is the work of God from beginning to end. God provides the substitute. God lays the sin upon Him. God ordains the atonement. God accomplishes redemption.

That means the cross is not man persuading God to be merciful. It is God in holy love providing the way of mercy consistent with His justice.

Here again, this is precious. Christ's atonement is definite and effectual. He

does not vaguely carry sin in an undefined way. He bears the iniquity of “us all,” namely the people described in the passage, the sheep who confess their wandering and whose sins are actually laid on Him. The Servant does not fail in this work. He accomplishes what the Father gave Him to do.

And this is where assurance is rooted. If your salvation finally depended on you, you would have no lasting peace. But if your iniquity has been laid on Christ, and if Christ has fully borne it away, then your standing with God rests on something outside of you and stronger than you: the finished work of the substitute.

Conclusion

Isaiah 53:4–6 leaves us with a gospel both humbling and glorious.

It humbles us because it shows us what our sin deserves. Our grief. Our sorrow. Our transgression. Our iniquity. Our wandering. Our self-will. None of it is light. None of it is excusable. The cross tells us the truth about sin in a way nothing else can.

But it also glorifies Christ because it shows us what He has done. He bore our grief. He carried our sorrow. He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The chastening for our peace fell upon Him. By His wounds we are healed. The Lord caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.

This is not tragedy. This is redemption. This is not divine defeat. This is divine purpose fulfilled. The substitute stands in the place of sinners and secures everything necessary for their salvation.

So the question pressed upon every listener by this passage is not merely, “Do you admire this truth?” The question is, “Have you trusted this Substitute?”

It is not enough to know the doctrine in an abstract way. It is not enough to affirm that Christ died. The issue is personal. Have you fled to Christ? Have you ceased from trusting yourself? Have you cast yourself upon the One who bore sin and satisfied justice?

If you remain outside of Christ, then your sin remains upon you. If you reject the substitute God has provided, you will bear your own judgment. But if you come to Christ in repentance and faith, then you may know this

with certainty: your sin has been laid on Him, your peace has been secured by Him, and your healing is found in Him.

This is the gospel.

This is the glory of the cross.

This is the Substitute for sinners.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We thank You for the truth of Your Word and for the clarity with which You have revealed the work of Christ. We thank You that You have not left us in our sin, but have provided a Substitute—One who has borne our grief, suffered our judgment, secured our peace, and carried our sin.

Lord, we confess that we are those who have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way. And yet, in Your mercy, You have caused our iniquity to fall upon Your Son.

Help us to live in light of that truth. Guard us from taking lightly what cost Christ so much. Fix our eyes upon Him. Stir our hearts with gratitude, humility, and worship.

And for those who have not yet trusted in Christ, we ask that You would draw them to Yourself. Open their eyes to see their need and the sufficiency of the Savior.

We ask all of this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Substitute and our Redeemer.

Amen.