

Isaiah 52:13-15

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Isaiah begins his fourth Servant Song prophesying about the Messiah. It speaks of how the Messiah will prosper and be exalted before making predictions that would likely have been difficult to reconcile with what the Israelites believed about the Messiah, because it appears to conflict with other predictions of the Messiah as a conquering king. Isaiah describes the Messiah's appearance as "marred" and predicts that He will redeem the Gentiles. He ends this opening portion of the final Servant Song predicting that the Gentiles will recognize the Messiah as their Savior without previously being told about Him.

This Messianic prophecy is commonly known as the Suffering Servant prophecy.

The end of Isaiah chapter 52 begins a new song. Unlike the previous song (Isaiah 52:7-10) which was uttered in the voice of Isaiah on behalf of the LORD, this new song is sung in the voice of the LORD. It is a prophecy about the Messiah, who is described as *My servant*.

This is the beginning of the fourth "Servant Song" in Isaiah. The Old Testament predicts both a suffering servant Messiah as well as a victorious king Messiah. Jewish tradition calls the suffering servant Messiah "Son of Joseph" and the victorious king Messiah "Son of David." Some schools of thought held that there would be two messiahs ("anointed ones"). Jesus fulfills both. In *His* first advent on the earth, Jesus fulfilled the suffering servant prophecies. In *His* second advent on the earth, *He* will fulfill the conquering king prophecies.

The first "*Servant Song*" of Isaiah is found in Isaiah 42:1-4. It prophesies that the Messiah *will* bring forth justice but *will* not be quarrelsome. *He will be* so gentle, "a bruised reed He will not break" (Isaiah 42:3). This *Servant Song* is quoted by Matthew as a demonstration of Jesus being the Messiah by virtue of having fulfilled this prophecy after *He* walks away from an escalating confrontation with the Pharisees over *His* healing on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:18-21).

The second "*Servant Song*" of Isaiah is found in Isaiah 49:1-6. It prophesies that the Messiah *will be* set apart as God's *servant* from *His* mother's womb. And *He will be* sent like an arrow from the LORD to accomplish *His* mission, which will be to redeem the nations. This song is quoted by the devout man, Simeon, when his old eyes saw the baby Jesus, the infant Messiah.

"For my eyes have seen Your salvation,
Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
A Light of revelation to the Gentiles,
And the glory of Your people Israel."
(Luke 2:30-32)

The phrase "A light of revelation to the Gentiles" spoken by Simeon in Luke 2 is a quote of Isaiah 49:6, which is part of the second "*Servant Song*."

The third “*Servant Song*” of Isaiah is found in Isaiah 50:4-11. It prophesies that the Messiah will rely upon the LORD for *His* vindication. *He* will set His “face like flint” towards obeying *His* Father’s will (Isaiah 50:7). Luke alludes to Isaiah 50:7 when he wrote: “When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined [literally “set His face”] to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51).

The crowd’s mocking of Jesus on the cross also seems to be a fulfillment of this *Servant Song*. Compare the chief priest’s taunts: “He trusts in God; let God rescue Him now, if He delights in Him; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God’” (Matthew 27:43) with Isaiah 50:10 “Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.”

Isaiah 52:13-53:15 is the fourth “*Servant Song*” of Isaiah. It is commonly known as “the Suffering Servant” passage.

Isaiah 53 begins with the question: “Who has believed our message?” (Isaiah 53:1). The “message” Isaiah is referring to in that chapter is the message of the LORD’s song at the end of Isaiah 52 as well as the hard-to-believe report about the Messiah’s suffering that the prophet is about to share in Isaiah 53. Isaiah is referring to both the LORD and himself when he says “our message.”

As we will see, this message of this *Servant Song* is astonishing and hard to believe.

The song begins with the lines:

*Behold, My servant will prosper,
He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted* (v. 13).

The term *My servant* refers to the Messiah. It is not clear why the NASB translators choose to not capitalize the word *servant* in this verse as they do elsewhere in this song (Isaiah 53:11).

The opening thought of this verse, *My servant will prosper*, reflects what is said later in the song of this same *Servant*, “And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His [My Servant’s] hand” (Isaiah 53:10) and “I will allot Him [My Servant] a portion with the great” (Isaiah 53:12).

To *prosper* means to “succeed,” “thrive,” “win,” or “overcome.” This song begins indicating that the Messiah will be triumphant.

This remark would have been in line with Israel’s expectations of their Messiah. The Messiah was to be a prosperous king like David, who “shall build a house for My name, and I [the LORD] will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Samuel 7:12).

The song expands upon the Messiah’s prosperity: *He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted*.

The expression, *high and lifted up and greatly exalted* normally means to *be greatly* praised and glorified. And indeed, many people *will* see the greatness of the Messiah and *His* works and

celebrate *Him* and *His* victories. This too expressed Israel's expectations of their Messiah. *He* would be celebrated for His victories over His enemies, just as David slew "his ten thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7).

The Apostle Paul tells us in Philippians, that God highly exalted Jesus, the Messiah, "and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow... and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-10). This is further supported by the first line of the Great Commission Jesus gave to *His* disciples after *He* rose from the dead: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18b).

However, as this Suffering *Servant* song will reveal, the Messiah's victories prophesied in this song will not be of a military nature. (Some of the Messiah's later victories will be militant. See Revelation 19:11-21). Therefore, contrary to Israel's expectations, the contest and the manner in which this song describes how *My servant will prosper* is not on a battlefield of horses and chariots. His victory will be over the enemy of sin (Isaiah 53:5, 11, 12). And as Isaiah 53:5, 10-12 will reveal, the manner in which *He* defeats His enemy of sin, will also be astonishing, not to mention unconventional.

The line *He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted* has a double meaning. The first meaning has already been mentioned. It means to be greatly glorified and praised, as Jesus already has been and will further be in the future. But it also has a surprising prophetic meaning that we can now understand through the benefit of history.

This line prophetically speaks to how Jesus, the Messiah, *will be high and lifted up* on a cross.

When Jesus was *lifted up* on the cross, *He* was an object of scorn for both God and man (Matthew 27:39-46).

But it was by paying the penalty of death by being raised up on the cross that Jesus fulfilled *His* mission as the Messiah and saved the world,

"As Moses lifted up the [bronze] serpent in the wilderness [upon a pole], even so must the Son of Man be lifted up [on a cross] so that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life."
(John 3:14-15)

"When you were dead in your transgressions...He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to a cross."
(Colossians 2:13-14)

Moreover, Jesus's exaltation upon the cross was also an example for us to follow,

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily."
(Luke 9:23)

“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus”
(Philippians 2:5)

At the time of Isaiah’s prophecy few (if any) Israelites would have expected that the Messiah would defeat *His* enemies by dying on a cross. For one, death by crucifixion had not yet been invented. And it is largely with the benefit of hindsight that we are able to understand this meaning within Isaiah’s prophecy.

The LORD then compares *My servant* to you, *My people*.

*Just as many were astonished at you, My people,
So His appearance was marred more than any man
And His form more than the sons of men* (vs 14).

The first line of the comparison describes how the world (*many*) *were astonished at you, My people*. The expression, *the many* most likely refers to the Gentile world in this instance. The world was *astonished at* Israel, God’s *people*.

The Hebrew word that is translated as *astonished* is שָׁמָּה (H8074—It is pronounced: “shaw-mame”). “Shawmame’s” sense of astonishment and wonder generally has a negative connotation. It describes a sense of disgust, or an unexpected disappointment or bewilderment. “Shawmame” means to be “appalled.”

The Israelites were appalling among the nations. The reason *the many were astonished at* God’s *people* was because Israel was lowly and disliked. They were a race of former slaves who refused to worship the false idols of other nations. It was appalling to the Gentile nations that Israel was brought out of slavery in Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for forty years. And as the lowly Israelites conquered the wicked pagans who dwelt in the Promised Land of Canaan, *many were astonished*—“shawmame.”

And as *the many* nations *were astonished at* Israel, so will everyone be astonished of the Messiah. He too *will be* lowly and disliked. People, including the Israelites themselves, will not think much of *Him* when they see *Him*.

Isaiah describes the Messiah’s appearance as *marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of any man*. To have a *marred appearance* means to have an unattractive face. To have a *form* that is *marred* means to be physically unattractive. Isaiah prophesies that the Messiah *will be more* unattractive *than any man* and *more than the sons of men*. This may or may not mean *He will be* less attractive than most. But it likely does predict the brutal flogging and maiming of Jesus by the Romans prior to His crucifixion (Mark 15:15-19).

This verse and the line in Isaiah 53:2 are among the only verses in the entire Bible that describe Jesus the Messiah’s physical appearance.

Isaiah continues with an interesting line: *Thus He will sprinkle many nations* (v. 15).

The verb *sprinkle* is the Hebrew word: נָזַף (H5137—It is pronounced: “naw-zaw”). This word most often appears in the book of Leviticus and describes the sprinkling of blood for atonement.

In this prophecy, *sprinkle*—“nawzaw”—likely has a double meaning.

First, it foreshadows how the Messiah *will sprinkle many nations* with the blood of atonement as a High Priest. Jesus, the Messiah, is our perfect High Priest (Hebrews 3:1). And the blood of the sacrifice that *He* has and *will sprinkle the nations* with is *His* own blood. Remarkably, in this prophecy Isaiah predicts that the Messiah *will* not just *sprinkle* and save Israel from her sins, He will also be a High Priest who *will sprinkle* and save *the many nations* (Gentiles).

That the Jewish Messiah would redeem the Gentiles from sin is probably astonishing and surprising to the Jews. However, it was predicted in God’s promise to Abraham, that “...in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).

A possible second meaning of *sprinkle* is that the Messiah will surprise *many nations*, like someone who suddenly gets their face sprinkled or splashed. When viewed through a historical lens, this certainly is the case. At the time of Jesus, the Jewish people were not particularly relevant to the Gentile world. The controversy between the Jewish authorities and Jesus seemed to the Romans/Gentiles to be an intramural squabble (Mark 15:10, 15). It is indeed an incredible surprise that these events are now among the most talked about episodes in the history of the world.

The context of Isaiah allows for both interpretations for *sprinkle* (atonement and surprise) to be in play.

Isaiah ends this verse and portion of his final Servant Song, which continues through the end of Isaiah 53, with three more lines about surprise and/or disbelief concerning the prophesied events surrounding Messiah the *Servant*:

*Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him;
For what had not been told them they will see,
And what they had not heard they will understand* (vs 15).

The line saying: *Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him* could indicate that earthly rulers will not know what to make of the Messiah.

The Roman Prefect, Pilate, who had few qualms about murdering people, seemed very uneasy to kill Jesus, the Messiah (John 18:38; 19:4; 7-8; 10-12; Luke 23:20-22; Matthew 27:24). He seemed to recognize something mysterious about Jesus.

When Paul testified of Jesus the Messiah before King Agrippa, the king hardly knew what to say, “In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian” (Acts 26:28).

Isaiah’s line could also describe how the Messiah’s glory will greatly outshine all *kings* and they *will shut their mouths* to pay *Him* silent respect as they are in awe of *Him*. Jesus, the Messiah is

the King of *kings* (1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 19:16). It could also include the reality that Jesus is and will be crowned King of *kings* and Lord of lords, and every knee will bow before *Him* (Revelation 19:16; Philippians 2:10).

Once again, both interpretations—that He will baffle and greatly outshine earthly rulers—could be applied at the same time.

Isaiah's final two lines of verse 15 seem to predict that the Gentile rulers *will understand* the significance of the Messiah as their Savior before the Israelites *will understand Him*:

*For what had not been told them they will see,
And what they had not heard they will understand.*

The *they* refers to the Gentile rulers of *the many nations*. *They will see* the Messiah as their Savior even though *they had not been told* about *Him*. *They will understand* who *He* is even though *they had not heard* about *Him*.

This is similar to some of the things the Apostle Paul will say to the Roman believers about the good news of Jesus the Messiah in regard to the Jews and Gentiles (Romans 2:14-21).

“What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law.”
(Romans 9:30-31)

In Romans 11, Paul goes on to describe how God has used the Jews' blindness to recognizing Jesus as their Messiah as an opportunity to graft Gentiles into His plan of redemption. The Apostle Paul is *astonished* (in a good way) at this. And Paul interrupts his flow of thought to worship God and marvel at how unfathomable God's plans are,

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!”
(Romans 11:33)

Isaiah, too, seems to pause and marvel after prophesying how the Messiah will sprinkle and redeem the nations, and the fact that the Gentiles *will see* the Messiah for who *He* is before the Israelites *will* recognize *Him*, despite *not* having *been told* or *not* having *heard* about *Him*.

Isaiah's marvel is recorded in the first verse of Isaiah 53, which is a continuation of the fourth *Servant Song* of Isaiah,

“Who has believed our message?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”
(Isaiah 53:1)

Biblical Text

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