

Who Is This Man? : The Suffering Servant
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 53, Mark 8:31-33, Hebrews 9:19-28

Our final Scripture reading today is from Hebrews 9:19-28. This is God's holy, inerrant, and inspired word to us. "When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep." In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

Great art often comes through great suffering. We're all familiar with the Sistine Chapel, which was painted by Michelangelo. It's so famous, even people who don't know anything about the church or the Bible have seen parts of it. As it turns out, Michelangelo didn't paint it on his back; he painted it standing up on scaffolding, with this head behind him. Painting like this for so long left him with incredible pain, so bad he wrote a poem about it, calling the whole experience "torture." For months afterwards, he couldn't read or look at drawings without putting his head in the same position he painted in.

Or take Beethoven. Beethoven's final symphonies -- including his greatest, the 9th Symphony -- were all written after he had gone deaf. When the 9th Symphony was performed, he had to be turned around to see the audience at the end because he wasn't aware the orchestra had finished. He wrote purely by his sense of music that stayed with him long after his hearing had left him. Many great poems, songs, novels -- they come out of an artist's suffering.

But we don't equate suffering with kings. In fact, kings usually make other people suffer -- either their enemies through war or their citizens through taxes. A great king is just and merciful; he cares for those under his rule and protects them. But a suffering king? That's not the face they show to their people. A suffering king is a weak king open to attack and ruin.

That's the conundrum we face today as we look at another one of Jesus' roles -- that of the suffering servant. If Jesus was a king, why did He have to die? Why did He have to suffer? There's very little historical question that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact crucified for blasphemy -- Jewish and Christian sources alike agree on that. But why did things go down the way they did?

Why is this week, the week where we remember Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, so important? That's what we're going to explore. Because ultimately, Jesus' sacrifice of Himself was more than just an event...it was a work of art, the centerpiece of human history.

As we've done each week, we're going back to the Garden of Eden to find what became broken that Christ needed to fix. The hints to what we need to know lie in-between the lines of Genesis 3. When Adam and Eve sin, they learn that suffering will enter their lives due to their disobedience. But that isn't what God had said before.

God warned them that if they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the day they ate from it, they would surely die -- literally in Hebrew, "dying you will die." There was no more intense way God could have described it. The text makes us think that they should have fallen over right where God found them.

But that's not what happened. Instead, after God describes their curse, it says, "The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them." Now they made clothing of leaves for themselves. We know they didn't need clothes for protection or warmth. They made them to cover their shame and embarrassment. God replaces those with fur coats – a pretty nice upgrade, right? Especially since they just disobeyed Him.

But think a moment longer. God didn't just say "ta-dah" and then, poof, animal skins! Where did He get them? The Lord's promise came true; death did enter the world on the day that Adam and Eve sinned. The only difference was in who died. Adam and Eve don't die, but at least one animal did. God Himself performed the sacrifice that allows Adam and Eve to live, even though they committed treason against Him. They are literally covered by the animal that has saved them.

At this point in history, God gives no official rules and regulations, no sacrificial law like He gives Israel later. But one thing is clear: disobedience to God separates us from God and puts us under death's curse. And the only thing that can make us right with Him is a sacrifice.

We look at an animal sacrifice and think, "How gory. How primitive. How could God possibly want us to kill animals to make things right with Him? Isn't there something a little less disgusting, a little more palatable?" Part of that comes from living in an "advanced" society where the stuff we buy at Kroger or Meijer looks nothing like a chicken or a cow. When I buy ground beef or chicken nuggets, I don't ever think that this was once an animal. Nobody wants to know how the sausage gets made, right? If I saw what went into it, I might not want it!

But the disturbing nature of a blood sacrifice is something we need to understand just as much as the ancients did. Of course it's grotesque; of course it's messy. That has always been true. Whenever a sacrifice was made, it was a vivid, gory reminder that sin separates us from God just as surely as the dead are separated from the living. The punishment for disobedience to the One who made us is death. God's grace allows something or Someone to die in our place to cover our sins. Yet the sacrifice must be made because God is just. He cannot let sin go unpunished forever; otherwise, He would be unjust. As Hebrews today said, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."

The sacrificial system that came with the Law of Moses made sacrifices central to receiving God's grace. Sacrifices of all kinds are detailed in Leviticus – sacrifices not just of animals but grain and produce, fellowship offerings, wave offerings, all sorts of different gifts the Israelites could give to God as recognition of His gifts to them.

But the central sacrifices, the ones that atoned for sin and made amends with God for disobedience to the covenant, those were all animal sacrifices. Once again, Hebrews reminds us that virtually everything in the ancient worship space of the tabernacle was cleansed and set apart for God by blood that marked those items and places as sacred. Those sacrifices continued, day after day, year after year. The high priest entered the Most Holy Place in the sanctuary only one day a year, with the sacrifice in hand so that he could stand in the presence of the Lord and not die. It was a constant, continual cycle of sin, sacrifice, forgiveness, sin, sacrifice, forgiveness.

This cycle was only broken one time – when the temple was destroyed and the Israelites went into exile in Babylon in 586 BC, as God had promised through the prophets because of Israel's long disobedience. The book of Lamentations was written during that period because the people had no means to atone for their sins. In their view, God was no longer with them; their sins were still upon them, and God had left them in Babylon. When they are eventually freed by King Cyrus, the conqueror of Babylon, the very first thing they need to do is rebuild the temple. Only then can they make the sacrifices that would put Israel back in God's good graces.

But that situation makes the problem all that more evident: no temple, no sacrifices, no forgiveness. And perhaps even more than that, there is no end to the sacrificial system. The blood of animals makes God look away from the sin committed, it covers the sin, but it doesn't remove it. God is able to overlook it, but then the next time a sin is committed, another sacrifice is required. God's justice requires the sacrifice...but even then, God didn't even want sacrifices from His people. He wanted obedience, and sacrifices can't make obedience happen.

We, the human race, needed a new and different way – a way out of the old system, one that did not just cover our sin but removed it from us completely, one that covered all sins throughout all time, and a sacrifice that at the same time would make us genuinely able to obey God's commands. That would be a work of divine art. And that's what we find in Jesus, the suffering servant.

So why does He come the way He does, meek and lowly, submitting Himself not only to a peasant's existence but an awful, terrifying, excruciating death? I want to look at just a few of the reasons that Jesus lived and died as a suffering servant. And the first, the simplest one, is this: *in doing so, He fulfilled the prophecies of the Messiah.*

Isaiah 53 is a key text showing that the Messiah would suffer and die for His people. It's not the only one; Psalm 22 is another, and there are more, but those two are the clearest. In these two passages we see Jesus to a tee, fulfilling all the necessary Scripture. From Isaiah 53, He is "pierced for our transgressions." He is "despised and rejected by men." He did not speak during His trial. He is buried in a rich man's tomb. He is made into a guilt offering. From Psalm 22, "they have pierced my hands and feet." They cast lots for His clothing.

These things were not in Jesus' control. The piercing of His hands and feet is the most surprising, because crucifixion was normally done by tying someone to a cross. The reason they nailed Jesus to the cross was for further punishment and humiliation. And no form of crucifixion existed a thousand years before when David wrote that psalm. Nevertheless, there it is.

Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 have long been two key passages that have driven Jewish people to Jesus – they still do even today, for those who are willing to read them with eyes open to the truth. The Jewish people were not expected a suffering servant as their Messiah, but it was written throughout the Old Testament for them to see. After Jesus' death and resurrection, the apostles reasoned with their opponents through the Jewish bible – what we call the Old Testament – to show that the truth was hiding in plain sight.

But that only answers part of the question. Why did Jesus have to die like He did, especially if He really is the King of the Jews and King of all people? Another reason He came as a suffering servant was this: *He became the perfect sacrifice to get rid of our sins permanently*. Our passage from Hebrews puts it plainly: “But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” He replaces the endless cycle of bulls and goats and lambs being slaughtered because He permanently removes sin.

Earlier in Hebrews, Hebrews 2, it says that it was “fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.” Why is this the case? Why is it fitting? Here's why: Jesus is perfect in and of Himself. He is a part of the Trinity, Son of the Father, part of the Godhead, the only truly sinless human being.

And yet Christ was made perfect in His humanness through the time He spent here. By perfect we mean complete and whole. To be the proper sacrifice for us, He had to be like us in every way. That meant living among us, dealing with temptations and trials, facing the challenges we do. Coming as He did, no one can argue that He came as royalty; all of His actions show us service. Hebrews 2 again explains it this way: “He had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might turn aside God's wrath, taking away the sins of the people.”

Because Jesus was perfected through His time on earth in His humanity, Jesus is able to take the place of Adam as our spiritual head. Only a perfect specimen was accepted for sacrifice at the temple. Jesus Himself is that perfection for us. When God the Father sees us believers, He sees us as perfect and made whole because we belong to the Son.

His coming as a suffering servant made it possible. The greatest King of all becomes lowly even to the point of death for His people. That is truly a perfect offering. Because Jesus is human, His death covers *us*; because He is divine, His sacrifice covers *any* sins from *any* believers. And because He had no sin and thus did not deserve to die, He defeats death itself as we celebrate next week.

But the last point is the most touching. He came as a suffering servant so that *we would see His love is real and personal and powerful, and to teach us that true power comes through servanthood*. Coming as a servant, as a peasant, a wandering preacher with no place that He could call home, means that He sympathizes with our weaknesses. We can come to Him knowing that He understands all our hopes, dreams, fears, weaknesses. He never sinned, but in His human nature, He knows the pull of it. My friends, we have a friend in Jesus who knows better than anyone what we're going through. Medical problems, financial problems, personal problems...Jesus has been where we are.

He came so that we could relate to Him. I don't relate much to superstars and presidents and famous people. I might enjoy reading about them, but I don't relate to them. We're not at the same level; we're not invited to the same parties; we don't have the same friends. I might be smart, but I don't relate to the brainiacs behind NASA and Silicon Valley. Their lives are very different from mine.

But Jesus is someone that we can relate to. His bill for His tax at the temple was due and He didn't have it – He had Peter find the coin they needed in a fish (true story). He slept outside on hillsides a lot – He was homeless. He trusted in His Father for everything; He knew the Father would give Him His next meal, but He didn't know the earthly hand that would provide it.

He personally experienced injustice; He was shouted down not because He spoke falsely but because as a man from Galilee, He came from the wrong side of the tracks. He knew what it was to be accused falsely and executed for a made-up crime in order to satisfy the powers that were. He was the extraordinary Messiah, God in the flesh, come as an ordinary man with problems like ours that He faced.

He came and suffered because we suffer. He is not a God far away and remote. He is close to us – not just physically or spiritually, but in His humanness, He experienced all these things. Idols once gave people a way to attempt to see and control the holy. In Christ, we have something far better – the real God made known to us in a way we could see and touch. And when Christ comes again, we will experience the closeness with God we were made for if we have a relationship with Him now.

He comes to relate to us in His suffering, but He also teaches us through it. He shows what true power is. Power is not forcing your will on others. Power is freely giving up your rights for someone else's benefit. Power is not having your finger on the nuclear trigger or having millions of dollars to spend. Power is found in choosing God's ways and serving others to serve God. Jesus gave up His very life rather than to exert His power as God, but in doing so, He gained the people of His Kingdom forevermore. We follow in His stead as servants to others. We lay down our interests for the interest of others. That's a theme we need to explore more soon. But for now, it's enough to say that we follow Jesus' example as a servant leader.

Jesus was a suffering servant for us, but that's not His permanent role. Where once He came in humility and weakness, He will return in strength and power as all will see that He is truly the Son of God. And that's what we'll explore next week as we celebrate the Resurrection together.