

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

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His Silence in Suffering

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Dear Radio Friends,

We open our Bible again to the book of Isaiah and the beautiful prophecy of the suffering servant, recorded in Isaiah 52:13 all the way through chapter 53. It is a prophecy of Christ in His suffering, crucial to understanding why Jesus came and what Jesus suffered.

We know this passage is about Jesus because in the book of Acts, chapter 8, we have the story of the Ethiopian eunuch who loved God and believed the Old Testament Scriptures. This man, who had just been up to Jerusalem to worship God, was traveling in his chariot back to Africa. And, as he went along the way, he was reading a part of the Word of God that he had in his possession. The passage that he read was from Isaiah 53. We read about it in Acts 8:26 and following. In verse 32, “The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth.”

And the eunuch asks Philip, “I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man?” And in response, Philip “opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.” This passage is about Jesus. And today, I want to preach Jesus to you, beginning at the same place as Philip.

Today we come to the fourth sectional stanza in this prophetic song: Isaiah 53:7-9. Please read those verses, and as you do, take note especially of the first verse (7). It is the key verse in this section.

Now the first thing that you see in these verses is the amazing silence of Jesus in His suffering. Verse 7 begins: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth.” In the original Hebrew, the word “oppressed” has the idea of being hunted down—a wild deer or some other animal being pursued and hunted by a pack of wolves or by a group of hunters with their weapons. The other word, “afflicted,” has the idea of being pressured. It is used in the Bible in connection with the winepress. After the grapes had been picked, they would be put into a hard-sided box with holes in the bottom. Someone would then jump on them and trample them, in order to squeeze all the juices from them.

This is how Jesus’ suffering is described. He was hunted. He was pursued. And He was pressured, or squeezed. It is important for us to remember that this happened to Jesus all His life long. In verse 3 He is called: A man of sorrows. From the moment He was born, there was a

manhunt for Him. Herod, when Jesus was still a child, tried to kill Him. From the moment He opened His mouth to teach, the Jews wanted to kill Him. After His first sermon in Nazareth, they tried to push Him from a cliff to His death. How many times did they not take up stones to kill Him? All His life long, the scribes and Pharisees were trying to trick Him in His words so that they could bring an accusation against Him that would stick so that He could be tried and executed. He was pressured constantly. Every direction He turned, the enemies met Him.

All of this came to a head at the end of His life. When you read the Gospel accounts of the last week of Jesus' life, you can see this. In Luke 20:20, "They watched him, and sent forth spies, which should feign themselves just men, that they might take hold of his words, that so they might deliver him unto the power and authority of the governor." They come with hard questions to trick Him, to try to get Him to speak against the Roman government, to get Him to speak against their Jewish laws. They ask Him about Caesar, about marriage, about the great commandment in the law, about the resurrection.

And when none of that works, they arrange for an inside job. They make an agreement with one of His own disciples to betray Him. They come in the dark of the night with soldiers and they find Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, where He is quietly praying with His disciples. They put Him on trial that night. There are six trials in total. He is dragged from the house of one high priest to another, and one governor to another, and back again. They spend the night trying to trump up charges against Him. By the morning they have condemned Him. They beat Him. They mock Him. They weaken Him to the point that He does not even have the strength to carry His cross.

He was oppressed and afflicted. He was brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth. That is amazing. Just think what Jesus could have done, what He could have said. Think of the power of His voice. His voice was the voice that called all things into being in the beginning. His voice sends the storms and calms the seas. Today His voice is the voice that effectually calls sinners from their ignorance and from darkness into life and knowledge. In Gethsemane, when Peter, in defense of Jesus, pulls out his sword to fight, Jesus says, "Put up again thy sword into his place. Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?" Just think what Jesus could have done!

And, certainly, He was innocent. He could have spoken up in His own defense before the high priest and the Sanhedrin, before Herod, and before Pilate. Those might have been perfect opportunities to prove His own innocence and sinlessness and to explain why He came and why He suffered.

But He does not do those things. Instead, He is silent. In Matthew 26:62 and 63, "And the high priest arose, and said unto him, Answerest thou nothing? What is it which these witness against thee? But Jesus held his peace." When they mock Him and blindfold Him and smite Him and say, "Prophecy, who is it that smote thee," He says nothing. When He was before Pilate, we read in Matthew 27:14, "And he answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly."

What does it mean that Jesus was silent, like a lamb. Well, it does not mean that He simply rolled over and played dead, that He never said a word. No. There were times through all His suffering when Jesus did speak. For one: all through His life He challenged the self-righteous Pharisees and the empty religion of His day. He also very clearly taught that He was the Christ, the Son of God.

And He did challenge His captors and accusers at the end of His life. When they tried to trap Him in His words, He always had an answer for them. When they came to arrest Him in the Garden, He said, "Are ye come out as against a thief with swords and staves for to take me? I sat daily with you teaching in the temple, and ye laid no hold on me." When the high priest demanded: "Art thou the Christ?" Jesus said, "I am. And ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven." When Pilate said, "Answer me. Don't you know it's in my power to crucify you or to release you?" Jesus says, "Thou couldest have no power at all against me except it were given thee from above." And He told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world, else would my servants fight."

Even in the face of His suffering, He spoke. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He cried out in agony, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." From the cross, in His suffering, He spoke seven times, expressing even from the darkness the agony and the depths of His suffering. So, it is not that He said nothing.

What then does it mean that he was silent?

The answer is that Jesus spoke only when the glory of God mattered or when the salvation of His people depended on His speaking. He never spoke in His own defense. He never said a word to clear His own name. He never spoke in order to lighten the load of His suffering. He never spoke so as to avoid the cross. He uttered no protest. He suffered injustice in silence. I Peter 2:23 says, "when he was reviled, [he] reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not." When they spewed out vexations against Him, He uttered no threats in return. He said nothing about their character back to them. He did not respond in like manner to those who provoked Him and assaulted Him.

Why not? Why did He not say something? That is really the question that is asked here in verse 8 when it says, "He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation?" The prophet is saying that when Jesus was led from prison and from trial to Calvary to be crucified, who in his generation could understand it and explain it? Who, when Jesus was suffering, knew why? His silence confused the disciples. When He was cut off out of the land of the living, who considered it and who understood it? What was the reason for it? Why was He silent?

The first reason was this. He realized that He was the Lamb of God, the lamb pictured in the sacrifice of Abel, in the Passover of Egypt, in the sacrifices of the Levitical law, in this text, and in the words of John the Baptist: "Behold, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." He knew that He was appointed of God to be this lamb, this substitutionary sacrifice for sinners. He knew that He was the Lamb of God, slain before the foundation of the world, the

Lamb ordained and sent of God. That is why He was silent. That is the first reason. He knew that He was the Lamb of God that must be slain.

The second reason for His silence was to show His obedience to God and His willingness to suffer. He went as a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb. That figure is important. If you grab a pig by its back leg, it will squeal and kick. If you try to restrain a cow or a horse, it will buck and fight. But if you grab a sheep by its wool, it stops, it surrenders. And, notice here, it is a ewe and not a ram, "as a sheep before her shearers is dumb." The female sheep is especially meek and submissive in captivity. Christ's silence was an evidence of His submission to God. He understood when He was on trial before men that this was all according to the will of God. He says, "I come to do the will of him that sent me." He is voluntarily silent. He chooses to be silent.

He is not silent because He does not know what to say or because He has no answer or because He is powerless. But the silence itself is a display of His power. By the power of His divinity, He chooses to be silent so that He may suffer and die. He says to the Jews of His life, "I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again."

In His silence, He exercises a power greater than you will ever find among men. Who could be silent like this when His own name is mocked and blasphemed, and when He is completely innocent? When Peter takes out his sword in the Garden and Jesus tells him to put it again in its place, He gives this reason: "But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be." You see, He knew the will of God. And in His silence, He is submitting.

Third, He was silent because He bore our sins. And His silence shows His love. He did not bear the sins of all mankind but, in verse 8, "For the transgression of my people was he stricken." He bore the sins of those whom He and the Father loved from eternity. He was silent for them. Out of His commitment to them, out of His love for them, He was quiet. He was silent because He must die for them. His love for them constrained Him to go to the cross. Is not His silence beautiful? For us sinners, He spoke not. He could have. He was innocent. Even His silence proved His innocence. But He was willing to bear reproach...for us.

A fourth reason He was silent. He was silent because He stood before God the Judge with our sins. Beloved, when you stand as a sinner before God, you are silent. The reason He was silent was that now He entered into judgment for sinners. His silence was not merely before earthly judges and accusers. No. When He went to the cross with our iniquities laid on Him, He was guilty before God. And we read in Romans 3:19 that in the last day, before God the judge, every mouth will be stopped and all the world will become silent before God because of their guilt. When you stand before God the Judge as a sinner, you must not speak; you must not justify yourself; you must not hold up your own righteousness, your own good works, for God to look at. No, you must be silent. In Matthew 22 we read about a marriage supper. Everyone who came in was to put on a white marriage garment that symbolized the righteousness of Christ. But there was one there who said, "I don't need that garment. I don't need the righteousness of Christ. My clothes, my good works, are enough." He was so out of place that he was cast out to the place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. We must not bring our righteousnesses

before God. No, we must be silent. We must confess our emptiness and unworthiness. Only in Christ can we stand before God. Christ was silent because He stood before God in our sins. He realized, as our sinbearer, that He deserved the wrath and the judgment of God, that He deserved hell for our iniquities. And so He was silent.

Is not the silence of Christ beautiful? Is it not marvelous? Verse 9 tells us that it is. Some might look on His silence as a sign of defeat. But He was not a victim there that day. No, He was the victor. The ungodly assigned Him a grave with the wicked. Given a choice between Him and the notorious criminal Barabbas, they say, “Crucify Him, Crucify Him.” They accuse Him of being an anarchist, a man guilty of insurrection, a political rebel against Israel and Rome. They crucified Him between two thieves. But He was the victor. Look, in verse 9, at what God did: He made His grave “with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.”

At this point the story changes. Every step in the story to this point has been down and down and down. But now He has paid the price for sin. He has declared, “It is finished.” His soul has been lifted up to God in heaven. And now, as they take Him down from the cross, intending to give Him a grave with the wicked—a dishonorable burial—now God reaches down and He is buried with the rich. He is no longer the humiliated servant, but our Savior. Is that not beautiful? Shortly He will be raised. But already in His burial, God gives Him a comparative place of glory. And so, this is the fourth section: His silent submission.

As we close, let us move our eyes from Christ, to His disciples, to us. In Christ, here, you have a model, for all believers, of true submission to God, of suffering unjustly in a God-honoring way, an example of one who is willing to be personally wronged for the glory of God and the good of others. You know, there are some people who go through life thinking that they have to correct all the wrongs that others commit against them. Every time that they feel that they are hurt or wrong, they will go after the other person. And they can put a very pious coating on it. They will say, “He has sinned, so I’m doing this for the sake of his soul.” And the truth is that they have very little of the love that bears all things and that covers a multitude of sins in others. There is very little self-examination and personal repentance.

What did Jesus do when He was wronged? What was His concern? Jesus, in His suffering, had every right to defend Himself, to stand up for His own innocence against the injustice of others. But this is not what He did. His concern was not the clearing of His own name. He was willing to die Himself, so long as God was honored.

As Christians, we have to follow Him in this. Peter puts it down as one of the outstanding characteristics of a Christian in I Peter 2:21, where he says that Christ left us “an example, that ye should follow his steps.” What was that example? In the previous verses, “This is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? But if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God” (vv. 19, 20).

And in the following verses Peter makes specific application of this to women—this is what a

gentle and quiet spirit looks like. It is not just to women, but to parents and to children, to employees and employers, to the flock, to spiritual leaders, to men, to all of us in our relationship to God. We are all to live this way, not standing up for our own rights, intimidating others and reviling in return. Jesus says, "You must turn the other cheek, you must give your coat as well as your cloak." How it glorifies God when we are silent, when we are willing to suffer wrong, to not retaliate, to live with a meek and quiet spirit.

How prone we are to want to get in the last word, to come out on top in a dispute, to demonstrate our own righteousness. But, you see, it is not about your reputation. It is not about your name, but it is about God and His honor. Does He, does His glory, shine through you in your conduct? Is there a Christ-likeness in you, a willingness to be wronged as a Christian? In Christ, you have the supreme example of humility. He was willing to suffer wrong for our sakes.

Oh, may we be able to do it, too. And may God use it for the sake of the spread of the glorious gospel and the honor of His name in the earth.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for such a Savior, willing to suffer for us, silent in the face of His accusers so that our sins could be paid. Amen.