

Setting the Captives Free

As the time for the Jews' release from captivity draws near there is a rising tide of expectancy and excitement. The call goes out in Isaiah 51:17 to those who have experienced God's wrath to "awake!" During the exile, Judah had drunk God's wrath fully—all the way to the bottom of the cup. Now they are to "awake" because God is doing something new ... their calamity is coming to an end! Babylon the "queen" will fall to the dust in shame (47:1), while Jerusalem will rise up from the dust and be enthroned (52:1-6)! Note: In this section it appears that Isaiah is also envisioning the spiritual heavenly Jerusalem in which all believers will share (Hebrews 12:22).

1. a. Chapter 52 begins with an appeal to Jerusalem to prepare herself for the salvation that the LORD will provide. What is she instructed to do in verses 1-2?

- b. What do you think these actions symbolize?

Israel could not deliver herself, but she needed to rise up from her humiliated and bound condition and respond to the Lord's deliverance of her. Salvation is not by works of righteousness, but it does require faith. *Humans cannot break the chains that bind us, but we must remove them with God's help, for He has promised to break them.*

For your own heart: Ask God to help you act in faith to remove the chains that bind or hinder the abundant life that God intends.

The basis on which the deliverance from Babylon rests is set forth by an unusual argument in 52:3-6. Apparently, the issue is not redemption from sin, or a question of whether Jerusalem was guilty and deserving of punishment.

2. Study verses 3-6 carefully. What is the Lord's perspective in this section?

The thoughts that follow in verses 7-10 move to a high level of joy and exultation. God is about to escort His people home. He will lead a second Exodus from Babylon, like the escape from Egypt long before. **Read 52:7-10** thoughtfully.

3. a. The news reaches His people through a messenger whom the prophet pictures as running across mountains. What declaration effectively sums up his entire message?

- b. What would this message mean to those who had witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem? (See verse 9 especially.)

In verse 8, the command to “listen” is directed toward Jerusalem. The watchmen along the walls who were anxiously awaiting the messenger’s report, break out simultaneously in a shout of joy! Picture the scene in your mind as you review verses 8-10.

4. How is the Lord’s magnificent blessing for His people described (v. 10)?

5. How does 52:8-10 connect with Isaiah 35:9-10; 40:1; 49:13; 51:3,11,12? Also compare Psalm 47.

Note: The expression “lay bare his holy arm” (52:10) is a Hebrew idiom derived from rolling up long, loose sleeves before starting to work. The arm “bared” was a symbol of any mighty undertaking or initiative.

6. Finally, the words come for which Judah had waited many years (52:11-12). What does God exhort His people to do and why? (Consult 2 Corinthians 6:16-18.)

As we come to this point in Isaiah, we’ve continued to hear of the terrible nature and destructiveness of sin and idolatry, and the holy necessity of judgment and cleansing. Yet at the same time, God’s messages concerning Israel *and* “the nations” increasingly overflow with promises and hope! Also, pictures of deliverance and passages concerning the wonderful Servant continue to come at us with increasing frequency and detail. What is the connection between all of these distinct and significant strands? How will the mighty arm of the Lord act to ultimately solve the dilemma of a rebellious, enslaved people and fulfill all of His promises?

With this message of great deliverance for His exiled people, all of the themes of Isaiah are joining together. This passionate prophecy is coming to a head. Isaiah has now prepared the way for the “heart” of God’s revelation of the Servant Messiah. We must now prepare our hearts, for we are walking on holy ground.

Invitation to pray: As we continue at Your feet, Lord, open Your wonderful Word to us. O Savior, draw us to Yourself. May we see You in every line and adore You above all.

Because it is easy to lose the impact of a passage like this in close analysis, **read 52:13-53:12** meditatively before you begin the questions. Try reading it aloud, expressively and prayerfully, dwelling on phrases that touch you. And try to feel the mystery the Jews felt, even as you read in the light of the New Testament.

The final song begins like the first, with a call to “*Behold, my Servant*” (52:13 NASB).

52:13-15 The Astonishing Servant

7. As this song opens, what are we told to observe or notice?

Different translations use various words to describe the Servant here: acting wisely or prudently, prospering or succeeding. Each choice helps express the Hebrew word “shakal” (*shaw-kall*).

8. In verse 14, we’re shown the Servant’s wise path to success! Noting especially the use of *appalled* or *astonished*, what are your personal observations and reactions?

Read about the rite of sprinkling in Leviticus 16:15-16. Then read on in Isaiah 52, noting that the phrase *Just as* in v.14 leads to the *So* or *Thus* in v. 15.

9. a. What is the outcome (success) which follows the Servant’s wise actions? (For help on v. 15b, notice 49:6-7.)

b. What do you personally “see” or “understand” from looking at this first stanza of our Servant Song?

53:1-9 The Suffering Servant

In this section, different speakers are heard in verses 1-9. These voices express the feelings of Israelites when they come to understand the meaning of the Servant’s sufferings. The prophet cries out as the voice of the nation. *These remarkable words are felt by anyone who comes to Christ and remembers how lightly they once regarded Him.*

10. **Re-read verses 1-3.** Compare John 12:37-40. How is the Servant’s reception among men described in verse 3? Also, refer to Matthew 2:13-14; Mark 3:4-6, 11:17-18.

11. a. In 52:10, we are told that the Lord is going to “lay bare his holy arm” to save His people. When He does so, what sort of person is revealed (53:2)? Compare Matthew 13:53-57 and John 1:45-46.

Note: A tender shoot is an unwanted sucker that sprouts up from the root. Parched ground is a place where you don’t expect a root.

b. In light of what we’ve seen thus far, why do you think the Servant was rejected and humiliated by His people (John 1:10-11)?

12. What does the description of the Servant as despised, tormented, and sorrowful add to our understanding of service?

In ancient times, it was commonplace to reject and despise those in deep suffering, as they thought this was a sure sign of God's displeasure. *For centuries the Jewish leaders struggled with the idea that the glorious Messiah would suffer. They got the impression from Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1-16, and 42:1-9, that the Messiah would come as a triumphant liberator—a warrior like King David. But already in 49:4, 7, and 50:4-9, suffering began to cast its shadow in the life of the Servant.*

As the Servant's obedience led Him into deeper and deeper suffering, His contemporaries were convinced that He had been "stricken by God" for His own wrongdoings. It becomes clear in the next stanza that the Servant's sufferings were not what the onlookers thought. The speakers in 53:4-6 now testify to a completely new understanding of the Servant's death.

13. **Carefully observe verses 4-6.** Ten times, in three verses, the first person plural pronoun occurs as Isaiah describes Jesus' suffering *for us*. **Mark these occurrences in the text.**

The sufferings that are now described are of a different nature than His previous griefs. Here we are introduced to what it meant for the Holy One of God to take away our sin.

14. List the phrases in verses 4-6 that describe His suffering *for us*.

Looking *back* from the Cross, we can see how appropriate these prophetic words of Isaiah were in view of the death Jesus died. The Hebrew words for "pierced" and "crushed" (NIV) are the strongest words in that language for violent and excruciating death. **But these were also meant to be symbols of a greater piercing that took place on Calvary that day.**

15. a. For a personal look at the Savior in His final hours read Matthew 27:11-44.
- b. Then read Matthew 27:45-51, Psalm 22:1, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Romans 5:9: then re-read Isaiah 53:4-6. Meditate on the immensity of what these verses reveal. What do you see happening to the Savior that day, for you and for all humanity?

We cannot understand the depth of our human depravity until we see the awful agony through which our Lord passed. All this spells out for us what we really are like (v. 6).

16. **Re-read Isaiah 53:7.** What can we learn from the Lord's silence before His accusers? Also look at 1 Peter 2:19-23.
17. What final insult must the Servant bear (53:9a)? Read Matthew 27:57-61 to learn the outcome.

What the Lord did in bearing the consequences of mankind's sins would bring wondrous results for many. **Read** Galatians 3:13-14; Hebrews 9:13-14; John 1:12-13, 4:14, 6:40, 14:27; Ephesians 1:13; Romans 8:1-2; Romans 8:15; Matthew 11:28-30 and 1 Peter 1:3-5 for a few examples.

18. Explain in your own words what the Lord's death achieved for both Jew and Gentile.

53:10-12 The Servant Glorified

In the final stanza of the Song, Isaiah returns to the theme of exaltation, which began in 52:13. The biblical principles of "life out of death" and "glory through suffering" are beautifully illustrated in the Servant's experience.

19. **Review 52:13-15 and 53:10-12.** How would you explain the paradox between the Servant's death (53:9) and His seeing the "light of life" (53:11 NIV)? (Compare Revelation 1:17-18; John 12:24-25; and Isaiah 53:10b.)
20. After His sacrificial work had ended, the Servant would look back on it with perfect satisfaction. What further great insights are revealed for us, in Hebrews 12:1-4?
21. The Father has the final word in v. 12. He begins by drawing on a familiar scene in Isaiah's day, that of a king giving the spoils of war *to the one who personally achieved the victory on the battle field*. Why is this so appropriate? (Note His words of v. 12b.)

In closing, scan Philippians 2:5-11, and think back over what you have seen in this study of Isaiah 52 and 53.

22. The precious gift of eternal salvation has been made freely available to you, at infinite cost to the Father and the Son. *What are some ways you can personally respond, to bring joy, delight and honor to the beloved Servant Son and to our great Father?*