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Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Tenth Message

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## EXALTED, YET DESPISED

*SERIES: A NEW SERVANT, A NEW COVENANT, A NEW AGE*

Over the past couple of months I have been astonished and amazed at God's grace in the salvation of my father at the age of 81. Twenty-three years ago, when I came to Christ, I began praying for my dad. One Father's Day, I wrote him a letter telling him how much he meant to me. I also told him that I had another Father, the Lord God. As I had been about my earthly father's business up to then, I wrote, as a maturing man I now felt called to be about my Heavenly Father's business. After he read the letter, dad told my mother that he felt he had lost his one and only son. Shortly afterwards I left the field of economics and began teaching the Scriptures, and he was very upset by my decision. I continued to pray for him, and later, after I was married, I prayed that my children might lead him to faith. In the mid-1970's, Emily and I lost a son, and a year later a daughter, but I felt that it was all worthwhile if my dad came to Christ. Even this, however, failed to make a difference. I gave up hope, and I even gave up praying that he would ever be saved.

Several weeks ago, my mother telephoned me to say that my father had a blocked carotid artery, and they were rather concerned about him having a stroke. Although he had been a practicing surgeon in the Los Angeles area for 50 years, he could not find a surgeon who would operate on him because he did not manifest any symptoms. I shared this with a Christian cardiologist friend. He called my dad that very day and invited him to come up to the Bay Area, saying that he knew an excellent vascular surgeon who would perform the surgery. He accepted, and flew up here a couple of days later. In surgery, the doctors discovered that his artery was 95% blocked. It was a miracle he had survived up to then. The surgery was successful, and within a couple of days he was recuperating in my home. I sensed that he had changed. He wanted to be involved in everything I was doing. He went with me to pick up my children; he asked me to write thank you notes to the doctors and nurses; he followed me around, observing me in all I was doing.

Our PBC Men's Retreat was scheduled for the following weekend, and I had planned to spend the two days preceding the retreat with Michael Green, the guest speaker. I invited my dad to come along with us, and he said he would like to come. During those two days we had several conversations about family matters, and for the first time in my life I felt we had begun to communicate about these things. One evening he shared with me concerning various personal events in his life. Then suddenly, out of the blue, he asked, "If Jesus is the Messiah, why did the Jews reject him?" I about fell off my chair! As I thought about his question, and how I would respond, I suddenly thought how interesting it was that the relationship between Jesus, the Jews, and the nations was almost an exact parallel to the relationship between my dad and me.

That relationship between Jesus, the Jews, and the nations is the theme of the fourth Servant Song from the book of Isaiah, to which we come today in our studies in the Servant Songs. Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is the most frequently quoted text in the New Testament. Here we

enter into the Scriptural Holy of Holies, as Isaiah gives a detailed description, 700 years before Christ, of the Servant's atoning work and his reception by God, the nations and Israel. The song is composed of five sections, each having three verses. Each section describes an amazing, astonishing paradox in God's actions in bringing his salvation to the whole earth.

This text forms the basis of Peter's first sermon to the Jews on the day of Pentecost, a message which resulted in the conversion of 3000 Jews. Because the early Christians were so effective in using this text to evangelize the Jews, it was officially removed from all synagogue readings. The distinguished orthodox Jewish scholar, the late Herbert Loewe, wrote, "the reason the prophecy of the Suffering Servant is not included in the synagogue lectionary, although the passages immediately preceding and following it are found there, is the Christian application of that prophecy to Jesus." Since this was a favorite text of the apostles, one that proved so effective for evangelism for the early Christians, ought we not master it for the good of our own souls and in order to spread the gospel?

The literary structure of the text is easy to follow. It will be helpful if we can imagine the setting as a stage, and as each section of the drama unfolds, a spotlight is turned on the different participants involved.

I will begin by giving observations on the literary structure of this song.

*A1: Spotlight on God: 52:13-15*

God exalts his Servant, granting him great success among the nations.

*B1: Spotlight on Israel: 53:1-3*

Israel evaluates the Servant, and rejects him because he did not have the credentials she sought.

*C. Spotlight on the truth: 53:4-6*

*The Atonement:* The Servant suffers our death for us!

*B2: Spotlight on Israel: 53:7-10*

Israel executes the Servant, while the Servant remains silent.

*A2: Spotlight on God: 53:11-13*

God rewards the Servant and grants him eternal glory. God has the first and last word regarding his Servant.

Each section unfolds an amazing, astonishing paradox concerning God's salvation in history. These events demonstrate that God is extremely complex in the manner in which he brings about salvation. In the same way, I was astonished when my father came to faith just a few weeks ago. God answered in an amazing and complex manner the prayers which I had prayed for my father 23 years ago.

Let us look then at this first section.

## I. The exaltation of the Servant by God (52:13-15)

### A. The description of his exaltation (52:13)

**Behold, My servant will prosper,  
He will be high and lifted up, and greatly exalted. (NASB)**

The Hebrew word for “prosper” has three aspects. First, the Servant will have insight; he will have a plan—he will know what to do; second, he will successfully do it; and third, he will be rewarded for it. This verse focuses on the third aspect, namely, the Servant’s reward.

Recent events have made it obvious that General Schwarzkopf, the commanding general of the coalition forces in the Gulf War, is a military genius. This is the man who came up with a plan for the liberation of Kuwait. Military campaigns are won by deception, and he deceived the Iraqi forces by feigning an amphibious landing, but instead, he accomplished the greatest ever movement of troops and supplies in history, and invaded Iraq from the west. He had a plan, he carried it out successfully, and he has been rewarded with honor. Now, however, comes the difficult work of cleaning up the mess in Kuwait — the carnage, the oil spills, the fires, the destruction.

This is what the Servant has done for man. He knew what needed to be achieved in order to accomplish salvation. By dying on the cross he cleaned up the wickedness of man, brought forgiveness for sin, paid the damages, and is creating a new heavens and new earth. As a result of his success, he will be exalted: “He will be high and lifted up, and greatly exalted.” Many scholars see in this a parallel to Jesus’ resurrection, ascension and exaltation. No one else, however great his record, has achieved the heights which the Servant has. God rewarded him by crowning him Lord of all. We see this elsewhere in this book. In his first vision of the Lord, in Isaiah 6, the prophet sees him, “high, exalted on the throne.” Here the prophet is saying that due to the work of the Son, the Son is everything that God himself is. Every honor that God has, the Servant also possesses. Here is how the apostle Peter, from his sermon in Acts, described this, “This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth that which you both see and hear” (Acts 2:32-33). Thus we see described the exaltation of the Servant.

Next, Isaiah describes the impact which this exaltation will have on the nations.

### B. The impact of his exaltation among the nations: Worshipped in amazement (52:14-15)

**Just as many were appalled at him,  
So His appearance was marred more than any man,  
And His form more than the sons of men.  
Thus He will startle many nations,  
Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him;  
For what had not been told them they will see,  
And what they had not heard they will understand.**

To the astonishment of the nations this Servant, like Israel, suffers. When they behold the suffering of this once glorious man from Galilee, men will be absolutely horrified. They will be appalled to the point of being speechless by the appearance of this one. Jesus suffered to the point where he was beyond human recognition. In the words of Psalm 22, he said of himself, “I am a worm, and not a man.” Suffering that results in disfigurement sometimes causes the sufferer to be cut off from his fellow men. Jesus was flogged with 36

lashes; he was beaten with a reed; crowned with thorns that pierced his skull; mocked and spat upon. He was scarcely recognizable as he made his way to Golgotha. And this was the great stumbling block for Israel. How could Jesus be the beloved Messiah and suffer a fate that set him apart as under the curse of God?

The first step in understanding the work of Jesus on the cross is to experience in our being a deep sense of horror that leaves us speechless at the suffering he endured. In the television news accounts of the Gulf War we viewed the reporters’ pool reports of what the military wanted us to see. What was presented, of course, was not the human carnage, but what some have described as a Nintendo-type war—smart bombs hitting their targets with pinpoint accuracy, Stealth bombers on nighttime missions, etc. One reporter, however, spoke of other video he had seen of the Apache helicopters blowing dozens of Iraqi soldiers to pieces. We would find that horrifying; we wouldn’t want to look at it. Yet we will never fully appreciate the love of God until we look upon the face and the body of Jesus and be horrified at the sight of what we deserved to suffer for our sin — because what happened to him was intended for us. He loved us so much that he suffered the torture and torment which we justly deserved.

Just as the nations are appalled at the sufferings of the Servant, they will be startled and speechless at his exaltation: “He will startle many nations/Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him.” What was unheard of is comprehended, so that they will be speechless. News will go like wildfire into faraway places (nations) and into exalted circles (kings). This is the paradox: the nations (the *goyim*)—those who were not studying the prophetic promises, who had no preparation in the sacrificial literature, who had never heard of the Word—are the ones who freely give their hearts to Jesus when they hear his name. They learn the background afterwards, reversing everything. This is truly astonishing!

Verse 15b: “What had not been told them they will see.” In the Old Covenant, God first displayed his acts of salvation so that the first generation saw them with the eye. It was their responsibility to pass to the next generation what they saw, thus succeeding generations heard God’s acts of salvation with the ear. The psalmist says,

**Listen, O my people to my instruction;  
Incline your ears to the words of my mouth.  
I will open my mouth in a parable;  
I will utter dark sayings of old,  
Which we have heard and known,  
And our fathers have told us.  
We will not conceal them from their children,  
But tell to the generation to come the praises of the LORD,  
And His strength and His wondrous works that He has done.**  
(Ps 78:1-4)

In the New Covenant, says Isaiah, “what had not been told them, they will see.” Perhaps this is a hint that by means of the Holy Spirit, one’s experience is so real that he becomes, in a sense, an eyewitness of God’s salvation, as if he were part of that first generation. We remember Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians, “But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18).

How astonishing, that this man who was smitten, crushed under the wrath of God until he was utterly disfigured, should be given such approval and significance among the nations! And especially

so when the nations who worship him so readily had no previous knowledge of him!

Last year, I met an Iranian man on a train journey from Romania to Austria. He was escaping from his country, having suffered under the horrific war between Iraq and Iran. His brother had been killed by an Iraqi chemical weapon, and his family were speechless at the barbarity of his death. I shared the gospel with him, but he replied, "I don't want God in my life. He has allowed too much pain." We exchanged addresses, and later I sent him a copy of the New Testament. I told him about the pain which Jesus suffered, that he was "marred more than the sons of men," and this is what finally opened the door to Farzad. Each time he writes me now he quotes from the New Testament. Just last week he wrote and said, "I have found another Christian propagandist, just like you! He's taking me to church in Austria every week." Isn't that amazing? This man is a Muslim, with no Christian background whatsoever, and now he loves the New Testament. Doesn't that astonish you? It ought to. This is God's plan of salvation.

Thus the first paradox in our text is the fact that the nations who have not heard of the Servant, begin to worship Jesus immediately when they hear his name.

We find the second paradox in verses 1-3.

## II. The rejection of the Servant by Israel (53:1-3)

### A. Astonishment at the Servant's rejection by Israel (53:1)

**Who has believed our message?**

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

If it is astonishing that those with no previous knowledge of the Servant can worship him, it is even more amazing that those to whom the promises were given, for the most part rejected him. What a paradox this is!

Next, Isaiah gives the reasons for Israel's unbelief. It is because the Servant seemingly did not have any credentials for the task.

### B. The reasons for unbelief: Lack of credentials (53:2)

**For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,**

**And like a root out of parched ground;**

**He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him,**

**Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.**

"Tender shoot," a suckling, or sapling, is a shoot which grows from a plant's stem or root. Vegetable gardeners know that as soon as the sucker shoot grows up in the tomato vine, it must be removed or it will sap the vitality of the plant. This is how the Jews regarded Jesus. When he presented himself to Israel, they charged that he was not part of the established lines of Judaism. He would not identify himself with the Essenes; he attacked the Pharisees, the Scribes, and the Sadducees; and he would not partake in the cause of the Zealots. He said the Kingdom of God was different from what all these groups had anticipated.

Secondly, the Servant was regarded by the Jews as "a root out of parched ground." The Servant seemed to have no promise for success. He was like a root out of parched ground. He was raised in Galilee, outside the main centers of Jewish life in Jerusalem. His parents were poor, lacking prestige. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. His disciples were a collection of outcasts from varying backgrounds. At his death he had no following, yet he claimed to be the Messiah.

Thirdly, the Servant had "no stately form or majesty." He had no outward beauty, unlike David, who was ruddy and handsome, or Joseph. In the OT, beauty symbolized God's blessing, but Jesus had "no appearance that we should be attracted to Him." At the announcement of his kingship in Jerusalem, he entered the city, riding on the foal of a donkey (Matt 21:1-11). He was not crowned not with gold, but with thorns. Instead of a scepter he wielded a broken reed (Matt 27:29). The Servant demonstrated nothing in his personal appearance that pointed toward his Messiahship.

Next, we have Israel's assessment of this man.

### C. Israel's evaluation of the Servant (53:3)

**He was despised and forsaken of men,**

**A man of sorrows, and (well) acquainted with grief;**

**And like one from whom men hide their face,**

**He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.**

"Despised" is the key word here. The Servant's physical appearance led Israel to esteem him of no value. Having "esteemed" him—having put a lot of thought into their appraisal of him, in other words—they felt he was without significance. Rather, they despised him; they held him in contempt. The words here are reminiscent of the language used by the psalmists to describe the pain of rejection. In the psalms, however, these concepts are used only of a period in someone's life, while here in Isaiah they speak of one who was despised all throughout his life, even unto death. He was held in contempt, without kindness or courtesy all his days. In fact, the expression, "like one from whom men hide their face," in Israel referred to one suffering from leprosy. The Servant was treated like a leper, and subjected to great mental anguish. Today, we could say he was treated like a child who, through no fault of his own, suffers from AIDS, and is treated like an outcast, a leper, at school. This will give us an inkling of how Jesus was treated all his life. The astonishing thing, of course, is that he suffered all of this willingly for us. Surely one of the most poignant verses in the entire New Testament must be Jesus' words, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Luke 9:58). He was welcome nowhere. His entire life was stamped with grief and sorrow. The psalmist wrote,

**Because for Thy sake I have borne reproach;**

**Dishonor has covered my face.**

**I have become estranged from my brothers,**

**And an alien to my mother's sons. (Ps 69:7-8)**

During our Men's Retreat, I taught a seminar on coping with grief. Two men who attended shared that their wives had committed suicide. One of them said that when he told his mother, she challenged him and said, "Don't cry. Grow up." So, as men are wont to do, he held everything inside. Isn't it true that your own family circle is very often the arena where you feel the most pain? Fathers, mothers and children have a way of hurting one another deeply at times. It is amazing that the Servant deliberately chose abuse, verbal abuse throughout his life, and intense physical, verbal and emotional abuse on the day of his death, so that he could bring healing to you and me. Truly, he was "a man of sorrows, and well acquainted with grief."

The second amazing paradox in God's plan of salvation, is that the Jews, the very people who possessed the law and prophets, to whom were given the promises, were the ones who esteemed the Messiah of no value, and they rejected him. He willingly endured abuse, for you and me. Why? you ask. The glorious note of this text, however, is

that God has not forgotten the Jews. He went to the nations because, just as we discover in our own family circles, it is hard for one's own flesh to discern spirit. The Jews were too close to Jesus to recognize Spirit, thus God dispensed the gift among the nations so that they might play the symphony of the love of Christ for man. Then God dispersed the Jews among the nations so that they might hear the divine symphony, so that they might see and believe that God has not rejected his people Israel.

When my father asked me that question, "If Jesus is the Messiah, why did the Jews reject him?" I could have responded, "Dad, it's just like you and me. I'm too close to you for you to see Jesus." It is amazing that God brought my father to the Bay Area on the only weekend when he could hear the symphony of love played by 500 men. By the time the Retreat began, I was already emotionally spent by what had already happened between us. Then I heard him singing the hymns, and I was amazed again. Many men spontaneously shared with him what the Lord meant to them. Although there were several seminars, he wanted to come to mine dealing with grief, and I shared about losing my children. Tiredness prevented him from attending Michael Green's group meeting that evening, during which Michael spoke on coming to faith in Christ. On Sunday morning, Michael delivered an altar call to everyone present at the Retreat, although I knew he was speaking directly to my father. He did not respond, however, and I felt discouraged. People began to file out to eat breakfast together, and I went to do an errand. While I was gone, Michael sat with my father and looked him right in the eyes. "When are you going to come to Christ?" he asked him. "I'm ready right now," my dad replied. When I returned to our rooms to take Michael and my father to the airport, my dad looked at me, with tears in his eyes (the first time in my life I had ever seen him cry). He stretched out his hand to me and said, "I have just accepted the Lord." Then we embraced. A friend brought the news to the hundreds of men just sitting down to breakfast. The entire crowd stood and cheered, many of them weeping with joy.

This is the kind of God whom we worship. He took one life, and multiplied it, so that when my father, at 81 years of age, came to the Bay Area to undergo life-saving surgery on his body, he heard a symphony of love sung by the many. God was all the while operating on his spirit, and he ended up coming to faith in the Servant.

In appreciation to the Lord, I have written the following poem:

### *My Father Remembered*

O Father, you heard the cry of a boy,  
Who first learned to weep over his father,  
When he sat silent in the face of love,  
You put his tears in a bottle,  
And hid them.

Years later you called him to Mt. Moriah,  
But he thought not in vain,  
If the sweet scent would  
Place the Son in the father's heart.

He descended the mountain  
And clung to his father,  
He looked into his face  
But saw only silence.

The boy went into the desert to forget.  
He sang in the cave of Adullam;  
And there he found men,  
The discontent and fatherless.

They grew strong together,  
And became his mighty men of renown,  
He loved them,  
They would be his father.

In all their travels,  
The son thanked his Father,  
For such a wound,  
That forged this new family.

But whenever he returned to Ziklag  
Under the darkness of the night,  
He heard his daughters cry, "Daddy,"  
He knew he could not forget.

Then God remembered the boy,  
And visited him with his father,  
"Take now your father, the one whom you love,  
And journey to land of Moriah."

They journeyed quietly up the mountain,  
The father asked,  
"Behold the fire and the wood,  
But where is the lamb?"  
The son was silent.

Then he raised his eyes,  
And heard them singing,  
All the men of renown.  
With the lamb upon their shoulders.

Those thousand eyes,  
Broke into the father's heart,  
The father wept, took the lamb,  
And became a son.

O Father, how great are your wonders,  
You heard the cry of a boy,  
And kept his tears in a bottle.  
I shall never forget.

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