

An excerpt from Messiah: The Words
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THE WORDS

AIR

He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. He gave his back to the smiters, and his cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: he hid not his face from shame and spitting. (*Isaiah 53.3; Isaiah 50.6*)

CHORUS

Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him. (*Isaiah 53.4-5*)

CHORUS

And with his stripes we are healed. (*Isaiah 53.5*)

CHORUS

All we like sheep, have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. (*Isaiah 53.6*)

COMMENTARY

Background: Jennens made a curious choice when he stopped short of including *Isaiah 53.7* in the libretto, since *53.7* is one of the possible sources for the “Lamb of God” reference in *John 1.29*. In *53.7*, the “suffering servant,” bearing the sins of the wayward sheep, silently submits to death like “a lamb to the slaughter.” It is a symbol of strength in suffering for a greater good.

The life of Jesus was the life of the suffering servant. Despite the temptations of the devil and, apparently, the intrigues of Jewish revolutionaries, he did not try to become a king, a powerful leader who dominated and destroyed evil. Instead, he preached love, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice and, in the end, lost his life at the hands of those who held the power he rejected. This was unacceptable to many who followed him or heard him preach. They rejected his teachings because he was the wrong kind of messiah.

Often the prophecies in *Isaiah* read as if they were real events. As a result, *Isaiah* is sometimes called the “fifth gospel.” In *Isaiah 53* in the King James Version, the past, present, and future tenses of verbs are mixed together. Jennens dealt with this problem by using the past tense only, thus making a prophecy appear to be an account of Jesus’s life.

Isaiah 53 is in the tradition that God’s salvation is open to all, Gentile as well as Jew.

Definitions: “Stripes” are the blows from being flogged or caned.

Interpretation: The person who is suffering in these verses is probably meant to be the Jewish nation, in particular, the Jewish nation during the Babylonian Exile. *Isaiah 53* might also be referring to an historical figure such as Jeremiah. It is unlikely that the suffering servant is meant to be the messiah, since in those days it was believed that the messiah was not supposed to suffer. A suffering messiah would have been a radical departure from *Old Testament* beliefs.

With these excerpts, Jennens emphasized that, as things turned out, being the messiah was a tough job. Not only did Jesus take on other people’s problems, but he was tortured and killed for doing so. It is also likely that Jennens wanted to stress that suffering may be the only alternative to disobeying God’s will.