

## **THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR**

March 28, 2010 The Man of Sorrows

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Dear Radio Friends,

I ask you to open your Bibles with me to the book of Isaiah, chapter 53.

If you tuned in last week, you will remember that we started a series on the suffering Servant from Isaiah 52 and 53. I told you then that Isaiah is the "gospel writer" of the Old Testament. There is no book like this one, in all the Old Testament, that speaks so clearly of Jesus Christ. Even though Isaiah wrote seven or eight hundred years before Jesus came, he gives much detail on the person and the work of our Savior.

Chapters 52 and 53 are the mountain peak, the climax, of the book of Isaiah. They speak of the suffering of Jesus. And what is so beautiful about these verses is that they take us to the reason for His suffering. Whereas the New Testament gospel accounts focus on the historical details of the suffering of Jesus Christ, these chapters look at what the cross of Christ was, and why Jesus had to suffer on the cross.

Last week we looked at the last three verses of chapter 52, which are something of an introduction to chapter 53. You will remember that Isaiah speaks in those verses of the extreme contrast between the humiliation and the exaltation of Jesus Christ. He speaks first in chapter 52, verse 13, of the exaltation of Jesus Christ: "He shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high." Those words are something of a promise. Before he begins to tell us of the suffering of Christ, he gives us a glimpse of the glory that will be His beyond the cross in His resurrection and ascension. Christ will be successful in the work that He comes to do.

But in contrast to that, when He comes to the earth to do His work, He will be completely humiliated. His visage will be so marred, His appearance so deformed that, looking at Him, from an outward point of view, you will not be able to know that this is the Christ. And when you understand who it is, you will be shocked at this news.

That is the introduction.

Now, in chapter 53, the story of the suffering of Jesus Christ begins. Isaiah 53:1-3: "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."

It is important, as we begin looking at these verses, to identify the speaker. Who is it that says these words? In the verses at the end of chapter 52 God Himself speaks and says, "Behold, my servant." Now though, there is a new voice that asks, "Who hath believed our report?" The voice here is the voice of the messengers of Christ. Back in chapter 52:15 we saw that, in His

coming, Christ would sprinkle the nations and that kings from the distant parts of the earth would hear of Him. This happens when the gospel is preached in all the world. And now these messengers of the gospel say, "Who hath believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" As we go out into the world and tell the story of the coming of the Messiah and His death for sinners, who is there that receives it? And the answer is: "How very, very few."

Cannot we identify with that in our day? The gospel is preached, but how few there are who receive it and believe it.

Verses 2 and 3 begin the message of the suffering Christ. And the first thing that Isaiah talks about here is how He came. When the Savior came, He did not come with pomp and splendor. He did not come with royalty and recognition and fame. But He came in obscurity and poverty. He came in a very ordinary and lowly manner. Look at verse 2. "He [that is, Christ, the suffering servant] shall grow up before him [that is, before God who sent Him] as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground." Isaiah is using a picture here to describe the lowly beginnings of Jesus' earthly life. He was not born in a palace as a prince. He did not grow up among the famous and the recognized teachers and rulers of His day. No, He came from Nazareth. And can any good thing come from Nazareth?

He came, like a tender plant and a root out of the dry ground. Perhaps you have walked on a sand dune or in a desert and there is nothing but barrenness and sand. This is not the place of trees and vegetation. But if you dig your toes into the sand, or if you run through the sand in bare feet, occasionally a little twig or the root of something will stick between your toes. You would not have noticed it or found it at first. Well, Christ's coming was something like that. He was born to ordinary people, in an ordinary town, in very ordinary circumstances, unnoticed by the world. His parents moved to Nazareth and nobody would have known anything about Him except that, as Herod and the Jews walked through life, He occasionally became to them an irritant. Otherwise, His background was like the rocky, barren wilderness.

And so the text says, "He hath no form nor comeliness." He had no star-power, no glamour, nothing to attract attention to Himself. "And when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him." Now, who is saying that? It is those who believe. Those who are the messengers of this gospel. They are saying, "There's nothing attractive about Him even to us in His origins." They mean that, naturally, all men would turn away from Christ, and that by nature no one, not even we who now believe, would be drawn to Him. Who hath believed our report? The gospel, you might say, is a hard sell. The Christ that we preach is not someone esteemed by men. He is not popular.

And that is the second thing in the text—how He was treated. Look at verse 3. "He is despised and rejected of men." Now, if you despise something, that means you count it to be of little or no worth. You disregard it. You ignore it. You count it as nothing to you. You disdain it. You despise it. You hate it. And you do that intentionally and deliberately.

Looking at the life of Christ, we can see that very clearly. Think of how He was treated by the Pharisees and the Jews. He was despised for His origins—"He's from Nazareth." He was despised for His family—"This is Joseph the carpenter's son." He was despised for His friends. They called Him the "friend of publicans and sinners." His teaching was despised. His

miracles were despised. He was despised as a Savior—"He saved others, himself he cannot save." Oh, how Christ was hated and rejected. The Jews said, "He has a devil." No, "He is the devil." No, "He is Beelzebub, the prince of the devils." He was so despised and so hated that ultimately they killed Him.

And the point is that this is the way it was for Him in all His life. Wherever He went, whatever He said, He was hated for it. There were words and looks and actions filled with hatred against Him. In Psalm 22, He says, "I am as no man, as a worm, despised by the people." Nothing. So this is how Christ was treated.

Verse 3 continues: "And we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not." He was like one from whom people turned and hid their faces. When He entered His suffering, Christ was too repulsive, too hideous, to look upon. As He stood on trial, as He was led to the cross, as He was lifted up and crucified, men were not drawn to Him, but repulsed by Him. Even His own friends and disciples forsook Him in the hour of His suffering.

And, apart from regeneration, we would despise Him too. Apart from the grace of God, we would not look on Him either. Again, it is the messengers, those who believe, that speak. And they say, "We hid our faces from Him. We esteemed Him not." You see that in the disciples, His own followers. Apart from grace, Christ is One on whom no one would look. No one would receive Him. He is One whom we despised and we esteemed not, in our indifference to the gospel, in our pursuit of the world, in our love for self. We despise Him, we reject Him, until God comes and opens our eyes to see Him.

So that is the second thing in the text—how He was treated.

Then, third, you have here what He experienced. He is called in the text "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." This is a description of Christ, a description of who He was during His earthly life. This was the key characteristic of His persona. If you knew Him, this is how you would describe Him. You would not describe Him as a man of humor. He was not a man of fun. He was not a man of pleasure. He was not laid-back. No, He was a man weighted down with sorrows. And that is put in the plural to intensify it. He is not a stranger to grief. But He is familiar with grief.

So, what does that mean? Well, first, it means that He experienced all the grief that we experience. For example, He knew what it was to be weary and tired. In Mark 4 He is so tired from His work that He gets into a boat with His disciples and He falls fast asleep. He knew hunger pangs when He was tempted. When He fed the multitudes, He was hungry too. He knew poverty. He experienced the pressure of temptation. He felt pain in His flesh. All the things that come on Adam and Eve and on the human race—all the results of the curse—He knew. In Hebrews 4:15, "We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." Jesus knew human suffering that comes as the result of the curse.

But, second, Jesus' sorrow was this: that He was sinless God dwelling among sinful man. The psalmist in Psalm 119:136 says, "Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law." That was the sorrow of Jesus. As He stood among sinners and He saw that they did not

honor God, that grieved Him. If you look at all the times that the gospels speak of Jesus in sorrow, in almost every case this is what His sorrow was. What a grief for Him to see sin, to see the folly and the rebellion of man against God. How grieved Jesus was by the unbelief and the blindness of His generation, and even of His disciples. In Mark 8:12 we read that "he sighed deeply in his spirit, and saith, Why doth this generation seek after a sign?" When the disciples were fearful in the storm, when they wondered how the hungry multitude would be fed, Jesus said, "O ye of little faith." And it was because He was God, because He loved God, because He sought the glory of God, and all sin and unbelief detracts from the glory of God.

Then, also, Jesus' sorrow was that He was despised and reproached, as we just saw. He was cast out. He was rejected. He was forsaken even by His closest companions. He was alone in His suffering.

But now, if that is all we say about Jesus' sorrow, we have missed something. We have missed the heart of His suffering. This was His sorrow: that the cross cast a shadow over His entire life. All His life was leading Him to the suffering of the cross. Every bit of His suffering was a reminder that He was the sin-bearer and that the curse of God was upon Him.

What did the curse of God bring on man? Well, it brought sickness and grief and poverty and death. We experience all those things. And for us, they are somewhat normal in the sense that they are an inevitable part of our human existence. We deserve them. We expect them.

But for Christ, it was different. He took on all this suffering, He took on this curse and its effects voluntarily. And He deserved none of this sorrow. And so, for Him, every yawn, every cramp, every tear, every sorrow and grief was a part of the curse of God resting on Him. These were all reminders to Him that He was the One who was responsible to lift the curse by suffering the justice of God on the cross. The cross cast its long shadow over all His life. This was His experience—unique to Him. A suffering and a sorrow that we will never know. And this sorrow intensified throughout His life. It came to a peak in the suffering right before the cross, in the days and moments before the cross. You see Christ wrestling in His sorrow, struggling as He contemplates the agony that is coming.

In John 12:27, as He looks ahead to the cross, Jesus says, "Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour." In the garden of Gethsemane, immediately before His arrest, He spends hours in prayer over this, both on His own and with His disciples. And this agony almost killed Him. He said to His disciples, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death." And the Bible, to show us the intensity of the suffering of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, tells us that His sweat was actual drops of blood. He prayed and He wrestled with this. He said, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39).

And now, if we understand this properly, we see that the cross, the sorrow of Jesus Christ, was not simply the pain of the nails in His hands. It was not simply the pain of being rejected by fellow man. His grief was not the agonizing slow death by crucifixion. All those were a part of His suffering. But the essence and the heart of Christ's suffering He expresses Himself from the cross when He cries out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The Son of God in the flesh was forsaken, abandoned, by the Father. This was His sorrow. He suffered the agonies

of hell for us. That was the cross.

This passage demands a response. This man of sorrows, despised and rejected, demands a response. And this is the response that is demanded: faith in Jesus Christ. Verse 1 begins with a question: ""Who hath believed our report?"" This is not only a rhetorical question with the answer: ""Well, very few."" But it also puts before all who hear the gospel the demand and the obligation, the command to believe in the suffering Servant of Jehovah. And we do not mean a simple, easy-believism. This is not just accepting Jesus as your Savior and saying a sinner's prayer. No. It goes much deeper than that.

Why are there so few who believe? The answer is this: Because the response of faith here to the suffering Servant demands that we look at ourselves and our sins. Isaiah gives us here the what and the why of the cross. What was the cross? It was suffering the agonies of hell for sin. Why the cross? Why was Jesus a man of sorrows? The answer is: because of sin. Because He carried the sin and the curse of all who would believe on Him. Faith in Jesus means that I see my sin, that you see your sin, and that you grieve because of it. Jesus's suffering was so intense because our sin is so great.

Do you understand this? It means that the way of faith begins with knowing our sinful misery. May God open our minds and hearts to see why Jesus was such a man of sorrows. And, may we be brought to humility and repentance before His Word.

Let us pray.

Father, what a burden of sin was placed on Christ. And what suffering and agony He had to bear in our place. Help us to have an awareness of our sin and sinfulness and to live in thankfulness for what He has done for us poor sinners. For Jesus's sake, Amen.