

The REJECTION of the Servant of the Lord Isaiah 53:1-3

CHAPTER TWO

Who believed what we heard? And to whom was the arm of Jehovah disclosed?

And he grew up as a suckling-plant before him, and as a root from very dry ground there was no form to him, and no splendor; and we looked at him and there was no good look that we should delight in him.

He was rejected and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as those caused to hide our faces from him so he was despised and we did not esteem him.

In the previous chapter we learned something of the mystery of the Servant of Jehovah. There was mystery in His humiliation and there will be mystery in His coming glory. Above all there was mystery--till the resurrection--concerning the fact that Messiah would be both a patient sufferer and a reigning sovereign.

A glance at the chapter now before us will demonstrate that the verses we have studied (52:13-15) are an epitome or preview of the chapter to follow, for the chapter likewise begins with the suffering and ends with the glory.

A PROBLEM: WHO ARE THE CONFESSORS?

A new speaker is introduced in chapter 53--a group of persons--who speak in the first person. "Who believed what we heard" (verse 1). "We looked at him...we should delight in him" (verse 2). Then mention is made of "our faces" (verse 3), "our calamity...our sorrows" (verse 4), and "our transgressions...our punishments" (verse 5). So it continues throughout the passage. Who are these ready confessors? Some have said they are the prophets, Isaiah and others, whose message was largely rejected. The Authorized and American Standard Versions seem to support this by their rendering of verse one, "Who hath believed our report?" (A.V.), and "our message?" (A.S.V.). But I think the Hebrew settles the matter, for the word is not "message" or "report" in the sense usually understood. It is a passive participial form of the regular word for hearing a message, and might well be translated "that which was heard by us." It is the message not from the standpoint of the speaker of the message, but from the standpoint of the hearer. The "report" is not "what we said," but rather "what we heard."

In this light, these words can refer in a primary sense only to Israel. These words fit best in the mouth of Israel of the end-time, who, having then seen both the suffering and the glory, will then understand the mystery and confess Jesus as Lord. They will see then what they had not been told, that He died to save them and has come again both to save and to rule them. This chapter will never have its complete historical

fulfillment, in such a case, until Jesus comes back.¹

LOCALE AND CIRCUMSTANCES

The prophet Zechariah (12:9ff) gives the locale and circumstances. He relates how the Christ-rejection of Israel will at the last bring them to their greatest extremity. In that day not Poland or Russia, not Spain or Germany--but "all nations" shall come against Israel in his land to destroy him. On that occasion, Zechariah relates: "It shall come to pass in that day, that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced; and they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his first-born..." (Zechariah 12:9,10). (See also Revelation 1:7 on this point).

But having said this,² one must hasten to add that it seems that the spirit of prophecy purposely left the speakers' identify vague. It was in order that anyone could read the verses himself and make himself the confessor--so that I could write my name in there (you could write yours)--and say, "He was wounded for *my* transgressions, was bruised for *my* iniquities."

Nobody who knows in his heart the saving power of Jesus can read this chapter without seeing his own picture in these descriptions of sin, sinners, and of divine forgiveness.

Let us then read and consider these verses in a personal way, realizing that we too were responsible for the rejection and suffering of Jehovah's righteous Servant.

Our attention is now directed to the second section of the oracle, verses one, two, and three of chapter 53, which represents the historical rejection of the Servant of Jehovah.

The first and most obvious fact is

THE REJECTION OF THE MESSAGE CONCERNING HIM (verse 1)

"Who believed what we heard? And to whom was the arm of Jehovah disclosed?"

1. REJECTION OF THE MESSAGE IN WORDS

Historically speaking, Israel rejected the *spoken message* God gave them

1 This was the view of Franz Delitzsch, a very able German Jewish Christian scholar of the 19th century, whose three-volume commentary on Isaiah has gone through many editions in English translation. Delitzsch was a Premillenarian who thus easily accepted this view. Some Postmillennialists and Amillennialists have shared an expectation of future conversion of the Jews.

2 Some may wonder why, having quoted Zechariah 12:9,10, I do not continue by quoting also Zechariah 13:6, "And one shall say unto him, What are these wounds in thine hands? Then shall he answer, Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends." The phraseology seems so applicable to our Lord and so like what one would expect Him to say that there must be some compelling reason for interpreting otherwise. Such there is. The immediately preceding context applies the words to a false prophet, not to the Lord. So agree the majority of critical commentators.

about their Messiah. The implied answer to the question "Who believed?" is "Very few or none." What did they hear? They heard the prophets. Jacob said He would be of Judah's tribe (Genesis 49:10); Micah, that He would be a Bethlehemite (Micah 5:2); Isaiah spoke of His ministry to the poor (Isaiah 9:1ff and 61:1). But Herod sought to kill Him, and the leaders of religion took up Herod's cause. They also heard the angels who announced His miraculous birth; they heard the Magi who saw His star; they heard John the Baptist who prepared His way and identified Him when He came. They heard the voice of God from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." They heard the seventy; they heard the twelve. Even the demons cried out and bore witness that He was the Son of God. But they did not believe what they heard. Oh, they listened. Thousands ate His loaves and fishes. But in the sense of this word "believe," which means full agreement, absolute trust, they did not believe. It is the same word in other constructions and forms often translated "Amen." No one really said Amen to the words of and about Jesus.

2. REJECTION OF THE MESSAGE IN DEEDS

There was another message which Israel rejected besides the spoken one--it was the *message of the works* which Jesus performed. This is brought out in the words "and to whom was the arm of Jehovah disclosed?"

The "arm" (literally lower or forearm) is a common Old Testament figure of power. An example is Job 22:8. Eliphaz mentions one called the "mighty man." The Oxford Bible margin, true to the Hebrew, renders it "man of arm." Psalm 79:11 speaks of God as having greatness of "power," but the marginal reading is "arm." Again, Genesis 49:24 in speaking of Joseph's strength strangely refers to it as "the arms of his hands," i.e., the strength of his hands.

In our verse "was revealed" indicates divine revelation. Now the sense is seen to be, "To whom did God make known His power?"

But, someone asks--What power? When? Where? The answer is that the "arm of Jehovah" is clearly those manifestations of God's power in the miracles which Jesus wrought. A common Greek word in the New Testament for the miracles is *dunamis*, or power. The people saw the work--the stilling of the waves, the casting out of demons, the raising of the dead, the cleansing of the lepers--but few indeed discerned the God who wrought the works. They said He had cast out devils by the prince of devils. When there was a miracle they could not deny, the leaders shrugged their shoulders. The message of the works of Jesus was seen and understood but not believed, or "discerned" in the spiritual sense of that word.

One may be certain that this interpretation of Isaiah 53:1 is correct, for the New Testament so claims (John 12:37-40): "But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him, that the saying of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke: Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said,³ He has blinded

³ Jesus' use of Isaiah's prophecies incidentally proves that He believed in the unity of authorship of the book called

their eyes and hardened their heart, that they should not see with their eyes nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them."

3. THE PRACTICAL LESSON

The rejection of the message of even our Lord's own words and deeds ought to teach us something important--that saving faith is not brought about by eloquent and convincing speech alone. Neither is it produced by evidence, as such. No event was ever so eloquently described in speech as our Lord's coming. It was likewise well furnished with evidence. He came as the prophets said He would; He presented His credentials and spoke nothing that could not be proved true. But still men did not believe. Why didn't they? They didn't want to. Isaiah says that God would not let them (6:9,10; cf. John 12:39,40). Why didn't God let them? Because they would not let Him! No one can fully explain this--it is one of the mysteries of God past finding out. There are the facts. Convincing argument and evidence can produce conviction but they cannot produce saving faith. That only God can do. It is as Paul says, "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Corinthians 12:3). This ought to encourage us to preach courageously as did the rejected prophets of the past, whatever the results, and to pray more earnestly that God himself will give the increase. To Him belongs all the credit in the salvation of even one single soul.

The next step in the story of the Servant's rejection is

THE REJECTION OF THE PERSON OF THE SERVANT (verse 2)

"And he grew up as a suckling-plant before him, and as the root from very dry ground there was no form to him, and no splendor; and we looked at him and there was no good look that we should delight in him."

There is nothing about a message in verse two. It is the person of the Messiah, Himself, who is rejected.

1. REJECTED FOR RUSTIC ORIGIN

The first reason why sinful men rejected Him was the unpretentious manner of His coming before the nation's attention. Kings are usually born in palaces, reared in rich surroundings, and presented with pomp and splendor. Princes usually grow up before the eyes of all men. But it was not so with this King--"He grew up as a suckling-plant before him" (that is, before Jehovah).

"Suckling-plant" is the Hebrew *yoneq*, literally a sucker. In the horticultural sense it refers to a layer-sprout, the new plant which springs up when a low branch from a berry bush makes contact with the soil (cf. Job 8:16, 14:7). It is as if, to use an expression we Americans know

"Isaiah." He quoted Isaiah 53:1 as "the saying of Isaiah the prophet" (John 12:38) and on the same occasion, Isaiah 6:10 (John 12:39-40), as from the same Isaiah. It is quite customary in many scholarly circles to assign the book of Isaiah from chapter 40 onward to a second writer (or a third) living a century and a half later.

very well, he was a "hillbilly," a "backwoods" character--just another little bush from the back side of the blackberry patch.

Yes, God knew about Him. God selected the mother. She was a humble woman. God chose the city, a rather remote mountain village in a poor section, from the viewpoint of leaders at the center of affairs in Jerusalem. God also chose the home--a carpenter's home--in which He grew up, and God chose the carpenter's vocation He was to follow for a while.

But even though He was God's "beloved Son" and grew up in plain view of Jehovah (and of the hosts of angels), He was unknown and unsung by men. Only God knew. Even His mother could only "ponder these things in her heart;" she couldn't fully understand.

The result is well known. Mark relates (6:2,3) that "when the sabbath day was come, he began to teach in the synagogue. And many hearing him were astonished, saying, From whence has this man these things? And what wisdom is this which is given to him, that even such mighty works are wrought by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joseph, and of Judas, and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at him."

But though the hidden life, when like a tender plant or a suckling babe He grew, was an offense to them, it should be a blessing to us, for it sanctified forever the obscure tasks that common people do and the humble places in which common people dwell. He came to do His Father's will. For thirty years His Father's will was a carpenter's shop! Wasted time you say? Not if that was where God wanted Him. Does a home seem an obscure place for your talents, young lady? There is no "career" so blest by the promises of God as that of Christian motherhood. Does a farm seem out of the way, young man? There is no place like a farm to serve God if a farm is God's will for you! And to the preachers let me add: Jesus was prepared to hear one crowd cry "Hosanna...blessed be the king who comes in the name of the Lord," and another crowd "Crucify him!" during those quiet years at Nazareth. Moses was great in the kingdom of heaven, and still is, but the will of God for him was forty years on the "backside of the desert."

Let us despise neither the quiet places and the quiet people, nor the quiet years that God may give us.

2. REJECTED FOR HUMBLE APPEARANCE

The second reason sinful men rejected Him was that His appearance, when once He made Himself known, was not such as would delight unspiritual men. "And as a root from very dry ground there was no beautiful form to him, and no splendor." You will compare these words with the Authorized Version and observe the increased clarity of language. Some have made out from these words that our Lord was an ugly man--ill-formed and misshapen. But this statement has no reference to the physical body of Christ.

"A root from very dry ground" probably has reference to the circumstances of the nation when He arose. When this "sprout" or "rod out of the stem of Jesse"--a "shoot" in Israel--grew up, the national soil was never drier.

They were in subjection to Rome. Their kingdom had vanished; the throne was extinct; the religious hierarchy was corrupt; and the people were in dispersion. It was indeed "very dry ground." Such a man from such a people was low and despised by the haughty Romans, of course. Since he was very different from what the Jewish people expected, He was despised by them also.

Three expressions tell us how He looked to Israel: "no beautiful form...no splendor...no good look." The Authorized has "no form, nor comeliness...no beauty." "No form" means He had no beautiful form. David is called a "comely person" (1 Samuel 16:18), and the word is the same as this. "Comeliness," the word I translate "splendor," is kingly splendor such as is seen in royal courts. In Psalm 21:5, translated "majesty," it is spoken of David's court. "Beauty," which I have rendered "look," is literally just that. There is a play on words. "We looked and there was no good look."

To show how we all attach these special meanings to words when there is nothing intrinsic in the words to give the special meaning, consider how we regard the two words *sight* and *vision*. Ask someone what the difference is between sight and vision, and he will likely say there isn't any difference. We say that the eyes are organs of sight, or organs of vision, and we mean the same. But try this out on your wife when she comes home in a fresh "hairdo" and new dress. Tell her she is a vision to behold, and she will purr like a kitten; tell her she is a sight to behold, and she may chase you out of the house!

Now in our Lord men saw a "sight" in the most depreciating sense of that word. What did they miss in Him? Not the physical excellence--there is every reason to believe Jesus was a well-formed person. But there was no *kingly* form, no *regal* majesty, no *royal* appearance. They wanted a *king*, but they got a *carpenter*. They felt like Goliath when the Israelites sent a youth (David) out to fight him. Their egos were insulted.

Let this fact teach us too. There are some great men whose dress is poor, whose diction is provincial. But they call spades spades. They seek no favors and are too honest to "pull strings" or to put better than their usual foot forward. People of God, they are gold--real gold--the thing great saints are made of, the stuff great and good movements run by! There is entirely too much glorying in appearance among us--too much knowing men "after the flesh" (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:12,16).

That this resulted in the rejection of our Lord's person is stated by the words "that we should delight in him." They simply did not want Him! That was the horrible result of judging by appearances; yet men still do it. By the same false principle of judgment some of God's best servants have been judged as of little worth.

We have now approached five of the saddest statements in all the Bible, five statements which set forth the exact details of

THE NATURE OF THE SERVANT'S REJECTION (verse 3)

"He was rejected and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as those caused to hide our faces from him, so he was despised and we did not esteem him."

1. HE WAS REJECTED

"He was rejected," or as the Authorized has it, "He is despised." It was a dreadful thing. The word means to lift the head disdainfully, to treat with contempt, to reject. It is the word used when it is said that Esau "despised" his birthright. It is the most comprehensive of all the terms here, involving that complete act of the whole man when he utterly and completely refuses something.

2. HE WAS FORSAKEN

"He was forsaken of men." How true it was. His brethren first forsook Him, and then His home town did the same. Nobody welcomed Jesus when early in His ministry He came back home to Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30). Later His many disciples began to go away, and He asked even the twelve "Will ye also go away?" (John 6:66, cf. 7:28). And they did. Finally, when with swords and staves they came after Him in the garden, Matthew says, "Then all the disciples left him and fled" (Matthew 26:56). One may espouse a cause and rejoice to find everybody cheering for him until continued support and friendship mean they may get in trouble along with him, and then [he will] find himself fighting all alone. That is what happened to Jesus. And even though a handful of His friends gathered to watch Him die, not one of them understood what was happening.

Many have found it not difficult to bear pain and hardness when there were those to cheer. Foreign and home missionary service in lonely spots may not be really very hard if someone publishes your picture and sends a word of encouragement occasionally. But the sorrowful missionary is the one who leaves home and church young, healthy, well-known, and even popular--only to return after years of lonely service to a generation who either never knew him or have forgotten about him.

In the case of our Lord, there was not only the loneliness of physical pain (the thieves at least shared that), but there was the loneliness of complete misunderstanding. There is no evidence that even His mother or John or the friendly women at the cross understood just why He "laid down his life." In fact, He was not only forsaken of men, even God turned His face away. In such loneliness, in that terrible hour, the Saviour of the world bowed His noble head and died. The following poem by Ben H. Price, especially the sixth line, expresses what I mean.

It was alone the Saviour prayed in dark Gethsemane;
Alone He drained the bitter cup and suffered there for me.
It was alone the Saviour stood in Pilate's judgment hall;
Alone the crown of thorns He wore, forsaken thus by all.
Alone upon the cross He hung that others He might save;
Forsaken then by God and man, alone, His life He gave.

Alone, alone, He bore it all alone.

He gave Himself to save His own,
He suffered, bled and died, alone, alone.

3. HE WAS AN OFFENSE

He was an offense. I read, "We hid as it were our faces from him." What did it mean? There are several things that cause people to hide their faces--shame or shock or contempt will do it. The last, contempt, is the case here. He was not truly contemptible. His presence was always a blessing. He made the best wine for a wedding; He produced food for the hungry; He healed the sick; He opened the eyes of blind men and cleansed lepers; He tamed a wild man; He even broke up a funeral and restored the corpse of a man alive to his household. But still they turned their faces in contempt. When He healed a man, they complained because it was on the Sabbath. When He claimed to be the Son of God, they called it blasphemy. They called "evil good and good evil...put light for darkness and darkness for light." If Jesus had lived in our generation, the meteorologists would have jailed Him for breaking up a storm they had predicted. The undertakers would have complained that His actions implied they had buried Lazarus alive. The Democrats would have damned Him for fellowship with a Republican, and the Republicans for featherbedding the carpenters' union! The physicians would have complained about His robbing them of their business, and the lawyers for encouraging Christians to disavow their services. Nothing He might do could possibly be "right" in the eyes of His countrymen.

It's a strange world. The wheels are out of gear. If it were not, it would never have hid its face from such a Saviour.

4. HE WAS "CONTEMPTIBLE"

"He was despised." It is the same Hebrew word as the first of this series--the same as translated "rejected" earlier in the verse. I want to add here that all the contempt and hate possible is poured into this word. The most hated, despised, and villainous man in Hebrew history is probably Antiochus Epiphanes, who in about 165 B.C. robbed and then profaned the Jewish temple by offering heathen sacrifices on the brazen altar. To the Jewish mind there could be nothing worse. Yet Daniel in describing Him uses the same word--a "contemptible person" (Daniel 11:21). Jesus, in the minds of these men, was in the same class with the reprobate who desecrated the holy altar with the carcass of a sow!

5. HE WAS UNESTEEMED

Finally, He was unesteemed: "And we did not esteem him." The word is elsewhere rendered "impute." Of Abram it is said that God "imputed to him righteousness." But to Jesus men did not impute anything good. He was just "no good," worthless, unfit to be their Messiah.

We are told what it did to our Lord Jesus. Human beings react to praise or blame, to love or hate, to esteem or contempt, and Jesus was a human being. It made him "a man of sorrows." Of Israel in Egyptian bondage, God said, "I know their sorrows" (Exodus 3:7); Job spoke of the "pain" (Job 3:19);

and the Lamentations of Jeremiah speak of the "grief" that poor man suffered--in each case the Hebrew word is the same. Jesus knew sorrows, pain, and grief. None of these other men suffered the sorrow Jesus did. And because of it He became "acquainted with grief." He knew it in others for He lived among the poor, the weak, the sick, the suffering; widows and orphans were a primary concern. He knew it in Himself. Above all, His conflict with sin brought grief upon Him, and when He took our sins upon Him, then sin brought a grief that could only break His heart and kill Him. We can almost hear Him say

*I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath.
He has led me and brought me into darkness but not into light.
He has turned aside my ways and pulled me in pieces; he has made me
desolate.
He has bent his bow and set me as a mark for the arrow.
I was a derision to all my people, and their song all the day.
He has filled me with bitterness, he has made me drunk with wormwood.
He has also broken my teeth with gravel stones, he has covered me with
ashes.
And you have removed my soul far off from peace; I forgot prosperity.
And I said, My strength and my hope is perished from the LORD.
Remembering my affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall.
My soul has them still in remembrance and is humbled within me.*

(From Lamentations 3:1-20)

This experience of our Lord was something ultimate. It had to be if He was to bear the sin of the world. As such it is occasion both for our joy and sorrow--joy that we have a complete and sure redemption; joy that our Saviour knows how to help us in suffering; sorrow that it was our sin as well as theirs that nailed Him there. This mingled joy and sadness has probably never been better expressed than in the poem "Man of Sorrows."

"Man of sorrows," what a name for the Son of God who came,
Ruined sinners to reclaim! Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned He stood.
Sealed my pardon with His blood; Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Guilty, vile and helpless, we; spotless Lamb of God was He.
"Full atonement," can it be? Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Lifted up was he to die; "It is finished" was His cry.
Now in heav'n exalted high; Hallelujah! What a Savior!

When He comes, our glorious King, all his ransomed home to bring,
Then anew this song we'll sing--Hallelujah! What a Savior!