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Those Who Missed Easter

Nehushtan

When Israel was wandering in the wilderness right after they left Mount Sinai (where the Lord gave them the Ten Commandments) the people fell into horrible sin. Here poisonous snakes were sent as a means to discipline Israel- to teach them to trust God.¹ After the scourge of their painful bite, the people called out to God for deliverance. And it was here that God deigned to deliver them through the object of their suffering.

Numbers 21:8-9, “And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.”

Isn't this beautiful? It is a picture of what Jesus did at the cross. Romans say, “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). As such, each and every one of us deserve death. We deserve a Roman cross because of our sin. Yet God became man and took our place on that cross such that if we would simply look to Him rely upon His sacrifice as the basis for God's forgiveness, we would be saved.

¹ Compare Numbers 21:4-5

Yet do you know what became of the bronze serpent by which God delivered His people?

Israel forgot that it was God who healed them, and so in time began to worship the serpent as if it could heal them. And that is where we read about Nehushtan. Speaking of Hezekiah when he became king the Scripture tells us this:

2 Kings 18:4, “He removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it [they worshipped it]: and he called it Nehushtan.”

I truly believe this is what has happened in our day when it comes to Easter! We have missed the whole point!

Many of us today think of these things when we think of Easter:

- Dresses.
- Chocolate bunnies.
- Going to church.
- Family get-togethers.

Yet none of this has anything to do with Easter.

The Religious Miss Easter

However, we aren't the first people to miss this holy day. At 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, I want to look at the group I have called, “The Religious.” These “Religious” were satisfied with their religion.

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

As we look back upon this passage, we see the incredible significance when it comes to the timing of this text. As most of you know, it was during Passover that Christ was killed. And so as I mentioned, the account we are reading would have occurred exactly three years before Christ's death.

Now the significance of this will be seen as we work our way through this passage.

John 2:14-17, “And found in the temple those that sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the changers of money sitting: And when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers’ money, and overthrew the tables; And said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father’s house an house of merchandise. And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.”

At first glance, this is a rather shocking passage. Here we have Christ, the morally upright and loving teacher, physically and forcefully removing “innocent” people from the market. And yet upon a closer look, we see a completely different picture.

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. One didn't just grab a lamb and go to the temple you had to plan for the journey, a journey which would make bringing a lamb quite difficult. And so, to make the worship of God more accessible, a market arose in Jerusalem in which sacrificial animals could be easily purchased and then brought to the temple for worship.

Now by the time of Christ, this market had become a big business, and sadly, a corrupt business. This business was located in the Court of the Gentiles on the Temple Mount. Here sacrificial animals could be purchased for a “small” price which was “slightly inflated” so that the merchants who sold the animals could make a living. And yet in reality, like the price of a coke 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 were willing to help. The Jews at the time of Christ had developed a system in which twelve trumpets or canisters were placed in the Court of the Women on the Temple Mount. Each trumpet was designated for a certain gift or sacrifice. So, if the worship in which you wanted to participate required the sacrifice of a Lamb, rather than messing with buying a spotless lamb, presenting it to the priest, confessing your sin with your hands on its head, cutting its throat, etc., you 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 and purchase as many animals as the money would buy and then sacrifice them for you.

Now for this system to work there was the need for money changers. The money changers in Christ's day would be akin to bankers today. They typically paid six percent interest to the depositors, and they lent money at typically twelve percent interest. They also exchanged money. They traded Roman money for Greek money; Greek for Hebrew; and Hebrew for Roman.

Because it was illegal for a Jew to place anything other than a Hebrew coin in one of the trumpets located in the Woman's Court of the temple, the Money Changer set up his booth in the Outer Court. Here he exchanged the worshipper's Greek or Roman money for Hebrew money. And again, he charged just a “slight” commission. Or, another way of saying it, “They 'milked' the worshippers out of a large portion of what they gave, and thus robbed God the worship that was due His name!”

Now it was this scene that confronted Christ in our passage. With zeal for God and for the purity of His worship, Christ cast these 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 these corrupt merchants literally robbed God of the worship that was His due! Dr. John MacArthur put it this way:

“As He surveyed the sacred temple grounds now turned into a bazaar, Jesus was appalled and outraged. The worshipful atmosphere that befitted the temple, as the symbol of God's presence, was completely absent. What should have been a place of sacred reverence and adoration had become a place of abusive commerce and excessive overpricing. The sound of heartfelt praise and fervent prayers had been drowned out by the bawling of oxen, the bleating of sheep, the cooing of doves, and the loud haggling of vendors and their customers.²”

The key in understanding this is that the merchants and money changers were on the temple mount on the authority of the Jewish leaders. Thus when Christ overturned their tables, He in essence was overturning these religious leaders' authority. And that naturally lead to a challenge.

² Dr. John F. MacArthur, John 1-11: The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Moody Publishers, 2006, page 90 ISBN 0802407714

The Shameful Challenge

John 2:18, “Then answered the Jews and said unto him, What sign shewest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things?”

Here we read of the challenge of the religious leaders who themselves had allowed the unjust system previously described to continue. In essence, these leaders wanted a sign, a powerful testimony from heaven that Christ had the authority to oppose their religious system. And yet, as my heading indicates, this challenge was 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. And yet, rather than protecting it, they encouraged the unjust buying and selling that occurred on the Temple Mount. And when they were confronted by Christ who called their evil practices into question, they didn't repent. Instead, they challenged Him by requesting a sign, as if a sign were needed!

What a shameful commentary on the state of the Jewish religious system at the time of Christ. Christ quoted Isaiah:

Matthew 15:8-9, “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.”

Truly, as we shall see, it would be these leaders that would deliver Christ over to die on a Roman cross!

The Shocking Response

John 2:19-20, “Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days?”

Now brothers and sisters, to use a colloquialism of our day: “These are fighting words.” See, Christ here is speaking to a people who “love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi” (Matthew 23:6-7). These are the people whose focus in life was to maintain their religious authority, power, and privilege.³ They had long since had lost their love for God, but rather were serving themselves via their religion.⁴ And thus, to hear of this “sign,” a sign which appeared to have represented nothing less than the destruction of their religion would have been infuriating. In fact, notice:

Matthew 26:59-62, “Now the chief priests, and elders, and all the council, sought false witness against Jesus, to put him to death; But found none: yea, though many false witnesses came, yet found they none. At the last came two false witnesses, And said, This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days. And the high priest arose, and said unto him, Answerest thou nothing? what is it which these witness against thee?”

³ John 11:48

⁴ Compare Matthew 23:5

And then while Christ hung on the cross we read this:

Matthew 27:29-40, “And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

Truly, Christ's words here would have been infuriating. And why is that? Why did the Pharisees and Sadducees react so violently to the sign that Christ was willing to give?

They were infuriated because of their view of the Temple. The Jewish view of the temple at the time of Christ evolved from the promise that God gave to His people in Exodus 25:22. Here we read these words ultimately speaking of the temple:

Exodus 25:22, “And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel.”

See 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 this was right to do.⁵ Unfortunately, we also read passages like Jeremiah 7⁶ where the people began to trust in the Temple rather than in God.

Now 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. This is why when Stephen spoke against the temple, he also was executed.⁷ Now all of this brings us to the time of Christ, a time in which Jewish religion, comforted by the presence of the Temple and thus “God's approval” had long since forsaken the teaching of the Old Testament in favor of the teachings of the Rabbis and Scribes.⁸ This was the religion of apostasy, a religion where God had long since abandoned.⁹

So, when Christ here speaks of destroying the temple and rebuilding it, the Jews would have understood this as a direct attack against their religion. That is why the Jews never forgot these words, but instead brought them up during Christ's trial.¹⁰

The Surprising Truth

John 2:21, “But he spake 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 was NOT the destruction of a physical building BUT, don't miss it, His own resurrection: Easter! And this was the same sign that Christ gave throughout His earthly ministry.

Matthew 12:39-40, “But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation

⁵ Compare 2 Samuel 22:7; 2 Kings 23:27; Psalm 48:9, and Habakkuk 2:20

⁶ Compare Jeremiah 7:1-15

⁷ Compare Acts 7:48-54

⁸ Compare Matthew 7:28-29

⁹ Compare Matthew 23:1-26; and Roman 2:17-24

¹⁰ Compare Matthew 26:59-62

seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; 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 this passage, these leaders would indeed destroy His body. 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 in three days would rise from the dead!

What an incredible truth! And yet, these leaders missed it! It is as Christ said of these leaders, "seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand" (Matthew 13:13). They had a selfish and self-centered religion so that when these leaders stood in the presence of their Messiah, and yet they rejected Him!

Truly, 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! The sign that Christ would give that would verify and substantiate His authority was His rising from the dead! This is exactly what Paul picked up on in Romans 1 when he spoke of Christ.

Romans 1:3-4, "Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; And declared to be the Son of God [that is, GOD] with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead."

Now the question is, "How did Christ's resurrection prove His divine nature?"

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 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 have been raised from the dead, **NO ONE NO WHERE AT NO TIME EVER RAISED HIMSELF!** And yet, that is exactly what Christ did!

Christ said, speaking of His life, "I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again" (John 10:18). In our passage, Christ said, speaking of His body, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19).

Christ fulfilled this promise as we read this:

Matthew 28:5-6, "And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that

ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said¹¹. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.”

And so, what is the message of Easter?

The message of Easter 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” their religion! And amazingly and quite tragically the Jewish leaders of Christ's day who claimed to be the followers of God not only missed this incredible news but in fact rejected it!

And why was that?

Because they were in love with their man-made religion.

Matthew 23:5-7, “But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.”

Luke 18:10-12, “Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.”

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

- “We're all Christians.”
- “We go to church.”
- “We believe in Christ/Messiah.
- “We pray.”
- “We forgive.”

And rightly do you speak for I know most of you.

And yet I ask, “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. Is it that they were Jewish and you Christian?

Nonsense! This merely is a distinction in religion! Recall the words of Christ:

Matthew 5:20, “For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness

¹¹ 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).

of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

And so I ask again, “Will you reject the Christ of Easter this day on account of your 'Christian' religion?” After all, Christ said this:

Matthew 7:21-23, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”

Truly on the last day when we stand before the Christ of Easter, there will be many, so called, “Christians” whom God will reject on account of their religion!

What must a man do in order to be saved? What must a person do in order to receive the Christ of Easter?

- John 1:12, states, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.”
- Acts 16:31: or as Paul told the Philippian jailor, “...believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved...”

Truly, the person who receives the Christ of Easter is the person who abandons their “religion” as the basis upon which they stand before God and relies upon Christ as the only reason for God to let them into heaven!

When Adam and Eve rebelled against God in the Garden, all of mankind became the enemies of God. And yet, in His incredible love for His people, God was unwilling that any should perish.¹² And so, knowing that the “wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23); that God Himself became man;¹³ lived a perfect life(fulfilling the law in every way);¹⁴ and willingly died in our place on the cross that had been reserved for you and me on account of our sin.¹⁵

Now in light of this incredible act on the part of God, the only way to be reconciled to God is NOT by becoming more religious:

- Going to church.
- Praying more.
- Being good.
- Giving to the church.

(Not that these things are bad, but how would you feel towards the murderer who sought your forgiveness on account of the flowery letters that he sent or the money that he gave?) BUT by relying upon the work of Christ on your behalf as the only basis upon which God will forgive you.

¹² Compare 1 Timothy 2:4; and 2 Peter 3:9

¹³ Compare 1 John 5:20

¹⁴ Compare 2 Corinthians 5:21

¹⁵ Compare 1 Peter 3:18

Christ came into this world “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). Christ became a man and died that “that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives” (Hebrews 2:14b-15).

And thus, if you and I this day would just simply let go of our religion of self which believes that I myself am able to please God and so save myself, and confess our need for Christ and His cleansing blood, and rely upon Christ as the only sacrifice for my sins, God will forgive you and on the last day receive you to Himself!

Through His death and resurrection, Christ not only proved that He Himself is God. But He also broke the power of Satan and thus freed all who would receive Him from the death their sin deserved!

This is the Incredible Story of Easter!

About Bethel Presbyterian Church

The Bethel Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word is published regularly.

VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The recording for this sermon and the these notes can be found at [The Religous Miss Easter](#). The web address for all sermons at Bethel Presbyterian Church can be found out as follows: <http://bethelpresbyterian.sermonaudio.com>

About the Preacher

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