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Sermonic Study on Is. 50:4-10

By THEO. LAETSCH

THE GREAT ATONEMENT

On this passage August Pieper in his *Kommentar ueber den zweiten Teil des Propheten Jesaias* makes the following apt remarks. "Vv. 4-9 consists of two subdivisions: vv. 4-6, vv. 7-9; the first speaks of the obedience of the Servant; the second, of the support granted Him by the Lord. This passage reads like a prelude to ch. 53. The obedient and suffering Servant of the Lord here states essentially the same facts concerning Himself that the Prophet states concerning Him in ch. 53. Only the order of presenting the great truths is reversed. In ch. 50 the Servant begins by announcing the fruit of His suffering: the gaining of souls by the preaching of the Word (v. 4 a), while ch. 53 reserves this for the conclusion (vv. 10-12). The central portion in both passages treats the same subject, perfect obedience and patience in suffering (50:4 b-6; 53:1-9). The concluding verses (8, 9) speak of the vindication of the Servant, while this forms the beginning of the later passage (52:13-15). The content of the third subdivision (50:10, 11) is placed at the beginning and the conclusion of ch. 53 (vv. 1, 2 and 10-12). This different arrangement of the subject matter in the two passages (to which, as far as I know, no interpreter has called attention), is, of course, intentional. We are to realize that both passages speak of the same person, supplementing each other in many traits of the person presented. Only the two chapters taken together form a complete picture. Then it becomes the more evident that the two passages do not speak of the people of Israel [or some human prophet] as the Jews and rationalizing modern exegetes assert, but of the Servant of the Lord, our Lord Jesus Christ." (P. 347 f.)

The passage under consideration is part of Isaiah II, ch. 40-66. Isaiah, living in the days of Hezekiah, ca. 700—725 B. C., sees in prophetic vision the return of captive Judah out of the Babylonian Exile, 536 B. C. He speaks to them as if he were one of them and living with them through those great events leading to the restoration of the Jewish commonwealth, the rebuilding of the city and the Temple and the ushering in of the New Testament era with its glorious consummation in the Kingdom of Glory. Written some 200 years

before the beginning of its gradual fulfillment, it was to serve the Jews living before the exile as a call to repentance and faith in the Lord and His promised Redeemer; the believing Jews during the exile as a source of comfort and strength; and all children of God to the end of time as a powerful and efficacious exhortation to unwavering trust in the Lord, their Savior, to grateful adoration of their Redeemer, to willing service of the Mighty One of Jacob. Cp. Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11; 2 Tim. 3:14-17.

The Servant's activity extends through all the various phases of God's kingdom, and all material blessings and physical aids and temporal boons granted by Him to His people are based on the spiritual and eternal salvation, which the Servant effected by His great work of atonement, restoring the disrupted union of God and man and man and God, so that they are "at one" once more after that sad separation caused by man's first disobedience and his continued sin service. It is man that separates himself from God, without any blame attaching to the Lord. That is the first lesson taught in our passage.

"Thus saith the Lord, Where is the bill of your mother's divorcement, whom I have put away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you?" V.1. The Lord addresses His chosen people in exile. They were captives not because of any fault or neglect on God's part. The "divorcement" was not the result of a sudden whim, or caprice, of God, of an unwarranted fit of anger. Nor had He been obliged to sell them to one of His creditors in order to satisfy a claim which could not have been adjusted in any other manner than by selling His children (Ex. 21:7-11; 2 Kings 4:1; Neh. 5:5; Matt. 18:25). There was no such creditor to whom the Lord owed anything. Nor had He without reason grown tired of His spouse. The cause of Judah's exile lies elsewhere! It rests entirely upon their own shoulders. They have sold themselves into exile by their iniquities, their guilts, *baavonotekem*, that huge mass of debts they had piled up by their sins. And your mother (the community regarded as God's spouse, while the individual Jews are the children of God and the Church) is put away for your transgressions, your rebellions, your insubordination, your willful desertion of your Spouse.

"Wherefore, when I came, was there no man? When I called, was there none to answer?" V. 2 a. Throughout the centuries, in the Old as well as in the New Testament, God comes to man in various forms of revelation (Acts 14:17; 17:24-28; Rom. 1:19, 20); yet man treats them with disdain (Rom. 1:21 ff.). And throughout the ages God calls and preaches and sends His messengers and ambassadors, and man will not hear, as the Jews had refused to listen (Is. 65:2; Jer. 7:23-28; Matt. 23:34-37; Rom. 10:16). It is man's guilt, man's iniquities, man's transgressions, that have erected a barrier, a wall of separation, between himself and God. So it was in the days of Isaiah, so it is to this day. It was not for lack of love on God's part that this gulf came into existence and continues to exist. He pleaded and continues to plead, "Be ye reconciled." He is ready to accept all men if only they come to Him.

Nor is it lack of power on God's part that caused the exile of the Jews. His hand is not shortened. He is at all times the almighty God, able to redeem and to deliver, that He was in the days of old when He dried up the sea (Ex. 14:22) and the river (Josh. 3:16; cp. Ex. 7:18) and clothed the heavens with blackness, Ex. 10:21-23. The Lord, who is I Am that I Am, has not changed in the course of the centuries since He delivered His people out of the bondage of Egypt. It is this God who already ch. 49:24-26 had promised to deliver His people out of exile in token of the still greater spiritual deliverance, the actual at-one-ment of God and man, by which all flesh was to know Him as the Lord, our Savior and our Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

Now the great Atoner introduces Himself as the Proclaimer of the atonement which He as the Servant of the Lord has accomplished. This atonement is not to be kept secret, known only to its Author. That would be of little or no value to those of whom He is speaking here, the weary, tired souls. Man finds delight in serving sin until he begins to realize its true nature and its evil consequences. When his conscience upbraids him; when the uninvited and unwelcome guests of sickness, misfortune, shame, poverty, death, enter his home; when, looking for help, he finds none, and for comfort, and there is none, then the Servant with the tongue of the learned knows how to speak words of comfort. This word

is "in season," *lauth*, a word occurring only here. Koenig derives it from a stem denoting to moisten, refresh, revive, strengthen. And His tongue can do that, because, given to Him by the Lord Jehovah, it is that of the learned, the trained, the adept at speaking. He speaks what His heavenly Father has taught Him. Cp. John 7:16-18; 8:26 b, 28, 38, 40; 14:10, 24. Therefore He could say, John 6:63. Peter confesses, John 6:68. Those that heard Him praised Him (Luke 4:15; John 7:46) and were astonished (Luke 4:22; John 7:15). What wisdom, strength, comfort, in His last discourse with His disciples! Who can fathom the depths of His sacerdotal prayer (John 17)? of the seven words spoken on the Cross? What authority revealed in His Sermon on the Mount! What comfort and power in such brief words as Luke 4:35; 5:13, 20; 7:13, 14, 48, 50; 8:48, 50, 54. Here spoke the Mighty Atoner, uniting man and God in spite of sin and sickness and death and grave! The Atoner with the tongue of the learned!

"He wakeneth morning by morning; He wakeneth Mine ear to hear as the learned. The Lord God hath opened Mine ear." Vv. 4 b, 5 a. As the Servant is an adept at speaking, so He is equally adept at hearing, obeying the Lord. The Lord wakeneth, stirs up, rouses, the ear of His Servant; makes Him eager to listen, to hear what the Lord has to tell Him. The Lord "opens" the ear of His Servant, so that there is no closing of the ear against a single item of God's Word, no shutting out of an iota of God's will. We have here in language understandable to human minds the great mystery of the communication of the Father with His incarnate Son. Here was that Child, born of a virgin, who was Immanuel (Is. 7:14), the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father (Is. 9:6). Yet this Mighty God had in Mary's womb taken on a true human nature; and being found in fashion as a man, He could confess as we confess: "I believe that God has made me . . . has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses." Through the means of the human senses, the human ears of this Servant, the Everlasting God communicated His will to His incarnate Son. And this Servant, whose human nature was never for a moment severed from His divine person, had not only a human tongue which was trained to perfection by the Lord. He had also human ears which, being the ears of the incarnate Son, were

trained to perfection by the Almighty Father, so that this Servant was indeed the Master of Obedience. His obedience was in the manner of a man who is the Lord, an obedience such as only the God-Man can render, an obedience of divine perfection, satisfying every demand of God. Compare His ever-repeated statements that He came not to do His will, but the will of Him that sent Him (Luke 2:46; John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 7:16; 8:28, 29; 9:4; etc.). This is the obedience which the Servant of the Lord as the Great Atoner has placed at the disposal of every human being, to atone for man's disobedience.

"I was not rebellious neither turned away back," v. 5 b. This is the actual manifestation of His obedience, to which the Lord stirred, awakened, opened, the ear of His Servant. Rebellion was the sin whereby angels lost their first estate (Jude 6). Rebellion was the sin of our first parents. And every sin is rebellion, turning away from God and His will. Here is a man, flesh of our flesh, who was never rebellious, who never departed in the least from the will of God, nor from the way which according to the will of God He was to walk.

This way, as He Himself informs us (Matt. 3:15), included the fulfillment of all the laws of God, not only the moral precepts given to all mankind, but also those special laws — ceremonial, ritual, civic — which were given in particular to that people of which he was a member. To this will of God He willingly subjected Himself (Gal. 4:4); was circumcised, presented to the Lord (Luke 2:21-27, 39); fulfilled all righteousness (Matt. 3:15; 5:17, 18). And His was a perfect obedience (John 8:46; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:22; 1 John 3:5; Matt. 3:17). This is the perfect obedience, the flawless righteousness which the Servant of the Lord as the Great Atoner offers freely to all mankind in Word and Sacrament.

"I gave My back to the smiters and My cheeks to them that plucked off the hair; I hid not My face from shame and spitting." V. 6. Throughout His life the enemies of the Servant heaped shame, insults, persecutions upon Him (Matt. 2:13; Luke 4:28, 29; Matt. 11:19; 12:2, 14, 24; 16:1 ff.; 21:22; John 5:18; 7:12, 25, 32, 47 ff.; 8:48, 59; 10:31, 39; 11:46-53, 57). Yet as we read the words of the Prophet there arises before us particularly the picture painted by the four Evangelists in their story of the great Passion of the suffering

Servant and already in the Old Testament by the Evangelist among the Prophets in Is. 53. "Plucked off the hair." The Jews wore long beards, of which they were very proud. To catch one by the beard and pull his hair was as shameful a treatment as it was painful. And the Servant endured this abuse. He endured smittings, and even spittings, the worst insult that can be offered to any man. The obedient Servant hid not His face from the most shameful and atrocious maltreatments the mind of man could invent. He was indeed despised and rejected of men (Is. 53:3). So He bore our griefs (Is. 53:4, 5). As the obedient Servant He fully satisfied the punitive justice of God by bearing the penalty for man's sin, by suffering in His own person the wrath of God burning to the lowest hell. Thereby He removed also this obstacle to the complete at-one-ment of God and man. Here we have the Great Atoner who offers to all men freedom from divine punishment.

In vv. 7-9 the Servant expresses His confident trust that the Lord Jehovah will help Him so that no shame, be it ever so bitter, no accusation, be it ever so shameful; no enemy, be he ever so mighty and hateful, shall keep Him from doing His full duty (v. 7), nor prevent His acknowledgment as a faithful Servant by the Judge of all the world (vv. 8, 9).

"For the Lord will help Me; therefore shall I not be confounded; therefore have I set My face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed." V. 7. "For," rather "and." The unchanging Lord, who has appointed Me to be His Servant, to make atonement for the sins of the world by bearing them and all their penalties for mankind, He as the faithful God will help Me so that I will not permit the shame heaped upon Me to overcome Me, to make Me shirk My duty. In this firm confidence He set His face like a flint in unwavering determination to do the work given Him to do. Compare Luke 9:51; John 11:7-10; Matt. 16:21-23; 17:22, 23; 26:2; Luke 22:15, 16; Matt. 26:39, 42; John 18:11. Even in those dark hours when He hung on the Cross, an outcast from His people, forsaken of God, in the clutches of Satan and his hosts, even then this bitter shame did not overwhelm Him, even then He did not turn from the path of His duty! He clings to God in incomprehensible obedience, calls Him of whom He was forsaken *My God! My God*. I will not let Thee go! I know

that I shall not be put to shame! Instead of being ashamed of His sufferings and shame, instead of permitting them to lead Him astray, these very shames became the objects of His glory (Matt. 16:22, 23; John 10:15; 12:32; 13:31, 32), even after His resurrection (John 20:20, 27). To John at Patmos he says, Rev. 1:18 a; and repeats this in His message to the church in Smyrna (2:8), He stands in the midst of the throne, the four beasts, and the elders as "a Lamb as it had been slain" (5:6) and receives gladly the hymns of praise raised by the ten thousand times ten thousand in honor of the Lamb that was slain (5:12). On Judgment Day His enemies will see Him whom they had pierced (1:7). No! He did not suffer shame to overwhelm Him, for by the suffering of this shame He, the Servant of the Lord, became the Atoner of mankind.

"He is near that justifieth Me. Who will contend with Me? Let us stand together; who is Mine adversary? Let him come near to Me. Behold, the Lord God will help Me! Who is he that shall condemn Me? Lo, they all shall wax old as a garment; the moth shall eat them up." Vv. 8, 9. The Servant is firmly convinced that the Lord, the supreme Judge, from whose court there is no appeal to any higher tribunal, will justify Him, declare Him righteous in spite of all accusations raised against Him and all abuse and shame heaped upon Him. He challenges His enemies that contend with Him, all His adversaries, be they men or devils, the forces of hell, to stand together with Him before the throne of the righteous Judge. He knows that the Lord Jehovah will help Him, will come to His rescue, by declaring Him His faithful Servant and publicly declaring Him the Atoner of the world. Cp. Rom. 1:3-5; 4:24, 25; 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Eph. 1:20-23; Phil. 2:9-11. This Servant, unashamed of His sufferings and shame, is our Atoner, acknowledged as such by the supreme Judge, the Lord Jehovah! All His "adversaries," literally, "lords of My judgments," claiming the right to investigate, judge, condemn Him, shall wax old like a garment, the moth shall eat them up. Before the penetrating eyes of the omniscient Judge all the arguments and accusations and calumnies raised against His Servant in their efforts to condemn Him, literally, "to establish Him as wicked," an ungodly liar and deceiver, will appear in their true nature. Before the Lord these charges

will fall to pieces like a worn-out, moth-eaten garment. And His opponents will share the fate of their accusations: destruction, condemnation, death!

St. Paul teaches us to apply these confident words of the Atoner to ourselves as believing servants of the Lord God (Rom. 8: 31-39). That is the blessed fruit for us of the glorious work of our great Atoner, who now, through His Prophet, encourages us to make this reconciled Lord the God in whom we trust.

"Who is among you that feareth the Lord?" V. 10. "The fear of God is generated by the consciousness of one's guilt and impotence before the holiness and omnipotence of God. But the motive of this fear is changed in him whom Scripture characterizes as a God-fearing man. Abraham is acknowledged by the Lord as a God-fearing man because through his faith in God's promises he had been willing to sacrifice what was to him dearer than all the earth, since he loved God and His Word above all things. While the wicked trembles before God because of his wickedness (Ps. 14:1-5), the God-fearing man is upright and eschews evil (Job 1:1, 8), because his is that reverential awe before the Lord of Lords, who has granted to him who has merited damnation His grace and has accepted him as His child and heir. How can he dishonor this God, who has become to him his One and his All? (cp. Gen. 39:9)" (Pieper, *Jesaias II*, p. 354 f.).

"Among you" = not the enemies (v. 9), but the children of Mother Zion (v. 1), who are obedient to the voice of the Servant, the Atoner, acknowledge Him as the only Savior He proclaims Himself to be, apply the justifying and sanctifying Gospel of atonement, the living Word (John 6: 63; 1 Pet. 1: 23), to themselves; accept, and rejoice in, the fact that God was in Christ, the Atoner, reconciling the world unto Himself (2 Cor. 5: 18-21).

"Obeyeth," literally, "heareth," connects this verse with v. 4, to speak a word of comfort, etc. The Word of the Atoner is the means whereby the blessed fruit of His atoning work is offered and appropriated to man.

"That walketh in darkness . . . let him trust in the name of the Lord and stay upon his God." When at times life's burden seems unbearable, the journey wearisome, when darkness encompasses him and no star of hope is seen, then let

the God-fearing believer turn his eyes toward Calvary's Cross, where his Atoner hung in densest darkness, forsaken of God, in order that no one need ever be again forsaken of his Creator. There hangs his Atoner, through whom God is at one with him, is reconciled to him, has become his loving Father. Let him trust in the name of the Lord, Jehovah, the Covenant God, who has revealed His name, His essence and being, in His Son Jesus Christ as the Redeemer and Savior of all mankind. He is the Covenant God, who entered into covenant relations with Israel in the Old Testament; who in the New Testament establishes His covenant with the children of men in Word and Sacrament; who accepts all believers as His children, because in Baptism they have put on Christ, their Atoner (Gal. 3:26, 27; Is. 61:10). This Covenant Lord is "his God," who has given Himself to His believing child, who with all His grace and all His power and all His wisdom has put Himself at the service of the God-fearing man. This Lord and God is the believer's rod and staff, his "stay" that is firm and reliable, that will never break, that will safely lead him through all the storms and tempests of life and through all the breakers of death and corruption to the shores of the heavenly Canaan. In the strength of our Atoner we follow Him in the firm conviction that

Here through shame and wrong,
There the joyous song;
Here in hoping and confessing,
There in seeing and possessing,
For the glorious crown
Follows disreknown.

My Atoner, my strong Deliverer, be Thou still my Strength and Shield. Songs of praises I will ever give to Thee.

This text with its rich content of Gospel truth very well adapts itself to a series of Lenten sermons. Under the general heading *The Lord's Servant Our Great Atoner* bring out (1) The need of atonement (vv. 1, 2); (2) The Servant's equipment (v. 4); (3) His obedience (v. 5); (4) His suffering (v. 6); (5) His determination (v. 7); (6) His confident assurance. In every sermon stress Him as our Savior and our Example. On Good Friday: *Standing Under the Cross, Let Us Obey His Voice!* (1) Let us recognize our need of atonement. (2) Let us trust in His name. (3) Let us fear the Lord and follow His Servant's example.