Isaiah - Commentaries by John Gifford Bellett

Christian Truth: Volume 8, Isaiah 53:2: Extract From a Letter

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I have been just asking myself how far I really see "form" and "comeliness" in the rejected a n d despised Jesus, and I am assured that while the soul is under the power of things seen, this cannot be; because the marred visage, the thorny crown, the carpenter's Son, the penniless, homeless stranger, the One spit upon, the patient sufferer of wrongs and reproaches daily heaped upon Him, is no object of "form" and "comeliness" before the eye of mere man. If the soul, therefore, be under the power of things seen, what is Jesus to it? It is faith alone that can admire Him. It is the eye trained and practiced by the Holy Ghost that alone can see the beauty of the smitten form of the low-estated Galilean. This speaks loudly against the constant currents of our hearts. May we be more and more lifted above the admiration of or delight in the things seen-the fair shows of the flesh. Such glances of our hearts, of which they are so guilty, weaken our power to perceive this only real "form" and "comeliness."

So where is the ear for the Shepherd's voice? Surely only in that which the Spirit has, in like manner, opened. And if the flesh and the world be practicing it with its music and soft words, its readiness and skill to catch that unearthly voice will, in like manner, decline and be impaired. Another solemn thought for our souls, another humbling reflection on the too easy and constant ways of our senses, arises here.

Bible Treasury: Volume 16, Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12

Until we discover the distinctness and order of the parts of any piece of writing, we are not in a position for interpreting it in detail. All careful readers of the scriptures must have found that the arrangement of the several books into chapters and verses, as adopted in the Authorized Version, does not serve the most important end of arrangement at all, rather the reverse. For they appear to have been designed more for the convenience of occasional readings or of reference, than to assist in the exposition of the scriptures. But to assist in the exposition of the book itself is surely the most important end of arrangement and division.

In the historical books of the Bible, for instance, the order clearly evinces itself. We there at once perceive where a narrative begins and where it closes, and the connection of all its parts; but in the prophets it is not so. In them there are no clear and decisive marks given to us, at least very generally: we must therefore be at some pains to discover the order and make the arrangement ourselves. It will then be inquired, how are we to do this? Generally, I would say, let the prophets be read throughout and in order, as entire pieces, and then let attention be given and judgment exercised upon them, as on any book, to discover their distinct interruption and periods. Assuredly these holy and beauteous oracles of our God are worthy thus to be entertained; and surely an indolent and careless reading of them will be rebuked of Him by leaving us in contracted and indistinct apprehensions of His glory to which they all testify.

While, however, I would urge, upon the consciences of my fellow-disciples, the duty of bestowing labors such as these on the oracles of God, I would clearly recognize that knowledge of God Himself (such as he who is spiritual alone can have) is our best help in studying the details of His holy book. The friendship of the Lord Jesus lets us into His secrets—into the divine counsels. “I have called you friends,” says the Savior, “for all things that I have heard a My Father I have made known unto you.” Communion with Him makes us clear and able witnesses to Him; for He further says, “Ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with Me from the beginning.” Human learning has its uses, I deny not; but, as it is an attractive thing, and imposes much on our poor hearts, which ever naturally relish that which is of man, and not that which is of God, we must be careful that we do not over-value it. It is the church which is made the pillar and ground of the truth, and not the schools of science and literature and the church is thus the witness and upholder of truth, not as being endowed with human learning, but as having “the mind of Christ,” and “an unction from the Holy One.”

It was not because there was in them a lank of intellectual power or of literary attainments, that the apostle rebuked the disciples for being still but learners, when they ought to have been teachers of divine mysteries. The failure was of a moral character, or he would not have rebuked it. They were dull of hearing, because their souls had not taken that interest in the glory of the Lord Jesus, which, had they loved Him better, they would have taken; and therefore it is, that He presents this failure in knowledge as the first step of fearful apostasy, and of final curse and rejection (see Heb. 5:11- 6:8).

On the principle, then, of ascertaining the limits of the distinct strains of the prophets, before we attempt to interpret them in detail, looking at the 52nd, 53rd, and 54th, of Isaiah, we perceive at once that the prophet is introduced to a new subject at the 13th verse of the 52nd chapter; that the same subject is continued throughout the 53rd chapter; but that it does not occupy him in the 54th chapter. We therefore conclude that 52:13-53. is one distinct strain of prophecy, and thus we are in a position for interpreting this portion in detail.

In beginning to do this, we must inquire what form it takes, into what subordinate parts it naturally distributes itself, and what title the whole subject will properly bear.

Doing this, by reading it from the beginning to the end (ever remembering with reverence, and yet to our unspeakable comfort, that it is the word of the living God—our God, in the sure mercies of His dear Son), it at once presents itself to us in the following character—it exhibits Messiah and the saints alternately or interchangeably contemplating the suffering Messiah, and passing their several judgments upon that mysterious blessed object, and we may entitle it, “Messiah in His sufferings.”

52:18-15.

“Behold, My servant shall deal Prudently, He shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. 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 sprinkle many nations the 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.

Jehovah, in these verses, looking at Jesus' smitten form, and affectingly presenting it to our view, celebrates that glory to which all this humiliation and suffering were to conduct Him, according as it is written of Him (Phil. 2:8), “And being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross; wherefore also God hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.” For this was the rule of Messiah's glory, as He said, “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth ranch fruit;” and so all scripture teaches that glory now must take as it were a resurrection form, just as life must do. For as the life and inheritance of those whom Jesus represented, and for whom Jesus. gave Himself up, according to the everlasting covenant, had been both forfeited, and death and the curse been induced upon them; Jesus, in regaining both, must pass meritoriously through death, and get for Himself and His saints a condition of life and a kingdom and glory, only by destroying thus, through death, him who had the power of death. And this He did to secure to those who believe on Him, a life that shall prove itself stronger, than death, and “a kingdom that cannot be moved” (John 11:25, 26, Heb. 12:28).

The day of the Lord Christ, when He shall take to Himself “the heathen for His inheritance,” and be exalted as “King of kings,” is here anticipated by Jehovah, when “to Him whom man despiseth, to Him whom the nation abhorreth, to a servant of rulers, kings shall see and arise, princes shall also worship,” —when “the kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents, the king of Sheba and Saba shall offer gifts, yea, all kings shall fall down before Him, all nations shall serve Him.”

53:1-6.

“Who hath believed our report, or to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground; He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see Him there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from Him; He was despised and we esteemed Him not. Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of as all.”

The remnant here addressing themselves to the same blessed object point at once, not lo the result of Messiah's sufferings, as Jehovah had done, but to their cause, their own deep iniquity and many transgressions. They begin by rehearsing the common unbelief, and intimate this to arise from the resistance which the pride of fallen man naturally offered to the despised form of Jesus of Nazareth, to the humiliating and rebuking sign of the carpenter's son (see Matt. 13:55). And they confess that they had naturally partaken of the same spirit of unbelief (Ephes. 11:2). In the progress of their meditations they utter the memory of the Lord's wondrous love; and after again taking shame to themselves for their unbelief, they at length, in the sweet assurance of faith, confess their sin on the head of this worthy Lamb of God, finding peace in His blood (Ephes. 16, Heb. 12:24).

Before we proceed with our subject, we may here observe the suitableness of those respective judgments of Jehovah and of the remnant, while looking by turns upon the Messiah's griefs. Jehovah looks at them as intimating the glory into which they were all to result; for the covenant between Jehovah and the Christ was surely on this wise (but oh! for the spirit of unshod worshippers while standing here), the Son emptied Himself of all, not acting as for Himself, but as Jehovah's servant, and as such endured the cross; and then by the covenant He took back all,1 and therefore was it fitting that Jehovah then pledged in covenant promises to the suffering Christ, looking at His sufferings, should celebrate the day of those promises when they shall be manifested in the kingdom as the people of Christ, and HE shall be declared the heir of all things. So was it alike suitable to the saints, in looking on these sufferings, to be reminded of their many stains and wrinkles; for to purge them away, and to give them beauty and acceptance in the eyes of their Lord, were all those sorrows borne. “He was made sin for us Who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

7,8.

“He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment; and who shall declare His generation? For He was out oft out of the land of the living; for the transgression of My people was He stricken.”

Here Jehovah resumes the subject. He justifies Messiah in His conduct throughout all His bitter agony; that He had therein conducted Himself, as towards God, rebellious murmur (Mark 14:26); as towards man, without a returning threat (1 Peter 2:23). But the Father rehearses, that though He was thus worthy of all justification, yet (being made sin) He was treated as unworthy; left without righteous judgment: none of all who had, been taught by Him in the synagogue and in the temple, or who had ever heard Him, though they knit what He said unto them, would now stand for Him (John 18:20-22). As against Him, oppression and wrong were in the place of judgment, and He was hurried to the grave as numbered with the transgressors.

I would observe that the, propriety of interpreting these verses as the words of Jehovah is warranted by two clear considerations. First, the passage “for the transgression of My people was He smitten,” affords literal evidence that they are so; and, secondly, the justification of Messiah which this passage contains is, as I may say, a moral evidence of the same; for judgment, and consequent justification is in this connection the province of God, and not of the saints. Accordingly we find in the 49th chapter of this prophet, that Messiah says, “My judgment is with Jehovah;” and again, in the Gospel of John 8:50, “I seek not Mine own glory; there is One that seeketh and judgeth.” And an apostle, filled with the Spirit of his Lord, would say (1 Cor. 4:4), “For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified; but He that judgeth me is the Lord.”

10.

“Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He hath put Him to grief: when Thou shalt make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand.”

Here the saints again, as in their turn, look at Jesus. Before interpreting their meditation, we may pause for a moment's reflection on that which here meets the soul, that it is, as touching Jesus, that Jehovah, and the remnant of once ruined and helpless sinners, in judgment and affection meet; that it is Jesus who draws and detains and fixes the regards both of heaven and of earth, Jehovah counting Him as His elect, whom He delighteth to honor (Isa. 42:1), the remnant esteeming Him “all its salvation and all its desire.” And oh! the treasures of divine wisdom and goodness! that with the full maintenance of all the holy honors of God's throne, He who sits thereon, and they who had sold themselves to him who sought to overturn it, should yet meet in such fellowship as this!

In the verse which we are now considering, the remnant again rehearses Messiah's sufferings, as He endured them at the hand of Jehovah. The passage reads as if the saints had just caught the preceding words of Jehovah, wherein He had vindicated His holy One and righteous servant, and wondered therefore that in spite of this, “it pleased the Lord to bruise Him;” but soon recovering as it were from their surprise, through a fresh apprehension of the purpose and necessity of these sufferings, they anticipate and celebrate that three-fold blessed fruit of them which in due time the Lord was to gather. First, “He shall see His seed” —that He should have His household about Him like a flock of sheep, should gather the great congregation, should be encircled by the ten thousand times ten thousand, and the thousands of thousands who should understand and magnify the grace of these His sufferings, and say, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain” (Rev. 5:11, 12). Secondly— “He shall prolong His days” —that He should enter manifestly upon the power of an endless life, that “having died unto sin once He should live unto God,” —that “He that was dead should be alive for evermore.” And here we observe that this promise embraces all the seed which He was to see and gather, according to the first promise; for He should take them with Himself into this life: having Him, the Son, they were with Him to have life eternal (1 John 5:12); death, as touching them, was to be swallowed up in victory. Thirdly— “The pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand,” that He should have dominion; and that in His hand dominion should not again be, abused and forfeited as it had been of old, but that the pleasure of Jehovah should be fully answered, and a scepter of righteousness order in peace all things throughout the reconciled heavens and earth, shedding there “the light of the morning when the sun riseth; even of a morning without clouds.” And here we, in like manner, observe that this promise embraces also the seed which He was to see and gather, for if sons with Him, as of one kingdom as it is written, “When Christ, who is Our life shall appear, ye shall also appear with Him in glory” (Col. 3:4).2.

11, 12.

“He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied; by His knowledge shall My righteous servant justify man? for He shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I divide Him a portion with the great; and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because He hath poured out His soul onto death; and He was numbered with the transgressors; and He bare the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors.”

Jehovah again takes up, as it were, the wondrous tale in these verses which close the prophet's strain. As with zealous desire for Messiahs exaltation, He confirms, and also in brighter and faller light presents all the prospect of glory just anticipated by the remnant— “He shall see of the travail of His soul,” confirming the words, “He shall see His seed,” and then presents the character of this seed—a seed made righteous through the Messiah’s meritorious sufferings, and obedience unto death, and that this honor and dominion, as all scripture presents it, is the reward of His precious and most worthy sufferings.

Thus the Father delighteth to honor the suffering Son of man, and so with desire should we desire the day when this honor shall all be prepared for Him. “To wait for the Son from heaven” is as much of the character of a renewed soul, as is the turning “from idols to serve the living God.” And there should be a sense of patience accompanying this waiting—the waiting being for an object so longed for, that the heart should be sensible of its “need of patience.” But alas! how much have other delights than to see the Lord Jesus honored, which is thus alone in sympathy with the Father, divided the hearts of most of us, and made it no occasion or patience to wait for His day!

I would here add, that while I thus treat the alternate parts of this beautiful and affecting prophecy as the language of the saints, the language indeed of every renewed soul that cleaves, as it must, in all desire to the once crucified and soon to be exalted Lord—I would distinctly avow this—that I believe such will be the faith, and such the confession of the children of Israel in that day, when receiving the Spirit of grace and supplication they look on Him whom they pierced and mourn for Him, and find in Him and by Him “a fountain opened for their sin and their uncleanness” (Zechariah 12, 13). Then, but not till then, will the connection between this 53rd and the following chapter of our prophet be really and livingly developed, for then “shall the barren sing, and the woman that travaileth not with child break forth into singing because of the multitude of her children, the enlargement of the place of her tent, and her seed's inheritance of the Gentiles.” For even our own apostle testifies to us, that though blindness in part is now happening to Israel, yet Israel shall all be saved, and the receiving of them shall be to the world as life from the dead (Rom. 11). And we the present election out of the world, only serve as a sample of that mercy by which Israel shall then be saved (Rom. 11:31); and as an occasion for the provoking of them—the covenant people of God—by us who are no people, a foolish alienated nation (see Deut. 32:21; Rom. 10:19; 11:11). But now Christ crucified is for Jew and Gentile; all are equally one in Him. Let us then “behold the Man.” His sorrows have gone too much out of mind; the chastened tone which they should give to the spirits of all the worshipping household of our God is too feebly expressed among us. But with what tenderness will they be traced, with what power, as in the language of Isaiah will they be rehearsed by the awakened tribes of Israel! May the Lord the Spirit quicken our sense of them and also give us to anticipate that joy and fullness of glory into which they shall, ere long, conduct the blessed Sufferer Himself at the head of the great congregation.

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