

THE SUFFERING SERVANT

DEVOTIONAL READING: Philippians 2:1–11

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Luke 24:1–35

ISAIAH 53:4–11A

4 Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

8 He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.

9 And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.

11a He shall see of the travail of his soul.



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KEY VERSE

He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.—Isaiah 53:5

PROPHETS FAITHFUL TO GOD'S COVENANT

Unit 2: Prophets of Restoration LESSONS 5–8

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Restate what the servant of the Lord would accomplish through suffering.
2. Explain how Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy.

3. Write a prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord, using language from today's passage, and use it as a source of family or personal devotions each day this week.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Climbing to the Summit
- B. Lesson Context: The Prophecies of Isaiah
- C. Lesson Context: The Servant
- I. The Servant's Death (Isaiah 53:4–9)
 - A. Grief, Sorrow, Affliction (vv. 4–6) *Why Do We Suffer?*
 - B. Oppression, Slaughter, Burial (vv. 7–9)
- II. The Servant's Delight (Isaiah 53:10–11a)
 - A. Sovereign Purpose (v. 10) *Aging Gracefully*
 - B. Sacred Success (v. 11a)

Conclusion

- A. Relishing the View
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Arimathaea	<i>Air-uh-muh-thee-uh (th as in thin).</i>
Cyrus	<i>Sigh-russ.</i>
Esaias	<i>E-zay-us.</i>
Hezekiah	<i>Hez-ih-kye-uh.</i>
Isaiah	<i>Eye-zay-uh.</i>
Messiah	<i>Meh-sigh-uh.</i>
Sennacherib	<i>Sen-nack-er-ib.</i>

Introduction

A. Climbing to the Summit

Kyle Yates, an Old Testament scholar who taught seminary for many years, once referred to [Isaiah 53](#) as the “Mount Everest” of Old Testament prophecy. That analogy brings to mind the reality that mountain summits are not reached without first doing a lot of hiking up difficult terrain. Sometimes during our “hike” through the Bible, we may question the value or relevance of what we are reading. And so we struggle

through the laws and regulations in Leviticus and rush quickly through the genealogies that fill the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles. As we do, we may wonder why we even began the climb in the first place!

But reaching a summit-passage like [Isaiah 53](#) makes us realize that the climb is worthwhile. This is all the more so when we consider that the existence of the New Testament ensures that Old Testament summit passages are clearer to us than they were even to the original readers. Specialized “guides” such as [Acts 8:32–34](#) and [Romans 10:16](#) assist us in our journey to understand [Isaiah 53](#) specifically while the general guides of [Romans 15:4](#) and [2 Timothy 3:16](#) establish the importance of doing so for the Old Testament as a whole.

B. Lesson Context: The Prophecies of Isaiah

The importance of the book of Isaiah is seen in the fact that it is quoted over five dozen times in the New Testament. Isaiah prophesied in Jerusalem during dismal times for God’s people. His prophetic call came “in the year that king Uzziah died” ([Isaiah 6:1](#)), which would have been 740 BC. The latest historical event recorded (not prophesied) by the prophet is the death of the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib ([37:37–38](#)), which occurred in 681 BC.

That makes for a lengthy period of ministry, so it is not out of the question to assume that Isaiah’s call came when he was a teenager or a bit older.

The span of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry included the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to Assyria in 722 BC. The southern kingdom of Judah was in danger of going the same route in 701 BC. However, the presence and the prayers of a godly king, Hezekiah ([Isaiah 37:14–20](#)), resulted in an outcome far different from what the north experienced. Isaiah assured the king that the capital city of Jerusalem would be spared ([37:33–35](#)), and it was—in a miraculous act of deliverance ([37:36](#)).

With Spirit-empowered insight, Isaiah spoke of a future day when Jerusalem would *not* be delivered; it would come under the control of the Babylonians ([Isaiah 39:5–7](#)). But Isaiah also promised that the Lord was not finished with Jerusalem or with His people. The Lord would rebuild the city through the efforts of a ruler whom Isaiah named: Cyrus ([44:24–45:1](#)). But Isaiah looked beyond even this restoration to someone far greater than Cyrus.

C. Lesson Context: The Servant

The Lord’s “servant” is one of the most striking figures in the book of Isaiah. The term *servant* is sometimes a reference to the entire nation of Israel, describing the special relationship the covenant people have with the Lord (example: [Isaiah 41:8](#)). In other places, *servant* appears to describe a remnant of God’s people, referring specifically to those who remained following captivity in Babylon (example: [48:20](#)).

There are still other passages where the word *servant* points to one individual who was assigned a very special role to fulfill. Four passages in Isaiah — often called Servant Songs—function in this way to point to the Messiah: [Isaiah 42:1–9](#); [49:1–6](#); [50:4–9](#); and [52:13–53:12](#). ([Isaiah 61:1–4](#) can also be included since Jesus applied it to himself [[Luke 4:16–21](#)].) This servant would carry out his tasks in a way that neither the nation of Israel nor the remnant could ever do.

The servant passage studied today is the fourth in the list, beginning, “Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high” ([Isaiah 52:13](#)). The passage then describes the astonishment and rejection that many would experience at the servant’s lowly and repulsive appearance ([52:14–53:3](#)). It seems so inappropriate for someone “exalted and extolled” not to also have a striking physical presence! But nothing in the servant’s background speaks of greatness at first glance. Our printed text begins with an explanation of the servant’s sorrows and griefs that are introduced in [Isaiah 53:3](#).

Christians have long and rightly interpreted the prophetic Servant Songs as fulfilled in Jesus alone. For instance, [Isaiah 53:7–8](#) (see below) makes up the passage that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading when Philip approached his chariot. The Ethiopian asked whether the prophet was speaking of himself or someone else. And Philip “began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus” ([Acts 8:35](#)). No other figure appears in Scripture who claims to be the servant, and only Christ fulfills all that was written about that servant in these passages. The importance of today’s text is seen in the fact that the New Testament quotes from the song in which it occurs seven times.

I. The Servant’s Death ([ISAIAH 53:4–9](#))

A. Grief, Sorrow, Affliction (vv. 4–6)

4. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

In keeping with how suffering was often viewed in biblical times (both Old and New Testaments; examples: [Job 4:7–8](#); [John 9:2](#)), those who witnessed the servant’s suffering saw it as a punishment from *God*. The servant was deemed to be bearing the *griefs* and *sorrows* associated with his own sinful actions. No one would assume that he was suffering on account of the wrongdoings of others.

Followers of Jesus can readily see these words as a compelling description of Jesus’ suffering on the cross. Those who mocked Him there voiced their belief that God had abandoned Him—that He was *stricken*, *smitten*, and *afflicted* (see [Matthew 27:43–44](#)). There was a sense in which the servant was stricken by God, in that Jesus fulfilled God’s “determinate counsel and foreknowledge” ([Acts 2:23](#)). But why He suffered matters tremendously. Being only partially right about Jesus’ suffering means being terribly wrong about what it could accomplish.

Jesus’ death was the ultimate example of substitutionary atonement. In the Law of Moses, atonement for sins was fulfilled through God’s accepting the sacrifice of animals ([Leviticus 1:4–5](#); [Numbers 6:16](#); etc.). They were substitutes for the people who had sinned and so deserved to die ([Romans 6:23](#)). Jesus became the perfect sacrifice for others’ sins ([Romans 3:25](#); [1 Peter 2:24](#)). For this reason, we no longer offer sacrifices of grain or oil or animals; Jesus is the last and perfect sacrifice ([Hebrews 10:10–14](#)).

While we usually focus on the impact of Jesus’ death as an atoning sacrifice for our sins, we must keep in mind that this impact affects every aspect of our humanity, both spiritual and physical. Jesus died so that a complete reversal of the curse of sin could be accomplished (see [Genesis 3:14–19](#); [Isaiah 65:17](#); [Revelation 21:5](#)). The wholeness of body accomplished by Jesus’ servanthood is illustrated in [Matthew 8:14–17](#). Immediately following a description of Jesus’ healing ministry and His power to cast out unclean spirits, Matthew wrote that all this happened “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet” ([Matthew 8:17](#)).

During Jesus’ earthly ministry, miracles and signs demonstrated that He possessed power to heal all brokenness, sinful or otherwise (example: [Mark 2:1–12](#)). His return will usher in new heavens and a new earth from which sin and its consequences will be banished ([Revelation 21:1–4](#)). Until that day, Jesus takes our infirmities and sicknesses, not by healing them immediately in every instance but by providing grace in those circumstances. His grace empowers us and enhances our testimony to others (see [2 Corinthians 12:7–10](#)).

5. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

The emphasis on how the servant suffered for humanity continues. We are guilty, but Jesus was treated as though *He* were. *Chastisement* signals the consequence for sin, the consequence *we* deserved. *Peace* with God is the result ([Romans 5:1](#)); indeed Christ is our peace ([Ephesians 2:14–17](#)).

WHY DO WE SUFFER?

Patricia was my wife for 58 years before succumbing to cancer. She also had endured decades of chronic, severe pain. She had contracted polio as a child. As the years added up, she experienced the effects of degenerative disc disease, then post-polio regression syndrome.

At one point during those years, a well-meaning Christian woman approached Pat. “I can’t understand why God is doing this to you,” she said.

“There must be something terribly wrong with your spiritual life to make God give you all this pain.”

Pat’s response was twofold: “God isn’t doing this to me; it’s the effect of disease. And why this is happening is far less important than how I respond to it.”

The woman’s misguided concern was based on an ancient misunderstanding of how God works: that when someone suffers, it is because of one’s sin (example: [John 9:2](#)). In this mistaken light, Jesus—given His degree of suffering—must have been the most terrible sinner ever! However, Jesus’ suffering came to Him because *we* have sinned. How does Jesus’ suffering help you overcome the stigma of your own wounds?

—C. R. B.

6. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Here human beings are compared to *sheep*, which are known for easily wandering *astray* into what is harmful to them. While we were all born inclined to sin ([Psalm 51:5](#)), we also choose sin (compare [Romans 6:1–2](#)). Humanity’s descent into sin is not something we have no part in; we make choices to turn from God. Yet the one against whom we sin, whose law and standards we treat with contempt, placed our wrongdoings and their punishment on the servant. *All* is repeated to emphasize that every one of us has sinned, and the servant has given His life for each of us.

What Do You Think?

Without beginning with Scripture, how would you respond to an unbeliever who claims to have no sin?

Digging Deeper

Consider Paul’s technique in [Acts 17:16–31](#).

If we are sheep, who will shepherd us? At the risk of mixing metaphors (see [Isaiah 53:7](#), below), we note that Jesus declared himself as our shepherd ([John 10:1–18](#); [1 Peter 2:25](#)). Like a shepherd, Jesus takes responsibility for our lives. If we are enticed by sin and so die, Jesus the shepherd takes the loss to heart and grieves over the consequences of our sinfully misguided actions (compare [Luke 13:34](#)).

B. Oppression, Slaughter, Burial (vv. 7–9)

7a. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth.

The servant would respond to his cruel treatment with silence. This may not seem very significant. But when we ponder who Jesus was and the power in His spoken word, such silence should produce a reverent

silence within us. Jesus used His words to heal the sick ([Matthew 8:5–13](#)), raise the dead ([John 11:43](#)), calm storms ([Mark 4:39](#)), and work other miracles (example: [Luke 4:31–36](#)). Yet when it came to defending himself, He said nothing ([Matthew 26:63a; 27:12–14](#)).

Notably, however, Jesus did not remain silent when others were being harmed, especially by leaders who should have cared for them. He called out the enemies who would kill Him—the scribes and the Pharisees—for the ways their hypocrisy damaged the people of Israel (example: [Matthew 23:13–36](#)). His speech on behalf of others contributed to the hatred those powerful leaders felt for Jesus ([26:3–5](#)). Yet He did not argue on His own behalf to proclaim His innocence.

7b. He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

Sheep imagery links this concept to [Isaiah 53:6](#). The comparison to a *lamb* being led to the *slaughter* emphasizes humility and (apparent) powerlessness. A lamb could not overpower the priest who would slaughter it for a sacrifice.

Such language did not become triumphal until the early believers began to understand Jesus as the Lamb of God. In that role, He fulfilled His Father’s plan to be the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world ([John 1:29](#)). This same sacrificial Lamb is worshipped in Heaven and by every creature that exists: “Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever” ([Revelation 5:13](#)).

What Do You Think?

Under what circumstances would you take [Isaiah 53:7](#) as a precedent for not responding to an oppressive situation?

Digging Deeper

How do texts such as [Amos 5:13](#); [Matthew 26:62–64](#); [Acts 16:37; 22:25; 24:10–16](#); and [1 Peter 2:20–23](#) influence your answer?

8a. He was taken from prison and from judgment.

This verse prophesied the travesty of a trial that Jesus experienced at the hands of His enemies. In their bitter hatred of Jesus, they denied Him any semblance of a fair proceeding. For example, a person could not be put to death except on the testimony of two or three witnesses according to [Deuteronomy 17:6](#). The witnesses called to testify against Jesus did not agree in their testimony ([Mark 14:55–59](#)), but He was still found guilty and crucified.

8b. And who shall declare his generation?

This seems to be an indictment against Jesus’ fellow Jews. They not only failed to protest His condemnation, they demanded it ([Luke 23:21](#)).

8c. For he was cut off out of the land of the living; for the transgression of my people was he stricken.

Jesus’ life was *cut off out of the land of the living* at about age 33 (compare [Luke 3:23](#)). Even so, the injustice that He, the servant, experienced and the shameful circumstances surrounding His execution fulfilled a high and holy purpose. Yes, He was *stricken*, but only so that His death could serve as a substitutionary atonement for us (again, [Isaiah 53:5](#), above).

9. And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

Jesus fulfilled this passage in two ways. First, Jesus was an innocent man who was convicted as if He were a notorious criminal; when a crowd was offered a choice between releasing Him or a man guilty of murder and insurrection, it chose the latter ([Mark 15:6–15](#)). As a result, Jesus was hung between two criminals as if He were one of them. Jesus had engaged in violence to clear the temple ([John 2:14](#)), but He never committed a violent act that would call for Roman crucifixion.

Second, Jesus was buried in the grave of a rich man. Normally criminals at the time of Jesus who were executed were left unburied. Eventually, the beasts and the birds consumed their flesh. Jesus, however, was treated differently as two factors came together: a request by Jewish leaders to get the bodies off the crosses, which was followed by Jesus' interment in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy man ([Matthew 27:57](#); [John 19:31–42](#)).

What Do You Think?

What would you say is the single-most important practice Christians could adopt or improve on to eliminate deceitful speech patterns?

Digging Deeper

Do you see this as a big problem or a minor one? Why do you say that?

II. The Servant's Delight

([ISAIAH 53:10–11a](#))

A. Sovereign Purpose (v. 10)

10a. Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin.

The Lord was at work in and through the servant's suffering, though not in the sense that God was punishing the servant for his own sins (see [Isaiah 53:4](#), above). In truth, the servant's suffering and death constituted *an offering for sin*. The Hebrew term used here refers to the trespass offering (see [Leviticus 5:1–6:7](#)).

What made this offering distinct from others was the connection between the sin committed and the remedy stipulated in the law. Jesus' atoning death on the cross was exactly what humanity needed. And it was a sacrifice that needed to be offered only once ([Hebrews 7:26–27](#); [9:24–28](#)). By Jesus' death He destroyed "him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" ([Hebrews 2:14](#)).

10b. He shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.

The number of Jesus' disciples—*his seed*—has continued to grow since the first century AD, when His church was established. That the servant *shall prolong his days* likely points to Jesus' resurrection. That was by no means obvious to any Jewish interpreter before Jesus had actually been raised from the dead. Only then did His disciples begin to grasp how He fulfilled many prophecies, including this one. The Hebrew word translated *pleasure* is also translated "desire" in the Old Testament ([2 Samuel 23:5](#); etc.), and that is the sense here.

What Do You Think?

How would you answer a person who questions the fairness of Jesus being punished for sins committed by others?

Digging Deeper

If you are unsure how to answer, study the nature of the grace system, beginning with [2 Corinthians 5:21](#).

AGING GRACEFULLY

Our culture is fixated on staying young. We use cosmetic surgery and hairpieces. We shun words that suggest we are growing old, and we use euphemisms such as “passed on” instead of speaking plainly about death. The hopeful phrase “She’s gone to be with the Lord” can be employed to soften the blunt fact that death has robbed us of the presence of a loved one.

However, many of us have found that there are advantages to getting old—advantages such as seniors’ discounts! But even better, wisdom can come with age. If we’ve been paying attention to what life’s experiences have taught us, we can bless younger generations with the benefit of knowledge we gained over the years.

Isaiah foretold Jesus’ suffering, but he also revealed that Jesus would see His spiritual children prosper. Jesus lives and sees countless generations of His followers living out their days in spiritual blessedness. For the Christian, aging gracefully means more than becoming a kindly grandparent or uncle or aunt. It is the grace of God at work, making us more like Jesus.

—C. R. B.

B. Sacred Success (v. 11a)

11a. He shall see of the travail of his soul.

Jesus was able to look at the *travail*, or suffering, He went through and know that He did indeed accomplish the work given to Him. [Hebrews 12:2](#) says that Jesus “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Just as we cannot begin to understand the depth of Jesus’ suffering at the cross, we cannot imagine the joy that He felt after He uttered the words “It is finished” ([John 19:30](#)).

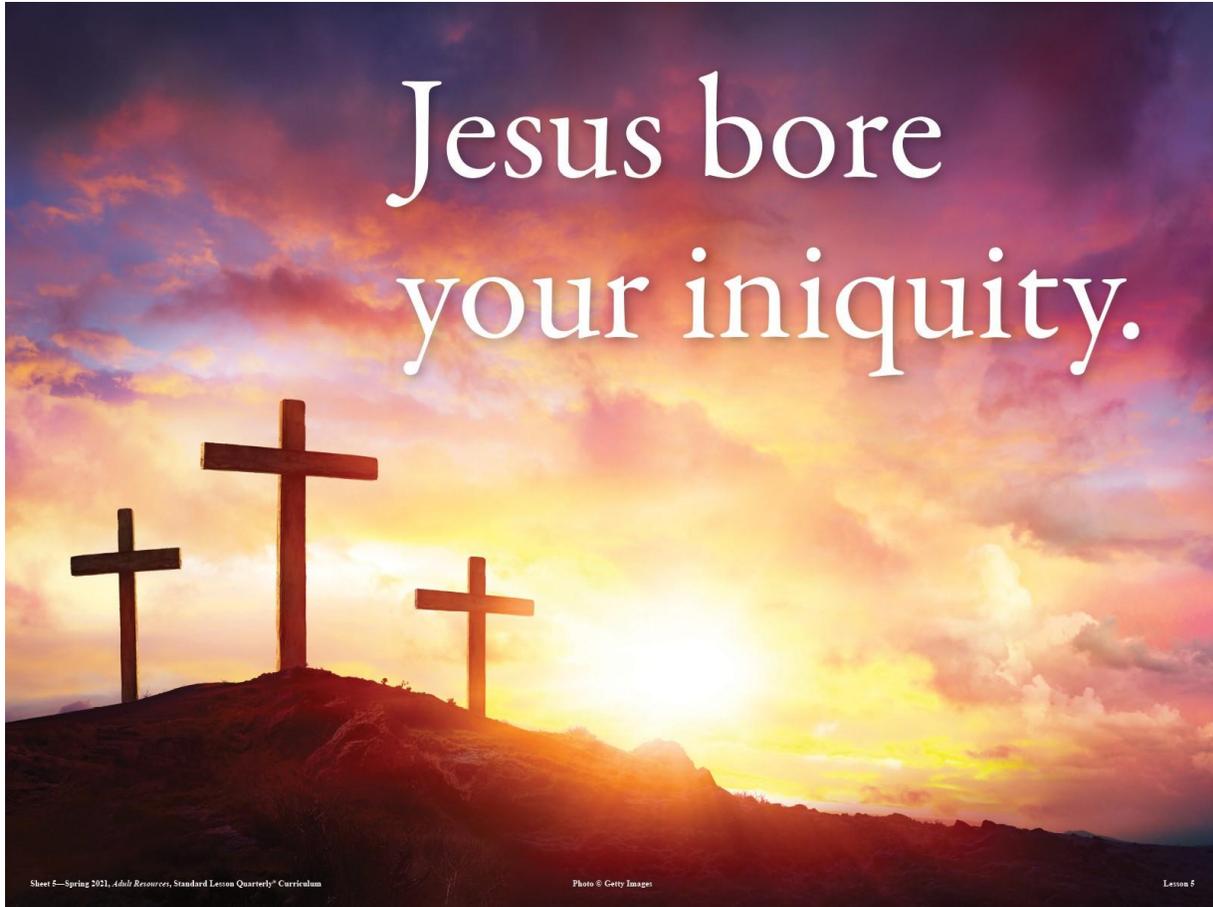
Conclusion

A. Relishing the View

As with many mountaintop experiences, it can be difficult to return to life below after leaving the magnificent scenery of [Isaiah 53](#) behind. That is perhaps the most powerful of the Servant Songs in its prophetic depiction of the suffering experienced by Jesus at the cross as He died for the sins of others.

Jesus’ death was not an accident or random tragedy as we use those terms. Rather, His death was the fulfillment of a divine plan to rescue lost humanity. The study of a passage such as [Isaiah 53](#) should not end with the lesson. We can return to it and scale its heights again and again, as often as we like—and we should.

Prophets like Isaiah yearned to know more about how their prophecies would come to pass ([1 Peter 1:10–12](#)). But it was not granted to those men to live in the era of fulfillment ([Hebrews 11:39–40](#)). That is our privilege as Christians, who possess the sacred Scriptures of both Old and New Testament. It is we who are able to see from the mountain’s summit what Isaiah could see only partially, from somewhere farther down.



Visual for Lesson 5. *Point to the statement on this visual as you introduce the question associated with verse 10.*

May we never take such a sacred privilege for granted.

What Do You Think?

How will study of today’s text result in changes to your thoughts, words, and actions?

Digging Deeper

Consider also use of today’s text in the New Testament: [Matthew 8:16–17](#); [Acts 8:32–35](#); [1 Peter 2:22–25](#).

B. Prayer

Father, thank You that Jesus came in the fullness of time to fulfill prophecies such as Your wonderful words recorded by Isaiah. Thank You for the amazing love demonstrated by Jesus in His undeserved suffering for undeserving sinners such as us. In Jesus' name we praise You. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Jesus makes both the prophecies of Scripture and our lives complete.

INVOLEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with KJV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the KJV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Write the words *Suffering* and *Service* on the board, or on displayed placards. Give each person a blank index card and announce that participants have one minute to write a sentence that includes both words on the board. Stress that you will collect the cards and that students should not sign them.

After calling time, collect the cards. Note similarities or unusual combinations as you read them aloud. Then pose these questions for discussion: 1—In what contexts, if any, does service always include suffering? 2—What are some notable examples of service that include suffering?

Make a transition by saying, “Today’s lesson includes some of the most beautiful and oft-quoted passages in Scripture. But these also describe a harsh reality of a certain suffering. Let’s investigate.”

Into the Word

Briefly present the setting for today’s passage, using material from the Lesson Context. Then group students into triads. Give to half the groups an assignment to read today’s text and to make a bullet-point list of what Isaiah said about the servant. Assign the other groups the task of listing specific actions of Jesus that fulfilled the prophecy. (*Option:* Put the assignments on handouts so you don’t have to repeat verbal instructions.) Allow at least six minutes to make the lists.

Call the groups together. Read [Isaiah 53:4](#) and ask volunteers from the **Isaiah said** groups to share what they listed from this verse. Then ask volunteers from the **Jesus fulfilled** groups to share what they discovered in that regard.

Continue in this back-and-forth pattern as you work through each verse of the lesson. (*Option:* Write participants’ responses on the board as they are voiced, under appropriate headings.)

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Servant Songs” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. This exercise will allow learners to see today’s text in a broader context of the other four Servant Songs in Isaiah. There are a total of 40 verses to consider, and the five songs vary widely in length. Therefore, you will need to think carefully in advance regarding how many groups there will be, how many participants will be in each group, how much time to allow, and how to keep things moving briskly when groups report conclusions in the ensuing all-class discussion.

Into Life

Send students back to their initial groups to make a third list regarding what the servant's suffering did for them (all groups working on the same activity). As they do, write *What the Servant's Suffering Did for Me* on the board. After several minutes, call for reflections as you pause between reading individual verses of the lesson. Jot responses on the board.

Send class members back to their triads one more time and ask each group to write exactly one sentence (no more than a dozen words) of thanksgiving or praise to God for something specific the Suffering Servant has done for them. Groups should arrive at their sentence by consensus, which will require more thinking than mere majority vote.

Option 1. Play a recording of the sections in Handel's *Messiah* that have put [Isaiah 53:4–6](#) to music. (If your classroom is equipped, you could project an appropriate video that includes these verses.) Encourage class members to jot down phrases that particularly strike them or emotions they feel as they hear the Scripture set to music.

Option 2. Distribute copies of the “Servant Thanks” exercise from the activity page. This devotional prayer-writing activity is designed for students to begin in class but finish at home.

ACTIVITY PAGE

[Click here to download the free reproducible pdf page](#)

