

JOHN MACARTHUR

THE  
GOSPEL  
ACCORDING  
TO GOD

REDISCOVERING THE MOST REMARKABLE CHAPTER

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT



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**Ligon Duncan**, Chancellor, CEO, and John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary

“Isaiah 52:13–53:12 shows the height, depth, and width of the wisdom of God and even the infallibility of his Word. And all that richness is made clear in this book by one of the most gifted and Bible-saturated teachers of our times. MacArthur has done it again; this is the result of searching, believing, and exposing the Scriptures for almost half a century. As you read this profound study, our Redeemer looks more gracious, merciful, desirable, and worthy. This is a must-read!”

**Miguel Núñez**, Senior Pastor, International Baptist Church of Santo Domingo; President and Founder, Wisdom and Integrity Ministries; Council Member, The Gospel Coalition

“As an eight-year-old boy in a Scottish state school I was ‘forced’ to learn Isaiah 53 by heart. The teacher said it was about Jesus. She was right. But I wish she had been able to read *The Gospel according to God*. Then she could have shown me how Isaiah’s prophecy would be fulfilled in detail. And she could have helped me to understand the meaning of the terrible loneliness, violence, shame, and rejection the Savior endured for me. That’s what *The Gospel according to God* does. And it does it with all the Bible-saturated boldness we have come to expect from its author, John MacArthur.”

**Sinclair B. Ferguson**, Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary

“We have all gained immensely from the pen and preaching of John MacArthur for almost half a century due to his unflinching fidelity to the Scriptures. In *The Gospel according to God* he is again in his element as he deals with a matter at the very heart of the Christian gospel—Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Isaiah 53 is a rare but amazingly rich vein of gospel truth, and Dr. MacArthur mines it with his usual precision and evangelical warmth. If you want to gain a fresh view of Calvary’s love to enlarge your mind and heart, this is the book to buy and read!”

**Conrad Mbewe**, Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church; Chancellor, African Christian University in Lusaka, Zambia

**THE GOSPEL  
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TO GOD**



# **THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO GOD**

**Rediscovering the Most Remarkable  
Chapter in the Old Testament**

**John MacArthur**

**☐☐ CROSSWAY®**  
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*The Gospel according to God: Rediscovering the Most Remarkable Chapter in the Old Testament*

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To Stan Broder,  
my friend and beloved fellow bondservant—  
an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit.

Stan founded the international ministries of Grace to You nearly four decades ago, extending the outreach of my preaching ministry to India, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, England, and ultimately every English-speaking region of the world.

No worker in our ministries has served longer,  
seen more fruit, or been more faithful, and no one  
on our team is more universally beloved.

“The hearts of the saints have been refreshed  
through you, brother” (Philemon 7).





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# Introduction

## The Whole Story of Salvation in Prophecy

Mr. Moody was once asked whether his creed was in print. In his own prompt way, he replied, “Yes, sir; you will find it in the fifty-third of Isaiah.” A condensed Bible is in this chapter. You have the whole gospel here.

*Charles Spurgeon*<sup>1</sup>

*Isaiah* means “The Lord is salvation.” It’s a fitting name for the prophet, because he foretold the gospel message in thorough, vivid, accurate detail.

So far, every prediction Isaiah wrote down has come to pass. The only prophecies that have not yet been fulfilled are those that pertain to the future reign of Messiah, when “the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations” (Isa. 61:11). People “shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (2:4). And finally, all of redeemed humanity will enter into an eternity of perfect bliss in which heaven and earth will be united, when God “create[s] new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind” (65:17).

In that regard, Isaiah provides a ringing endorsement for the value of knowing Scripture well enough to see prophecy fulfilled.

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1. Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 63 vols. (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1893), 39:22.

Taking all the Old Testament's messianic prophecies collectively, the side-by-side themes of suffering and glory were understandably mysterious prior to the crucifixion of Christ. Even after the resurrection, when Christ appeared to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus, they were puzzled and clearly discouraged about what had happened. "We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel," they said (Luke 24:21).

Jesus's answer was a mild rebuke: "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe *all* that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (vv. 25–26). And then he began to talk them through the Old Testament's many messianic prophecies: "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (v. 27).

Scripture does not record the substance of that discourse, but we can be absolutely sure that the risen Messiah took them to Isaiah 53. He very well might have spent a significant amount of time there, showing them that everything he suffered was clearly foretold. His death on the cross was neither an accident nor an interruption in the plan of God, but he was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23), in order once for all "to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26).

Throughout the New Testament, Isaiah is the most quoted of all the Old Testament prophets. Jesus and the New Testament writers quote him at least sixty-five times, and he is mentioned by name twenty-two times in the New Testament. (By contrast, the prophet's name appears only sixteen times in the Old Testament's Historical Books.) We have very little information about the man himself. We will survey his life and the times in which he ministered in part 2 of this book.

Isaiah's prophecies are rich and riveting, full of imagery and doctrinal themes that constitute the cardinal truths of the Christian gospel—human depravity, divine grace, justification, substitutionary atonement, and more. Jerome, the fourth-century theologian and historian who translated most of the Bible into Latin, famously said Isaiah "should be called an evangelist rather than a prophet, because he describes all the mysteries of Christ and the church so clearly that one would think

he is composing a history of what has already happened rather than prophesying what is to come.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Isaiah foretold coming events with such remarkable accuracy that rigid rationalists and skeptics in the academic community stubbornly *insist* the book that bears his name must have been written by at least three authors living centuries apart, and that they were actually writing history rather than prophecy. One such critic arrogantly asserted that “virtually no one maintains that the entire book (or even most of it) was written by one person.”<sup>3</sup>

That statement seethes with the foolish conceit of modernism. *All* faithful believers who accept the Bible as the Word of God (together with countless Jewish scholars) hold to the single authorship of Isaiah. In fact, for at least 2,400 years after the prophet’s lifetime, *no one* of any significance ever suggested that more than one person wrote Isaiah. Jesus himself, together with all the New Testament Gospel writers, clearly maintained that Isaiah was a single individual. Matthew’s Gospel quotes from many diverse parts of Isaiah and always attributes the words to the prophet.<sup>4</sup>

Modern criticism is rooted in the rationalism of Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). Spinoza famously questioned the Mosaic authorship and early date of the Pentateuch. Over the next century various European scholars experimented with Spinoza’s agnostic, conjectural approach to the biblical text (known today as *the historical-critical method*, or *higher criticism*). Finally that approach was adopted and developed further by German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). By the middle of the nineteenth century, higher criticism had decimated the religious academic communities of Europe. They in turn helped spawn the theological

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2. From Jerome’s prologue to Isaiah in the Vulgate, *Biblia Sacra: Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, ed. Robert Weber, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1975), 2:1096.

3. David L. Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 48.

4. Matt. 13:14–15 is a quotation from Isa. 6:9–10, and Matt. 15:8–9 quotes Isa. 29:13. In both places Jesus specifically credits the prophet Isaiah with the words. Matthew himself quotes repeatedly from Isaiah (Matt. 3:3 cites Isa. 40:3–5; Matt. 4:15–16 is from Isa. 9:1–2; Matt. 8:17 quotes Isa. 53:4–5; and Matt. 12:18–21 comes from Isa. 42:1–4). In each case Matthew says this “was spoken by the prophet Isaiah.” John’s Gospel includes a short passage (12:38–41) where the apostle quotes from Isa. 53:1 and Isa. 6:9–10. Without exception, every liberal critic would claim those two sections of Isaiah must have been written by different authors, but John attributes them both to “the prophet Isaiah.”

liberalism that wrecked so many mainstream denominations in the twentieth century.

Isaiah is a favorite target of higher critics precisely because they cannot maintain their anti-supernatural skepticism if they acknowledge the uncanny accuracy of the prophet's predictions. And nowhere is the supernatural origin of the biblical text more obvious than Isaiah 53, with its powerful prophetic portrayal of Messiah's suffering and death.

A serious blow to critical skepticism came when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947. One of the first and best-preserved documents discovered was a complete scroll of Isaiah. (Known as the Great Isaiah Scroll, it is now on permanent display at the Shrine of the Book, a special wing of the Israel Museum.) The scroll is more than a thousand years older than any other extant manuscript. It dates from more than a century before Christ—sometime between 150 and 125 BC. A second Isaiah scroll was also found. It is not quite as ancient (but still from a time no more recent than the late first century BC). It is well preserved but not quite complete. Subsequent research has identified fragments from at least twenty other Isaiah scrolls. The existence of so many Isaiah fragments confirms what the New Testament suggests: Isaiah's prophecy was highly prized and well known in the first century.

Evangelical scholar Gleason Archer meticulously examined the Isaiah scrolls from the Dead Sea collection. He wrote:

Even though the two copies of Isaiah discovered in Qumran Cave 1 near the Dead Sea in 1947 were a thousand years earlier than the oldest dated manuscript previously known (A.D. 980), they proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. . . . The five percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling.<sup>5</sup>

Notice, first of all, that nearly two hundred years before the time of the apostles, the book of Isaiah was already well established and thoroughly documented *in exactly the same form and content we have today*. It was universally regarded as one piece, the work of an individual author, not an anthology compiled over time.

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5. Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 29.

Furthermore, the modern critics' argument hinges largely on the claim that no one could possibly foresee future events with the level of accuracy reflected in the book of Isaiah. For example, Isaiah 13:17–22 is a prophecy declaring that the Medes would destroy the city of Babylon: “Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations” (vv. 19–20). When Isaiah made that prophecy, Assyria was the dominant empire, and the Medes were weak and divided. Within a hundred years after Isaiah's death, Babylon grew to become the world's largest city. To any observer of world politics at the time, Isaiah's prophecy might have seemed to paint an impossible scenario.

But more than three hundred years after Isaiah recorded it, the prophecy was indeed fulfilled. The fall of Babylon began in Daniel's time. “The Chaldean king was killed. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom” (Dan. 5:30–31). Babylon was ultimately destroyed by the Medes just as Isaiah predicted, and to this day the site (some 50 miles south of Baghdad) remains uninhabited. Although attempts to rebuild have been made (most recently from 1983 through 2003 by Saddam Hussein), Babylon today is largely a mound of debris with some unfinished brick structures. There hasn't been a sustainable city there for centuries, just as Isaiah predicted.

Scattered prophecies throughout the book of Isaiah accurately describe several other events that came to pass after Isaiah's lifetime. The exactitude of those oracles is frankly the only reason critics have for claiming that parts of Isaiah must have been written after Isaiah's time by multiple authors separated by centuries of time.

But Isaiah 53 debunks their hypothesis because of the detailed way it perfectly presages the most epic event (the crucifixion of Jesus) that happened nearly two hundred years *after* the earliest extant scroll of Isaiah. That, of course, is the passage we will focus on in this book. It would take a cold heart of willful unbelief to study Isaiah 53 with any degree of care and conclude that it has nothing whatsoever to do with the events described in the New Testament Gospel accounts. One commentator rightly says Isaiah 53 “speaks so eloquently of the work



of Christ that even the inclusion of his name could add but little more to the extent of its disclosure of him.”<sup>6</sup>

Chapter 53 may be more familiar to Christian readers than other parts of Isaiah, but the entire book has significant implications for the Christian faith. Many doctrines essential to Christianity are illuminated by passages in Isaiah.

The book of Isaiah is sometimes called the “fifth Gospel.” It’s really more than that. It contains in microcosm the whole range of redemptive truth. It is like a miniature compendium of the Bible. In fact, there are some interesting parallels between how the book of Isaiah is laid out and the arrangement of the Bible as a whole.

There were of course no chapter breaks or verse numbers in the original Hebrew manuscripts. (Those were added in the middle of the sixteenth century, when Bibles were first being mass-produced on printing presses in order to make Scripture accessible to common people.) Nevertheless, the chapter and verse divisions do generally follow the logical composition of the text, and they can sometimes reveal the amazing symmetry of the Bible’s structure in an extraordinary way.

Isaiah is divided into two sections, the first containing thirty-nine chapters and the second twenty-seven chapters. The Bible also is divided into two sections: the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New.

That second major division of Isaiah begins and ends exactly where the New Testament begins and ends. It opens with the ministry of John the Baptist (Isa. 40:3–5), as does the New Testament (Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4–6; John 1:23). It concludes with the new heavens and the new earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:22), which is also how the New Testament ends (Revelation 21–22). So Isaiah’s incredible prophecy accurately anticipates and foreshadows the flow of the New Testament, even though it was written centuries before the birth of Messiah.

Isaiah’s second part includes four prophetic songs about the Messiah, who is called the servant of the Lord. The first one is found in 42:1–9. It reveals that he will be chosen by God and empowered by the

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6. Geoffrey W. Grogan, “Isaiah,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 6:305.

Holy Spirit. The servant will bring justice, righteousness, and salvation to the world, delivering blind prisoners from the dungeon of sin.

The second Servant Song is found in 49:1–13. Here we see the servant’s authority over the Gentile nations, whom he commands to listen and give attention to him. He will be a man, not an angelic being, since God calls him while he is still in his mother’s womb. He will bring salvation to both Israel and the Gentiles, and he will be glorified.

The third song (50:4–11) introduces the servant’s suffering, through which he will ultimately be vindicated. The details given about him in this song are more complete and more astonishing than those in the earlier songs.

The fourth and final Servant Song is the text we are most concerned with in this volume: Isaiah 52:13–53:12. This passage reveals precise details of the servant’s mission that could not have been known to anyone but God. Here it becomes clear that the servant is more than merely someone chosen by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit, learning obedience through humiliation and suffering. He is the Messiah, the one who will bring justice and salvation to the world—and he will die as a sacrifice for sin.

His full glory would not be revealed until after he suffered. That fact alone was astonishing, unexpected, and baffling to most Jewish readers. They found it impossible to imagine that the Lord’s Anointed One would be a suffering slave before he would appear as a conquering king.

Even more scandalous was the idea that the servant of the Lord would suffer not for any evil he had done, but for the sins of others. He would be a substitute, dying as a surrogate for others who (unlike him) deserved the fate he would suffer. “They made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him . . . when his soul makes an offering for guilt” (Isa. 53:9–10). He bore the guilt of his people. “He was crushed for our iniquities” (v. 5).

Today Isaiah’s words remain just as unbelievable to unrepentant ears, and his message just as vital for their salvation. These pages

represent my best effort to explain Isaiah 52:13–53:12 in a readable volume of manageable size. As we walk through the text together, I hope to shine a clear light on the historical and prophetic context of this passage, point out some of its amazing features that you may never have seen, and (by comparing Scripture with Scripture) attempt to infer the gist of what Jesus might have said about this text on the day of his resurrection as he sought to explain to his disciples on the road to Emmaus that the Messiah had to suffer these things before he could enter into his glory.

Part I

**THE SUFFERING  
SERVANT**



# The Most Remarkable Chapter in the Old Testament

This is one of the chapters that lie at the very heart of the Scriptures. It is the very Holy of holies of Divine Writ. Let us, therefore, put off our shoes from our feet, for the place whereon we stand is specially holy ground. This fifty-third of Isaiah is a Bible in miniature. It is the condensed essence of the gospel.

*Charles Spurgeon*<sup>1</sup>

No text in the entire Old Testament is more momentous than Isaiah 52:13–53:12. It is a prophecy that begins and ends with the voice of Yahweh himself. He calls our attention to a singular individual: “Behold, my servant . . .” (52:13) and “the righteous one, my servant” (53:11).

The servant is the Anointed One of Israel—the Messiah. We know that for several reasons. To begin with, those opening words are a clear echo of Isaiah 42:1: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; *he will bring forth justice to the nations.*” In the introduction we noted that Isaiah wrote four psalm-like passages prominently featuring a person the prophet calls the servant of Yahweh: Isaiah 42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–11;

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1. Charles Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 63 vols. (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1903), 49:189.

and 52:13–53:12. All of them (often referred to as Isaiah’s Servant Songs) speak of the servant’s gentle manner and his worldwide mission. All four are clearly messianic prophecies.

Those passages from Isaiah ring the same note as Zechariah 3:8, another famous messianic prophecy: “*Behold*, I will bring *my servant* the Branch.” Of this same individual, Isaiah had previously written, “The government shall be upon his shoulder [and] of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore” (9:6–7).

So the introductory words of Isaiah 52:13 make clear that what follows is a prophecy concerning the Messiah, the promised Redeemer from Israel: “Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.”

The entire passage then focuses on the servant of the Lord—described in plain terms as a specific individual. The passage is not about any nation, tribe, people group, or general category of oppressed persons. This is about the suffering of one person, the Lord’s servant, and he remains the singular focus of the passage through the end of Isaiah 53.

As we also observed in this book’s introduction, the chapter and verse divisions in our modern Bibles aren’t found in the original manuscripts. Though generally useful and convenient, the chapter breaks and verse numbers were not divinely inspired. In the case of our text, the break between chapters has been inserted in a rather unfortunate place. The prophecy clearly shifts from one topic to the next after Isaiah 52:12. Both the context and the content make clear that the final three verses in Isaiah 52 actually introduce (and belong to) the passage that spans all of chapter 53. So for convenience’s sake, please understand that throughout this book when I speak in general terms of Isaiah 53 without citing specific verses, I have in mind the entire pericope, including those final three verses in chapter 52.

### **The Text**

Here is the complete passage, formatted to reflect the fact that Isaiah is writing in poetic verse:

Behold, my servant shall act wisely;  
he shall be high and lifted up,  
and shall be exalted.

As many were astonished at you—  
his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,  
and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—  
so shall he sprinkle many nations.

Kings shall shut their mouths because of him,  
for that which has not been told them they see,  
and that which they have not heard they understand.

Who has believed what he has heard from us?  
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?  
For he grew up before him like a young plant,  
and like a root out of dry ground;  
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,  
and no beauty that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;  
and as one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.  
But he was pierced for our transgressions;  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,  
and with his wounds we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned—every one—to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he opened not his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,



so he opened not his mouth.  
 By oppression and judgment he was taken away;  
 and as for his generation, who considered  
 that he was cut off out of the land of the living,  
 stricken for the transgression of my people?  
 And they made his grave with the wicked  
 and with a rich man in his death,  
 although he had done no violence,  
 and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;  
 he has put him to grief;  
 when his soul makes an offering for guilt,  
 he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;  
 the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.  
 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;  
 by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,  
 make many to be accounted righteous,  
 and he shall bear their iniquities.  
 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,  
 and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,  
 because he poured out his soul to death  
 and was numbered with the transgressors;  
 yet he bore the sin of many,  
 and makes intercession for the transgressors.

That brief but pivotal portion of Isaiah is a crystal-clear prophecy about the ministry, death, resurrection, and coronation of the Messiah, written more than seven centuries before he came. It is the gospel according to God. Of all the Old Testament's messianic prophecies, this one stands out for its sublime richness and unparalleled clarity. In particular, Isaiah paints a precise prophetic portrait of Messiah's sufferings. He also explains in vivid detail the true meaning of Messiah's death as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of his people.

Many key historical details from the events surrounding the death of Messiah are expressly stated in this passage. For example, Isaiah speaks of the savage brutality of the wounds that were inflicted on him (52:14), his utter silence before his accusers (53:7), his death (vv. 8–9),

the place of his burial (v. 9), and the ultimate triumph of his finished work (v. 11). The prophet even alludes to his resurrection from the dead: “He shall prolong his days [and] the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand” (v. 10).

The passage is also loaded with doctrinal themes: substitutionary sacrifice (vv. 4–6, 10), the forgiveness of sins through the shedding of Messiah’s lifeblood (v. 5), the sinlessness of this “despised and rejected” servant who dies for his people (v. 9), the sovereign initiative of God in providing atonement for sinners (vv. 10–11), the justification of many (v. 11), and the intercessory work of the one who offers himself as a sacrifice (v. 12).

### **Who Is This Suffering Servant?**

Ancient Jewish commentators recognized and acknowledged the messianic significance of Isaiah 53. An early belief among some rabbis was that Messiah would be pale and sickly—regarded as a leper—because of how the suffering servant is described in Isaiah 53:3: “despised and rejected . . . as one from whom men hide their faces.” The Talmud is a massive compendium of rabbinical teaching covering several centuries of tradition, commentary, legal opinions, philosophy, ethics, and other matters of Jewish custom. It dates from the fifth century after Christ but includes a record of oral traditions from as early as two or three centuries before Christ. One section of the Talmud features a discussion about Messiah and what he was to be called. “What is his name?” the writer asks. Someone answers “Shiloh,” based on Genesis 49:10 (“The sceptre shall not depart . . . until Shiloh come,” KJV). However, the writer says, “[our] Rabbis maintain that his name is ‘the leprous one of the school of Rabbi Judah the Prince,’ as it is said ‘Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.’”<sup>2</sup> Clearly those rabbis recognized the messianic significance of Isaiah 53, even though they misunderstood key details of it.

Here, for example, is how Isaiah 53 was used in a formal Jewish

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2. Talmud Bavli, tractate Sanhedrin 98b. This translation is cited in Yehoiakin ben Ya’ocov, *Concepts of Messiah: A Study of the Messianic Concepts of Islam, Judaism, Messianic Judaism, and Christianity* (Bloomington, IN: Westbow, 2012), 34.

prayer taken from a ninth-century (AD) liturgy for the Day of Atonement:

Messiah our righteousness (or “our Righteous Messiah”) has departed from us: Horror hath seized upon us, and we have none to justify us. He hath borne the yoke of our iniquities and our transgressions, and is wounded because of our transgression. He beareth our sins on His shoulder, that He may find pardon for our iniquities. We shall be healed by His wound at the time the Eternal will create Him (Messiah) as a new creature. O bring Him up from the circle of the earth, raise Him up from Seir to assemble us the second time on Mount Lebanon, by the hand of Yinnon.<sup>3</sup>

A learned and highly esteemed sixteenth-century rabbi surveyed Jewish literature on Isaiah 53 and noted that from a strictly Jewish perspective, the passage is “difficult to fix or arrange in a literal manner.” He nevertheless acknowledged that “our rabbis with one voice accept and affirm the opinion that the prophet is speaking of the King Messiah.” A traditionalist himself, the rabbi therefore wrote, “We shall ourselves also adhere to the same view.” But in order to avoid conceding that the passage speaks of Jesus, he quickly added, “The Messiah is of course David.”<sup>4</sup>

For those who lived in the Old Testament era, some measure of confusion about how to interpret this passage was understandable. Like most of the Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah, Isaiah 53 was somewhat shrouded in mystery until the fulfillment of the prophecy made its meaning clear. The apostle Peter acknowledges that even “the prophets . . . searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of [Messiah] in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of [Messiah] and the subsequent glories” (1 Pet. 1:10–11).

And make no mistake, the Old Testament is full of prophecies about Messiah that point only to Jesus. He is the central theme not only of

3. Believed to be composed by Eleazar ben Kalir. “Yinnon” was a rabbinical name for the Messiah. Cited in David Baron, *The Servant of Jehovah: The Sufferings of the Messiah and the Glory That Should Follow* (New York: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1922), 14.

4. Mosheh El-Sheikh (commonly known as Moses Alshech), in *The Fifty-third Chapter of Isaiah According to the Jewish Interpreters*, trans. S. R. Driver and A. Neubauer (Oxford, UK: Parker, 1877), 258.

New Testament preaching (Acts 5:42; 8:12; 9:27; 11:20; 17:18; Rom. 16:25; Titus 2:8), but also of Old Testament prophecy. After Jesus called Philip to follow him, Philip “found Nathanael and said to him, ‘We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph’” (John 1:45). Indeed, “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev. 19:10).

In John 5:39 Jesus said to the Jewish religious leaders, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me.” Later in that discussion the Lord added, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me” (v. 46). In Matthew 5:17 he said to those listening to the Sermon on the Mount, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them”—a claim that he repeated throughout his earthly ministry (see Matt. 26:24, 31, 54, 56; Mark 9:12; 14:26–27; Luke 4:16–21; 18:31; 22:37; John 13:18; 15:25; 17:12; 19:28).

### **Messiah in the Old Testament**

In fact, the Old Testament is so full of teaching about Messiah that when the disciples were confused about Jesus’s death and unprepared for his resurrection, he rebuked them for their ignorance of the Scriptures. Remember that after his resurrection he said to those two disciples on the road to Emmaus, “‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:25–27). Later that same evening the Lord said to the eleven remaining apostles who were gathered in the upper room,

“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms [the three divisions of the Old Testament] must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that

repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:44–47)

As we noted in the introduction, Scripture does not record the specific content of our Lord’s teaching that afternoon on the road to Emmaus. But it would undoubtedly have included both direct, explicit predictions concerning him and many symbols that pictured him. The latter would include Noah’s ark, which pictures him as the true ark into which sinners enter and are kept safe through the waters of divine judgment (cf. 1 Pet. 3:20–21); the ram Abraham offered as a substitute for his son Isaac (Gen. 22:13); the Passover lambs, which pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God, the final sacrifice (Exodus 12; Num. 9:12; cf. 1 Cor. 5:7; John 1:29); the manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16), which pictured him as the true bread from heaven (John 6:32–35); the bronze serpent that was lifted up (Num. 21:4–9; cf. John 3:14), which symbolized his crucifixion; and the five major offerings in Leviticus (burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings), of which he is the fulfillment. The Day of Atonement pictures him both in the sacrifice on the altar and in the scapegoat that bore away sin (Lev. 16:7–10). The rock that gave water in the wilderness (Ex. 17:5–6; Num. 20:8–11) prefigured him as the source of spiritual provision for his people (1 Cor. 10:4). And Jonah’s emergence alive after three days and nights in the stomach of a large fish was a prophetic picture of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead (Matt. 12:39–41).

Jesus is the rejected cornerstone (Ps. 118:22; cf. Matt. 21:42; Acts 4:11; Eph. 2:20); “the shepherd of the flock doomed to be slaughtered by the sheep traders” (Zech. 11:4–14); the stone cut out without human hands who will destroy Antichrist’s empire at his second coming (Dan. 2:34–35, 44–45); and the Branch out of David’s family tree—“a shoot from the stump of Jesse” (Isa. 11:1–5; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Ezek. 17:22–23; Zech. 3:8; 6:12). Psalm 72 pictures Christ’s millennial reign as King (see especially verses 7 and 17). In some of the messianic prophecies Jesus is referred to as “David,” since he is the greatest of David’s descendants, the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise to David in 2 Samuel 7, and the culmination of David’s kingly line (Jer. 30:9; Ezek. 34:23–24; 37:24–25; and Hos. 3:5). Since all those prophecies

that refer to Messiah as “David” came many years after David died, they clearly referred to someone yet to come, who would embody what David’s throne was meant to signify.

Of course the Old Testament also contains many direct predictions concerning our Lord’s first coming. In the protoevangelium (the “first gospel”) recorded in Genesis 3:15, he is the seed of the woman (cf. Gal. 4:4) who will destroy Satan (1 John 3:8). He is the great prophet of whom Moses wrote (Deut. 18:15–22; cf. Num. 24:17–19; Acts 3:22–23). Daniel 7:13–14 describes him as the glorious Son of Man (a title Jesus used of himself more than eighty times in the Gospels). This is the Messiah, who will return on the clouds of heaven (Matt. 24:30; Mark 14:62; Rev. 1:7). As the Old Testament predicted Messiah would be, Jesus was of the line of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; cf. Gal. 3:16), from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10; cf. Rev. 5:5), and a descendant of David (2 Sam. 7:12–16; 1 Chron. 17:11–13; cf. Matt. 1:1).

Isaiah 7:14 predicted that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. Micah 5:2 foretold that he would be born in Bethlehem (cf. Matt. 2:6). Jeremiah 31:15 foreshadowed the weeping that accompanied Herod’s slaughter of the male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16–18). Isaiah 40:3–4 and Malachi 3:1 and 4:5–6 predicted the coming of his forerunner, John the Baptist (cf. Matt. 3:1–3; 11:10, 14; 17:12–13; Luke 1:17; John 1:23). Psalm 69:8 prophesied his rejection by members of his own family (cf. Matt. 12:46–50; John 7:3–5).

The Old Testament is full of implicit clues about Israel’s Messiah. These include references to him as God incarnate (Ps. 45:6–7; cf. Heb. 1:8–9) and as the sovereign King and eternal high priest (Ps. 110:1–7; cf. Matt. 22:43–44; Acts 2:33–34; Heb. 1:13; 5:6–10; 6:20). Other subtle references to Messiah appear in phrases that serve as word pictures depicting how he would be hated without a cause (Ps. 69:4), hanged on a tree, cursed by God, and taken down before sunset (Deut. 21:22–23).

Daniel’s prophecy of the seventy weeks (Dan. 9:24–27) predicted the exact day of his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> Zechariah 9:9

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5. For a credible accounting of how Daniel’s seventy weeks reveal the date of Jesus’s Triumphal Entry, see Harold Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977), 139.

even described how he would ride on the colt of a donkey during that event (cf. Matt. 21:4–5).

The Old Testament foretold many major details (and some seemingly minor ones) about specific events that occurred in connection with his crucifixion. The prophets foretold the treachery of Judas (Ps. 41:9; 55:12–14), including the exact amount of money the betrayer received and what was eventually done with it (Zech. 11:12–13); the scattering of his disciples after his betrayal and arrest (Zech. 13:7; cf. Matt. 26:31, 56); the beatings and abuse he received (Mic. 5:1) in the court of the high priest (Matt. 26:67–68), from the temple guard (Mark 14:65), and at the hands of the Romans (Matt. 27:27–30); the scene at the cross (Psalm 22)—including the Roman soldiers’ casting lots for his clothing (Ps. 22:18); his being given sour wine (Ps. 69:21); his legs remaining unbroken (Ex. 12:46; Num. 9:12; Ps. 34:20; cf. John 19:31–33, 36); and the piercing of his side by a Roman soldier (Zech. 12:10). Psalms 2:7 and 16:8–10 predicted his resurrection (cf. Acts 13:34–37). Psalm 109:8 foreshadowed the choice of Matthias to replace Judas as one of the apostles (cf. Acts 1:20). And Psalm 68:18 refers to Christ’s ascension (cf. Eph. 4:8).

But nowhere in the Old Testament is the coming Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, more fully and clearly revealed than in the prophecies recorded by Isaiah. Isaiah reveals him as the incarnate Son of God, Immanuel (7:14; 8:8); the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace (9:6); the branch (4:2; 11:1); and most frequently the servant of the Lord (42:1; 49:5–7; 52:13; 53:11).

Isaiah predicted that he would be born of a virgin (7:14), and he was (Matt. 1:20–23); that this virgin-born child would be the one who will rule the nations of the world (9:6), and he will (Rev. 11:15; 19:11–21); that the Holy Spirit would rest upon him in a unique way (11:2), and he did (Matt. 3:16; cf. Isa. 61:1–2 with Luke 4:18–19). Isaiah also revealed that he would be rejected by the nation of Israel (8:14–15; cf. 28:16). Indeed, “he came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (John 1:11; cf. Mark 12:10; Acts 4:11; Rom. 9:32–33).

Isaiah 9:1–2 foretold Jesus’s Galilean ministry (cf. Matt. 4:14–16). Jesus himself cited Isaiah 29:18 (cf. 35:5–6; 42:6–7) as a prophecy about his healing of deaf and blind people (Matt. 11:5). Verses 1–4 of

Isaiah 42 describe Messiah's character, revealing that he was gentle and meek, and that he would establish justice even for the Gentiles (Matt. 12:18–21). Isaiah 50:6–7 describes his perfect obedience to the Father's will—even in the face of brutal treatment at the hands of his enemies—and his resolute determination to continue that obedience all the way to the cross. Through his death and resurrection, he would fulfill the new-covenant promise of salvation for his people (55:3; cf. 61:1–2 [quoted by Jesus in Luke 4:18–19]; 2 Cor. 3:6–18; Hebrews 8–10).

Isaiah also noted the servant's role as the chief cornerstone of God's plan of salvation (28:16); his freeing lost sinners from spiritual blindness and bondage (9:2; 42:7); and the physical abuse he suffered at the hands of the Jewish and Roman authorities (50:6).

But of all the marvelous prophecies in Isaiah, this passage in chapter 53 rises above all the rest. It is a majestic description of Christ's sacrifice for sins. Some commentators call it the most important text in the entire Old Testament. Isaiah 53 has received many such accolades throughout the history of the church. Polycarp, the second-century church father and disciple of the apostle John, referred to it as “the golden Passional of the Old Testament.” Augustine called the entire book of Isaiah “the fifth gospel,” and that name applies particularly to chapter 53. A collection of John Calvin's sermons on Isaiah 53 is titled *The Gospel According to Isaiah*.<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther declared that every Christian ought to have the whole of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 memorized. The noted nineteenth-century Old Testament commentator Franz Delitzsch famously wrote, “In how many an Israelite has it melted the crust of his heart! It looks as if it had been written beneath the cross upon Golgotha. . . . [It] is the most central, the deepest, and the loftiest thing that the Old Testament prophecy, outstripping itself, has ever achieved.”<sup>7</sup>

Although it is part of the Old Testament, this vital chapter of Holy Scripture features truths that are cardinal points of Christian doctrine. Its phraseology has become part of our Christian vocabulary, and the passage has been used by more people who have preached and written

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6. John Calvin, *The Gospel According to Isaiah*, trans. Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953).

7. Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1873), 2:303.



and sung about the gospel of salvation than any other portion of the Old Testament. Many have called this chapter “the Mount Everest of the Old Testament.” It is the choicest of all the messianic prophecies, the pinnacle of the book of Isaiah, and the crown jewel of the Prophets in general. It is, in fact, the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Isaiah 53 is the precise passage the Ethiopian eunuch was reading in the Gaza desert when Philip encountered him. The eunuch read a portion of the passage aloud: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter . . .” (Acts 8:32). Then he posed a question to Philip—and it was exactly the right question. This is the key that unlocks the passage: “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” (v. 34).

“Philip opened his mouth, and *beginning with this Scripture* [Isaiah 53] he told him the good news about *Jesus*” (Acts 8:35)—the gospel according to God!

Isaiah 53 has always intrigued the faithful. Old Testament believers who struggled to understand it knew it was a highly important prophecy. It gave hints about the answer to the great unanswered question of Old Testament soteriology—namely, the problem of how humanity’s sin could one day be fully and effectually redressed apart from the wholesale condemnation of every sinner. How could any sacrifice ever be sufficient to make a full and final atonement? How could a just and holy God redeem sinners without compromising his own perfect righteousness?

The unshakable persistence of human guilt and the impossibly high cost of redemption were truths built into the Old Testament sacrificial system. It was obvious (or should have been to anyone exercising a modicum of common sense) that “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). After all, “every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” (v. 11). The relentless repetition of those sacrifices made clear (for centuries on end) that the work of atonement was not yet finished. And the bloody reality of so many animal sacrifices made clear that the true cost of atonement was higher than any mortal soul could ever hope to pay.

At first glance, Isaiah 53 would seem an unlikely place to find a

prophecy heralding the triumphant answer to sin's dilemma. On its surface, the tone of the passage is bleak. The servant is described as "despised and rejected . . . a man of sorrows . . . acquainted with grief . . . one from whom men hide their faces . . . and we esteemed him not" (v. 3). This was not a picture of the Messiah most people in Israel were expecting. They envisioned him as a conquering king who would deliver his people, overthrow their adversaries, and "execute vengeance on the nations and punishments on the peoples, to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron, to execute on them the judgment written!" (Ps. 149:7–9). But Isaiah 53 tells of an unpretentious, lamb-like servant, who would be sorely persecuted and put to death: "By oppression and judgment he was taken away; . . . he was cut off out of the land of the living" (v. 8).

Nevertheless, this prophecy did contain bright rays of hope for faithful readers who already felt the weight of their own sin. It clearly describes one who would suffer for others' sake: "He was pierced for our transgressions . . . crushed for our iniquities" (v. 5). His chastisement is what brings us peace. "His soul makes an offering for guilt" (v. 10). The climactic verse of the passage is verse 11: "Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities" (v. 11).

For anyone familiar with the New Testament account of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and high priestly intercession, there should be no mystery about what Isaiah 53 signifies. It is the complete gospel in prophetic form, a surprisingly explicit foretelling of what the Messiah would do to put away the sins of his people forever. It is the gospel according to God, set forth in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the chapters that follow we will delve more deeply into the details of this amazing prophecy. I trust this study will strengthen your faith, intensify your love for Christ, and deepen your understanding of what Jesus Christ accomplished for his people by his death.



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