

The Ground of the Revealing of the Arm

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the contrast between human pride and God's values as revealed through the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, culminating in the significance of the Cross.

Scripture: Isaiah 53:1

Topics: "Humility", "The Suffering Servant"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the profound contrast between man's judgment and God's perspective on the suffering Servant described in Isaiah 53. He emphasizes that both Gentiles and Israel fail to recognize the true nature of the Servant due to their pride and false standards of value, leading to a rejection of the very means of their salvation. The sermon highlights how God's ways are often mysterious and contrary to human expectations, revealing that true humility and self-emptying are essential for receiving the Arm of the Lord. Sparks calls for believers to confront their pride and embrace the humility exemplified by Christ, as only then can they experience the fullness of God's grace and strength. Ultimately, the message challenges the congregation to reassess their values in light of the Cross.

Transcript

In this fifty third chapter of Isaiah (with which we include the last three verses of chapter 52), we believe there are to be found certain Divine thoughts, Divine laws, Divine principles, of abiding and universal application, upon which the Arm of the Lord can be revealed. We continue our investigation to discover what these Divine thoughts are. There are certain things which lie clearly upon the surface, as we have the record before us.

Man's Attitude to the Servant

First of all, one thing which is very apparent is the difference between the attitude of man and attitude of God to this suffering Servant of the Lord. These two attitudes are very clearly defined, and represent two entirely different realms. What is said as to the attitude or judgment of man concerning this One--'My Servant' --falls into two parts: firstly, that of the Gentiles; secondly, that of Israel.

(1) The Gentiles

The reaction of the Gentiles, on hearing the report and receiving the description, is found in those last verses of chapter 52: "Like as many 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" (for that is the word, not 'sprinkle') "many nations; kings shall shut their mouths at Him for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider."

The 'report' of Him (mentioned in the next verse, chapter 53:1) which has gone forth, has caused the nations and the kings to be startled. They shut their mouths in horrified consternation. The description produces an attitude of dumb amazement and incredulity. 'Who has received the report?' Not these! They are incredulous-- this could never be the Servant of the Lord! Such an one! 'Do you tell us that this is the servant of Jehovah?--that such a weakling stands within the pale of Divine approval? Never!' They shut their mouths; their jaws are fixed. That is the Gentile reaction.

(2) Israel

(a) As to His Life

What is the attitude of Israel? His whole career is here brought before us. First of all, as to His birth and youth, He is described as "a root out of a dry ground". There was a sense in which this was a true description, for the seed of David had seemed to have become very dry; and yet the nation is discrediting Him in this way. "When we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him". There is no shining glory or splendour perceptible in His coming into this world. Who is He, after all? Where did He come from? Of course we know more, but you must remember that Matthew and Luke wrote their records of His birth long years after He had gone to glory. They had set themselves with pains to trace His ancestry, and to find out all the circumstances of His birth, and we have them in their Gospel narratives. But these were not common knowledge in Israel. "Search", they said, "and see that out of Galilee ariseth no prophet" (John 7:52). "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). No, there was no carry over of human glories and grandeurs into this life naturally; He was born with no human prestige.

As to His life--well, in the description here, there are more negative things than positive; there are more handicaps than advantages. He had "no form"; He had no "comeliness"; He had "no beauty that we should desire Him". We must not attempt mental pictures of the appearance of the Lord Jesus, but this is how they looked upon Him. He had a heritage of woes--"a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief". In His life, linked as it was with the tragedies of human inheritance and experience, there were only sorrows, griefs and woes-- that is how they viewed it; that was man's judgment. In their view there was not one positive factor about Him that would attest Him as the chosen and anointed Servant of the Lord, the Redeemer and Messiah.

(b) As to His Death

What is Israel's judgment on receiving the 'report' of His death? How does Israel look upon Him? "A root out of a dry ground". There is nothing beautiful or attractive about that: it is the sort of thing that you might find in the way and kick out of your path. That is their estimate of it. "Despised and rejected"--that is Israel's judgment. "A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief". 'Tell us that is the Messiah! Tell us that is the Anointed of the Lord! Tell us that is the Servant of Jehovah! Tell us that is the Redeemer of Israel! No, never, a thousand times never!' "As One from whom men hide their face He was despised; and we esteemed Him not." It is not difficult to visualize the gestures, the attitudes, the looks on these faces. "We did esteem Him smitten of God...." ('Smitten of God! That is the meaning of His Cross--He deserved it! God has smitten Him!') "...smitten of God, and afflicted." God has put upon Him the judgment which He deserved and earned.' "They made His grave with the wicked"--that is, no doubt, what would have

happened, had Joseph of Arimathaea not intervened and begged His body from Pilate. He would have been flung into the common grave with the malefactors.

What a full description there is of His death! "He was oppressed, yet He humbled Himself and opened not His mouth; 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." He was like something for the slaughter --terrible, horrible word! Slaughter! "Smitten of God" --that was the interpretation of the Cross. "From... judgment He was taken away". The fact was that at that time the judgment was being exercised by Him over His oppressors: but their view was, 'He is rightly deprived of judgment; all His franchise is removed, all His rights are eliminated, and deservedly so.' "He was cut off out of the land of the living": 'God has just cut Him off--God has done it!' This is the judgment of Israel, the judgment of man. Man's judgment of Divine things, Divine Persons and Divine works, is based entirely upon objective consideration, without any knowledge of inward reality.

Why These Strange Ways of God?

Now, when we take all these reactions together, we find ourselves in the presence of the deep ways of God as He moves toward revealing His Arm. How deep are His ways! how mysterious! how past finding out! And oh, how startling, when you begin to recognize them! As we consider this interpretation and judgment of the human mind, the mind of this world about this One Whom we know to be the Divine Son of God, the Redeemer of men, we have to recognize that these are the profound ways of God, as He is moving--moving steadily, moving with determination, moving resolutely--toward the point of revealing His Arm. Is it not tremendous, that this should be His way?

Now, two questions arise here. First, why this universal reaction of the world of men to this Servant of Jehovah? From our standpoint, as Christians, it is an astonishing thing that such judgments and reactions should be possible on the part of men universally, but we know they were there, for a fact. What is more, we know that they are still a fact. The mind of this world sees nothing desirable in this Crucified One.

Second--and this question perhaps goes even nearer to the heart and root of the whole matter: Why this deliberate method of God, making this reaction on the part of man inevitable? It is such a strange thing. It seems as though God has gone out of His way to produce such a reaction from man. Why did not God give One "altogether lovely", Whom all would appreciate; One Who would stand in a position of acceptance with all men at first sight? Why did He not bring Him into the world in state, in grandeur, in glory? Why was He not at the beginning embellished with all the signs of Heaven, for all men to see? Why did God deliberately, it would seem, take a line that would produce reactions of this kind? They would be inevitable. Draw this picture, as it is drawn by Isaiah: "His visage... marred more than any man"--distorted "more than the sons of men", and all the other details--and then hold it up and say, 'That is your Redeemer!' It would seem that God has deliberately taken a course to upset and to scandalize.

And so He did! But why?

Because of Man's False Standard of Values

We are getting very near now to the real point. Man's standard of values is an entirely false one, and God knows it. It is utterly, utterly false--because it is the result of man's pride. It is offended pride, is it not, that speaks like this: 'Tell us that we have got to come down to that! That we have got to accept that for our salvation! That we have got to condescend to that level! No, never! It is contrary to human nature!' Yes, it is, because human nature has an utterly false standard of values, produced by man's pride. So the idea of

the Suffering Servant is an affront to human pride, an offence and a scandal to man's standard of things. For this very reason, neither Jew nor Gentile would receive the report --pride would not allow it. We sing:

'When I survey the wondrous Cross...

I... pour contempt on all my pride.'

That ought to be the effect of the Cross. But no. Man being what he is, his pride will not accept that; and therefore 'He is despised, rejected'; 'He has no beauty that we should desire Him.'

The Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ represents the deep undercutting of all false glory. It goes right to the very root of man's self esteem and self-importance. It goes to the very root of life that is based upon man's own prestige and value. Even though, from this world's standpoint and by this world's standards, a man may be something and have something; even if, by birth, or by acquisition, by his brains or his cleverness, by his hard work or study, he may have acquired some position, some glory, some success, some prestige: if you or I base our life, before God, upon anything like that, we are numbered with those here who are in absolute contradiction to the Divine standard of values.

Man's Pride Emptied by the Cross

The fact is that, when we come to the Cross, even our rightful glories, as this world regards them, are going to be emptied out--just poured down the drain. Look at Saul of Tarsus--had he something to glory in? He tells us of all his advantages by ancestry, by birth, by upbringing and by training, by acquisition and by success. He had climbed to the top of the ladder. What did he think of it when he came into the presence of the Cross of the Lord Jesus? He called it just 'refuse'! For him, life was not based upon that at all. He knew quite well that that was out of the Divine court as the basis of any standing with God. And if you or I are coming into the 'fellowship of God's Son'--God's Servant--in heart, in spirit, in truth, that is the way all our natural values will go. We are destined to come to the place where everything that we have, whether from before birth, or at birth, or since birth, as something that we might glory in, will become nothing to us. We shall see that that thing always contains a threat to our spiritual life, if we are not very careful.

I am speaking, of course, about basing our life before God upon that sort of thing. I am not saying that there are no values in those things; but if we should begin to bring them into the presence of God, and to calculate with them, and make something of them, it is clear, is it not, in whose company we find ourselves? We do not come into account with God; God has discredited all human pride. In the Cross of the Lord Jesus, He has utterly undercut all man's glory. The picture that is painted here of the Suffering Servant of Jehovah, with all the agony, all the distortion, all that is so terrible, is a portrait of what sin does--what pride does--in the eyes of God. That is how God views man. These people who would not receive the report, because of pride, are here depicted as they are in the sight of God, in the Person of that Man hanging on the Cross. He bore our sins, our iniquities, our transgressions; all that we are was put upon Him. That is how we are in God's sight. He was not brought into that position because it was true of Him, but because it was true of us; that is the whole argument of the chapter.

But it is not only life based upon things that in their own realm are legitimate and true, upon merits and values either inherited or acquired, that has no standing with God, but life based upon assumed importance. This may be more subtle, and it is certainly more terrible: when a person, who has no natural rights to be anything, begins to assume that he is something, to display self-importance, to take position

and strut about in the very house of God. How contrary to the spirit of this Servant of the Lord! "He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause His voice to be heard" (Is. 42:2). There is nothing about Him that is assertive, loud, noisy. Yet people can assume positions, even in the very house of God, making themselves noisy and assertive, drawing attention to themselves. This is something that is very horrible to God.

The Psalmist says: "Thou desirest truth in the inward parts" (Ps. 51:6). What is true of us, after all? What is true of you, what is true of me, before God? For it is before God that things are weighed rightly (1 Sam. 2:3). The Apostle said: "Love... is not puffed up" (1 Cor. 13:4). What a phrase, 'puffed up'--full of air and nothing else! Love is not 'puffed up'; there can be no inflation of man in the presence of God. When we come into the presence of God, we become completely deflated. It always was so--"When I saw Him, I fell on my face" (Ezek. 1:28; Dan. 8:17; Rev. 1:17).

So we see man's standard of values, and God's in contrast. What a difference! This disfigured, marred Servant is God's way of showing us what we are in His sight. There is something very deep in the ways of God. Man has ever, since the day of the Fall, sought to draw attention to himself, to be something in himself, to have glory for himself; and at the heart of the whole thing was pride. It brought Satan from his high estate, and it brought man from his. And God has repudiated the whole thing in the Cross of the Lord Jesus. "To whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" Not to anybody who has anything of that about him. Here are your principles of Divine committal. "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit" (Is. 66:2). "The haughty He knoweth from afar" (Ps. 138:6). "Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination unto the Lord" (Prov. 16:5).

On the one side, therefore, the Cross of the Lord Jesus is the undercutting of all our pride, all our self-importance; of life based upon a false standard of values. But on the other side, the Cross is the uncovering of that which is God's standard of values. What is His standard?

God's Standard of Values

Paul's Letter to the Philippians is the great letter of the Cross, is it not? The second chapter of that letter is the most perfect complement to Isaiah 53. Listen to how this part of the letter begins:

"If there is therefore any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any tender mercies and compassions, make full my joy, that ye be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind; doing nothing through faction or through vainglory, but in lowliness of mind each counting other better than himself".

What a challenge! Would that not undercut all our criticism, even of those in whom we feel we have something to criticize? That brother, that sister, may have some very glaring faults--but, God only knows, I may have very much worse!

"Each counting other better than himself; not looking each of you to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others. Have this mind in you"--notice how frequently this word 'mind' occurs--"Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be held on to, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross".

This is the complement, I said, of Isaiah 53. What immediately follows is the complement of the end of Isaiah 52 ("My Servant... shall be very high"):

"Wherefore also God highly exalted Him, and gave unto Him the name which is above every name...."

What is the basis of the Arm of the Lord being revealed? To whom...? To these, to these, described or addressed in this second chapter of the letter to the Philippians. When you pass into the third chapter, you find a list of those things in which man glories, of which man takes account, on which man builds, as exemplified in the past life of Paul. But God did not at that time look toward him in this way of approval and blessing; He did not say, 'I will stand by that man.' He first met him and laid him low in the dust, broke him and shattered him; and then, afterward, He lifted him up. The principle is so clear. The chief evil with God is pride! The chief virtue with God is meekness! So this is but a confirmation of what we have in this great chapter in Isaiah. To whom will the Arm of the Lord be revealed? To this One, and to those like Him--to those who are of 'this mind that was in Christ Jesus.'

But are we not ever more and more amazed, when we think of this Servant of the Lord--knowing beforehand, as He did, what He was going to experience and suffer, and all that it was going to mean--being willing to take that course, in order to redeem us from our pride --the iniquity of our pride? The root of that word 'iniquity' in the Hebrew means 'perversity'. It was in order to deliver us from that perversity--really an inward alliance with Satan, in his pride of heart--that the Servant of the Lord went down to the depths of degradation! This gives us a true estimate of pride: we see what pride is in the eyes of God, as well as man's utterly false standard of values. And surely there opens up to our eyes the infinite value of self emptiness, of 'having no confidence in the flesh' (Phil. 3:3), of the "meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price" (1 Pet. 3:4).

So then, if we want the Arm of the Lord for us, and not against us; if we want its girding, its support, its strength, in our lives, in our fellowships, our assemblies, and in our service--this is the ground. Nothing that is a contradiction to this will find that Arm lifted up on our behalf. He will leave us to wallow in the mire of our own creating, until, at the Cross, we are prepared to 'pour contempt on all our pride', and to find what it means to be 'dead to all the world'--most particularly the world of our own hearts.

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