

ISAIAH 53 AND THE SUFFERING SERVANT

THE ETHIOPIAN'S DISAPPOINTMENT

The story is told of a man from Africa who undertook a journey to search for God. He sensed the bankruptcy of the religion around him. He eventually acquired a copy of what we call the Old Testament. As he read he learned that God had called one nation out from all the other nations to be a great light and to present God to the world. God called them His Servant, for they were to do His will and be His representatives in the world. This was the divine mission of the nation of Israel. Excitedly he made preparations and went to Jerusalem on one of their feast days so he could benefit first hand from their spiritual ministry. Like many today, he went to those who claimed to be God's people for answers. And like many today, he left terribly disappointed. He came to Israel, whose meaning "God fights." But he found spiritual weakness. He came to the Jews, which literally means "God's praise." But he found those who "worshipped God with their lips but their hearts were far from Him." He came to see the very house of God, but all he found were whitewashed tombs, external rituals and appearances, but deadness on the inside. The ones who were to bring salvation to the world, clearly needed salvation themselves. Dejected, he went back home reading the prophet Isaiah in his chariot. He was confused – how could this impotent nation of hypocrites be the arm of the Lord? He read on. As he read out loud, for that was the practice at the time in order to increase reading comprehension, a man approached and asked him a simple question "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "how can I, unless someone explains it to me?" The explanation he heard was revolutionary. Many, perhaps like this Ethiopian, think of the world in terms of the religious and the irreligious. But when they do so, they find that the religious can be just as, if not more, disappointing than the irreligious. He learned that the so called righteous people need a deliverer, just as badly as the so called sinners.

The passage the Ethiopian was reading was Isaiah 52:13-to 53:12, one of the most profound passages in all of Scripture. For it's there that we read in the clearest terms of the mission of the Messiah, God's true servant. So let's turn there and read this passage, which has been called the holy of holies in Bible reading. Read Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

OVERVIEW

This passage starts with God speaking, extolling His great servant. And this passage ends with God speaking, extolling His great servant. The beginning and the end are from God's perspective. The middle is from Israel's perspective – specifically believing Israel, or what is called "the remnant." That middle section explains why God's Servant, the Messiah, is so exalted. The Servant's Supremacy (52:13-15) Secrecy (53:1-4), Sacrifice (53:5-6), and Silence (53:7-9), and Supremacy (53:10-12)

THE SERVANT'S SUPREMACY (52:13-15)

GOD EXALTS HIS SERVANT

But let's begin where the passage begins, in 52:13. With the words "Behold My servant" Isaiah introduces his fourth, and last "servant song." The other ones are found in 42, 49, and 50 and they all have to do with the coming messiah. They all speak beautifully of the Lord Jesus Christ, over seven hundred years before His advent to Earth. This fourth servant song begins by assigning the place of the Messiah as "exalted and extolled and very high." He could have just said exalted. But he piles on the description so we won't miss this all important idea – Heaven's highest place is reserved for God's Great Servant – the Messiah – our Lord Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, we read in Phil. 2 that God has "highly exalted Him and given Him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, those in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord to the glory of God the father." Actually, the word for "highly exalt" in that passage isn't even a word, that we know of. It seems like Paul made it up, as if the regular word for exalt wasn't enough for the greatness of Jesus Christ, so he put two words together to get the meaning of "super-exalted." The New Testament, in Ephesians says that God "seated Him at His right hand in the Heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in that which is to come and put all things under his feet." Yes, it is the Lord Jesus Christ, as God's true Servant, that is exalted and extolled and very high. Before we move on, let me say very clearly that verse 13 is our purpose this morning. We are to behold, consider, gaze on, Jesus Christ. As we think about how he acted prudently, that is, wisely to accomplish his goal, may He be exalted and extolled and very high. That's our purpose. No other call to action, no call to write your representative. Just to think more accurately and more highly of the Lord Jesus Christ.

THE MARRED MAN

Without warning, cold water is then splashed in our faces. After reading of the servant's unparalleled glorification, we read that people will be horrified, (KJV – astonished), at him. We go from thinking about a person whose appearance Paul would describe as brighter than the sun to someone that is unrecognizably human. When we read "marred more than any man," it means that he was disfigured to the point that he didn't look like a human being. Many movies have been made and pictures painted about the sufferings of our Lord, but none of them come close to the reality. When we think of his beard pulled out, with the flesh, from his face, when we think of the crown of thorns pressed into his brow, when we think of the hundreds of soldiers mercilessly beating him over the head, forcing the thorns deeper into his scalp, when we think of the cat of nine tails, making his back like a plough field, to where you could see the bone, we can see how this prophecy was fulfilled. No wonder the movies and paintings tone it down! It is too much to take in. Never has a man's appearance so hidden his true identity.

THE RULER'S SHOCK

At his trial, the Lord Jesus had told Caiaphas and the chief priests, that they would see Him coming in the clouds of heaven with great glory. When that prophecy comes true, and the rulers of the earth will see the one that they have denigrated as the king of kings and Lord of Lords, they will be startled and shut their mouths at the sight. They were shocked with horror and disgust when they looked at Him at Calvary. They will be shocked with fear and remorse when they see Him again on the Mount of Olives. We have a similar thought in another servant song, in Isaiah 49:7 – “to Him whom man despiseth, to Him whom the nation abhorreth, to a servant of rulers, Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship.”

THE SERVANT'S SECRECY (53:1-4)

JESUS DIDN'T LOOK THE PART

In chapter 53, we shift perspective to the remnant, believing Jews. They confess that there was a time that they did not recognize the meek and lowly Jesus as the great I am. They ask the rhetorical question, “who has believed our report and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” According to those who know such things, I've read that the Hebrew of verse suggests that “our report” refers to the report they were given. God had announced ahead of time “the sufferings of Christ and glories that would follow,” but they didn't believe it. They could not, they would not, see that the carpenter of Nazareth (can anything good come out of Nazareth) was the mighty “arm of the Lord.” He was not a Saul, head and shoulders above the rest. He had no outstanding physical features. In movies or in picture Bibles, you can always tell who Jesus is supposed to be. He either has a halo around his head or he is in white robes. Not so. He looked like a regular person. You can think of the tabernacle. It was all beautiful and gold on the inside, but on the outside it was covered with badger's skin. So it was with Christ in His earthly ministry. All the beauty was on the inside.

JESUS' HUMILITY IS CONTRARY TO OUR PRIDE

The hiddenness of the messiah's beauty is so contrary to our human nature. Remember how the Lord's brothers taunted him and said “no one does these miracles in secret” (John 7:4). We push our weight around and stick our chests, demanding that people recognize our achievements and our own greatness. This is not God's way. When the Son chooses where to be born, he goes not for a palace or Jerusalem, but the barn of Bethlehem. He chooses not the life of privilege, but the poor city of Nazareth working hard as a carpenter. When he enters Jerusalem, he comes not on a king's horse, but on a donkey, and a borrowed one at that. The great King being “meek and lowly of heart” is so contrary to our nature.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS OF ISAIAH 53

In fact, it is so contrary to our nature that some have difficulty believing that this portion in Isaiah even refers to the messiah! Now, if you print out this passage and show it the man on the street, I would venture to say he'd think it was from the New Testament. It so clearly refers to Jesus. But some cannot

accept this. Several theories have been purported to escape this conclusion. The most popular is that the Servant refers to the nation of Israel. This is the main interpretation among Jews (who have studied) today. Now, there are portions in Isaiah which refer to the nation as God's servant. For example, we read in 43:1 and 10 – "ye are my witnesses saith the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen." Notice the plural "witnesses" and singular "servant." There are numerous references like this. Nonetheless, there are other times when God's servant cannot be the nation of Israel. Consider Is. 42:6, which is part of another servant song talking about "My servant" (see vs. 1). In verse six the servant is given as a covenant to the people and for a light to the Gentiles." He cannot be God's people, Israel, since he is a covenant to them, as well as to the Gentiles. Consider also 49:6, where again we have the servant being given to "raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel." So the servant cannot always be the collective nation of Israel. And when we take a close look at Isaiah 53, it cannot refer to her there either. Consider verse 12, "he has poured out his soul unto death...he bare the sin of many" God rewards the Servant for doing this. It is His own willful decision to pour out his own soul. Now, the Jews have been oppressed and afflicted, probably more than any other nation. But never have they willingly given themselves over to affliction in order to atone for other's sins! And this observation discredits all other suggestions besides the Messiah for being God's servant. Some have said it was Isaiah himself, or Isaiah speaking as a representative of the prophets. They say that the prophet suffers for doing what is right because they want the people to be forgiven. Another theory is Cyrus, the one who released the Jews from their captivity. Another theory is Jehoiachin, the king of Judah who was taken into judgment during the captivity but then released later on. Though different parts of these theories make sense of some verses and themes in this servant song, none of them take seriously all of it. When we remember that sometimes the phrase "servant of the Lord" cannot refer to Israel or the remnant within Israel, and when we take seriously the language of Isaiah 53 that the person under consideration willingly offers himself as a guilt offering to atone for sins he had not committed, the reference can be none other than the messiah – the Lord Jesus Christ. As the quotations from it in the New Testament clearly show. For example, the eunuch asks Philip, is Isaiah talking about himself or someone else, Philip preaches to him Jesus.

53:1 IN JOHN 12:37

So, it was because the Lord Jesus didn't look the part of the Messiah that the nation didn't believe in Him. He came unto His own and His own received Him not. In fact, 53:1 is quoted in some significant places in the New Testament to describe the nation's failure to grasp the Messiah's true identity. The first is John 12:38. This is a transitional part in John's gospel. The first twelve chapters give signs for Jesus' identity. From chapter thirteen on, we have the Lord preparing his disciples for what things will be like in his absence. In chapter twelve, we see Greeks coming with the desire to see Jesus. But that was not the desire of the nation as a whole. The Lord explains how He must be lifted up. The Jews get the reference to crucifixion, but don't understand why the messiah would have to suffer – they can't see how he can die and yet remain forever. He then says that they have the light, and that they need to believe in the light while they have it so they can become sons of the light. And then we have the climactic verses 37 to 43. Of course, I'm sure you noticed the reference – these things said Isaiah when he saw His glory and spoke of him, another confirmation that we're talking about Jesus Christ here in

Isaiah 53. The nation's rejection of their Messiah is a product of their own hard hearts. They had the light! They saw it! They could have believed in Him! In fact many did, even of the rulers like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, but their cowardice prevented an open confession of him. So they were without excuse. He was not so undercover that they couldn't recognize him. But his coming was not in overwhelming glory such that all would be forced to believe in Him. The nation of Israel had gone through a lot since the rebuke of Isaiah's day of them being "completely sick"(see Isaiah 1). They had gone through the captivity, the restoration, the persecution of Antiochus, the reforms of Chassidim and the leadership of the Pharisees. A lot had happened in over seven hundred years. But as it turned out, it was a lot on the outside. They were still the same sick people described in Isaiah 1. They had the same rebellious heart as those who literally heard Isaiah in chapter six. So when the Messiah came, they were not eager to believe in Him. In fact, the light shone right in their face and they would not believe. Remember what happened just a chapter earlier? The Lord raises Lazarus from the dead. Jews report the situation to the chief priests. What is their response? "If we let this man alone, all will believe in Him. . .from that day they took counsel together for to put Him to death." They were part of the same evil generation that killed the prophets (see Matt. 23:29-33).

53:1 IN ROM. 10

Isaiah 53:1 is also quoted in another portion dealing with Israel in an important section in Rom. 10. Paul talks about the necessity of hearing the gospel and quotes from Isaiah 52:7, which we read earlier – "how beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace." He then quotes from 53:1 to describe their unbelief. Paul explains that their unbelief was not due to a lack of hearing, but from their own hardness of heart from a quote from, you guessed it, Isaiah "all day long I have stretched forth my hand to a disobedient and contrary people."

53:4 IN MATT. 8

Moving on to verse four, we find this same point emphasized. A careful study of verse four will show that it is in the same vein as vs. 1-3 – Israel's willful ignorance of the Messiah and rejection of the Messiah. Notice that this verse says He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows. This is quoted in Matt. 8. It is a wonderful section. We'll read 16 and 17. "When evening had come, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed. And He cast out the Spirits with a word and healed all who were sick, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: 'He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses.'" So 53:4 refers to his miraculous ministry of exorcisms and healing. He did come, incognito, as God's secret weapon. But as we've been saying, it's not that He's without witness. He gives them more than sufficient evidence to believe in Him. Recall those words from Matt. 8, he healed all who were sick. What success rate! 100%! No one came to Him and found Him disappointing. Earlier in that chapter we have the Centurion, who goes a step farther than the rest in His faith, believing that he doesn't need to have Jesus actually come to his sick servant. And the result? "His servant was healed that same hour!" Whatever a person trusts in Christ for, He is good for it. But as a whole, what was the nation's response to the one who "went about doing good?" "Barabbas" they shouted when given the choice between the friend of sinners and the murderous insurrectionist. Though He took our griefs and carried our sorrows, he was esteemed as stricken, smitten of God and afflicted.

What's the point of all these four verses? The Lord comes in humility, in disguise. But he's disguised just enough to where the nation won't believe in Him if their heart is not prepared (hence the ministry of John the Baptist, prepare the way of the Lord) and he reveals enough of his identity to where people do believe in Him if they are willing to believe in the light while they have it.

So one purpose of the Messiah's coming in humility and suffering was to expose the hardness of Israel's heart, to show them that they were not really looking for the Messiah. In the next two sections in which Israel speaks, we focus on why Christ suffered (verses 5 to 6) and how he suffered (verses 7 to 8).

THE SERVANT'S SACRIFICE (53:5-6)

HIS SUBSTITUTIONARY DEATH

In verse four we have the Lord's ministry of taking away our sorrows and our griefs. And as we read in Matthew 8, he did that with just a word! Tabitha Cummi! Come out of Him! Peace be still! Lazarus Come forth! He spoke and it was done. But in verse five we see Him undertaking a much more difficult task. Not only did he come to take away our griefs and sorrows, but he came to accomplish an infinitely more difficult task, to deal with our transgressions and iniquity, to give us peace and healing. Whereas before we were considering His suffering throughout his whole life (which of course was most clearly seen at the cross), we now come to exclusively view His suffering at Calvary.

When the chief priests buffeted Him in the face and mocked Him "prophesy!" when he was scourged and brutally beaten by the band of hundreds of soldiers, when the nails were driven into His hands and feet and he was left to suffer the agonies of the cross, men thought he was there because of sin. The Jews believed (and correctly so) that those who died on a cross were publically cursed of God. And they were right! He was there because of sin. But not for His own! For ours! In these couple verses we get some of the clearest insight in the Bible to the substitutionary sufferings of the Lord. He was not there for His sins, He had none. He was there for ours, paying the price that we deserved to pay! Do your best to think about the immensity of that price. Verse six says "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way." In case we get confused and think that this work was only accomplished for a portion of humanity, see how the Spirit emphasis all – everyone of us. This considers every person from the first man Adam to the very last sinner and everyone in between. The immensity of this sin debt could only be known to God. So often I callously sin and forget about a week later. I could never begin to imagine my own personal sin debt, let alone the sins of the world. But God knows it. Throughout human history God has seen every heinous act of man – every lie, every hateful thought, every haughty look, every rebellion, every theft, every rape, every murder, ever act of child molestation, every sin He sees and knows the depths of. And ALL those iniquities, from ALL men, God laid them ALL on the spotless Lord Jesus. Sometimes we sing that song, and I wish we'd sing it more often: "All thy sins were laid on Jesus, Jesus bore them on the tree; God who knew them laid them on Him and believing thou art free."

THE GUILT OFFERING

This is the picture of the guilt offering in the book of Leviticus. The offerer lays his hand on the head of an animal, a goat or a bull, and from then on the animal is treated as if it was sin, as if through the act of identification, the sins of the offerer were passed on to the animal. In the great annual Day of Atonement, Israel was to have two goats as sin offerings, because one animal couldn't paint a full enough picture. One goat had the sin of the nation transferred to it and was slaughtered. The other goat had the sin of the nation transferred to it and it was lead "to a place uninhabited" as if it was taking away the sin to a place of banishment. In fact, Jewish tradition tells us that they would lead that goat through the wilderness to a cliff and then push it off.

So in verse ten we read "You make His soul a guilt offering." In the New Testament we read that this was fulfilled at Calvary, when "He who knew no sin became sin for us," that Christ "bore our sins in His own body of the tree," that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law being made a curse for us," that He became "the lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." And though it defies human comprehension, we try to wrap our mind around what happened in those three hours of darkness, when the suffering that surpassed all others was endured, when Jesus Christ, the Son of God, experienced all the wrath and judgment of holy, sin-hating God. Who can enter into the depths of His cry of anguish – "My God My God, why have you forsaken me?" The answer of course, is given in the next verse where David, speaking prophetically of Jesus Christ, says "Because thou art holy!" He was taking my place and God is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. He was there for me. Hallelujah! What a savior!

THE SERVANT'S SILENCE (53:7-9)

HIS SILENCE

So that is the precious reason why he died. In next three verses we move on to see how he died. We read of his silence before His accusers. Remember how He was before Caiaphas? They brought out witnesses against Him and even their testimony didn't agree. He asks "Do you answer nothing? What is it these men testify against you? Mark reports "But He kept silent and answered nothing." Do you remember when he was in front of Pilate? Pilate had been trying to release the Lord and the Jews say "we have a law and by our law he ought to die because He made Himself the Son of God." Pilate goes back and asks Jesus "Where are you from" but Jesus gives him no answer. You remember Pilate's indignation. "Are you not speaking to me? Do you not know that I have power to crucify you and power to release you?" The Lord's silence is not because He simply refuses to talk, like a child in trouble and so they won't look you in the eyes. Nor is it that He doesn't want to say the truth. In both cases referenced above the Lord proceeds to speak after being silent! But notice when He is silent and when He speaks. When Caiaphas asks "What's your defense?" He could have given an answer, as He had done before when His time hadn't come. He could have responded in such a way that they could not have moved on with the trial. Hey had tried to trick him before – "Should we give taxes to Caesar?" He answered then because His hour had not yet come. But not then. He did not want the trial to stop. He had set His face like a flint and was determined to do the Father's will and would not by speaking,

escape it. Same thing applies for Pilate and Herod. Herod was excited to see Him. Pilate sends Jesus to Herod to try to get out of judging Him. Herod was Jesus' best chance for sympathy and release. But He is silent and refuses the out. So He is mocked and sent back to Pilate. At first the Lord is silent before Pilate and then He answers. But He speaks not out of self-preservation. Instead He boldly replies 'you would have no power at all except it were given to you,' putting Pilate in his proper place. Peter uses this verse to admonish us to follow Christ's example in I Pet. 2. "When He reviled, He reviled not again but entrusted Himself to Him that judges righteously." Instead of attacking insult for insult or attempting to escape crucifixion, he boldly remained silent so He could drink the cup the Father had given Him to drink.

HIS HONORABLE BURIAL

He never lost His cool. He did no violence. He never cursed. On the cross, you'll find that everything He said was either a prayer to God, a bestowal of forgiveness, caring for others, or fulfilling Scripture. His righteous character was missed by so many, but not all. We read of that in verse 9. They made His grave with the wicked. I'm told the word wicked is plural, so we could read, wicked ones. He was crucified between two thieves. But they made he was with the rich at His death. The word rich is singular. Though so many despised and rejected Him, there were His secret followers, who buried him in the tomb of one rich man – Joseph of Arimathea.

So these three sections tell us how the Lord's servant would suffer and die. First, he would suffer and die in disguise of his true nature (vs. 1-4). Then He would die as a substitute to pay the price of the sins of the world (5-6). And as we've just been reading, He would die righteously, entrusting Himself to the One who judges righteously.

THE SERVANT'S SUPREMACY (53:10-12)

NOT A TRAGEDY

When we think about the sufferings of this innocent servant, we might be tempted to think it is a sad, tragic story. And in one sense it is. But in another sense, as verses 10 to 12 point out it is a great victory! This is not a great injustice, a great crime against God. It was the will of God. So we are told those infamous, strange words "It pleased the Lord to bruise Him." This was God's plan all along. In fact we learn from the Revelation that Jesus is the lamb slain from the foundation of world. This was not a catastrophe in God's purposes – it is the great fulfillment of them! And so God would not forget His Son. He did not "leave His Holy One to see corruption." Yes, the messiah would be cut off in the prime of His life, unable to have a generation, as verse eight says. But He is raised in glory, His days are prolonged forever. As we read in verse ten, He will see His seed – not physical descendants, but a kind of spiritual offspring – the product of His work.

TRAVAIL OF HIS SOUL

This is what is called the "travail of His soul" in verse eleven. And it's there that we are told the great end result. "He shall see the labor of His soul and be satisfied." When the Lord went through the Hell of

Golgotha, through suffering unimaginable, and then thought of what it was all for – to redeem our souls, He said “It’s worth it!” When He sees the church He will see it glorious, without spot or wrinkle. He accomplished the work and when we appear with Him in glory, He will be satisfied. J. N. Darby put it well in that wonderful hymn:

O Jesus Lord who loved me like to Thee?
Fruit of Thy work! With thee too, there to see
Thy glory Lord while endless ages roll
Myself the prize and travail of thy soul

JUSTIFICATION

But if we’ve read all this and stop here, we’ve stopped too soon. Isaiah uses an important phrase and talks about many being justified. It means to be declared righteous, that in God’s court room I am not guilty, but innocent, free of all charges, and considered just in God’s records. In Romans we read that we are justified by His blood. But how do we receive that justification? How are we considered righteous in God’s eyes? Verse eleven tells us – by the knowledge of Him. So that’s the all important question – do you know Him? Do you know that Jesus Christ is God’s servant, the one who came to earth to give you eternal life as a free gift? Have you “believed His report?” If so, then Christ’s work on the cross is applied to you and you are justified!

CONCLUSION

THE ETHIOPIAN’S ANSWER

The Ethiopian Eunuch asked a question – who is Isaiah 53 talking about? From there Philip preached to him Jesus. And it was then that his confusion and frustration was cleared up. He had thought that coming to Jerusalem would be some spiritually enlightening event. But he found that they were as lost as anyone. But after understanding Isaiah 53, he saw God’s great plan. Everyone, Jew, Gentile, Religious, Irreligious, everyone has gone astray and is in need of God’s true servant and that the peace he was looking for, the forgiveness he was looking for, was found in knowing this servant – the Lord Jesus Christ.