

Isaiah 53:1-3

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/isa/isa-53/isaiah-531-3/>

Isaiah continues an unusual prophecy about the Messiah that He began in Isaiah 52:13. He predicts that the neither He nor the Messiah will be believed. The Messiah will be unrecognized, unremarkable, unattractive, despised and forsaken of men, full of grief and sorrows, and misunderstood.

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

Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 is commonly referred to as “The Suffering Servant” prophecy. This description is derived from the suffering the passage foretells will fall upon the Messiah, who is described by the LORD as “My Servant” (Isaiah 52:13; 53:11).

It is an unbelievable and ironic prophecy concerning the Messiah.

The prophecies about the Messiah are also extremely accurate. They are so precise, that for some time skeptics claimed that they were a forgery added to Isaiah after the death of Jesus. But when the Dead Sea Scrolls (which date back to three centuries before the life of Jesus) were discovered in 1947, Isaiah 53 among them, the prophecies were seen to be authentic. This commentary will attempt to first understand each of the Messianic prophecies in this chapter in its own terms and then consider its fulfillment in the life and death of Jesus, the Messiah.

As you follow along, we invite you to consider the uncanny accuracy of Isaiah’s prophecies about the Messiah, 700 years before Jesus Christ came and fulfilled them.

This is a continuation of the fourth “Servant Song” in Isaiah.

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 cited by the gospel-writer Matthew as a demonstration of Jesus being the Messiah 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 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 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 3:30-32)

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). In his gospel, Luke alludes to this line 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 crowds’ mocking of Jesus on the cross also seems to be a fulfillment of this *Servant Song*. Compare the chief priests 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.”

This is the fourth “*Servant Song*” of Isaiah. It is commonly known as “the Suffering Servant.” This song lasts from Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

Previously, Isaiah has prophesied in this song that the Messiah will

- Prosper and be high and lifted up (Isaiah 52:13)
- Have an appearance and form that is marred more than any man (Isaiah 53:14)
- Sprinkle and Atonement many nations (i.e. the Gentiles) (Isaiah 53:15)
- The Gentiles and their Kings will marvel and recognize the Messiah for who He is before the men of Israel will recognize Him, despite the fact they were never told about the Messiah (Isaiah 53:15)

In the first verse of this chapter, Isaiah admits that this prophecy will not be easily received.

Who has believed our message?

This line both recalls the unbelievableness of the prophecy in the previous verse about the Gentiles understanding the Messiah while the Israelites do not recognize Him (Isaiah 52:15); and it recalls the unbelievableness of what Isaiah is about to share about the Messiah.

This verse is akin to Paul’s amazement in Romans about how God has used the Jews’ rejection of Jesus as the Messiah to usher in the Gentiles into His kingdom,

“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)

The reason Isaiah’s prophecy is unbelievable is because it defies the people’s deeply held expectation of themselves and how they will welcome the Messiah with open arms. Even though this chapter is a prophecy concerning the Messiah and what will happen to Him, it is equally about the people who will reject Him when He does come. For the people to receive this prophecy they would have to accept that they will abuse and murder the very Messiah they pray for and affectionately await.

What makes this prophetic chapter so ironic are these same things.

In summary, the prophecy was unbelievable and ironic for two reasons.

First, it was unbelievable and ironic because the Messiah would be beaten, rejected, and murdered; none of which align with the prophetic hopes of His triumph over His enemies and the benevolent rule over His people. And second, it was unbelievable and ironic because the very people who presumably will love the Messiah will be same people who will despise, forsake, and kill Him.

Therefore, this prophetic chapter is about the Messiah and His people.

Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah and His *message* would be rejected. Isaiah makes this prophecy about the future by using a tense that is described as “the prophetic past.”

The prophetic past predicts a future event that has not yet happened. But it speaks of these future events in the past tense as though they have already taken place. One of the upshots of speaking in this prophetic past is that it dramatically stresses the certainty of the future events it predicts. Another possible reason for using the prophetic past is that it is an attempt to speak of things from God’s eternal perspective in human terms. Because God is eternal and above time, all events are past, present, and future for Him. God is eternally present. He is already present in our future. And He is still present in our past. By using the prophetic past, Isaiah and the other prophets give expression to God’s eternal nature. Isaiah uses the prophetic past in the first nine verses of this chapter.

Isaiah predicts eight things about the Messiah in this portion of his prophecy.

The Messiah will:

- Not be believed
- Be unrecognizable
- Be unremarkable
- Be unattractive
- *Despised*
- *Forsaken of men*
- *Full of Sorrows and Grief*
- Misunderstood

By extension, these prophecies about the Messiah reveal as much about the men of Israel as they do the Messiah.

1. **The Messiah was not Believed**

The first thing Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah in the Suffering Servant passage is that *He* will not be *believed*.

He begins this prophecy with two rhetorical questions. They are:

*Who has believed our message?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?*

The rhetorical or expected reply to both questions is: “No one.”

As to the first question: *Who has believed our message?*—no one fully believed the Messiah’s *message*. Everyone demonstrated their doubt by either rejecting (Matthew 26:65-66; 27:21-23) or deserting *Him* (Matthew 26:56).

Jesus the Messiah’s *message* was “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). The kingdom the Messiah offered was unlike the political kingdoms and religious fiefdoms of men. These petty dominions bitterly and bloodily squabbled with one another over who got to dominate the people. Their authority was oppressive and exploitative. The Messiah’s kingdom was based upon its great men using their talents and resources to serve and bless the people (Matthew 20:25-28). Because the Messiah refused to submit to the rules of earthly kingdoms—including those of the corrupt religious authorities—*He* was rejected by them, and His *message* was not *believed* (Matthew 9:3; 12:24).

The gospel-writer John explains how this prophecy was fulfilled even though Jesus had performed so many signs, and still the people did not believe Him: “This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: ‘Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’” (John 12:37-38).

Paul cites this prophecy to the Romans as an explanation as to why not everyone believes the Gospel (Romans 10:16).

It is also worth noting that Isaiah’s question says *our message*. This begs the question: Who is asking this question? We know that it is more than one person because of the plural pronoun. But who are they? Or more precisely, who might *our* refer to?

One possibility as to who *our* might refer to is Isaiah and God. As a prophet, Isaiah is delivering a *message on the LORD’s* behalf, as an obedient servant of God, it is only natural for him to associate himself with *the LORD* and His *message* as their *message*. Or spoken from Isaiah’s perspective, *our message*. This could be part of the fulfillment of God’s call to Isaiah to tell the truth to Judah, even though they would not listen to the truth (Isaiah 6:8-11).

Another possibility for the meaning of *our* is that this is a reference to the Trinity: God as Father-Son-Holy Spirit. If so, this would be similar to God's expression at the creation of man in His image: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness..." (Genesis 1:26). This interpretation aligns with what the Messiah repeatedly emphasized throughout His ministry. Namely, that His *message* was the Father's *message* (John 5:19, 26-27, 36; 8:28-29; 10:30; 14:11; 17:4).

2. The Messiah was Unrecognizable

The second thing Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah in the Suffering Servant passage is that *He* will not be recognized.

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

The natural reply to the second rhetorical question is "*the arm of the LORD has been revealed to no one.*"

The expression *the arm of the LORD* is similar to the contemporary expression, "right-hand man." *The arm of the LORD* is a metaphor for the Messiah. The Messiah is the one who will execute God's will and lead His people to victory.

The identity of the Messiah was not known at the time of Isaiah's prophecy, because it had not yet *been revealed*. The Jews were looking and eagerly waiting for the Messiah, but when the Messiah finally came, no one knew who *He* really was, "He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). Isaiah prophesies that when the Messiah comes, *He* will largely live and die unnoticed as the Messiah. Isaiah accurately predicted this quirk seven centuries before Jesus's public ministry.

Jesus's response to the multitudes clamoring for another miracle is ironic; when they asked *Him* what works God required of them, *He* told them the only work God required was "that you believe in Him whom He has sent" (John 6:29b). But most did not believe that *He* was the Messiah and therefore they did not believe His message. This interaction in John 6 is a fulfillment of these prophetic rhetorical questions in Isaiah 53.

Isaiah prophetically explains how the Messiah will be among His people but will not be properly recognized for who *He* is,

*For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,
And like a root out of parched ground*

In these lines Isaiah compares the Messiah to a tree sapling that *grew up before the LORD like a tender shoot*. Trees grow slowly and quietly. Shoots of new trees from the roots of the parent tree pop up all the time without anyone paying careful attention to them, until one day they are recognized as a tree. No one seemed to notice this sapling growing, as no one seemed to recognize the Messiah.

3. The Messiah was Unremarkable

The third thing Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah in the Suffering Servant passage are that *He* will have no official titles nor have any reason for people to pay special attention and *look upon Him*.

*And like a root out of parched ground
He has no stately form or majesty
That we should look upon Him.*

Isaiah compares the Messiah to an exposed *root* that emerges from the *parched ground* when the dried soil blows away. Isaiah's intended meaning is not clear to us. Some have taken this to mean that Jesus did not have smooth facial features because roots are twisted and gnarly. It could also simply mean that Jesus seems out of place; roots are not supposed to be visible. This interpretation certainly fits Jesus's experience; Jesus's message did not conveniently fit in to His times. Subsequent verses will also tell us that Jesus did not "fit in."

This prophecy foretells that the Messiah will have *no stately* or political titles bestowed by men. He will not *look* like an earthly King, nor will *He* have titles in earthly governments. He will have no earthly *majesty* or official authority from man.

Jesus, the Messiah never held any titles, nor did *He* hold public office. In the eyes of the religious authorities, Jesus was a wandering rabbi, without proper authority, who preached strange doctrines and performed magic tricks to deceive people into following *Him*. *He* did not *look* like much. Jesus, the Messiah was little regarded by the authorities because *He* was from Nazareth (John 1:46) In the words of Isaiah, *He had no stately form or majesty. He was altogether unimpressive. There was nothing about Him that particularly stood out and demanded attention. There was no reason anyone should look upon Him.*

The Messiah's authority and power will be from God, not man (Matthew 28:18). It is not of this world (John 18:36).

4. The Messiah was Physically Unattractive

The fourth thing Isaiah prophesies about the Messiah in the Suffering Servant passage is that *He* will not have an attractive physical *appearance*.

Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.

Not only will the Messiah not have titles or impressive positions, *He* will not be particularly good looking either. Interestingly, this prophecy is the only passage in scripture that describes what Jesus looked like. This line is one of the only scriptures that describes the Messiah's general *appearance* and/or physical attributes during His first advent. Another is from an earlier line in this Servant Song found in Isaiah 52:14: "So His appearance was marred more than any man and His form more than the sons of men."

Revelation describes the Messiah's *appearance* during His second Advent in starkly different terms (Revelation 1:13-16; 19:11-16).

But also notice how Isaiah makes this prophecy personal to the reader. He prophesies that *we* will not *be attracted* to the Messiah. In other words, the men of Israel who read this prophecy and who enthusiastically await the Messiah will be the people who are repulsed by *Him*.

It is also possible the Isaiah is prophesying about how the Messiah's *appearance* will be turned into a bloody mess at the hands of *His* murderers. Jesus the Messiah *was* badly beaten, flogged, and had a crown of thorns pressed into *His* head before *He* was crucified. In that awful moment, *His appearance* was an appalling and unattractive sight.

5. **The Messiah was Despised.**

Not only would the Messiah not be believed, recognized, noteworthy, or physically attractive, *He* would also be *despised*.

Twice Isaiah prophesies in this passage: *He was despised*. To despise something means to strongly dislike it. It means to have contempt for it or scorn that thing. Despising something comes from the gut. It is an emotional response, a state of loathing.

It is quite strange that the Messiah—the long-hoped-for hero who would speak God's words of life (Deuteronomy 18:15), redeem Israel (Isaiah 54:11), bring justice to the nations (Genesis 49:10; Isaiah 42:1-4) and establish His prosperous kingdom forever (2 Samuel 7:12-13; Psalm 2:1-12)—would be *despised* by the same *men He* came to rescue and bless.

And yet, Isaiah tells us: *He was despised*.

Such a prophecy would have likely been perplexing to the faithful Jews who heard and read it. It would have been difficult for them to consider any scenario where they could *despise* the Messiah they prayed for. Their response would probably have not been much different from the Messiah's own disciples who swore to Jesus that they would ever forsake Him mere hours before they abandoned Him (Mark 14:29-31).

But the Gospels describe how this unfathomable, prophetic scenario came to pass. Jesus, the Messiah, *was despised of men*. The Gospels show how the people of Israel came to despise the Messiah.

- Jesus was rejected by His hometown (Luke 4:24, 28-30)
- Jesus was hated and slandered by the Pharisees (Matthew 12:24)
- Jesus was arrested and beaten by the Sadducees (John 19:20-24)
- Jesus was betrayed and denied by His own disciples (Mark 14:43-45; 66-72)
- Jesus was condemned to death by His people (Matthew 27:15-26)
- Jesus was mocked by His people as He was executed (Mark 15:29-32)

The Messiah *was* and is “the Light of the world” (John 1:9; 8:12). But even though “the Light has come into the world...men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed” (John 3:19-20).

6. **The Messiah was forsaken of men.**

Forsaken means to be left to face troubles or hardships alone. It means to be abandoned without help or aid. The Hebrew word translated as *forsaken* is from לָדָל—pronounced “khaw-dale” (H2308). It can also mean “rejected” or “ostracized.” Isaiah prophesied that *men* would want nothing to do with their redeemer and King.

The Messiah *was forsaken of men*. The Messiah was rejected by His people when they called for Barabbas to be liberated and Jesus to be executed (Matthew 27:15-26) and we have already seen how His own disciples abandoned *Him* in His hour of trouble (Mark 14:66-72). And *men* forsook *Him* despite His authoritative teachings and numerous miracles that blessed them and others (John 10:38).

But even as the Messiah *was forsaken of men*, *He* was also *forsaken of God*. Jesus cried out on the cross “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46).

7. **The Messiah was full of Sorrows and Grief.**

Isaiah describes the Messiah as *a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*.

The Hebrew word that it is translated as *sorrows* is a form of the word, מַכְאֵב—pronounced “mak-obe” (H3510). It refers to pain—both physical and mental. It can also mean troubles and disappointments. To be called *a man of sorrows* means to be *a man* who has experienced physical hurt and encountered troubles. In describing the Messiah as *a man of sorrows*, Isaiah was predicting that the Messiah would suffer much pain and hardships in His life.

The Hebrew word that is translated as *grief* is a form of the word, כּוֹלֵעַ—pronounced “khol-ee” (H2470). The English word “melancholy” derives from khol-ee'. It means to be sick with sadness and emotional anguish. Isaiah predicted that the Messiah who would redeem Israel from her *grief* would be well *acquainted with His grief*—the Messiah’s *grief* and the *grief* of those *He* came to save (Isaiah 53:4).

Jesus, the Messiah, suffered many *sorrows/”mak-obe”* throughout His life. Among the difficulties He faced include His family having to flee the country as refugees from Herod’s murderous rage when *He* was very young age (Matthew 2:13-16). Even though *He* was the Messiah and true King of Israel, Jesus never had a place of His own or house where *He* could lay His head throughout His time of ministry (Matthew 8:20). And Jesus endured tremendous pain from the physical beating, the flogging, and many tortures on the cross.

Jesus, the Messiah was *acquainted with grief*. It was agonizing for Him to be rejected by His people. He wept over Jerusalem and her rejection of Him and the pain they would suffer for

doing so (Matthew 23:37-38; Luke 19:41-44). It was heartbreaking to be abandoned and betrayed by His closest friends. And the grief of these things and the anticipation of the cross led Him to pray so fervently for another way to do God's will, so much so that He sweat blood (Luke 22:41-44).

Upon arriving in Jerusalem for the last week of His earthly life, Jesus prayed to His Father, in front of His disciples:

“Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour.”
(John 12:27)

Isaiah goes on to elaborate how the Messiah will be *like one from whom men hide their face*.

This expression means that people will be ashamed to know or be associated with the Messiah. We see this fulfillment in Peter's adamant denial of Jesus, swearing that he was never His disciple or even knew who Jesus was (Mark 14:66-72).

8. The Messiah was Despised yet we did not esteem Him

Isaiah repeats that *He was despised*, before saying that *we did not esteem Him*. To *esteem* something or someone means to give that person or thing its proper value or due respect. But *men* will fail to assign the Messiah His due worth. Because *men* will fail to recognize *Him* for Who *He* is, they will misunderstand His important mission. Instead of honoring *Him* for who *He* is, *men* will hate *Him*. Notice how, for a second time, Isaiah uses the personal pronoun *we* to indicate how Israel will be the people who reject the Messiah. (The first time was in Isaiah 53:2).

The shameful irony of this prophetic line—*we did not esteem Him*—is that Jesus the Messiah is the only One who is worthy of *esteem* (Revelation 5:2-5, 9, 11-14).

Biblical Text

¹ Who has believed our message?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
² For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,
And like a root out of parched ground;
He has no stately form or majesty
That we should look upon Him,
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.
³ He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
And like one from whom men hide their face
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.