

The Messiah

The Suffering Servant; the vital part the Jews missed

The Jews so looked forward to the Messiah's arrival, but when he arrived they didn't recognize him.

How on earth could that be? Their Scriptures were loaded with detailed information about the Messiah, starting with hints in the Garden of Eden, then the amazing promise to Abraham, a prophecy given to Moses, a sacrificial system and holy days tuned to what the Messiah was for, and all kinds of predictions and signs to watch for from a long line of Spirit-inspired prophets. The Scriptures also gave names and titles identifying the Messiah, a Davidic line of kings leading directly to the Messiah, and all sorts of pointers as to what the Messiah would look like when he came, what he would do, and how he would act.

So how could so many Jews have missed identifying Jesus as the Messiah? Some of them HOPED he was the Messiah, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, who really thought Jesus was "the one who was going to redeem Israel," **Luke 24:21**, but their hope went out the window when Jesus was killed. The Messiah was supposed to be a conquering hero killing off the pagans, but instead the pagans had killed him. It had all turned into a horrible nightmare.

So Jesus met them on their sad shuffle to Emmaus and opened their eyes to the part of Scripture they'd missed (verses 31-32), that "the Christ (would) have to **suffer** these things and then enter his glory," **verse 26**. It was there in the Old Testament all along so, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself," **verse 27**, with **the focus on his suffering**, because that's the bit they'd missed. And when they grasped that, that's when their hearts burned within them (verse 32).

A few days later, when the two disciples are relating all this to the others, Jesus suddenly appears among them (verse 36-37). They're all "startled and frightened" that he's alive after all, so Jesus gently reminds them in **verse 44** that "This" - his suffering and death - "is what I told you (would happen) **while** I was still with you." So THEY TOO had missed the vital detail about his suffering. Again, then, he opened their minds to "understand the Scriptures" (verse 45).

But look where he put the focus: It was on the part where it “is written: ‘**The Christ will suffer** and rise from the dead on the third day,’ **verse 46**. There’s no direct quote of that statement in the Old Testament, but in context Jesus is **summarizing** “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (verse 44), and “what was said in ALL the Scriptures concerning himself” (verse 27). And the MAIN FOCUS of all that Scripture - boiled down to its essential ingredient as far as Jesus was concerned - was his suffering.

Take into account, though, that when Jesus talks about his suffering it’s **to his fellow Jews** in the first century, and **how his suffering related TO THEM**. Jesus wasn’t talking to Christians, he was talking to Jews, the one group of people on earth who were LOOKING for him to rescue them. THEY were the ones that Jesus had come to; they were the ones to whom the Scriptures and the knowledge of salvation had been given; they were the ones expecting the Messiah, and whose hopes had been dashed. It’s to them, then, that Jesus gives the explanation for his suffering from the Old Testament, because it was in the context of THEIR lives, their history, their hopes, and their future that the meaning of his suffering would become clear.

John the Baptist confirmed that when he announced, “the reason I came baptizing with water was that **he (Jesus) might be revealed to ISRAEL**,” **John 1:31**. “To ISRAEL,” take note, not to the whole world. Jesus’ arrival was meant for Israel. So was his suffering. It’s in the context and history of ISRAEL, therefore, that we look for an explanation of Jesus’ suffering.

And the time in Israel’s history **where John the Baptist began** was “the words of **Isaiah** the prophet, ‘I am the voice of one calling in the desert, Make straight the way for the Lord,’” **John 1:23**. It was a quote straight out of **Isaiah 40:3**, and to any Jew listening it was like a bell ringing, echoing a call from the distant past, that this was it, the prophecies of old were about to happen, so hurry home and read Isaiah 40, because that was the first clue, starting in verse 2.

In **verse 2** Isaiah had written: “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” The **immediate context** of the “voice of one calling” in **verse 3**, then, is God letting those poor, suffering, hurting people of **Jerusalem** know that he’s punished them enough, and their hard slog in exile is over because their “**sin has been paid for.**”

This was **staggering news**. You mean John's arrival predicted in verse 3 was tied in directly with verse 2? But that was exactly what every Jew had been hoping for, that the Messiah was on his way as their conquering King to defeat the forces of evil, end their long, frustrating exile under pagan powers, restore their nation to a pristine state of holiness, and then through the victorious Israel he would set out to bring justice and peace to the whole world.

Was the arrival of John, then, the actual **start** of that longed for prophecy in **Lamentations 4:22** that predicted "O daughter of Zion, your punishment will end; **he will not prolong your exile**"? Well, according to John, YES IT WAS, because he, John, was the "voice" of Isaiah 40 given the job of announcing it. And then Jesus turns up crying out, "The time has come. **The kingdom of God is near**. Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15).

First John the Baptist and now Jesus, both saying the same thing, that the time the Jews had been waiting for - when God would rip them out from under pagan powers and set up **his** Kingdom in Israel - was about to happen. And according to Jesus the Kingdom of God was, in fact, ALREADY right there with them.

The Jews had heard all this before, however. Several Messiahs had come and gone, announcing great things about to happen, but they'd all fizzled into nothing, so why should Jesus be any different? But there **was** something different about Jesus, because he didn't try to fire them up to fight like the Messiahs before him. Instead he said, "repent and believe the good news," meaning repent of their desire to fight and believe the good news HE was preaching - that their time of exile was coming to an end **without** any need for violent revolution.

But how was that possible? Well, back in **Isaiah 40:2** the SIGN given that Israel's exile was ending was **their sins had been paid for**. That was the sign. But what evidence was **Jesus** offering of that sign, to **prove** their sins had been paid for? Well, according to Jesus it was the HEALINGS he was doing. He was doing all kinds of amazing, miraculous healings SO THAT "you may know that **the Son of Man has authority on earth to FORGIVE SINS,**" **Mark 2:10**.

This was more staggering news, because the healings proved their sins had been dealt with by **Jesus himself**. But how could a mere man like Jesus forgive sin? Well, that was the key question, because if Jesus really DID have the power to forgive sin, then HE, not violent revolution, was the means by which the Jews' sins would be paid for and their exile would end.

But if that was true - that Jesus coming with the power and authority to forgive sin was the sign their exile was ending - there should be some sort of clear, visible evidence it was happening, right? If the two were directly connected, as they were in Isaiah 40, then **relief and release** from the forces of evil that had held them in exile should ALSO be happening too.

Well, this is where things get interesting, because Jesus had ALREADY shown them that the forces of evil were in retreat when he cast out an evil spirit right off the bat in Mark 1:23-26. So they **already** had proof that the showdown with the forces of evil had begun.

But Jesus goes one shocking step further when he heads straight for the TEMPLE as early as **John 2:14-15** and chases out the money changers yelling, "How dare you turn my Father's house into a market," **verse 16**. Jesus immediately identifies **where the Jews' sin really lies**. It's in their own pathetic, disrespectful, thoroughly ungodly treatment of the temple, the very centre of the world where God himself connected with humanity.

What a shock it must have been for those Jews, then - and in particular the Jewish priesthood, the caretakers of the temple - to be told by Jesus, WITH all the authority of the Father behind him, that THEY were in fact the forces of evil that needed to be dealt with, and that THEY, therefore, had been the cause of Israel's sins, and it was THEIR fault that the Jews had been in exile under pagan powers.

The Jews thought the forces of evil were the Romans, but Jesus doesn't take issue with the Romans until he faces Pilate. Instead, he zeroes in on the Jews themselves. But rather than them repenting, **verse 18**, "the Jews demanded of him, 'What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do this?'" It was a question they would regret asking, because Jesus fires right back with **verse 19**: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days," by which he meant his death and resurrection (verses 21-22).

And to the Jews' terrible embarrassment Jesus' resurrection would **prove** that everything he said about them was right, that THEY were the sin that needed to be paid for, and Jesus had been **doing the job of the Messiah** all the while he was with them, by getting right at the heart of their problem and dealing with it. But they refused to accept that THEY THEMSELVES, not the Romans, were the problem that had got them into so much trouble in the first place.

But of course they were the problem. They had never managed to defeat the influence of the societies around them, nor had they managed to obey God fully or trust him to defeat their enemies as evidence to the world of God's power and faithfulness. Their priesthood had constantly let them down too. And here they were now, still a captive nation, still a mess spiritually, and still in the hands of a rebellious, misguided priesthood that thought it didn't have a problem.

No wonder they didn't expect the Messiah to die, because, in their minds, what was the problem he needed to die for? They thought they were doing what needed to be done. But Jesus knew better. He knew from Scripture that Israel was in a miserable state, and the only way to get them out of it was **the Messiah paying for their sins himself**.

So what we see unfolding in the gospels is Jesus taking on the role of the Messiah on behalf of Israel, as predicted in precise terms by Isaiah. Jesus knows from Isaiah that God had provided a "servant" for Israel, **Isaiah 42:1**, "my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him" to "open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness," **verse 7**. And Jesus clearly saw **himself** as that Servant, as we see in **Luke 4** when he read these same words from Isaiah 61:1-2 to his fellow Jews and said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," **verse 21**.

It was a clear clue to his fellow Jews to **check out the other verses in Isaiah about the Servant**, because they would soon discover the good news that the Servant's job was "to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself," **Isaiah 49:5**, and "my servant will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted," **Isaiah 52:13**. It was exactly what the Jews were hoping for, that through this Servant their nation would be restored to glory, their exile would be ended once and for all, the forces of evil would be shredded, and God's kingdom of peace and justice would spread from Israel to the whole world (Isaiah 52:7-10).

But it was also about HOW the Servant would go about doing all this. Yes, he would be exalted, BUT, **verse 14**, "there were many who were appalled at him - his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness." Here's our first hint of the Servant **suffering** on behalf of Israel, expanded dramatically in **Isaiah 53** where he's described as "a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering," **verse 3**, who "was pierced for our transgressions" and "crushed for our iniquities," **verse 5**, and "the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all," **verse 6**.

Who's the "us" here? It's Israel, because it's Israel's iniquity that the suffering Servant came to pay for to release them from exile. When Isaiah talks of "the punishment that brought us peace was upon him," **verse 5**, it was the punishment Jesus took upon himself to bring peace to **Israel**. That's the context. And in **verse 11** where Isaiah writes, "my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities," it was the iniquities **of Israel** that the righteous servant was bearing. That's how the sins of Israel would be paid for, through the Servant "pouring out his life unto death," **verse 12**.

And why is all this important? Because when Jesus said, "Destroy this temple," referring to his death, he knew it would be followed three days later by his resurrection (John 2:19), which would **prove Israel's sins had been paid for**, and to a JEW that was huge because now, going back to **Isaiah 40:5** (where we began), "the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and ALL MANKIND together will see it." The forgiveness of Israel's sin was the sign that God's glory would now spread from Israel to the whole world.

That's why Jesus said to his disciples in **Luke 24:48**, "You are witnesses of these things," that the Suffering Servant paying for the sins of Israel in himself was the sign that "repentance and forgiveness of sins" in "ALL NATIONS, beginning at Jerusalem," **verse 47**, was now possible, and they (the disciples), with the help of the Spirit (verse 49), would be the ones to explain it, just as Jesus had explained it to them (verse 45-46).

It would mean filling in the gap that the Jews missed, **that their sins had to be paid for first by the Suffering Servant**, but once that was done God's kingdom community could begin, starting in Jerusalem and from there to the world. That had always been God's plan through Israel, but they had never become that kingdom community THEMSELVES yet because of their rebellion against God, pictured by their atrocious treatment of the temple.

They could expect things to be very different from now on, though, with the **raising of a brand new temple** made up of both Jews and Gentiles who'd know the history behind the Suffering Servant, and why he'd died for Israel's sins. It was to free Israel from exile so that God could begin his kingdom on earth through Israel, and from Israel it would reach out to the whole world (Luke 24:47, Acts 1:8).

And it all began with the Suffering Servant, the vital part the Jews missed.