

WHAT'S EASTER ALL ABOUT?

Today, we commemorate one of the two most holy of all days on the Christian calendar—Easter: The glorious celebration of the resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, following His crucifixion. There is nothing more significant in the Scriptures than this. And if you were to choose three verses from the Bible that tell what Easter is all about, which verses would you choose? There are so many verses to choose from, but for our purposes this morning, I am going to start with Paul's words in Galatians 3:13. Paul wrote: ¹³ “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’” (NIV) So, in light of this verse, what is Easter all about? Well, this verse tells us that it is *about the Cross of Christ*. More specifically, it speaks of Jesus' death on the Cross to atone for your sins and for mine.

And we can begin to see this when Paul wrote, *“Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.”* What was it that he was referring to? Well, as it turns out, he was quoting from Deuteronomy 21¹—and this phrase about *“hanging on a tree”* refers to death by crucifixion on a cross. Now, Deuteronomy was written by Moses around 1,400 B.C.² so we can tell from this fact alone that crucifixion, as a form of execution, had been around for centuries—long before the Romans became so very expert in administering this cruel form of punishment. Although Moses was apparently familiar with the practice of crucifixion, the Israelites were actually introduced to it on a first hand basis by the Greek conqueror, Alexander the Great. During the fourth century B.C., he invaded Palestine and crucified 2,000 inhabitants of the City of Tyre, all in one mass execution. And, history teaches us that the Romans were very astute imitators of all things Greek, and they quickly adapted crucifixion as their favorite means of inflicting a slow and agonizing death on anyone who dared oppose the supremacy of Rome. In fact, when a gladiator named Spartacus led a slave rebellion in 73 B.C., the Romans promptly crushed his followers and crucified 6,000 of the rebels on crosses that lined approximately 130 miles all along Rome's famous highway, that Appian Way.

And so, by the time of Jesus' ministry in the first century A.D., the Romans had refined the art of crucifixion to perfect its most agonizing characteristics. Recognizing this, the Roman orator and statesman, Cicero, spoke of death by crucifixion as the *"most cruel and disgusting penalty,"* that inflicted upon its victims the *"worst extreme of the tortures."*³ And when Paul spoke of one being *"hung on a tree,"* he was speaking of the most dreaded form of death imaginable. That was the kind of death Jesus suffered at Calvary when He was nailed to a cross. But, what else do we take away from this verse in Galatians?

Well, Paul points to the very meaning of Jesus' death on the Cross. It is one of the most important things that Easter is all about. Again, Paul said: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law." The "law" is God's law—God's commandments in the form of the Ten Commandments and the other moral demands of the Scriptures—all of which were so well summarized by Jesus Himself when He pointed out the Two Greatest Commandments of all. Jesus said: ²⁹ "The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. ³⁰ And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' ³¹ The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these." Mark 12:29-31 (NLT2) And, for us, therein the problem lies. The difficulty is that when we deviate even in the slightest little way from the Law, then we sin. And God has promised that if we sin, then we earn certain wages—whether we want those wages or not. And they are terrible wages indeed. You see, the "wages of sin is death"⁴—not just physical death, but eternal death in a place called Hell. There is another huge problem and the Scriptures describe it this way: "For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard." Romans 3:23 (NLT2)

So, if all of us have sinned, and if any sin condemns us automatically to Hell, then what possible hope do we have? What can we do to avoid receiving that big pay check—those wages of death? Nothing—the answer is that we can do nothing. Why?—because Jesus has already done everything for us on the Cross. What has Jesus done? How did Jesus redeem us from the curse of the law whose wages are death? As we have read, Paul gives

us the answer, and the Good News, that Jesus **“redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us.”**

Yes, Jesus has redeemed us! The Greek word for “redeemed” is ἐξαγοράζω (*exagorazō*). It means to “pay for” something, as in buying something in an open marketplace, especially as in redeeming or “buying back” a slave. That is why Jesus said: ³⁴ **“Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. . . ³⁶ [But] if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.”** John 8:34 & 36 (NKJV) After all, doesn’t the Bible teach that, **“You were bought at a price.”** 1 Corinthians 7:23 (NIV) So, what was the price that was paid for all of your sins and mine? Again, the Bible couldn’t be clearer—they were paid for through the Blood of the Lamb—for we are assured that **“by [Jesus’] sacrificial death, [He] bought for God people from every tribe, language, nation, and race.”** Revelation 5:9 (TEV)⁵ In other words, by “*hanging on the tree*,” Jesus came under the curse of God by accepting the wages of death that were justly payable to us. This is why the Apostle Peter proclaims: **“He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed.”** 1 Peter 2:24 (NIV)⁶

Through Jesus’ sacrifice of His life on the Cross, we are given the opportunity of life. It is an incredibly good opportunity, yet it is something that the world has such a difficult time understanding—especially those who define life in the limited, temporal sense as those days that are taken up by each of us in this earthly realm. It is amazing to me how some of the most wealthy, and supposedly intelligent, people in the world cling to this life and direct their energies and resources to preserving their lives in this world, but have no sense whatsoever as to what it means to take advantage of the gift on eternal life in the world to come.

For example, Larry Ellison is the 74 year old chief technology officer of Oracle Corporation. Just last month, Forbes magazine listed him as the fourth-wealthiest person in the America, and the seventh-richest man in the world, holding around \$63.5 billion in assets.⁷ Ellison has spent \$430 million on anti-aging research and another \$200 million on

his cancer institute at the University of Southern California. He seems to dread the idea of human physical death and believes that prolonging life here in this earthly realm should be our chief goal. When asked to explain his fervor in pursuing this goal, he often responds by saying: “[I do this because] *death never made any sense to me.*” It may not make sense to him, but all the money in the world isn’t going to change the fact that death is inevitably coming for him, just as it is coming for all of us. The goal shouldn’t be to prolong temporary physical life here on earth, but to attain eternal life through Jesus Christ. But, Ellison is by no means alone in this self-deceived state.

Recently, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, who are the founders of Google, invested \$1.5 billion in a research center dedicated to pro-longing human life through genetic and pharmaceutical research designed to combat diseases associated with old age. Jeff Bezo, the founder of Amazon, and a few of his friends, invested \$116 million in a firm named Unity Biotechnology, for the purpose of *“targeting cellular mechanisms at the root of age-related diseases.”* The men’s health guru, Dave Asprey, takes about 150 daily supplements in an effort to delay cognitive decline. He has indicated that it is his goal to live to be 180, all to which he has invested about \$1 million just to live a few extra years.⁸

Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with these people investing money into health related research, but this obsession with prolonging our years on earth beyond their natural boundaries belies a very unhealthy mindset—one that seems to ignore Jesus’ own admonition—Jesus said: *“For if you want to save your own life, you will lose it; but if you lose your life for my sake, you will find it.”* Matthew 16:25 (TEV) Jesus is trying to tell them—all the Larry Ellison’s and Jeff Bezo’s of the world—as He is telling you and me, that eternal life comes through Him, not through health related research. Jesus says that He is “the Way, the Truth and the Life.”⁹ Yet, so many have not a clue as to what Jesus is talking about. Nor do they understand what the Cross of Christ represents. While they agree with people like Larry Ellison that *“death makes no sense,”* they are at a loss in finding the way to eternal life. Maybe our health guru friend, Dave Asprey, won’t die until he’s 180, but what then? Which

way does he expect to go then? Jesus points to the Way and commands us to take up our crosses and follow Him.¹⁰ And if you will simply do that with a repentant heart, then Jesus' work on the Cross will open the way for you to eternal life. So again: What is Easter all about?—*Easter is about the Cross.*

Now, the second verse that I would pick to tell what Easter entails is *John 11:25*, for it is there that Jesus said, "I am the RESURRECTION and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies." (NIV) So what else is Easter about?—*Easter is about the Resurrection.* More to the point, it is about how God can take even the most terrible, awful things and, for those who love Him, he turns them into good things—wonderful things. That is what compelled Paul to say: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." Romans 8:28 (NIV) Yes, God turns disasters into blessings for those who hang on, persevere and trust in Him. The events of Easter prove exactly that, because Easter is what turned the Cross from an instrument of death into one that gives eternal life. How did this come about? Well, to state the facts is quite simple: The dead, crucified body of Jesus was placed in the tomb on Friday. A huge stone was rolled over the entrance to the tomb and securely sealed it. Yet, on the third day—that *first Easter Sunday*—the stone was rolled away and Jesus rose from the dead.¹¹

And what is the significance of His Resurrection? Bible scholar Bill Cook states the answer quite succinctly when he says: *"[The Resurrection of Jesus] substantiates the proposition that His life and death were not just the life and death of a good man, but that He indeed was God incarnate and that by His death we have forgiveness of sin."*¹² God's people know this. We have faith in this. We know that the historical fact of the Resurrection is what makes a difference in our lives. In the words of Christian theologian, Leon Morris: *"The same power that brought Christ back from the dead is operative within those who [belong to Christ]. The Resurrection is an ongoing thing."*¹³ And we are called to live our lives based upon our faith in the Resurrection. So what would such a life look like—

one lived in the reality of the Resurrection—one that acknowledges something as deadly as a Roman Cross could be used by God to offer forgiveness to the entire world.¹⁴

Well, consider the example of a chaplain named Leon Maltby who served in the Pacific Theatre during WWII. He was attached to the U.S. troops had invaded the Indonesian island of Biak in June of 1944 to secure an airbase there. But, Chaplain Maltby's job was quite different. He was there to minister to the spiritual needs of the soldiers. So, he went about constructing his chapel out of wooden posts that were wrapped with canvas to serve as the walls. The floor was made of nothing but crushed sea coral, and the roof was made of a huge yellow parachute. A few of the carpenters among the troops helped him build a crude altar, a platform and a few pews. At the machine shop, he set about making a set of candlesticks from 40 mm shells. And, he took a 90 mm shell and fashioned it in such a way to make a cross.

And there he was—ready to begin Easter service, but for one thing. He wanted to serve the Lord's Supper at his service, but he didn't have any Communion Cups. So, this is what he did. He looked around for some unused 50 caliber bullets. There were hundreds of spent 50 caliber shell casings lying around, but he wanted to stay away from them because he knew that some of those used shells had likely killed someone. So, with permission of the commanding officer, he obtained a box of new 50 caliber bullets and pulled out the lead, removed the firing caps and poured out the gunpowder. With a little help from a welder, he reshaped these shell casings until they took on a more holy shape. Then, he buffed them until the brass shined. It was tedious work, but eventually he had made from these little instruments of death a total of 80 shiny and ready-to-use communion cups. And on that Easter service, each cup was grasped by a grateful service man. When the war ended in 1945, Chaplain Maltby was among those troops who entered into Japan where he became friends with a local Japanese pastor. When it became time to serve Communion in this Japanese Christian church, these "shell-casings-turned-into-communion cups" were used to serve the congregation. The Japanese pastor was so deeply moved by the Chaplain's

faithfulness and resourcefulness that he was instrumental in having these “50 caliber” communion cups put on display in the Veterans Museum in Daytona Beach, Florida where a sign has been erected that reads: *“The pastor clearly understood the significance of ‘Instruments of death becoming a symbol of eternal life.’”*¹⁵

That is what Easter calls us to do—to recognize that it is only through the Cross of Christ, and His blood that was so freely shed, that our sins are washed away. And with the Resurrection of Christ, the Cross was not a symbol of death any longer. Rather, the Cross now points to the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus Christ which brought about a total victory over death. And so, we can say with absolute assurance, *Easter is all about the Resurrection.*

And now, very briefly, the third and final verse, describing what Easter is all about, is found in *Deuteronomy 30:19*. Actually, in this verse, Moses tells us exactly what Easter offers to us—it is an offer that no one can afford to refuse. For it is here that he tells the Israelites, as he tells us today: “I am now giving you the choice between life and death, between God’s blessing and God’s curse, and I call heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Choose life.” (TEV) This verse announces something extremely important, because it tells us what Easter is all about on a very personal level. And so, for this last time this morning, I ask, *“What is Easter about?”* And the answer is this: *Easter is about you*. It is about the choices that you make—life or death choices, choices with eternal consequences. A young Muslim man, who had come to this country to go to college, came to faith in Jesus Christ. It was a difficult choice to make. In taking up the Cross of Christ, he had to leave his own family behind—not because he wanted to, but because they basically excommunicated him for becoming a Christian. One of his friends just couldn’t understand why he would make such a choice to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. As so, the friend asked him, *“Why did you do such a thing?”* The young man responded: *“It’s simple really. Imagine that you’re walking down a road and you come to a fork in the road. And there in that fork, the two people are facing in opposite directions—one pointing down one road, and the other*

pointing down a different road. And you must follow one of these two people who will be your guide along the way. One of them is dead, but the other one overcame death and is very much alive. Which one would you follow?¹⁶

**This Easter Morning Jesus is asking you the same question. What will your choice be?
Which road will you take? Who will you follow?**

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
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¹ Deuteronomy 21:22-23 (NIV) ²² If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, ²³ you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.

² New Living Translation, 336.

³ Jeannine K. Brown and Nicholas Perrin, "DEATH OF JESUS," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition*, ed. Joel B. Green, Second Edition ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 173.

⁴ Romans 6:23 (NLT2) ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

⁵ Revelation 5:9 (TEV) They sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to break open its seals. For you were killed, and by your sacrificial death you bought for God people from every tribe, language, nation, and race.

⁶ Kenneth L. Boles, M. A., *The College Press NIV Commentary – Galatians & Ephesians*, ed. Jack Cottrell, Ph.D. and Tony Ash, Ph.D., (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Co., 1993), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 79-81.

⁷ Wikipedia.

⁸ Jerry de Luca, Montreal West, Montreal, Canada, "One Luxury the Wealthiest Are Determined to Buy—At Any Cost," preachingtoday.com.

⁹ John 14:6 (NIV) Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

¹⁰ Mark 8:34 (NIV) [Jesus said:] "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me."

¹¹ John 20:1, 18 (NIV) Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. . . ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

¹² Bill Cook, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), s.v. "RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST," WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

¹³ Edythe Draper, *Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 534.

¹⁴ John 3:16 (NIV) For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

¹⁵ Stephen Dempster, Micah: Two Horizons OT Commentary (Eerdmans, 2017), p. 131, from Jonathan Romig, "Instruments of Death Become Symbols of Eternal Life," <https://www.preachingtoday.com>. See also: Jonathan Romig, "50 Caliber Bullets into Communion Cups," <http://www.cornerstonewestford.com> (February 5, 2019).

¹⁶ "Muslim College Student Explains Why He Follows Jesus," <https://www.preachingtoday.com>.