

Isaiah 53:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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.

Analysis

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. This verse appears at the heart of Isaiah's fourth Servant Song (52:13-53:12), providing a comprehensive statement of human sinfulness and divine substitutionary atonement. It moves from universal condemnation to universal provision through the suffering Servant, making it one of the clearest gospel presentations in the Old Testament.

"All we like sheep have gone astray" (כָּלֵנוּ כְּצֹאֵן תָּעִינוּ/kullanu katzon ta'inu) begins with total inclusiveness: "all of us." No exceptions, no exemptions, no privileged class excluded. The comparison to sheep (tzon) is deliberately unflattering in biblical usage. Sheep are notoriously prone to wandering, defenseless against predators, directionless without a shepherd, and lacking natural homing instinct. "Gone astray" (ta'ah) means to wander, err, go astray, lose the way—not innocent mistake but willful wandering from God's path. Sheep don't accidentally wander; they choose to follow their own impulses (grass looks greener elsewhere, water seems closer another direction) rather than following the shepherd. This is humanity's portrait: we've all wandered from God's way, pursuing our own interests, following our own desires, trusting our own judgment over His guidance.

"We have turned every one to his own way" (אִישׁ לְדַרְכוֹ פָּנִינוּ/ish ledarko paninu) intensifies and personalizes the indictment. "Every one" (ish, each individual)

emphasizes that universal sinfulness is also individual and personal—not just humanity generically but each person specifically. "His own way" (darko, his own path, his own road) reveals sin's essential nature: autonomous self-direction rather than submission to God's way. Each person charts their own course, makes their own rules, determines their own direction. "Turned" (panah) indicates deliberate choice, active turning away, purposeful redirection. The verb's reflexive form suggests we have turned ourselves—this wasn't done to us but by us, voluntarily choosing rebellion over submission, independence over obedience.

The verse's structure presents devastating parallelism: collectively "all" have strayed; individually "every one" has chosen his own path. Sin is both universal (affecting all humanity without exception) and personal (each person's deliberate choice and responsibility). This demolishes all claims to human goodness or self-righteousness. The righteous and unrighteous, moral and immoral, religious and irreligious, educated and ignorant—all have gone astray, all chosen their own way over God's. No one can claim exemption; no one can plead innocence. The playing field is level at the foot of the cross: all are sinners needing the same salvation.

"And the LORD hath laid on him" (וַיִּהְיֶה הַפָּגִיעַ בּוֹ/va-Yahweh hifgia bo) marks the dramatic, saving turn from universal condemnation to particular redemption. Hifgia means to cause to meet, to make to strike, to lay upon—carrying connotations of violent impact. This is God's deliberate, sovereign act—He caused our iniquity to fall upon, to strike, to meet in the Servant. The verb indicates violent collision—our sin crashing down on Him with full force. Critically, God Himself is the active agent transferring sin from us to the Servant. This wasn't accident, tragedy, or human injustice alone, but divine plan. The Father deliberately placed on the Son what we deserved, making the cross both cosmic injustice (the innocent suffering for the guilty) and perfect justice (sin receiving its due penalty, just on a substitute).

"The iniquity of us all" (אֶת אָוֹן כָּלֵנוּ/et avon kullanu) brings the verse full circle with stunning inclusiveness. The same "all" who strayed now have their iniquity laid on Him. Avon encompasses guilt, punishment, and the twisted, perverted nature of sin itself. Not merely sinful acts but the guilt those acts incur, the punishment that guilt deserves, and the moral corruption that produces such acts—all laid on the Servant. The inclusive "all" that condemned us in the verse's first half now saves

us in the second half: all who strayed, all whose iniquity was laid on Him, can therefore all be saved through Him. The scope of redemption matches the scope of sin: as wide as the fall is deep, salvation runs equally deep and wide.

This is substitutionary atonement in its clearest Old Testament expression: we sinned (all, every one); He bore the punishment (the LORD laid on Him our iniquity). The exchange is complete and perfect: our sin for His suffering, our guilt for His innocence, our punishment for His pain, our death for His life. What we deserved, He received; what He deserved (righteousness, vindication, life), we can receive through faith in Him.

Historical Context

For broader context on Isaiah's Servant Songs and historical background, see Isaiah 53:5. Verse 6 stands as the theological centerpiece of the chapter, pivoting from description of the Servant's suffering (vv.1-5) to explanation of its meaning and scope (vv.6-9). Ancient Jewish interpretation struggled with this passage for the same reasons as 53:5—how could Messiah suffer? How could God's Anointed One bear sin?

The sheep metaphor had deep resonance in ancient Israel's agricultural society. Everyone knew sheep's behavior: they wander from the flock, pursue immediate desires (grass, water) without considering danger, become lost easily, and are defenseless against predators. David, the shepherd-king, used this imagery in Psalm 23. Ezekiel 34 condemned Israel's leaders as false shepherds who scattered the sheep. Jeremiah 50:6 lamented: "My people hath been lost sheep: their shepherds have caused them to go astray."

The phrase "his own way" captured Israel's history of rebellion. From the golden calf ("they have turned aside quickly out of the way," Exodus 32:8) through the judges period ("every man did that which was right in his own eyes," Judges 21:25) to the divided kingdom's idolatry, Israel repeatedly chose their own way over God's. The prophets consistently confronted this: "They are all gone out of the way" (Psalm 14:3); "We have turned every one to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6).

The New Testament writers saw unmistakable fulfillment in Christ. Peter quotes this verse explicitly: "For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls" (1 Peter 2:25). He connects our sheep-like straying with Christ's bearing our sins (1 Peter 2:24, quoting Isaiah 53:5). Paul's theology of universal sinfulness echoes Isaiah: "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23)—the same "all" Isaiah declares went astray.

Jesus Himself embodied the good Shepherd who seeks lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7). His parable of the lost sheep illustrates Isaiah 53:6's first half—we all have gone astray. His life and death fulfill the second half—laying down His life for the sheep (John 10:11-18). The shepherd imagery connects Old Testament prophecy to New Testament fulfillment: we are the wandering sheep; Christ is both the suffering Servant who bears our sin and the good Shepherd who seeks and saves the lost.

For the early church, this verse provided theological foundation for understanding Christ's death. It wasn't tragedy or accident but divine plan: "the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." God orchestrated the atonement. Roman soldiers and Jewish leaders were instruments, but God was the ultimate agent transferring sin to Christ. This preserved both God's justice (sin must be punished) and mercy (we who sinned are spared because another bore the punishment).

Church history records how this verse confronted every attempt to minimize sin's seriousness or Christ's substitution. Against Pelagianism (denying original sin's universality), Isaiah declares "all we like sheep have gone astray." Against medieval merit theology, Isaiah shows salvation comes not through our way but through Christ bearing our iniquity. Against Socinianism (denying substitutionary atonement), Isaiah explicitly states "the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." The verse's clarity has made it a touchstone for orthodox Christianity's understanding of sin and salvation.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. How does the image of 'all we like sheep have gone astray' challenge modern notions of human goodness and self-sufficiency?
2. What does it mean that we have each turned 'to his own way,' and how does this reveal sin's essential nature as autonomous self-direction?
3. How does understanding that 'the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all' affect our view of God's justice and the necessity of Christ's death?
4. In what ways does the 'all' that condemns us (all have strayed) become the 'all' that saves us (the iniquity of all laid on Him)?
5. How should the substitutionary atonement described here shape our gratitude, worship, and daily living as those whose iniquity was laid on Christ?

Interlinear Text

כָּל־נוֹ	כָּצֵא־אֵן	תָּעַ יְנוֹ	אֵ יֵשׁ	לְדַרְכּוֹ	
H3605	All we like sheep	have gone astray	every one	to his own way	
	H6629	H8582	H376	H1870	
פָּנֵי יְנוֹ	וַיהוָה	הִפָּגַ יַע	אֵ ת בּוֹ	עָלָיו	כָּל־נוֹ
we have turned	and the LORD	hath laid	H0	H853	on him the iniquity
H6437	H3068	H6293		H5771	H3605

Additional Cross-References

1 Peter 2:25 (Parallel theme): For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

1 Peter 3:18 (Sin): For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit:

Psalms 119:176 (Parallel theme): I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant; for I do not forget thy commandments.

Romans 4:25 (Parallel theme): Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.

Isaiah 55:7 (References Lord): Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

James 5:20 (Sin): Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.

Isaiah 53:10 (Sin): Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.

Isaiah 56:11 (Parallel theme): Yea, they are greedy dogs which can never have enough, and they are shepherds that cannot understand: they all look to their own way, every one for his gain, from his quarter.