

THE MEANING OF EASTER

During the war between England and France there were soldiers drafted into Napoleon Bonaparte's army. One young man was drafted but a friend volunteered to go in his place. The substitution was made, and some time later the surrogate was killed in battle. The same young man was, through a clerical error, drafted again. "You can't take me" he told the startled officers. "I'm dead. I died on the battlefield." They argued that they could see him standing right in front of them, but he insisted they look on the roll to find the record of his death. Sure enough, there on the roll was the man's name, with another name written beside it. The case finally went to the emperor himself. After examining the evidence, Napoleon said, "Through a surrogate, this man has not only fought, but has died in his country's service. No man can die more than once, therefore the law has no claim on him." Two thousand years ago, Jesus went to a cross to bear the penalty that rightly belonged to us. He died in our place. And through Him, our names are written in the book of life, with His name written beside ours.

Matt 16:21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and *suffer many things* at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must *be killed* and on the third day *be raised* to life. 22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" 23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

What is Easter? It is more than just bunnies and eggs. Jesus came to fulfill a mission, and that mission was to die for the sins of the world. The events that happened on that Easter weekend occurred in a dramatic succession of three events. There was the trial of Jesus, then there was the death of Jesus, then there was the resurrection of Jesus. We're going to look at all three and their implications.

1. The TRIAL of Jesus shows His PURPOSE

Jesus was arrested at night and in secret because He was so popular they didn't want an uprising in the city of Jerusalem. Jesus actually went through six trials that night. Then He went through three religious trials and then He went through three civil trials. His arrest was not an accident and He endured the trials for a reason. Upon His arrest Jesus said:

Matt 26:53 Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?

First He went to Annas, then a trial before Caiaphas the high priest. Then a trial before the Sanhedrin, the religious Supreme Court. Then He went before Pilate, the governor of Jerusalem. Then Herod, the governor of Galilee. Then He was back to Pilate again. He went through six different trials all through that one night. When they finished those six trials, what did they have to accuse Him of? Nothing. He had done nothing wrong. They had no crime against Him. They brought in people to make phony charges but they didn't stick.

Finally they got Him convicted on one count. He claims to be the Son of God. That's why they put Jesus on the cross. He claims to be the Son of God.

Matt 26:59 The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. 60 But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward 61 and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" 62 Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" 63 But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." 64 "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." 65 Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. 66 What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered.

Jesus never claimed to be a good man or great moral leader or teacher. Jesus said that He was God and the only way to heaven. He said "No one comes to the Father but through Me."

That kind of changes the picture a little bit. If I were to ask people what they thought of me some might say (if I paid them enough!) "he is a good teacher." or "he is a nice man and an ethical person who teaches good moral principles." You may or may not agree with that. But if one Sunday I stood up here and said, "By the way, I'm God! And the only way you're ever going to get to heaven is to put your trust in me" would you start feeling a little bit differently about me? It would force you to make a decision.

If you ever meet anybody who claims to be God, you only have three options. One, believe he's crazy. The guy doesn't know what he's talking about. He's mentally deficient. The lights are on but nobody's home. Like the guy in the institution who thinks he's Napoleon. That's one option when a guy tells you, "I'm god." You say he's crazy and you feel pity for him.

Two, you could say he is a deceiver. A shyster, a swindler. He's trying to con me into believing he's something he's not and he probably wants my money. There are people like that out there. People who will tell you they are something they're not in order to get something out of you.

The third opinion is to say, "I believe you're telling the truth. In that case I need to fall down and worship you, obey you, and follow you."

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. — CS Lewis

John 12:47 ... For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it

That is why He allowed the trials, so there would be no doubt about who he was. Jesus never claimed to simply be another prophet. He claimed to be God almighty and the only way to salvation.

This means that Christianity is not just another religion, one of many ways to God. The claims of Jesus are exclusive, and you need to either accept them or reject them, you cannot ignore them.

2. The DEATH of Jesus shows His PASSION

Crucifixion is probably the most brutal and torturous death penalty ever devised by men. But even before Jesus went to the cross, he experienced incredible pain. Anyone who has seen the movie the Passion of the Christ knows what I am talking about. All through the trials Jesus was beaten and then He was taken and scourged.

Scourging was far worse than whipping. They would tie your hands to a post, strip you down to the waist, then two men would hit you with whips that had a cat-of-nine-tails in it. These were nine long strands of leather with 2 things tied in them – sharp bone that would cut the skin and bits of led in order to bruise the skin. By law, you could only give 40 stripes because it would usually kill a man. So they always gave only 39.

Jesus' back was a bloody pulp even before He went to the cross. Then they gave Him the heavy cross that He was to carry up the hill to Calvary. Physically he was unable due to the loss of blood and fatigue. The soldiers just grabbed somebody out of the crowd to help Him carry it. When He got up to the top, they stretched Him out on the cross and nailed Him to it. The nails were not through the palms but the wrists between the two bones. When it would go through it would hit that never that goes up your arm and be excruciatingly painful.

Actually that is what the word EXCRUCIATING means. It comes from the Latin EXCRUCIARE which means 'like crucifixion.' The next time you use that word, think about it's meaning.

The death on the cross was a death of suffocation. As you hung your lungs were forced open. You could breathe in but you can't breathe out. To prolong the suffering they would take a person's knees and bend them a little bit and nail the feet to the cross. The victim would be hanging there in absolute agony unable to breathe until he would lift himself up on his feet that were nailed, so he could breathe. He would hold that position until He could no longer stand the pain in his feet and He would let himself back down again. Until the pain in his lungs became unbearable again. The death on the cross was up and down, up and down. Often it would take days for a person to die. When the Romans wanted it to end they would eventually break the legs of the person on the cross. Then they couldn't stand up anymore and they would suffocate.

That's the kind of punishment that Jesus went through on the cross. Why? To show you His love. The depth of the suffering that Jesus endured on the cross shows the height of His love for you – what He was willing to pay so that you could be forgiven.

Rom 5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Even when we were still enemies of God, Jesus suffered and died for us. He paid the price.

Heb 12:2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Many years ago there was a little girl named Liza who was suffering from a rare and serious disease. Her only chance of recovery appeared to be a blood transfusion from her five-year-old brother, who had survived the same disease and had developed the antibodies needed to combat the illness. The doctor explained the situation to her little brother, and asked the boy if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister. The boy hesitated for a moment before taking a deep breath and saying, "Yes, I will do it, if it will save Liza." As the transfusion progressed, he lay in bed next to his sister and smiled, as we all did, seeing the color returning to her cheeks. Then his face grew pale and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor and asked with a trembling voice, "Will I start to die right away?" Being young, the boy had misunderstood the doctor; he thought he was going to have to give her all his blood and that he would die because of it. He was willing to make that sacrifice, out of love.

3. The RESURRECTION of Jesus shows His POWER

After Jesus died they took His body down and put Him in a tomb. They didn't bury people under the ground in those days. They would dig caves in the side of mountains, into the limestone. They would dig the caves then dig a trench right in front of the cave and put a giant millstone in front. Then when someone else in the family would die they would take it apart – roll the stone back and put another person's body into the tomb. After a long period of time they would go back into the tomb and take the bones and put them in a box in the family crypt.

Matt 27:62 The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. 63 "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' 64 So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first." 65 "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." 66 So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

After Jesus died the religious rulers were afraid. They asked Pilate that the tomb be made secure. In the history of the world, Jesus is the only person who they planted guards at His grave to keep Him from coming out. But this is what Christianity is. It is all about the resurrection.

A few years ago, the top historians around the world gathered and made a list of what they considered the 100 most significant events in the history of the world. There were things like the discovery of America, invention of the airplane, invention of the printing press etc. Number four on their list was the life of Jesus Christ. They forgot the most important part. If Jesus only came to live and then died like everybody else, that's probably about the best you could say about Him. There have been other good teachers, other moral philosophers, other unselfish martyrs. But what makes Jesus different is He not only died a martyr's death on the cross but He came back to life. And nobody else has ever done that and that's what makes this the most significant event in history because it's never been done.

Newsweek, said, "The risen Christ is the center of the Christian faith. The mystery without which there would be no church, no hope of eternal life, no living Christ to encounter today. No other historical figure has ever made the claim that He was raised from the dead. It was this appearance of the resurrected Christ that lit the flame of the Christian faith. It wasn't the morality of the Sermon on the Mount, which enabled Christianity to conquer Roman paganism, but it was the belief that Jesus was alive. He'd been raised from the dead."

Easter is not some memorial to a nice religious teacher who lived 2000 years ago. It's a celebration of the fact that Jesus is risen. He is alive and with us here this morning.

Romans 1:4 and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus showed Himself many times after His resurrection. At one point He showed Himself to 500 people. Can you imagine the people who put Jesus to death and three days later He is walking around Jerusalem talking to you again? It would be quite an event!

When Jesus was hanging on the cross, the skeptics and the critics, mocked Him and said, "If You're the Son of God, why don't You just pull Yourself down from that cross. Why don't You just come down and show that You're really God." Jesus was going to do something far more than just come down from the cross. He had something more spectacular planned. He said, "I'm going to let you bury me for three days then I'll come back to life to prove that I am what I am."

THE TRIAL OF JESUS SHOWS HIS PURPOSE
THE DEATH OF JESUS SHOWS HIS PASSION
THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS SHOWS HIS POWER

What does this mean to me today, Easter of 2016? For many today Jesus Christ is still on trial. He is on trial in every heart and mind of every person who's not yet acknowledged Him for who He is and said. Today, I'm going to turn this church into a courthouse. All of you are the members of the jury. Let me call some witnesses about Jesus Christ, some eyewitnesses.

Peter walked with Jesus for a few years and watched Him do all kinds of miracles. Who do you say Jesus is?

Matt 16:16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Martha, you watched Jesus raise your own brother, Lazarus, who had been dead for a couple of days. Who do you say Jesus is?

John 11:27 I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God.

Thomas was one of His followers. After Jesus died on the cross he doubted that He would be raised again. In fact, he even said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it". What did he have to say after seeing the risen Christ?

John 20:28 My Lord and my God!

But those are all people in the past. Are there any current witnesses? Look around you. In addition to those here there are a billion people around the world celebrating Easter this week. The trial is still on and for many the jury is still out. At the trial of Jesus Pilate asked an important question:

Matt 27:22 ... What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?

That is a good question. What will you do with Jesus? You must decide. What's your verdict? You see, Easter really boils down to two questions: Is Jesus who He says He is? The second – if Jesus really is who He claims to be, will you receive Him into your life or will you reject Him?

Jesus was willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice so that we could live.

A woman took her husband to the doctor's office. After his checkup, the doctor said, "Your husband is suffering from a very serious infection." The husband, who was hard of hearing said, "What did he say?" His wife said, "He says you're sick". The doctor went on. "But there is hope. You just need to reduce his stress. Each morning, give him a healthy breakfast. Be pleasant, nice, and kind. For lunch and dinner make him his favorite meals. Don't discuss your problems with him, it will only make his stress worse. Don't yell at him or argue with him. And most importantly ... just cater to your husband's every whim. If you can do this for your husband for the next 6 months I think your husband will have a complete recovery." The husband said, "What did he say?" His wife said, "He says, You're going to die".

That woman was just not willing to do what it took to save her husband. Aren't you glad today that Jesus did what it took to save you? Will you do what it takes today to recognize who Jesus is and to accept Him as savior and Lord. It is not enough to believe in Jesus, you have to belong to Him.