

LESSON 10 *May 29–June 4

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.*

SUNDAY May 30

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.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: *Isaiah 52:13–53:12.*

Teachers Aim:

1. To tie together Messianic themes woven throughout Isaiah and climaxing in Isaiah 53.
2. To convey the hope of God's salvation through the image of the suffering servant.

Lesson Outline:

I. Messianic Climax.

- A. Isaiah foretells the coming of a Messiah, in chapters 7, 9, and 11, and through the first three *servant songs* of chapters 42, 49, and 50.
- B. The *suffering servant* imagery contrasts with more regal images, such as the imagery used in association with Cyrus in Isaiah 45.

II. Hope of Salvation.

- A. Our only hope lies in Christ's complete degradation at the Cross. He descended that we might ascend. (*Compare the valley forms of Isaiah 53 and Philippians 2:5-11.*)
- B. Complete salvation—sacrifice and reparation required by a guilt offering—could be accomplished only by God.

Summary: The Bible is history, with all things pointing to salvation through Christ. This climax is reached in Isaiah 52:13–53:12, which speaks of the redeeming work of Christ. The Christian's life is to be transformed by the realization that the hope and the joy of salvation are intrinsically interwoven with Christ's suffering on our behalf.

COMMENTARY

Introduction: Doing the Unthinkable.

Isaiah 52:13–53:12 details the sacrifice of Christ. It forms a kind of triptych (a picture or carving in three panels side by side) painted by a master Artist. On the first panel, we see Christ's obscure and despised origins linked with His ministry of restoration. On the second panel, we witness the treatment He was subjected to from His arrest to His crucifixion. Finally, the third panel reflects the redemption of believing souls.

Isaiah 50:4-10 is a meditative prelude to the more intense depiction of Isaiah 52:13–53:12.

I. Gracious Counselor Ungraciously Scorned (*Isa. 50:4-10*).

Christ's "messages of mercy were varied to suit His audience. He knew 'how to speak a word in season to him that is weary'

MONDAY *May 31*

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.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

(Isa. 50:4); for grace was poured upon His lips, that He might convey to men in the most attractive way the treasures of truth. He had tact to meet the prejudiced minds, and surprise them with illustrations that won their attention. . . .

“Christ never flattered men. He never spoke that which would exalt their fancies and imaginations, nor did He praise them for their clever inventions; but deep, unprejudiced thinkers received His teaching, and found that it tested their wisdom. They marveled at the spiritual truth expressed in the simplest language. The most highly educated were charmed with His words, and the uneducated were always profited. He had a message for the illiterate; and He made even the heathen to understand that He had a message for them.

“His tender compassion fell with a touch of healing upon weary and troubled hearts. Even amid the turbulence of angry enemies He was surrounded with an atmosphere of peace. The beauty of His countenance, the loveliness of His character, above all, the love expressed in look and tone, drew to Him all who were not hardened in unbelief. Had it not been for the sweet, sympathetic spirit that shone out in every look and word, He would not have attracted the large congregations that He did. The afflicted ones who came to Him felt that He linked His interest with theirs as a faithful and tender friend, and they desired to know more of the truths He taught.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 254, 255.

Though the enemies of truth opposed Jesus’ actions and words, nothing could stop Him from pursuing His mission of mercy. Many trusted Him despite the fury this aroused in the religious leaders.

II. Despised Wisdom and Undiscerned Beauty. (*Isa. 52:13–53:3*).

Christ’s wisdom surpassed that of all the scholars and prophets of history, for He is the Source of wisdom and grace (*see John 1:14, Col. 2:3*). Truth-hating people, especially those who thought themselves wise and superior, looked upon Jesus with contempt (*see John 15:20-25, Rom. 15:3, 1 Cor. 1:18-24*). One of the marvels of the gospel is that, knowing all He would be subjected to, Christ still was willing to carry out the plan of salvation (*see Zech. 6:12, 13; John 3:16*). This is love like no other. Jesus was born into sinful humanity; His redeeming mercy imparted new life to us so that we might become trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to bring forth fruit to His glory (*see Isa. 53:2; 61:3; John 15:8, 16*).

III. Our Merciful Substitutionary Sacrifice. (*Isa. 53:4-9*).

Christ’s suffering was not caused by a misconception on His part as to how His work would be received but by a misconception on humankind’s part as to the nature of His mission

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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

(see 1 Cor. 2:6-8). He voluntarily laid down His life for our redemption. It was not snatched from Him against His will (see John 10:17, 18). By merciful design and omniscient forethought, the Godhead agreed to let the iniquity of us all rest on Him (Isa. 53:6). Christ and His Father envisioned mighty results from the atoning sacrifice. These results include:

Inductive Bible Study

Texts for Discovery: 1 Samuel 16:7; Psalm 44:21; Jeremiah 17:9, 10.

① As you read “In Pilate’s Judgment Hall,” from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, contrast in two columns Christ’s demeanor with the demeanor of others (Herod, Pilate, etc.). Share this list with the class. Ask class members how they respond when being *persecuted*. Also, ask them what they do when others ask them, against their conscience, to join in the condemnation of another person.

② To understand fully the suffering of Christ and His sacrifice, we must consider His mental, emotional, and spiritual anguish. Consider the results of such stress and grief on the body. Discuss with the class the physical ailments caused by severe grief, stress, depression, fear, etc. For example, such emotions can cause our skin to turn dull or gray or make us look worn and aged. Stress can cause strokes and can weaken our immune system, making our body a friendlier host to cancer, colds, etc. Imagine how Christ agonized over the weight of our sins. See Isa. 52:14.

③ Christ was “made . . . to be sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). What does sin look like? Is it pretty when seen from a spiritual perspective? Contemplate how God must see us when we walk around with unconfessed sin. Does He see our beauty we portray through the masks we display to our fellow humans? How does this bring home the point of 1 Samuel 16:7; Psalm 44:21; and Jeremiah 17:9, 10?

④ Consider the role of a father and how he makes sacrifices for his children on a regular basis that they, being so young, hardly recognize or appreciate. He aches when they suffer pain. He aches when they cause him pain. Only when children become adults do they fully understand the sacrifices their father made for them, and only then do they realize how their father shaped them to be who they are. How does that compare to our heavenly Father and us as growing (childlike) Christians? What are the signs that tell us we have become *adults* in Christ?

WEDNESDAY June 2

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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

1. The salvation of every sinner who accepts His sacrifice (*see 1 Cor. 15:1-3, 2 Cor. 5:21, Col. 1:20-22, 1 Pet. 2:24*).

2. The charges Satan brings against God's government will be proven false, which will result in eternally restored harmony throughout the universe (*see Eph. 1:7-10; 3:13, 14; Col. 1:20*).

3. The permanent elimination from the universe of evil (*see Neh. 1:9, John 1:29, Rom. 6:6, 2 Thess. 1:7-9, Heb. 9:26*).

IV. "Who for the Joy That Was Set Before Him" (*Isa. 53:10-12, Heb. 12:1-3*).

No one can fathom the horrors Christ experienced as He died for the salvation of the human race (*see Psalm 22*). For this outcome, He was willing to endure the Cross and suffer its shame (*Heb. 12:1-3*). Scripture guarantees that by virtue of Christ's sacrifice the "pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand" (*Isa. 53:10*). That is, the plan of salvation will bring forth eternal fruit from all the world, thus fulfilling God's purpose (*see Rev. 7:9-17*).

Witnessing

While growing up, a young child became accustomed to her mother's misshapen hands. Yet, she often longed for hands to hold that were smooth and pretty. Sometimes she silently pouted, *Why do I have a mother with such ugly hands?*

One night, while sitting on her mother's lap before bedtime, the youngster asked, "Mother, why are your hands so rough and scarred?"

Smiling, the mother replied, "One night, a terrible fire burned in our house. The firefighters couldn't reach your room, because of the heat and smoke. I found a way into your room, and, together, you and I found our way out of the fire. But when the blanket you were wrapped in caught fire, there was no way to put out the flames except with my hands."

The child gently reached out and picked up her mother's hands. She placed a soft kiss on each one then looked up into her mother's eyes. "They're the most beautiful hands in the world, because they saved my life!"

While there is no denying this mother's deep love for her child, her gift of life was the result of an unplanned act during a crisis.

Jesus, on the other hand, had known of His Father's plan for earth's salvation for centuries. Yet, during all that time, He never wavered at the thought of His own scarred hands as payment for our salvation.

Just before you pray each morning, examine your hands. How will you use them to help someone next week?

THURSDAY June 3

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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Life-Application Approach

Icebreaker: When H. M. S. Richards visited Christ's tomb, he spent a few minutes there alone. When he left, he signed the guest book and wrote this comment: "It is empty!"

A short time later, another minister visited the tomb. While signing the guest book, he noticed Richards's comment, which inspired his own: "Thank God!"

Read John 11:25. What hope does this text give us?

Thought Question:

Crucifixion was particularly cruel. Jim Bishop writes, "Wine, slightly drugged [was prepared]. . . .

"[Jesus] looked at the wine . . . and shook his head. He would not drink it. He had to feel the fullness of pain. . . .

"The executioner laid the crossbeam behind Jesus and brought him to the ground quickly. . . .

"The executioner probed the wrist of Jesus to find the little hollow spot. When he found it, he took one of the square-cut iron nails from his teeth and held it against the spot. . . . Then he raised the hammer over the nail head and brought it down with force. . . . [The same procedure was used for the second hand.] When the crossbeam was set firmly [the executioner] knelt before the cross. Two soldiers hurried to help, and each one took hold of a leg at the calf. The ritual was to nail the right foot over the left. . . . The Romans learned to push the feet upward on the cross, so that the condemned man could lean on the nails and stretch himself upward. This prolonged the period of dying."—*The Day Christ Died* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957), pp. 295–298.

Jesus was also weighed down with the enormity of sin, plus His sense of separation from God. How does knowing all this help you understand His sacrifice better? How does this knowledge make His sacrifice more personal?

Application Question:

What might be stopping you from fully accepting Christ's salvation? Have you admitted that you are one of the *unreachable* ones mentioned in this week's lesson? Be cautious in thinking that only those who personify our definition of *lowest of the low* qualify for this category. We are all tainted by Satan's ways. We are all lost unless we unconditionally accept Christ's salvation and live the new life He requires of us. Honor this new life by practicing hands-on humility this week toward others around you.

FRIDAY June 4

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:

❶ **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.*

❷ **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.