

Isaiah Saw His Glory #6
Is. 52:12-53:10—“The sufferings of Christ”

Intro: The chapter we are studying today turned the chief financial officer of the Ethiopian government into a Christian in one conversation. You know the story. Directed by God’s Spirit Phillip the evangelist made his way on the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. The Ethiopian had been to Jerusalem to worship and was reading from the scroll of Isaiah. His attention was riveted on this text:

He was led as a sheep to slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He does not open His mouth. In humiliation His judgment was taken away; who shall relate His generation for His life is removed from the earth.” (Acts 8:32-33)

He didn’t know who this was about; but he wanted to know. And Phillip was sent by God to answer his questions. Starting from this very verse, he preached unto him Jesus and when the conversation was over the Ethiopian was ready to be baptized. Where in the OT was the passage and what was it about that passage that so deeply moved this new student of the gospel?

The fourth servant song of Isaiah gives us one of the most complete pictures of both the sufferings of Christ and the glories that followed. Isaiah has already introduced the suffering of the Messiah in his third servant song. In chapter 50:4-11 the Servant describes those sufferings from his point of view. In Isaiah 53 we are given a picture of the Servant’s sufferings from the prophet’s point of view.

The rejection of the Servant

The fact of the Messiah's rejection

Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? (Isaiah 53:1)

And interestingly he writes all this as if it had already taken place (using the past tense) even though it would not take place for another 700-800 years!

The prophet acknowledges that the prophecy of the Servant has not been believed by his people; and because it has not been believed, the “arm of the Lord” (His saving power) has not been revealed to those for whom the Christ was sent. It is one of the sad facts of the gospel that the Savior God sent to the Jews was rejected by the Jews.

But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him; that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke, “Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (John 12:37-38)

But why?

The cause of the Messiah's rejection

For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. (Isaiah 53:2).

There was nothing about the king that attracted the Jewish people to him from a worldly or carnal perspective:

His unimpressive beginnings

As a tender shoot, like root out of dry ground. Jesus grew up in a city that had such a reputation that Nathaniel once asked, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” To think that the King of the Jews should be raised in Nazareth was laughable to most Jews.

His unimpressive credentials as king

No form or majesty that we should look upon him or be attracted to him.

Cf. 1 Sam. 10:23-24 Saul's appearance evoked ready reception of him as king of Israel; but Jesus had no such advantage. He did not grow up in the royal palace. He did not have the training and experiences of a prince.

And Isaiah may even be saying that he didn't even look like royalty.

The results of the Messiah's rejection

He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. (Is. 53:3)

These pictures are intended to tell us that the experience of rejection was painful for the Servant! He felt sorrow, grief, and loneliness because of His rejection

Out this rejection came...

The sufferings of the Servant

Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. (Is. 53:4-6)
This must be one of the most poignant passages in the entire Bible—a word picture of the sufferings of the Christ. His sufferings were:

Severe

The words used to describe the Servant's sufferings evoke pictures of torture: stricken, smitten, afflicted, pierced, crushed, and chastened.

Undeserved

For what terrible things was the Servant suffering such torment? Matthew reminds us that his crimes were only these, that he cast out demons and healed all who were ill:
And 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 ill in order that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "He Himself took our infirmities, and carried away our diseases." (Mt. 8:16-17)
who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; (1 Peter 2:22)

Misinterpreted

Any Jew who looked at Jesus hanging on the cross would have thought, "What kind of vile creature is this that God would subject him to such a fate?"
Did not his crucifixion indicate that God did not approve of His life and that this was His punishment for wrong-doing? Not it all, instead Isaiah gives another explanation. His sufferings were:

Vicarious

They were born for those who really deserved them! The prophet repeated stresses the vicarious nature of Jesus' sufferings by the repeated use of "our"—our griefs, our sorrows, our transgressions, our iniquities, chastening for our well-being, we are healed. And then he makes the most astounding statement of all!
"The Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall upon Him!"
Jesus' death was, like all sacrifices, substitutionary; but in this case initiated by God Himself!
Was the victim of these things unwitting? Could He have chosen to avoid them? Isaiah answers these questions in the next paragraph.

The submission of the Servant

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

The servant who suffered so much is said to have endured it all without protest. By speaking he could have answered the charges made against him, providing evidence that He had committed no crime worthy of judgment; yet He chose to remain silent. Therefore the prophet tells us that the sentence Jesus endured was due to oppression and judgment (condemnation) rather than legal obligation and justice.

The Ultimate Question

Finally, the prophet looking back on the event as if it had already happened raises this final important question:

and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due? Who standing there at his crucifixion gave thought to the idea that Jesus was dying this death was not for His sins but for theirs?

Of course the answer to that question might have been originally answered, “No one!” Eventually, a few faithful followers came to understand that this death was not like any other. Among them was the apostle Peter who later wrote:

and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. (1 Peter 2:24-25)

But for the masses of the Jews, the crucifixion became the ultimate stumbling block; the idea of a crucified Christ was scandalous! And they did not believe, just as Paul would later write:

However, they did not all heed the glad tidings; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our report?” (Romans 10:16)

Conclusion: “Who considered...?” That question never goes away. That Jesus died no one can deny. The question as to why He died every person has to answer for himself.

You can say, “I really don’t care what happened to Him”.

Or, you can say, “He was a false prophet and imposter who deserved to die!”

Or, you can say, “What a pity that such a good person should be unjustly murdered! But it has nothing to do with me.”

Or, you can say, “I deserve to die for my sins; but He took my place on the cross”.

What would your response be? When the Ethiopian understood the person of Isaiah 53 and the nature of His death, he chose option four and with excitement said, “Look, water! What hinders me from being baptized?” How about you?