Main Point – God’s ultimate servant, Jesus Christ, made salvation possible by dying in our place for our sins and being raised in victory over sin and death.

Introduction
What is a story you’ve read or movie you’ve seen where a main character has died? What reactions did you have?

When you hear about real accounts of tragic suffering or unexpected death, are you very likely or not likely at all to ponder why such events happen? Explain.

This passage presents the fourth and final of the “servant songs” the prophet Isaiah embedded in the second half of his book (see Isa. 42:1-7; 49:1-6; 50:4-10; 52:13–53:12). Bible scholars have long debated whether the servant in these songs represents the nation of Israel; a remnant of Israelites who would return from the Babylonian exile; the prophet himself (or true prophets as a group); or some other unnamed individual who would become Israel’s deliverer and hero. Yet Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is the most individualistic of the four “servant songs” and is therefore the one that most clearly points to fulfillment in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The story told in this passage is both shocking and compelling. It shocks us in the sense that a hero (God’s servant) destined for success (52:13) suddenly becomes so odious that people can’t stand to look at him. They begin to mistreat the hero—going from hateful rejection, to humiliation and physical abuse, and finally to violent death. At the same time, we are spellbound to read in the account that God was at work in the hero’s suffering and death (53:10). The hero suffered on behalf of others. He took on himself the punishment that others deserved. Incredibly, God allowed His innocent servant to suffer as a means by which the guilty could be forgiven and declared righteous.

Understanding

Read Isaiah 52:13-15

What evidence in these verses suggests that God’s servant is an individual, not a nation or a remnant of people?
Do you think people today view Jesus’ life and death as an amazing success or a shocking failure? Explain.

If Isaiah’s fourth servant song was a novel or movie, the prophet would have given away the ending at the start. In 52:13, Isaiah described the servant’s future in glowing terms (“successful,” “raised and lifted up,” “greatly exalted”). That description only increased the shock of reversal in verses 14-15. Something will so disfigure the servant’s appearance as to render him barely recognizable as a human being. The servant’s disfigured appearance would put kings to silence as they witnessed something they had never before seen or heard. Paul quoted Isaiah 52:15 in Romans 15:21 to explain his strong desire to take the gospel message to lands where people had not yet heard about Christ.

Read Isaiah 53:1-3

What most troubles you about the servant’s description in these verses? Why? Where and how does the description point to Jesus’ life and ministry?

The two questions posed in Isaiah 53:1 indicate that the meaning and purpose of the servant’s life, like the gospel message it foreshadowed, involved faith (“who has believed”) and God’s decision to act in power (“the arm of the LORD…revealed”). In other words, the servant’s appearance and actions not only would fail to meet the popular expectations of a hero-deliverer, but also would evoke contempt and rejection by many.

For Israelites living as captives during the Babylonian exile, Isaiah’s words would serve as a warning. God’s promise to bring them home again to the promised land would not unfold as they imagined. Their deliverer would be someone unexpected, perhaps even someone they despised. They would need to trust God, knowing that His thoughts were not their thoughts and their ways were not His ways (Isa. 55:8).

How do we know Isaiah’s words referred prophetically to Jesus? Read John 12:37-41 for additional insight.

Ultimately, Isaiah 53:1-3 points to Jesus’ life and ministry as the Savior. The apostle John quoted Isaiah 53:1 to emphasize that many Jews in Jesus’ day refused to believe in Jesus even though “he had performed so many signs in their presence” (John 12:38). Paul quoted the same verse in Romans 10:16 in explaining that God used Israel’s rejection of the gospel to open the way for Gentiles to hear the message of Christ. In Philippians 2, Paul pointed to Jesus as the supreme example of humility in that He was God, yet He took on human form and became a servant who “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death … on a cross” (2:8). No one expected God’s ultimate servant, the Messiah, to come in this manner.
Read Isaiah 53:4-9

What did most people conclude about the reason for the servant’s terrible suffering (53:4b)? What was the true reason? In what ways does Isaiah 53:7-9 point to Jesus and the gospel?

These verses describe the servant’s brutal suffering and death. The types of suffering run the gamut: sickness, pain, affliction, piercing, crushing (both physical and emotional), punishment (beatings or whippings), and wounds. Two things stand out about this description of suffering. First, the suffering caused most onlookers to conclude that God hated, and therefore afflicted, the poor servant. Second, the true reason behind the servant’s suffering was even more shocking. The servant took on himself the punishment for our sin—“the iniquity of us all”!

How far would the servant go in suffering for our sins?

Verses 7-9 reveal that he would go silently to death “like a lamb led to the slaughter.” Although innocent of any wrongdoing, the servant would be “cut off from the land of the living” and “assigned a grave with the wicked.” New Testament writers saw clearly that Isaiah 53:4-9 pointed to Jesus as the fulfillment of the suffering servant who willingly lays down His life in the place of sinners. Matthew recognized in Jesus’ healing of the sick and demon-possessed a fulfillment of the servant’s taking on our weaknesses and diseases (Matt. 8:17; Isa. 53:4). Peter saw in Christ’s example of enduring hostility without retaliation a fulfillment of the servant’s innocence (1 Pet. 2:22; Isa. 53:9) and substitutionary atonement (1 Pet. 2:24; Isa. 53:5; 1 Pet. 2:25; Isa. 53:6).

How does the understanding of Jesus’ suffering help you through the events of the last month? How does it comfort you and also challenge you?

Read Isaiah 53:10-12

What was God’s ultimate plan in permitting the servant’s brutal suffering and death? How do others benefit from the servant’s sacrificial death?
To hear that “the Lord was pleased to crush [the servant] severely” (53:10) sounds extremely harsh. The Hebrew verb rendered “was pleased” can also mean “to desire” or “to will” something. God’s “pleasure” in this context refers to His will or plan—not a sadistic pleasure derived from inflicting pain on an innocent victim. God’s plan was for His servant’s suffering and death to qualify as a guilt offering—a pure and holy sacrifice offered for the forgiveness of sinners (see Lev. 5:14-15; Heb. 9:24-28).

The servant’s story would not end with suffering and death. God promised that the servant, after his sacrificial death, would once more “see light and be satisfied” (Isa. 53:11). Further, the servant would be vindicated and victorious, receiving “the many as a portion” and “the mighty as spoil” (53:12). Many Christian scholars understand verses 11-12 to foreshadow Christ’s resurrection and exaltation. Paul described Christ’s exaltation in this way in Philippians 2:9-11: “For this reason God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth—and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

**Application**

What areas of suffering in the midst of these current events need to be surrendered to the one who bore our pain?

How are you challenged to respond to Jesus’ voluntary sacrifice on your behalf?

How can we as believers use Isaiah 52–53 to help others understand and believe the gospel?

**Pray** - Praise God for showing His unlimited love by giving His Servant-Son Jesus Christ to be our Savior. Ask Him for greater understanding of and appreciation for the new life we have in Christ as believers.

**Specific Prayer Requests for your Bible and Life Group:**
Commentary

52:13–53:12 The NT authors recognized that the description of a Suffering Servant, who bore the sins of many,” fit Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for the sins of His people. This chapter’s description is the most individualistic of all the Servant Songs in the book of Isaiah, and thus most clearly points to application beyond Israel.

52:13 The poem begins with the end point—the exaltation of the Servant (53:11-12). Glory will be the end result of His suffering.

52:14 The suffering of the Servant will so disfigure Him that He will not appear human.

52:15 Much debate surrounds the meaning of the Servant sprinkling many nations. The main problem is that the verse does not specify what the Servant will use to sprinkle them. The best guess is that it refers to a ritual act like the sprinkling of blood (Lv 4:6,17; 16:14-15,19; Num 19:4) or oil (Lv 8:11). The effect of this sprinkling is either to purify or to dedicate to a holy status.

Isaiah 53:1-12

53:1. The speakers of these verses (“we”) are likely both the prophet and the community he represents. The “arm of the Lord” refers to His victorious power, ironically revealed through a Suffering Servant.

53:2-3. A young plant growing up in dry ground would be withered, thus providing an appropriate image of the man of suffering. Just like a withered plant is uprooted and thrown away, so the Suffering Servant was rejected by men.

53:4-6. For the first time, the reader learns that the Servant suffered on behalf of others. Even so, people did not recognize it, and He was rejected as One struck down by God for His own supposed sins.

53:7. Though not suffering for His own sins, the Servant suffered silently and willingly. Philip used this passage to tell the Ethiopian eunuch the good news about Jesus, who silently bore His crucifixion (Acts 8:31-35; 1 Pet. 2:23).

53:8. For the first time, the passage reveals that the Servant’s suffering culminated in death.

53:9. The Servant died unjustly and was buried as if He were an evil man. The pairing of the wicked with the rich man implies that the wealthy man got his riches by deceit. This may be confirmed by the final statement of the verse that the servant had not spoken deceitfully. Jesus was literally buried with a rich man when He was placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:50-56).

53:10-11. That God was pleased to crush the Servant sounds mean-spirited, but His pleasure is explained by the fact that the Servant’s suffering will justify many. What seems harsh will turn out to be gracious. The Servant’s pain, suffering, and death will function like a restitution offering (Lev. 5:14-6:7; 7:1-10). The sin of God’s people was such a transgression.

53:12. Returning to the theme at the beginning of the poem (v. 52:13), the suffering of the Servant will give way to His exaltation. Jesus’ suffering culminated in the crucifixion, but gave way to the resurrection.