

God's Solution for Our Sin Isaiah 52:13-53:6

Marius von Senden has written a book that gives a history of the early years of eye surgery (cited by Annie Dillard in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* pp. 27-31). Specifically he describes the experience of people who had been blind since birth due to cataracts, but whose sight was restored when surgeons developed a way to remove cataracts safely. What they found is that the transition from blindness to sightedness was a very difficult one. Concepts such as space, size, and form had no meaning. People could quickly learn the names of colors, but things like learning to identify objects were “tormentingly difficult.”

It was written of one twenty-one-year-old girl:

Her unfortunate father, who had hoped for so much from this operation, wrote that his daughter carefully shuts her eyes whenever she wishes to go about the house, especially when she comes to a staircase, and that she is never happier or more at ease than when, by closing her eyelids, she relapses into her former state of total blindness. (p. 30)

Of course others adjusted well to sight and were forever grateful that the world was opened up to them as never before. But they *all* found seeing difficult. Seeing made them aware of things they never were before (things such as grooming and appearance); some found that they were ashamed of old habits that they weren't even aware of before. They found seeing to be challenging and difficult.

This morning we are going to discuss how challenging and difficult it can be to see Jesus Christ, especially His humiliation. Looking at Jesus in this way is not easy because the depth of His suffering reveals the enormity of our sin. And when we look at our lives in light of His humiliation, we might find that we're ashamed of old habits that we never really noticed before.

Some who see for the first time the spiritual truth of Jesus' suffering and humiliation turn away and never want to look upon Him again. Quite honestly, they would rather live in total blindness than see themselves in light of Jesus' suffering. Others see the spiritual truth of Jesus' suffering and continue looking at Him anyway, realizing that His suffering not only reveals our sinfulness but also God's solution for our sinfulness. On this Sunday before Easter, let's take an honest look at Jesus' suffering.

Isaiah 52 and 53 describe how people “saw” the person known as the Servant of the Lord. The NT makes numerous references to this passage and emphatically asserts that Isaiah was talking about the suffering of Jesus Christ. This passage has five stanzas of three verses each. We'll look at the first three stanzas this morning, the fourth stanza on Good Friday, and the fifth stanza next Sunday morning. Let's wade out into this wonderful passage written 700+ years before the events being described.

The first stanza speaks about how people (i.e., the nations) would ultimately “see” the Servant of the Lord. **The Ultimate Response to Jesus' Humiliation and Exaltation: Speechless Astonishment (52:13-15)** In verse 13 God speaks of the eventual exaltation of His Servant:

13 Behold, My servant will prosper,
He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.

First, God's servant would prosper. But this would be a very different type of prosperity – one that would involve immeasurable suffering. But biblically speaking, prosperity doesn't mean an easy life; if you prosper, you accomplish your God-given mission. In that sense, the Servant would prosper. Second, God's servant would have the closest possible proximity to God Himself. These terms - "high and lifted up" and "greatly exalted" - are used in Isaiah exclusively of God. In chapter 6 Isaiah saw the Lord "sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted" (6:1). God is here saying that His Servant would prosper and would have the same exalted status that He has.

This exaltation stands in stark contrast to the humiliation the Servant would first experience:

14 Just as many were astonished at you, *My people*,
So His appearance was marred more than any man
And His form more than the sons of men.

When Judah was dragged off into exile, people were astonished; it was a devastating, brutal judgment that people witnessed. God says that people would have this same astonishment at the humiliation of His Servant. When we read that "His appearance was marred/disfigured more than any man" we need to avoid being overly-literalistic. The spiritual reality is that because of *who* Jesus was and *what* He accomplished, no one has ever suffered to the extent that He did. God is saying that His Servant's suffering would outstrip anything that humanity ever experienced - either individually or collectively.

Verse 15 reveals that the humiliation and exaltation of the Servant of the Lord would have international significance.

15 Thus He will sprinkle many nations,
Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him;
For what had not been told them they will see,
And what they had not heard they will understand.

The Servant is being depicted as a priest who sprinkles the blood of the animal upon the people to identify them with a sacrifice has been made on their behalf. Jesus would be the Great High Priest who sprinkled His blood on the nations and brought about their cleansing.

Notice the reaction given in the second line: "Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him." Kings will be speechless. Important, powerful people almost always have something to say: a pronouncement, a critique, an opinion. But when these kings see the humiliation and the exaltation of the Servant, they are speechless because they have experienced something too deep for words. I think that's what the last two lines of this verse communicate. In chapter 6 God had told Isaiah (6:9-10) that he would be preaching to people who were so spiritually calloused that they would neither see nor understand what he was telling them. By contrast, here we have kings and nations seeing and understanding the truth about Jesus.

When we think about the humiliation and exaltation of the Servant, we can't help but think about Paul's words in Philippians 2 in which he says of Christ that after He humbled Himself even to the point of death (the humiliating and excruciating death of the crucifixion) that "God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name." The result is that one day every knee would bow - either in humble submission or in forced submission to Him. That's the ultimate response to the Suffering Servant.

In the second stanza Isaiah backs up from this ultimate response to the Servant and describes **The Immediate Response to Jesus' Humiliation: Disbelief and Rejection (53:1-3)** Verse 1 expresses that the message of this Servant was met with unbelief.

1 Who has believed our message?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

John quotes this verse in John 12 and links it with Isaiah 6, the passage in which God told Isaiah that he would be speaking to people who were spiritually blind and deaf. The implication is that the people who should have believed didn't; the people to whom God revealed Himself persisted in unbelief. The "arm of the Lord" signifies God's strength/might. The idea is that when God rolls up His sleeves, you see strong, powerful arms that are capable of doing anything. There are numerous references to the arm of the Lord in Isaiah. Perhaps the most significant for our purposes is Isaiah 52:10. There Isaiah describes God's might in bringing salvation to the nations:

10 The LORD has bared His holy arm
In the sight of all the nations,
That all the ends of the earth may see
The salvation of our God.

There are certainly passages in Isaiah which speak of God baring His arm in a mighty display of power (as in 51:9; see also Psalm 136:12). But we see in verse 2 that God "bared His arm" in a very different way. God displayed His might through humility.

2 For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,
And like a root out of parched ground;
He has no *stately* form or majesty
That we should look upon Him,
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.

When God pulled up His sleeve to flex His muscles, guess what people saw? "A tender shoot." When Jesus appeared, He wasn't a towering, strong tree, only a tender shoot. Or like a root out of parched ground (look back at 11:1). And there was nothing inherently compelling about Jesus' appearance that made people sit up and pay attention to Him. He didn't have a commanding physical presence that made people want to follow Him. To the contrary, the normal reaction to Jesus was rejection and scorn.

3 He was despised and forsaken of men,

A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
And like one from whom men hide their face
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

When you read in the gospels how Jesus was treated at His trial and crucifixion, you see that how accurately this verse describes people's reaction to Jesus. (See 49:6 for another description of how Jesus would be despised.) In Jesus' day people couldn't fathom that the Messiah would be "despised and forsaken of men" or that He would be "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." They thought the Messiah would come in triumph and overwhelming might. A few people could look at Jesus in this condition; the Centurion, for example, kept looking at Jesus on the cross and concluded, "Truly this was the Son of God" (Matthew 27:54). But most people didn't. Most hid their face, despised Him, and did not esteem Him.

When people "saw" the Servant of the Lord, He was difficult to look at. Some people chose to close their eyes and continue in their blindness. But when our spiritual eyes are opened, we see **The Truth about the Jesus' Humiliation: He suffered as a Substitute for Us. (vv. 4-6)** The third stanza is an implicit rebuke to the people we just saw described in verse 3. These verses tell us why Jesus was the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. It was because He was bearing *our* griefs and *our* sorrows.

4 Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.

These verses use relentless repetition to drive home the point that Jesus appeared as He did because He was our substitute - He got what we deserved. Jesus was "acquainted with grief" because He entered our world and "bore" *our* griefs! And Jesus was "a man of sorrow" because He entered our world and "carried" *our* sorrows! Yet just as Job's friends looked at his suffering and concluded that he was suffering because God was angry with him, so too "we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted." But nothing could be farther from the truth. We totally misinterpreted Jesus' suffering.

5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.

He was "pierced through for *our* transgressions"; He suffered a brutal death because of our rebellion. "He was crushed for *our* iniquities"; He was "broken into pieces" (so Oswalt) because we were bent away from God. As it turns out *we* are the ones who are diseased and sick (imagery Isaiah used to describe our sinfulness in chapter 1). Through His "chastening and scourging" we find health – in the most comprehensive sense, spiritually and emotionally and (ultimately) physically.

Jesus' suffering reveals what the Puritans called "the sinfulness of sin." Our sin is so sinful that it required a sacrifice. Our sin is so sinful that it requires a death – the death of the Sinless One. Because God is holy and just, He couldn't merely say, "Don't worry about it." A sacrifice had to be made. Verse 6 emphasizes that this is a universal problem that God addressed once and for all in Christ:

6 All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.

Like a newly-sighted person looking at the world, looking at Jesus' suffering in this way can be difficult, even painful. It is a great burden to realize that *we* caused Jesus' suffering. Because each of us has strayed far from God, "the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall upon Him."

Let me suggest two implications to what we've seen in Isaiah 52 and 53. First, ***Jesus' death on the cross is God's solution for our sin.*** On a sunny day in 1972 in downtown Chicago a stern-faced man stood on the street corner. As people walked by, this man would occasionally raise his right arm, point his finger at someone, and say, "Guilty!" He would put his hand down and a few moments later pick out another person, point his finger and pronounce, "Guilty!" Apparently the effect on people was eerie. Almost nobody protested this man's pronouncement. One man was even overheard remarking, "But how did *he* know?" That man wasn't really going out on a limb by pointing at someone and pronouncing "Guilty!" When we're honest, we each have to admit that we are guilty. Each of us has done things that we shouldn't have. Simply reading the list of the "seven deadly sins" is convicting: pride, envy, anger, greed, lust, gluttony, and sloth. Isaiah was right: *All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.*

The good news (i.e., the gospel) is that Jesus' death on the cross is God's solution to our sin. *But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.* All you have to do is admit that you're guilty (that you've sinned) and receive Jesus' sacrifice by faith. You can't pay off your sin and you can't earn forgiveness. You simply have to receive it. Your response this morning might be to receive this gift. If you accept Jesus' sacrifice, your sin will be removed as far from you as the east is from the west. God will put His Spirit within you, and you will never be alone again. You will become a new creature with new appetites. In a couple minutes I'm going to invite you to pray along with me and receive this gift of salvation. This could be a day that changes everything for you.

The second implication is for those who have already understood and received this gift of salvation. I would encourage you to understand that ***Jesus' death on the cross continues to cleanse us from sin.*** Even though we are forgiven, we continue to sin in various ways. Yet sometimes we're reluctant to label our actions and attitudes as *sinful*. Sometimes we justify our anger or our unkindness or our selfishness by saying, "I'm having a rough day" or "I'm really stressed" or "I'm dealing with some very difficult people." Those things may all be true, and they may explain why we are tempted to anger, unkindness, or selfishness. But those things are

still sin. Those are the very type of sins that required a substitute/sacrifice/death on our behalf. And the death of Jesus on the cross continues to cleanse us from those types of sins.

Sometimes when I'm stuck spiritually, the very thing that gets me going again is admitting to God that I've actually sinned – not that I'm merely stressed or that I'm having a rough day. When there's sin, there's hope because Jesus paid for my sin. It may be that you have already accepted Jesus' payment for your sin, but that there are specific sins that keep you from experiencing God in all His fullness. You're still a new creature in Christ but you need a fresh cleansing from some sin. Perhaps it's anger or pride or lust or jealousy or greed.

I've said it before: Jesus didn't die on the cross so that we might try to manage our own sin as best we can. No, Jesus died on the cross so that we might walk in freedom and fullness as sons and daughters of the one, true living God. "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). In a couple minutes, I will give you the opportunity to confess your sin to God and receive a fresh cleansing.

1 Corinthians 5:21 is a powerful summary of what we've seen today in Isaiah 52 and 53.

21 [God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.