



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Suffering Servants
(*Suffering*, pp. 20-28)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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Suffering Servants

In the prophets, the (suffering) servant, and Jesus, the suffering of those called into God's service becomes clothed with ever deepening significance. Their suffering is not glorified, but it is endowed with power to advance God's kingdom.

Prayer (Psalm 138:8)

The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Scripture Reading: Acts 8:26-39

Responsive Reading (Isaiah 53:5-8, 10)

But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
**upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.**

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
**and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.**

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
**like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.**

By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?

**For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.**

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.

Reflection

Beginning with the servant song of Isaiah 53 that the Ethiopian Eunuch is reading, Philip shares "the good news about Jesus Christ." Imagine just how *good* the news sounded to the Eunuch, who was prevented by his condition from joining the covenant community (Leviticus 21:18-20; Deuteronomy 23:1) though he could hope for the day when even foreigners and eunuchs will be gathered into God's household (Isaiah 56:3-8). "About whom is the prophet speaking?" the Eunuch asks when he reads about the shorn and scorned servant. "Is it himself or someone else?"

"From its earliest beginnings, the Christian Church has interpreted the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus by means of the servant-paradigm of Second Isaiah," notes Janzen. His suffering:

- ▶ *is prophetic*. Jeremiah, the quintessential suffering prophet, faced rejection for his prophetic message and "pre-lived" his people's coming Divine judgment and exile (Jeremiah 16:1-9). Likewise, the Isaianic servant and Jesus suffer rejection and "pre-live"



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God's judgment. Beyond enduring rejection, Janzen writes, the servant "embraces in a spirit of gentleness, meekness, and submission the wide range of suffering that marks the human condition," and the same applies to Jesus.

- ▶ *vicariously bears the rebellion of others.* God called the nation of Israel to be a "light to the nations," a prophetic witness to the world. Now the servant obediently takes up the task the nation has failed to accomplish (49:3) and accepts the consequent suffering unto death (50:4-9; 53:1-11a). "God's new move consists of not rejecting Israel for failing as a people to follow the call to be God's servant (42:1-4), but 'reducing God's expectation' of Israel's obedience to the obedience of *one* person and accepting it as vicarious for the people."
- ▶ *extends God's salvation to all.* He lives out the "servant's total calling...to be 'a light to the nations' and to 'restore the survivors of Israel' (49:6). Jesus not only atones for the sins of both through his suffering and death, but also extends God's salvation by reaching out to those suffering in many and various ways." Thus, Matthew 12:15-21 (citing Isaiah 42:1-4) links Jesus to the servant on the basis of his healing ministry.

These texts apply to us as disciples. "If opposition and suffering result from obedience to our call [to proclaim the gospel], this too...may make our lives a witness to the world around us," Janzen writes. In a "post-Christian" world, "God's commission can be carried out by a small remnant, and this is due to God's grace that accepts such a remnant...to represent before God, in its suffering and rejection, 'the many' who have turned away."

Study Questions

1. In Janzen's view, who is the (suffering) servant—the nation of Israel, a remnant group, or an individual—in each of the four Servant Songs (Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12)?
2. As you read each phrase of the fourth Servant Song (Isaiah 52:13-53:12), what images of Christ's suffering come to mind?
3. In 1 Peter 2:18-25 what does the servant-paradigm suggest to people who must "endure pain while suffering unjustly"?
4. Are Christians called to prophetic suffering today?

Departing Hymn: "I Lay My Sins on Jesus"

I lay my sins on Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God;
He bears them all, and frees us from the accursèd load;
I bring my guilt to Jesus, to wash my crimson stains
white in His blood most precious, till not a stain remains.

I lay my wants on Jesus; all fullness dwells in Him;
He heals all my diseases, He doth my soul redeem:
I lay my griefs on Jesus, my burdens and my cares;
He from them all releases, He all my sorrows shares.

I long to be like Jesus, strong, loving, lowly, mild;
I long to be like Jesus, the Father's holy Child:
I long to be with Jesus, amid the heavenly throng,
to sing with saints His praises, to learn the angels' song.

Horatius Bonar, *SONGS FOR THE WILDERNESS* (1843)

Suffering Servants

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	1 Peter 2:18-25
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss 1 Peter 2:18-25
Questions 2 and 4	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To explore the mysterious role of suffering in the four Servant Songs in Isaiah.
2. To see how the early Church used this servant-paradigm to understand Jesus' suffering.
3. To consider how Christians are called to prophetic suffering today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Suffering (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "I Lay My Sins on Jesus" locate a tune, WHITFIELD or AURELIA, in your church's hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

Despite the suffering caused by a brutal civil war and policies that oppress the poor, "there are still little pockets [in El Salvador] where hope can be found," Yvonne Dilling reports. "I am reminded of an interview with Ignacio Martín-Baró, a Jesuit priest and university professor, shortly before he was slaughtered in 1989 along with five of his brother priests and their cook and her daughter. Giving an overview of the economics of a war fueled by rigid U.S. ideologies, the priest painted a very pessimistic view of the future. After a poignant silence, someone in our group asked him, 'Is there any hope?' With a small, but triumphant smile, he raised a hand with one finger pointing upwards to emphasize his soft reply: 'I'm not optimistic, but I am hopeful.'

"Martín-Baró understood that Christ did not come to suffer and die, but to announce a project of life – the building of a kingdom of love, a project in which we are invited to participate. This glorious project has many enemies and its construction workers inevitably experience suffering just as Jesus did. Indeed, they can bear their pain better if they understand the structural aspects of their suffering and its relation to the work of building the kingdom of God. Because they know that God does not will their suffering, in a spirit of gratitude they remain open to the comfort God provides in times of suffering, to the hope of a radically different future, and to God's continuing invitation to be involved in the kingdom" (*Suffering*, pp. 58-59).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently for an individual or a group that endures suffering due to their witness for Christ. Then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 8:26-39 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Tracing the great trajectory within Scripture of the ever deepening significance of the suffering of those who are

called into God's service, Waldemar Janzen reviews (1) the lives of the prophets (especially Jeremiah), (2) the Servant Songs in Second Isaiah, and (3) the person and life of Jesus Christ. This study guide 'works backwards' through the same trajectory, beginning from Philip's interpretation of Jesus' life and death by using a Servant Song and its references to prophetic suffering. Janzen concludes, "The trajectory we discover in these texts must not stop, however, before we ourselves identify with the 'we' of Isaiah 53:1-11a and the equally astonished post-resurrection disciples of Jesus." We should ask two crucial questions: "In what sense was their suffering 'for us'?" and "How should we endure suffering that comes as we are called into God's service?" Horatio Bonar responds to these in the hymn, "I Lay My Sins on Jesus."

If you decide to extend the discussion to a second session, members might reflect with the author of 1 Peter 2:18-25 on how our suffering can be prophetic.

Study Questions

1. Janzen suggests that in the first Servant Song (42:1-4) the servant is the nation of Israel. "Elected by God and endowed with the spirit, the servant (Israel) will, in a gentle and unobtrusive but persistent way, bring justice (*mišpat*) to the nations, who are awaiting God's teaching. Yet Israel apparently fails to see or disregards God's commission."

In the Second Song (49:1-6), the servant may be an individual who was first mentioned in 48:16b. "[T]his human speaker tells of his earlier prophetic commissioning (1b-3), reminiscent of Jeremiah's call, together with his lack of success in carrying it out (4a)." In the third Servant Song (50:4-9), this individual servant "emphasizes his obedient acceptance of suffering...and his unwavering confidence in God's help and triumph."

In the final Servant Song (52:13-53:12), others describe this individual servant – in 52:13-15 and 53:11b-12 the speaker is God, while in 53:1-11a it is a subgroup of persons in Israel who now perceive the vicarious nature of the servant's suffering.

2. Meditating on the Servant Song through the lens of Christ's life does not reveal the only or the original meaning of this passage, but it reshapes our imagination (just as it formed the early Christians' imagination) with a deeper appreciation of Christ's suffering.

Members may recall images of Christ's Passion – the mock trials, insults from the soldiers and crowd, beatings by soldiers, physical abuse on the cross, and burial in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Isaiah 53:6 may remind them of Jesus' teaching that the people are "like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34), that he is "the good shepherd" who seeks lost sheep (John 10:1-18; cf. Luke 15:4-7), and that his disciples are to "feed my sheep" (John 21:16-19) though this involves suffering. His cousin, John, echoes Isaiah 53:7 when he proclaims Jesus "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29; cf. 1:36).

3. Though Christians are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9), they still live in earthly empires. In families with or as slaves to unbelievers, they may suffer for their faithfulness. How do they "live honorably among the Gentiles, so that...they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge" (2:12)? How do they live prophetically? Their standard is God's judgment: "live as free people, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as slaves of God" (2:16).

The passage is addressed to slaves, who were a third of the population in the Roman Empire. For background information on ancient slavery, see S. Scott Bartchey's "Slave, Slavery" in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 1098-1102.

4. Members may mention people who face political discrimination, physical dangers, or death for being Christians. Discuss the situation closer to home. In our culture, do Christians endure suffering for taking prophetic stances in regard to racial equality, care for the environment, economic protection for the marginalized, or opposition to sinful practices? Put another way, on what issues do we fail to courageously confront our society?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.