

## Isaiah 53. 1-6. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 17 July 2011.

As advertised, our reading for this morning comes from Isaiah 53 ... the first six verses.

*Who* has believed our report? And *to whom* has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

For He grew up before Him as a tender shoot, and as a root out of a dry ground: He has no form nor majesty; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him.

He was despised, and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and as one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.

Surely He has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities: the chastisement that procured our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

This is the second of our studies in the last of the four servant songs of Isaiah ... a song which began in verse 13 of chapter 52 and which extends through to the closing verse of our chapter.

As is generally known, the book of Isaiah consists of two main sections ... chapters 1 to 39, which are largely concerned with God's judgement, and chapters 40 to 66 which are largely concerned with God's comfort and consolation. This final servant song sits at the centre of the second half of the book.

The song is generally recognised as having five parts – five stanzas, each consisting of three verses. Verses 4 to 6 of chapter 53 form the central stanza of the song, and, of this, verse 5 is, of course, the central verse. So, in one sense, verse 5 occupies centre stage in God's message of comfort and consolation for His people. And I can think of no better words to do so.

But we need to start where our set reading does – with verse 1.<sup>1</sup> This verse is quoted twice in the New Testament – both times related, as here, to the unbelief of the nation of Israel. The first quotation, in John 12 verse 38, is connected with Israel's rejection of the message preached by our Lord Jesus Himself,<sup>2</sup> and the second, in Romans 10 verse 16, with their rejection of the preaching of the gospel by the apostle Paul and other heralds of the cross.<sup>3</sup>

In both of these New Testament passages, the questions are addressed by the prophet (on behalf of those he describes in verse 8 as 'my people') to God. '*Lord*', he asks, 'who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?' The answer to both of these questions is the same ... an answer so obvious it didn't need to be given ... that there were *very few indeed* in Israel who responded in faith to the message which they heard, and to that revelation of God's power which was demonstrated supremely in the Person of the Messiah, the Servant of the Lord, our Lord Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

In the following verses, introduced by the 'for' of verse 2, the nation confesses that they rejected God's message concerning His Servant for two main reasons. First, that, on account of His humble appearance and seeming insignificance, they had seriously undervalued Him, and, second, that, on account of His severe and unparalleled sufferings, they had entirely misunderstood the reason for those sufferings – reckoning them to be God's judgement on Him because of His own sins.

First, they say, 'He grew up'. He would not, that is, suddenly appear as if from nowhere – which, according to John 7 verse 27, some in Israel apparently expected Him to do.<sup>5</sup>

And His growing up is expressed by two botanical pictures which convey most graphically the unpromising surroundings from which the Servant came – 'as a tender shoot, and as a root out of a dry ground.'<sup>6</sup> And indeed, as we know well, our Lord certainly did grow up in the lowliest of earthly circumstances. His mother was a poor virgin and His supposed father a humble craftsman.<sup>7</sup>

In this connection, I suspect that the reference to the 'tender shoot' here is a throwback to the opening verse of chapter 11, where we read that 'there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots shall bear fruit'. When our Lord was born, many centuries had passed since any descendant of David had sat upon a throne. And the royal house of Israel – now long sunk into obscurity – could well be likened to the decayed stump of a once great tree which had been cut down. And the lowly birth and early growth of our Lord could therefore well be likened to the springing forth of a fresh shoot or sapling from the decayed stump of the one-time proud tree of the royal line of Israel.

And we might think of the town and area where the Lord Jesus grew up. John 1 tells how Nathanael was initially very sceptical that the Messiah could have come out of the insignificant and despised town of Nazareth. 'Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?' he asked Philip.<sup>8</sup> And we discover that later the members of the ruling Jewish council were similarly unimpressed with the fact that the Lord came from Galilee. 'Out of Galilee arises no prophet', were their angry words to Nicodemus when he had the temerity to speak up in our Lord's defence.<sup>9</sup>

'There was', Israel confesses, 'nothing about His background or His earthly credentials to draw us to Him ... no form ... no majesty ... no beauty'.<sup>10</sup>

I should perhaps point out that, when Israel claim in verse 2 that God's Servant had 'no form nor majesty', they are not speaking of our Lord's personal and physical appearance. Their words tell us rather that, when He emerged into the public gaze, and presented Himself to them (His people) as their Messiah, they saw nothing at all attractive, impressive or desirable in Him ... that He possessed none of the glamour, pomp and grandeur for which they were looking.

They expected the Messiah to come as a worldly conqueror and prince in great glory, to deliver them from the Roman yoke and to restore their nation to its former greatness. But what did they see? Nothing that corresponded to their expectations ... no regal splendour ... no royal robes ... no diadems adorning His brow ... no men of rank and status supporting His cause.

They looked for a king who matched their criteria of wealth, power and glory, but all they saw was a carpenter, accompanied by a small band of untrained followers and supported by a group of pious women.

And I note that the Greek Old Testament renders the words, 'no form nor majesty (a word which signifies magnificence)' as 'no form nor *glory*'. And I remember that, in chapter 12 of his gospel, John reports that Isaiah himself had earlier seen the 'glory' of Jesus as the Lord of hosts, seated on His high and heavenly throne.<sup>11</sup> But here in our chapter Isaiah has to come to terms with the fact that, when the Lord of hosts came to earth as the Man of Sorrows, His own nation perceived 'no glory' in Him.

'And when we see Him', the nation now add, 'there is no beauty that we should desire Him'. And sadly that was only too true.

But I can tell you that *God* found great beauty in Him to desire. And, thank God, so do we! When speaking of the Saviour, we can safely borrow words from chapter 5 of the book immediately preceding this – 'He is altogether lovely'. And we relish the day when our eyes shall, in Isaiah's own words back in chapter 33, 'see the king in his beauty'.<sup>12</sup>

I said that God found great beauty in Him to desire. And He certainly did!

And we should not overlook the prophet's statement that God's Servant 'grew up before Him ('before His face' literally – before God's face, that is) as a tender shoot'.<sup>13</sup> Towards the close of chapter 2 of his gospel, Luke provides a brief summary of the growth and development of Jesus from His birth to His twelfth year. 'The child grew and became strong', Luke says, 'being filled (continuously, day by day) with wisdom, and the grace (the favour) of God was upon Him'.<sup>14</sup> And then Luke further records Jesus' continued growth into manhood until the time of His baptism. 'Jesus increased in wisdom and stature', Luke says, 'and in favour with God and man'.<sup>15</sup>

His baptism was, of course, the bridge between His early life and His public ministry. And how we thrill to hear the Father's announcement of His approval and delight at the 10,000 days of unbroken satisfaction which our Lord had brought Him while at Nazareth ... 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'.<sup>16</sup>

Twice in verse 3 God's Servant is spoken of as 'despised'.<sup>17</sup> And when here, our Lord certainly was that.

And men hurled every conceivable kind of insult at Jesus. They referred to Him as a glutton and drunkard<sup>18</sup> – to Him who at times hungered and thirsted for us.<sup>19</sup> They attributed collusion with Beelzebul to Him<sup>20</sup> – to Him who had come to undo the works of the devil and who performed His miracles in the power of the Spirit of God.<sup>21</sup> They sniggered at Him, with obvious innuendo, 'We were not born of fornication'<sup>22</sup> – at Him who was 'that holy thing', born of a virgin.<sup>23</sup> They sneered at Him, 'You are a Samaritan'<sup>24</sup> – at Him who was of the royal house of Israel.<sup>25</sup> They scoffed at Him, 'You have a demon'<sup>26</sup> – at Him who cast out unclean spirits with unique and irresistible authority.<sup>27</sup> They branded Him as a 'deceiver'<sup>28</sup> – Him who was ever all He claimed to be, and the very 'truth' itself.<sup>29</sup> No term of contempt was too bad for Him; He was well and truly 'despised'.

And He was 'rejected of men' – 'by rulers and persons of rank', the Hebrew word signifies – indicating that men of importance kept their distance and refused to associate themselves with Him. Which is why the Pharisees could fling at their officers the challenge, 'Have *any* of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on Him?'<sup>30</sup>

What a thought for us this morning ... that we have been 'accepted' by God,<sup>31</sup> solely on account of Him who was rejected by men!

Last Lord's day was the 10<sup>th</sup> of July, and I understand that it was on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July in 1741 that a close friend of George Frederick Handel, the German-born composer ... one Charles Jenner ... sent to Handel the text of what was to become Handel's best known – if not best – composition. I refer, of course, to Handel's 'Messiah'.<sup>32</sup>

And I have read in several places that, when Handel contemplated the words of our text, 'He was despised and rejected of men', the great composer was found prostrate over his score ... sobbing. Alas for me this morning that my eyes are dry!

According to chapter 6, in heaven the seraphim covered their faces in awe and reverence before His transcendent glory,<sup>33</sup> but, according to our passage, on earth men hid their faces in disgust and revulsion from 'the Monarch with the Marred Face'.<sup>34</sup>

'We esteemed him not', Israel say – 'esteemed' being an 'accounting' word. His own nation, that is, set no value on Him – 'we reckoned him as nothing – as unworthy of our notice', they say. Quite possibly, Jesus had this verse in mind when He forewarned His disciples in Mark 9 that it is 'written of the Son of man, that He must suffer many things, and be set at nought'.<sup>35</sup>

We are well aware that our Lord experienced fullness of joy while here on earth<sup>36</sup> – knowing what it was to rejoice (to exult) in the Spirit.<sup>37</sup> Yet, for a host of reasons, He truly was also 'a man of sorrows' – sorrows which culminated in Gethsemane and Golgotha, where He did not, as all others, merely sip from the sup of sorrow, but where He drained it dry<sup>38</sup> ... and did it for me.

According to the latter part of verse 4, His nation assumed that, when He suffered, God was punishing Him for His own transgression ... His own iniquities. But how wrong they were!

And so to verse 5.

One well known Bible commentator, when writing of this verse, said that, 'There were no stronger expressions to be found in the (Hebrew) language, to denote a violent and painful death' than the words translated 'wounded' and 'crushed'.<sup>39</sup>

The word translated 'wounded' means pierced or bored through, usually fatally ... a fitting word indeed to describe the piercing of Messiah's hands, feet and side. And yet the 'piercing' in view here went far deeper than any nail-prints or spear thrust. For His being 'pierced through' speaks rather of the terrible blows which divine justice inflicted on Him. As also does His being 'crushed' – His being broken, beaten to pieces, as the word is.<sup>40</sup> In truth, the transgressions were mine, but the piercing was His ... the iniquities were mine, but the crushing was His.

We learn from Genesis 18 that 'the Judge of all the earth' will not punish the just with the unjust,<sup>41</sup> but, thank God, He has accepted the suffering of the Just on behalf of the unjust!<sup>42</sup>

But our verse speaks not only of the 'transgressions' and iniquities' *from which* we have been saved, but also of the 'peace' and 'healing' to which we have been saved ... the word translated 'peace' including the ideas of wholeness, blessedness and general well-being. I note that elsewhere Isaiah twice wrote the words, 'There is no peace ... for the wicked',<sup>43</sup> and, interestingly, our passage comes midway between these two references ... speaking, as it does, of the only true basis of peace for the repentant sinner – namely, that 'the chastisement that procured our peace was upon Him' ... the word translated 'chastisement' meaning 'correction, discipline and, more generally, punishment'. It was as if God's own Son took the whipping that we deserved for being rebellious children. Such was His love for me that He endured the *pain* that I might enjoy the *peace*.<sup>44</sup>

And not only 'peace', but 'healing'. Previously in his prophecy, Isaiah has used the language of *sickness* to describe sin and its consequential effects, and the language of *healing* to describe God's forgiveness and His consequential blessing.<sup>45</sup>

And the apostle Peter clearly understood our verse to refer figuratively to spiritual healing, for, with his eye very much on our passage, he wrote concerning the Lord Jesus, 'who His own self bare *our sins* in His own body on the tree ... with whose stripes you were *healed*. For you were as sheep going astray, but have now *returned* to the Shepherd and Overseer of your *souls*'.<sup>46</sup> Well then does the returning sinner cry out with David in Psalm 41, 'O Lord, be gracious to me: heal *my soul*; for I have sinned against you'.<sup>47</sup> The expression 'with His stripes' is a reference, not to the horrendous Roman scourging which our Lord endured, but to the strokes of God's judgement on Him.

And then we read in verse 6 that 'the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all' – of 'us all', that is, who were as self-willed and straying sheep.<sup>48</sup> And I note that the Hebrew word translated 'laid on' occurs frequently in the Old

Testament to describe those who meet with, or who fall on, others with a view to smiting and killing them.<sup>49</sup> Quite likely, therefore, we should understand verse 6 as saying that, during the three hours of darkness at the cross, God caused our iniquities to rush on the Lord Jesus, falling upon Him as would some vicious and destructive foe.<sup>50</sup>

We can hardly miss that verses 4 to 6 ... the central stanza of this, the last of the Servant Songs ... that verses 4 to 6 focus our attention no less than seven times on our Lord Jesus as the One who took *our* place.<sup>51</sup>

Behold then, our glorious Substitute.

Earlier I mentioned Charles Jennens, the friend who sent to the composer Handel the text of the 'Messiah' in July 1741. I close with something which Mr Jennens wrote to another friend at the time ...

'I hope he (Handel, that is) will lay out his whole genius and skill upon it, that the composition may excel all his former compositions, as *the Subject excels every other subject*'. Yes, indeed Mr Jennens, the 'Messiah', our Lord Jesus, *certainly excels every other*.

Let me read verses 1, 3 and 4 of the hymn 'O Christ what burdens bowed Thy head' by Mrs Ann Cousin ...

O Christ, what burdens bowed Thy head!  
Our load was laid on Thee;  
Thou stoodest in the sinner's stead,  
Didst bear all ill for me.  
A Victim led, Thy blood was shed;  
Now there's no load for me.

Jehovah lifted up His rod;  
O Christ, it fell on Thee!  
Thou wast sore stricken of Thy God;  
There's not one stroke for me.  
Thy tears, Thy blood, beneath it flowed;  
Thy bruising healeth me.

The tempest's awful voice was heard,  
O Christ, it broke on Thee!  
Thy open bosom was my ward,  
It braved the storm for me.  
Thy form was scarred, Thy visage marred;  
Now cloudless peace for me.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> And, as we enter the chapter, we remind ourselves that the ground we tread is more than usually sacred and that we must therefore proceed with reverence and care.

<sup>2</sup> John 12. 37-38.

<sup>3</sup> Rom. 10. 16 – see verse 19.

<sup>4</sup> The expression ‘the arm of the Lord’ is an emblem of the power of God by which He executes His purpose; for example. ‘Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord ... Art thou not it ... that hath made the depths of the sea a way for the ransomed to pass over?’, Isa. 51. 9-10. Isaiah saw that this mighty power of God was to be exhibited supremely through God’s Servant, the Messiah. For, in many ways, the Lord Jesus is the very embodiment of the power of God. Indeed, we might venture to speak of the Saviour as ‘the arm of the Lord’ personified. Certainly God’s power was manifested in : (i) our Lord’s conception and birth. The angel Gabriel announced to Mary, ‘The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God’, Luke 1. 35; (ii) our Lord’s life and miracles. Luke tells us that, ‘as he was teaching ... the power of the Lord was present to heal them’, Luke 5. 17, and, ‘they were all amazed at the mighty power of God ... they wondered every one at all things which Jesus did’, 9. 43; (iii) our Lord’s death and gospel. Concerning ‘the preaching of the cross’, Paul said that ‘unto us which are saved it is the power of God. We preach Christ crucified ... unto them which are called ... Christ the power of God’, 1 Cor. 1. 17-25 (iv) our Lord’s resurrection and exaltation. Paul spoke of the operation of God’s ‘mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places’, Eph. 1. 19-20. And God’s power will certainly be manifested in : (v) our Lord’s future advent and kingdom. The Lord Jesus said, ‘They shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory’, Matt. 24. 30. The apostle John tells of ‘great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever’ and adds that ‘the four and twenty elders ... fell upon their faces ... saying, ... Thou hast taken to thee thy great power, and hast reigned’, Rev. 11. 16-17.

And I note that these opening words of the second stanza of the song stand in marked contrast to the closing words of the first stanza, which we looked at last week. According to verse 15 of chapter 52, in a future day the gentile nations, together with their kings, *will* understand that which they had *not* previously heard – namely the revelation which God has given concerning His Servant. Whereas, on the contrary, according to verse 1 of our chapter, the nation of Israel in general will *not* believe that which they *had* heard concerning Him.

<sup>5</sup> He did not suddenly appear as some towering and impressive cedar tree!

<sup>6</sup> This word translated ‘tender shoot’ is derived from a word meaning ‘to suck’, and in a human setting, it would refer to a nursing child, sucking milk from his mother’s breast. But here, in the context of a plant, it is referring to a shoot which comes out of a stump.

<sup>7</sup> Matt. 13. 55.

<sup>8</sup> John 1. 46.

<sup>9</sup> John 7. 52.

<sup>10</sup> A word which emphasises the external, the visible, what one sees on the outside.

<sup>11</sup> John 12. 37-41.

<sup>12</sup> Isa. 33. 17.

<sup>13</sup> And ‘as a tender shoot’, in the words of Psalm 1, this ‘blessed’ Man brought forth ‘His fruit in His season’, Psa. 1. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 2. 40 lit; cf. 1. 80.

<sup>15</sup> Luke 2. 52.

<sup>16</sup> Plants owe much to ground in which gets life and nourishment. but Lord derived nothing from the spiritually parched and arid ground out of which He sprang. The seed on the stony ground had no root; but this plant had a hidden life. For this ‘root’ had His own hidden life; striking deep down to draw His sustenance and refreshment from God. And so it is that throughout the gospels we get occasional brief glimpses of a life lived in constant communion with God; e.g. He ‘departed into a solitary place, and there prayed’, Mark 1. 35, and ‘departed into a mountain to pray’, 6. 46. It struck its roots deep down into God.

<sup>17</sup> A word not used elsewhere in Isaiah.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 11. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Matt. 4. 2; John 19. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 10. 25; 12. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Matt. 12. 28; 1 John 3. 8.

<sup>22</sup> John 8. 41.

<sup>23</sup> Luke 1. 34-35.

<sup>24</sup> John 8. 48.

<sup>25</sup> Luke 2. 4.

<sup>26</sup> John 7. 20.

<sup>27</sup> Mark 1. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Matt. 27. 63.

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<sup>29</sup> John 8. 14, 25; 14. 6.

<sup>30</sup> John 7. 48. And we know that He was 'rejected' not only by men of rank, but by His own people in general, John 1. 11, including those of 'His own country', Luke 4. 24 and context.

<sup>31</sup> Eph. 1. 4.

<sup>32</sup> The last performance Handel attended before he died was that of the 'Messiah'.

<sup>33</sup> Isa. 6. 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> Isa. 52. 14.

<sup>35</sup> Mark 9. 12.

<sup>36</sup> John 15. 11; 17. 13.

<sup>37</sup> Luke 10. 21.

<sup>38</sup> Matt. 26. 37-38.

<sup>39</sup> Franz Delitzsch.

<sup>40</sup> For, just as bread corn is crushed by being ground in the mill, or spice is crushed by being beaten in a mortar, my Lord was broken and crushed on account of my sins and the punishment due to them.

<sup>41</sup> Gen 18. 25.

<sup>42</sup> 1 Pet. 3. 18.

<sup>43</sup> Isa. 48. 22; 57 .21.

<sup>44</sup> The Lord Jesus made 'peace through the blood of his cross', Col. 1. 20.

<sup>45</sup> Isa. 1. 4-7; 6. 10; 30. 26.

<sup>46</sup> 1 Pet. 2. 24-25.

<sup>47</sup> Psa. 41. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Literally translated, the phrase, 'all of us', a single word in Hebrew, begins and ends the verse, bracketing the whole statement: 'All of us, like sheep, went astray...and the Lord laid on him the iniquity of all of us'.

<sup>49</sup> For example, 1 Kings 2. 25, 34, 46; cf. Judg. 15. 12; 1 Sam. 22. 18.

<sup>50</sup> We know that, during our Lord's passion, *men* rushed on Him with hostile intent, for there came 'a great multitude with swords and staves', Matt. 26. 47, 55. So too did *the overlord of evil with his demonic forces*, for Jesus said, 'this is ...the power of darkness', Luke 22. 53; cf. Col. .2. 15. But for Jesus the extreme agony of His passion lay, not in the violent assaults He suffered from men and demons, but in that which He suffered from our sins.

<sup>51</sup> Surely He has (i) *borne our griefs*, and (ii) *carried our sorrows*: yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was (iii) *wounded for our transgressions*, He was (iv) *crushed for our iniquities*: (v) *the chastisement that procured our peace was upon Him*; and (vi) *with His stripes we are healed*. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and (vii) *the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all*.