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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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Believing What We Have Heard

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Isaiah 53:1-12.

It is important for you to recognise that the dividing of chapters here is a little unfortunate and that that part of chapter 52 which is marked by verse 13 to the end, is really a part of chapter 53 and is in relation to chapter 53 in the nature of what we may call a synopsis. If you were gathering up chapter 53 in its main content and features, you could not do better than express it and define it in the words of these three verses so far as the main lines of revelation and prophecy are concerned. If you read them with that thought in mind you will see how they range and embrace those great things which mark the different phases, the progressive phases of this great 53rd chapter. "Behold, My servant shall deal wisely, He shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high." That takes you right on to the end of chapter 53 and shows you the issue of all that proceeds in that chapter; then working backward from the end of chapter 53 and the grand outcome of it all: "Like as many as were astonished at thee (His visage was so marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men), so shall He startle many nations: kings shall shut their mouths because of Him." So in those words the Lord presents the One Who is here called by Him "*My Servant*", the suffering Servant of the Lord. The Lord brings Him into view and calls for a consideration of Him and foreshadows His history, and ranges the whole course of His life from birth, not to death, but to the throne of the universe, the very high place above all kings and rulers. You see the range of this familiar chapter. To take its range alone is to be impressed with its grandeur, with its wonder.

I am afraid sometimes the very phrase or title, "Isaiah 53" has in our minds just brought into view the sufferings, the Cross of the Lord Jesus. And while that occupies such a large place, nevertheless it is not all by far, it is the sufferings and the *glory* that should follow, and those two things always go together. If we keep them together, we keep the balance and there will always be in the suffering the

note of triumph. The note of triumph in and through the unutterable suffering and sorrow of this chapter is a thing not to be missed and when, before ever the outline and the detail is given by the Lord, He introduces His suffering Servant, He carries you immediately to the end, to the issue. He does not begin by working His way, as the historic sequence is, from beginning to end, but He takes you to the end. Then you are able to understand and appreciate all the other: the meaning of it, the object of it, the direction of it, God's end of all this. And God would always, from His standpoint, bring the exaltation of His Son as the first note of emphasis and stress and revelation to the hearts of men.

You come to the book of the Acts and you find that the first sermon preached of the Gospel concerning His Son Jesus Christ sets Him first of all in His place of exaltation; and the apostles always begin there, from that point. God began with them in experience from that point. The thing which made all the difference was not that they knew about His sufferings, not that they had seen His Cross, not that they had been tremendously impressed with the pathos and the tragedy of it all - doubtless they had been - but that in itself had still left them men unchanged and unequipped for their great life-work. But it was on the other side, when they saw who this One was in reality from the standpoint of glory, that they were able to give a right and true valuation of these sufferings and see the meaning of those sufferings, and they came into the good of all that from the standpoint of the exaltation and the glory. That is where the Lord always begins.

And so these three verses are the presentation of His Servant, beginning with the end of the suffering: the place "very high", exalted, and lifted up. The apostle Paul's history commenced there. He knew all about Jesus of Nazareth. He knew all about His death on the cross. He knew these very Scriptures of the suffering Servant of the Lord. Saul of Tarsus was very familiar with Isaiah 53, but what did it mean to him? Not until he saw Jesus of Nazareth very high, lifted up and exalted, did all this have any real meaning for him in a transforming way. And when he saw the One whose glory and brightness was above that of the noonday sun, then he commenced to understand the meaning and value of the sufferings.

Now beloved, while we need so very much an apprehension and appreciation of Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and all the value of the work of His Cross, the thing that will make that of real transforming power in our lives is to see from God's standpoint who the Lord Jesus is: to see Him high and lifted up in His exaltation, working as it were downward. I wonder if I might put it this way to try and impress it upon you. The difference will come, beloved, when you and I (I trust I may say that of all of us, those of us who have come by way of His wonderful atonement onto the ground of acceptance in Him), we shall see Him as He is, in all His infinite and universal, and eternal glory, and when we see Him like that, we shall marvel, wonder, and be smitten with a dumbness and utter amazement! And then with that glory before us, breaking upon us, we shall have a new appreciation of His Cross, and we shall say: "Did *that* One allow men to smite Him and spit upon Him and humiliate Him? To charge Him with every foul and evil charge that men could lay upon a man, and crucify Him as a criminal - *that* One?" Then our hearts will appreciate the meaning of His humiliation, His self-emptying.

From that standpoint we will better appreciate the main content of Isaiah 53, but today it is not impossible and it is in the will of God that we should have some greater grasp of the glory of the Lord Jesus. And as we have that, we shall have a far deeper impression of the meaning of His Cross. We shall then enter very sympathetically into an understanding of His own words: "Oh Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine own self, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was... The glory which I had, which I let go, which was Mine, but which I let go - for this". Now, that may not very greatly impress you, but I do trust that you will take that to the Lord and remember that a sufficient

apprehension of salvation, redemption, can only be had upon a sufficient apprehension of who the Redeemer is. This is no ordinary One, no ordinary Man, and not even a Superman. This is One who shared the eternal glory before the world was, and let it go for our sakes.

Having that in mind we can go on with Isaiah 53, seeing how the Lord presents His servant, and then being impressed, as we ought to be, with the tense of this chapter. Do you notice that it is all in the past tense, or most of it is in the past tense? It is looking back upon something. And yet all this was written many years before it happened, but it is a retrospective point of view from which it is written, and it is a tremendously impressive thing when you recognise that the Spirit of God is causing a man to write from the standpoint of something having been effected. It is not the prophet who is saying this. Do not forget that. While the prophet writes this, it is not the prophet who is saying this. Isaiah is simply the inspired instrument of the Holy Spirit to write down things which in the mind of the Holy Spirit are being said to a people at some future date.

It is not the prophet saying: "Who hath believed our message?" It is a people many years later looking back over their unutterable folly, seeing their unspeakable madness, and they are saying this: "Who has believed that which we have heard? It is not 'our report' in that sense, something we have given out. We heard something, and who believed it among us? Who of us believed what we heard; the report that was given to us concerning Him?" The inclusive answer to the enquiry is: "We did not believe what we heard, and because we did not believe what we heard, all the rest followed: 'He was despised and rejected of men' and so on, because we did not believe." Oh, I want to throw that from the commencement of this chapter right on to the issue. Beloved, that is a tremendous challenge to our hearts in some other particular direction. If it is not in the specific direction in the atoning work of our Lord Jesus, it may apply in some other respect to us. We have heard something about Him, there was a report which came to us concerning Him and we did not believe it. Throw that right on to the Lord's issue. Here is "very high", "exalted", and about Him things were said under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in our time, and we did not believe. What might be the awful issue of that for us?

Here is everything that was said about Him now demonstrated as true, proved in what He is, where He is to have been true. It was all true every bit of it, and now the truth of it is established in Him as glorified, exalted, very high, and we have to face that glorious issue of all that was said about Him, and shall we say "We did not believe it"? Shall it ever be said of any one of us, that either in part or in whole, we did not believe it? This really is the cry of a people enlightened, a people now in penitence and in grief. Thank God that is a prophecy of Israel. The day will come when rejecting Israel will take the attitude of this chapter and repentantly say: "Who believed what was said about Him? We did not believe it". But there will be a sob in the voice of repentant Israel in that day. "All this we knew, all this came before our notice, all this has been told us, and we did not believe it, we refused to accept the report of Him." But there is an awful possibility of having heard and having refused beyond the point of repentance; seeing Him vindicated and knowing that we stand condemned because we believed not.

"Who has believed?"

Now, that may apply to some in the particular direction of this chapter as to the atoning work of the Lord Jesus in His Cross, concerning our sins, for our salvation. You have heard it, you have heard the report, you have been told the story of His Cross; you know it all. Again and again it has come under your notice, it has been presented to you. Oh, beloved friend, the day is coming when high, lifted up, exalted, you see this One, this Jesus of Nazareth. Will your position and attitude then have to be: "Yes, I never believed it, I never believed unto my salvation." I am asking you: what are you doing

with the report? What are you doing with the presentation of Jesus Christ? What are you doing with that which has come so frequently, so often to your notice about Him and His work for your salvation? What are you doing with it? I am not asking if you mentally assent to it, if you believe it in that historic sense, that: "Yes, I believe that it was so." I am asking if you are believing in a saving way, believing unto the salvation of your soul - if you are basing the whole of your eternal welfare and destiny upon what Jesus Christ did at Calvary. That is the only believing of the report that is saving.

And it is worthwhile, beloved, that if there are 150 believers in this place and an extra one is unsaved, that you 150 should suspend for a moment your eagerness to have something for yourselves while that was applied to a lost soul. The gospel must be preached for the sake of one soul and I am quite sure you are heartily in that and we must not take it for granted that because this is a place where the Lord's people for the most part gather, that unsaved ones are not in our midst. At any rate, I am not going to take the risk of having an unsaved soul in and mixing with the Lord's people and not being met, and going away. Oh, that you might come in repentance to the place which is foreseen in this chapter and say; "I have not believed, I have heard, I know; there is little about this that you can tell me that I do not know, and yet I have not believed unto the salvation of my soul." Beloved friend, the moment is coming when the issue of all this will blaze forth before the universe. Christ, no longer Advocate on your behalf to plead your cause before a righteous God, before the Judge of all, but then He will take His place as Judge and to plead your case He will no longer be in a position to. And then it will be too late to say: "I did not believe, it is all true, I see it is all true, but I did not believe" - too late then.

God tells you from the beginning what the end is going to be. God says at the outset: "This Son and this Servant of Mine shall be lifted up and shall be very high." That is God's "shall". The Lord says that He *shall* be lifted up, He *shall* be very high. Look at the "shalls" of Isaiah 53: "He *shall* see His seed, He *shall* prolong His days ... He *shall* see of the travail of His soul and *shall* be satisfied." These are the words of the Spirit of God, not merely of a human prophet, they are God's words and God brings in with these superlative "shalls", right at the commencement, He brings in His Servant and He says this is how it *shall* be with Him at last. And we shall come to God and see God's 'shall' accomplished - but when we stand there it will be too late to decide whether we believe or not. And so, having shown us the end, He brings us down to that which we must believe in order that that thing may be something that we glory in and not tremble at. You see what I meant when I said to enter into the glory and the value of the end of all this atoning work. We must see the end of it, the end from the beginning and that surely brings a very great stress upon our hearts.

Now let me remind you that while this does apply to unsaved men and women, to those who have not believed to the salvation of their souls, the principle operates in every fragment of the revelation of Jesus Christ for the Lord's people as well. The Lord is constantly breaking open the content of His Son to His own people. He is constantly bringing forth the treasures of Christ, constantly bringing out of His treasure, like the householder, things new and old, all concerning His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. He is bringing to us ever-fresh fulnesses of Christ in revelation and in truth.

What are we doing with it? Have we believed in that active way of faith which apprehends, lays hold? Beloved, every bit that the Holy Spirit gives concerning the Lord Jesus will be proved at last to be true. The thing is, shall we be in it? For it is all for us. There is not a glory, a moral excellency and splendour of the Lord Jesus that is not for us to share, but it calls for faith's apprehension, faith's action. Oh, what a lot we hear, what a lot comes to us as the Lord's people. How many-sided is the revelation of Christ. How true it is, He is the manifold, the many-sided Wisdom of God, and we are constantly seeing Him from some new angle which means seeing some fresh facet of this glorious

Gem. But it is not good enough for us to come together and see, not good enough for us to have it presented to us, to be told about it.

I want to safeguard, or guard against that which I think would be as terrible a tragedy as anything could be: that a people, coming together again and again through months and years in a place like this, who have literally mountains of truth concerning the Lord Jesus piled up in their midst (and I sometimes almost shudder when I think back over the years of ministry, as to its practical outworking and accomplishment - what a lot has been given) and I can think of no greater tragedy than a people who have had all that, should be at last in the position where but comparatively little of it became really living and experimental in them. Don't you think it would be terrible for us to see all that in living truth in Christ at last blazing forth, everything we have heard, a glorious living reality, that you and I were called unto by the report of Him here, and now it is outside of us, objective to us, and we are apart from it? We hear it. Do we rejoice in it as a presentation of truth? We were stirred, perhaps for the time being. Oh yes, and the conference passed and we looked forward to the next, and then we heard more, a great deal more, and rejoiced, and it passed, and we had another one, and with all the coming and the going and the unveiling of Jesus Christ, our activity of heart in relation to the unveiling of Him was never such as to bring us commensurately into the thing. And in that sense, while it could never be said that we intellectually did not believe it, in that heart sense we did not believe, in that sense in which the realisation is saving, is transforming. We did not exercise faith in the truth.

It is my responsibility to speak to you, and to my own heart like this. We watch as those who have to give an account, and we secretly grieve and bear a terrible burden upon our hearts when we do not see the Lord's people progressing, moving on; when we see over the lapse of years very little progress made, very little development, where there is nothing that can be called commensurate with all that the Lord has said and urged upon us as the practical result, that there is so much standing just where we were. Oh, what a responsibility.

Now beloved, as one who is as the watchman and who has to give a warning because the blood of all those committed to his charge will be laid at his door if he does not sound the warning note when he sees the enemy coming; and I tell you, I see an enemy. I see an enemy upon the horizon and that enemy is that in the great day of the revelation of Jesus Christ, you who have heard so much and do know so much, should not be in any vital practical relation to what you have heard, and should fall under condemnation.

So I urge upon you the necessity (oh, you faithfully attend the gatherings, you are always there and perhaps at great sacrifice) but that you should exercise heart faith towards the truth as it is in Jesus to make it a living thing in your lives, to enter into that measure of Christ which has been revealed to you. It is necessary: "The word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it" said the apostle. Do not take "faith" there as meaning just an assent of mind, just as acceptance of intellect, just the opposite of saying - "I do not believe it". Remember that faith is always an active and a positive principle. It calls for the appropriation of something even though that something at present be unseen, it reaches out and embraces and exercises itself in relation to that. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." It is a very practical thing.

We have not touched the content of Isaiah 53, we have simply dealt with the governing law of this chapter. When you have recognised that, what the chapter is built upon, and see what the issue of it all is going to be, then you can go back and actually work your way through the chapter and see that what the Spirit of God is foreshadowing is a day when a people who did not believe will recognise

the folly of their unbelief. In this sense, the recognition of their folly will bring them on their knees and they will say: "Who has believed what we heard? It is true. 'He grew up as a tender plant and as a root out of a dry ground, no form nor comeliness'. It is true that His early life and character were such that He grew up before the Lord as a tender plant; all that was true about His youth, His childhood, we knew all about it. It is true that before the Lord He grew as none other ever grew; He was despised and rejected of men - yes, and *we* were the despisers and rejectors, *we* turned our faces from Him. He was despised and we esteemed Him not. Yes and more, the meaning of it was true so that there was this atoning factor and this vicarious element in it, 'He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows' - it was not the penalty of His sin, it was the penalty of our sin." And so you go on and see that it had to do with things morally in this universe. It was a moral thing in its essence; our transgressions, because we have gone astray and turned every one to our own way, it was all related to that.

Yes, all that deep, unspeakable ignominy - but it was all so willingly undertaken by Him, yes, so willingly. His willingness in all this can only be duly represented by the way that a sheep goes to the slaughter: no resistance, no questioning, no murmur, silently led. So willing, that you would hardly believe that it understood what was going to happen. The willingness of it all. There is no driving, no compulsion, no forcing here. Neither heaven nor men have to compel Him to His death, but: "as a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before her shearers is dumb; yea, He opened not His mouth". No complaint, no resistance; all entered into quite willingly. We know, we have been told all this, this is the report, this is what we know. Yes, and the injustice of it all.

Read the chapter again and you will see that paragraph which deals with the injustice and unrighteousness that was associated with His trial and His death. "He was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people He was stricken". Cut off by man who heaped charges against Him, suborned, induced by bribery false witnesses who did not give Him a chance, but took every precaution against justice in order to carry out their determined purpose against Him. Yes, He was not allowed an ordinary criminal's fairness, was not given the chance even of that preference which could be exercised by a release at such a time though He had been a criminal. No, they silenced Pilate and would not allow him to suggest that, even though he were guilty at this season they were wont to have released someone unto them. No, they would not give the Lord Jesus that benefit, so dead-set were they upon His destruction. All that, voluntarily accepted, gone through in relation to *our* sin, our transgressions, that we might be healed.

"By His stripes we are healed". That word "healed" only occurs four times elsewhere in the Old Testament, and that in the book of Leviticus. And it refers to that kind of healing which was taken note of by the priests when a leper had been set apart because of leprosy and had to undergo certain treatment, and at last when the leprosy was healed the priest had to go out and examine the leper and pronounce him clean again, and the word "healed" is the same word that is used. And that is the category in which you and I stand, as those who, from the crown of their head to the soles of their feet - are worse. And by His stripes we are made whole, healed of all that moral sickness, the malady that is like leprosy; healed by His stripes. But we did not believe it. I do not know how modernists are going to face the exalted Christ when they rule out the atoning work of the Cross.

Where are we in the light of all this? And there is much more, but see the glorious end: God vindicates Him. He sees His seed. Men cut Him off, but He prolongs His days, "Thy throne, O God" it is said of Him "is for ever and ever." The pleasure of the Lord prospers in His hand, the travail of His soul has been fruitful, and He sees the fruit, He is exalted, lifted up, very high. That is our Christ. But oh, that we might be in the place where all this truth, this report of Him that we have received should have faith's outworking in our own lives. That whenever there is brought to us some fresh

unveiling of Him from any one of the ten thousand angles of His full and glorious Person and work, that ours may be the attitude which shall not call for future penitence, whether that penitence means salvation at long last or whether it is penitence too late, that we shall not have shame in that day, but that we shall now respond in a true heart-exercise in faith's apprehension, appropriation, entering into every bit of the truth concerning God's Son.

I say again, this is a challenging word. Where are we now? The Lord save us from all self-deception, all self-sufficiency, all self-excusing of hearts, and rebellion of heart, all prejudice and stubbornness, everything like that, and give us grace to humbly get down now in penitence and say: "Yes, I have heard much, I know much, the report has come to me of Him in a very full way, but I am far from the value of that truth." Let us be penitent now. Oh beloved, not one of us can stand outside of that. The speaker stands in that as much as anyone else. We know so much, but so little active, energetic faith has been exercised in relation to what we know to make that ours.

The Lord in His grace and mercy give us a due exercise of heart, but bring us in our lives and experience abreast of our knowledge, that our knowledge in the great day of the unveiling of Him may not be ahead of our character. The Lord bring us to the full measure of Christ.