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The Religious Missed Easter

How many of you know what Nehushtan was? To answer this we have to go back to the time when the nation of Israel was wandering in the wilderness right after they left Mount Sinai (where they got the Ten Commandments). At this time God's people fell into horrible sin such that poisonous snakes were sent as a means to discipline Israel- to teach them to trust God (cf. Numbers 21:4-5). After the scourge of their painful bite, the people called out to God for deliverance. And do you know what God did? He deigned to deliver them through *a Symbol of their Suffering*.

Numbers 21:8-9, "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard [a pole]; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at

it [which again was a symbol of their suffering], he shall live.’ And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard [pole]; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.”

This is what Easter is all about! Romans 6:23 tells us that “The wages of sin is death...” As such, each and everyone of us here deserves death- deserves to hang on a Roman cross — on account of our sin. Yet, and this is the glorious message of Easter, God became a man and took our place on the cross such that if we look, in faith and reliance, upon the suffering Savior, the symbol of our suffering, we will be saved.

Yet the story is not over, for you will never believe what God’s people did with the bronze serpent that Moses made. They forgot that it was God who healed them in the wilderness and so, in time, began to worship the bronze serpent! And that is where we read about Nehushtan. 2 Kings referring to Hezekiah and his acts as kings records it this way:

2 Kings 18:4b, “...He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan.”

Pretty shocking! And yet, this is what has happened in our day when it comes to Easter! So many have missed the point! Today when we think of Easter so many think of these things:

- Lillis.
- Dresses.
- Chocolate bunnies.
- Egg hunts.
- Going to church.
- Family get-togethers.

Yet none of this has anything to do with Easter!

And yet ours would not be the first generation to miss the significance of this day, for on the first Easter, many stood in the presence of Christ and completely missed Him! In fact of all the groups that missed that first Easter, it was The Religious!

John 2:13, “And the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.”

As we look at this passage, we see the incredible significance in its timing.

As most of you know, it was during a “Passover” that Christ was killed. As such, the events of this passage occurred exactly three years before Jesus was to be crucified. That means this was Christ’s first formal act as He began His three year ministry. Now what makes this act important, if not to us, most certainly to God, is that this also would be one the last public acts of Christ.

Fast forward three years and we read of the Triumphal Entry (Matthew 21:1-11) which was immediately followed by a description of Christ ascending the temple mount and turning his focus NOT against Rome, BUT against the money changers and vendors situated on the temple mount (Matthew 21:12-13). Accordingly, there is an important Messianic statement being made here.

John 2: 14-17, “And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the moneychangers seated. And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the moneychangers, and overturned their tables; and to those who were selling the doves He said, ‘Take these things away; stop making My Father’s house a house of merchandise.’ His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for Thy house will consume me.’”

At first, this is rather shocking. Here we have Christ, this morally upright and loving teacher, physically and forcefully removing *innocent* people from the market. And yet upon a closer look, the picture is completely different. Recall that by the time of Christ, Jewish worship had become quite elaborate and complicated. Jews were spread throughout the whole Near East which, on account of geography alone, made worshipping at the Temple very difficult. You didn’t just grab a lamb and go to the temple; for many, the journey could take months! As such, you had to plan for the journey, a pilgrimage which would make bringing a lamb quite difficult. And so to make the worship of God more accessible, a market was established in Jerusalem in which sacrificial animals could be purchased and then brought to the temple for worship.

By the time of Christ, this market had become a big business. Located in the *Court of the Gentiles* on the Temple Mount, sacrificial animals could be purchased for a price which was “slightly inflated” so that the merchants who sold the animals could make a living. In reality, like the price of a soft drink or hot dog at a ball game, these merchants made a killing as they sold sheep and oxen for much more than they were worth.

Now for those who didn’t want to mess with actually presenting an animal in worship, there were Money Changers who also had been placed there to help in the worship of God. Recall that, the Jews at the time of Christ had developed a system in which twelve trumpets/canisters were placed in the *Court of the Women* on the Temple Mount. Now each trumpet was designated for a certain gift or sacrifice. And so, if the worship in which you wanted to participate required the sacrifice of a lamb, rather than messing with buying a ceremonially clean lamb, presenting it to the priest, confessing your sin with your hands on its head, cutting its throat, and the like, one could place the purchase price of the lamb in the designated Trumpet and at the end of the day, the priests would take the money, purchase as many animals as the money would buy, and then sacrifice them on behalf of those who had given money that day.

Now for this system to work, there was the need for money changers. The money changers in Christ's day were much like bankers today. They saved money typically at six percent interest. They lent money typically at twelve percent simple interest. They exchanged money, Roman money for Greek, Greek for Hebrew, and Hebrew for Roman. Because it was considered to be unlawful for a Jew to place anything other than a Hebrew coin in any of the trumpets located in the Woman's Court (lest God's worship be tainted by Gentile money), the Money Changers:

- Set up his booth in the Outer Court.
- Exchanged the worshipper's Greek or Roman money for Hebrew money.
- And again, charged just a "slight" commission.

Once again, in reality they "milked" the worshippers out of a large portion of what they gave, and thus they robbed God of the worship that was due His name!

Now the key to understand the passage before us is realizing that all of this was done, the money changers and the vendors, upon orders of the Jewish leaders, specifically the high priest. It was this man who established the system by which he himself received a kick-back when it came to any and all profit.

It was this scene that confronted Christ in our passage. As we just read, with a zeal for God and for the purity of His worship, Christ cast the money changers and merchants out of the temple area! Truly, what was designed for the benefit of the worship of God had become a hindrance as the corrupt Jewish leaders of Israel robbed God of the worship that was His due!

The Shameful Challenge

John 2:18, "The Jews [specifically, the religious leaders] therefore answered and said to Him, 'What sign do You show to us, seeing that You do these things?'"

Here we read of the challenge of the religious leaders who, as I just said, had allowed the unjust system previously described to continue.

Now these leaders wanted a sign, a powerful testimony from heaven, that Christ had the authority to oppose what they had established. Reasoning from the Scriptures alone should have been sufficient. Yet herein is the hypocrisy of false religion. These leaders appealed to the biblical standard of prophetic authentication in defense of their sinful practice! Though they were violating the word of God that didn't stop them from using the word of God to defend their wretchedness (which is why I've labeled this point, "The Shameful Challenge")!

Because God deigned to give His word through the work of sinful men, that is, a prophet, to protect the sacred office of the prophet/the revealer of Scripture, the Lord established three incredibly high standards to authenticate a genuine prophet (it would have been quite easy for anyone at this time to stand up and say, "Thus says the Lord!").

The three authenticating tests were:

1. He had to be able to tell the future, Deuteronomy 18:22.
2. His prophecy had to be in accord with the rest of known Scripture, Deuteronomy 13:2-5.
3. He had to perform miracles/signs, Deuteronomy 13:1-2a.

It was this last test that the Religious Leaders of Christ's day were asking of Christ. And yet you must see that this is so shameful As the stewards and overseers of the worship of God, it was the duty of these leaders to protect God's worship from being defiled. But rather than protecting God's worship, they established the unjust buying and selling that occurred on the temple mount. And when confronted by Christ who called their evil practices into question, they didn't repent. Rather, they challenged Him by requesting a sign, as if a sign were needed! It is as Christ said in Matthew:

Matthew 15:7b-8, "...rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me.'"

The Shocking Response

John 2: 19-20, "Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' [They wanted a sign; this was the sign Jesus gave them- the destruction of the temple!!] The Jews therefore said, 'It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?'"

On the surface this sounds rather innocent; yet these were fighting words! It would have appeared that Christ here was calling for the destruction of these Jewish leaders' entire religious system, which obviously would NOT have sat well with these men! In fact notice, three years later, at Christ's trial before these same leaders, they were still fuming:

Matthew 26:59-62, "Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus, in order that they might put Him to death; and they did not find any, even though many false witnesses came forward. But later on two came forward, and said, 'This man stated, "I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.'"

And the high priest stood up and said to Him, 'Do You make no answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?'" In fact, as Christ hung on the cross, notice that with which the Jews used to mock Him:

Matthew 27:39-40, "And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, 'You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself!'"

Obviously Christ's words were infuriating. Why was that? Why did the Pharisees and Sadducees react so violently to "the sign" that Christ was willing to give? Because of their view of the Temple, which we'll talk about at the end. For now, notice the surprising truth.

The Surprising Truth

But He was speaking of the temple of His body: this is an incredible statement and brings this entire passage into focus! The testifying sign that Christ would show to the unbelieving Jewish nation (that He had the authority to rebuke them as well as to proclaim the truth) was NOT the destruction of a physical building, BUT His own resurrection: Easter! This was the sign Christ gave throughout His earthly ministry:

Matthew 12:39-40, "But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.'"

In exactly three years from the time of our passage, these leaders would indeed destroy "the Temple" Christ here spoke about. They would:

- Unjustly arrest and try Him.
- Mercilessly beat Him.
- Eventually hand Him over to Pilate to be crucified on a Roman cross!

And yet, Christ Himself after three days in the grave would rise from the dead!

What an incredible truth which Christ preached here and which the leaders missed it! Truly in the words of Matthew 13:13, "Seeing, they do not see. Hearing, they do not hear!" Because of their self-centered religion, these leaders stood in the presence of the Messiah, and yet they rejected Him! See, their commitment to "self" blinded their eyes to the incredible workings of God! Their love of religion had closed their ears to the unbelievable news of this passage!

Now the question is, "How did Christ's resurrection prove His authority?" After all, there have been many throughout biblical history who were raised from the dead:

- In John 11:33-34, Christ raised Lazarus from the dead.
- In Matthew 9:25, Christ raised the synagogue official's daughter.
- In Acts 9:41, Peter raised Tabitha.
- In Acts 20:9-10, Paul raised Eutychus from the dead.

So how is Christ's resurrection any different from these? While many had been raised from the dead, NO ONE, NO WHERE, AT ANY TIME EVER RAISED THEMSELVES! And yet, that is exactly

what Christ did! Christ speaking of His life said this:

John 10:18b, "...I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again."

Did you get that? Because Christ is God, He had the authority/power to rise from the dead! In our passage, Christ said, speaking of His body:

John 2:19b, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

Notice Christ here didn't say that God would... rather, HE would! In Matthew 28, Christ fulfilled this promise as we read this:

Matthew 28:5-6, "And the angel answered and said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen,¹ just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying.'"

Now, according to Paul's teaching in Romans 1, it was this power that Christ had to rise from the dead that demonstrates to the world that He is indeed God!

Romans 1:3-4a, "...[He] was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh [which means that He was fully man], who was declared the Son of God [that is, GOD] with power by the resurrection from the dead..."

And so, what is the message of Easter? It is nothing less than a powerful declaration on the part of Christ that He is God! And thus as God, He has the authority to "overturn" any and all false religion!

And sadly, the Jewish leaders of Christ's day who claimed to be the followers of God NOT ONLY missed this incredible news, BUT they in fact rejected it! And why was that? Two reasons really. First, they were in love with their man-made religion.

Matthew 23:6-7, "And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi."

They were receiving quite a benefit from their man-made religion. Again, it was these leaders who had established the bankers and vendors on the temple mount. Recall, through this commerce, the religious leaders were making a killing!

I wonder, how many hearing this message today likewise will reject the Christ of Easter on account of their religion? You say this:

- "We're Christians."
- "We go to church."

- “We believe in Christ.”
- “We pray.”

And rightly do you speak, for I know most of you. Yet, in what way do you differ from the religious leaders of Christ’s day who rejected their Messiah? They too fasted, prayed, sacrificed and did great works for God. And it has been throughout Redemptive and Church history.

Matthew 7:21-23, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’”

Truly on the last day when we stand before the Christ of Easter, there will be many so-called “Christians” whom God will reject- even though they were so religious! And so I ask again, “Will you like them reject the Christ of Easter on account of your ‘Christian’ religion?”

To answer this, we need to understand the error of these religious leaders, aside from them loving their religion. What was it? The Jewish view of the temple at the time of Christ evolved from a promise God gave to His people in Exodus.

Exodus 25:22a, (ultimately speaking of the temple) “And there I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony...”

Because the Temple was the place that God physically met with His people in the Old Testament, the Jews quickly began to identify the TEMPLE as the symbol of God’s approval and blessing upon them! And so, just as their fathers did with the snake of Numbers 21, the people of God years before began to trust in the temple and not God (cf. Jeremiah 7:1-15, esp. v. 14)! Such that by the time we get to the New Testament, the Temple in the mind of the Jew had become nothing less than the objective and unqualified proof of God’s approval and endorsement of the Jewish religion. Why were they saved? Because they owned and operated the temple!

That is why when Stephen spoke against the temple, he also was executed (Acts 7:48-50, 54)!

Christ here spoke of destroying the temple and rebuilding it, the Jews took this as a direct attack against their religion- which again is why the Jews never forgot these words, but instead brought them up three years later during Christ’s trial (again see Matthew 26:59-62)!

So how is it that these Religious Leaders missed Easter? Their trust and hope had long since been diverted from God to their religious system! That was their error!

And so get this: if your trust and hope this day is in a religious system — albeit a system that is

right and proper before God- you too are on the broad road which leads to destruction! Let me ask you: when you sin:

- What must you do in order for God to forgive you?
- What must you do in order to be acceptable before God?

The answer is, “Nothing! In Christ we already are acceptable to God even when we sin!” Now that is NOT to say that we shouldn’t confess our sins to the Lord in accord with 1 John 1:9. But we must understand that our confession is NOT in order to restore our relationship with Christ, BUT in order to restore *the well-being of* our relationship. It based upon Christ’s sacrifice that we live, move, and have our being!

And yet, if you are one this day who is NOT trusting Christ as your Savior, understand the glorious news and message of Easter, As sinners we cannot stand before God- go to heaven when we die- if we are guilty of just one sin. Truly, “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23)! If you are guilty of just one sin, you must die. But just as God pictured in the sacrificial system of the Bible where a person guilty of sin could take a spotless lamb, lay their hands on its head, and transfer their sin to the animal through confession, so it is with Christ.

Isaiah 53:6, “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 [Jesus].”

That is what is being spoken about in John.

John 1:12, “But as many as received Him [that is, confessed theirs in relying upon Jesus to take them away], to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe [trust] in His name [in His character and so His sacrificial work on the cross on their behalf].”

And so I exhort you, let go of your religion of self which believes that you are able to please God and so save yourself. Confess your need for Christ and His cleansing blood. Rely upon Christ as the only sacrifice for your sin. And God will forgive you and on the last day receive you to Himself!

End Note(s)

¹ While it is true that this is an aorist passive which therefore could be translated as “has been raised,” this does not contradict the point being made here. Truly, the Scripture makes clear that the entire Trinity participated in the resurrection of Christ from the dead: the Father (Romans 6:4; Galatians 1:1; 1 Peter 1:3), the Son (John 10:18; John 2:19), and the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:11).