

Isaiah 53:7-8a

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/isa/isa-53/isaiah-537-8a/>

Isaiah predicts that the Messiah will be as mild as a sheep just before it is slaughtered. He will not protest or complain about what is unjustly happening to Him. He will be oppressed and judged. Isaiah prophesies these things in a chiasm.

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).

Isaiah prophesies these things in a prophetic-past tense which speaks of future events as though they have already occurred.

In the previous verses of this prophecy, Isaiah described the terrible sufferings of the Messiah and revealed that the reason for His suffering was for our good. He bore the grief of our transgressions and the guilt and penalty of our iniquities fell on Him (Isaiah 53:3-6).

Isaiah 53:7-8a foretells how the Messiah will respond as *He* suffers these injustices at the hands of men and in obedience to the LORD. The prophet compares the suffering Messiah to an ignorant and *silent lamb that is led to slaughter*. Isaiah does this through a short chiasm.

A chiasm is a poetic pattern of statements or ideas whose arrangement resembles the left half of the form of the Greek letter “Chi” which looks like the English letter “X.” Chiasms are a mirrored pattern that follow an A-B-C...C’-B’-A’ format. The main idea of chiasms is located in their center so that as they narrow, chiasms get closer in proximity and significance of their most important statement, before they unwind, and mirror the earlier lines. Chiasms are found throughout scripture. They were commonly used in Israel’s culture to express thoughts and ideas.

Here is Isaiah’s prophecy in its chiastic structure:

A. *He was oppressed and He was afflicted*

B. *Yet He did not open His mouth;*

C. *Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,*

C’. *And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,*

B’. *So He did not open His mouth.*

A’. *By oppression and judgment He was taken away*

The first and last lines go together. They both describe kinds of *oppression* the Messiah will suffer.

A. *He was oppressed and He was afflicted*

A'. *By oppression and judgment He was taken away*

The second and fifth lines go together. In Hebrew they are identical.

B. *Yet He did not open His mouth;*

B'. *So He did not open His mouth.*

And the middle two thoughts form the heart of the chiasm. They compare the Messiah's behavior to a docile *lamb* or *sheep* that is about to be sacrificed.

The heart of this short chiasm therefore is a comparison of the Messiah's humble restraint before *His* enemies to the submissiveness of a *lamb* and a *sheep* before *its* slaughterers and *shearers*. Jesus behaves as a docile lamb, even as His enemies humiliate and murder Him.

The opening line of this chiasm recalls that the Messiah *was oppressed and afflicted*.

A. *He was oppressed and He was afflicted*

Oppressed means to be abused and unjustly stripped of one's rights. *Afflicted* means to suffer pain. The previous verses detail the ways in which the Messiah will be *oppressed and afflicted* (Isaiah 53:3-6). The Hebrew word that is translated as *oppression* in this line is נָגַס (H565 – pronounced “nāgās”). It means to be pressed or driven by a taskmaster or tyrant.

Usually when someone is *oppressed* and unjustly *afflicted*, they complain. The Israelites cried out to God for deliverance when they were *oppressed and afflicted* in Egypt (Exodus 2:23-25). And God heard their cries and sent Moses to deliver them (Exodus 3:9-10).

But the Messiah will *not* complain or cry out when *He* is *oppressed and afflicted*. Isaiah prophesied: even as *He* unjustly suffered terribly, *yet He did not open His mouth*.

And this is prophesied in the second line of the chiasm.

B. *Yet He did not open His mouth;*

While Jesus did ask Father to provide a different way for Him to redeem the world in the garden before *He* was arrested and abused (Luke 22:41-42), *He* never complained or called God unjust. Like Job (Job 42:7b), Jesus endured *His* suffering without sin or speaking wrongly of God. Unlike Job, Jesus could have asked *His* Father to send twelve legions of angels to rescue Him, and it would have happened (Matthew 26:53). But Jesus humbly submitted to *His* Father's will (Matthew 26:39).

Later in this prophecy about the Suffering Servant, Isaiah will foretell: “Nor was there any deceit in His mouth” (Isaiah 53:9). Jesus was a perfect *lamb*, the true Passover sacrifice given for the sins of the world (Hebrews 9:26-28).

Years after Jesus’s death, resurrection, and ascension, the Apostle Peter will declare that Jesus fulfilled this prophecy from Isaiah 53 during *His* trial and sufferings:

“Since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, **nor was any deceit found in His mouth**; and while being reviled, **He did not revile in return**; while suffering, **He uttered no threats**, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.”

(1 Peter 2:21-23)

Given that Peter refers so many times to Isaiah 53 in his writings, we might speculate that Isaiah 53 was a prominent passage Jesus used to open the disciples’ minds to the scriptures, and show that it was prophesied that *He* must die and rise from the dead (Luke 24:44-45).

The heart of this short chiasm from Isaiah 53:7-8a is a comparison of the Messiah’s humble restraint before *His* enemies to the submissiveness of *a lamb and a sheep* before *its* slaughterers and *shearers*, as they humiliate and murder Him. The central lines of this prophetic chiasm are:

C. Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,

C’. And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,

Lambs were regularly offered as sacrifices as part of Jewish custom and law. But the lambs were ignorant and did not know what was about to happen to them as they were led to the place of sacrifice. Lambs submissively go along as they are *led to slaughter*. They do not protest. They are *silent*. Even though Jesus knew that *He* was to be sacrificed, *He* too was submissive as *He was led to His slaughter* to serve as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world (Hebrews 9:27-29).

This prophecy indicates that the Messiah will be slaughtered. *He* will be murdered, assassinated, or executed. And as *He* is about to be killed, *He* will be as passive as *a lamb* who does not know it is about to die.

Jesus, the Messiah, who was the “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29), was as submissive as *a lamb* leading up to *His slaughter*, even though *He* knew exactly what was happening.

He foretold *His* death many times to *His* disciples (Matthew 10:38, 12:39-40; 16:4; 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; 26:31-32). *He* prayed that God would take “this cup” from Him, but nevertheless, prayed that *His* Father’s will, and not *His* be done (Matthew 26:39). And despite knowing the cruel injustice and suffering *He* was about to endure; *He was silent like a lamb being led to slaughter*.

Moreover, there is also a hint within Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah will even be killed by the priests, because the priests were the ones who performed the sacrificial *slaughter of a lamb*. The priests were the ones who for all intents and purposes performed the sacrificial *slaughter* of the Messiah and *Lamb* of God. The priests plotted and orchestrated Jesus's arrest (Matthew 26:3-4; 47). They manufactured a death verdict at His trial (Matthew 26:57, 59-67). And they pressured Pilate to order *His* execution according to their murderous desires (Matthew 27:1, 20-25).

Isaiah foretells the Messiah's quiet meekness as *His* enemies slaughter Him. He also foretells that the Messiah will remain *silent* as they humiliate Him.

C'. *And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,*

B'. *So He did not open His mouth.*

In this analogy Isaiah compares the Messiah to *a sheep* whose wool *is* about to be shorn off. As the *sheep* seems unaware of what is about to happen it does not protest when its shearer comes to shave it. Another possible aspect to this analogy is the wool, even though it is not mentioned by name. *Sheep* appear silly after their wool is shorn off them. In a sense, *its shearers* humiliate the *sheep*.

So, too will the Messiah *not open His mouth* before *His* enemies as they humiliate Him. This prophecy hints toward some sort of trial (or other situation) where the Messiah will decline an opportunity to address and/or avail Himself before His enemies. The final line of this chiasm reinforces those hints of a trial when it says: *By... judgement He was taken away*.

Jesus the Messiah was largely silent before *His* enemies as they slandered and beat Him. It appears that *He* only answered a few specific questions.

When *He was* before the Sanhedrin council of Jewish priests and elders that was to decide His fate, "Jesus kept silent" (Matthew 26:63; Mark 14:61). The only time *He* spoke was when they ordered Him to tell them whether or not *He* was the Messiah (Matthew 26:63-64; Mark 14:61-62).

When *He was* brought before King Herod, Jesus "answered him nothing" (Luke 23:9).

And though Jesus answered Pilate's questions, *He* only did so in private. But before the crowds clamoring for His death and the release of Barabbas, *Jesus was like a sheep that is silent before its shearers*, and *He did not open His mouth*.

Isaiah ends his prophetic chiasm by reiterating the theme of *oppression*.

A'. *By oppression and judgment He was taken away.*

He prophesies that the *oppression* of the Messiah will continue into the court of justice.

The Hebrew word for oppression in this verse is different than the word that was used for *oppressed* in the opening line of this chiasm. The word used in the first line is נָגַס (H5065—pronounced “naw-gas”). It described being politically *oppressed* and pressured by a tyrant or *enslaved* and driven by a taskmaster. The Hebrew word used here is from עָצַר (H6113—pronounced “o’-tser”). It means to be “bound,” “constrained,” or “arrested.”

The Hebrew word translated as judgment is a form of the word: פָּטַח (H8199). It is pronounced “mish-pawt”. And it is strongly associated with a legal trial. According to Strong’s Concordance, its primary definitions include:

- “an act of deciding a case”
- “a place, court, or seat of judgement”
- “a process, procedure, litigation (before judges)”
- “a case or cause (presented for judgment)”
- “a sentence, decision (of judgment)”
- “an execution (of judgment)”
- “a time of judgment”

The word that is translated as “taken” in the phrase *By oppression and judgment He was taken away* is a form of the Hebrew word: לָקַח (pronounced: “law-kakh”—H3947). It can mean to be “taken captive” or to “take vengeance against.”

Oppression means being unjustly treated. A court of *judgment* or a trial is a place where *oppression* should end, and justice be rendered. But according to this prophecy, the Messiah will be *oppressed* and receive injustice at His trial.

This prophecy is strange for two reasons.

First, the Messiah is the King of Israel. *He* is the One who is to judge Israel and render judgment. *He* is not supposed to be judged. As the LORD’s Anointed, the Messiah is above judgment. But here, Isaiah is predicting that *He* will be judged by others.

The second reason this prophecy is strange is because the Messiah, the LORD’s Favored One, will not receive justice, but injustice. Not only will *He* be oppressed, despised, and forsaken of regular men (Isaiah 53:3), *He* will also be abused and oppressed by *His* judges.

Jesus, the Messiah, *was oppressed and taken away at His judgement.*

The priests in Jesus’s trial were not interested in the truth. Their sole concern seemed to be how to find a slander they could use to sentence Him to death. Their *judgement* was hasty. It was done illegally in the secrecy of night and early dawn—they brought *Him* to Pilate while “it was early” (John 18:28). Their trial was corrupt and shoddy. They couldn’t even get their false accusers to agree on their charges (Matthew 26:59-60). They ridiculed and beat Jesus throughout the trial—even before they had reached their official *judgment* (Luke 18:63). And when Jesus did tell them the truth about Himself, *His* oppressors went into a rage of abusive vengeance and ridicule (Matthew 26:67-68; Mark 14:65).

Jesus's trial was a sham. It was a mockery of justice and itself was a defiance of God's laws. Here is a short list of several ways the priests broke the law when they convicted Jesus.

1. They participated in bribery.

“You shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted and subverts the cause of the just.”

(Exodus 23:8)

Jesus was betrayed by His disciple, Judas, who was paid thirty coins of silver to lead the priests' men to arrest Him (Matthew 26:14-16).

2. The trial included blatantly false testimony and the testimony was not investigated.

“If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing, then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the LORD, be the priest and the judges who will be in office in those days. The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother.”

(Deuteronomy 19:15-19)

Jesus should have been acquitted because the testimony of the false witnesses did not agree. There was no thorough investigation to discover the truth (Matthew 26:59-66).

3. The High Priest tore his garments, which showed him to be an emotional and not impartial judge.

“The priest who is the highest among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not uncover his head nor tear his clothes.”

(Leviticus 21:10)

The high priest tore his clothes to demonstrate his anger when Jesus answered his question about whether He was the Messiah (Matthew 26:65).

Other cultural violations included: they were to not render a verdict after sundown, judges could not be involved in the arrest, the trial had to be public, etc.

Throughout this *oppression and judgement* Jesus did not raise a finger or *open His mouth* to speak against His oppressors, even though *He* could have appealed to *His* Father to put “more than twelve legions of angels” at *His* command (Matthew 26:53).

After they *oppressed and afflicted Him* during their *judgment*, they had *Him taken away* as a convicted criminal to Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, for him to execute (Matthew 27:1-2).

Interestingly, Isaiah 53:7-8 was the passage that the African Eunuch was reading on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza when Philip appeared to him and led him to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. This story is told in Acts 8:26-40. Isaiah 53:7-8 is quoted in Acts 8:32-33. Phillip used the passage to share the good news of Jesus with the eunuch.

As he was studying this prophecy, the eunuch could not understand who it was about:

“Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?”
(Acts 8:34).

Philip was able to explain how the prophecy was about Jesus the Messiah:

“Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.”
(Acts 8:35)

Biblical Text

**⁷ He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth.
⁸ By oppression and judgment He was taken away;**