

The Easter Message

Key Verse:

**“He is not here:
He has risen,
just as He said.
Come and see
the place
where He lay.”**

Matthew 28:6

Extra: What does Easter mean to YOU?

Level 5 lesson 9

Read: 1 Corinthians 15:1-20

Also: Luke 24:36-48 and John 3:15-21

During Easter much of the world has its attention directed to the death and resurrection of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. The word ‘Easter’ is found only once in the King James Version of the Bible (in Acts 12:4) and is actually derived from the name of the heathen goddess Easter (festivals in her honour used to be held at this time of the year). Obviously, since the time of Christ, Christians have also commemorated His death and resurrection which took place at the same time of the year, the time of the Jewish Passover.

With both events taking place at the same time, the result was that Christians eventually used the term Easter, too. However, while the term Easter is heathen in its origin, today it reminds us of what is Christian, not what is heathen. And of course the message of Easter is at the very heart of the Christian faith. Let’s consider it together again in 1 Corinthians 15.

A WONDERFUL MESSAGE:

Paul begins, “I want to remind you of the Gospel I preached to you.” Always remember that the word ‘gospel’ in the Bible means ‘good news!’ It is not a bad or a sad message, but a good or glad one we are considering. And what is this ‘good news?’ Here it is: “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; He was buried; He was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures.”

A VICTORIOUS SAVIOUR:

How simple and plain all this is! So the good news is about a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Son of God! Then there are these three great facts: HE DIED, then HE WAS BURIED, and then HE ROSE AGAIN! So why is that significant for us? Why did Jesus die? Paul spells out the answer, doesn’t he: Jesus died for OUR SINS! Not His own (for He has never sinned, rather, He is the Holy Son of God), but yours and mine. We will never fully know what suffering He endured when He did this on the Cross. So why was He buried? Well, because He really did die, and so the next thing you do with a body is to properly bury it.

Those who claim Jesus did not really die on the Cross but merely ‘fainted’ have a real problem with the fact that Jesus’ dead body was embalmed and buried. And what about this last amazing bit? He rose again from the dead! That’s the real ‘Good news!’ No-one else has ever done that! Because He was the sinless, perfect Son of God, death could not hold Him. It had no claim on Him. Having paid the terrible price for our sin, and borne all God’s righteous punishment for it in His own body on the Cross, the work of our salvation was finished. He rose a mighty VICTOR over sin, Satan, and the grave. Notice too, he died and rose again ‘according to the Scriptures.’ The Bible said He would do this and He did it. God’s Word is vindicated and proven true.

A RELIABLE TESTIMONY:

In verses 5-8, Paul also mentions the ample human witnesses we have of Christ’s resurrection. There was Peter, the twelve, 500 brethren at one time, James, all the Apostles, and then himself. Paul could have mentioned many others, but this was enough. Add to this the facts that the tomb was empty, that no dead body could be found, and that many of those who opposed Jesus were ultimately convinced; and you will see that there is nothing surer than the truth of the Easter message stated in verse 20, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the ‘first fruits’ of those who have fallen asleep.” Yes friends, the ‘good news’ is that we have a living Saviour, “able to save completely, those who come to God through Him” (Hebrews 7:25).

A SERIOUS QUESTION:

Suppose we know all this, will that save us? I mean, will the knowledge that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again be sufficient for our salvation? Certainly not! The Lord Jesus has done all this but unless we believe in Him as Saviour and confess our sins, it won’t help us one little bit. Indeed, knowledge alone will condemn us if we fail to put our faith in the Jesus Christ and confess Him as Lord. Please read Romans 10:9-10, and check out the little word “IF”; it’s very important!

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Who is the Easter message about?
2. State the three main facts of the Good News.
3. Why did Christ have to die?
4. Why is He now a victorious Saviour?
5. Does just knowing about Easter really help us? Please explain.

My Name is Age

The Martyrdom of Stephen

Key Verse:

“...Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

Revelation 2:10b

Extra: Research the history of Christian martyrs since the Early Church period.

Level 5 lesson 10

Read Acts 7

Down through the centuries since the time of Christ, millions of Christians have died for believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. The first of these Christian ‘martyrs’ was a man named Stephen. He preached the truth of Christ’s resurrection from the dead and the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation. For this he was falsely accused by the Jewish religious leaders of speaking against Moses and God. In his defence he gave this wonderful historical resume (see today’s reading) of God’s dealings with the people of Israel, culminating in His ultimate provision of Jesus Christ, a Saviour, not only for them, but for the whole world!

GOD’S FAITHFULNESS: Stephen began his address by reminding them of the call of Abraham. “The God of Glory,” he said, “appeared to our father, Abraham, calling him to leave his country and his people to go into an unknown land.” Abraham, of course, obeyed God and eventually arrived in Palestine, the same land where the Council were now living. Abraham was given no inheritance in this land, but God promised his descendants would receive it. Before receiving the inheritance however, Abraham’s descendants would have a long period of slavery in a strange land. God would finally judge that nation though, and deliver Israel back home again to the land of Palestine.

Stephen’s words met no resistance from the Jewish leaders. This was now historical fact, of which all were well aware. Abraham had Isaac; Isaac had Jacob; and Jacob had twelve sons who became the fathers of the people of Israel. These ones sinned by selling their brother Joseph into Egypt, but God blessed Joseph and made him governor of Egypt. At Joseph’s insistence, Jacob finally moved his whole family to Egypt to receive the help that Joseph was able to provide during the days of famine.

The way was now prepared for the descendants of Abraham to pass into slavery as the word of God to Abraham predicted. It wasn’t long before “another king who knew nothing about Joseph became ruler of Egypt.” This king made all Jacob’s descendants (the Israelites) slaves. To prevent them from over-populating Egypt he decided to kill all their baby boys. Moses was born at this time, and was put in a flax boat to save him from being killed. He was rescued from the Nile River by Pharaoh’s daughter, who raised him as her own son.

Stephen continued with his story, reminding these ones how Moses became a mighty man in Egypt, and was chosen by God to deliver Israel - a thing he first tried to do when he was 40 years old, but failed and fled from Egypt. Forty years later, God called him to deliver the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. He succeeded because he was acting under God’s leadership. Moses brought them through the Red Sea, into the wilderness where he led them for about forty years. God gave Moses the Law for the people, and promised that He would one day raise up a prophet for Israel. However, the Israelites in Moses’ absence were disobedient, and worshipped the golden calf which they’d made, and later they sank into even worse idolatry (see verses 42-43).

THE RULERS’ DISOBEDIENCE: And so Stephen went on with the whole sad story, reminding them of the 70 year exile of the Israelites as slaves in Babylon, and referring to David, Solomon, and his temple, of which they were all so proud. Then having alluded to the words of the prophet in relation to the temple (v48-49) he exclaimed that they were stubborn, unclean in their hearts, and deaf toward God’s message! “You are just like your fathers!” he cried, “You always resist the Holy Spirit!”

Then he asked the searching question, “Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?” He answered himself with this final terrible charge against them, “No! They killed all those who spoke of the coming ‘Just One’ and now YOU have betrayed and murdered HIM!” With the law they accused Stephen of blaspheming, but they were the ones who had disobeyed it (v52-53)! Oh such straight talk! The Bible records that these wicked men were “cut to the heart,” but instead of repenting of their terrible sin, they became incensed with rage, dragged Stephen outside, and stoned him to death on the spot.

STEPHEN’S LOYALTY: “Poor Stephen,” you may think. No way! Even as the rocks began to fly, this good man set his gaze toward Heaven and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. With his face shining like an angel, Stephen called on God to forgive his murderers. Then, with his final words, “Lord Jesus receive my spirit,” he ‘fell asleep’ (i.e. died) and became the first of many who will one day wear the martyr’s crown mentioned in today’s Key Verse.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Who does Stephen speak of first in his address?

.....

2. Who was the just One and what had they done to Him?

.....

3. When dying, what did Stephen ask Jesus to do for his murderers?

.....

4. What did he ask Jesus to do for him?

.....

5. Why do you think the crowd killed Stephen?

.....

Blessing in Samaria

Key Verse:
"...Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest."

John 4:35b

Extra: Think of ways to put the Key Verse into practice.

Level 5 lesson 11

Read Acts 8:1-25

Further reading: Galatians 6:7-10

WIDESPREAD PERSECUTION: Christians should not be surprised that they're called to suffer hardship for the name of Christ. Jesus warned His disciples, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first.... If they have persecuted Me, they will persecute you, also" (John 15:18-20)! So it proved to be! Stephen's execution unleashed a bitter wave of persecution against the early Christian Church in Jerusalem. Jewish authorities tried to stamp it out, but threats of violence and imprisonment couldn't stop its growth. Christians kept preaching the good news everywhere that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead. This proved that Jesus' claim to be 'the Christ' was true!

Saul, a devoutly religious young man, became the chief persecutor against the new 'Christian' movement. He saw it as a threat to his own 'culture' and religion of Judaism and was determined to stop it, too. So "he began to destroy the church... Going from house to house, he dragged off Christians to prison." However, 'squashing' this work of God proved harder than trying to pick up quicksilver (i.e. liquid metal) with your bare hands! As desperately as Saul tried to stamp it out, it appeared in more cities! The effect of the brutal persecution in Jerusalem was that Christians were "scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria," and so even more people believed the preaching of the Gospel!

BLESSING THROUGH THE GOSPEL: Philip though, one of seven chosen deacons like Stephen, fled the persecution in Jerusalem and travelled to the city of Samaria. There he began to preach that Jesus was 'the Christ' and that He had indeed been raised from the dead. The people listened carefully to what Philip told them. They didn't let the truth go 'in one ear and out the other!' In fact, practically the whole town repented and believed in Christ as Saviour! Friends, it is vital that you do the same! To hear or read about Him, but not receive Him will only add to your condemnation. It is important you realise this. Don't be satisfied with anything less than believing in Jesus to save you from sin, and devoting your life to His service.

Look at the result when the people believed and were baptised: "There was great joy in that city!"

In unsaved bondage to sin and Satan, there is always sorrow and wretchedness here on earth, and then eternal misery and punishment in Hell. But it is a real joy to have our sins forgiven, experience God's presence with us during our earthly life, and be rewarded with the deep joy of life forever in Heaven! Even the harshest persecution cannot extinguish these! Yes, we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by trusting Christ as Saviour and Lord!

THE FOOLISHNESS OF DECEIT: Let's look now at the sad example of Simon the Sorcerer - a man who had for many years held the people of Samaria completely in his power. Through the power of evil spirits he fooled the superstitious Samaritans, convincing them he was "someone great" He used this as a way to get rich, too! Upon hearing Philip's preaching and seeing the crowds turn from their evil ways to faith in Christ, Simon too made a profession of faith in Christ. He even got baptised! Then, "He followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw." However, v18 indicates his ulterior motive, which would soon reveal itself to all.

Meanwhile, Peter and John heard of the good work in Samaria. They came down and laid hands on the believing Samaritans, who then received the gift of the Holy Spirit. This placed the Samaritans on an equal level with the Jewish believers. Simon witnessed this and immediately the true motive for his 'profession of belief' was revealed. He saw in Christianity a means of obtaining even more power, prestige, and prosperity than he had before! So he tried to buy the power to give people the Holy Spirit! This is a solemn reminder that becoming a Christian is not simply about saying some words or 'going forward' at a meeting. The Lord Jesus Himself warned, "By their fruits you shall know them!" And so Simon's actions proved that he was not genuine.

"May your money perish with you!" cried Peter in response. "Your heart is not right before God. Repent and pray for forgiveness. I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin" Peter concluded! Sadly, Simon ignored this solemn rebuke. Instead of repenting and praying for salvation himself, he unbelievably asked Peter to do the praying (v 24). Unfortunately, it is not hard to find such people pretending to be 'Christians' in our world today. Watch out for them; but the most important message is, make sure that YOU have truly repented from sin and believed unto salvation in Christ alone!

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

- 1a. Who was the chief persecutor?
 1b. What did he do?

(a)

(b)

2. What was the effect of this brutal persecution?

3. What does unsaved bondage to sin and Satan result in?

4. What stern message did the Apostles give to Simon?

5. What is important for us to realise about the Gospel message?

Philip and the Ethiopian

Key Verse:

"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

Isaiah 53:6

Extra: What are some results you can see today of the new Ethiopian believer taking the Gospel message back to Africa?

Level 5 lesson 12

Read Acts 8:26-40

Further Reading: Isaiah 53

In our lesson today, we find a very interesting example of how God was working through the Apostles to spread the truth of the gospel far and wide. An Angel of the Lord instructed Philip to leave Samaria and travel south along the road leading from Jerusalem to Gaza. Now this was not an easy place to go, in fact it was really a desert wilderness. However, Philip immediately "arose and went," even though he may have wondered at the reason for the angel's instruction.

SEEKING THE TRUTH: As he looked along the desert road, he saw the tell-tale dust-cloud of an approaching chariot. Its occupant was an Ethiopian official who was in charge of all the treasure of Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia. Therefore he was probably a dark-skinned man, and he was certainly in a very important and responsible position. Most importantly, he was interested in the things of God! He had been up to Jerusalem to worship the true God and was now returning home.

However, it seems that after worshipping in the temple at Jerusalem he was still searching for answers. There was plenty of 'religion' there, but he had probably also heard about the new 'Christian' movement, which claimed that Jesus was the Christ (Messiah). The Apostles preached enthusiastically about receiving 'new life' through belief in Jesus Christ. They told how Jesus Christ had in fact risen from the dead and that their miracles were done in His power! Maybe their claim that Jesus the Messiah had to first suffer and die, before returning to earth as the kingly Messiah, had led him to wisely check the Scriptures for guidance. So while reading Isaiah 53, the Ethiopian became puzzled.

THE TRUTH EXPLAINED: Looking up, he saw Philip standing at the side of the road and perhaps surprised to find someone alone out in the desert, he reined in the chariot. Philip, directed by the Holy Spirit, introduced himself to the great man. "Do you understand what you are reading?" he asked kindly. Isn't God's timing great?!! God worked it so that Philip met the chariot at exactly the right moment. The Ethiopian was not at all offended by Philip's question, and readily invited him into the chariot to explain the puzzling passage.

Of course, Isaiah 53 speaks of the One who was "led as a sheep to the slaughter, and who was like a lamb before His shearers." "Who does this refer to?" queried the Ethiopian, "The prophet or some other man?" This was Philip's opportunity! Beginning at that very Scripture he explained to him how Jesus Christ had only recently fulfilled that prophecy during His trial and subsequent crucifixion in Jerusalem. Jesus didn't resist his arrest or try to avoid His own slaughter on the cross!

Philip no doubt went on to describe how Jesus had risen from the dead and presented Himself alive to hundreds of others. He was indeed the Christ, Israel's Messiah, and so His sufferings and the opposition He had received were proof of it. Now all who place their faith in Jesus Christ can have their sins forgiven and receive new life through the Holy Spirit, who then indwells each new believer. It is also true that all true believers in Christ should show their faith by being baptised in water - symbolising their union with Christ in His death, and resurrection to Eternal Life.

THE TRUTH OBEYED: The Ethiopian man listened like a little child. Coming to a watering place he eagerly asked Philip, "Look, here is water; why shouldn't I be baptised?" Note: some Bible versions include verse 37, which spells out clearly the basis for Christian baptism: first, a heart belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and second, confession of such belief. Modern versions (like the NIV) don't include this verse because it does not appear in the most ancient and reliable copies of the Bible. Rather, it seems some well-meaning Christian added the verse hundreds of years after Luke wrote Acts, as a way of summarising what the Bible makes quite clear elsewhere, about faith before baptism.

Anyway, Philip recognised his genuine faith and agreed to his request. Then together "they both went down into the water" where Philip baptised him. This is important too, as it shows baptism is by immersion, rather than sprinkling (e.g. from a water container). As they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord "suddenly took Philip away," leaving the Ethiopian to go on his way rejoicing. He could now be a preaching ambassador for the Christian faith in Ethiopia!

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What portion of Scripture was the Ethiopian reading, and why was he puzzled about it?

2. What shows that the Ethiopian was ready to learn?

3. Why was Isaiah 53 a good place for Philip to start?

4. How did the Ethiopian show he had believed Philip's message?

5. How did this encounter between the Ethiopian and Philip spread the Gospel?

Please complete and return by post to

PSSM, 5/399 New North Road, Kingsland, Auckland 1021 or scan & email to info@biblediscovery.org.nz