

"Isaiah the Evangelist" Isaiah 52:13-53:12 Feb. 23, 1997 [No. 1 in a Series on the Text]

I have long wanted to preach a series of sermons on this text, wonderful as it is and so central to our understanding of the life and work of our Savior. But until recently, whenever I thought of doing so, I found myself without the materials to make as careful a study as I should. The Lord has now provided the materials -- a superb new commentary on Isaiah by Alec Motyer, the British evangelical, some illuminating pages on this passage and its context in Jack Collins' syllabus for the OT prophets course at Covenant Theological Seminary, and last, but not least, there came into my hands recently, from my father's library, an early 18th century copy of the classic work of the Reformed Church on Isaiah 53, *Christ Crucified: or, the Marrow of the Gospel, Evidently Set Forth in LXXII Sermons on the Whole 53rd Chapter of Isaiah*, by James Durham.

"Read Durham on the 53rd of Isaiah," said Dr. John Duncan, the famous Rabbi Duncan of the 19th century Scottish Free Church, "it is eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of God." Durham is referred to, in Scottish theology, as "the judicious Durham." He lived in the middle of the tumultuous 17th century in Scotland. He had been brought up to conform to the royal policy, whatever it might be, but was led, by the influence of his godly young wife, to become a supporter of the Gospel party and of the Covenants. He became a minister as a result of David Dickson, the great Scottish preacher and author of "The Sum of Saving Knowledge" -- that little work that is often printed with editions of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms -- hearing Durham praying at the head of his troops before one of the battles fought for the liberty of the gospel in Scotland in those days. He died when he was only 36 and most of his published work appeared after his death, edited by his widow. So, I have long wanted to read Durham on Isaiah 53 and now have my opportunity!

This morning, I want to begin our study of this great passage of God's Word with a consideration of its context in the prophecy of Isaiah. And I want to do that with a single end in view: to answer the one great question that is always raised in connection with these verses: viz. who is the Servant that Isaiah speaks of here?

Many of you will be aware that much of contemporary biblical scholarship, as well as Jewish scholarship in the Christian era, has argued that the nation of Israel is the servant of the Lord in Isaiah, or, at least, the faithful remnant of Israel. Christians, of course, are in no doubt, that we have here a prophecy of the life and work of our Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, and have always been amazed at how beautifully and accurately his mission in the world was predicted here some seven centuries beforehand. Can we have confidence in that belief? Are we, as much unbelieving scholarship has tried to argue, reading our Christian beliefs back into Isaiah rather than letting Isaiah speak for himself?

As you may remember, this passage we have read is usually characterized as a "Servant Song," a poem concerning the Servant of the Lord, a person that figures prominently in this section of the book, from chapter 40 to chapter 55. Indeed, our text is usually designated the fourth of these "Songs." Isaiah does not himself, of course, designate his material in this way, so this is a scholars' way of organizing Isaiah's material.

Most commonly, the first song is said to be found in 42:1-4; the second, 49:1-6 (or v. 13); the third, 50:4-11; and, finally, our text, 52:13-53:12. But these songs are thoroughly integrated into Isaiah's prophecy, especially from chapter 40 through chapter 55, and "Servant" occurs frequently in these chapters outside of these four "Servant Songs."

Now, if you take all of these occurrences together, and take the Servant Songs in order, it appears that Isaiah gives us something like layers of meanings or interpretations of this Servant of the Lord.

There are clearly instances in which the title is applied to Israel as a people:

Isaiah 41:8-9: "But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham, my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant'; I have chosen you and have not rejected you."

Or, to Israel as the remnant of the people:

Isaiah 48:20: "Leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians! Announce this with shouts of joy and proclaim it. Send it out to the ends of the earth; say, 'The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob.'

There are other texts like these in these chapters in which either Israel as a whole or the faithful remnant is addressed as the Servant of the Lord.

But, without a doubt, the term is used in these chapters of an individual. Isaiah already has distinguished between Israel as a nation and Israel as a remnant of faithful followers of God -- the term can refer to either entity, not all Israel are Israel, as Paul would later say. Now he goes on to distinguish the faithful remnant from the particular Servant who represents it and redeems it. In a sense we can say, just as Israel was once an individual man -- Jacob or Israel, the grandson of Abraham --, so it will be again reduced to an individual man, the Servant of the Lord. As one scholar puts it, the individual Servant of the Lord is called "Israel" not because the nation is being viewed in some kind of idealized form, but because the nation has forfeited the right to its name (as Isaiah says in 48:1), and this one Servant alone has the right, the true right, to use it still. This is the man who is everything Israel should have been.

There is then in this section of Isaiah and his teaching about the Servant of the Lord a series of concentric circles, as it were, with Israel the nation in the outer circle, the faithful remnant of Israel a circle within that circle, and, finally, the Servant of the Lord as the individual Redeemer in the innermost circle.

There is all manner of evidence that Isaiah is certainly thinking in these chapters of the life and work of a particular individual: he is born of a woman (49:1, 5); he is the Lord's chosen agent (42:1); and, while identified with the people, he is distinct from the nation.

All of this is found elsewhere in these chapters, but is strongly emphasized in the fourth song in 52:13-53:12. Here, for example, we find not only someone with a particular life history, but a

man who committed no sin (as we read in v. 9)! As verse 6 indicates, this servant could not be Israel, for Israel needs the forgiveness this Servant provides. And, as v. 8 indicates, he cannot be God's people because he was stricken for the transgression of God's people.

What is more, there is, in all of this material about the Servant a linking up with the great messianic prophesies of the early chapters of Isaiah, especially 2,7, and 9. This servant will be a man among men, with special gifts and endowments from God. He is both identified with the Lord and distinguished from Him, as in Isaiah 9, the child who is born but whose name will be Mighty God and Everlasting Father. Jack Collins, for example, draws attention to the language of 52:13, where the Servant is described as "raised, lifted up, and highly exalted," which is almost exactly how God is described in Isaiah 6:1 in the vision that Isaiah had of him in the temple.

Or, in 49:1, when the Servant says, "Listen to me...", language is put in the Servant's mouth that Isaiah elsewhere puts only in the Lord's mouth. He is identified with the "Arm of the Lord" in 51:9 where the Arm of the Lord is identified as a person and the acts of the Lord are ascribed to him, and again in 53:1, and so on. And in the description of his life and work, we find the Servant, fulfilling the offices of a prophet, a priest, and a king as the Messiah shall.

What is more -- and this is a very helpful way to see our passage in its context, what leads up to it and what follows after -- in 52:13-53:12 we have the most explicit Servant Song followed by, what one writer calls "two tailpieces," viz. chapters 54 and 55.

In 49:6 we read that the Servant of the Lord will do two things: he will restore Zion, Israel to its true covenant with the Lord, and he will bring the Gentiles also, bringing God's salvation to the end of the world.

After the most complete and explicit account of his work as the Servant in 52:13-53:12, we have, in the following two chapters, these two results described: the restoration of Israel in chapter 54 and the salvation of the nations in 55 (note v. 5). In these great achievements, also, he fulfills the great messianic prophesies of the early chapters of Isaiah: He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, but the result of that will be that the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Much more could be said in setting this text in its context, but time fails to say more.

Let me conclude this introduction to our text this morning by commenting on the central role it serves in the rest of the Bible and, especially, in the New Testament.

I. First, it is the Bible's central summary of the life and work of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, it is not too much to say that the Four Gospels are simply a commentary on this text. For example, when the Lord, after his resurrection, met the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, he rebukes them for not understanding what had happened.

"How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!

Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" [Luke 24:25-26].

This point, that the Messiah must first suffer and only then enter his glory, mentioned so often in the Gospels, is never more clearly stated than here in Isaiah 52-53. But, not only in this general way, but in its specific details, this text outlines the mediatorial career, the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus, from his obscure birth and origins, to his ministry to the people's needs (the first part of 53:4 is quoted in the Gospels as a prophecy of his healing ministry, e.g. Matt. 8:17), to his rejection by his people, his crucifixion, his burial, his resurrection, and his session at the Right Hand of God where He intercedes for those he has redeemed. The text we have read is cited many times in the NT and is alluded to even more times. In the index of OT texts cited or alluded to in the NT which one finds in the back of the standard text of the Greek NT, there are 46 references, that is, 46 places where the editors of the Greek NT either found a verse or verses from Isaiah 52:13-53:12 actually quoted -- word for word -- or alluded to in the NT. Forty-six separate places in the NT where a reference to this text is either explicitly made or seems clearly to lie beneath what a NT author is saying. It would take too much work to survey the entire index, perhaps one of you may want to do this, but I cannot imagine that there are very many other chapters of the OT referred to more often in the NT than this one.

The emphasis that falls upon his bearing the sins of his people, his giving up his life for their forgiveness, is exactly what is uppermost in the teaching of the Gospels: the angel announces his birth by saying that he shall save his people from their sins; John announces his ministry by saying, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world;" Jesus himself says that "he came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many;" Caiaphas, the wicked high priest, overcome by a power he knew nothing of, prophesied near the end of Christ's ministry that one man would die for the people and, most interestingly, not for that nation only but for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one -- strange at that time for a Jewish high priest to say!; and, immediately, after the Lord's ascension to heaven, it was this that was begun to be preached in the world. As Paul said to the crowd in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:38), "through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you."

Indeed, no one has any difficulty at all understanding how it was that, in Acts 8 when Philip came upon the Ethiopian eunuch in the desert reading from Isaiah 53, "Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus." Why, you and I would lick our chops if we found someone reading Isaiah 53 who wanted to know what it meant! There isn't an easier text in all of the Bible from which to explain the life's work of Jesus Christ and its significance.

No wonder then that the Church father, Jerome, referred to Isaiah as "Isaiah the Evangelist," "Isaiah the Gospel Writer."

II. Second, this chapter plays a central role in the demonstration of the reality of predictive prophecy.

We, of course, admit that many unbelievers have refused to see in these verses a prediction, long beforehand, of the life and work of Jesus Christ. They have refused to admit that the perfect conformity that exists between this prophecy, seven centuries before the birth of the Lord, and

the course of his life, death, and resurrection is any argument either for the divine character of the Bible or the certainty that Jesus of Nazareth did in fact die for the sins of the world and rise again to everlasting life.

There is none so blind as he that will not see. But, it is very interesting that the Jewish interpretation of the Bible prior to the life and ministry of Jesus took this passage as a prophecy of the Messiah until Christians began using it to make their claims for Jesus of Nazareth. Only then did other interpretations of Isaiah 53 surmount what seems to be its simple meaning, especially the view that the Servant is Israel herself. In the Aramaic commentaries on the Hebrew OT which appeared in the centuries between Malachi and John the Baptist, the various statements in this passage were regularly applied to the life and work of the coming Messiah. Indeed, very interestingly, one of the names of the Messiah in Jewish literature of that period, was "The Leper", based on Isaiah 53:3. And there was frequent reference to the Messiah's sufferings, based on this text as well as others.

The Jews who read their Bible in the days between Isaiah and Jesus thought that what was given here was a description of the life and work of the Messiah. It was only when it became obvious that it described a man they had rejected and crucified that they abandoned that view and replaced it with another.

Christians, you and I are on the firmest ground when we make the obvious point that Isaiah gave a most beautiful and powerful summation of the life, the career, and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ seven centuries before he was born to the Virgin Mary, and that that fact cries out the supernatural origin of the Bible and the certainty of the Messianic claims of Jesus of Nazareth.

III. And, then, finally, this chapter provides, long before the event itself, the clearest conceivable explanation of substitutionary atonement.

We will have cause to visit this subject again in our series, so I only mention it at this point. But, surely, there is no more beautiful, more unmistakable, more emphatic presentation of vicarious atonement to the nature of Christ's redeeming work -- Christ suffering the penalty of our sins for us, in our place -- in all of the Bible. Paul gives us more technically precise explanations, but nothing is easier to understand or more difficult to evade than what we have already here in Isaiah 53:5-6: "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

There is the Gospel, there is Christianity, there is the only hope of this sinful world, seven centuries before the Prince of Life was born in Bethlehem. And what is the result of that? We read it in the opening verses of chapter 55: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!"

Well, said John Duncan, in recalling his conversion to Christ, "When I heard all the good things that were offered in this market, I said to myself, I will marry the merchant and they will all be mine!"