

The Messiah— An Unforgettable Chapter



Chapter divisions in the Bible are very helpful, but they are not part of the inspired original. Sometimes, therefore, portions of God's word are divided when really they should be viewed together. This is the case with the beginning of Isaiah 53. It would have been better if this chapter had commenced with the last three verses of chapter 52. These three verses form an introduction to the fifty-third chapter; they belong with it and should not therefore be separated from it. John Calvin said it was not so much a "dividing" of the passage as a "dismembering" of it.

The concluding verses of Isaiah 52 invite us to "behold" the servant of Jehovah. Here is One who is described as "exalted," "extolled," and "very high," and yet his visage will be "marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men" (vv. 13–14). It is He who will ultimately reach to many nations. Clearly, the

words of this prophecy speak emphatically of the person and work of Christ. Only the wilfully blind can fail to see this! What is given here is a vivid summary of the humiliation of the Saviour when He came from glory into this world to die on the cross. It takes us through the work of Christ, through His atoning death, and it goes beyond the grave, right to the exaltation of the Saviour at the right hand of God. Should there be any lingering doubt as to the identity of this remarkable person it is removed by the evangelist Philip in the New Testament. Acts chapter 8 records how he heard the Ethiopian eunuch reading from this very portion, and, prompted by the Holy Spirit, he ran to join himself to the chariot. When the man enquired as to whether the prophet was speaking of himself, or of some other man, Philip began at the same scripture and "preached unto him Jesus" (v. 35). Thus we have clear testimony as to the

imperative of seeking Christ in this wonderful chapter in Isaiah.

His suffering (vv. 1–3)

The humiliation of the Saviour is clear from the outset of the chapter but particularly in verse 3: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.” The words could be rendered “a man of pains.” The entire earthly life of Christ was characterised by suffering and pain. He suffered rejection before He was even born: There was no room for Him in the inn. He suffered at every turn because of man’s sinful treatment of Him. The agony and pain reached its zenith as Christ suffered on the cross. The pain there is plain to see, with the violent scourging, the crown of thorns pressed into His head, and the nails driven into His hands and feet.

The Saviour endured grief throughout His life. He was acquainted with the grief of Jairus over the loss of a daughter, with that of the widow of Nain over the loss of a husband and a son, and with that of Mary and Martha over the loss of a brother. He knew what it was to weep at the grave of His friend Lazarus. Truly, He was the sympathising Jesus. But here was a form of suffering that culminated in His own anguish at the cross. There He became personally acquainted with grief, that intense, inward, immeasurable grief of soul.

His substitution (vv. 4–6)

Verses 4–6 unmistakably reveal a substitutionary work. Although the term *substitution* is despised and neglected by many modern theologians and preachers, the term is nevertheless familiar to men, albeit from the realm of sport. A substitute, to put it simply, takes the place of another. This is what the Saviour has done for His people. He who knew no sin became sin for us. The end of verse 6 sums it up by saying, “The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” One marginal reading suggests the iniquity was “made to meet on Him” and so graphically pictures Christ as the sin-bearer.

The doctrine of substitution is woven into the very texture of this chapter and indeed into the rich tapestry of Scripture. “He took my place and died for me” is the bedrock, the foundation, upon which we build our faith. Every believer rests on this truth as his hope for eternity. Peter speaks of this substitutionary work of Christ “who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24). And Paul had substitution in mind in Galatians 2:20 when, speaking of Christ, he said, “Who loved me, and gave himself for me.”

His sacrifice (vv. 7–9)

Verses 7–9 describe in great detail the sacrifice of Christ. It is difficult to believe that it could be spoken of with such minute accuracy seven hundred years before Christ was born! This can only be explained by the fact that what was written was inspired by God (2 Peter 1:20–21).

Here we witness the slain Lamb (v. 7). That there is silence at the moment of sacrifice indicates how the Saviour submitted Himself and voluntarily laid down His life. The One with whom the law of God could find no fault chose not to speak a word in His own defence and was “cut off out of the land of the living” (v. 8).

The deficiency of the legal sacrifices of the old dispensation was that they had to be repeated often (see Hebrews 10), but this was the sacrifice to end all other sacrifices. The sacrifice of Christ’s atoning blood was once, for all, and final. The work of the Saviour is in every way a sufficient work.

His satisfaction (vv. 10–12)

Isaiah declares that “He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied” (v. 11). The word *travail* incorporates all the suffering of the Saviour. The awful and intense torment involved is something we could never fully understand. It includes that agony and grief peculiar to the Saviour, when He sorrowed in His soul. This was evident at times such as that in the garden of Gethsemane, when He cried, “My soul is

exceeding sorrowful, even unto death” (Matthew 26:38). It was certainly evident on the cross when, out of the darkness, the Saviour cried, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). This incomprehensible agony is the travail of His soul.

How then can we read, “He shall be satisfied”? It appears paradoxical to suffer and also to be satisfied. Christ is said to be satisfied because of the glorious end that was in view as He hung upon the cross. In His work at Calvary He declared God’s righteousness (Romans 3:25–26), He defeated Satan (1 John 3:8), and He delivered the saints (Isaiah 53:11). A chapter that commences with the question “Who hath believed our report?” ends with many being justified through the work accomplished by the Saviour. This is what satisfies our Lord.

The final words of the chapter show us that having poured out his soul unto death and having borne the sin of many, He now makes intercession for the transgressors. This is a work which Christ has begun and not yet ended: “Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25). ■

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