

# WHO IS THE PROPHET TALKING ABOUT?

## ACTS 8

**30** Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

**31** “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

**32** This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:- “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

**33** In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”<sup>[b]</sup>

**34** The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?”

**35** Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

In Isaiah, there are four passages which are known as the Servant Songs-42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11 and 52:13-53:12. On several occasions, the New Testament quotes these to describe the ministry of Jesus. For instance, Acts 8 quotes Isaiah 53 and Matthew 12:17-21 quotes Isaiah 42. Isaiah was writing in about 700 BC, so how could he so accurately describe Jesus? There can only be one answer and it's that God was revealing these truths to the prophet. In chapter 53, Isaiah presents to us a remarkable description of our Saviour's death. When the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 was reading this portion of Scripture, he could not understand it, but his ignorance was dispelled when "Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus:"

These four songs were written by Isaiah to Jewish exiles in Babylon. They were discouraged and depressed and convinced that God had forgotten their nation. Isaiah brings them a message of hope by telling them of a mysterious Servant of the Lord who was to come.

The New Testament clearly saw Jesus as this Servant. For instance, verses 1-4 of today's first song are applied to Jesus in Matthew 12:15-21. Repeatedly Jesus tells his disciples that all that happens to him is to fulfil the Scriptures. But which Scriptures? Luke 22:37 quotes one of the Servant Songs to answer this

question.

### **THE FIRST SONG - Isaiah 42:1-9**

Isaiah 42:1 brings before us the unique qualifications of Jesus, God's Servant. He belongs to God and God willingly acknowledges him as 'my servant'. Here is a description of honour, which is emphasized by the words, 'my chosen one in whom I delight'.

The task God had for his Servant was one that only Jesus could carry out. All Christians should gaze in wonder at the Servant Songs. Here is our Lord and Saviour and he is going to do a marvellous thing for us.

*In verses 2-4 there is a beautiful picture of Jesus. We see gentleness, meekness, loving care and concern for the broken and the frail. He is tender and delicate in handling bruised souls. What Christian has not known Jesus like this? The loveliness of Jesus' character has come to our rescue time and time again.*

### **THE SECOND SONG - Isaiah 49:1-13**

The Servant is speaking and he tells us in verses 1 and 5 that his ministry is totally under the control of God. This was stated in yesterday's reading, 'my chosen one', but now it is spelt out more clearly in words like 'before I was born' and 'he who formed me in the womb to be his servant'.

This is a tremendously comforting truth particularly as we shall go on and see in Isaiah 53 what happened to the Servant. He was despised and rejected, crushed by God; but all that was part of God's plan.

Verse 6 is thrilling as it shows us the breadth of salvation — Jew and Gentile. Then in verse 7, kings and princes, and captives (v. 9) are all embraced by God's Redeemer. None, the high or the low, will remain outside of the grace of God simply because of their social or intellectual standing. This does not mean that everyone will be saved but it does mean that all sorts of people will find salvation in God's Servant.

The cry of the Redeemer to those in sin is, 'Come out' and 'Be free!' (v. 9). There is a great New Testament ring about all this, which is inevitable because what Isaiah writes 700 years before Jesus was born finds its fulfilment in the life and death of Christ.

***He is the one in whom God displays his splendour (v. 3).***

These Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah remind us powerfully that God planned our salvation before the world was created. Isaiah is not speculating as to what may be but prophesying what shall most certainly be. He can only do this because he is inspired by God.

### **THE THIRD SONG - Isaiah 50:4-11**

The language of verse 6 shows us Jesus on the cross (see Matthew 26:67 and Matthew 27:30). Note the words here: 'I offered' and 'I did not hide my face.' Jesus was not passive at Calvary. He is not helpless in the hands of sinful men. He is there because he is the obedient Servant. The suffering of the Servant is the wish of God, and what we have in verse 6 is a majestic description of Jesus in full control of the situation. Instead of saying men beat him, he declares that he gave his back to those who beat him.

At Calvary man is confronting God. He insults God and spits on him and thinks he is in control with Jesus as his helpless victim. But one word from Jesus and everyone at Calvary would have been obliterated to eternity.

In verse 7 Jesus says, 'I set my face like flint'; here is his determination to go to the cross. He did this because he knew there was a purpose in his suffering. The death of Jesus was not an empty gesture. It was not an example to us on how to endure suffering. We shall see tomorrow what exactly was involved. The Saviour knew that God would not leave him in disgrace (v. 7). The Lord would vindicate him (v. 8) — see 1 Timothy 3:16.

*Compare verses 8 and 9 with Romans 8:33-34. The Servant asks three questions but he is speaking not just of himself but of all his people. His righteousness becomes ours. His acceptance with God is ours. His vindication is ours. Amazingly, what is true of Christ is true of all his people.*

### **THE FOURTH SONG    ISAIAH 52:13 – 53:12**

#### **DESCRIPTION OF JESUS**

Other parts of the Old Testament describe Jesus as "The Lily of the Valley," "The Rose of Sharon," "outstanding among ten thousand and altogether lovely." In fact, the exact opposite of Isaiah 53:2-3. "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not." In Isaiah 53, we do not see Jesus as the Son of God in all His unique glory and majesty, but as man's sin-bearer dying on the cross in agony and

shame. Isaiah doesn't paint a pretty picture, but it's the same Jesus that Solomon describes as "altogether lovely."

Isaiah had already described Jesus as "Emmanuel, God with us:" What we then see in Isaiah 53 is what God came into this world to do. It's staggering and almost unbelievable, but certainly true. In verse 2, we see the humble beginning of His life. He grew up on the streets of Nazareth and no one paid any special attention to Him. He was like an insignificant root in dry ground; a piece of vegetation that seemed doomed to wither away, so He was scarcely noticed. King Saul, the first King of Israel, stood head and shoulders above other men, and therefore could not help but be noticed. King David had a very attractive physical appearance so that eyes would have been drawn to him. The Jesus of Isaiah 53 wasn't like that. In spite of this, there was a beauty and loveliness about his character, and one could expect that this would attract some. But it was not so. We see in Isaiah 53 the complete and absolute humiliation of Jesus. This was Emmanuel, God become man.

### **WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM?**

The whole picture is one of suffering. In His life, Jesus had been familiar with suffering. In spite of this, there was a beauty and loveliness about His character. In His death the suffering reached untold depths. The words the prophet uses to describe what Jesus had to endure are significant. He was stricken, smitten, afflicted, pierced, crushed, punished, wounded and oppressed. That's a frightening list. Worst of all, He did nothing to deserve it. He was God's righteous servant (v. 11) who did no violence nor spoke any deceit (v.9). We might expect therefore that he would plead His innocence and demand justice, but no, "He didn't open his mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter" (v.7).

### **WHY DID IT HAPPEN?**

The answer to this is most extraordinary. It's so staggering that most people refuse to believe it. They say it's impossible and even immoral. Yet, Isaiah states the answer very clearly and gets an abundance of support from the rest of Scripture. It happened because it was God's will. Jesus was stricken by God (v.4) and "it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause Him to suffer" (v.10). This brings us back to Acts 2:23 and the truth that the death of Jesus was in accord with God's set purpose. Christ's death and how He died was all part of God's plan. The plan is unfolded in Isaiah 53 and no less than ten times are we strongly told that Jesus died for us, instead of us.

Jesus was suffering not for any wrong He had done, but on behalf of the guilty. That is why there was no objection from Him. To say that Jesus died in the place

of sinners is not enough. The Bible will not leave it there and insists upon using key words like "propitiation" and "blood" to describe what Jesus was doing on the cross. Isaiah 53 goes further. The atoning death of Jesus is shown to be one of humiliation. It wasn't a quiet dignified death, but the sinless Jesus was identified with the wicked (v.9) and transgressors (v.12). He is killed with criminals as if He is no better than them.

More than that, He is crushed (v.5) by the law and justice of God. In verse 5, the Authorized Version and the Revised Authorized Version use the word "bruise;" but that's too weak a word to describe what was happening. A bruise is uncomfortable and leaves a mark, but crushing is agonizing and destroys. The Hebrew word *is daka* and used of people being trampled to death. This was the death of Jesus.

The reason for all this is summed up in verse 10-"the Lord makes his life a guilt offering:' This is the language of the Old Testament sacrificial system and simply means that if a sinful man, under the wrath of God, would approach Him, he must first sacrifice a spotless innocent victim in his place. This did two things: it showed the man acknowledged his sin, and that he came trusting in God's way to make atonement for that sin.

The wonder of the gospel is that God now makes himself an offering for our sin. He sacrifices not some animal, but his own Son; Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away our sin. Once we see that, Isaiah 53 becomes clear. We are all guilty and under God's wrath, but because He loves us, God lays our sin and guilt upon Jesus and pours out His judgement upon our substitute, our sin-bearer. Jesus is the guilt-offering for our sin. It's the punishment of our Saviour that brings us peace (v.5). The Bible says that there's no peace for the wicked, and this is so because of our sin. On the cross, Jesus deals with sin and this brings us peace.

The song begins in 52:13 on a note of praise and victory, and ends on the same note at the end of chapter 53. The cross is a great success story. Because of His death, Jesus now has an offspring. The offspring are the people whose sin He has borne. He sees this offspring (v.10) and He is satisfied that He has totally fulfilled all that God the Father wanted Him to do. He has justified many (v. 11) and made the guilty acceptable to God. This was His purpose in coming into the world, and that task is now finished. When Philip explained this to the Ethiopian in Acts 8, the man's life was transformed and he went on his way rejoicing. This is the experience of all believers: Our joy and peace rests only upon what Christ has done for us. It can be your experience when you turn to God in repentance and faith.