

Isaiah 53 – Suffering and Glory

The apostle Peter spoke of the Spirit in the prophets of old, and how it “testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow” (1 Pet. 1:11). Our readings for today take us to Isaiah chapter 53, which deals with both of these aspects of our Master’s experiences. Although our readings of this section of Scripture commences with verse 1 of Isaiah 53, the section really begins in the preceding chapter, where the speaker is Yahweh concerning His Son:

“Behold, **my servant** shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. As many as were astonished at thee; his **visage was so marred** more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men” (Isa. 52:13-14).

Here then, we read of the appearance of the suffering servant: it was “marred”. Again, chapter 53 continues this theme: “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” (Isa. 53:2). We shall return to this verse presently, but suffice to note that Jesus’ face (ie. visage) was marred through suffering. At his trial, “the men that held Jesus mocked him, and smote him. And when they had blindfolded him, **they struck him on the face**, and asked him, saying, who is it that smote thee?” (Lu. 22:63-64). To look at, during the days of his humiliation, he did not appear as a mighty king, destined to rule the world. Rather, he was despised and rejected of men: he had to wear the crown of thorns before the crown of glory.

The Apostle Peter again, speaks of the natural state of man who have a transient show of beauty: “all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the Word by which the Gospel is preached unto you” (1 Pet. 1:24-25). The Lord Jesus Christ, however, had no transient beauty – and he did not fall away. Growing up like a plant in a sterile environment, with no natural nourishment, Jesus was one who men despised – yet he was the only one who would endure for ever. Being the Word “made flesh”, he abideth for ever, by contrast to all that is in the world, which shall “pass away” (1 Jno. 2:17).

Turning to the first verse of Isaiah 53, we have a change of voice: now it is repentant Israel speaking:

“Who hath believed our report? And to whom is the arm of Yahweh revealed?” (Isa. 53:1).

That the answer to this question is negative is evident from the New Testament quote of this chapter:

“But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him: **That the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled**, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (Jno. 12:37-38);

A “report” had been given, but it was not received in faith: “yet they believed not” for the most part, although there has always been a faithful remnant: a minority who hold fast to the report of the prophets and apostles. In a day when the things of God are spurned by the majority of men and women, we would do well to heed the warning of Israel of old. The Arm of Yahweh is revealed to us, as it was extended to Israel:

“And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor: therefore his arm brought salvation unto him: and his righteousness, it sustained him” (Isa. 59:16).

In the Lord Jesus Christ, then, we see the arm of Yahweh revealed, bringing righteousness and salvation to those who would take hold of it. Indeed, the days are near when that arm shall be manifested to all peoples, as it is written in Isaiah 52:

“Yahweh hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Isa. 52:10).

DRY GROUND

As we saw earlier, the Master was “a tender plant,” coming as “a root out of a dry ground” (Isa. 53:2). That is to say, he grew up in a spiritually barren ground; a desolate wilderness. There was no natural nourishment to sustain him during the days of his mortal weakness. Following the bestowal of the Holy Spirit upon him at his baptism, our Lord was in the wilderness for a 40 day period, tempted of the adversary. During the trials that came upon him at that time, Jesus demonstrated a mind of the spirit, refusing to yield to the promptings of his own nature. Yet that occasion in the barren wilderness reflected how that he would be sustained in the spiritually “dry ground” of Israel, by constant recourse to the Word and Encouragement from his Father in heaven.

However, the days are coming when the dry ground shall be transformed into a luscious paradise:

“The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing ... in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert. And **the parched ground shall become a pool**, and the thirsty land springs of water ...” (Isa. 35:see verse 1-7).

Whilst these verses speak of literal blessings that will come under Messiah’s reign, they also reflect a spiritual revival for Israel. For instance, we read that “the desert shall rejoice”: literally, the desert is inanimate – it is incapable of rejoicing. But formerly barren Israel shall rejoice with “joy and singing” at the blessings their Messiah shall bring.

REJECTED OF MEN

Being “despised and rejected of men”, Jesus was “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.” He was rejected by those he came to save: he was, as it were, “the light shining in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not” (Jno. 1:5). As the spirit of Christ in the Psalmist wrote: “... I am a worm and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people. All that that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, He trusted on Yahweh that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him” (Psa. 22:6-8). Notice again, that it is those “that see me” that treated him so: his visage was marred before them to the extent that humanly it would seem impossible that this man was the Son of the Almighty Creator. He looked nothing like a King in human terms, and so they sarcastically said of Yahweh “let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him”. These are the things he endured “for us”, that he might bare our griefs, and carry our sorrows away.

This chapter continues to describe in detail some of the sufferings of Yahweh's servant:

"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" (Isa. 53:5).

The New Testament record illustrates the accuracy of this prophecy. Being scourged, smitten with rods in the face, and wounded by the terrible nails that pierced his hands and feet, he endured all of these things "for us". The entire system of salvation depended upon his loving obedience to his Father in all things. As Peter wrote, citing Isaiah 53, Christ was one:

"Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: **by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned** unto the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Pet. 2:22-25).

Notice the application of Isaiah 53: "All we like sheep have gone astray" – but Peter adds: "But are now returned". There is hope of repentance even for the most hardened criminal, if they would but turn to Yahweh, and embrace the arm of Salvation extended to mankind in the giving of His Son. Even those who rejected and despised the Master could come to repentance, acknowledging the Truth.

Isaiah's prophecy continues to describe the meek submission of Jesus to his Father's will:

"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" (Isa. 53:7).

He gave no justification for his position: he did not give a railing accusation to prove he was in the right. Rather, he humbly accepted his Father's requirement that he would be as a lamb to the slaughter. Interestingly, however, the Apostle John saw a vision of Christ in glory: "I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood **a Lamb as it had been slain ...**". And then the sound of singing "a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: **for thou wast slain**, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation ..." (Rev. 5:6, 9). The fact of the Lamb being slain was the qualification required to open the seals of the scroll, and by implication, take control of the future in the working out of the various seals etc in the book. But also, the Apostle continues to describe the multitude of the redeemed "saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain **to** receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing" (Rev. 5:12). Notice the point here, the Lamb was slain *in order to* receive the things so described. As Paul expressed the situation in his Epistle to the Philippians:

"... he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross, **wherefore** God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow ..." (Phil. 2:9-10).

THE PLEASURE OF YAHWEH

The prophet continues to describe how that in the sufferings of Messiah, we see the Divine pleasure being worked out:

“Yet it pleased Yahweh to bruise him: he hath put him to grief ...” (Isa. 53:10).

This statement is a stumbling block to some. How could it possibly be that Yahweh took pleasure in the sufferings of His Only Begotten Son? The solution to the problem is to recognise that it was not the sufferings that gave Him Pleasure, but it was what would be able to come as a consequence of those sufferings. In the purpose of Yahweh, sinful human nature needs to be put to death, and so it was in the case of His Son. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19).

The Apostolic testimony is that:

“What the Law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh ...” (Rom. 8:3)

Notice that it is all the work of God. God sent his son, and in this way condemned sin in the flesh by sacrifice. Those wicked men who took Jesus, and crucified him were “gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand, and thy counsel determined before to be done”, said the disciples (Acts 4:28) in their prayer to the Father. His guiding Hand was in it all, so that the Slain Lamb could be raised to glory, and his brethren could be saved through faith in him, and in the power vested in him.

BEING SATISFIED

Most of the chapter under consideration is regarding the sufferings of Christ, but the closing verses describe the glory that would follow:

“ ... he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of Yahweh shall prosper in his hand” (Isa. 53:10).

Following his death, Messiah’s days would be prolonged. As the Psalmist describes: “He asked life of thee, and thou gavest it him, even length of days for ever and ever” (Psa. 21:4). Daniel saw a vision of the glorified Messiah, as being the “Ancient of days” (Dan. 7:9), who would sit upon the throne.

“He shall see the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied” (Isa. 53:11).

When the Lord looked back in immortal glory, at the things he endured, the records says he was “satisfied”. Beholding the great blessings that came through him – and will come – he was satisfied that it was all worthwhile. He laid down his life for his friends – which friends are we, if we hold fast to the faith in the present day of darkness. The Lord is our example of one who overcame by the vision of the future that was ever before his mind. By contrast to those who “hid their faces from him”, let us therefore be found “looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith: who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2).

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