

"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)

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How context enables us to understand accurately God's message in Isaiah 53

by Galen Peterson

Passages of the Bible are often emphasized without regard to the context around them. Sometimes that leads to inaccurate conclusions. At other times it leads to missing out on important content that enhances a passage or explains why it is recorded. The latter is true in the case of Isaiah 53—one of the key portions foretelling the death and resurrection of the Messiah.

The book of Isaiah prophetically covers both the demise of the northern kingdom of Israel by Assyria and the captivity of the southern kingdom of Judah by Babylon. The content of

chapter 51 concerns the conclusion of the Babylonian captivity.

Isaiah begins that chapter with a declaration that he is giving a message intended for people who want to live a righteous life and want to know God personally. And since his audience at the time was Jewish, Isaiah gives an exhortation to return to their heritage by acknowledging their covenant relationship with God through Abraham.

To put it in a contemporary manner, he is saying, "Don't go looking for Me anywhere else, in any other form of spiritual movements, or in any other

religious writings. You will only find me in the revelation I have given in the Holy Scriptures."

That is something that isn't just true for Jewish people, but everyone. So God is saying here, that He is going to communicate a message that you won't hear anywhere else, and it will be consistent with what He has already revealed.

He gives a clue that something good is coming for the exiles in captivity—in spite of the physical destruction of Jerusalem, a day is coming that will bring joy and blessings resulting in thankfulness. But here is the key—

they have to “pay attention” (51:4). In other words, God was about to do something that would be easy to miss.

The Lord declares that the thing easy to miss is His salvation going forth and that it “will be forever” (51:5-6). The word used here is *yeshua*, which is the act of salvation, and it is the root for Yeshua, the name form of salvation (Jesus in English).

Then Isaiah prophesies that “the ransomed of the LORD will return and come with joyful shouting to Zion, and everlasting joy will be on their heads” (51:11).

This great thing that God is going to do, which He has identified as an everlasting salvation, is connected to Zion in some fashion. And it begins with the promise of the return to the land of their inheritance that they had lost due to disobedience. In other words, the Jewish people have to go back to Jerusalem for this act of salvation to come about. And when they return, it would be a time of great joy.

But first, they would have to endure great sorrow while in being tormented in captivity. His words are also reflected by the Psalmist: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion” (Ps 137:1).

As chapter 52 begins, Isaiah describes the history of Israel in a succinct way. They became a nation while enslaved in Egypt. Then the northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria. And then the southern kingdom fell to Babylon. As a result, God acknowledges, “Those who rule over them howl, and My name is continually blasphemed all day long” (52:5).

It is as if the conquering nations are boasting, “Ha, you puny god. You could not protect the people who worship you. Our

god is mighty. All glory to him, and we spit at this impotent god of Israel.”

It is in this context that a remarkably positive exhortation is given:

“Therefore My people shall know My name; therefore in that day I am the one who is speaking, ‘Here I am.’” How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, and says to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (52:6-7)

The LORD wants His people to know that He is the God of all power and might and the one who will redeem them. It is very similar to the way that He revealed Himself to the people of Israel in Egypt, beginning with Moses at the burning bush when God identified Himself as “I AM.” But this time, that message would not be communicated through a burning bush. He describes it poetically.

Imagine sitting somewhere in a far away land where you are captive. You can remember the good old days when you had your own land to dwell on, and the temple to go to for worship. And now it was all gone. So it would understandably be a sad time.

And then, while looking at the horizon, you notice there is a man running toward you, after having come down off the mountains. It seems that he has had to run a great distance from a battlefield. As the messenger draws near, he begins shouting out, “Good news, we have won the victory, peace has come and we have been delivered from the threat. Our king still reigns.”

In this kind of situation, the

victory is certain. But not everybody was able to know about it in those days when communication required direct human involvement. So without the messenger using his feet to span the distance, nobody could know about the Good News. That understanding is behind the description of the messenger’s feet being “beautiful.”

The Hebrew term used here doesn’t refer to beauty in terms of external appearance. It literally means “to be at home.” That’s all about being in a place where you feel at peace. In the case of this messenger, the right place was to be at home with his fellow Jewish people, and to have brought with him Good News. That’s what makes his feet beautiful. The key content of this message of Good News is that salvation has come.

Isaiah continues by declaring:

The LORD has bared His holy arm in the sight of all the nations, that all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God (52:10).

What makes that so remarkable is that in that day, the Jewish people thought of themselves as the only godly people on earth. It was not within their mindset even to consider God’s salvation being extended to every Gentile on earth, especially when they were being tormented by Gentiles at that very moment.

God then declares that He is about to lead them back to the land. And after they get there, He will cause salvation to come about in such a way that it would reach all the peoples on the earth and it would be everlasting in nature.

What immediately follows in the text is the prophetic description of the precise act of salvation that God would carry out in that restored city of Jerusalem:

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

- ¹³ Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.
- ¹⁴ Just as many were astonished at you, My people, So His appearance was marred more than any man and His form more than the sons of men.
- ¹⁵ Thus He will sprinkle many nations. Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him; for what had not been told them they will see, and what they had not heard they will understand.
- ¹ Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of Adonai been revealed?
- ² For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.
- ³ He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.
- ⁴ Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.
- ⁵ But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed.
- ⁶ All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but Adonai has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.
- ⁷ He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth.
- ⁸ By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due?
- ⁹ His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death, because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth.
- ¹⁰ But Adonai was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of Adonai will prosper in His hand.
- ¹¹ As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities.
- ¹² Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors.

Those words above comprise the Good News that was foretold to the people of Israel while in captivity, and was also promised to include Gentiles from every nation. That understanding only becomes apparent by first determining the context of the previous two chapters.

Moreover, everything we know about Yeshua from the context of the New Testament corresponds perfectly to the

description of this humiliated yet exalted suffering Servant of Israel.

This kind of contextually based understanding does not force the meaning, unlike the rabbinical interpretations of Isaiah 53 that have emerged. The most prominent of those variant interpretations was put forth by the influential eleventh century rabbi known as Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki). He proposed the idea that the servant of Isaiah 53 was

not the Messiah, but was a reference to the nation of Israel. So the suffering detailed in this chapter is the historical suffering of the Jewish people. This was the first time the passage wasn't considered to be a reference to a literal person.

We might ask, what gave rise to this idea for the very first time 1700 years after Isaiah wrote the prophecy? The writings of Rashi clearly reflect opposition to the

recognition of Yeshua as the Messiah. So it follows that he would reject the Messianic understanding of Isaiah 53 and then conceive a new one. That reactionary position took root in Judaism and has prevailed until this present day.

The problem with this interpretation is threefold: it diverges from the previous Jewish understanding of the text dating back to Isaiah's time, it significantly disregards the context, and it is inconsistent with the references to the servant bearing the sins of humanity, which Israel has never done.

In spite of the protests of rabbinical voices carrying forward until today, this passage fits Yeshua perfectly in a prophecy that was given set in motion 700 years in advance, and long before the Romans invented crucifixion.

What about the way that the death of Yeshua connects to Isaiah's description of how beautiful the feet are of the one who brings Good News? We know from the account in the gospels that the feet of Yeshua were pierced through for our transgressions, just as Isaiah foretold. It's probably a bit crude to think of how His blood stains and torn flesh would make for beautiful feet. And Isaiah does describe Messiah's appearance as

being marred and the people not wanting to look at Him.

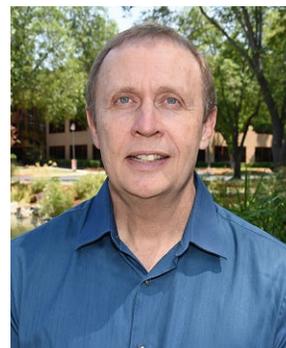
But this is not about a beautiful external appearance. It is about "being at home." In keeping with Isaiah's complete revelation in chapters 51-53, when Yeshua's hands and feet were pierced for our transgressions at the restored city of Jerusalem, He was right at home, right where He was supposed to be according to God's redemptive plan. That is why we can say those feet are beautiful.

What matters now is whether we all are willing to accept this message as being true. Remember, the Jewish people of the day we have been considering had to act on the news they had been given. Had they doubted the words of the messenger and went about their normal lives in their new home in Babylon, Jerusalem would never have been restored and rebuilt, and there would be no place for the Messiah to come in fulfillment of prophecy. And that would have meant no fulfillment of the prophecies related to the death of Messiah. It was all part of God's redemptive plan, and the Jewish people had to do their part by simply agreeing to the message and acting upon it.

In Judaism today, the 53rd chapter of Isaiah is never read in the synagogue. That means when chapters 51 and 52 are read, you

are left waiting for the Good News of everlasting salvation to come. The bad news is that if you are stuck in that place, there will never be another everlasting salvation to come because many Messianic prophecies can no longer be fulfilled, including the timing, location and means of His death.

But the good news is that Yeshua did fulfill all of them and He died "once for all" (Heb 10:10). So let it be said that THE Good News has already come and it's just up to us to believe it and to receive it. In so doing, we can have not just the everlasting salvation that God has promised us, but true joy and happiness for today, just as Isaiah described. And that's what makes his message, given under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, the beautiful Good News.



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