

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Good morning and welcome to our talk on this Easter Sunday.

It is not so long ago that we were celebrating Christmas, the time when Jesus Christ came into this world as a baby by way of the manger at Bethlehem. As the Bible puts it, *"God manifest in the flesh"* (see 1 Timothy 3:16), *"God with us"* (Matthew 1:23). Now it's Easter time, when Christians all over the world think about the death and resurrection of that same Person, born in Bethlehem and then only thirty three short years later crucified just outside the city walls of Jerusalem. No coincidence that there was no room in the inns of Bethlehem that first Christmas or within Jerusalem's city walls that first Easter!

Has much changed? Many will think in a superficial way of the Christmas and Easter stories but do we really understand, believe and rejoice in the wonderful and deep significance that these events have had on the whole of creation and on us personally in 2016? If we only think of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus at Easter time, or indeed His birth at Christmas time, then we are missing out a great deal. The early Christian church met together on a Sunday to remember all that the Lord had done and to have fellowship with each other. Sunday is the first day of the week, the start of a new week. It was on that first day of the week that they discovered that the Lord's body was no longer in the sealed tomb where He had been laid. So there is a very profound picture for us that every Sunday is "the resurrection day", not just this Easter Sunday. What a way to start each and every week, to remember that the Lord is risen. I hope to say a little more on this later.

The word 'Easter' is only mentioned once in our Kings James (Authorised) Version of the Bible. It is in the book of Acts 12:4. Great persecution was coming on the early Christian church at that time and Peter had just been taken prisoner. King Herod's plan was to keep him bound and bring him before the people after Easter. The Greek word used is usually translated 'Passover'. At that first Christmas time, Bethlehem was jostling with people who had returned to that place from all over the region for the census to take place (Luke 2:1-7). At that first Easter time, Jerusalem was similarly jostling with people from all over as it was the time of the Passover (Luke 22:1, John 11:55).

To understand the full significance of what this meant to the Jewish people of that time, we need to look back into the Old Testament to the book of Exodus and Exodus 12. It was here that the final judgement of God fell upon the Egyptians so that Pharaoh had no option but to let God's people escape from the awful bondage he had put them under. God gave Moses very clear instruction as to what was going to happen and what His people should do to avoid this judgement. They were to take a lamb that was perfect in every way (Exodus 12:5) and it was to be sacrificed (Exodus 12:6). The blood was then to be put on the doorposts and the lintel of their houses (Exodus 12:7) and when God saw their obedience to Him the avenging angel of God's judgement would pass over them (Exodus 12:12-13). The instruction God gave was clear and unequivocal; there was no other way of escape. The following day, amidst great horror in Egypt, the children of Israel were set free and so began their long journey to the promised land (See Exodus 12:31-42). The people were in no doubt of God's power and His faithfulness to save those who had obeyed Him.

It is always good to remember and celebrate great occasions in our lives. Birthdays, anniversaries, etc., are all wonderful celebrations but this was something that would be remembered for thousands of years and still is to this day among Jewish people. So it was with this backdrop that Jerusalem was heaving with people. A great concoction of devout Jews and their Roman oppressors. People from all over the known world would be gathered at that very time. This is why the Apostle Paul, many years later, as he is telling King Agrippa the Christian gospel could say *"for this thing was not done in a corner"* (Acts 26:26).

What was being witnessed at that time in Jerusalem, however, was actually the working out of the true Passover. The incident in Exodus 12 was in reality only a foreshadowing of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ when He became the sacrifice and means of escaping God's judgement for the whole world, not just the people of God who were in captivity in Egypt all those years ago. Another Old Testament picture that we can use to explain this is when Isaac asks his father, Abraham, in Genesis 22:7, *"..but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"* and Abraham can answer with confidence and divinely inspired prophecy, *"My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering"* (Genesis 22:8).

This particular Passover time was like no other before or since. I would like us to look at different aspects of the story this morning through the eyes of five very different characters who were all eye witnesses of what had taken place. They are Peter, Mary, the Roman Centurion, one of the thieves and Pontius Pilate.

Peter

Firstly Peter, a fisherman, a man of action and a born leader. Impetuous but loyal and somebody I would certainly want on my team for any challenge that we were given. It was Peter and John who were chosen by the Lord Jesus to go and make ready the upper room where He would celebrate that last Passover supper with them (Mark 14:12-21, Luke 22:7-13). I have no doubt Peter would have set about this task with great gusto and have been delighted to have found the room through the precise instruction that the Lord had given him. They all celebrated the Passover there in that prepared room. Then, when this was over and Judas had left to go and betray the Lord (see Matthew 26:25, John 13:27), Peter, with the remaining disciples, was able to witness that first ever Lord's supper. The Lord broke bread and said, *"This is my body given for you"* (Luke 22:19), and passed a cup of wine around them and said, *"This is my blood which is shed for you"* (Luke 22:20). He instructed them that they were to do this in remembrance of Him.

Although they never fully appreciated it at the time and would continue to celebrate the Passover for some years, the old order had now been done away with and something new was being ushered in. Not only this, the disciples became involved in debating who of them should be greatest. How easy we can be sometimes sidetracked from the contemplation of what the Lord has done for us and become occupied in our own things. Peter was then rebuked by the Lord and we have recorded in Luke 22:31 the occasion where the Lord uses his name twice in addressing him. One of only seven people in the whole of scripture where their name is used twice by God (Abraham, Abraham - Genesis 22:11; Jacob, Jacob - Genesis 46:2; Moses, Moses - Exodus 3:4; Samuel, Samuel - 1 Samuel 3:10; Martha, Martha - Luke 10:41; Simon, Simon - Luke 22:31; and Saul, Saul - Acts 9:4). He is told that, in spite of his supreme confidence that he would follow the Lord no matter what (see Luke 22:33), in fact before the cock crows that very next morning he would deny the Lord three times (Luke 22:34). How sad it then is to see these denials coming to fruition and in Luke 22:62 we are told that this big, confident and strong man went out and wept bitterly. However, this was the turning point for Peter. It had taught him not to have confidence in his own strength and ability but to trust fully in the Lord. Only a few weeks later, he stands to preach with the others on the day of Pentecost and three thousand people come and accept Christ and are baptised (see Acts 2:14-41). What a wonderful result to come from what seemed a hopeless situation!

Pontius Pilate

Now let's think about Pontius Pilate. A powerful man with an important but difficult job. Asked to rule over a place where the majority of people didn't want him or his employers, the Roman empire. Many times he would have tried men and sentenced them to death, mostly through crucifixion, I am sure. An awful form of execution which the Romans themselves had invented. Worth remembering, though, that in Psalm 22 we get a prophetic description of it in graphic terms written at a time when it was still unheard of. Pilate had no difficulty finding fault with those who were brought before him, however, until Jesus arrived. We saw in Exodus 12 that the sacrificial Lamb was to be perfect and in Luke 23:4 and Luke 23:14 we get a wonderful confession of this hardened Roman emperor that he could find nothing at all wrong with the man named Jesus. Indeed, King Herod also had been used to bring fault but could find none. Surely, then an innocent man should be set free but His accusers and the general public did not want this and insisted He be crucified. Pilate literally washed his hands of the situation and caved in to the cries of "crucify Him" (Luke 23:20). This world now still is feeling the effect of that decision.

Are you washing your hands of decisions that need to be made that will have far reaching consequences? We all make decisions day by day that have varying degrees of importance but what you do with Jesus and His death and resurrection will impact every aspect of your life in this world and for all eternity. John 3:16 tells us, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."* There on that cross under the written confirmation of Pontius Pilate (see John 19:22, Luke 23:38), the Lord Jesus bore your sin and mine and satisfied the righteous claims of God for ever. Accept Him and the judgement of God against sin will pass over you as it did for those people in Egypt so long ago. We are not told what impact it made on Pontius Pilate.

The thief on the cross

Then we have the thief on the cross. We are told that two criminals were taken with Jesus to be crucified (Luke 23:32). They jeered and scorned (Matthew 27:44, Luke 23:39) until suddenly one of them became aware of the magnitude of the situation he had found himself in. He realised that he was a sinner and willingly confessed this and the fact that he was facing the correct punishment for the life he had led (Luke 23:40-41). He realised far more than this, however, and confessed that Jesus was different to them; He had done nothing wrong (Luke 23:41). In spite of the horror and

hatred of that scene, he was given to know that the man on the middle cross was the Lord and he then uttered those wonderful words, *"Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom"* (Luke 23:42). He then had the wonderful privilege of slipping from this life into eternity with the words of Jesus ringing in his ears: *"Today you shall be with me in paradise"* (Luke 23:43). We may not wish to die in such extreme circumstances but what a comfort when we can face death with this same assurance. That man's body would have been taken from the cross and, whether buried or cremated we are not told, but we can rest on the promise of Jesus that the eternal spirit of that man, the real essence of who he was, would have been in heaven with his new found Lord that very day. His is the blessing of spending eternity with Christ not because of what he had done himself but all because of the work that Christ had accomplished on that cross that very day and his acceptance of it.

The Roman centurion

Next, I want to talk about the Roman centurion. A battle hardened, professional soldier who would have faced situations like this many times and I am sure they would normally have just washed over him, just like any other day. This day was different, however; this death was different; this Man was different. There is no doubt that this centurion, however, would also be a different man from this day forward!

We are told that Jesus cried with a loud voice as He commended His spirit into the hands of His Father in heaven, and then He died (Luke 23:46). It may have appeared that His life had been taken from Him as with any other person who is executed but we see in these words a controlled and ordered giving up of a holy and sinless life, willingly. At that very point three remarkable things happen:

1. The veil in the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom (Matthew 27:51). This was a huge, heavy curtain that hung in the holy place and stood between the people and the presence of God. Only the High Priest could enter beyond that veil and only at a certain time of the year. From that day forward, there was now free access symbolically for everybody into the presence of God and God also could come out in grace to mankind.
2. There was a great earthquake (Matthew 27:51).
3. Dead believers were brought back to life and were seen walking around in Jerusalem (Matthew 27:52-53). Notice they were not resurrected to die no more but brought back to life for a specific purpose and time.

These things were done during a time of unprecedented and unnatural darkness for a period of three hours (see Matthew 27:46), right at the time when the sun should have been at its highest.

This hard centurion then bursts out and glorifies God exclaiming that this was indeed a righteous man as Luke records for us in Luke 23:47. Matthew 27:54 and Mark 15:39 add that he also exclaimed that *"this man was indeed the Son of God."* There were others there with him who also joined in the praise. What an incredible situation to come from something that seemed so hopeless! A dying criminal has found salvation in his last hours and a Roman centurion is glorifying God. It shows us that there can be hope and light in the darkest of situations if our eyes are fixed on Christ.

Mary Magdalene

Finally, I would like us to consider Mary Magdalene. Luke 8:2 tells us that she had been demon possessed and seven devils had been cast out from her once she came in contact with the Lord. Her life had been transformed beyond all recognition and she showed her thankfulness for this in her devotion to Christ and the other believers. She also was there at the cross with other women witnessing these wonderful events we have just considered (Matthew 27:55-56).

Then when it was all over, the horror had past, the Lord's body had been taken from the cross and laid in a garden tomb (see Matthew 27:57-66, Mark 15:42-54, Luke 23:50-56, John 19:28-42) it is Mary with other women who come to the place of burial when it was still dark to embalm the body (see Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1-2, Luke 24:1, John 20:1). She is at first distraught as she sees the tomb is empty (Luke 24:4, John 20:2) and therefore assumes that the body of her Lord has been stolen. She, with the other women, is then given the most wonderful message by the two angels dressed in shining clothes who were sitting in the place where the body had been laid. The women were asked, *"Why do you seek the living among the dead?"* (Luke 24:5). It seems such a strange question as they were in a graveyard! Yet we see in this wonderful picture that Lord has now conquered death. He had broken the power of the grave and given hope to all who believe in Him. Then as Mary turns away from the tomb, still uncertain of the news she had just been given, she sees a man behind her and, in the darkness of the early morning, she assumes Him to be the gardener (John 20:15). She tells Him of the reason for the great grief that she was now experiencing (John 20:15) and it only takes Him to say her name and she recognises her Lord (John 20:16). Everything was now changed; the Lord was risen and her life had once again taken on a new meaning. She was then given the wonderful task of going to tell the other disciples (John 20:17-18). The most incredible event in the history of this world had come

to fruition. Everything in the ways of God that had happened up until this point in time had looked forward to this occasion and everything that happened from that day on would look back to it. It is the centre of eternity.

So to go back to where we began this talk. If we celebrate great happenings in our lives, surely this one stands above all others and should take precedence over everything else. On the Lord's day, on the first day of a new week, what a privilege it is if we are able to gather with those of like mind at His own invitation to remember Him in the way He instructed His own in that upper room so long ago. It was simple, it was sincere and it was meaningful and that is all He asks of us today. I am often struck by the fact that however much it means for us to do this it surely must mean even more to Him that we have obeyed His final request to His own. The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 is then inspired to give it an additional aspect when he says that, "*[in doing this,] [we] shew forth the Lord's death till He comes [again]*" (1 Corinthians 11:26). Some day we will remember Him for the last time as we will not need the bread and the wine to remember when we are in His presence forever.

May the lessons we have learned regarding these quite different people, who were all eye witnesses of this, the greatest event in history, both encourage and challenge us as we consider the Easter story once again today.

May the Lord richly bless you all this day.

Thank you for listening.

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