

Songs of the Servant (4.1) ... Isaiah 52:13-15

We're back again for the first of five evenings in the book of the evangelical prophet, Isaiah; a man whose name actually means, 'the Lord is salvation' ... the focus of our interest tonight is the last few verses of chapter 52, then over the next four weeks the plan is to walk down to the end of chapter 53, one section at a time ...

we are lifting the lid on the last of the four Servant songs ... the theme here is on a substitute who carries the sin and guilt of his people. That's what Vernon Higham had in mind when he penned the words which are a fitting tribute to this fourth song: *great is the gospel of our glorious God.*

The spotlight is shining on what are often called, the servant songs of Jehovah ... four poems of the servant. Let me refresh your memory: the first one is in chapter 42 where he is the **supreme** servant, the torchlight shines on the equipping of the Servant, we were reminded then that people need the Lord, the hope of the world is a Servant; the second song is in chapter 49 where he is the **sovereign** servant, the theme there was on the calling of the Servant, we were reminded then that here is a Servant well worth singing about; the third is in chapter 50 where he is the **submissive** servant, the laser beam directed us to consider the faithfulness of the Servant; and the fourth runs from the last few verses in chapter 52 into chapter 53 where he is set before us as the **suffering** servant, He is our redeemer, our rescuer, the one who died an atoning death on Calvary's cross for you and me.

These words are often spoken of as 'the fifth gospel' along with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I'm inclined to see them as the 'first' gospel, as they were around long before the other four! Here, in the space of 15 verses, is a miniature compendium of gospel truth - a condensed Bible in a single chapter! Spurgeon called this chapter, 'the holy of holies of divine writ.' One writer said that 'it looks as if it was written beneath the cross upon Golgotha.'

It reminds me of the old hymn, which says: *Upon the cross of Jesus, Mine eyes at times can see, The very dying form of one, Who suffered there for me; And from my smitten heart, with tears, Two wonders I confess, The wonder of his glorious love, And my own worthlessness.*

Polycarp, a disciple of John and former bishop of Smyrna who was martyred in his mid-80s because of his love for the Lord Jesus, called it 'the golden Passional of the OT.' The reformer Martin Luther declared that every Christian should memorise the entire chapter ... well:

I did that as a boy in Sunday School in the Church Street Mission Hall in Bangor and got a crisp ten shilling note for it! A few weeks later I did it again, and doubled my money at the annual prize-giving in Ebenezer Gospel Hall, and got a £1 note for it! That was a lot of money back then in the late 50s, early 60s.

You'll recall the familiar story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 - on his way back home from one of the feasts in Jerusalem, he's

all alone in his chariot, he's absorbed with what he is reading from the scroll of Isaiah; and, in the providence of God, he was in chapter 53, he did not understand it at all - so we read in verse 35 that Philip the evangelist 'told him the good news about Jesus.'

That is hugely interesting - this man was Jewish and for Jewish people, even today, this chapter is the so-called 'forbidden' chapter! When portions of the the OT are read in synagogues around the world, week in, week out, this chapter is always omitted - for reasons best known to the ancient rabbis the cycle of public readings stops at verse 12 in Isaiah 52 and picks up at Isaiah 54:1.

Strange, eh! Maybe not. Because this, the most remarkable chapter in the OT, is all about Jesus. To borrow a musical phrase, the prophet has one string to his bow - Jesus. In these verses, he brings us on to a new plane of prophecy, a new depth of promise of what the Saviour would do and what he would go through and how people would respond to him. Let me show you what I mean: in these 15 verses, there are 5 stanzas of 3 verses each:

number one, 52:13-15, we see the Servant's **exaltation**; number two, 53:1-3, we see the Servant's **rejection**; number three, 53:4-6, we see the Servant's **passion**; number four, 53:7-9, we see the Servant's **submission**; and number five, 53:10-12, we see the Servant's **salvation**.

This evening we are looking at the first one, **the Servant's exaltation** ... but, before we do, let me also point out that each of these stanzas matches one of the five Levitical offerings:

The burnt offering is depicted in 52:13-15; the meal offering is represented in 53:1-3; the peace offering is portrayed in 53:4-6; the sin offering is closely aligned to 53:7-9; and the trespass or guilt offering is recounted in 53:10-12. You can check these out at your leisure - again, it underlines for us the intertwining threads that are woven into the tapestry of divine truth.

These three verses are a kind of summary of all that is found in chapter 53 - they introduce to us a couple of contrasting ideas: suffering and glory - for the servant, the sin-bearing Jesus, will go the way of the cross before being enthroned on high - echoes of Philippians 2, methinks.

The big question is: Why is he exalted? And there are three reasons. First,

He is exalted because of his success (13)

It's interesting to note that the verse begins with the words, 'Behold, my servant' - that should ring a bell for that's how the first one began in chapter 42:1, 'behold, my servant' ... and now, like a bookend, the last of the songs begins in the same way - 'behold, see, here is my servant.' God is speaking here and he wants us to fix our eyes on him ... take a look at him ... gaze upon him ...

This exclamation is used more than a thousand times in the OT - but - it's used four times by two of the prophets who heralded the advent of Jesus Christ ... messianic promises ... Zechariah 3:8 introduces us to the anointed one as 'my servant the Branch' ... Zechariah 6:12 the word 'behold' points to 'the man whose name is the Branch' ... Zechariah 9:9 uses the same word to highlight the famous prophecy re Palm Sunday, 'behold

your *king* is coming to you ...' ... and, last one is in Isaiah 40:9, where we are encouraged to 'behold your *God* ...'

See the connection ...? Behold the servant, the man, the king, and your God! Those four titles find a unique parallel in the four Gospels where Mark portrays Jesus as a servant, Luke stresses his humanity, Matthew presents Jesus as king, and John emphasises his deity.

The one who is the servant is one whose sole aim in life is to always please his Father — he never acted on a whim, never acted off his own bat, never acted independently, he sought only to do what the Father wanted him to do - we know that from what he often said in John 4, etc. That was his passion in life, and in death - to do the Father's will and work. God never had such a servant like Jesus!

The text also speaks of him as 'my servant' - we talked about that in our first study - again, it's a powerful indication of his relationship with God. It speaks of security and identity. You see, the one who is the servant is also a son and a sovereign! Yes, he is the Father's servant, but he is our Saviour!

Isaiah says that he 'will act wisely' - or he shall deal prudently. He will accomplish his purpose; he will act so wisely that he will certainly succeed in his mission. It has the idea of someone who performs a task with skill and expertise. He knows how to do it and he gets on with it. The NASB says, 'my servant will prosper.' And that he does!

Praise for the servant in verse 13 is stated in three parts - because he 'will act wisely' we can see the outcome - 'he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.' That's a terrific acclamation of success. And when we dig down into each of those words they remind us of beautiful truths - it's like climbing up a ladder or going up a moving escalator - we go from high, to higher, to highest! I think they speak to us of his resurrection, then his ascension, and culminating in the highest possible honour of his coronation. No one else ever acted so wisely or as a result was so highly exalted. From the cradle to the cross to a crown! The hymnwriter captured those sentiments when he wrote: *Hark, those bursts of acclamation, Hark, those loud triumphant chords, Jesus takes the highest station, O what joy the sight affords, Crown him, Crown him, King of kings and Lord of lords.*

In passing, it's worth noting that the phrase 'raised or high and lifted up' is used 4 times in Isaiah, and nowhere else in the Word of God. In the other 3 instances, they describe God (6:1; 33:10; 57:15). He is exalted and extolled! Far above all! And right here in 52:13, Jesus is on a level with God! One with the Father in every sense. The mind boggles ... but the servant will not fail or falter, he is successful!

He is exalted because of his suffering (14)

These words in verse 14 are shocking, and they are meant to be. We are left shaken when we read them, but they convey to us something of the horror and terror of Calvary. Battered, beaten, bruised, bloodied - Jesus was treated in such a

way that he was left beyond recognition. *O make me understand it, help me to take it in, what it meant for thee, the holy one, to bear away my sin.*

Here is the servant's abject humiliation - the word used by Isaiah is also found in Ezekiel 27:35 to portray men's reaction to the ruins of Tyre ... they were 'appalled' - they were astonished with what they saw! It took their breath away, not because of the awesomeness or splendour of what they saw, but because of the cruel brutality inflicted on the dear Lord Jesus.

It speaks of being totally devastated - there is a sense of defeat, even desolation in the air; it has the idea of something being laid waste. We take one look at the Man of Sorrows and we are so shocked that we feel numbed, petrified, or even paralysed. We can't describe it - speechless!

Lifted high in verse 13 ... laid low in verse 14 ...! From one extreme to the other. Ah, beloved, the Lord Jesus as the suffering servant would be so disfigured from the injuries inflicted on him that his face and body would not even appear to be human. Here is the 'altogether lovely one' as Solomon spoke of him, yet he is indescribable.

It all began in Gethsemane when you will recall he sweat drops of blood as he contemplated the weight of sin that would be laid upon him and his separation from the Father - cut off ... anguish, exhaustion, emotional turmoil ... all for you and me!

But what left him 'disfigured and marred beyond human likeness' were the many tortures he endured from the hands of those evil men - we

know from the Gospel narrative that Jesus was struck on the head, he was spat upon, mocked, and flogged. He was beaten and abused by the chief priests (Matthew 26), by the temple guard (Mark 14), and by the Romans (Matthew 27). Added to that was the terrible scourging he was given on Pilate's orders (John 19).

To be flogged with a Roman scourge was a severe, even life threatening punishment. Many a man did not survive such a lashing. He would be torn to pieces. When a victim was to be crucified, a skilled lictor - that's the officer wielding the scourge - knew just how much to do to maximise the pain and injury, yet keep the victim alive so that he could be crucified.

Crucifixion was the most brutal form of public execution ever devised. You only have to read Psalm 22 and other portions to catch a glimpse of what Jesus, the suffering servant, experienced on our behalf. That this should happen to anyone is beyond comprehension, that this should happen to Jesus is unthinkable.

Isaiah tells us that Jesus was so maimed and so mangled that he hardly looked human. The hymn says: *The tempest's awful voice was heard, O Christ it broke on thee, Thy open bosom was my ward, It bore the storm for me. Thy form was scarred, thy visage marred, Now cloudless peace for me.*

He is exalted because of his service (15)

It seems to me there is a comparison being made here with verse 14 - there they are shocked at the servant's abuse, now they are shocked and taken aback at his accomplishment and achievement.

The word 'sprinkle' used in this verse has the idea of being startled, or amazed, or surprised. But there's another way for us to look at it - if you were reading this back in Isaiah's day, the word 'sprinkle' would stand out to you. The first thing you would think of was the sprinkling of sacrificial blood in and around the altar in the tabernacle or temple. As a result of that, the sins of the people would be forgiven and they would be cleansed. Here's the punchline: the people whose mouths dropped open wide with astonishment at his humiliation and exaltation will shut their mouths in guilt when they hear his proclamation. These guys who always have something to say will end up with nothing to say. Paul uses these words in Romans 15:20-21 as a spur, as a motivation, to reach out with the gospel to the Gentile nations. The gospel message is not just that Christ died - that is a fact of history ... it is that Christ died for our sins ... yes, you and me, we are as guilty of his death as Annas, Caiphas, Herod, and Pilate. Now you can see why people are stunned when they understand the message of the gospel. This man whom they condemned has declared they are condemned unless they turn from their sin and trust him. You cannot rejoice in the good news of salvation until first you face the bad news of condemnation. Jesus did not suffer and die because he was guilty, he did it because we are! People are amazed, startled, at this simple fact - it shuts their mouths!

And that's why, even today, around the world, he continues to work in the lives of men and women,

seeking them, saving them, bringing them into his global family as redeemed children.

With one of old, we joyfully affirm that Jesus, 'who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God' (Hebrews 12).

In this, the first of five stanzas, we discover that he is exalted, because of his success in verse 13, because of his suffering in verse 14, and because of his service in verse 15. So ... Jesus is the name we honour, Jesus is the name we praise! A lovely hymn I quoted earlier says this: *O Christ, what burdens bowed thy head, Our load was laid on thee, Thou stoodest in the sinner's stead, To bear all ill for me, A victim led, thy blood was shed, Now there's no load for me.*