

Doing *the* Unthinkable



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Lough Fook, a Chinese Christian, was moved with compassion for those of his compatriots who had become slaves in African mines. He wanted to give them the hope of the gospel, but how could he have access to them? His solution was to sell himself for a term of five years as a slave. He was transported to Demerara, where he toiled in the mines and told his fellow workers about Jesus.

Lough Fook died, but not until 200 people were liberated from hopelessness by accepting Jesus as their Savior.

Talk about self-sacrifice for the good of others. What an example!

By doing the unthinkable, that is, humbly “taking the form of a slave” (*Phil. 2:7, NRSV*), Jesus, too, had reached the unreachable—you and I and all the world steeped and lost in the abyss of sin.

This week we’ll see this incredible event prophesied hundreds of years before it happened.

The Week at a Glance: How does Isaiah prepare us for what’s coming in regard to the death of Jesus? How is Jesus presented in these verses? What’s the key theme in Isaiah 53? How is the idea of substitutionary atonement presented there?

Memory Text: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (*Isaiah 53:5, NRSV*).

*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 5.

Isaiah's Testing Truth *(Isa. 50:4-10)*.

If Isaiah intended to convey only information, he would have laid out all the details regarding the Messiah at once. But in order to teach, persuade, and give his audience an encounter with the Servant of the Lord, he develops a rich fabric of recurring themes in symphonic fashion. He unfolds God's message in steps so that each aspect can be grasped in relation to the rest of the picture. Isaiah is an artist whose canvas is the soul of his listener.

Read Isaiah 50:4-10. Summarize what these verses are saying. How do you see Jesus in there?

We found in Isaiah 49:7 that God's servant is despised, abhorred, and "the slave of rulers" (*NRSV*) but that "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves" (*NRSV*). Here in chapter 50 we learn that the valley is deeper for the gentle Teacher whose words sustain the weary (*vs. 4*): His path to vindication leads through physical abuse (*vs. 6*).

This abuse sounds bad to those of us in modern Western cultures. But in an ancient Near Eastern culture, honor was a life and death matter for a person and his or her group. If you insulted and mistreated someone like this, you better be well protected: If given half a chance, the victim and/or his or her clan would surely retaliate.

King David attacked and conquered the country of Ammon (*2 Samuel 1-12*) because its king had merely "seized David's envoys, shaved off half the beard of each, cut off their garments in the middle at their hips, and sent them away" (*2 Sam. 10:4, NRSV*). But in Isaiah 50 people strike the servant, painfully pluck out hairs from his beard, and spit at him. What makes these actions an international, intercosmic incident is that the victim is the envoy of the divine King of kings. In fact, by comparing Isaiah 9:6, 7 and 11:1-16 with other "servant" passages, we find that the servant is the King, the mighty Deliverer! But with all His power and honor, for some unthinkable reason, He does not save Himself! This is so strange that people didn't believe it. At Jesus' cross, leaders mocked him: " 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' " (*Luke 23:35, NRSV*); " 'Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him' " (*Matt. 27:42, NRSV*).

Read through Isaiah 50:4-10. Write down the spiritual principles depicted here that should be applied to our own lives. Look at yourself in light of the list you make. In what areas could you do better? If discouraged, then read on for the rest of the week.

The Suffering Servant Poem (*Isa. 52:13–53:12*).

Isaiah 52:13–53:12, known as the “Suffering Servant Poem,” confirms Isaiah’s reputation as “the gospel prophet.” In harmony with the excellence of the gospel, the poem towers above other literature.

Though breathtakingly short, every phrase is packed with profound meaning that reveals the core of God’s unthinkable quest to save a race steeped and lost in sin.

This is not the “milk” of Isaiah’s word. He has prepared his audience by developing the Messianic theme from the early part of his book. Following the overall course of the Messiah’s life on earth, the prophet started with His conception and birth (*Isa. 7:14*), introduced His identity as a divine Davidic king (*Isa. 9:6, 7*), and elaborated on His work of restoration for Israel (*Isa. 11:1-16*) and quiet ministry of liberation from injustice and suffering (*Isa. 42:1-7*). Then Isaiah revealed that the Messiah’s grand drama includes the contrast of tragedy before exaltation (*Isa. 49:1-12, 50:6-10*). Now the Suffering Servant Poem plumbs the depths of the tragedy.

Go back over those sections listed in the above paragraph. Review what they tell us about the Messiah, Jesus. How do they help prepare us for what’s coming in Isaiah 52 and 53? Or do they simply make what happens in Isaiah 52 and 53 more striking?

Isaiah 52:13–53:1 introduce the poem with a preview containing a stunning contrast: The Servant will prosper and be exalted, but His appearance will be marred beyond recognition. Who can believe it?

Verses 2 and 3 begin a painful descent from the Servant’s origin and ordinary appearance to His sorrow and rejection. Verses 4-6 pause to explain that His suffering is our punishment, which He bears to heal us. Verses 7-9 continue the innocent Servant’s descent to the grave.

In verses 10-12, the Servant ascends to the exalted reward foreseen at the beginning of the poem starting in Isaiah 52:13, with the added insight that His sacrifice to save others is the will of God.

Compare the “valley” shape of Philippians 2:5-11, where Jesus begins in the form of God but descends by emptying Himself to take on the bondage of human form, humbling Himself down to death, and the lowest of all deaths: death on a cross. Therefore, God highly exalts Him so that everyone should acknowledge Him as Lord (*compare Isa. 49:7*).

Read Isaiah 52:13–53:12. Write down everything the poem says that Jesus has done for us. Dwell on what those actions in our behalf mean to us.

Who Has Believed? *(Isa. 52:13–53:12).*

In Isaiah 52:13 God’s Servant is highly exalted, but without warning, the next verse describes His appearance as so disfigured He cannot be recognized as one of the “sons of men.” The New Testament describes the factors that marred Jesus’ appearance, including scourging, a crown of thorns, crucifixion, but, above all, bearing the sin of the human race. Sin was never intended to be natural for humans; bearing it made the “Son of Man” appear inhuman.

Compare the story of Job, who suddenly plummeted from a position of great wealth, honor, and power to a miserable wretch sitting among ashes on the ground and scraping his painful sores with a potsherd (*Job 1–2*). The contrast was so great that not even Job’s friends recognized him at first (*Job 2:12*). The question is: Why does Job suffer? Why must God’s Messiah suffer? Neither deserves it. Both are innocent. Why, then, the suffering?

Read through the text for today and write down the places where the theme of the innocent suffering for the guilty appears. What is the essential message there for us?

Look at the questions in Isaiah 53:1. These questions emphasize the challenge of believing the unbelievable (*compare John 12:37–41*) and warn us to sit down for the rest of the story. But the questions also imply an appeal. In this context, the parallel between the two questions implies that the Lord’s arm/power of salvation (*compare Isa. 52:10*) is revealed to those who believe the report. Do you want to experience God’s saving power? Then believe the report.

Look carefully at Isaiah 53:6. What is the specific message there? What is that text saying to you, personally, that should give you hope despite your past sins and failures?

The Unreachable Is Us! (*Isa. 53:3-9*).

Like a vulnerable plant, apparently of no special value, and despised (*Isa. 53:2, 3*)—that’s the depiction we are given here of the Suffering Servant. Isaiah has quickly brought us through innocent youth to the brink of the abyss. Even with the background provided earlier, we are not prepared in the sense that we are resigned to the Servant’s fate. To the contrary! Isaiah has taught us to cherish the Child born to us, the supreme Prince of Peace. Others despise Him, but we know who He really is.

As someone has said: “We have met the enemy and they are us.” The Servant is not the first to be despised, rejected, or a man of suffering. King David was all those when he fled from his son, Absalom (*2 Sam. 15:30*). But the suffering borne by this servant is not His own and does not result from His own sin. Nor does He bear it merely for another individual; “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (*Isa. 53:6, NRSV*).

The answer to the question “Why?” is Isaiah’s testing truth: Because of God’s love, His Messiah would choose to suffer. But why? Isaiah drives the “golden spike” to complete the unthinkable truth: He would choose to suffer in order to reach the unreachable, and the unreachable is us!

Those who do not understand regard the servant as “struck down by God” (*Isa. 53:4, NRSV*). Just as Job’s friends thought his sin must have caused his suffering, and just as Jesus’ disciples asked Him “ ‘who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ” (*John 9:2, NRSV*), those who saw Jesus on the cross assumed the worst. Didn’t Moses say that “anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (*Deut. 21:23; compare Num. 25:4*)?

Yet, all this was God’s will (*Isa. 53:10*). Why? Because “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (*Gal. 3:13, NRSV*). Because God “made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (*2 Cor. 5:21*). “Imagine that! In a sense, Christ *became* sin! He bore every evil passion and selfish degradation of the billions of people who have ever inhabited our planet. With that overwhelming deluge of misery collected upon Him and identified with Him as if He were the personification of all evil, He gave Himself up for destruction in order to wipe out all sin and all of its consequences.”—Roy Gane, *Altar Call*, p. 77, author’s emphasis.

The punishment for the sins of the whole world—every sin, by every sinner—fell upon Christ at the Cross, at once, as the only means to save us! What does this tell us about how bad sin is that such a price had to be paid? What does it tell us about God’s love that He would do this for us, even at such a great cost?

A Transforming Reparation Offering

(Isa. 53:10-12).

What does it mean that the Servant’s life is “an offering for sin” (vs. 10, NRSV)?

The Hebrew word refers to a “guilt/reparation offering” (*Lev. 5:14–6:7, 7:1-7*), which could atone for deliberate wrongs against other people (*Lev. 6:2, 3*). Such sins were singled out by Isaiah (*Isaiah 1–3; 10:1, 2; 58*). Also, the sinner must restore to the wronged person that which was taken, plus a penalty, before offering the sacrifice to receive forgiveness from God (*Lev. 6:4-7; compare Matt. 5:23, 24*). In a case of inadvertent misuse of something that belongs to God, the reparation goes to Him (*Lev. 5:16*).

Now we can understand Isaiah 40:2, where God comforts His exiled people by telling them they have paid enough reparation for their sins.

But following the reparation, there must be a sacrifice. Here it is in Isaiah 53: God’s Servant, instead of a ram, is led like a sheep to the slaughter (*Isa. 53:7*) on behalf of people who have gone astray (vs. 6).

Although “cut off from the land of the living” (vs. 8, NRSV; compare *Dan. 9:26*), completely consumed in the sacrifice that kindles the flame of hope for us, the Servant comes forth from death, the land of no return, to receive exaltation, see His “offspring,” and prolong his days (*Isa. 53:10-12*).

Look up each of the following verses. How does each one reflect the same basic message as Isaiah 53?

Ps. 32:1, 2

Rom. 5:8

Gal. 2:16

Phil. 3:9

Heb. 2:9

1 Pet. 2:24

If someone were to ask you to summarize in a single paragraph the good news of Isaiah 52:13–53:12, what would you write?

Further Study: “What a price has been paid for us! Behold the cross, and the Victim uplifted upon it. Look at those hands, pierced with the cruel nails. Look at His feet, fastened with spikes to the tree. Christ bore our sins in His own body. That suffering, that agony, is the price of your redemption.”—Ellen G. White, *God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 172.

“Christ bore our sins in His own body on the tree. . . . What must sin be, if no finite being could make atonement? What must its curse be if Deity alone could exhaust it? The cross of Christ testifies to every man that the penalty of sin is death. . . . Oh, must there be some strong bewitching power which holds the moral senses, steeling them against the impressions of the Spirit of God?”—Ellen G. White, *Our High Calling*, p. 44.

“The law of God’s government was to be magnified by the death of God’s only-begotten Son. Christ bore the guilt of the sins of the world. Our sufficiency is found only in the incarnation and death of the Son of God. He could suffer, because [He was] sustained by divinity. He could endure, because He was without one taint of disloyalty or sin. Christ triumphed in man’s behalf in thus bearing the justice of punishment. He secured eternal life to men, while He exalted the law, and made it honorable.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 302.

Discussion Questions:

1 Verses 7-9 of Isaiah 53 descend to the depths of the abyss: the Servant’s death and burial. How many aspects of these verses were fulfilled at the end of Jesus’ life? *Matt. 26:57–27:60, Mark 14:53–15:46, Luke 22:54–23:53, John 18:12–19:42.*

2 Look at the last quote above by Ellen White about Christ’s death magnifying the law. What does she mean by that? How do we understand His death as proof of the perpetuity of the law?

Summary: Having told about the birth, identity, and career of God’s Deliverer, Isaiah finally reveals the supreme tragedy that gives us hope: To reach, save, and heal lost people, including us, God’s Servant voluntarily bears our suffering and punishment.

Peace Beyond Understanding

IVANKA GEORGIEVA

A close friend of mine teaches in the same village I do in Bulgaria. My friend was not a Christian, and she was undergoing great troubles. Her boyfriend died in an accident, and nothing would console her. One day she called me and sobbed, “I cannot stand to live any longer. I am going to end my life!” I feared for her, because I knew this was not an empty threat. I begged her to give God a chance, to open the Bible I had given her and read it.

“Come on,” she wept, “give me a break with this Bible thing! Don’t you understand? I’m dying inside. I can’t stand it any longer!”

We live far from each other, and I could not get to her quickly. But I knew that God could be beside her in an instant. I knelt and begged God for my friend’s life. After awhile the phone rang. It was my friend, but I hardly recognized her voice. “You know, I must be crazy,” she said. “A little while after I hung up, I picked up that Bible you gave me and started to read it. Suddenly such a peace flooded my heart that I was sure I must be losing my mind.”

We talked for several more minutes, and I told her, “The peace you feel is the peace of God. It is so overwhelming that we cannot understand it. God is reaching out to you, asking you to give Him a chance to make your life meaningful.”

Often I had invited my friend to attend church, but she would not come regularly. However, after this experience she often asked me to take her to church. She began studying the Bible and eventually surrendered her life to God.

People who don’t know God don’t realize that God’s peace can be theirs just for the asking. My friend’s experience is a living example of the difference God can make in a person’s life, a difference people cannot understand until they experience it for themselves.



IVANKA GEORGIEVA (left) is a teacher in Varna, Bulgaria.