

Broomfield



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The Meaning and Message of Easter

The events of Matthew 16:1-4 began just after the Lord crossed the sea of Galilee from the Gentile area of the Decapolis (where He had miraculously fed the 4000) to the Jewish region of Magadan. We also find that this passage contains Jesus' final invitation to the religious leaders of His day. And thus, through this account, we gain a greater insight into the meaning and message of Easter.

I want to talk with you about the Meaning and Message of Easter. Now I'm not talking about the meaning and message the WORLD has attached to Easter, such as Easter bunnies, eggs, and chocolate candy. Nor am I talking about the meaning and message the CHURCH has attached to Easter. Rather I want to talk with you about the meaning and message the BIBLE attaches to Easter.

Now, I am aware that the celebration of Easter does not find its roots in the Bible, but in a celebration that the early church invented in the second century AD. However because Easter is the celebration of Christ's resurrection, the Bible has much to say about "The Meaning and Message of Easter" for it has much to say about the meaning and message of Christ's resurrection.

What meaning and message does the Bible attach to the resurrection of Christ?

You find that when the resurrection of Christ is discussed in the Bible, two imports largely stand out the resurrection of Christ means NEW LIFE for those in Christ.

1 Peter 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,"

This is what is traditionally viewed as the meaning and message of Easter. And it is a glorious message! And yet this gives one only half the picture because the resurrection of Christ also means the condemnation of the wicked. This is something we rarely consider. In fact, this is probably quite shocking to most of you. And yet it is just as important a truth and constitutes the other half of the meaning and message of Easter.

The Wicked Identified

So let us look at Easter from an angle we rarely consider: The Condemnation of the Wicked. The questions we are going to examine are these:

1. Who are the wicked condemned by Christ's resurrection?
2. What is the sign of their condemnation?
3. And How should this truth effect us?

Matthew 16:1, "The Pharisees also with the Sadducees came, and tempting desired him that he would shew them a sign from heaven."

The focus of this verse rests on two religious groups; the Pharisees and Sadducees. Ironically these two groups were enemies, and yet here we see them teamed up in the endeavor to test and so condemn Christ.

The Pharisees were the conservative and fundamental Jewish religious group of Christ's day who held rabbinic tradition to be of equal authority with Scripture.¹ They were strongly separatist, and considered themselves the protectors of Judaism. They generally were from the working class, and many of them (like Paul² made their living from a trade.

The Sadducees were the liberal Jewish religious group in Christ's day who completely denied the supernatural (angels, immortality, and the resurrection of the dead). They cared nothing for rabbinic tradition and had no hesitation about making religious, cultural, or political compromises. For the most part, they were aristocratic. Usually the High Priest and the Chief Priests were among their number. Many of them made fortunes operating the lucrative Temple concessions of money changing and the selling of sacrificial animals.

Now in our passage, Christ calls them "evil and adulterous."³ While this describes far more than the Pharisees and Sadducees, nevertheless it was applicable to these two religious groups. Indeed, the Pharisees and Sadducees before Christ were evil, adulterous, and ungodly.

And why was that? Was it their ACTIONS?

No, the Bible is quite specific in its description of them that they were quite an upright people.

Matthew 5:20, "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."

So whether you do good or bad things, this is of no consequence to the Biblical assessment of what constitutes a wicked individual!

Was it their RELIGION?

No, the Bible is full of Jews. Some of these Jews no doubt were Pharisees and Sadducees with whom God was well-pleased.⁴

Was it their LACK OF INTELLIGENCE?

¹ Compare Matthew 15:2-6

² Compare Acts 18:3

³ Compare Matthew 16:4

⁴ Compare Acts 2, 4

No, Christ makes it quite clear that (1) intelligence is not a barrier to righteousness⁵ and that (2) the Pharisees and Sadducees were quite intelligent.

Matthew 16:2-3, “He answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowring. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?”

This saying corresponds to the age-old mariner's ditty: “Red sky at night, sailor's delight. Red sky in the morning, sailor's warning.” Truly these religious leaders were quite intelligent. They could “discern the appearance of the sky.”

So what was their problem? Why did Christ call them “an evil and adulterous generation?”

Because brothers and sisters, these religious leaders were spiritually blind. Notice how verse 3 ends.

Matthew 16:3, “And in the morning, It will be foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowring. O ye hypocrites, **ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?**”

Do you see it?

In spite of their religious training and position their primitive and limited knowledge of weather was far superior to their knowledge of God. And just so that there is no misconception, the Pharisees and Sadducees of this text were in the presence of God and yet they totally missed Him on account of their wickedness — specifically, their unbelief!

And it is this that makes a man or woman wicked! It is not their actions or even their thoughts. It is the fact that they refuse to believe that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing [they] may have life in His name” (John 20:31).

It couldn't be clearer.

Matthew 16:1, “The Pharisees also with the Sadducees came, and tempting⁶ desired him that he would shew them a sign from heaven.”

The word *tempting* or *testing* can refer to a trial which is given for the purpose of making one fall. For example, it used in these passages:

Matthew 4:1, “Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.”

Galatians 6:1, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.”

James 1:13, “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man:”

⁵ Compare 1 Corinthians 1:26

⁶ πειραζω peirazo

The Pharisees and Sadducees did not come to Jesus in hope of finding truth FROM Him, but in hope of finding falsehood IN Him! And so far from believing in Him, their evil and adulterous heart sought to condemn Him. Thus they asked for a “sign from heaven.” This indicates that they desired to see a miraculous sign from the sky.

While they had already seen Christ perform many signs, the Pharisees and Sadducees attributed Christ's power to Satan.⁷ Thus here they want a sign from HEAVEN, which according to popular Jewish superstition, could only be performed by God.

And what would a “sign from heaven” — a sign directly from God — look like? It would be things like one of these:

- Manna from the sky (Exodus 16; John 6:32).
- The stopping of the sun (Joshua 10:12-14).
- The setting the stars in the heavens to fight for man (Judges 5:20).
- The drawing down of thunder to attack the enemy (1 Samuel 7:10).
- Fire from heaven (1 Kings 18:30-40).

And so in spite of the many miracles Christ performed which demonstrated His deity, the Pharisees and Sadducees were so driven by unbelief that they demanded “a sign from heaven” — a sign which they believed would have been out of His grasp for they thought Him to be of Satan!

And so don't misunderstand this text or the question posed by these religious leaders. The Pharisees and Sadducees were not honestly seeking proof that Jesus was the Messiah. In fact, they had many “proofs” of Christ's divinity, and yet these proofs were not enough.

Indeed! They were seeking after Christ's condemnation for they refused to believe! And it is this that constitutes “Wickedness” before God!

Hebrews 3:12, “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.”

An “unbelieving heart” is one and the same as an “evil heart.”

Romans 11:20a, “Well; because of unbelief they [the Israelites] were broken off”

God's people weren't broken off because they did this or thought that. Rather, they were cut off on account of their refusal to trust God!

Psalm 14:1, “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good.”

What is it that characterizes corrupt individuals?

They refuse to believe in God!

⁷ Compare Matthew 12:24

And so, one can be a very “good” person. He can go to church, help his neighbor, never lie or steal, raise a good family, receive the “man of the year” award, and even follow the Ten Commandments. But, if he refuses to believe in Christ — that is to rely upon Christ as your Lord and Savior — in the eyes of God YOU ARE WICKED!

The Sign of Their Condemnation

Matthew 16:4, “A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. And he left them, and departed.”

This is a very interesting response. Christ says that the only “sign” that God would give to the Pharisees and Sadducees, and for that matter any who refuse to believe, is “the sign of Jonah.”

Well, what is this sign?

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

Do you see it?

The sign is the RESURRECTION OF CHRIST! This is what the celebration of Easter is all about. It is the one and only sign that Jesus has given to an unbelieving world.

What therefore is its message?

On the one hand, the resurrection authenticates Christ's true identity! Speaking of Christ, Paul wrote that He “was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:4).

It is very clear in Scripture that Christ raised Himself from the dead.⁸ That being the case, Christ's conquering of the grave testifies to His deity; He is God!

And yet as in this text, Christ's resurrection also serves as a sign of JUDGEMENT AND CONDEMNATION to all who will not believe!

Matthew 12:41, “The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.”

The resurrection of Christ is viewed in Scripture as the Sign which seals the condemnation of the wicked! To sit in unbelief in spite of the Resurrection is to bear testimony to your wicked heart. And that is why we read this:

Matthew 16:4, “A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign

⁸ Compare John 10:17-18; Hebrews 2:14-15

be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. **And he left⁹ them, and departed.**”

The word *left* often carries in Scripture the idea of forsaking or abandoning.¹⁰ And that's the idea here. Jesus leaving of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the crowds refers to a judicial as well as physical forsaking and abandoning. Henceforth, from this time forth, Jesus spent the majority of His time with His disciples, and gave no more signs to unbelievers (only additional truth for those who believed).

Divine Pattern

This is God's pattern with all wicked people. After a determined amount of unbelief, the Lord “gives” the wicked “over” to their own wicked desires. Because of their unbelief we read these passages:

Romans 1:24, “Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves.”

Romans 1:26, “For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature.”

Romans 1:28, “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient.”

And though these verses speak of a TEMPORAL abandonment (as long as sinful men are alive, there is still the opportunity for salvation), yet if the wicked persist in unbelief till their death, they will receive an ETERNAL abandonment. On the Day of Judgment Christ will say these words:

Matthew 25:41, “Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:¹¹

The Grace of God

And so when the resurrection of Christ is discussed in the Bible, two meanings are attached to it:

1. NEW LIFE for those who believe.
2. CONDEMNATION (or eternal separation from God) for those who refuse to believe.

Though half the meaning and message of Easter is terrible news the GOOD NEWS is that until you die, there is still the opportunity to believe! The Apostle Paul encourages you to do so:

2 Corinthians 6:1-2, “We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.)”

In the Bible's view, to hear me preach this morning is to “receive the grace of God.” Thus don't receive this message in vain! The resurrection of Christ is Truth. Receive the New Life that God grants through

⁹ καταλειπω kataleipo

¹⁰ Compare 2 Peter 2:15

¹¹ Compare also Romans 2:5 and Hebrews 9:27

the Resurrection TODAY!

But sadly today, as hundreds of thousands across the United States and this world sit in church and hear about the Resurrection, many will say, “There is not enough proof that Christ rose. How can I believe?”

To this I say, there is AMPLE proof.

- The empty tomb.
- The witness of the 1000's who saw the resurrected Christ.
- The radically changed Roman world!
- The many ancient documents which attest to it.
- And the testimony of millions throughout the world who have been transformed by this Risen Savior!
- Historically speaking Christ's resurrection is a foregone conclusion!

And so to say that there is not enough proof that Christ rose from the dead is a smoke-screen. There is enough proof for any who will take a rational look at the cross and the empty tomb with integrity and truth.

But you see that is the issue! You don't believe because you will not believe! The Pharisees and Sadducees would not believe even though they witnessed hundreds of miracles including the resurrection! The more the Pharaoh saw God's power demonstrated, the more he hardened his heart in unbelief.¹² The French Voltaire declared, “Even if a miracle should be wrought in the open marketplace before a thousand sober witnesses, I would rather mistrust my senses than admit a miracle.”

Hear me well! That which keeps you from Christ is NOT a lack of evidence; it is a wicked and evil heart which refuses to believe!

You say, “Believe/trust what?” That is the question.

See every man, woman, and child stands before God as sinners and transgressors of God's word and will. Now the only thing that we can do as a result is to suffer in hell for eternity.

Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

But do you know what God did?

He Himself became a man. Now because He is God, He never sinned. As such, He didn't need to die! Yet He did die. He suffered under Pontius Pilate. He was abused by the Roman soldiers. He was hung on a cross to die! And then He raised Himself from the dead three days later.

Why?

2 Corinthians 5:21, “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.”

¹² Compare Exodus 7-11

You have to think of the sacrificial system. For a sinful being to approach God in the Old Testament he had to take a spotless lamb (i.e., a representation of that which is sinless.) He laid his hands on the lamb's head and confessed the sin that warranted death. He then slew the lamb to demonstrate that forgiveness can only come when the innocent dies on behalf of the guilty!

Well that is what Christ did. He died on behalf of the sinner.

Well how then can we — the wicked — be saved?

One can only be saved by believing/trusting/relying upon Christ. In other words one must this day lay your hands on the head of the Lamb of God, the Jesus Christ and must confess your sin- thereby trusting in Christ's spotless sacrifice as the payment for your sin. This is what it means to believe in Christ!

In light of this, I plead with you!

- Turn from your unbelief.
- Throw away the excuses.
- Go to Christ this morning.
- Rely upon Him to save you.
- Rely upon His spotless life.
- Rely upon His death for sin.
- Rely upon His resurrection.
- Receive the NEW LIFE God grants through the resurrection!

Christ has never cast out or abandoned the soul of one who sincerely sought Him. And so in the words of Isaiah the prophet, I urge you to “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (Isaiah 55:6-7).

If you have sought the Lord and been saved by His grace, how ought you to respond to a passage like this?

First we must pray and weep for the one who will not believe. How many unbelievers sitting in church and listening to the words of life will have heard for the last time? In one weeks time, how many will be in that terrifying place where the fire is never quenched? Pray for these lost souls!

But we must also gaze upon the beauty of our Savior who humbled Himself and suffered shame and humiliation at the hands of sinful men.¹³ Who obeyed the Father and went to the cross though He had no sin.¹⁴ And who broke the chains of death on our behalf and ROSE FROM THE DEAD!¹⁵

Indeed, it is a bitter/sweet message, the resurrection of Christ.¹⁶ Accordingly, let us close this passage examining ourselves to make sure this Easter finds us relying upon the Resurrected Christ as the satisfaction for our sin.

¹³ Compare 1 Peter 2:23

¹⁴ Compare Philippians 2:8

¹⁵ Compare Hebrews 2:14-15, Acts 2:24

¹⁶ Compare Revelation 10:8-10

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on April 16, 2006. Greg is the Preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.