

AN EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
ON THE WORK OF CHRIST
IN ISAIAH 52:13 – 53:12

Across the street from Albion College (Albion, MI) stands a historical marker giving tribute to George Bennard's renowned hymn, "The Old Rugged Cross." Written in that small industrial town nearly a century ago, this inauspicious metallic-gray sign now stands to honor a song, ironically, that glories in another roadside marker. In first-century Palestine, Roman crosses were often found roadside. However, these crosses are not like those seen today on the side of highways—passed in a blur, forgotten in a moment. Rather, Roman crosses were characterized by screams of agony, stains of blood, and the fragrance of death.¹ These unavoidable and unforgettable implements of death were not commemorating former glories; they were enforcing the ever-present rule of the Roman empire, and they graphically displayed what would happen to national rebels and rogue criminals.

In a twist of fate, Bennard is honored for a song that tells the story of a man who was shamefully nailed to a cross and displayed as a condemned criminal. How history turns! Lungs that were filled with blood have resulted in lungs filled with song. While mocking Jews passed by hurdling insults at this man, wondering if God's Messiah would ever come (Matt. 27:38-44), the crucified Son of God was bringing many sons to glory (Heb. 2:10).

This man is none other than Jesus of Nazareth, and since his death, millions have contemplated its meaning. And it would be difficult not to, his shortened life changed history.

¹ John Stott outlines the horrors and the shame of crucifixion in *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 22-25.

But how? How has the crucifixion of one man had such an enduring, world-altering effect? In other words, “What did the death of Jesus Christ accomplish?” Answering that question is the intent of this paper, and Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is the source of that inquiry. In a day when scholastic voices compete to explain the crucifixion of an innocent man, it is imperative to consider Isaiah 53 as an interpretive key to understanding the doctrine of the atonement, penal substitution, and the only way to eternal life.

Isaiah 52:13-53:12²

Isaiah 53 is situated in the middle of the second section of Isaiah’s oracle. In chapters 1-39 the prophet’s message is one of judgment and affliction, but in Isaiah 40-66 the prophet begins to emphasize eschatological blessings that follow the prophesied Babylonian exile. Isaiah 40:1 begins, “Comfort, comfort my people,” and following this new song, Isaiah unfolds a futuristic vision of redemption and glory. Yet, leading to this hope is the vivid description of one man’s intensive suffering.

In the midst of these chapters are four servant songs (42:1-4; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). They speak of a faithful servant who will be the eschatological leader of a lasting spiritual renewal for the people of God. The servant is beloved by God but hated by the world, and so these songs are marked by suffering. Motyer notes, “The suffering which began to cast its shadow over the second Song (49:4; cf. 49:7) and which formed the heart of the third Song (50:6), is now explained as the wounding and bruising of one who bore the sins of others.”³

Despite the minor key, the ultimate message of the song is resoundingly hope-giving.

² For the duration of this paper, Isaiah 53 will be the appointed abbreviation for the whole pericope of Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

³ Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 422.

For the work accomplished by the servant renews the covenant (54:10) and ushers in a new creation (55:1-3). In fact, without this servant, all that is promised in Isaiah 55-66 would be impossible. He is truly the high and exalted one because he is the one who died and rose again to be the king of glory. With the light of the New Testament, it is evident that this suffering servant is Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Acts 8:26ff), but that future revelation does not overshadow the explanatory truths revealed in this passage, which elucidate the inner workings of the cross.⁴

Isaiah 52:13-15

Verse 13 begins with a command to “behold” the servant’s wisdom and splendor (52:13).⁵ Isaiah says that the servant possessed by God “shall act wisely.” Alec Motyer comments that this “wisdom” conveys the notion of both wisdom and success.⁶ Like a skilled surgeon’s wisdom is seen in the recovery of his patients, so the wisdom of the servant is seen in the success of his redemption. Where other servants of the LORD have failed, he will succeed.⁷

This notion of wisdom is immediately followed by an appellation reserved for YHWH. Isaiah describes the servant as “high and lifted up” (cf. 6:1; 33:10; 57:15).⁸ Yet, here Isaiah ascribes this exalted term to the servant connoting a Messianic expectation for this

⁴ In fact, opponents of penal substitution, Joel Green and Mark Baker, go wrong at this point. They fail to see the New Testament’s dependence on Isaiah 53, and thus they deny substitution in passages that implicitly rely on this antecedent theology. When Green and Baker reference Mark 10:45 and Matthew 20:28, for instance, they make no substantial connections. (*Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*: ____ [], ; *contra* James Brooks, D.A. Carson).

⁵ This command to “behold” (52:13) is the last of a string of commands beginning in Isaiah 51— “Listen” (v. 1, 7); “Look” (vv. 1, 2); “Give attention” (v. 4); “Lift up your eyes” (v. 6); “Awake, awake” (v. 9; 52:1); “Wake yourself, wake yourself” (v. 17). This literary device serves to emphasize the servant’s climactic appearance.

⁶ Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 424.

⁷ For a full treatment on antecedent “servants of the Lord,” see Stephen Dempster, “The Servant of the LORD” in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 131-33.

⁸ John also uses this language of “lifting up” in his gospel. The evangelist conflates the ideas of suffering and glory in the term (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34).

redeemer.⁹ In contrast with Cyrus (Is. 45-48), the Messianic servant could accomplish what the earthly king could not—spiritual redemption and permanent obedience of God’s people.

At first glance, verse 14 seems to veer off course from verse 13. Whereas the servant is exalted in the opening verse, he is subsequently described as marred and disfigured in the next verse. This juxtaposition is jarring, and it raises the question, “How can such conflicting descriptions coexist, let alone parallel one another?” Some commentators assume that to understand this passage correctly, a disjunctive parenthetical reference is needed.¹⁰ It is for this reason that translations like the ESV and the NIV bracket verse 14 to make sense of the syntax. Yet, not all commentators accept this reading. Peter Gentry in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* supplies a different translation of this verse based on context, grammar, and Hebrew word usage.¹¹ He translates verse 14, “As many were astonished at you—so his appearance anointed beyond all humanity, and his form beyond all that of the children of mankind.”¹²

If verse 14 is understood in the manner Gentry describes, verse 15 rounds out the stanza with further attestation to the glory of the servant. First, it says that he “shall sprinkle many nations.” Based on the usage of this word in the Old Testament, it seems most likely that

⁹ In his commentary on Isaiah, John Oswalt identifies the servant as “the Messiah or no one” (*The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998], 378-79).

¹⁰ See Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 423-25; Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 373-380.

¹¹ Peter J. Gentry, “The Atonement in Isaiah’s Fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)” in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2007),” 26-31.

¹² Gentry looks to the little-known work of French scholar, Dominique Barthelemy’s, for support (“The Atonement in Isaiah’s Fourth Servant Song,” 44-45). Gentry also finds collaboration from John Goldingay, who writes, “[t]he observation that following his desolation, the servant is superhumanly anointed fits with the description of his superhuman exaltation in v. 13. The reference to anointing (*mishat*) parallels the account of David’s anointing as a person good in appearance and a man of [good] looks (1 Sam. 16:12-13, 18). It also again parallels Ps. 89:19-20, 50-51, where Yhwh’s ‘servant’ David is ‘anointed’ as well as ‘exalted’ and his successor as Yhwh’s ‘servant’ and ‘anointed’ s taunted by ‘many’ peoples. Further, the anointing of this servant as if he were king parallels the designation of Cyrus as Yhwh’s anointed in 45:1... (Goldingay, *Isaiah 40-55*, 491 quoted in Gentry, *SBTJ* 11, no. 2, 45).

the servant is functioning as a priest, making atonement through the sprinkling of blood.¹³

Isaiah moves from the work of the servant to the response of the nations. In this response, two questions arise: 1) What emotion is expressed by the slack-jawed kings? Is it astonishment or horror? 2) What is it that they are seeing and understanding? Concerning the first question, Job 29:7-11 is instructive. As Job describes the days of his former glory, he says “princes refrained from talking and laid their hand on their mouth.” It is clear that the silence is due to profound deference and awe. Such is the case in the presence of the exalted servant.

Second, the response of the Gentiles is one of fear and respect for great the “sprinkler of the nations.” Isaiah 49:6 says of the servant, “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” The inclusion of the Gentiles is a part of God’s plan of redemption, and the servant’s suffering is not only for Israel, but for all the world.¹⁴ In fact, Paul quotes this passage to support his missionary efforts to the Gentiles (Rom. 15:21).

Taken together the first three verses of Isaiah’s fourth servant song depict a dignified servant. The poetic nature of the song piles up accolades. The servant is wise and successful, high and lifted up, anointed beyond all mankind, assuming the form of a king, serving as a sacrificial high priest to the nations, and one to whom all the nations are turning and revering. This glorious beginning only magnifies the holocaust that follows.

Isaiah 53:1-3

As verse 1 begins a new stanza, an ominous tone foreshadows things to come. In

¹³ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: 40-66*, 379. See also Derek Tidball, *The Message of the Cross in the Bible Speaks Today* series, ed. Derek Tidball (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 104. By the end of the servant song, it will be evident that this blood is his own. While this understanding is initially difficult to stomach, the Scriptures are clear. Jesus Christ’s blood washes away sin (Heb. 9-10).

¹⁴ The New Testament explains what the Old Testament forecast. See Acts 10-11; 15; Romans 9-11; 15:8-13; and Ephesians 2:11-22.

response to the message of the servant in 52:13-15, the unbelieving nation of Israel represented through the voice of the prophet asks,¹⁵ “Who has believed what they heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?” Following the course of their obstinate patriarchs, God’s people stubbornly refuse to believe in the servant sent to save them. As this passage unfolds, unbelief escalates into violent resistance against the Lord’s anointed.

Two truths emerge in this rebellion. First, the servant as the “arm of the LORD” is the way of salvation for God’s people.¹⁶ In Isaiah 51:5, “the arm of the LORD” is said to “judge the peoples;” in 51:9-11, the great acts of YHWH’s mighty arm are remembered; and in 52:10, “the arm of the LORD” is seen by “all the ends of the earth” as the salvation of God.

Second, unbelief is brought about by two different but complementary agents. Actively, no one in Israel believed in the servant (53:1a); passively, no one has received a revelation of the servant’s true identity (53:1b). It follows that the unbelief of Israel is a result of God hiding his servant. When John reflects on this passage (12:36ff), he explains it as a fulfillment of Isaiah 6:9-10, “[God] has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart.” John explains Israel’s unbelief in concordance with God’s sovereign purpose, a theme found in Isaiah 53 and all the Scriptures.

Verse 2 describes the origins of this servant. The language here is intentionally ambivalent. For while Isaiah uses branch-language, language that is explicitly royal (see Isaiah 5:1-7; 6:13; 11:1, 10; Dan. 4:10-12), he removes any notion of visible nobility by describing this root as finding its origins in the “dry ground.” As one commentator puts it, “it is amazing that

¹⁵ While debate has surrounded the identity of the scoffers in verse 1, John Oswalt supplies a convincing argument for the vocal unbelievers as the nation of Israel (Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: 40-66*, 381). This corresponds with the quotation of this verse in John 12:38 and Romans 10:16.

¹⁶ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: 40-66*, 376.

this branch grew at all.”¹⁷ More explicit is Isaiah’s assertion that there was nothing winsome about this man. This servant is a king, but his royalty is subsurface, hidden by disfigurement. Later, Paul speaks of Jesus as the fulfillment of this humbled servant who became obedient to death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:6-8).

In verse 3, the people’s response to this unsightly king is described. He was “despised and rejected.” The earthly life of this man was misunderstood, and in turn the people of God forsook this “man of sorrows.” Nowhere is this more evident than in the life of Jesus. In addition to the direct quotations and applications of this passage to Christ (Acts 8:26ff), the whole tenor of Jesus life is one of rejection and abandonment. Jesus is despised and forsaken by his family, his friends, and his followers as he moved towards his earthly demise.

Isaiah 53:4-6

Isaiah 53 expresses both the life and the death of the suffering servant. Whereas verses 1-3 primarily relate to the servant’s life of suffering, verses 4-9 explain the effects of his substitutionary death. The third stanza (vv. 4-6) gives the definitive answer to what transpired on the cross—penal substitution; while the fourth stanza (vv. 7-9) approximates Jesus death to three Old Testament conventions—sacrifice, exile, and capital punishment.

This personal transaction in verses 4-6 is made evident through the insistent exchange of pronouns in verses 4-6. Notice the italicizes.

Surely *he* has borne *our* griefs and carried *our* sorrows; yet *we* esteemed *him* stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But *he* was wounded for *our* transgressions; *he* was crushed for *our* iniquities; upon *him* was the chastisement that brought *us* peace, and with *his* stripes *we* are healed. All *we* like sheep have gone astray; *we* have turned every one to *his* own way; and the LORD has laid on *him* the iniquity of *us* all.

Such a radical emphasis on the “us – him” relationship is informative. There is

¹⁷ Tidball, *The Message of the Cross*, 105.

evidently a significant interchange between the subject and object of this passage. The question is, “What is the transaction?” Looking at man’s condition in this passage, it quickly becomes apparent that misery originating from sin is the mark of humanity. Yet, it is not the guilty who suffer. Instead, the Spirit-filled, obedient, guiltless servant is afflicted.¹⁸ Therefore, the transaction is one of legal substitution. The guilt of humanity is charged against the innocent servant as he is wounded, crushed, chastised, and striped.¹⁹

There is at the same time, a ray of light in the darkness of Isaiah 53:4-6, and that is the chastisement endured by the servant offers peace. Apart from the servant’s acquisition of peace with God, there was only war. The last reference to ‘peace’ was in Isaiah 48:22 when Isaiah concluded “‘There is no peace,’ says the LORD, ‘for the wicked’” (48:22), and as Isaiah 53:4-6 indicates humanity’s condition is nothing but wickedness (cf. 64:4). The peace which had alluded Israel had now been purchased with innocent blood. Clearly this “Great Exchange” is the heart of the gospel,²⁰ and the answer to the question, “What did the death of Christ accomplish?” Simply put, the death of Christ accomplished peace with God (cf. Rom. 5:1).²¹

¹⁸ For a description of the servant’s pure and holy life see the other servant songs (Isa. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9).

¹⁹ The testimony of the New Testament confirms this verdict. For instance, in Luke’s gospel, the good doctor records the testimony of Pilate (23:4, 14), Herod (23:15), Pilate again (23:22), two criminals (23:41), and the nearby centurion (23:47) all confirming that “Certainly this man was innocent!”

²⁰ A recent book on penal substitution uses this same “exchange” language. See, Jerry Bridges and Bob Bevington, *The Great Exchange: My Sin for His Righteousness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007).

²¹ Unanimously, the New Testament writers understood the servant’s work this way, as a substitutionary sacrifice effecting peace and forgiveness for sinners trusting in Jesus Christ. Peter writes in his first epistle, “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth...He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (2:22-23). Paul agrees, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Moreover, John understands Jesus to be the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29) and the one whose death served to propitiate God’s wrath against humanity’s sin (1 John 2:2; 4:10).

Excursus: God is Both Just and the Justifier

This understanding of Isaiah 53 is not without difficulty or debate, for it raises a question. How can one man pay the penalty for another? Or from a close reading of the Bible, how can God “justify the ungodly” (Rom. 4:5) when it says, “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD” (Prov. 17:5)?

Today, the doctrine of the atonement is under fierce attack, and what is at stake is nothing less than the gospel. For if this doctrine is lost, so is the good news of forgiveness and eternal life.²² This is why understanding Isaiah 53, exegetically and theologically, is so important. It details the great effects of the cross, and makes sense of God’s plan of redemptive history.²³ Even if the doctrines of grace and justice seem at first to be at odds with one another, as Scripture speaks, the purpose of the cross becomes more apparent. The message of Isaiah 53 is that Christ’s cross is the place “where wrath and mercy meet” and salvation is procured.²⁴

John Piper’s treatment of the theological quandary raised in Isaiah 53 is immensely helpful and many of his arguments are included here.²⁵ As he wrestles with the divine purpose in the death of Christ, he begins to resolve matters in the Godhead by asking the question, “Who

²² See Roger Nicole’s short but powerful post script in *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 445-52. In that brief summary, Nicole warns that rejection of penal substitution inevitably makes the cross of Christ impotent. In his words, penal substitution is “the linchpin without which everything else loses its foundation and flies off the handle so to speak” (*The Glory of the Atonement*, 451).

²³ For instance, the disciples on the road to Emmaus could not make sense of the Scriptures or the events of Jesus’ passion until Jesus explained to them all that the Scriptures said about him—his suffering and exaltation (Luke 24).

²⁴ This phrase is taken from a song by Graham Kendrick, entitled ‘Come and See,’ as cited in a recent book by the same name which makes an able defense of penal substitution. (David Peterson (ed.), *Where Wrath & Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2001), xiv.

²⁵ For a full treatment of this subject see John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 157-178.

killed Jesus?”²⁶ Citing Isaiah 53:10, he answers that God did. “The LORD was pleased to bruise him.” Behind the senseless violence of wicked men stood the Father. It was according to his “definite plan and foreknowledge” that Jesus died as the suffering servant (Acts 2:23; cf. 4:27-28). This was done to put sin to death and to end its marring effect on the glory of God.²⁷

Isaiah 42:8 and 48:11 attest to YHWH’s commitment to his own glory. So too Isaiah 43:6-7 teaches that mankind was created for the glory of God. Yet, the world under Satan’s thralldom is imprisoned to sin and wars against God’s glory. The devil deceived Adam and Eve to sin in the beginning, and ever since mankind has been God’s enemy (Rom. 5:8; Eph. 2:1-3). “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Sin is directly connected to God’s glory, and since God is committed to his glory *and* to the beings created in his image, he sent his Son to undo the works of the devil and to redeem a people for his glory (1 Jn. 3:8; Tit. 2:14). Yet, the only way to do that is through the death of sin in the death of his son.²⁸

Piper moves from God’s glory to humanity’s sin, contending that Jesus died to make a “propitiation” for sins, whereby “God averted his own wrath through the death of his Son.”²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., 160.

²⁷ Many contemporary formulations of a “non-violent atonement” fail to recognize the gravity of sin. Thomas Schreiner articulates this glaring deficit as he surveys other views of the atonement in his chapter, “Penal Substitution View” in *The Nature of the Atonement* edited by James Beilby and Paul Eddy [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006], 67-98.

²⁸ Thomas Schreiner’s defense of penal substitution argues along these same lines (“Penal Substitution View,” 67-98). Sin necessitates a penalty to be paid, and only through the payment of that penalty can any sinful man or woman truly be legally freed from the debt they owe God. This is what is absent in all other models of the atonement. None of them sufficiently handle the problem of sin. They either minimize it or shift attention to something else. However, Scripture teaches that this humanity’s biggest problem and therefore the central issue of the cross.

²⁹ Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 163. Piper explains the necessary use of “propitiation” as the proper interpretation of *hilasterion*. He writes on the same page, “This old word is important because other words like “expiation” and “sacrifice of atonement” do not press forward the idea of appeasing wrath which is in the word. The point of the word is that God’s wrath is against the ungodly because of the way they have desecrated his glory, and a way must be found for this wrath to be averted. This is what happened in the death of Jesus. That is what

Often debated as a term originating in Greek mythology, Leon Morris contends that in the Bible this notion of heathen propitiation is abandoned.³⁰ Still questions of God's love and his demand for a propitiation to satisfy his wrath abound. John Murray's treatment addresses these issues:

1) to love and to be propitious are not controvertible terms [i.e. mutually exclusive]. It is false to suppose that the doctrine...regards propitiation as that which causes or constrains the divine love... 2) propitiation is not a turning of the wrath of God into love. The propitiation of the divine wrath, effected in the expiatory work of Christ, is the provision of God's eternal and unchangeable love...3) propitiation does not detract from the love and mercy of God; it rather enhances the marvel of his love. For it shows the cost that redemptive love entails...*God appeases his own holy wrath in the cross of Christ in order that the purpose of his love to lost men may be accomplished in accordance...his glory.*³¹

Through the propitiation of God's wrath, the mercy of God makes payment to the wrath of God,³² making a transaction that will once and for all clear Him of injustice and at the same time bring an end to sin, Satan, and death.³³ On the cross, God's wisdom is revealed (1 Cor. 1:18ff; Eph 3:10) and the tension of God's seething wrath and unfailing mercy are resolved. As Paul says about Jesus in Romans 3:25-26,

whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sin. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.³⁴

propitiation means: *God averted his own wrath through the death of his Son* (emphasis mine)."

³⁰ Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 210-11.

³¹ John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), 31-32.

³² John Stott captures the essence of this, "The only way for God's holy love to be satisfied is for his holiness to be directed in judgment upon his appointed substitute, in order that his love may be directed towards us in forgiveness...Divine love triumphed over divine wrath by divine self-sacrifice. The cross was an act simultaneously of punishment and amnesty, severity and grace, justice and mercy" (*The Cross of Christ*, 158-59).

³³ Though it is out of the purview of this paper, this accomplishment must be understood in an already / not yet fashion. While Christ's work has been completely fulfilled on the cross (John 19:30), the effects of that propitiatory victory are still being worked out. Much like Nazi-occupied France between D-Day and V-Day, we live in between the time when Jesus won the decisive victory on the cross and when he will return and reign on the earth.

³⁴ For an excellent treatment of this passage which argues for the historic understanding of penal substitution see D.A. Carson, "Atonement in Romans 3:21-26: 'God presented him as a propitiation,'" in *The Glory of the Atonement*, 119-139.

Some may ask, “Couldn’t God forgive humanity without such a payment?” However, such a cheap forgiveness would militate against his veracity and justice. By forgiving without payment, God’s initial warning in Genesis 2:17 and mankind’s rightful curse would only be vain words from an inconstant God. This would invariably denigrate the value of God’s glory. For if sin impugns His name, and God merely excuses this kind of defiant behavior as accidental or minimal, the great judge would display reprehensible justice as he dismisses sin without concomitant justice.³⁵ Instead, by the death of his son, God the Father upholds his justice while extending forgiveness to all those for whom Christ died.³⁶

Conversely, some question the love of God because of His commitment to his own glory and the execution of his righteous judgment. Sadly, there are some, who with limited human understanding, categorize God as a child abuser. Yet, it must be remembered that Jesus gladly obeyed the Father and voluntarily laid down his life as a ransom (Mark 10:45; cf. John 10:11, 18). There is no evidence for a cosmic quarrel in the Godhead. To deny God’s love because of penal substitution is to fly in the face of biblical evidence. In the Bible, God’s love is not denied, but demonstrated, on the cross (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 8:31-39; Gal. 2:20-21; 1 Jn. 4:10). “[P]ropitiation is the fruit of the divine love that provided it...[it] is the ground upon which the divine love operates the channel through which it flows in achieving its end.”³⁷

Piper’s words illumine the significance and necessity of Christ’s death. Reflecting on

³⁵ It should be mentioned at this point, that God is not subservient to an external law forcing him to be just. No, his own eternal and internal character is the enforcing agent. God must be just, because his nature is holy. His holiness requires divine retribution against any sin that wars against him. For more on the relationship between God and His law see Garry Williams, “The Cross and the Punishment of Sin” in *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2001), 81-98.

³⁶ Stott expounds this proposition in his chapter, “The Self-Substitution of God,” in John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 133-63.

³⁷ John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied*, 32.

the perfect obedience of the Son of God, he articulates, “The foundation of our justification—our acquittal, our forgiveness—is not a flimsy sentimentality in God, nor is it a shallow claim of human worth. It is the massive rock of God’s unswerving commitment to uphold the worth of his own glory.”³⁸ Propelled by this promise of glory, God sends the Son, the Son gladly obeys the Father, and salvation is accomplished on the cross. “Although there are various ways of explaining the achievement of Christ’s cross, the idea that he suffered the divine penalty for sin in our place appears to be foundational to various strands of New Testament teaching.”³⁹ Therefore, while many metaphors and concepts of the atonement are found in the Bible, penal substitution is the only one that upholds God’s mercy and justice [making] sense of all the rest.⁴⁰

Isaiah 53:7-9

Seamlessly, Isaiah moves from effects of the cross in verses 4-6 to the experiences of the cross in verses 7-9. Using the Old Testament imagery of sacrifice, exile, and the death penalty, Isaiah expounds on the suffering expressed in the third stanza. Here Isaiah meditates on the passive obedience and death of the servant and systematically moves from the servant’s procession in verse 7, to his execution in verse 8, to his burial in verse 9.⁴¹

³⁸ Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, 166.

³⁹ David Peterson (ed.), *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, xv.

⁴⁰ Often proponents of this view are caricatured as those who reduce the cross to accomplishing just one thing—penal substitution (PS). However, this is not the case. Scripture is too vivid and expansive to reduce the effects of the cross to only one. Nevertheless, PS is the anchor which fastens all other aspects. Tom Schreiner in his article defending PS expresses this nuanced position. “I am not claiming that [PS] is the *only* truth about the atonement taught in the Scriptures. Nor am I claiming that PS is emphasized in every piece of literature of that every author articulates clearly PS. I am claiming that penal substitution functions as the anchor and foundation for all other dimensions of the atonement when the Scriptures are considered in their canonical whole” (“Penal Substitution View,” 67).

⁴¹ Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 432. It is not a coincidence that this pattern—procession to Calvary, execution, and burial—is employed by the New Testament evangelists.

In verse 7, Isaiah relates the servant's suffering and death to that of a sacrificial lamb. Unlike any animal sacrifice though, this sacrifice had a will. Motyer observes, "only a consenting will can substitute for a rebellious will."⁴² Only as a man could Jesus identify with humanity; only under the law, could Jesus obey God and turn back humanity's ubiquitous rebellion. More than the blood of bulls or goats than, Jesus' offering "exactly fitted our need."⁴³

In verse 8, the imagery shifts from sacrifice to exile. Here the death⁴⁴ of the servant is described as being "cut off out of the land of the living." This notion of land conjures up images of exile and the judgment of God who "takes away" those who are disobedient to his covenant (cf. Lev. 26:14ff; Deut. 28:15ff). In this case, it is clearly the servant who incurred the curse of God "for the transgression of my people." Peterson summarizes, "As Israel's substitute, the Servant is punished in a manner that exceeds the just punishment of the Babylonian exile."⁴⁵ The Servant is not just expelled from the land, he is cut off from the "land of the *living*."

In verse 9, the burial of the servant is described. As with verses 7 and 8, this verse continues the theme of an innocent man receiving undo punishment. Drawing on the idea of capital punishment, the servant is executed like a guilty criminal.⁴⁶ The people who rejected and

⁴² Ibid., 433.

⁴³ Tidball, *The Message of the Cross*, 110. Tidball also observes that the silence of Jesus stresses his innocence. George Adam Smith says of this, "In the Old Testament the sufferer is always either confessing his guilt to God, or, when he feels no guilt, challenging God in argument" (Quoted by Derek Tidball, *The Message of the Cross*, 109). Yet, in the case of Jesus he opens not his mouth to confess guilt or to revile his sufferings. Instead, as an atoning lamb, he faithfully and lovingly lays down his life as the perfect sacrifice.

⁴⁴ There is some scholarly debate about whether or not the servant actually died. In opposition to R.N. Whybray, John Oswalt and Alec Motyer argue for the natural reading of the servant's death (Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: 40-66*, 392-96; Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 433-35).

⁴⁵ "Atonement in the Old Testament," in *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet*, 21

⁴⁶ Capital punishment is commanded for many types of criminals in the Old Testament—murderers (Num. 36:15), blasphemers (Lev. 24), Sabbath breakers (Num. 15), false prophets (Deut. 13:1-10), idolaters (16:21-17:7), and rebellious children (21:18-21).

despised the servant assuaged their consciences by reckoning him accursed and worthy of death (Deut. 21:22-23), even though “he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.”

Concerning this juxtaposition, John Oswalt furthers the argument made in the preceding excursus and concludes the commentary on this stanza.

This Servant not only did not deserve the punishment of his people—he did not deserve any punishment. Here we move even deeper into the mystery. Where has such a person ever lived on the face of the earth? ... But as mystifying as such righteousness is, it at least moves us toward clearing up another mystery. How can someone suffer for others, or suffer in a way that produces healing and reconciliation in their relationship with God (v. 5; 6:10; 19:22; 30:26; 57:18-19; and note that it is God who heals in every case). Only someone who did not deserve the same punishment he or she did, someone who could say in absolute sincerity that he or she had never rebelled against God, could effect such reconciliation. This servant is just such a person (see John 8:29; 2 Cor. 5:21).⁴⁷

Isaiah 53:10-12

The last stanza returns to the theme of the servant’s exaltation, only the glory and honor of the servant is now greater. Just a soldier is received more honor after victory, so the servant is glorified in the final three verses of this song—as a bloody champion returning from war. For in risking everything, the servant successfully (52:13; 53:10) accomplished God’s plan of redemption and purchased a people for his praise and honor.

Consider the “massive reversal” between verses 4-9 and verses 10-12, “in each verse the Servant’s resurrection and triumph are clearly implied.”⁴⁸

He who had no descendents (8) will see his offspring (10). He who was cut off in the midst of life (8) will now prolong his days (10). He who was stricken (8) will now prosper (10). He who was dead (9) will come alive (9). He who was unjustly condemned (9) will be satisfied (11). He who was despised and rejected (3) will become the center of a great throng (11-12), and he who was a helpless victim (7) will become a triumphant victor (12).⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Oswalt, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 396-97.

⁴⁸ Derek Kidner, “Isaiah” in *The New Bible Commentary: Twenty-first Century Edition*, edited by G.J. Wenham, J.A. Motyer, D.A. Carson, R.T. France (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 663.

Moving from a thematic reading to a more exegetical one, Alec Motyer outlines this stanza, “In the first four lines (10) the Servant is doing the Lord’s will, in the final four lines (12c-f) he is meeting our needs, and in the middle five lines he is revealed in his own intrinsic worth.”⁵⁰ As this final section is considered it highlights two foundational Christian doctrines—the wisdom of God in penal substitution, and the exclusive offer of the salvation only in Christ.

First, it has been the wise plan of God since before the foundation of the world to bring about redemption through the death of his son (cf. 1 Pet. 1:20). As it has been argued throughout this paper, penal substitution through a propitiatory sacrifice is at the heart of the gospel, and this idea is only reiterated in Isaiah 53:10. Commenting on the guilt offering depicted here, Tom Schreiner says, “We have a clear indication that the guilt offering described in Leviticus finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. All the elements of a substitutionary atonement are here.”⁵¹ ‘All the elements’ include the voluntary action of the Son and the punitive action of the Father. Both are active participants. God is pleased to crush his Son as a guilt offering (53:10), and for joy (Heb. 12:2), Jesus though anguishing, moves towards the cross (Luke 9:51).

In this complementary act between the Father and the Son, all the needs of those for whom Christ died are met. Jesus as the servant provides forgiveness and representation for all those whom he serves. Negatively, “he [bears] the sins of many” (53:12), and positively, “he [makes] many to be accounted righteous” (53:11). Graciously, he shares with those who trust in him an inheritance won on the cross (cf. Eph. 1:3; Col. 2:15). As the obedient son, he has received all the blessings of God and he shares them with those under his covenantal headship

⁴⁹ Tidball, *The Message of the Cross*, 113.

⁵⁰ Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 437.

⁵¹ Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” 86.

(Gal. 3:13-14, 29). Additionally, “he makes intercession for transgressors” as a perfect and sympathetic high priest (cf. Heb. 4:14-16).

Second, the uniqueness of the Servant is stressed in the fact that he alone knows how to make many righteous and that he alone has received a reward for the life that he has lived. Therefore, he is the exclusive means by which one may be forgiven and made right with God. Unlike every other son of Adam whose righteous deeds are nothing but filthy rags (Isa. 64:6), the atoning work of the servant changes the standing of everyone who looks to his works and not their own. Thus he provides redemption and rest for all those who are dying in their own sin.

Conclusion

The debate concerning penal substitution does not look like it is going to die any time soon. For this reason, honest biblical exegesis of passages like Isaiah 53 is essential to accurately ascertain the meaning of the cross. Yet, the problem of understanding Christ’s death is not just hermeneutical. It is moral. Sin destroys mankind’s capacity for goodness and justice; it perverts beauty and truth; and it corrupts mankind’s ability to think about spiritual realities such as the gospel of Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14-16).⁵² Biblical “interpretation[s] would not be a problem for us, were it not for our sin.”⁵³ Therefore, the way we approach and ultimately decide on how to understand the work of Christ is not “ethically neutral”⁵⁴—we are culpable for our interpretation(s).

Until sin is finally removed by the work of the cross, the atonement will continue to be

⁵² In their excellent hermeneutics textbook, Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton positively affirm the absolute necessity for the Holy Spirit’s role in illuminating our minds to understand and convicting our hearts to believe any Spiritual truth (*Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible*, 2nd Ed. [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2002], 72-77).

⁵³ McCartney and Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand*, 28.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

misunderstood—accidentally and on purpose, but this is not a new problem. This can be seen in the two Emmaus-bound disciples who were themselves blinded by sin and unbelief. While they had been with Jesus and had heard him say, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day raised” (Luke 9:22), they did not see the truth to believe (24:11, 25).

We, like them, are in need of a holy interpretation of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the inspired doctor provides such an explanation. When Jesus graciously “opened” the disciples’ eyes, Luke records, that “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (24:27). Surely in the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus, Jesus recounted Isaiah 53, and like Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26ff), explained how he embodied all of the promises of suffering and glory foretold in Isaiah’s song. As we conclude this study, we reassert the need for Christ’s blood to cleanse our sins and his Spirit to open our eyes; we pray that we may behold him as our suffering servant and as the high and exalted savior whose life was given in exchange for ours; and that we, like George Bennard, might be found singing of the “Old Rugged Cross” until Christ returns.

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.

O that old rugged cross, so despised by the world,
Has a wondrous attraction for me;
For the dear Lamb of God left His glory above
To bear it to dark Calvary.

In that old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine,
A wondrous beauty I see,
For 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died,
To pardon and sanctify me.

To the old rugged cross I will ever be true;
Its shame and reproach gladly bear;
Then He'll call me some day to my home far away,
Where His glory forever I'll share.

*So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.⁵⁵*

⁵⁵ George Bennard, *The Celebration Hymnal: Songs and Hymns for Worship* (USA: Word Music / Integrity Music, 1997), 327.