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18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
Sunday, January 7, 2018

Isaiah 53:1-6, 10-12 “A Prophecy of the Cross”

Intro. V.6 tells us of the problem we face. “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way....” Isn’t that descriptive of humanity? We all have strayed like sheep from the right path. We are born with a sin nature that prompts us to go astray; and we foolishly decide to reject God’s way and go our own way. Many times we have failed to do what is right in spite of our best intentions.

This sin problem that we all have is not insignificant, but very serious. The prophet uses two different words to describe it in vv.5-6. He calls it transgression, which means rebellion against God, daring to cross the line that God has drawn (Isa. 53:5, 8). We have all willfully broken His commandments. He also calls it iniquity, which refers to the crookedness and perversion of our sinful nature. Furthermore, the Bible declares that the wages of sin is death.

How can the terrible sin problem be solved? Is there any hope for us? God is not indifferent to our sin problem. The answer to our sin problem is found in this prophecy of Isaiah 53. For hundreds of years God had been promising to send a Savior. Though some would question if Isaiah was indeed referring to the Messiah here in this prophecy, the New Testament makes it clear that the person described here was Jesus the Messiah. Do you remember in Acts 8 that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading this fifty-third chapter of Isaiah as he was going from Jerusalem back to his own country? When Philip asked for a ride from him, he asked Philip, “... of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?” (Acts 8:34). Philip made it clear that the prophecy of Isa. 53 was fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. Not only did Philip affirm this, but other New Testament authors did as well. Isaiah 53 is quoted or alluded to in the New Testament more frequently than any other Old Testament chapter. There are at least forty-one different citations from this chapter found in seven Scripture passages of the New Testament.¹ Furthermore, as we shall see, the details of this prophecy have been fulfilled in minute detail by none other than Jesus of Nazareth. Surely, He is the One this prophecy is about.

Now this morning I want you to see for yourself that this prophecy is indeed about Jesus, and I want you to see what He did to save us from our sins. Notice with me first of all:

I. THE HUMBLE BEGINNINGS OF THE MESSIAH

The prophet says in v.2, “For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him.” We now know that the Servant of the Lord is God’s Son, and yet He became human and grew up in a humble environment. Note the particulars of this prophecy. In v.2 we see that:

A. He Grows Up As a Tender Plant - He did not suddenly appear as a great tree, but came as a “tender plant.” Even so, Jesus began His earthly life, not as a warrior king from heaven but

¹ For example, see Matt. 8:17; Mark 15:28; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Acts 8:27-40; Rom. 10:11-21; 1 Peter 2:21-24.

as a baby, born in humble circumstance in Bethlehem. In childhood He grew up in a carpenter's shop in despised Nazareth (John 1:43-46). He was young and tender to begin with. Furthermore,

B. He Grows Up as a Root out of Dry Ground – One of the amazing things about certain trees is that you can cut one down, even level with the ground, and in a few months you may find new life springing forth from the stump. It is even more amazing if new life springs from the root that is in dry ground.

Well at the time of the birth of Christ the family of King David had been cut down. They were no longer princes and kings but most were peasants. The nation Israel had been conquered by yet another kingdom, the Roman Empire, and the Jewish nation was under the iron heel of Rome. Israel was a wilderness of dry ground, both economically, politically, and spiritually. Yet the loveliest flower of humanity came from one of the driest spots in the world's history. It was humanly impossible for His generation to produce such a great man, but He came nevertheless, for He came forth from God.

C. He Was Common in Appearance – The last of v.2 says, "He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him." These words probably describe His physical appearance from childhood to manhood. We all have our ideas of what Jesus looked like. We would like to believe He was strong and handsome, and even His appearance caused Him to stand out from the crowd. Yet this prophecy indicates that there was nothing about His physical appearance made Him different from a common, ordinary Jewish man. He had no stately form or splendor in His appearance that made Him look like a prince of royal blood. There was nothing about His physical appearance that caused people to take much interest in Him. When the people of His local community heard Him say that He was the fulfillment of Isaiah's Messianic prophecy, they were shocked with unbelief saying, "Is this not the carpenter's son?" (Mt. 13:55). He looked like a common, ordinary man.

I believe this means that Jesus fully identified Himself with common people. That should encourage most of us who are just common people. Furthermore, the prophet was warning His people that they should not expect a Messiah with an impressive, royal appearance. Yet the vast majority of people rejected Jesus because He did not fit their preconceived ideas of what the Messiah would be like. That is why Isaiah began this chapter with the words, "Who has believed our report?"

Not only did Jesus grow up in humility, but the prophecy also tells us of:

II. THE SUFFERING OF THE MESSIAH

Notice the kinds of suffering the Servant of the Lord would endure:

A. He Would Be Rejected – In v.3 we read, "He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him." Psalm 22:6 also predicted this: "But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised by the people." John 1:11 says, "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." He was even rejected by his own brothers according to John 7. He was rejected by one of His closest disciples. He was rejected by the leaders of His nation. He was rejected by some of the common people when they cried out, "Crucify Him, Crucify Him."

Rejection is one of the most emotionally painful experiences that we can endure, and there is no doubt but that such rejection brought sorrow and grief to Jesus. Haven't you felt the pain of rejection? To be rejected by a parent, or spouse, or friend is very painful. The emotional pain of rejection can linger longer than physical pain.

Why did they reject Him? Well the Jewish people wanted a conqueror; not a common carpenter. They wanted a sovereign; not a servant. They were ashamed of Him because He did not represent the things that were important *to them*, things like power (Mt. 16:1; John 6:30), wealth (Luke 16:14), social prestige (14:7-14; 15:1-2), reputation (18:9-14), and being pampered and served by others (22:24-27; Mt. 16:21-28). These values are not the ones Jesus promoted.

Jesus is rejected today for the same reasons. If you present the Jesus of the Bible, many will reject Him. Paul said the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness (1 Cor. 1:18). Don't reject Jesus just because Israel did, or because many reject him today. As we see in this prophecy, God predicted all along that His Messiah would be rejected, and many would not believe in Him!

Yes, Jesus suffered the pain of rejection. But notice what else Isaiah predicted He would suffer:

B. He Would Be Pierced – In v.5 we read, “But He was wounded for our transgressions....” He was “wounded,” which can also mean “pierced through.”

Doesn't this describe what happened to Jesus? Indeed, His hands and feet were pierced by nails (Ps 22:16; Luke 24:39-40) and His side by a spear (John 19:31-37; Zech. 12:10; Rev. 1:7). He was crucified, which was not a Jewish form of execution (John 12:32-33; 18:31-32). Capital punishment to the Jews meant stoning (Lev. 24:14; Num. 15:35-36). Crucifixion was not even practiced until hundreds of years after this prophecy was given!

C. He Would Be Bruised - V.5 goes on to say, “He was bruised for our iniquities.” Isaiah 53 is the only place this Hebrew word is translated “bruised.” Normally it refers to something or someone being crushed on the ground, either by a burden or an oppressor. That is why the HCSB says the He was “crushed because of our iniquities.”

Well, we do know that as He carried His cross, Jesus was so exhausted that He fell under weight of the cross. He was emotionally crushed by the rejection He faced. Yet the primary burden that crushed the Lord was our sin. V.6 says, “The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (see v.12; 1:4). What a heavy, painful burden indeed!

D. He Would Be “Chastised” – V.5 also says, “The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.” “Chastisement” refers to “discipline, chastening, correction.” This means that He endured the corrective punishment that we deserve. Part of that included receiving many “stripes,” for that was a common form of corrective punishment in that day. Jesus bore the terrible pain of that whip known as the “cat of 9 tails.” It had fragments of bone or metal at the ends, and the whip would tear away flesh with each lash. See Him wince in pain with each lash of the whip! What suffering He endured!

E. He Was Numbered with the Transgressors – That's what we read in the last of v.12. The HCSB translates says that He “was counted among the rebels....” Jesus did not die alone. He died along with two criminals, just as indicated here. Mt. 27:38 says, “Then two robbers were

crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left.” He was reckoned² or considered by His enemies to be no better than the criminals He was crucified with. What shame and humiliation it added to our Lord to be crucified with such ungodly men, as if He, too, was a wicked man! Furthermore, v.9 says, “And they made His grave with the wicked....” Normally, He would have been buried where other crucified criminals were buried, in the city garbage dump, where his body would be consumed with maggots!

The big question at this point is why would Jesus suffer to such an extent? Why would God even allow it? Well, the enemies of Jesus looked upon Him suffering on the cross and concluded that the cross proved that He was a sinner. In fact, we read in the last of v.4, “Yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.” Many smugly believed that Jesus was just getting what He deserved. In their mind, the fact that God did not intervene to save Him proved their point.

But were they right? As we read the rest of this prophecy, the answer is a resounding “No.” We see in the last of v.9 that He didn’t deserve such suffering. There Isaiah says, “Because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth.” So why did God the Father not prevent or stop the suffering of Jesus? Their own Scriptures gave the reason for His suffering right here in this prophecy. So now let’s consider last of all:

III. THE ATONING SACRIFICE OF THE MESSIAH

The prophet gives several reasons why the Servant of the Lord would suffer and die. First, it was:

A. To Take Our Place in Suffering the Penalty of Sin – Look at verses 4-5, where the emphasis is on the plural pronouns. “Surely He has borne *our* griefs and carried *our* sorrows; ...But He was wounded for *our* transgressions, He was bruised for *our* iniquities; the chastisement for *our* peace was upon Him, and by His stripes *we* are healed.” Clearly, the prophet is saying He would not suffer and die for His sins *but for our sins*, in our place. This message was at the heart of Israel’s religious system, the innocent animal dying for the guilty sinner (Lev. 16). This is what theologians call “the substitutionary atonement” of Christ. We cannot explain everything about the cross, but this much is clear: Jesus took the place of guilty sinners and paid the penalty of our sins to secure our salvation. Under the Law of Moses, the sheep died for the shepherd; but under grace, the Good Shepherd died for the sheep (John 10:1-18). We were the ones who had gone astray, yet He left heaven, lived among us, and took our place and suffered what we deserve.

So why did Jesus die in our place? The prophecy gives yet another reason why Jesus was willing to suffer:

B. To Satisfy the Justice of God – God is a just God. Sin must be punished. So we read in v.10, “When You make His soul an offering for sin....” That’s the language of the Old Testament sacrificial system. Every Jew was familiar with the sin offering. Animals were sacrificed, and their blood applied to the altar, to make atonement and satisfy the holy demands of the Law. Now look down at v.11, “He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities.” According to this verse, the Messiah would satisfy the righteousness of God and His holy Law.

² The word “numbered” also means “to be reckoned, be assigned.”

The theological term for this is “propitiation” (Rom. 3:25; 1 John 2:2). God’s wrath against sin is just because it offends His holiness and violates His holy Law. In His holiness, He must judge sinners; but in His love, He desires to forgive them. However, God cannot ignore sin or compromise with it, for that would be contrary to His own nature and Law. How did God solve the problem? The Judge took the place of the criminals and met the just demands of His own holy Law! As someone said, “God had to be satisfied before I could be justified.”

This truth was vividly illustrated at the cross of Christ. Imagine for a moment Jesus suffering on that cross. He was on the cross six hours, hanging between heaven and earth from nine o’clock in the morning until three o’clock in the afternoon. In the first three hours man did his worst. He spat upon Him, nailed Him without mercy to the cruel cross, heaped ridicule and insult upon Him, and many waited around to watch Him die. At twelve o’clock noon, after He had hung there for three hours in agony, God drew a veil over the sun, and darkness covered that scene, shutting out from human eye the transaction between God the Father and the Sacrificial Lamb. During those three hours God made His soul an offering for sin as Jesus drank every drop of the cup of the wrath of God against sin. That cross became an altar where we behold the Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29). He was dying for somebody else. He was dying for you and me.

Now that the demands of the Law have been satisfied, another purpose for His suffering could be fulfilled:

C. To Grant Us the Blessings of Salvation – One thing that motivated Jesus to go to the cross and endure the suffering was the fact that many would benefit from His sacrificial work. Notice three of the benefits or blessings mentioned in this prophecy:

1. Peace – The last of v.5 says, “The chastisement for our peace was upon Him...” The only way a lawbreaker can be at peace with the law is to suffer the punishment that the law demands. Jesus kept the law perfectly, yet He suffered the whipping and death that belonged to us. Yet because He took our place, we now have peace with God and cannot be condemned by God’s law. Romans 5:1 says, “Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. Rom. 8:1). Jesus has bought peace with God to all who will believe.

Have you experienced this peace in your own heart?

2. Healing – The last of v.5 also says, “And by His stripes we are healed.” The “healing” here primarily refers to the forgiveness of sins. The apostle Peter affirms this in 1 Peter 2:24, where he says, “who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.” Healed of what? Peter makes it quite clear that we are healed of our trespasses and sins (cf. Ps. 103:3). You see, sin is not only like a burden, but it is also like a sickness that only God can cure (Isa. 1:4-6; Jer. 30:12; Nahum 3:19.). Sickness in the body is a picture of the effect of sin in the soul.

Yet Matthew 8:14-17 the gospel writer says that our Lord’s healing ministry was a fulfillment of v.4, where it literally says, “Surely He has borne our sicknesses, and carried our pains...” Salvation will ultimately lead to freedom from all forms of sickness. Aren’t you looking forward to the day, as Rev. 21:4 says, “there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” The day is coming when there will be no more cancer! However, it should be clear to all that sickness and death remain a part of the Christian’s life, in spite of our spiritual salvation. This verse does not teach

that there is “healing in the atonement” in the sense that *every* believer therefore has the “right” to be physically healed prior to the return of Christ.

Jesus did not liken the kingdom of God to a diamond, but to a pearl (Mt. 13:46). Of all precious stones, the pearl has the humblest origin. It begins with a wound and is created out of God’s resources for healing the wound. So the kingdom of God begins with a wound, the wound in the body of Jesus. Then we marvel at God’s resources for healing: physically, mentally, and spiritually!³

3. Righteousness - It says in the last of v.11, “My righteous Servant shall justify many....” To justify means “to declare righteous.” He took our sins that we might receive the gift of His righteousness. 2 Cor. 5:21 says, “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (cf. Rom. 5:17). Justification means that God declares believing sinners righteous in Christ and never again keeps a record of their sins (see Ps. 32:1-2 and Rom. 4:1-8).

How do you obtain these saving benefits? How can we have peace with God, healing for our soul, and obtain righteousness? We know the answer from other Scriptures. We must repent of our sins and place our faith in Jesus Christ who died for our sins, as we have seen in this prophecy.

Conclusion: Isaiah began this prophecy with the words, “Who has believed our report?” Are you among those who will not believe, in spite of such a clear prophecy about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Or will you say today, “I believe in Jesus. I believe He died for my sins, and I want to be saved today.” If so, I invite you to repent of your sins, and place your faith in Jesus. If you will do that, then your sins will be forgiven and taken away, for God will not judge the same sins twice. You can join those who have been made right with God by the blood of Jesus. You can have peace with God. You can have hope of eternal life, where there will be no more sickness or pain.

Evangelist D. L. Moody was once about to board a train when he was approached by a man who wished to know how to be saved. The train was about to leave and Moody had but one moment to spare. “Isaiah 53:6” said Moody as the conductor waved his flag, “Isaiah 53:6.” Then he said, “Go in at the first ‘all’ and go out at the second one.” The train moved away and the man went home. He looked up the verse, did as he was told, and was wonderfully saved.

Most of us here today are Christians. Always remember that Jesus suffered and died for you. What are you doing for Jesus? Are you serving Him? Are you building up His kingdom? Do you need to rededicate your life to Him? Do you need to move your membership to this church? If so, you obey your Lord as we give the invitation.

Sources: David Cawston (notes from sermon on rejection, v.3); Jim Henry (notes from his sermon on this text); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 3 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1982); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Warren Wiersbe, *Expository Outlines on the Old Testament* (Wheaton: Victor Books/SP Publications, 1993). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

³ *Preaching* (March-April, 2004), 74.