

Do you remember the question that the Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip the deacon when he jumped up in his chariot and asked him about what he was reading? The eunuch asked Philip this question: "Who is Isaiah the prophet talking about? About himself, or someone else?" Today's passage prompts that same question, and my goal with *this* passage is to give Philip's answer: beginning with *that passage*, Philip told him the good news *about Jesus*. Philip teaches us how to understand Isaiah, because that's exactly what *this* passage is about: the good news about Jesus.

So let's start with with this passage, and make our way to Jesus: Isaiah the Prophet, writing about seven hundred of years before Christ, was prophesying to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. His words refer to himself and his own ministry, but especially, Isaiah is speaking about Jesus. This passage is commonly referred to as the third of four "Servant Songs" in Isaiah, songs sung by a messenger appointed by God to announce the coming of salvation through judgment, introduced in chapter 42 with the words: "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one, in whom my soul delights." If this reminds you of what God speaks from heaven at the baptism of Jesus in Matt. 3, it should: Matthew 12 tells us directly that this servant is Jesus. Isaiah spoke about Jesus.

So the answer to the question, "About whom does the prophet say this? About himself, or someone else?" is yes. Yes, *both*, but *primarily*, Jesus. Jesus is the Servant of God who sings these songs. It's important to see Jesus as primary, but we cannot lose sight of the secondary meaning, either. I'll explain why later, but for now, let's summarize what this passage says about Jesus. Verse 4: Jesus was *taught* in order to *teach*. God both opened His ear to hear, and since He heard and was taught, this gave Him an educated tongue, so that he could bring comfort to the weary.

Verse 5: Jesus would not only be *able* to teach, but would be *faithful* to teach. He would not fail to deliver the message that he was entrusted with. This comes as a direct rebuke to sinful Israel, threatened by Assyria and later taken captive by Babylon because she failed to represent God as a light to the nations. The sin and rebellion in view here is not just generic sin; it is the specific sin of *failing to deliver the message*. Israel was like that, but Isaiah prophesied that *Jesus would not be like that*. Good news!

Verse 6: Jesus would pay a personal price for his faithfulness. The reason Israel kept refusing to be a faithful messenger was because of the cost of delivering the message. It's never been easy to deliver the bad news that all men are sinners who need to repent, and turn their lives over to Jesus. That message is always received as arrogant, prideful, and bigoted. When that message is delivered, people respond by striking the back, plucking the beard, and spitting in your face. They cover you with disgrace and shame. Listen to **Matthew 27:24-31**. This describes verse 6 fulfilled. Jesus willingly bore this shame because he was not rebellious; because he did not turn backward. He did not hide his face from disgrace and spitting.

Verse 7: BUT Jesus knew this: “The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced. Therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.” *He is disgraced, but not disgraced.* The abuse and scorn that has been poured out on Him doesn't even register, it doesn't even count! Hebrews calls this “scorning the shame”. When an injustice is perpetrated, it is not the *victim* who bears the shame, it is the perpetrators, and so Jesus knows that He will not be put to shame.

Verse 8: The confidence of verse 7 results in the challenge of verse 8. Verse 8 is a neat little chiasm, structured abcb'a', and the whole point is that Jesus is so completely confident that he will be vindicated, cleared of all guilt, that he is unafraid of confrontation. “Bring on the trial,” Jesus says, “I already know the verdict.”

Verse 9: Because of this, he concludes with a powerful rhetorical question in verse 9: “Behold, the Lord God helps me; who will declare me guilty?” No fear. No shame. No hesitation to deliver the message. Utter boldness and complete confidence in God. And now we need re-visit the Ethiopian's question again: Who is this about?

Because the Apostle Paul picks up this passage in Romans 8, and when Paul uses it, He uses it about *you*. This passage is about you. This boldness, this freedom from shame and disgrace, is for you! Listen as I read verses 8-9 in the key of Paul, from **Romans 8:31-34**.

How can Paul do this? How can he take a passage about *Isaiah*, about *Jesus*, and apply it to you? How can he claim that you have not been disgraced? How can you know that you will not be put to shame and condemned?

Because every single one of us knows shame. We are all familiar with disgrace. Even when we have not sinned, we still know that crawling in our stomachs, that burning that spreads across our face. Maybe you have been abandoned by your spouse. Maybe you lost your job. Maybe you've been emotionally or physically abused. Maybe you are surrounded by children, but you yourself are barren. Maybe someone in your family has made headlines for doing something terrible or foolish. From simple embarrassment over a little *faux pas* to deep personal shame, we all know what this is like. *You haven't done anything wrong*, and you still feel ashamed when certain topics are mentioned or certain people enter the room.

This is where you need to look to Jesus, disgraced *but not disgraced*. No one has ever endured more shame than Jesus, despite the fact that He never made a single mistake or committed a single sin. He was *covered* with undeserved shame, but he looked beyond his immediate circumstances and saw Himself through God's eyes. Sinful people, who will wear out like moth-eaten old clothes, considered him shame-worthy, but the eternal God who made heaven

and earth had a different perspective. And so Jesus set His face like flint; He determined in His heart to scorn the shame that was placed on Him. This was not a stiff-upper-lip sort of move, this is what you do when you know that God is your helper.

So if you know what it's like to experience disgrace unjustly, or when you feel ashamed even though you've done nothing wrong, then follow Jesus. Look to God who helps you, refusing to look to the right or to the left, to the opinions of others, even the self-doubt in your own heart. Don't look there – set your face like flint and look to God and *His* verdict about you.

But let's take this even deeper: what do we do when it's hard to see how verse 5 can describe us? We are sinners! We've rebelled! We've turned backwards! Of course *Jesus* can have confidence, but how can I? Jesus never did anything shameful. *I did*. I've sinned – I've lied, I've lashed out in anger, I've betrayed those that I love, I've destroyed my marriage, I did something stupid and lost my job, lost a lot of money, lost a friend, lost my reputation. When you honestly assess yourself, you realize that you deserve every bit of shame that you've ever gotten, and if people really knew you, you'd deserve even more. Where is the good news here? *Of course* those who obey God have nothing to fear, *but I'm not one of those people!*

This is where, in the wisdom of God, it is important to remember that while this passage is ultimately about Jesus, it's also about Isaiah. When we can't identify with Jesus' perfection and freedom from shame, we *can* identify with Isaiah. Remember that famous scene from Isaiah 6? Isaiah sees a vision of God, clothed in glory and majesty, surrounded by angels crying out "Holy, Holy, Holy!" Immediately, Isaiah is overcome with shame: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

Isaiah becomes painfully aware of his own shame. But how does God respond? "Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." Isaiah is indeed a sinner, and his shame is well-deserved, but God cleanses away his shame. Remember, in verse 4 of today's chapter, how does Isaiah begin? "The Lord has given me the tongue of those who are taught..." God has done something to Isaiah's mouth to enable him, a sinner, to speak for God. Immediately after his lips are cleansed, God calls out for someone to represent Him to the people, and Isaiah says, "Here I am! Send me!"

This is what it means that God helps you. This is why you will not be disgraced as you walk before God as His representative. Not because you've never done anything shameful, but because God cleanses away your shame. Remember how the Servant was introduced, as one in whom God was well-pleased? We noted that these words were spoken of Jesus at His baptism, His cleansing.

Likewise, your baptism is your cleansing. When God washes you and puts His name on you, this is the fiery coal that touches your lips. You are clean. Your shame is gone. Jesus has washed it away with His blood.

How is this possible? The foundation of this glorious truth, that Jesus has taken away your shame, is the doctrine of *union with Christ*. You have been united to Jesus, and this means that what is true about Jesus is true of you. Listen to **Romans 8:1-4, and 10-11**. You will face disgrace and spitting, just like Jesus, but you will be vindicated *just like Jesus*. They might even kill you, but God will raise you up. Nothing people can say about you will stick; what God says about you will bring you up out of the grave long after those who mock and scorn you have turned to dust.

This means that what defines you is not what other people say about you, not even what your own actions say about you. The most true thing about you is not your sin and shame, but the cleansing you have received from God, and His calling you to represent Him to the world. Like you, Isaiah needed to be cleansed before he could speak for God, but *when* he was cleansed, he *believed* God, and was able to write verses 7-9 with a clean conscience. This means that you, too can claim these verses as your own testimony, as the foundation for an unshakeable confidence. So what if people try to shame you and disgrace you? Their verdict will crumble, and you will still be standing, because God's verdict on you is the same one He spoke over Jesus by raising Him from the dead: not guilty! Not ashamed. Not disgraced.

This means **boldness**: don't hesitate to deliver the message about Jesus because you are worried about your own sin. What sin? The sin that Jesus atoned for? The sin that was washed away? That sin no longer condemns you! It can no longer touch you. Speak boldly for God, and scorn the shame that people try to bring against you.

This means **no shame**. If you continue to live an ashamed life, you are not trusting in God's vindication. So let it go. Set your face like a flint, and refuse to listen to any voice that tries to shame you, even your own heart. Every time shame takes hold of your heart, stop believing lies, repent of your unbelief, and awaken your ear to hear God's voice: **you are clean!**

Finally, this means **comfort**. Not just for you, but for others. Your tongue has been cleansed and taught so that you can bring this same comfort that God has brought to your life to others. You live in a weary world, surrounded by people who are oppressed by sin and shame. *Everyone you meet struggles with shame, and you know how to help!* They may not want your help; they may spit in your face and pull out your beard. What is that to you? You follow Christ! The one who vindicates you is near. Who will contend with you? Behold, the Lord God helps you! No one will ever declare you guilty again, because God has made you clean.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*