

The Garbage Man

By David F. Sims

The garbage man is truly an indispensable member of our society. In my neighborhood, he comes every Monday morning to take away my garbage. Whether I have a lot of garbage or a little, he takes it away. No matter how smelly and disgusting my garbage is, he takes it away. He didn't create the garbage, but he takes it away, putting it into his truck and driving off with it, relieving me of it. Why does he do it? Because it is his job.

John the Baptist said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Jesus is the world's garbage man. He takes away the garbage of our sin. No matter how bad it is, He takes it away. He didn't create the sin, but He takes it away, and we are glad to be rid of it. Why does He do it? Because that is His job. Foretelling His death, Jesus said, "for this purpose I came to this hour" (John 12:27). He is the only one who could have done it, and that is why He is my Savior.

I can only imagine what it must have been like before there was such a thing as the garbage man. People had to deal with their own garbage, or have slaves deal with it. They burned it, buried it, threw it in the water, or just left it to rot. Around 3000 BC, the city of Knossos (on the island of Crete) created the first known landfill when they dug pits for their waste. In 500 BC, Athens enacted a law requiring garbage to be disposed at least 1 mile from the city. But it took the Black Plague (AD 1350), which killed 25 million people in 5 years, to motivate governments to establish an official garbage disposal program. The first garbage men in Britain were called "rakers." They raked up the garbage into carts and hauled it away. In the early 1900s in America, we relied primarily on "piggeries" to dispose of waste. 75 pigs could eat 2000 pounds of garbage in day, so everything edible was fed to the pigs (makes you think about the prodigal son, doesn't it?), and the rest was buried, burned, or cast into a body of water.

Why do we look down on the garbage man? Is it because his work is a dirty job? Is it because his pay is low, and reflects his socioeconomic status? Is it because he spends his day surrounded by garbage? Is it because we are ashamed of our own garbage, and we associate it with him since he takes it away?

Likewise, the Jews didn't appreciate Jesus when He came. Isaiah 53 tells the story of the suffering Savior who takes away our sins.

Verse 1. "Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" The idea of someone else coming to take my garbage away is a wonderful one. If you grew up out in the country, without the service of a garbage man, and then moved to the city, you might find it quite unbelievable that someone else will come down your street to take it away, freeing you from the burden of burning, burying, composting, or otherwise dealing with the garbage yourself. Likewise, the Jews did not believe that Jesus was Who He claimed to be, or that He could do what He claimed to do. Even today people won't believe the Gospel of Jesus. And even among those who claim to believe in Jesus, there are some who still try to save themselves by their works, trying to take out their own garbage.

Verse 2. "He has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him." I can't say that I've ever seen a garbage man who looked attractive; he may clean up well enough, but when he is taking away the garbage, he is just as dirty as the garbage itself, from our perspective. Jesus must have been an average-looking Jew...not too tall, not too short, not too fat or thin, neither handsome nor misshapen...just ordinary enough that no one would really be attracted to him on a physical level. His value, however, is not based on what He looked like, but in the service He provides of taking away our sin.

Verse 3. "He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; And like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him." We don't view the garbage man as the pinnacle of success in society; we put him a bit further down on that list. I can understand why he feels such sorrow in the job he does...people look down on him, even though he provides an important and indispensable service. Likewise, the Jews rejected Jesus...even his closest disciples forsook him when He was arrested.

Verse 4. "Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." Just as the garbage man carries away our garbage which grieves us when it piles up, so also the Savior carried away the sins that grieve us. We may experience sorrow and regret over our sins, but that sorrow and regret is taken away when those sins are forgiven. The Jews who called out for His crucifixion couldn't see that. What they saw was a man whom they perceived to be a sinner, whom they perceived to be smitten by God Himself, and suffering because He deserved it. How wrong they were!

Verse 5. "But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed." The garbage man wears gloves, long sleeves, long pants, steel-toed boots, and perhaps other gear to protect himself from injury. He doesn't want to get cut on the glass in our garbage. He doesn't want his feet crushed by something heavy in our garbage. The garbage man values his own life and wants to go home without injury. But our Savior differed from the garbage man in this respect, for our Savior came not just to take away the sin, but to provide actual forgiveness through His blood. The blood is what forgives, and the blood had to be poured out for the sins of the world. The only way to get the blood out of that body was to pierce the body, crush it, chasten it, and scourge it. From His wounds flowed the life-giving, soul-cleansing blood of the Lamb.

Verse 6. "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him." We all generate garbage, but fortunately the local city government has appointed a garbage man to take the garbage away. Likewise, we all sin, but God has appointed a Savior to take our sin away. Just as the garbage falls on the garbage man to take away, so also our sin fell on Jesus to take away. Note, however, that the garbage man was not guilty of creating the garbage, and did not become guilty of creating the garbage when he took it upon himself to carry away; likewise, Jesus did not create our sin, and did not become guilty of our sin when He took it upon Himself to bear away.

Verse 7. "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth." In today's job market, it can be really hard to find a job. When you are in the dire position that any job is better than unemployment, you don't complain too much about the smell, or the hours, or the low pay. When Jesus was arrested and tried and tortured, He did not resist, for at least a couple of reasons. He knew that He had come to do this very job, to fulfill this very purpose; complaining and resisting wouldn't have gotten Him out of it, and so He prayed, "not My will, but Thy will be done." He gave Himself freely, willing, because He loved us, and because He knew that His suffering and death would result in our benefit.

Verse 8. "By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due?" The garbage man doesn't create the garbage that I set out by the curb. It is not his fault the garbage exists. If anyone should have to deal with my garbage, it is me. It should be my burden to bear, and perhaps I even deserve punishment for polluting God's green earth with my garbage. As for Jesus, He endured mock trials, false accusations, blasphemy, beatings, insults, and a most cruel death, because He knew that His sacrificial death would take away the garbage of my sin.

Verse 9. "His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death, because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth." I don't know if the garbage man has a retirement plan, or a life insurance policy, or arrangements for his funeral. Maybe, as a city employee, he does have some benefits; or in the case of corporate garbage disposal companies, maybe he has some perks. But our Savior, upon whom men looked with contempt as if He was actually a criminal, was crucified between two criminals, and His body would have otherwise been cast out alongside those two criminals rather than being honored with a funeral, if the Jews and Romans had their way. But those who loved Him buried His body in the tomb of a friend, for they knew that He was actually innocent, and did not deserve either death or a dishonorable burial.

Verse 10. "But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand." Our government recognizes the importance of garbage disposal. It is necessary for sanitation, health, odor control, pest control, and for the pleasant appearance of the neighborhood. And so our cities appoint the garbage man to deal with our garbage, and we all rejoice that the garbage is taken away. Yes, the government is pleased to have a garbage man in service. Some read this passage and think that God must have delighted in torturing Jesus. Nothing could be further from the truth! Jesus was God's only begotten Son, and God loved Him! But God also loved all of us, and He loved us enough to sacrifice His Son in order to give us eternal life (John 3:16). God was pleased by Jesus' willing self-sacrifice as a guilt offering, God was pleased by Jesus' obedience, God was pleased by the sinless blood that is able to forgive sins, and God was pleased to have sins taken away by the sin-bearer, the garbage man, the Savior. And because God was pleased with Jesus, God did not abandon His soul to Hades or allow His body to undergo decay, but preserved His soul in Paradise and raised Him up again on the third day, so that the risen Savior could see His offspring: Saints composing a kingdom purchased with His blood!

Verse 11. "As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities." From time to time, the city may send out inspectors to see if the garbage man is doing his job effectively. If he is, the inspector is satisfied. God looked upon the suffering and death of Jesus and was satisfied in the adequacy of His sacrifice. Unlike the sacrifices of the Law of Moses, which had to be repeated year after year, Jesus' sacrifice was offered once and for all, for all time. The result is that by His blood we are justified (Rom. 3:24-26; 5:9), which means we are regarded as innocent, set free from guilt, and made righteous in God's sight, for Jesus the sin-bearer has taken our iniquity away.

Verse 12. "Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors." A garbage man who does his job well should be congratulated, thanked, and rewarded for a job well done. He deserves our praise and our appreciation. We ought to regard the garbage man more highly than we do. What would we do without him, without the service he provides? We would all be buried in garbage! Since Jesus filled His role of sin-bearer perfectly and endured horrid treatment through it all, God raised Him up and bestowed upon Him the name that is above every name, and gave Him all authority in heaven and on earth. We too should appreciate Him more for what He did, for the service He provided, for the gift of eternal life that He offers to all through His grace.

Let us thank God continually for providing a garbage man to take away our sin, the sin-bearer who gave His life and His blood to wash away our sins!