

## THE DOWNWARD STAIRCASE THAT ENDED IN A CROSS!

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

What a majestic portion of Scripture! It speaks to the deepest needs of every fallen human being. It also speaks to all the questions and urgings found in Isaiah up to this point. In the preceding chapters we hear the voice of the Lord crying out with questions and promptings:

- “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands” (49:15-16).
- “When I came, why was there no one? When I called, why was there no one to answer? Was my arm too short to ransom you? Do I lack the strength to rescue you? (50:2)
- “Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the Lord; awake as in days gone by, as in generations of old” (51:9).
- “The Lord **will** lay bare his holy arm in the sight of **all** the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God” (52:10).

Such divine questions and pronouncements are swiftly answered beginning here in Isaiah 52:13 to the end of 53:12. We are about to discover that “the arm of the Lord” is powerful and mighty to save. It is far from short; indeed it reaches to the ends of the earth. There is victory at both ends of this passage, but in between there are some disturbing overtones that seem to reflect anything but victory. What becomes apparent is that Isaiah prophesies what will be a smashing victory on the part of our Lord, but it will be achieved in the midst of rejection and abuse.

The Messiah will become what Israel was supposed to be – a light to the Gentiles. Moreover, Messiah will become the ideal Servant whose salvation reaches to the ends of the earth and to the end of the age.

Despite what some commentators would say, this majestic passage is clearly all about Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Look in 52:13 where it says, “*he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.*” Didn’t Jesus say clearly, “*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life*” (John 3:14-15). Didn’t Paul extol our Lord when he wrote that, “*he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name ...*” (Phil. 2:8-9).

But the picture of the way we treated the Master isn’t at all pretty. Verse 14 laments that “his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness.” As if it wasn’t enough that we drove the nails through his holy hands and feet – and how beautiful were the feet of Him who brought good news – as if this wasn’t enough, we beat the Master until His most holy face was puffed and swollen beyond recognition, disfigured beyond that of any man.

Unredeemed man is so disfigured, so marred with sin and wickedness, that to God our Father we must have hardly appeared to be human. God created us in the divine image, and then when Jesus, the One who is the exact image of God came, we beat Him, whipped Him, and nailed Him to a cross. How far we have fallen! If some vile, inhuman monsters had done this to our Lord, that would be shocking enough, but the scandal is that we did it.

The 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter tells us that our Lord came on the scene in a quiet, unassuming way. He humbled himself, taking the form of a servant, as Paul would later say in Philippians 2.

He clothed himself with no extraordinary beauty or attractiveness with which to draw people. Far from desiring him, we despised him and rejected him and treated him like the worst sort of criminal. Verses 4-5 tell the truth of the matter; that even though the Master was pierced for *our* transgressions and crushed for *our* iniquities, we used our subversive minds to make believe that he died for his own sins and was stricken by God. But Isaiah will have none of this deceptive folly:

***“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (53:6).***

Now there is a subtle trap into which we must not fall. There is a dangerous anonymity in speaking in the plural. The text says “**we all** have gone astray,” and “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of **us all**.” It is so easy to think of this reality in purely global terms – we all – that before I know it, I find myself accepting little personal responsibility for the sin and its consequences. I can even deceive myself into imagining that Christ died more for your sin than mine, because, of course, anyone with even a shred of objectivity can see that your sin is worse than mine.

But verse 6 insists that “*each* of us has turned his own way.” So what am I going to do with our Lord’s sin offering? You see, by the time we work our way down to verse 10, we are informed that our Lord literally makes his life “*a guilt offering*.” He’s taken our place on death row. He truly has become the Lamb slain upon the altar. And it is as if the Master comes to each person individually and says, “**Here, offer me up to the Father as an offering in your place!**” What will you say? What will I say?

What will we say to the eternal, pre-existent Son of God who came on a downward staircase that ended on a cross? What will we say to this One, “who being in very nature God ...

... made himself nothing, taking the nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” (Phil. 2:6-8).

Yes, what will we say to God Almighty, who left the courts of Heaven above and came down the staircase that ended on a cross? We can hide our faces, as it were, and say nothing. We can deceive ourselves by vainly imagining that our religious observances and practices make us perfectly acceptable as we are. Or, we can fall on our knees and give thanks to God that His unimaginable grace, mercy, and kindness has purchased our salvation. We all want to climb the staircase that leads to Heaven. But let us remember that there is a cross at the foot of the staircase. All who come to the Father come by way of the cross. All who come to the Father have been ransomed by the Son. All who come to the Father have had an unpayable debt discharged by the precious blood of the Lamb.

How could our Lord possibly have endured such suffering, such abuse? Isaiah tells us in verse 11. ***“After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.”*** You see, Jesus looked beyond the cross. He looked into the courts of Heaven and saw a great throng of the redeemed gathered around the throne of God. He saw you and me there, assuming, of course, that we are going by way of the cross. In Hebrews 12 we are exhorted to:

***“Fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart”*** (Heb. 12:2-3).

How well I remember when Bev was in the delivery room having our two girls. I remember her pain and struggling, which were so poignantly written on her face. But there came that joyous moment when they were born and gently laid on her breast. I watched in amazement as all the pain evaporated from her face and she beamed with love at those little girls. If you were to ask her today, “Was it worth it?” she would say, “O Yes! The final delivery was well worth the pain.”

That’s how it is with Jesus. His pain and suffering has resulted in a mass delivery. This age in which we live is the delivery room. The Church is the incubator, providing warmth for those who have been born again. What in the short-term appears to be an ignominious defeat turns out to be the greatest victory of all time resulting in the greatest harvest of all time.

Our Lord now beckons all those who remain dead in their sins and trespasses to make their way to the foot of the cross. To those who have already done so, He issues a further call. We are called to bear the griefs and sorrows and burdens of those around us. This is difficult. We would rather tell them what’s wrong with them and what the cure is. That way we do not have to become involved. But that was not the way of the Suffering Servant, our Lord. He didn’t tell us where to take our burdens. He took them – upon Himself!

How can we best help each other and best help those out there who are mired in sin and laboring under heavy burdens. We can help others carry their burdens to the place where they can unload them onto Jesus. We can go with each other to the foot of the cross.

So I finish with the question I asked moments ago: what will we say to the One who came down the staircase that ended on the cross? We can say, “Here am I, Lord. I am coming, just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me.”