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Foreword to the First Edition

That the rejection of our Lord, the Christ of God, by men, is not to be understood as a mere historical fact, but rather as a universal truth; that mere men, the flesh, must always reject the Christ of the scriptures; that, therefore, as we contemplate the cross of the Savior, we have nothing to boast, but must, in deep humiliation, confess our iniquity, and, putting away our own righteousness, trust in his righteousness only, and that, too, only through the power of God’s sovereign grace,—this has all the emphasis in the Lenten meditations that are hereby presented to the reader. The cross of Christ leaves no room for boast, yet, for those that boast in it, it is the sure ground of their salvation.

—The Author
Higher than the heavens, deep as hell, is the mystery of the suffering and death of our Savior. For higher than the highest heavens is the mercy of God of which it is the revelation; and deep as hell is his holy wrath and justice against sin that by this suffering is fully satisfied. If you could imagine all the suffering of mankind compressed into one awful agony, you could not fathom or comprehend the passion of our Lord that reached its climax on the accursed tree, and finally pressed from his dying lips the agonizing cry: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Who could endure suffering as he, the Son of God in human flesh, could endure? Who could taste the pains of hell as he, very God and very man, could taste them? Who could feel the anguish of being forsaken of God as he, the Servant of Jehovah, could feel it? To whom could the wages of sin be more bitter than to him, who knew no sin, but was made sin for us? And who could feel more deeply and keenly the reproach of men than he, who was the sinless one in the midst of a world of darkness and iniquity? Indeed, whenever we contemplate the passion and death of the suffering Servant of the Lord, we realize that here there are mysterious depths that we can never fathom. We can only stand amazed and worship.

Besides, the passion of our Lord is as many-sided as human nature and human life. For he came in the likeness of sinful flesh, he assumed the flesh and blood of the children, in order that, in that flesh, and that, too, in the whole human nature, he might bear the wrath of God against sin. He suffered in body and soul, in mind and spirit, in every fiber of his being. Is
there any pain anywhere that he did not endure? Is there ever any sorrow he
did not bear? Is there any agony of soul or body with which he was not
acquainted? Where, after he suffered and died, shall we ever tread a path of
suffering which he has not trod before, or discover a depth of agony in
which we do not find his footsteps? He suffered the wrath of God and the
hatred of men. He suffered hell and damnation, reproach and shame,
anguish of soul and spirit. He is eminently the Man of Sorrows!

Even for this reason it is expedient, as we would reverently contemplate
the suffering of our Savior, that we do not arbitrarily move about at random,
but take a certain definite viewpoint, and from that point of view consider a
certain aspect of the passion of our Lord. And in the following chapters, we
wish to study this suffering of Christ from the viewpoint of his being
rejected of men.

Our theme is taken from the fifty-third chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah,
a chapter of which it has been said that it might have been written in the
shadow of Golgotha, as in a sense it was. In the third verse we read: “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.” When, several centuries later, the Ethiopian eunuch read this
section of Isaiah’s prophecy, he asked of Philip: “Of whom speaketh the
prophet this? of himself or of some other man?” (Acts 8:34). And from the
standpoint of the eunuch, who could not read this prophecy in the clearer
light of the New Testament, as we are accustomed to do, the question was a
perfectly natural one. For the prophet is speaking of the Servant of the Lord.
And this servant of Jehovah is, indeed, the Christ, but only in the ultimate
and central sense of the word. The term, however, has different, though
closely related connotations. In the broadest sense it is used to denote the
nation of Israel, God’s covenant people, delivered out of the bondage of
Egypt to be God’s servant in the midst of the nations. Seeing, however, that
not all were Israel that were of Israel, and that there always was a large carnal
element among the people of God, the term servant of Jehovah is also used
to denote the true spiritual Israel, the remnant according to the election of
grace. In a still more limited sense, the term refers to the prophet himself. Yet, Israel could be called the Lord's servant only through and for the sake of Christ, the holy seed that was still in their loins. He is the Servant of the Lord par excellence. And, therefore, in the ultimate sense the term refers to him alone. This is emphatically true of the fifty-third chapter of this prophecy, which speaks almost directly of the suffering Savior. He is the arm of the Lord spoken of in the first verse. Of him the prophet had said that he grew up as a tender plant, as a root out of a dry ground; and that he had no form or comeliness, and no beauty that we should desire him. He is the despised and rejected one, before whom we hide our faces.

Consider what this means. He is despised. O, this does not mean that he belongs to those lowly and simple men that occupy a forgotten place in society, that live without being noticed, and die without being missed, to whom no one pays any attention. On the contrary, it presupposes that Christ came into contact with men, and that they expressed an opinion about him, and treated him accordingly. In the days of his flesh the Savior was well known, even as he is universally known in the world of today. Who did not know Jesus of Nazareth? Throughout the land his fame was spread abroad. His name was on the lips of high and low, of rich and poor, of the common people and of those that sat in high places. But he was despised of men. He was considered a worthless fellow, a good for nothing, who was not fit to live in decent and civilized society. No one would offer him a place in the world, or furnish him with a recommendation. This contempt of men for him was so profound, so the prophet declares, that men hid their faces from him. In modern parlance this means that, as they saw him, they would pull up their noses in utter contempt.

And he was rejected. This, too, implies that he was well known. It even presupposes that he appeared with a certain claim. He assumed a certain position. He represented a cause. He taught a certain doctrine. But he was rejected. He could find no supporters for his cause. No one took his side. Men forsook him. They left him alone. They condemned his cause, and left him alone. The prophet says that he was rejected of men. The emphasis of
this word probably falls on men that were outstanding among the people. Men of position and of authority, the leaders of the people, those that were supposed to know what they were about, princes, kings, governors, theologians, scribes and Pharisees, men that were honored for their wisdom and discretion, their piety and religion—they rejected him. Nevertheless, although there may be a special reference to men of eminent position and authority in this term, it refers, in general, to all men. The leaders took the initiative, but the people followed, and all rejected him. And the prophet even seems to include himself and his own people, for he repeats: “he was despised;” and then adds: “and we esteemed him not” (Isa. 53:3). O, it was not only the rabble of men, those that were of no account, that despised and rejected this Servant of the Lord, but men, mere men as they are found everywhere in this world, men, exactly in their capacity and character as men that filled him with contempt, and hid their faces from him.

Let us make no mistake about this: men rejected him! Let us not read this prophecy of Isaiah as a mere prediction of an event that was realized some eight hundred years later when wicked Jews and ungodly heathen nailed Jesus of Nazareth to the accursed tree, but that does not necessarily concern us, modern men, the church, and the world of the twentieth century. For then we miss the point. Then we look upon this prophecy as outsiders, as students of theology, or of ethics. Then we probably make an attempt to solve the problem how, more than nineteen centuries ago, men could ever despise and reject such a wonderful man as Jesus, and from the heights of our conceit we look down on the men that crucified him, and we feel rather secure in our self-righteous condemnation of them. Then we are quite ready to enjoy an evening of mingled aesthetic and religious emotions aroused by the rendering of Handel’s Messiah, and to be rather pleased with our own, rather pleasant, feeling of deeply pious sympathy stirred in our soul when this Man of Sorrows that is acquainted with grief is bewailed in music and song. O, what a pleasant experience it is for us to look down upon Golgotha from the heights of our modern self-righteousness and religiousness! What a self-flattering emotion it is to pity this man of sorrows, and to feel that if
Jesus had only walked our streets, and presented his cause to us, we would never have rejected him, and nailed him to the accursed tree!

He was rejected by men! Men of all classes, and of all ages, are included in this. Respectable men and men of disreputable character, honorable men and men in dishonor, religious men and men without religion, men of high moral standards and immoral men, professors of theology and ethics and the common people, educated and uneducated men, kings, governors, theologians, scribes, Pharisees, business men, fishermen, soldiers,—all rejected him! Even one of his own intimate followers betrayed him and sold him for thirty pieces of silver, another swore and cursed himself rather than have anything to do with him, and they all were offended in him and forsook him! O, how men hated him! How deeply they despised him! How utterly they rejected him! They called him a liar and deceiver, a blasphemer and an ally of Beelzebub, a glutton and winebibber, a companion of publicans and sinners! They contradicted him, cast him out of their synagogues, buffeted him, spit upon him, taunted and mocked him, and filled him with reproach, scourged him and pressed a crown of thorns upon his brow, nailed him to the cross and set him up between two malefactors. And even then they still railed on him, and poured the vials of their inexhaustible fury and contempt upon him!

O, do you not discern the tremendous significance of this? Do you not understand that you cannot read this word of God as an outsider, as a mere spectator, as an interested philosopher or theologian? Do you not see that this prophecy of Isaiah must not be understood as the mere prediction of an event that once took place during the first few decades of our era, and that could never occur again, but rather as the statement of a general truth and of a situation that must needs always arise wherever and whenever men come into contact with this Servant of Jehovah? Men despised him! Mere men rejected him! It made absolutely no difference by what other name they were called, whether they were of Israel or of the heathen, of the church or of the world, whether, besides being men, they were kings or priests or common people, religious or irreligious, decent citizens or criminals, as men they
surely rejected him, and must have nothing of the cause he advocated! Men, as they are found always and everywhere in this world, rejected him. What happened in the first decades of our era, when Jesus of Nazareth walked among men, is simply an outstanding example of what always happens, and must needs occur, wherever this same Jesus presents himself and his cause to mere men. You and I, as mere men, reject him. And however piously our modern world and our modern church may babble about the wonderful Christ, always it rejects the servant of Jehovah, and crucifies him afresh! He is ousted from our universities, scourged in our seminaries, robed in mock-purple on our pulpits, railed at by the rabble, cursed in our streets, crucified by the mighty powers of this world!

And why do men reject him? The answer to this question must be found in the fact that he is the Man of Sorrows. Do not misunderstand this. Mere men do not despise and reject their suffering fellows. Even though they are capable of inflicting the most cruel tortures upon one another, under favorable conditions they can also sympathize with one another’s suffering. But Christ was not merely a man who, like others, was acquainted with suffering: He was the man of sorrows. Sorrows belong to him. They are inseparable from him. They are an essential part of him. Suffering and death belonged to his calling, to his cause, to the work he had to do. He came into the world with the purpose in his heart to suffer and to die. For he came for sin. The sins of his own he freely took upon himself. The burden of their guilt he took upon his mighty shoulders. And with the sin of the world upon him, the Lamb of God walked the way of the righteousness of God. He represented God’s cause against man’s sin. He took the side of God’s righteousness against the self-righteousness of man. And for the sin of his own, and to satisfy the justice of God, he bore all the divine wrath, freely suffered all the agonies of hell, and thus brought the perfect sacrifice of atonement and reconciliation. And thus he is the Man of Sorrows. And as the Man of Sorrows he is and claims to be the arm of the Lord unto salvation. He condemns all the righteousness of man, all his goodness, all his wisdom, all his self-willed religiousness and piety. Always he stands for the
righteousness of God over against the unfruitful works of darkness. He never compromised. Consistently he proclaimed that there is no hope in man's work, and that there is no way out except through his own death and sacrifice on the cross. All the pride of man he lays low, in order to exalt the righteousness of God as the sole way of salvation.

That is the reason why men reject him. For men are enemies of God and his righteousness. They love the darkness rather than the light. Hating the righteousness of God, they seek their own righteousness. They seek salvation through the might and power, the wisdom and ingenuity of man. Hence, they hate the Man of Sorrows. He has no place in the world of men. The cross is foolishness to them. And so, it is inevitable that wherever and whenever this Servant of the Lord, this Man of Sorrows, appears in the world of mere men, he is despised and rejected. To this there is not a single exception. Mere men always reject the Christ.

What then? Must this be the last word? If all men reject him, must not the very purpose of his coming necessarily be frustrated? God forbid! For we must apply also here that what is impossible with men, is possible with God. The wonder of grace changes mere men, carnal men, into spiritual children of God, that have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts that yearn after the living God. With those eyes they behold him, not as an object of contempt, nor as someone whom it is but proper to pity, but as the Lamb of God that taketh away their sin. With those ears they hear his voice as the voice of the Good Shepherd that laid down his life for the sheep. With those hearts they yearn after him, hungering and thirsting for the righteousness of God. They turn to the cross of the Man of Sorrows, not to weep over him and feel pious in doing so, but to beat their breasts in shame and humiliation because of their sins; and to find the way out of sin and death into the fellowship of his righteousness and glorious resurrection. And thus, they that are saved by grace, find in him that is rejected of men the forgiveness of sins, peace with God, and life from the dead!

Yet, he is rejected of men. And they who by the grace of God come to him, must needs bear his reproach in the midst of this present world. For
they confess his name, love his precepts, keep his commandments, walk as children of light, and condemn the world in its unfruitful works of darkness. They represent his cause, the cause of the Son of God, in the world. And this means that they must bear his reproach. As men rejected him, so they will reject them; as they despised him, so they will despise them. But in all this they look forward to the final victory. For if we suffer with him, we shall also be glorified together! The rejected of men is the risen Lord!