

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

March 21, 2010 His Victory in Suffering

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Dear Radio Friends,

I ask you to open your Bibles with me to the book of Isaiah, chapter 52. We are going to look, in the coming weeks, at the cross and suffering of Jesus Christ from the point of view of Isaiah 52:13 through Isaiah 53. In these verses we are taken to the most important aspect of the cross of Christ. The Gospels in the New Testament tell us when, and where, and how, and at whose hands Christ died. They give us the history. But this passage tells us the what and the why of the cross. What was the death of Jesus Christ? Why did Jesus Christ die? In these chapters, you have God's own commentary on the cross of Jesus Christ: the meaning and the reason for the cross.

Isaiah, you understand, is the Old Testament evangelist, the Old Testament gospeler. In the book of Isaiah, we read of the person and the work of Jesus Christ. There is no book in all the Old Testament quite like the prophecy of Isaiah. Even though this book was written 700 years before Christ came, Isaiah tells us of His virgin birth (chap. 7), His humble beginnings and His divinity (chap. 9), His royal lineage (chap. 11). He tells us of the forerunner, John, in chapter 40. He calls Jesus the great Shepherd again in chapter 40. He speaks of His meekness and His gentle demeanor in chapter 42; of His tireless service to God (chap. 49); His anointing with the Holy Spirit (chap. 61); and His second coming and the new heavens and the new earth (chap. 63-65). And like a mountain peak, standing out from all those passages, is Isaiah 53, which speaks of His saving work through His suffering.

Today, we want to look at the last three verses of chapter 52. These verses belong with chapter 53 as one unit. It is a beautiful, prophetic song made up of five stanzas or sections, each comprised of three verses, the theme of which is the suffering of the Servant of God. The words at the end of chapter 52 (verses 13-15) are an introduction. Let us read those words.

""Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. As many were 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.""

You have here (in v. 13) first the exaltation and the victory of Christ. Isaiah, as he begins to tell us of the suffering of Christ, takes us immediately to the end. And in doing that, he uses here an excellent literary device to capture our attention at the beginning. Perhaps you've read a biography before in which the author does that. Instead of starting with the birth and childhood, you are carried forward to a moment of triumph and achievement in the person's life. Well, that is similar to what Isaiah does here. He starts with the glory of the exalted Christ: ""Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high.""

It is important that we understand who is speaking here. Who is it that says: ""Behold, my servant""? It is very obvious that this is God announcing to the world the coming and the

suffering of Jesus Christ whom He calls His servant. At the beginning, God wants us to know the end. In chapter 53, indeed in the very next verse, we are going to stand at the foot of the cross of a suffering, dying Savior. And God wants us to know that, regardless of how we may evaluate the cross—from an external point of view—regardless of how man may evaluate the cross from the point of view of what he sees, the cross *is* victory. And it leads to glory. Jehovah says, "Behold, my servant shall deal prudently." We could translate the original here this way: "My servant shall prosper," or "My servant will be successful." God calls us, here, to look on Christ in faith and to see the victory of the cross. Though we may stand at the foot of the cross and see Him smitten and wounded and reproached and shamed; and though it may give the appearance of defeat, He is on the way to victory!

That comes because of the willingness of Christ. Notice in the text that God calls Him "my servant." That is a very beautiful name of Jesus because it tells us of His willingness to carry out the work that the Father gives Him. It portrays Christ as the One who would come to accomplish salvation, who would come in humble obedience to the Father, who would lower Himself and take on the form of a servant, who would come in our human flesh, who would subject Himself to the law of God and the curse of the law to carry out God's plan for our salvation, who would humble Himself because this was God's way. He would humble Himself to the death of the cross.

The words, and the order of this text, must have been a great encouragement to Christ Himself. There is a great promise here for Christ. In Hebrews 12 we are told that Christ, for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross. And here, in Isaiah 52:13, the joy of the cross is set before Him.

Think of Christ's bitter suffering in the garden of Gethsemane, where His sweat was great drops of blood and where, as He contemplated what was to come, He prayed: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." And then God the Father held before His Son the promise of glory.

There is an important principle here for the Christian life, too. Though you may look and feel defeated in this life, despised by others, weak in the battle with sin, dear believer, listen. There is victory in Christ.

In the second phrase of verse 13 God, who speaks here, adds: "He shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high." He speaks here in the superlative. There are three verbs here: exalted, extolled, and made very high. It is like the "Holy, holy, holy" of the angels in Isaiah 6, another vision of the glory of Christ. He will be greatly exalted, above and beyond the greatest of all earthly kings and rulers. And that will come because He will lower Himself more than any servant. Because of that, He will be exalted higher than any other king.

We are talking about a reality, a reality today. Ephesians 1:20ff. speaks of this reality that God wrought in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and set Him at His own 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 world, but also in that which is to come; and hath put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be the head over all. Today, Christ is exalted.

So, this is where Isaiah begins—with, really, a breath-taking vision of the magnificence and the

glory of Jesus Christ in heaven.

But in verse 14, and for the next chapter, the story takes an unexpected twist. From the lofty heights of the exalted servant we are brought to the lowliness of His earthly life and suffering. In verse 14: "As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men." There is something absolutely astonishing and shocking happening here. The word "visage" means: appearance. Isaiah is talking about the appearance of the Servant of God. He is talking about Christ's coming. And there is something astounding and shocking about His appearance. His appearance is altogether different from what you would expect. Unless someone tells you that this is Christ, you would not believe it. And when you do hear, "this is the Messiah," you are astonished that this could be Him! Isaiah has in mind the coming of Christ to the earth in His birth and life and death. There is a great difference between what you would expect and what you actually see when Christ comes.

How does He come? Well, He comes into the lowliness of Bethlehem's stable and manger. He comes into a life of poverty where He has no place to call home. No extras in His life, no luxuries. He comes, not with might or power; but teaching—using words. He gathers around Him a band of disciples who are mostly uneducated fishermen and such. He lives a life on the edge of society—despised and rejected of men. You stand at His cradle; you look at His life, and you say: "And this is the Messiah? This is the Servant of Jehovah? This is the Son of God?" He ends up on trial. He is beaten and bleeding. All His friends and disciples forsake Him. He is falsely accused. He is led away and crucified with two thieves and murderers. He is abused. His appearance is so marred that it is barely possible to tell that He is a man, let alone that this man is Jehovah's Servant. He is the Son of God? The Creator of the universe? This One that is so barbarically treated and brutalized? This One who has His beard ripped out and His hands pierced, beaten with a whip so badly that His blood begins to flow? This is the Servant of Jehovah?

His visage is so marred. And the marring of His visage is not a cover-up. It is not like espionage or a private investigator hiding his identity. No, what Isaiah is talking about here is the humiliation of Christ in His human birth and in His life of suffering and in the cross of His death. He will humble Himself and become a servant and subject Himself to the death of the cross.

And as you look at Him in that humiliation, there is nothing that would tell you who He is. His identity is hidden. This is Christ, coming into our flesh; Christ, coming from the heights and the glory in the Godhead, becoming a man, dwelling among men, suffering with men, suffering at the hands of men, dying for men.

This is what Philippians 2 calls "the mind of Christ." He is God. He takes nothing from God by calling Himself God. He is rightfully called God from all eternity. He is the maker of the heavens and the earth. He is the eternal second person of the Trinity. But He takes on Himself the form of a servant. And He humbles Himself and becomes a man. And, finding Himself a man, He humbles Himself further and becomes a servant to the law. And He subjects Himself to death, the bitter and the shameful death of the cross.

This is absolutely astonishing and bewildering—that this servant, who will be so high and so lifted up and so exalted, that His appearance in His coming into the world will be so marred,

more than any other man, that He would be so humiliated that it would be impossible to recognize who He is. People who hear this will be astonished!

That response of astonishment is described in verse 15: ""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."" When the messengers of the suffering Servant go out and tell others about Him, who He is and what He suffered; when it is reported among the nations that the Son of God humbled Himself and was subject to such brutality; the kings of the nations will be astonished at Him and dumbfounded. They will say, ""This is the exalted Christ, the King of kings? Kings have throne rights. Why should a sovereign suffer in such a fashion?"" The kings shall shut their mouths. Kings who speak and no one tells them to be quiet; kings who command and armies march; kings who make edicts and people listen; kings who are used to talking all day long will be silent. They will shut their mouths at the telling of this story. When, at the end of verse 15, they hear and see things that they had not known, that this is the Christ, then they will be silenced and dumbfounded.

What is this silence? Well, it represents the silencing of unbelief. Unbelief is very noisy. In its attempts to silence the witness of the gospel, unbelief is loud and boisterous. Think of the day of Jesus. Those who refused to believe said things like this: ""This is Joseph the carpenter's son. This is not the Servant of Jehovah. This is not the Messiah. No, we know this man. We know his family—his brothers and sisters are here with us. He's just a man."" Think of the noise around the cross as Jesus suffered and died—the mocking and the laughter at Him. And it is really the same today. A lot of talk and noise, partying, pleasure, fun, to drown out the noise of the gospel and the witness of Jesus Christ.

There is some religious talk. Jesus, they will say, was a great teacher. He was a moral man. He was a good leader. They will tie themselves loosely to Christ. But they will not acknowledge His glory. They will not see Him as Lord and King. They will not submit to His word.

On the final day of Judgment, when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, then the unbelievers will be shocked into silence. Verse 15 speaks of kings. Think of Herod and Pontius Pilate on the Judgment Day, the two earthly rulers who condemned Jesus to death, they will stand before His throne. I think of what Jesus said to Caiaphas the High Priest in Matthew 26:63. Caiaphas says to Jesus: ""I adjure thee, by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of the living God."" And Jesus, in verse 64, says, ""Thou hast said. Nevertheless, I say unto you, hereafter ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven."" Think of Caiaphas, think of Herod and Pontius Pilate at their death, as they stood before the throne of Christ silenced. This is the One? This is the One whom I condemned? Their mouths will be shut.

And so, there is the one kind of silence. Finally, on the Judgment Day, all the unbelief of man, of kings, and of all who denied Jesus Christ will be silenced. All those who talk now, in unbelief, will be silenced then. Those who say of the Christ of the Scripture: ""That's the Son of God?""—those who will not believe—they will be silenced then. Then all the world will be silent before His throne.

But there is another silence, another awe and astonishment. It is the astonishment of one who

believes the gospel on this side of the grave. It is the one who is shocked at the marred visage of Christ because he understands why Christ was so humiliated. Do you know why? It was because of sin. Verse 15 speaks of Him sprinkling all nations. His blood will be sprinkled. It will be splattered, scattered over many nations. What is the sprinkling of His blood? The priests of the Old Testament would sprinkle the blood of an innocent sacrifice on the mercy seat to make atonement for sin. And you see here the purpose of the marring of the visage of Christ. Verse 14 leads into verse 15. He is so humiliated. His identity is hidden with the purpose of His sprinkling the nations with His blood. This is His sacrifice. This is the shedding of His blood for sinners.

And then the gospel of the cross will go forth to the nations. The astonishment, the awe, is the silencing of the sinners' unbelief. It is the silence of repentance. It is the silence that comes over the sinner as he realizes that Christ's humiliation was necessary as a payment for his sins. It is a silence when we understand that the greatness of Christ's suffering was for the greatness of my sin. His appearance, His visage, was so marred that I might be spared the humiliation and the suffering of hell that *my* sins deserve.

How about you? How do you view Christ? How do you respond to His humiliation? It is my prayer that your hearts continue to remain open and soft toward the message of the gospel, that you never become weary of hearing this extra-ordinary story of how the Prince of glory stepped down from His throne and came down into this world and took on Himself the form of a servant and humbled Himself that He might pull sinners out of the depths of their sin and the defilement of their depravity.

May we all be astonished today. May we all be bewildered. May we all be silenced that this King should have such mercy on sinners such as we are.

Let us pray.

Lord, we thank Thee for Thy Son, for His willingness to be humbled in our place, to suffer for our sins. Lord, give us true repentance before Him that we may be silenced and impressed with the greatness of His suffering, and then be sorry for our sins, trusting in Him alone. We pray it for Jesus' sake, Amen.