

Contrasting Responses to the Servant of the Lord – Isaiah 52:13-53:3

John Bray – North Houston Baptist Church

The United States has about 150 ambassadors that represent our country to the different nations around the world. They serve at the pleasure of the president and are supposed to represent our interests. They find themselves meeting various levels of success in their missions; they are various levels of receptiveness in the different countries to which they have been assigned, and in a similar fashion, the Lord God of heaven and earth has commissioned servants in this world to represent Him, to accomplish His will on the earth. He has called them and equipped them and given them a mission—men like Abraham, Moses, Joshua and David are referred to in the scripture as the servants of God. Isaiah, himself, the prophet who wrote this passage under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is referred to as the servant of God, but throughout the second half of this book, Isaiah has been speaking under inspiration about an ideal servant, a servant of the Lord that surpasses all other servants in obedience, and in the success of His mission. This servant is uniquely commissioned by the Lord. All of the Lord's Spirit to accomplish God's purposes in the world, He is utterly obedient to the Lord. I mean, He gives His whole body—everything that is part of His power He gives to the Lord to accomplish the purpose of Jehovah in salvation, and He is supremely successful in finishing the mission that God gave Him to finish. This great servant of the Lord is the One we sometimes refer to as God's Messiah, God's chosen one. He is identified by God Himself in the New Testament scriptures as none other than Jesus of Nazareth—our Jesus, the Savior is this Messiah, the servant of the Lord, to accomplish God's will. And Isaiah foresaw the Lord Jesus 700 years before His birth; he prophesied about Jesus' birth, about His calling when He was still in the womb; about the Holy Spirit coming down upon Him and empowering for ministry; about His cruel sufferings and death. Isaiah prophesied about His burial in a rich man's tomb, and about His resurrection from the dead. All of this Isaiah saw, by the grace and and the power of God, through the centuries. In this section that we have come to, Isaiah 52 and 53, where he sees that Servant so clearly in the essence of His mission; this is indisputably one of the most foundational passages in all of the word of God for us to really understand the nature of this Servant and His mission. And so, we give our attention again to this holy passage of scripture, beginning in Isaiah 52:13, and this morning, we are going to just look through Isaiah 53:3. Let us hear again this wonderful passage.

Is. 52:13 – 53:6 ESV:

13 Behold, my servant shall act wisely;

he shall be high and lifted up,
and shall be exalted.

14 As many were astonished at you—

his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—

15 so shall he sprinkle many nations.

Kings shall shut their mouths because of him,
for that which has not been told them they see,
and that which they have not heard they understand.

53 Who has believed what he has heard from us?¹

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

2 For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;

he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.

3 He was despised and rejected by 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.

4 Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;

yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;

upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.

6 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.

7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;

like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.

8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered

that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?

9 And they made his grave with the wicked

and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;

he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.

11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;

by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,

and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors.

May God bless this holy passage for all of us.

Before we begin, I just want to tell you the way the passage unfolds, just on a summary level here. Look at the text in front of you. As you look at Is. 52, verse 13, you will notice that there, the Lord GOD is speaking, and the Lord is characterizing the ministry of His Messiah, of the servant, the Lord Jesus. He is speaking about the nature of His ministry. Then in verse 14, he describes the response of many to that servant. And then in 53:1-2, the people, themselves begin to speak. So it is a shift in speaker, but the people, themselves are speaking about another response, a different response altogether to the servant of the Lord. I just want you to see this morning this simple thing, these contrasting responses, two responses to the servant of the Lord, the Messiah, Jesus the Savior. And it begins this morning with God, Himself speaking in chapter 52, verse 13: "Behold, my servant shall act wisely." We looked at that last Lord's Day and we noticed that the Lord was predicting that the servant that He had specially chosen and called for this mission, would act so wisely and so prudently as to guarantee the success of the mission for which God sent Him. This servant would do what all other servants failed to do, to act in such a way as to flawlessly bring about God's purpose of salvation; He will act wisely. And then the Lord says about Him that He will be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. So what is the Lord saying there about this Messiah, about the Christ? On the face of it He is talking about His glory: God will glorify His Messiah, right? But the rest of Chapter 53 goes on to describe great suffering and humiliation. And so how do we reconcile that with this prophecy that He would be high and lifted up and exalted, because in the rest of Isaiah 53 we read things like this, that His appearance was marred, His form beyond the children of mankind, He had

no form or majesty; he was a man of sorrows, despised and rejected, stricken by God, pierced, crushed, chastised, oppressed, and led to the slaughter. But the Lord says He will be high, lifted up, and exalted. And the Lord is actually going to say throughout the course of Chapter 53, that His exaltation is the direct result of His suffering. The way they are related to each other is that His exaltation is a direct result of His suffering. Look at Chapter 53, verse 12: notice again the first word, I pointed this out the last Lord's Day—after describing all of the sufferings of the Messiah, the Lord says, "Therefore, because of this—on account of this, I will divide Him a portion with the many, and He shall divide His spoil with the strong because He poured out His soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors. Ironically, His humiliation would be the source of His exaltation—in fact, the cross will be Christ's great triumph. It would be the ultimate display of His greatest glory, which is His perfect obedience to the Father. Even obedience unto death; the cross, ironically will be Jesus' great humiliation and His great glory, for no other person, no other servant of the Lord ever obeyed to that extreme end, but this One would, our Lord, Himself, seemed to acknowledge the irony of the fact that His greatest humiliation would be His greatest glory—He seemed to acknowledge that in the way He made reference to this term, "lifted up" which almost seems to have a double meaning in the way it is used here and throughout our Lord's references to it. Let me remind you of some things Lord said when He was in His earthly ministry: In John 3:14, He said this: "Moses lifted up the serpent on the pole in the wilderness days, even so, must the son of man be lifted up." Now that is an interesting image; and then in John 8:28, Jesus uses this language again, he says, "When you have lifted up the son of man, then you will know that I am HE. Again in John 12, verse 32, our Saviour says, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself" and then in the next verse, John specifically points out that what He was talking about was what kind of death He was going to die.

What did Jesus mean about all this talk about being lifted up? He meant, John says, that He would die a "lifted up kind of death," that is, by crucifixion being raised up on a pole raised up on a pole, just like the snake on a pole in the wilderness was lifted up in that way. His death would be a crucifixion and raised up on the pole but that it would be a death that would be His exaltation, His in fact he says, in this way when I'm lifted up all of men are going to be drawn to me and that was the case on the cross: when they lifted up that figure men turned away their faces. They were appalled at this sight that was beyond watching, and yet, what is it that we sing about every time we come together? What is it that we glory in as believers? What is it that we rejoice in but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ? That is the great glory of God to us isn't it?

There is this irony about it that Isaiah captures even as he foresees it, Christ's crucifixion would be like Moses lifting up that serpent on the pole. Remember that the Lord had sent the serpents into their camp, to come and bite these people because of their sin and wickedness and their rebellion against Him—this was the judgement of God—this was God's curse upon them for their wickedness, and then in His mercy, He tells Moses, "now make a serpent and put it up on a pole, raise it up from the earth, and tell all of the people to look, and whoever looks will live—and so they must lift their eyes up to see that serpent on a pole, and Jesus was lifted up I like manner—the Bible says cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree. And the Lord was lifted up as the great curse, and yet when people look to Him, they are set free, just as surely as the people who looked at that serpent on the pole were filled with faith and hope and were saved.

This is why Jesus spoke of His upcoming crucifixion in this way, “The hour is coming in which the son of man will be glorified” The Savior was lifted up on an instrument of humiliation and torture, but with those with eyes to really see, is lifted up in a way that is glorious, that draws them to Him, that gives them life and salvation and forgiveness. He will be high and lifted up and exalted. Can you see Him there in your mind’s eye? Shame and disgrace, and yet glorified in His obedience to God and in your salvation. Well that duality had an effect on many people. If you look at verses 14 and 15, you can see that it has an effect. And how would you describe that effect? Isaiah is saying that it will be the effect on people. He says many were astonished. The effect it will have on these many people is that it will cause astonishment—“Many were astonished—look at verse 15—Kings will shut their mouths because of Him—they will be speechless. It takes something pretty amazing to astonish even kings. But they will be astonished. It is a strong word, and it can mean to be dumbfounded, to be gutted, to be even appalled, or horrified at something. And part of astonishes or appalls these many who see the Servant is, verse 14. What is it that would have that kind of effect like that? Well, it would be this: His appearance. His appearance would have that effect. And in particular that His appearance would be beyond human semblance, and that His form, His bodily form would be that of the children of mankind. This doesn’t mean that He would be the most disfigured person in all of human history, but it means that He would be disfigured and marred in His form and His form, to be away from mankind, literally—it’s almost as if you look at that figure and you have to even question whether that is human. Isaiah foresaw a servant of the Lord who would be disfigured like that. And personally, it is hard to imagine the effects of the Roman scourging on the flesh of human. Have you ever seen, someone perhaps with an open wound, a deep wound where you can see into the flesh of that person, and here is a man whose body was laid open like that with hundreds of jagged wounds all over His body. He was whipped, the Bible says, beaten, flogged by the Romans. It would typically be done with a leather whip with any strands, and sometimes into those strands would be embedded little bits of bone or glass; and a great, big, burly Roman soldier would lift above his head, and the victim would be stripped naked and tied to a pole, and then that big soldier would bring that whip down with all his might on the back of a criminal and he would be flogged. Here is a servant of the Lord who was yet flogged, whose body was ripped open and time and time and time again, that soldier would bring down his whip upon His back. It is hard to imagine the grotesque effects of multiple soldiers grabbing fistfuls of hair and yanking it, pulling it from a person’s face by the roots. It is hard to imagine what it must look like to see someone who has been beaten multiple times with a long heavy rod as they do to the body and the face of our Savior. It is hard to imagine what must have happened to the soft tissue of His nose and his ears and His face as they jammed their fists into His face, and as they plated the crown of thorns upon His head—those thorns dug into the scalp and all of the blood running from His nose and His ears, down from His face, seeping out of open wounds and mingling together with the spit of these soldiers dripping off of His chin. Isaiah foresees such a figure and these are the only words he could use to describe—“He was marred beyond human semblance, and His form beyond that of the children of mankind.” No wonder they were astonished, appalled. But there is something more to it more than merely being appalled at His appearance of His form. Look at verse 14; there’s actually a comparison here I want you to see. As Isaiah was inspired to write this, the very first word of verse 14 is the beginning of the comparison, isn’t it? “As.” And the second half of the comparison is found in verse 15, “So.” As this-- So that.

Here's the comparison: "As many were astonished at you, verse 15, so He shall sprinkle many nations." So if you have a comparison, there is a point of similarity. What is the point of similarity between verse 14 and verse 15? What do they have in common? What word do they share in common? The word "many." Many are astonished in verse 14, and those "many" are also sprinkled in verse 15. In fact, the many is going to become a kind of specialized, almost theological, term that Isaiah is going to use throughout this whole passage about the suffering of the Messiah. The many are astonished at Him, verse 14, they will be sprinkled—the many will be sprinkled, verse 15. Look at Chapter 53, verse 11: "The servant make many to be accounted righteous." Verse 12 of Chapter 53: "The Lord says, I will give him a portion with the many, and then in the end of verse 12, "He bore the sin of many." This is for a particular group, distinct from the nation as a whole, who respond to the Messiah in a different manner. These many are people that are astonished at Him, who are sprinkled by His blood, and are accounted righteous because of Him, who are given a portion, an inheritance in Him. Whose sins are borne by Him, upon the Cross. This is why we speak of His atonement as being a particular atonement. He bore the sin of the many.

But there is an enlargement that comes in this comparison as well, between verses 14 and 15, so look for the wording that is different in verse 15, not wording that is the same, but the wording that is different enlarges this thought. In verse 15, the many who are astonished in verses 14 and 15, and in verse 15 they are sprinkled—the many He shall sprinkle. And the verb sprinkle means to splatter to splash. It is used 24 times in the Old Testament. Four of them have to do with the ceremonial splashing of water for the cleaning in various ways. But 20 of them out of the 24 uses has to do with the sprinkling or spattering of blood. We just read that the many were astonished at His grotesquely marred appearance as He is beaten and whipped and struck again and again, and it is almost as if Isaiah sees this, as Isaiah sees a people in the face of this Servant being beaten and struck and scourged for them, that the blood of that sacrifice, as He is being killed, is being splattered upon them. It is sprinkled upon them. And on the one hand it is it is appalling, but on further reflection, when they are given eyes to see, and when they are given hearts to understand, it is amazing—it is not just suffering, it is glory to them because that blood is the blood of sacrifice. And in Chapter 53, verse 10, the Lord's death is referred to as a sin offering, a sacrifice for sins. In the Old Testament, if you were spattered with blood, you would become unclean. Because blood is the symbol of death and that is the curse for sin. Any contact with blood made you unclean, but to be sprinkled or spattered with sacrificial blood actually had the opposite effect—it cleansed a person, made him acceptable to God. Because now, instead of Himself being on the receiving end of the curse, he is on the receiving end of something being made a curse for him and an animal is intentionally given as an atonement for his sins.

So here, Isaiah sees the One who suffered the curse but who sprinkled blood, saves. And in fact, the vast majority of times you see this word used throughout the Old Testament (sprinkled), it refers to the application of blood sacrifices. And so, the priest would take his finger or would take a branch and dip it in the blood and would spatter or smear it, and the sprinkling of the blood provided atonement. So he would take the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkle it on the altar. It provided consecration to God, so the blood of the sacrifice would be sprinkled or spattered on the

priests for their service. And it was given by God for purification, to cleanse, so the blood, for example, was spattered on the healed leper and that render him ceremonially clean and acceptable to God.

Remember that on the Passover night, they took the blood of the lamb, and they smeared it all over their doors, and when the Lord saw that blood spattered on their doors, He would pass over them, for the judgement of God had already fallen on that house; it would fall in the person of Messiah, I the person of the Servant of the Lord. Isaiah was foreseeing a great multitude, many, who would have the blood of the sacrifice of God's perfect servant applied to them, that they would be come identified with that sacrifice in such a way that it would have a saving effect for them. We're going to see as we continue to look at Isaiah 53, that the bloody suffering of Jesus was for the sins of men, not for His own—that He suffered the wrath of God against sinners, the anger of God against the many would be borne by the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. I tell you this morning, unless you are identified with Jesus Christ in His death, having His blood, as it were, applied to you spiritually through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, then you have no atonement, you have no covering for your sin. Your sin is right there on the surface, ready to be judged by the Almighty God. But here is a sacrifice to cover your sin, to wash it away, to cleanse you. Listen, if you are not in Christ you are like a leper who is hopelessly unclean and ever unable to come into the presence of the Holy and Righteous God. But the blood of the sacrifice is what it takes to wash away that sin, to cleans you, to make you pure to be able to come into His presence. Without that blood, there is no consecration, and rather than being dedicated to God, you are alienated from God. Rather than being His, you are separated from Him forever, under His judgement and His wrath because of sin. Here is the sacrifice that would atone for sins, for all who are sprinkled with the blood.

And the point here is this: either you die for your own sin under the wrath of God or you are covered by the blood of Christ who bore the wrath of God in your place. And that blood is applied to you by faith in Him, that you deserve what He suffered. His suffering was not for His own sin, but for my sin. His suffering was for my sin, for my ungodliness. That beating and that receiving of the wrath of Almighty God was for all of the ways that I have rebelled against Him. It is through acknowledging that; it is through looking to Christ in faith and calling out to Him to save you through the sacrificial blood of Jesus Christ, so that blood is applied to you. Is the blood of Jesus Christ covering you? Has that blood been sprinkled on your heart by the grace of the Almighty God? Have you received the Lord Jesus Christ, been identified with the sacrifice of the Savior? This is the only hope, this is the response of the many. In fact, if you have received the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel, then you are a part of that many who are astounded, astonished and in awe, both of His sufferings, but also of His glory as you look to the One who was lifted up from the earth. The many to whom Christ's blood will be applied are astonished—even their kings are in awe in the presence of this atoning Messiah.

And just as they were awed by the depths of His degradation, so they are astonished at the heights of His exaltation. And these kings mentioned here in verse 15 are not kings of Israel, Judah, but kings of many nations. Kings of once pagan peoples, put to silence by the wonder of the sacrifice of this Servant. These are kings and nations who had not had all of the divine revelation that Israel had, but now, as you can see at the end of verse 15, "but now that which has not been told them, they see. And that which they had not heard, they have come to understand." And Paul,

in Romans chapter 15, talks about how he carried the good news of Isaiah's prophecy from Jerusalem all the way to the farthest corners of the world, all the way to Italy, he says, "I carried the Gospel all across to these many nations of the world, not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles, I have taken the Gospel, and he says, I have made it my ambition to preach the Gospel where Christ has not been named, where people have never before heard the Gospel," and this, he said is a fulfillment of Isaiah 52 verse 15: "Those who have not heard see, and those who have never known understand" because he brings the Gospel to them. The Lord is calling MANY to Himself from all the nations of the earth, and whoever they are—and listen, whoever you are, whatever your background is, your sins are covered by the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ if you have eyes to see His glory and a heart to understand the significance of that sacrifice and to embrace Him in faith.

But now, look at the first few verses of Isaiah 53, there is a very different situation. Verse 1 is the exact opposite of the MANY in Isaiah 52, verse 15. Notice how they are opposites--look at verse 1 again: isn't this the opposite of the people in verse 15? These are people who have been told. These are people who have God's word. They have seen the mighty acts of God. Who are we talking about? We are talking about the Israelites, who had seen God literally part the Red Sea, who had heard these stories all their lives of how God brought the people through on dry land. Who had seen God provide for them again and again, in miraculous ways, even. These are people who had received and heard prophet after prophet after prophet that God had sent to preach His word to them, to proclaim His wonders to Him. These are people who were not like the nations of the world out there, these were people who were rich with revelation, but the problem was what? They had God's word, what is the problem—they should know, they should see. The blood should be applied to their hearts. Who has believed what He has heard from us? The problem was not their lack of knowledge, the problem was lack of belief. And I say that because I am preaching to many of you who have a lot of knowledge, you have heard the word. You've heard many sermons perhaps. You've sat in church services before. The problem with these people is that they did not hear with faith.

We are going to come back to these verses, Lord willing, next week, but I want you to just briefly see in verse 2, they were unmoved emotionally. There was no beauty in him in their sight that they should desire Him, there was no desire, there was no beauty in Him, they were unmoved by Him. Verse 3, they were willfully rejecting of Him. He was despised and rejected by men. The end of verse 4, They were misguided intellectually: "We esteemed Him not." The word is an accounting term: we esteemed Him. In other words, we counted Him as nothing. We added up everything that He claimed, and at the end of the day, it was a great big zero. We esteemed Him not. We made nothing of Him. The response, in order words, is intellectual, willful, emotional-intellectual rejection. Or in a word, unbelief. So some respond in verse 13-15, with astonishment, with awe. These are people who are sprinkled with the blood. Chapter 53, verse 1, there are people who respond with unbelief. Who despise, who esteem Him not. Who reject Him. All from unbelief. Those really are the two, and only two responses that people have to the Lord Jesus Christ. They are either in awe of Him, or they are dismissive in unbelief. And perhaps someone might object the word, "rejection" to describe unbelief. They may say, "I am not really for Jesus, but I am certainly not against Him. I have no animus against Him—I'm just not all in. I can't say am I awe of Him, but I wouldn't say I'm rejecting of Him just because I do not believe. I want to remind you that there are only two responses here. There are only two responses that are possible in mankind: either

all, or unbelief. You're either in chapter 52, or you're in chapter 53. The Lord Jesus, Himself said, "whoever is not with me is against me." And how could it be any other way considering who He is, who He claimed to be. He claimed to be THE SON OF GOD! The Lord of Lords! The King of all! How in the world can we disbelieve His claims and not call it rejection. The Apostle John said, "Whoever does not believe is condemned because already because He has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. Listen, you cannot be neutral. You are either in awe, or you are in unbelief. Which is it for you this morning? Which is it for you?"

In 1905, the Canadian pastor, A. B. Simpson wrote a hymn that reflected on Pontius Pilot. Pilot, as you know, was the Roman governor who tried the Lord Jesus. And as the Lord Jesus stood before Him, Pilot was forced to have to deal with what to do with Jesus. And, of course, you remember in the account of Jesus's trial, after examination, Pilot came out and said "I found no fault in this man." And he was of mind to release Him. But the Jewish people demanded His death because He claimed to be the king. Pilot on the one hand was sympathetic toward Jesus, but he was unwilling to take a stand, and finally, he brought out a bowl. You remember, and he washed his hands. He said "I am innocent of this man's blood. I am not for Him, and I am not against Him. I am neutral in this. This is on you—you have decided this. And when you come to the book of Acts, chapter 4, the Apostles stood up and began to preach the Gospel. They preached that Pilot's turning of Jesus over to the Jewish authorities to be killed was, in fact, a fulfillment of the second Psalm that says that the rulers of God would take counsel against God and against His anointed. Here was a man who said, "I am not for, I am not against; I'm not in awe, but I'm not rejecting—I'm just neutral about Him."

At the end of the day, you cannot be neutral about Him. You must either be in awe, or reject. You've got to decide: Is He really who He claimed to be, and when He was lifted up on that cross, was He really paying the sin debt for sinners? Is your sin going to bring upon you the judgement of Almighty God if you don't have a Savior? And is that Savior Jesus, the Messiah? Every one of us is going to have to come to the point of answering that question: What will you do with Jesus? You cannot escape it, and in contemplating that situation with Pilot, Simpson wrote these words:

What will you do with Jesus?

Neutral, you cannot be?

One day your heart will be asking,

"What will He do with me?"

Because the Bible says that one day,

this Suffering Servant will return in glory

and judge the whole world.

And what will it be then,

when you stand in the judgement?

Jesus said it this way: "Those who acknowledge me, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven. They're mine; they're mine, sprinkled with the blood. Those are my people. Those are the ones who are in awe of me. Those who reject, He says, I will reject them before God in Heaven in that last judgement.

You are either for Him, or you're against Him.

Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded by the fall,
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity, love and power.

I hope you can say, "I will arise and go to Jesus,
He will embrace me in His arms.

In the arms of my dear Savior,
O there are ten thousand charms."

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

Let's bow and consider this question in a very personal way. I ask you now not to think about those around you so much as really thinking about yourself. Are you in awe of the Savior? Have you called out to Him in faith? He will wash you with His blood. There is one Savior. You must deal with Him. You must either bow before Him with love and devotion, or you reject Him. You can't be neutral. I hope you can say, today, "I will arise and go to Jesus." Take a moment and tell Him. Take a moment to speak to the Lord God of Heaven.