

EXPOSITORY NOTES ON THE PROPHET ISAIAH

by

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ISAIAH CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

THE SUFFERING SAVIOUR

THE inspired writer gives us a graphic pen-portrait of the suffering Saviour and tells us of the glorious work He was to undertake in order that the sin question might be settled forever to the perfect satisfaction of God, the infinitely Holy One. This great Messianic prophecy is referred to a number of times in the New Testament, and in each instance is applied directly to our Lord Jesus Christ, as in Matthew 8:17; Acts 8:32-35; and I Peter 2:21-25.

Christ is here presented as the sinless Substitute for sinful men, to whom our sins were imputed that divine righteousness might be imputed to us who believe in Him. His lowly life, His rejection by His own people, His voluntary subjection to the suffering of the Cross, His atoning sacrifice, His glorious resurrection and the triumph of His Gospel in the salvation of a great host of sinners are all foretold here in a clear and concise way. None but God Himself could have given us this remarkable delineation of the character and work of the Lord Jesus so long before He came into the world.

Isaiah wrote this prophecy some seven hundred years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem in order to fulfill all that was written of Him. God foreknew all that His Son was to endure, and He gave this message to Isaiah to hand on to the future generations.

This wonderful passage begins with the 13th verse of chapter fifty-two: **“Behold, My Servant,”** for the One whom it describes is the same Person of whom he continues to speak in chapter fifty-three.

This is Hebrew poetry in blank verse. It is in sections of three stanzas each. The first one (chapter 52:13-15) introduces the Servant of the Lord whose glory must be equal to the shame He endured.

“Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. As many were astonished [astonished] at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men: So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider” (verses 13-15).

Hebrew scholars tell us that the word **“sprinkle”** here is from the same root as that for **“astonied,”** so that it could also say, **“As many were astonished at Him, so shall He astonish many nations.”** Then chapter fifty-three presents God’s servant, the suffering Saviour.

“Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (verses 1-3).

To the question, **“Who hath believed our report?”** Paul the apostle calls our attention in Romans 10:16 as evidencing the incredulity of Israel, the very people who had waited for the coming of their Messiah for centuries, but who, when He came, fulfilled their own Scriptures in rejecting Him. They failed to see in Jesus **“the arm of the Lord”** stretched forth for their salvation, as in the case of the great bulk of mankind today.

Christians often say that in their unconverted days, the Lord was to them as a root out of a dry ground, but now He is the altogether lovely one. But the expression does not imply lack of comeliness or beauty, but that the Lord Jesus Christ grew up before God as a sprout, a root. This is the Man whose name is **“the Branch,”** a root out of the dry ground of formalistic Israel, the one lovely plant that the Lord gazed down upon with such approval that He could open the heavens above Him and say, **“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”**

This was what the blessed Lord was to God - a tender plant, a plant of renown and beauty, growing out of the dry ground of Israel and of humanity in general. To God He was precious beyond words, but to unbelieving men He had no form, no comeliness, no beauty; that is, men did not recognize the moral loveliness that He ever exhibited. Some Christian teachers have misunderstood the expression, **“He hath no form nor comeliness,”** and have believed that the Lord Jesus Christ as man was positively repulsive in appearance, so that no one would like to look upon Him. But that is not in accordance with other scriptures.

In Psalm 45:2 it is written of our blessed Lord, **“Thou art fairer than the children of men,”** and we have every reason to believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, being the only sinless child that was ever born into the world, came here with a perfect human body and spotlessly beautiful. And as He grew up as a young man and later matured, He would be of lovely, splendid appearance, but those who listened to His teaching but loved their sins, and were angered by Him, saw in Him no beauty that they should desire Him.

It is not a question of physical characteristics; because of the sufferings He endured, His visage became marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men. But as Man here on earth, the Second Man, the Last Adam, He was as to His human form, face, and features absolutely perfect. But men looked upon Him with scorn and disdain because His teaching interfered with the lives that they loved to live. They say, **“When we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him.”**

So the prophet goes on to say:

“He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (verse 3).

All this was fulfilled in the days of our Lord’s ministry here on earth. Before that there is no hint that he was despised and rejected. The little that we are told of Him is that **“Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man.”** Before His ministry began, He must have been acceptable wherever He went; He was evidently a reader in the Nazareth synagogue because He went there and publicly began to read from this very book of Isaiah, so that He was in favor in the eyes of His townsmen.

It was when He went out on His great mission that men turned away from Him - despised and rejected Him - **“a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and we hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised and we esteemed Him not.** [Yet He was suffering in our place. Rejected, despised, He endured patiently all the shame put upon Him. **Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted** (verse 4).

Men looked upon the sorrows He endured as divine judgments for His own sins, deserved because of what He was in Himself, as though God was angry with Him, whereas He was but entering into our griefs and the sorrows that sin had brought upon the race of mankind. All through His lowly life He saw what misery sin had caused. Men said He had a devil, and called Him a Samaritan - made Him out as a deceiver, and considered that the sufferings that He endured were deserved.

“But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. 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” (verses 5, 6).

This brings us to the Cross, where He endured vicariously the judgment that our sins deserved in order that through His stripes we might be healed. There on the tree He was the great sin offering and the peace offering, too - there He **“made peace through the blood of His Cross”** (Colossians 1:20).

Surely here is substitutionary atonement. Sometimes people object to this on the ground that the word “substitution” is not found in the Bible, but when one is in the place of another, when one is taking what another deserves, that is substitution, and here we have the plain, definite statement, **“He hath borne our griefs . . . He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities,”** the chastisement whereby our peace was made fell upon Him with the result: **“With His stripes we are healed.”**

In verse six God, as it were, balances the books of the world-two debit entries and one credit entry.

The two debit entries: **“All we like sheep have gone astray”** - there is the whole fallen human race; **“we have turned everyone to his own way”** - there is each individual's own personal sin; and then the credit entry that clears it all on the books of God if men would but receive it: **“The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”**

Here we have the entire story of the Bible epitomized: Man's ruin both by nature and practice, and God's marvelous and all-sufficient remedy. The verse begins with all and ends with all. An anxious soul was directed to this passage and found peace. Afterward he said, “I bent low down and went in at the first all. I stood up straight and came out at the last.” The first is the acknowledgment of our deep need. The second shows how fully that need has been met in the Cross of Christ. How happy to be numbered among those who have put in their claim and found salvation through the atoning work which there took place!

To me verse six is the most wonderful text in the Bible. I have been trying to preach for sixty years and that is the first text I ever preached on. I was just a boy fourteen years old, and out on the street in Los Angeles with the Salvation Army, I started speaking on that verse, meaning to take five minutes, but a half-hour later the captain leaned over and said, “Boy, we should have been in the Hall twenty minutes ago. You'll have to tell us the rest some other time.” I have been trying to tell the rest all through the years since, but it is a text I never get beyond. The mock trial of the Lord is next foretold.

“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken” (verses 7, 8).

Taken from one place to another His case was heard but there was no one to speak for Him. It was all contrary to law, yet God permitted it. He said nothing for Himself. Pilate wondered greatly at His silence. Herod tried to make Him speak, yet brought as a lamb to be slain and like a sheep dumb before her shearers, so He opened not His mouth. With no word of complaint He gave Himself into the hands of wicked men to be crucified because there was no other way whereby guilty sinners could be saved.

Then the question comes in: **“Who shall declare His generation?”** or “Who shall declare His manner of life?” How careful God was to see that His manner of life was declared! Through false evidence he was condemned to die as a felon, as though guilty of sedition against Caesar, head of Imperial Rome; but God saw to it that His manner of life was fully declared, so that actually He was justified before His judges.

Pilate's wife sent him the message, **“Have thou nothing to do with that just Man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of Him.”** Pilate himself publicly took water and washed his hands, saying, **“I am innocent of the blood of this just Person.”**

Then as He hung upon that Cross, left to die as a felon, a thief by His side turned to his fellow and said,

“Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly . . . but this Man hath done nothing amiss.”

God saw to it that this declaration was made even on the very cross, **“This Man hath done nothing amiss.”** Yet He was allowed to suffer. Why? Because He was the great Sin Offering. **“He was taken from prison and from judgment and who shall declare His generation? for He was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was He stricken.”** He was hurried from one judgment scene to another until, at last, He was nailed to the Cross, there to endure all that our sins deserved.

“And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth. 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. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities” (verses 9-11).

They **“made His grave with the wicked.”** This was man’s intention. They would have cast His precious body out to be devoured by vultures or jackals, or burned in the fires that destroyed the refuse of the city in the valley of Hinnom. But God saw to it that He lay **“with the rich in His death,”** as a testimony to His absolute holiness and perfection of spirit.

What a wonderful epitome of the whole story of the life and death and mock trial and condemnation of our Lord Jesus is here! The four accounts of the crucifixion taken together give us the full meaning of the work of the Cross. Jesus is presented as enduring the shame and physical anguish inflicted upon Him by man for three awful hours. In that period He gave no evidence of perturbation of spirit. He was in perfect communion with the Father, and manifested a tender concern for others, but there was no word of self-pity or commiseration for His own sufferings. But in the last three hours He was enduring the terrible ordeal of bearing the judgment our sins deserved. His cry of loneliness is the key to the deeper suffering of those hours when God, the righteous Judge, had to abandon Him to the inward spiritual suffering as the Surety for sinners. It was then His soul - not merely His body - was made an offering for sin.

Observe, it was the Lord, God Himself, who dealt with Christ in judgment when He hung upon the tree. It was not His physical sufferings alone that made propitiation for sin, but what He endured in His inmost being when His holy, spotless soul became the great Sin Offering. In other words, it was not what man did to Him that made reconciliation for iniquity, but what He endured at the hand of God, leading to Immanuel’s orphaned cry, **“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”**

He was forsaken that we might be received into the divine favor. Because of this, in resurrection, **“He shall see His seed . . . and . . . be satisfied.”** God has raised up Jesus Christ from the dead and made Him the head of the new creation, made up of all who are saved through the work He accomplished on the Cross. Thus both His death and resurrection are depicted here.

The word “**travail**” refers to but one kind of suffering - birth pangs. Jesus travailed in His soul that millions might be born of the Word and Spirit of God to His eternal joy and satisfaction. The Gospel is based upon what He endured on that Cross, and this message goes out to all who have ears to hear.

“Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors”
(verse 12).

Instead of the offering of His body as a sin offering ending His days, He shall prolong His days. And He shall come back from the grave in resurrection life. How wonderful is that promise, **“Therefore will I divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong.**

Evidently the strong one here refers to Satan as man’s great enemy. The Lord Jesus said, **“No man can enter into a strong man’s house . . . except he first bind the strong man.”** He used that expression as typical of Satan himself, a wonderful encouragement here for those who try to preach the Gospel. **“He shall divide the spoil with the strong.”** Many people have an idea that there will be far more people in hell than in heaven, but God’s Word does not warrant that. Someone at once thinks of the question of the disciples, **“Are there few that be saved?”** But that was a question which the Lord did not answer by saying, “Yes, there are only a few that will be saved.” He said, **“Strive to enter in at the strait gate.”** In other words, Be in earnest about it, because many will strive to enter when it will be too late.

But what is the testimony of the Scriptures? Will there be few saved? There will be far more in heaven than will ever be in hell, because all the little ones will be in heaven - all the millions who have died in immaturity before coming to the years of accountability - they will all be in heaven. Jesus said, **“It is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish,”** and all those who have been mentally defective and never have been capable of accepting or rejecting Christ will all be covered by His Blood. And then in addition, all those who have turned to Him in repentance and trust in Him as Saviour. So he divides **“the spoil with the strong.”** God rewards the Lord Jesus according to His own thoughts of that which His Son has accomplished. Men may think lightly of His glorious work but God never does.

~ end of chapter 53 ~

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