

"Easter 1997" Isaiah 52:13-53:12 March 30, 1997 [No. 4 in a Series on the Text]

### **Text Comment**

We have been studying this famous and beautiful text over the past several Sunday mornings. It is the last and the grandest of Isaiah's prophesies of the personage, whom he calls "The Servant of the Lord" who will bring salvation to the world. It is dated about seven centuries before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Christians, of course, both on the strength of the plain words of this chapter and the many references to it in the New Testament have no doubt that it is what it purports to be, a prophecy of the coming of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

I decided that we should stay with the passage on this Easter morning because in vv. 10-12 there is such a clear prediction that this Servant, after he died for the sins of his people, would rise to life again and apply to those, here called "his offspring," the salvation he had purchased for them by his death. We have in this great passage, not only a prophecy of the death of Jesus, but of his resurrection as well.

**v.11** "by his knowledge" As in English so in other languages, including Hebrew there is an ambiguity in the Genitive or possessive case. Here the meaning could be "by the knowledge of him", that is, by the knowledge of Jesus that other people come to have, they are justified, or made right with God. That is, as people come to know him, they enter into the benefits of his salvation. That is, of course, a true thought. It is when people come to know Christ and believe in him that they are saved and their sins are forgiven. But the meaning could also be, "by Jesus' knowledge", that is, by what **he** knows, he is able to justify many, or make many right with God. All in all, it seems most likely that the latter idea is meant here, especially because of the parallel thought that follows it in the sentence, "he will bear their iniquities." The thought then would be akin to that in v. 3: he became "familiar with suffering." By his experience or knowledge of that suffering which he endured in our place and for our sins, he is able to make many right with God. In this case, it is simply saying again what has already been said so clearly in the passage. By his stripes we are healed, by his suffering the debt of our sins was paid.

Now, it is certainly striking, whatever opinion one has when he first comes to Isaiah 53, how precisely, how exactly this passage, written 700 years before, describes the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. He was, he himself once said, God the Father's "Servant." As he once said, "The Son of Man -- a name he used frequently -- came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." We have in this single passage the intelligence that this Servant of the Lord would be rejected by the very ones he came to help; that he would die a cruel death; that he would not answer publicly the charges that

were being made against him; that those charges were false because he had done nothing wrong; that he would be buried in a borrowed tomb, donated by a rich man; and that the knowledge of his death and resurrection would be proclaimed to the world and many be saved through faith in him. And all of that happened in the case of Jesus of Nazareth and in the case of no one else.

And this is but one chapter of many that were written about the Messiah long before he came into the world. We read in the ancient Scriptures that he would be born of the house and lineage of David, as Jesus was; that he would be born in Bethlehem, as Jesus was; that his public ministry would be concentrated in Galilee -- an unexpected detail, but, again, exactly what came to pass in Jesus' ministry. And on and on it goes.

But, someone might say, indeed, many have said, well there is no proof of anything in that. There is no proof that the prophets actually foretold all of this about Jesus. Rather, they suggest that Jesus simply conformed to the messianic expectations of his time. The arrival of such a personage was longed for and expected in the Judaism of Jesus' day. It was only natural that a man who wanted to be recognized as the Messiah or who thought he was the Messiah would act in such ways as to conform to what the Scriptures had prophesied and to what the people expected of the Messiah when he came.

Ah, but here the matter becomes really interesting. For, strange to say, clearly as Isaiah 53 seems to describe the life, death, and resurrection of the Servant of the Lord, almost no one in Judaism in the centuries before the birth of Christ or in his own day thought that the Messiah would suffer, die, and rise again. This was **not, in fact** the expectation of the people.

They weren't expecting anyone like Jesus of Nazareth proved to be. The Jewish scholar, S.W. Baron, in his *Social and Religious History of the Jews*, presents a detailed account of the "Messianic Expectations" at the time of Jesus. The Zealots, the activists, later turned guerrillas, expected a Savior to appear, sword in hand, to lead the people against Rome's military power. The spiritual visionaries, on the other hand, looked for a Messiah who would usher in a cosmic cataclysm, out of which would emerge a new world order with the chosen people, the Jews, marching toward final salvation at the head of a transformed and renewed human race. Even those with less exalted expectations thought that the Messiah would bring back the remnants of the ten lost tribes of Israel and reunite Israel and Judah, and restore the nation to its former glory. None of those expectations were met by a Messiah who said, "My kingdom is not of this world" and none of them had anything to do with a Redeemer who would accomplish salvation by suffering and dying and, in that way, pay the penalty that the sins of his people deserved. As Alfred Edersheim, the great Jewish Christian scholar of several generations back wrote, "Assuredly, the most unlike thing to Christ were His times." [In Montgomery, *Where is History Going?*, p. 67.]

Now, this is remarkable really, because Jewish writers between Isaiah and Jesus **did** apply statements in Isaiah 53 and the other Servant Songs in this part of Isaiah to the Messiah. They regarded this passage as a prophesy about the Messiah. **But, still, the notion that the Messiah would come into the world to suffer and die ignominiously in payment for the sins of the people, --plainly as Isaiah puts it here-- did not register and did not become the expectation of the Jews. By the time of Jesus, despite all the prophecies of the OT, despite the great ritual of blood sacrifice set up in the law of Moses, very few Jews had any expectation of a Redeemer who would die for the sins of the world.**

This is why, at the last, they crucified Jesus. **He disappointed their expectations!** When he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday they welcomed him excitedly and joyfully **because they thought he was coming to be their King and lead them in victory against their enemies and bring in the reign of peace and prosperity they longed for.** A few days later they had turned on him savagely, because it was finally clear to them that he had no intention of doing any such thing. They had been waiting for the Messiah, but when he came among them they rejected him -- because he didn't fit in with their program. They wanted an earthly king to make Israel great again, a King who would make Jerusalem once again the envy of all the world. But he said that his kingdom was not of this world and he came not to conquer Rome but to die on a Roman gibbet! They **hated** him for that. And, with regard to the resurrection, it was the same. Many Jews, for example, expected a general resurrection at the end of time, but, as one scholar put it, **"No one** expected to find a grave empty in the middle of history." [John Robinson cited in Polkinghorne, p. 119]

But, you see, this blindness to Jesus as the Messiah, even though he came with every conceivable demonstration of his divine credentials, even though he worked miracles, even though he taught the truth with an authority they had never experienced before, even though his life of perfect goodness and love and purity was itself the proof that this was a man far above all other men, their blindness to Jesus and their unwillingness to accept him, **was not unique. It is exactly the same today.**

Some people today imagine that they don't believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the King of Kings because they think that smart and educated people in this scientific age of ours can no longer believe in such supernatural events as the Bible says were part and parcel of the career of Jesus of Nazareth -- miracles, resurrection, etc. But, education and IQ have nothing to do with it. Last week, in the meeting of a committee of the Board of Trustees of Covenant College, the liberal arts College of the PCA, I sat next to Fritz Schaeffer, a professor at the University of Georgia, twice now nominated for a Nobel Prize in quantum chemistry, whatever that is. Fritz doesn't **think** Jesus rose from the dead, he **knows that he did!**

Others, I suppose think that they can't believe in the resurrection of Jesus and that he is the Savior of the world because they think it is simply wishful thinking -- not so bizarre perhaps, but still of the same kind as that which prompted these 39 folk near San Diego to kill themselves, expecting to meet together in Outer Space. They wanted it to be true and so convinced themselves that it was! Convinced themselves so completely that they were willing to commit suicide on the strength of their belief.

But, that is not the nature of Christian belief in Jesus at all. It is not "pie in the sky by and by." As a matter of fact, in order to believe as Christians do that Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior, and that he rose from the dead and lives still today and can be known personally, right now, by men and women, you must also believe a great many things that are very difficult and you must consent to do a great many things that you are naturally averse to doing. You must surrender the rule of your life to God. People don't believe in Christ to make their lives easy, because by believing in Christ they accumulate a set of genuine difficulties. As G. K. Chesterton, the British apologist for Christianity of several generations back, once put it: "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried."

No, according to the Bible -- and its teaching is verified by 2,000 years of observation -- the reason folk don't accept Jesus Christ to be the Savior Isaiah prophesied he would be, the Gospels tell us that he was, and the rest of the NT confirms that he was, is because they aren't looking for that kind of Savior. Just like the Jews long ago, they are looking for someone else -- someone offering immediate help, benefit, and personal peace and prosperity -- not someone who dies an ignominious death for their sins. Just like the Jews in Jesus day, they find Jesus the Savior a disappointment of their expectations.

They would be happy to have a Savior who promised them a new car and new house (which is why so many so-called Christian preachers say that that is just what Jesus will give you! They know you'll like a Jesus who offers you that!), or a Jesus who takes away all your problems, or one who promises to make you happy in just the ways you want to be happy -- in success at work, in love, in reputation, in the pursuit of pleasure. But Jesus didn't promise that -- at least not immediately and not in the way in which people think. To be sure, the prosperity and the happiness of those who trust in Jesus will, at last, be far greater than anything one can imagine in this world -- but it does not come at once and does not come by itself.

No, first, before all that, there must be this terrible death that Jesus died and our embracing of **that**, of the reality of our own sin and guilt, so great that only the Son of God could pay the price of it.

Why, if you can believe it, just as people who knew he performed miracles and rose from the dead still rejected him in his time, there are men, scholars with a world-wide reputation, who accept that the historical evidence for the resurrection of Christ is too persuasive, too impressive to ignore, who accept that Jesus did rise from the dead, but still do not believe in him as their Savior. Pinchas Lapide, a Jewish scholar, writes, "Thus, according to my opinion, the resurrection belongs to the category of the truly real and effective occurrences..." But he does not, for that reason, become a Christian or accept Jesus as the Savior. Why ever not? Because, Jesus is not the Savior he is looking for!

He is blind to the meaning of that evidence -- powerful as he himself admits that evidence to be -- because he has a preconceived notion of a Savior and salvation, and this Jesus and his death do not fit that notion. He is blinded by his prejudices. The Apostle Paul, if you remember, says exactly this about himself. He once, like most of his Jewish contemporaries, not only rejected Jesus but hated him; thought him the worst of men for claiming to be the Messiah when he didn't do what everyone knew the Messiah would do. But then Paul met the Lord Jesus, he met him and spoke with him and came to know him **after he had been crucified**. And all of those preconceptions that had stood in the way of Paul's understanding Jesus and accepting him were swept away in a moment of profound realization. The problem hadn't been Jesus at all. The problem had been entirely a false set of expectations that men had come to have which had not been taught them in the Bible but which came naturally, almost inevitably to sinful men and women. Paul was the same brilliant man before and after he came to believe in Jesus; his world was the same; but for the first time he now saw Jesus for what he actually was -- a Savior whose death -- so unexpected and unaccounted for -- was the only way to bring guilty sinners back to a holy God.

There was the great change for Paul, right where it comes for everyone who comes to believe in Jesus in the middle of life. Paul had not thought, for all of those years --not in his seminary and not in his rabbinical work-- in all of those years he had never seen himself really guilty and lost as a sinner before God.

He thought he was alright, morally and spiritually, he thought God would be satisfied with his life. So what need did he have for the Son of God to come into the world to be hung up on a cross for him? But, then, he says -- when the commandment came home to me; when I came finally to understand what God required of me; that my thoughts, my attitudes, as well as my words and actions had to be pure and right in God's sight and all of my life had to be love for God and for others -- well, then, Paul said, suddenly I realized that I didn't need a conqueror to lead me in triumph against Rome. I had no need of a Messiah like that. I needed a Redeemer, someone who could pay for my many sins, someone who could suffer the penalty of my guilt, take my punishment in my place -- otherwise, I would have to take it and suffer it myself.

And then, I saw what Jesus had done and why he had come to die

and why his death had to be so cruel.

And, then, said Paul, I understood for the first time what Isaiah had meant those many centuries ago. I understood for the first time what Jesus' resurrection had meant. It was not some stunt, his rising from the dead. It wasn't even some grand demonstration that he was right and the Jews who had rejected him were wrong. No, the resurrection was the validation of his death, the demonstration that the death he died in our place and for our sins, for my sins -- Paul said -- really did satisfy divine justice, really did make a way for me to have peace with a holy God, really did open the way for me -- so great a sinner -- to go to heaven forever, that place where sin cannot enter. I could go there because Jesus, having died for my sins, could take them away from me and deliver me from them. **That is what the resurrection means. It means Christ's death was not for him, it was for me! It is powerful to save me from my sins and raise me up to God!** It would be interesting if Jesus had risen from the dead -- surely; no matter what, it would have been interesting. But, having died, as Isaiah said he would die, not for his sins -- for he had none -- but for ours, the resurrection was not merely interesting, it was the proof that Jesus Christ had salvation in his hand and could give it to anyone who asked him for it, really asked, in faith and gratitude and love!

Men and women today remain uninterested in Jesus Christ for one reason only. They think they are alright without him. They think they will pass the test. Most of them, the recent Time magazine article tells us, most of them believe in heaven -- more than 80% and some of the rest don't disbelieve, they just aren't sure, so they say. But it doesn't matter much to them. Most of them believe in hell -- 63% and some of the rest just aren't sure. But it doesn't matter to them, for they think they themselves are alright. Only 1% of them worry about going to hell themselves. So we read in that article. That should worry any thinking man or woman -- those numbers. Sentimentalism -- believing to be true what one wants to be true! Why, because they think they will pass the test. So Paul thought. But do they know what that test will be? Will they pass the test if they are required to show that they have loved God with all their heart and soul and strength and mind **and**, besides that, that they have loved their neighbor as much as they have loved themselves? Can they pass the test if it requires them to have lived their lives in this world to the glory of God? What about my selfishness, my lusts, my imaginations, my attitudes toward others -- when God sees and will judge the secrets of men's hearts?

Oh, no, said, Paul, I had never imagined that that would be the test, and once I saw that, once I realized that, I knew I was lost unless somehow, somehow, my sins, my failures, my terrible shortcomings, my life lived for myself and lived in the pursuit of other goals than those God had for me could somehow be taken off my back and not held against me. No wonder that Jesus came to die, no wonder he died so cruelly. He had my sins to pay for, my

guilt to take upon himself.

Paul for years had no idea that the Messiah, when he came, would love as Jesus loved, would have such compassion as Jesus had compassion, would give his life for others. He had no thought of such a great love and mercy and kindness on God's part. He hadn't thought he needed such a love and compassion and kindness. And that is the problem with men today. They do not know the love of God or the compassion or kindness of God. They do not think of God as a God of magnificent and infinite mercy. They don't think of themselves as needing a salvation that only a great mercy could provide. Paul had no idea that Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, had forsaken the courts of everlasting day, to dwell with men, and then to suffer and to die for men and for their salvation, for the salvation of a man even like such as Paul himself, who hated Jesus, despised him, and was ready to spend his life hunting down and persecuting Jesus' followers.

The Jews didn't think they needed such a salvation; they thought they would be alright, would pass the test. And so they had no interest in Jesus as the Messiah. He came to redeem them from sin and guilt and they didn't care about that. They wanted something else. And so it remains today. Folk don't believe in Jesus because they don't think they need such a Savior as he was; they don't believe they need a mercy and a compassion as great as that.

They think they will pass the test, whatever test that is. But, they will not! God says they will not. Human history says they will not. Their own consciences, if they will just listen to them, say they will not.

Jesus Christ is alive today, the same Jesus Christ whose life expired on that cross 2,000 years ago. That is the great significance of the resurrection. He is present in this world to bring, to give salvation, the forgiveness of sins, to all who come to understand that that and nothing else is what they most desperately need.

History is chock full of great men who have lived and done great things in this world. But they have died -- however great they were in their day, their day is no more. You know the famous poem by Shelley from your school days -- his poem about the great Egyptian King Rameses II, known to the Greeks as Ozymandias.

I met a traveler from an antique land  
Who said, "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:  
Look on my works, ye mighty and despair!'

Nothing beside remains, round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

But not so Christ. Not so for he is no mere figure from the past. He lives today, the risen Savior. And also not so for there is no cruelty in him and he invites no one to look upon his works and despair. No, he came to save -- at terrible cost to himself, he came to save. His death was for our sins and our guilt. And he now has salvation in his hand to give to anyone and to everyone who recognizes his or her need of that salvation and that forgiveness.

Christ, the true Colossus of human history. No broken statue he, but the life of the world, and the love and the joy and the hope and the everlasting life of all those who come to him. Many of us in this room have come to him and like some of his early followers, we say to you, "come, we have found the Christ." Come and see for yourself!