

"The Great Surprise"
Isaiah 52:13-53:12
March 2, 1997
[No. 2 in a Series on the Text]

Text Comments

- v.13 "Raised and lifted up" said of God in 6:1
- v.14 "Many" is a theological term in this Servant Song -- here, v. 15; 53:11, 12 (twice; cf. the NIV margin). It seems to be a synonym for the elect; the company for whom the Servant acts.
- v.15 It is startling to join "many" to "nations," but this is the universal effect of the Servant's work. It is very like the reference to the Messiah honoring Galilee of the Gentiles in 9:1. In any case, we have already said that in 49:6 that the task of the Servant of the Lord is two-fold: to restore Israel to covenant with God and "to be a light to the Gentiles" that he might bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth. v. 15 is clearly in keeping with that vision of world wide salvation brought by the Servant of the Lord.

"Sprinkle" harks back to the cleansing or purifying rites of the Levitical law. Here the Servant of the Lord is regarded as doing the work of a priest, making people all over the world pure from the defilement of sin.

"Shut their mouths" seems to be a reference to a speechlessness that results from awe and wonder. These kings will stand in reverent silence before him just as many had once stood in revulsion and disgust at the sight of him.

"Let all the earth keep silence before Him!"

The fourth and climactic Servant Song begins with an opening statement full of mystery, riddle, and surprise. It begins predictably enough: the Servant of the Lord will act prudently: that is, he will use the best means to achieve success at his appointed tasks. And doing so, he will accomplish his mission. We expect to hear that!

The verses before, in 52:1-12, have described the deliverance of the people of God from the bondage into which their sins would cast them and the reign of peace and joy that would follow. In the specific case, the immediate reference is return from the Babylonian Captivity, but by comparing v. 11 with Rev. 18:4, we see that, not only Isaiah, but the rest of the Scripture saw in that deliverance a picture of the greater salvation of the church from sin and death and the reign of everlasting peace that God would give her in the world to come. Now, as the fourth song begins, God introduces the Servant who would be the means, the instrument by which this deliverance would come and salvation would be brought to the people of God.

And, for that, he will be highly exalted and be given a great place in the honor and esteem of man. That too is unsurprising. We expect the triumphant victor, the Savior of his people, to gain a great

name!

But, then comes v. 14 with its unexpected vision of doom and humiliation and ignominy for this Servant.

Now, perhaps the careful reader of Isaiah should have been prepared for this. Though there is no clear intimation of his suffering in the first of the four Servant Songs, in the second (49:1-13) we gather that he will have to face great difficulties in the performance of his mission (he will be despised and abhorred by the nations, 49:7), and, in the third (50:4-9), the Servant himself speaks of the mockery and punishment that he will have to endure at the hands of men. But there has been nothing like this!

"...his appearance was so disfigured...his form marred beyond human likeness." The idea seems to be that people will be so appalled at his appearance, -- it is a strong word; used for a bereaved wife, a city laid waste by a conqueror -- that **so far from thinking him to be the Servant of the Lord, they will wonder if he is even a man!**

Now this is figurative, of course, but no less powerful or meaningful for that. Just as I was considering this statement in v. 14, I happened to be reading at night from the magisterial history of the Second World War by John Keegan, the British military historian whose work combines brilliant analysis with eloquent English style. I was reading his account of "Barbarossa," the German invasion of Russia which began in June of 1941 and, in its first months, produced the most staggeringly successful military effort in the history of war. The Russian armies were battered and then swept up in great encirclements and forced to surrender by the hundreds of thousands at a time. In the encirclement of the city of Kiev, 665,000 Russian soldiers -- five armies and fifty divisions -- were captured, the largest single mass ever taken in an operation of war before or since.

But, what caught my eye in Keegan's narrative was this recollection from a German eyewitness of the spectacle of these untold thousands of captives being marched pitilessly back across the steppe to the prisoner cages in the rear where so many of them would freeze or starve to death in the coming winter. "We suddenly saw a broad, earth-brown crocodile slowly shuffling down the road towards us. From it came a subdued hum, like that from a beehive. Prisoners of war, Russians, six deep.... We made haste out of the way of the foul cloud which surrounded them, then what we saw transfixed us where we stood and we forgot our nausea. Were these really human beings, these grey-brown figures, these shadows lurching towards us, stumbling and staggering, moving shapes at their last gasp, creatures which only some last flicker of will to live enabled to obey the order to march?" [p. 196]

That was the line that caught my eye: "Were these really human beings...?" That is the thought of verse 14: "his form marred beyond human likeness." What is being described is a catastrophe, the personal catastrophe our salvation was to the Servant of the Lord, to Jesus Christ. Chapter 53 will go on to elaborate this and the Gospels will describe it in far greater detail, but it is never anywhere else put any more starkly than here.

And this we do not expect; this we are not prepared for. That our deliverance would prove such high and bitter tragedy for the Servant of the Lord; this so exalted figure, such personal humiliation

and abnegation, such devastation of his life for the one who brought it to pass. As we will read in v. 4 of chapter 53, such a fate as **this one was to pass through**, such misery as he was to bring upon himself, people would, perhaps naturally, come to believe could only result from God being angry with that man, God wrecking vengeance upon him. No one else could take a man down that far except God.

We are going to learn that the humiliation of the Servant was the price of our forgiveness. To pay for sins as great and deep as ours requires payment indeed! And it was the measure of God's holy wrath against those sins that it should be such ruin for the one who bore them for us and the measure of his love for us that he was willing to subject his own Son to that ruin!

But, after that dark and gloom-filled verse, we have the certain triumph of v. 15: the result of that immeasurable suffering will be the salvation of the world, the forgiveness of great multitudes both of Jews and Gentiles.

There can be no doubt about the effect of that terrible suffering the Servant would endure -- as Paul would later put it, in what is virtually a quotation of vv. 13 and 15: "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."

But, you see, the Bible and the rest of human history teach us what is not at first obvious -- there is a gap between v. 14 and v. 15 -- a gap in time -- 2,000 years and counting -- and a gap in recognition and realization.

This connection between the humiliation of the Servant of the Lord and the salvation of the world, between the tragedy in the first place, and the triumph that results from it is, in this world and this life, known only to faith.

As Charles Hodge put it, "Even omnipotence works gradually." We have the same point made less startlingly in the first Servant Song. Isaiah 42:1 says "Here is my Servant...he will bring justice to the nations." But in vv. 2ff. we read such things as these: "He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. He will not falter or be discouraged **till** he establishes justice on earth..." That is the triumph the Servant is promised to bring, it does not come all at once and immediately; it comes gradually and is finally consummated only at the end of a long process.

And we have the same intimation here in the opening statement of the fourth and last and most explicit Servant Song. The sprinkling of nations his suffering will make certain and sure will take place over time and the honor and worship of the kings of the earth comes finally only at the end of history.

Here is the principle of divine grace and its working in the world.

Certain and absolutely assured results based on the perfect accomplishment of the divine will by the Messiah -- but results that come so slowly that the unbelieving world feels free to deny them altogether and so slowly **that Christians themselves can waver in their confidence!**

It is true that Christ's sufferings for his people, terrible and wonderful as they were, will lead at last to the complete vindication of his church and the exaltation of his Name above all other names! But the world does not know that or believe it. They did not connect his sufferings with his future glory when he was abased before them and they do not connect the two things now.

And, while it is true that there are now Christians everywhere in the world, which was not true before the Gospel was sent out on its course of conquest in the world, there are still many more unsaved than saved in this world in which we now live. The unbelieving world does not think that all of its kings will someday soon shut their mouths because of him. Only faith knows that!

Only faith can make the connection between v. 14 and vv. 13 and 15. Only faith knows how certain that connection is, how inevitable, how unbreakable!

And what is true on the stage of human history as a whole, is true as well in the context of each believing life, your Christian life and mine.

Last Wednesday in the high school chapel, I was preparing the students to face the skepticism and the scorn of a world that repudiates the Christian warning that there is a Judgment Day ahead and that only those who are faithful followers of Jesus Christ will stand on that Judgment Day. People today think that belief unfair, cruel, out of date, lacking humanity. And I told them that one thing they must always remember is that unsaved people are actually much more evil than they appear to be either to themselves or to others. God in his mercy to the world keeps them from being as evil as their hearts would make them: all manner of constraints hem their behavior in -- the fear of punishments of various kinds and of the reproach of others keep them from saying and doing things they otherwise would. The influence of the church in the world, of 4,000 years of Christian civilization, of individual Christians, all make people who do not believe in Christ better than they are. So too the common grace of God, the law written on man's heart, etc. I reminded them that the 20th century is rife with the proof that when those restraints are removed perfectly ordinary people, like the people around us all the time, will become vicious and cruel and utterly self-centered to a degree no one would have thought possible beforehand. Rwanda: folk you would have thought cheerful, sweet, and kind...hacked one another to death in a frenzy of blood-letting! And, I reminded them, in hell all those restraints will be removed and unbelievers will become in their behavior what they truly are in their hearts and no one looking on that scene will think that God has not been just and fair to the unbelieving! But, now, only faith can see unbelieving man for what he is!

But, you see, the same is true in the reverse. When God begins his work in you -- that work, that blessing, that renewal, that sprinkling that the Lord Christ purchased for you -- he makes you what Paul calls "a new creation." Ezekiel, in wonderfully potent language that harkens back to v. 15, described the same reality this way [36:25-27]:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

That is you, if you are a Christian, he is describing. The world may not believe it; you may not yourself believe it half the time, because that pure new heart does not yet express itself as it should - - encrusted as it remains with the dregs of your former self -- and your cleansing is, so far, more in the verdict of God's heavenly courtroom than in the practice of your own earthly life. Nevertheless, that is you -- that clean, new, pure life that the Servant has made you by his sprinkling -- that sprinkling made possible by his terrible sufferings for your sins.

Why, just as if those polite, urbane, perfectly normal unbelieving folk around you could be seen for what they are in their hearts -- if their true character was manifested in their behavior -- we would all shrink back from them in hatred and disgust and fear -- **so, if we could only see what you are in your heart of hearts -- if you are a real Christian today -- if we could only see your life as it will be when what you are in your heart finally is expressed to the end of your fingertips --** when you are in your thoughts, speech, and behavior what you are now in that clean heart God has given you through Christ, why, we would fall down and worship you. You would seem to us greater than Gabriel and Michael themselves! I say, take the least admired true Christian in this room, the least regarded, the least loved, and make him in his outward life what he is already in his new heart and we could not keep from falling down and worshipping such a person -- and he or she would have to rebuke us and remind us that he is only a man, or she is only a woman.

But only faith knows that. Only faith can connect that new heart with what that heart will eventually produce, just as faith alone can connect the Savior's sufferings with the glories to follow.

But that is what faith must do -- that is the calling of every man and woman who has been given faith to recognize the truth, the voice of God in his Holy Word. The beginning -- whether in the sufferings of Christ or our own new hearts -- must lead inexorably to the end of Christ's exaltation and our perfection.

And, you see, we must make that connection, our faith must put us always to making that connection, to reminding us always what the present must eventually become in the future, because otherwise Christ does not get his full due from us and we do not admire and love and worship and serve him as we should and as we must.

If you look at the world now, if you look at your life now, and look no further, Christ's achievement will not seem very great to you -- it seems almost nothing to the world! But, look at what it shall become when the full effect of Christ's sufferings are felt in the world and manifested in your own life -- see that, if you can -- and Christ will seem unspeakably great, and his honor beyond your power to describe. And the love you will then know you owe him, and the thanks, and the obedience, and the service, you will not be able to put into words! You will cry out to God as Paul did, when he thought of this very thing -- what Christ's achievement would eventually bring to pass in the world:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.