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Jesus as Hero, Easter 2020

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father, I just again, I thank you for the incredible fact that you arose, thank you for the fact that the grave is empty, for the fact that we can celebrate an empty tomb and a risen Christ. Lord, we just today praise you for the fact that all around the world in these unusual circumstances we are still celebrating the fact that you rose from the grave. Thank you, Lord, for that gift. And Lord today as we again look specifically at what it was that you've done in and through and to us through Easter, we pray that you would give us your Holy Spirit's presence. We pray as we open up your book that you would make it of permanent value, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, I think it's pretty safe to say that there's never been an Easter like this one. The entire world is in the grip of a pandemic and it finds itself desperately looking for a hero, someone who can take control of a situation that seems to have overtaken the entire world and driven it out of control. Now some think that the medical experts are the heroes. Some think that

it's the government itself or the president, maybe the vice president, maybe various other peoples who have been appointed to try to deal with it. Other folks see those very same people as arch villains intent on destroying us. It always comes down to heroes or villains. And it turns out that we are not that far removed from the cartoon superheroes that still seem to dominate our entertainment. And whether it's Spiderman or Batman or Ironman, Thor or a half dozen other characters, we clearly have this huge appetite for heroes. And actually it's not really an appetite, it's a need. Part of our appetite for heroes goes, I believe, to the deep buried truth that we have indeed been rescued by the greatest of heroes of all time.

As much as the world likes to demythologize the Bible into a series of legends and pseudo-miracles, so C.S. Lewis wanted to re-mythologize the Bible as the ultimate fairytale on which all other fairytales are based. I mean it was Lewis's contention that the lure of fairytales stemmed from the fact that they were rooted in the greatest truth of all time. There really was a war in heaven and there really was a good prince and an evil prince. And an evil prince was really cast down from heaven. And the king of heaven really did come to earth to fight the evil prince and win the greatest battle of all time at the cost of his life. That -- quote -- "fairytale" -- unquote -- it's actually the gospel. And

that's why buried deep within our collective psyche is this desire for heroes.

Our appetite for heroes is not just the thing of comic books, it's the thing of philosophers as well. I mean Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is a philosopher's version of the comic book Superman but it's a hero nonetheless. And what is especially unsettling in light of this crisis that we now find ourselves in is how passionate the world is about going after every type of mythical superhero while missing the one true hero whose story actually happened. How easy it is to miss the one genuine superhero that Easter is all about. Just imagine someone who is powerful beyond comprehension, someone willingly becoming one of the creatures he's intent on rescuing, imagine him living among his people flawlessly as he heals and feeds and cares for those all around him. And now imagine that very same superhero facing off against the most evil and powerful character ever imagined, a character intent on enslaving us to death itself, described by the apostle Peter as a roaring lion seeking souls to devour. Our hero appears at first to lose the battle, only to claim the spectacular victory in the end as he successfully ransoms and rescues his people. The story reads like one of the dozen superhero movies. It just happens to be the gospel. Our hero was born to a peasant woman in a backwater town and as he grows up and starts exercising his power, he finds

himself in a series of epic battles. He battles against nature itself, he battles against a powerful government intent on enslaving his people and a cadre of wicked leaders intent on destroying him before finally entering into this epic final battle against a monstrous supervillain far greater than any evil character that Marvel comics or Disney Studios could ever come up with. I mean this is someone our hero refers to as "the prince of this world." The battle winds up costing our hero his life. And again three days later he comes back from the dead to claim his victory.

Now the difference between this story and all the other hero stories that we are familiar with is that this story didn't come out of a studio. It wasn't pulled off with computer graphics and the actors didn't have stunt doubles. It is rooted in historical fact. This cosmic battle actually happened. And the hero's name was Jesus of Nazareth also known as Jesus the Christ.

Now in some ways the story of David and Goliath mirrors the story of Jesus and Satan. I mean you look at Goliath, he's this terrifying adversary who challenges all of Israel to a fight and it's a fight between champions. Goliath wanted one individual from each side to represent each nation. In *1 Samuel 17* it says: *He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why do you come out to*

draw for battle, am I not a Philistine and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us." Well we all know how the story ends, this young boy named David armed only with a slingshot takes on this monster adversary knowing he's got the strength of the Lord behind him. It was the world's champion versus God's champion and the loser would become enslaved to the winner. Well Jesus versus Satan was a similar battle with far greater champions and far greater consequences. I mean should Satan win, he would have complete mastery over all of us and death would be our legacy. But should Jesus win, then death would be swallowed up in victory, our sin would be paid for, and we would be able to live forever. And just like with David and Goliath, each side had their champion. Jesus was our champion, our hero, he was the son of a carpenter from some backwater town who went to this ultimate battle with a creature that Hollywood in its wildest imagination could never have invented. I mean Satan was the highest created being ever. And he rebelled against God himself making war in heaven. And having lost that war he was cast down to earth itself where he became the ruler of this world. And his greatest victory occurred in the Garden of Eden and there he got our forefather Adam to rebel and trade in his state of untried perfection for one that was tested and one that

would ultimately fail for an imperfect state that cursed all of us and made us all unfit for heaven. From that moment forward God was committed to fighting the ultimate battle in order to rescue his children through his champion, and his champion was his son, Jesus the Christ.

You see, the fact is Jesus was the original superhero. And part of the reason why superheroes are so popular is because they harken back to this primordial truth that's buried deep within each of us and that is in fact the gospel. I mean Hollywood loves to pit her mythical heroes against all kinds of foes. Superman had Lex Luther, Batman had Joker, Ironman has Iron Monger. They all have their arch enemies that they have to deal with. And Jesus of Nazareth as the ultimate hero had the ultimate enemy to deal with. The battle between David and Goliath lasted just a few hours. The battle between Jesus and Satan lasted 33 years. It had its beginning in Bethlehem, it had its start in a demon-infested desert and its finish at a cross in Calvary. The beginning occurred right after Jesus' birth. His enemies sought to take his life. He literally entered into Herod the king who slaughtered every male child two years and younger in a desperate attempt to wipe out Jesus as an infant. And at the start of Jesus' public ministry we have God sending him out into the desert to confront his nemesis.

Now the terms of this confrontation had to do directly with temptation. You see it was Adam who had been tempted and fallen at the hands of this same nemesis, and it was Jesus who was about to confront Satan's attempt to tempt him. But here's where Jesus and the superheros of Hollywood part ways. You see, these superheros have power but that's really all they have. And Jesus never, never lacked power. In fact Colossians tells us a little bit about the enormity of the power that Christ had by telling us this all about him, it says this in *Colossians 1:16*. It says: *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities -- all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* Now scripture is telling us that while this very same Jesus is teaching and preaching and healing, he's simultaneously holding the entire universe together, and he's doing it by the sheer power of his being.

I mean allow me to digress just for a minute. That last sentence in that scripture we just read: *"In him all things hold together"* may well be scripture's comment about the cosmic glue that holds all of our universe together. I mean on the most basic elemental level of the atom itself, this is a great mystery. Even science recognizes that atoms should not hold together. The nucleus of an atom consists of protons and neutrons and it's got electrons

spinning around in outer orbit around them and held in orbit by the attraction of a positive proton and a negative electron. That's high school chemistry. At the center of the most basic structure in the entire universe is a collection of protons and neutrons. And to this day nobody's figured out why they stay together. I mean neutrons have no charge, so they don't count. But anyone who's tried to hold two similar poles of a magnet together know that similar poles repulse each other. Similar charges repulse. So on the most basic level, those protons at the center of every single atom, they should be pushing each other apart and yet somehow or other they stay together. Every single bit of the known universe should be flying apart, but it doesn't. This is not just me, science has been examining this phenomenon forever, and the best they can come up with is a series of theories about the idea of cosmic glue. You just want to goggle "cosmic glue," you'll see, you can spend a whole afternoon studying what science is trying to figure out. It's come up with all kinds of theories about how atoms stay together that talk about quarks and gluons and quantum states and they're always trying to kind of explain the unexplainable. But there's a much simpler explanation why the universe doesn't fall apart, and it gives us just a hint of the sheer power that Jesus possessed. It says: *In him all things hold together.* And furthermore there seemed to be another broad hint dropped by the scripture about what will happen when Jesus, our

hero, takes his hand momentarily off the process of holding this universe together. According to 2 Peter, it will be a deliberate act by Christ and it will demonstrate exactly what he's been holding together when it comes apart. *2 Peter 3:10* says: *But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.* You see science contents itself trying to understand how the universe holds together by grappling with things like dark matter and quantum energy fields and various attempts, they're all attempts to grasp the ungraspable. But scripture seems to say it very clearly and very plainly: *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities -- all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* It's simple. Christ holds the universe together. And at some point Christ will momentarily take his hand off it in order to let it come apart in order to rebuild it.

Now the implications of these scriptures are mind boggling when it comes to the sheer power that Jesus possessed and it's power behind the reason why Jesus is facing Satan in the desert. You see, the temptation that Jesus faced starting out in that desert was a

temptation to use his extraordinary power to his own ends. I mean just consider Jesus before entering into this desert. He recognizes this is another champion versus champion match. Jesus is going into a place that terrified normal human beings because they know this is the place where demons lived live. Jesus is going there absolutely alone determined to rely on the very same resources that you and I have. His temptation, you see, was to use the power that belonged to him as the greatest superpower in the universe. Satan's temptation was to get Jesus to no longer undergo the trial as a human being, to abandon his human status even momentarily in order to use his divine attributes.

And so Jesus begins his battle in the desert with forty days of fasting. Matthew's gospel, with considerable understatement, says this: *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.* Okay. This is the king of the universe who's at that same moment sustaining the universe, holding it together, he's now utterly alone in the habitation of demons choosing to have no recourse to his superhuman powers and having had no human sustenance for forty days and forty nights. It's this Jesus who is now going to go against his nemesis who is intent on getting Jesus to abandon his human state for the divine state that Satan knows he possesses. You see Satan knows his Bible. He knows

it as good as anyone. And he knows the claims that God has made for his Son. He knows *Hebrews 4:15* which says this: *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.* You see, should Satan tempt Jesus to fall back on his power, he would give the lie to his complete identification with us in our weakness, and that's precisely what Satan's intent was. And so the scripture says in verse 3: *And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."* We all know that you're hungry, we all know that you're God, so why don't you just put on a little show for us and turn these stones into bread. Well at this point in the movies, this is the point where the superhero demonstrates his other worldly powers, but this is exactly what Satan wanted Jesus to do. And Jesus refuses, saying in verse 4: *"It is written, "'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"* And so for a second time the devil tempts Jesus. This is verse 5, it says: *Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "'He will command his angels concerning you,' and "'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone."* I mean it's stunning to read. Here's the devil himself and what is he doing? He's quoting scripture. Here's Satan saying -- quote --

"It is written." Once again Jesus refuses his temptation to engage his power. He relies instead on what only we can rely on as well and that is God's word. *Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

And finally the enemy gets to the heart of the matter by offering Jesus every kingdom in the world for all time if he would only bow down and worship him. We got a script here that reads like any one of a dozen different superhero movies. We have a crazed monomaniacal enemy wanting nothing but power and worship, but this time this is not fiction, this is real. *And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." And Jesus answered him, "It is written, "'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'"*

Jesus using only his human strength utterly and completely destroyed at great devourer of our souls. It was champion against champion and Jesus again won. The devil was down but he was not out. The scripture ends with this pregnant statement in *Luke 4*, it says: *And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.* Well that time came some three

years later at the end of Jesus' ministry, and Jesus knew it was coming. Satan had begun his attempt to defeat Jesus at the beginning with an attempted murder. He met Jesus again at the start of his public ministry with an attempt at seduction and now it was time for the final showdown. As he observes Jesus's Passover meal with his disciples, Satan makes his final decisive move. The scripture says in *Luke 22: Now the Feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called the Passover. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put him to death, for they feared the people. Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve.* Satan thought he had a plan. He never realized that he was just acting out the -- quote -- "*definite plan and foreknowledge of God*" when he entered into a human named Judas who then betrayed Jesus to the Jewish leaders who then employed the Roman authorities to actually undertake his execution by crucifixion. The historical witnesses of the cross thought were seeing a deranged peasant who thought he was God along with two thieves getting their just comeuppance. The Jewish leaders were convinced that they were getting rid of a dangerous heretic, and the Roman government saw the death of Jesus as an unfortunate minor incident that would hopefully placate the Jews. What no one, what not one single person on earth understood was that this battle was far more epic than any Galactical star war could ever hope to be. The battle was not over a city like

Metropolis or a battle star or even a galaxy. This was a battle over death itself, and the two champions were now going to meet face-to-face. Human beings have no idea of the depth of the depravity, cunning and power that this monster who Jesus called "the ruler of this world" possessed. They also had no idea just what our champion was engaged in. Many thought he was a tragically misunderstood political leader or teacher or philosopher but that's never what he entered into this battle as or for. This was the genuine good prince meeting the genuinely evil prince to exchange his life for the lives of his sheep. *Matthew 20:28* says: *"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life--a ransom for many."* And by the way the good prince was not giving his life to the evil prince as if Satan had some kind of power over us to ransom us. In fact Jesus was giving his life to satisfy his own perfect righteousness, a righteousness which demanded a payment of death for sin. Jesus had come to take on a creature originally named "Lucifer" who had now taken on a title, the title of "Satan" or "accuser" because all he could really do is accuse us of being flawed sinners and unworthy of heaven and on that count he was correct. And Jesus was there at the cross to silence his ability to accuse us forever. And God tells us precisely, precisely how he did this in this scripture, in *Colossians 2:13*. He says: *And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together*

with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Here God describes all of us as dead men and women walking. The uncircumcision of our flesh describes our status before God as rebels from birth, as alienated from God, as outsiders to the covenant community. God tells us that the wages of sin is death and since all of us are born sinners, then all of us are under a death sentence. COVID-19 is really just a terrible reminder of a process that we all know that is inevitable for all of us. And God is saying in this scripture this morning that Christ went head-to-head with a monster that held us captive to death and then made us alive together with him, having forgiven us all trespasses, and then he tells us how he did it. He says in verse 14: *Having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us.* We have other names for that handwriting of requirement. We call it "the law," we call it "the ten commandments." It was God's declaration of who he is along with his non-negotiable demand required of all who would fellowship with him. I mean the reason why the ten commandments given by God to Moses was a handwriting of requirement that was contrary to us was because it held out a standard that was virtually impossible for us to meet. You know, when I hear people say I really want to live by the ten commandments, I really try to live my life by the ten

commandments, I think to myself, you can't live by the ten commandments. You can only die by the ten commandments because those commandments have to be kept flawlessly. *James 2:10* says: *For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.* And Jesus himself repeated the standard succinctly after he delivered the sermon on the mount. He said this in *Matthew 5:48*: *"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* Well that standard demanded that we be as flawless as our creator. It's an impossible standard. But here's what God says of that standard. He says: *And he has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.* Well now you might think why couldn't God just forgive sins and let bygones be bygones? Why did he have to nail that perfect standard through his flesh to the cross? Because in addition to being perfectly merciful and loving, God is also perfectly just, and justice itself demands that wrong be punished. And we have no problem whatsoever seeing the Hitlers and the Stalins of the world being punished. It's the Bill and Mary Smiths, the regular plain old folk that we have a hard time with. But justice doesn't make distinctions between Bill and Mary Smith and Hitler. It insists that the wages of all sin is death. And since all of us sin, we all die. That is unless of course we have a superhero, one who can wage war on our behalf and literally overcome death itself. And folks, we have that hero. *Romans 6:23* says: *For the wages of sin is death, but*

the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. You see the scripture says that Jesus took the requirements out of the way by nailing them to a cross, and that's not just figurative language. In a very real sense it is literal. Because Jesus, the only one who's ever lived a sinless life, literally became sin for us. You know saying that "Jesus paid it all" may give the impression that somehow or other Jesus kind of nobly reaches into his pocket of goodness and kind of pulls out the penalty of our sin and pays it, but it's much more real than that. You see, Jesus paid for our sin by becoming sin itself. *2 Corinthians 5:21* says: *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* I mean you've got to let that sink in.

Nobody describes the process of Jesus becoming sin for us better than Joni Eareckson in her book *When God Weeps*, and I've read her description so many times it's almost become an Easter tradition. But I've yet to find anything that quite captures the horror and the glory of it all as she does. Joni picks up the crucifixion imagining it from Jesus' perspective at the driving of the first nail, and this is how she writes. She says:

"As the man swings, the son recalls how he and the father first designed the medial nerve of the human forearm. The sensations it

would be capable of. The design proves flawless. The nerve performs exquisitely. 'Up you go!' They lift the cross. God is on display and can scarcely breathe. But these pains are a mere warm-up to his other and growing dread. He begins to feel a foreign sensation. Somewhere during this day an unearthly foul odor began to waft, not around his nose, but his heart. He feels dirty. Human wickedness starts to crawl upon his spotless being, the living excrement from our souls. The Apple of his father's eye turns brown with rot. His Father! He must face his father like this! From heaven the father now rouses himself like a lion disturbed, shakes his mane, and roars against the shriveling remnant of a man hanging on a cross. Never has the Son seen the father look at him so, never felt even the least of his hot breath. But now that roar shakes the unseen world and darkens the visible sky. The Son does not recognize these eyes. 'Son of Man! Why have you behaved so? You have cheated, lusted, stolen, gossiped, murdered, envied, hated, lied. You have cursed, robbed, overspent, overeaten, fornicating, disobeyed, embezzled, and blasphemed. Oh the duties you have shirked, the children you have abandoned! Who has ever so ignored the poor, so played the coward, so belittled my name? Have you ever held your razor tongue? What a self-righteous, pitiful drunk. You, who molest young boys, peddle killer drugs, travel in clicks, and mock your parents. Who gave you the boldness to rig elections, foment revolutions, torture

animals, and worship demons? Does the list never end? Splitting families, raping virgins and acting smugly, playing the pimp, buying politicians, practicing extortion, filming pornography, accepting bribes. You have burnt down buildings, perfected terrorist tactics, founded false religions, traded in slaves, relishing each morsel and bragging about all. I hate, I loathe these things in you! Disgust for everything about you consumes me! Can you not feel my wrath?' The father watches as his heart's treasure, the mirror image of himself, sinks drowning into raw, liquid sin. Jehovah's stored rage against humankind from every century explodes in a single direction. 'Father! Father! Why have you forsaken me?!' But heaven stops its ears. The son stares up at the one who cannot, who will not, reach down or reply. Two eternal hearts tear. Their intimate friendship shaken to the depths. The Trinity had planned it. The Son endured it. The Spirit enabled him. The father rejected the son whom he loved. Jesus, the God man from Nazareth, perished. The father accepted His sacrifice for sin and was satisfied. The rescue was accomplished."

Or was it? The entire universe waited for three days to see if the sacrifice would be accepted and the rescue accomplished. I mean for three days our accuser Satan celebrated thinking that at last he had finally driven our hero into the grave. His murder attempt

at the beginning of Jesus' life had failed. His seduction at the start of Jesus' public ministry had failed as well and now his final murderous attack was hanging in the balance. Had Jesus not flawlessly executed his role as our perfect sacrifice, then the grave would have claimed him and he and we would have forever been under the curse of death. But three days later after the stone was rolled away, the angel announced he is not here, for he has been resurrected just as he said. And here our hero, our champion assumes his rightful place as the greatest victor of all time. Satan, our accuser, now realizes that God has used his own bitter wickedness as the very foil to affect a victory that would now enable us to live forever with God. The devil desperately wanted a public humiliation to forever put Jesus in the ground, and what he got was just the opposite. And it turned out to be the perfect fairytale ending where the good guy triumphs and the bad guy has his plans blow up in his face.

And so we end the Easter story by quoting the full scripture that details again how our hero rescued us from certain death. I repeat *Colossians 2:13*. He says: *And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the*

cross. That part we've heard. But the best part, the Hollywood ending part where the good guy wins and the bad guy loses is described perfectly in the very next verse. Let me just again pick up at verse 14. It says: *Having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.*

You can't make this up. This is our Hollywood ending. The very thing that Satan hoped to accomplish God caused to backfire spectacularly. I mean the law was the weapon that Satan tried to use against us, and by perfectly fulfilling that law and then offering up his life in our place, Jesus disarmed the principalities and the powers. The cross was also Satan's attempt at public humiliation of God himself, hung naked, bleeding and dying, and instead it turned out to be the grandest public display of the greatest victory in the history of mankind. Love had triumphed over power. As the psalmist put it in *Psalm 85: Mercy and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed.* And so *having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.*

So what do we do with this? We do what the first witnesses of this

victory did when they met the angel at the tomb. *Matthew 28:5* says: *But the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead.* So what do we do? We go and we tell everybody how this movie ends, or rather how it begins. Let's pray.

Father, we just praise you and thank you for the single greatest victory the universe has ever known, for the greatest of all superheros winning the grandest battle of all. Father, we praise you for the empty tomb, we praise you that the sacrifice was accepted, we praise you and thank you for your Son and the gift that he has given not just to you but to us and to everyone who puts their faith in him. Praise God, he is risen. Amen.