

That First Passion Week

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Perhaps you've already heard what happened after Jesus had risen from the dead: how he appeared to his disciples over a period of forty days, and how afterward, he sent the Holy Spirit, who enabled us to be powerful witnesses to the rising Christ.

When Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to us, we were filled with overwhelming joy and hope. Joy and hope! Not sorrow and despair like we had when we saw him on the cross. Considering what God offers us now through faith in Christ, it would be all too easy to forget the anguish and sorrow Jesus endured on the cross. But to forget his anguish, to forget his sorrow, to forget that unimaginably dark moment when Jesus took on the sins of the world—to forget these things would be to forget the great price paid for our sin. And forgetting that, would rob us of a deeper understanding of our Heavenly Father's love.

And so I come today, to share with you both the sweet and bitter moments of That First Passion Week, a week that began so joyously on that first Palm Sunday....

We were on our way up to Jerusalem with Jesus and his disciples. Two had been sent up ahead to a small village to fetch a colt. When they returned, we put some of our cloaks on the animal, then Jesus got on and rode the rest of the way. As we traveled, crowds began to gather. I remember people taking off their own garments and laying them on the road—while others cut branches from the trees and laid them in Jesus' path. As we went on, the crowds grew larger and larger. And they began to shout out:

"Hosanna to the Son of David... Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord... Hosanna in the highest!"

As we entered Jerusalem, people began coming out of their houses.

"Who is this?" they asked.

And the crowds replied, "It is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee!"

Soon all who had heard of his miraculous signs and wonders, came out and joined us in the streets, joined in the shouting and celebration:

"BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!"

Oh, I tell you... the whole city was in an uproar!

And I remember Jesus walking through the temple area—shouting out as he overturned the tables of the money changers and those who sold the doves:

"It is written," he said to them, 'My house will be called a house of prayer'; but you have turned it into a 'den of thieves!'"

Oh, he spoke... he acted on such authority. No one dared lay a hand on him.

And there were little children in the temple area. You should have seen some of these little ones as they, too, were caught up in the shouting and celebration—their little arms waving, their shrill little voices crying out:

"Hosanna to the Son of David!"

Oh, this infuriated the priests! "You hear what they're saying?" they asked Jesus.

But Jesus replied:

"Haven't you read, 'From the lips of children and infants you've ordained praise...'"

Yes, this further angered the priests. Yet they dared not lay their hands on Jesus. They could see the people were behind him.

But later during the week, the priests, the elders, the teachers of the Law sought Jesus out and tried to lay traps for him. Oh, they asked him all sorts of questions. What is the greatest commandment? Is it right or not to pay taxes? Will there be marriage in the resurrection? (Ahhh, what you'd call a trick question.)

They were looking for ways to trip him up, to catch him at his words, to find something for which they might accuse him. But Jesus answered with such wisdom. He easily got around their traps. And then he turned the tables on them; Jesus began asking the "learned teachers" questions—questions to which they had no answers. It soon came to the point where no one dared ask him any more questions. But they became more determined to do away with him.

I remember walking in the temple area with his disciples. We were impressed by the beauty of all the buildings. We were anxious to show Jesus. But when we did, he told us a day would come when not one stone would be left upon another.

Later, Jesus met privately with twelve of his closest disciples. And they asked him what would be the signs of his appearing and of his kingdom. Jesus told them that before he would come back for his elect, there would be perilous times—times of great persecution and suffering. Then he told them he would soon be handed over to be crucified. And indeed, the priests and elders had already plotted to kill Jesus. And Judas Iscariot—one of the twelve—agreed to hand Jesus over to them.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus and the twelve gathered around the Passover table. The Lord took the bread, and after giving thanks, he broke it and handed it to them.

"This is my body which is broken for you," he said.

Later that evening he took the cup, and after giving thanks, Jesus handed it to them and said: "This is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

After they sang a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives, where Judas Iscariot later came with an armed crowd. And they took Jesus away.

They took Jesus to the palace of Caiaphas, the high priest. There, false witnesses were brought forward to testify against him. Jesus made no great effort to defend himself. He knew what was written of him; he knew of the cross that waited just hours ahead.

One by one, these so-called witnesses came forward with their testimonies, but they began to contradict one another and a long debate ensued.

Finally, Caiaphas the high priest, realizing they were getting nowhere, asked Jesus outright: "I charge you by the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the son of God!"

Jesus looked right at them and said:

"Yes it is as you say. And I say to all of you: in the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One, and coming on the clouds of heaven."

At this, Caiaphas jumped to his feet and shouted out, "He has blasphemed! What need have we of further witnesses?" And the assembly cried out he was worthy of death. Then they dragged him off to Pilate to be sentenced.

But Pilate? Pilate didn't know what to do—he sent Jesus to Herod! But Herod only mocked him and sent him right back to Pilate. And there again, before his accusers, Jesus made no effort to defend himself. He was like a lamb being led to the slaughter. Oh, Pilate realized that Jesus had done no crime, but to please the priests, he ordered that Jesus be whipped. But it wasn't enough for those who wanted to see him dead.

In commemoration of the feast, it was Pilate's custom to release one of the prisoners chosen by the crowd. At the time they had a notorious insurrectionist named Barabbas. And wanting to free Jesus, Pilate offered the people a choice: they could have Jesus or they could have Barabbas.

At first, this put our minds at ease; the choice was obvious, certainly the people would pick Jesus, we thought. But the priests went among the crowds, persuading the people to join in their demand: "Give us Barabbas!" they shouted.

Pilate looked over the crowd, and then motioning to Jesus, he asked: "And what am I to do with the one you call the King of the Jews?"

And their response... we could not believe our ears. Five days earlier, it had been, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Had their cry so quickly changed to "Crucify him!?"

Crucify him?

Then the Roman soldiers came... took him away. And they put him on the cross.

Maybe it's hard for you to imagine what it was like. Maybe you've heard the story so often before that it seems no more than some distant dream to you. But to us who walked with him, it was a nightmare.

We had known him nearly three years. We lived with him; we ate with him. We saw him laugh; we saw him cry. We were constant witnesses to his love, compassion.

After three years we never thought we'd see that day—even though he told us in advance. And even though he later appeared to us in the glory of his resurrection... Still, how can I forget the horrors of that Friday? His words ringing from the cross:

"Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?" My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

He was poured out like water, his heart pounding within. His strength drying up like a piece of pottery; his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth because of thirst. And His blood... his precious blood... flowed from his hands and feet when they nailed him to the cross. Blood flowed from his thorn-crowned brow—as he looked down at those who mocked him, those who cast lots for his clothing, those who despised and rejected him. Blood flowed from his side when they pierced him with the spear.

For three years we had known him! We were close to him. We loved him. He was our friend; HE LOVED US! But then... then he was dead.

The city was preparing for the Passover that Friday. Thousands from other lands were coming to Jerusalem's gates. Who knows how many passed that hill and cast no more than a disgusted glance at the three men crucified there. Not knowing nearly 800 years earlier, God spoke to the prophet Isaiah concerning one of those men.

(Isaiah 53: 1-6)

But at the time, not even we who walked with Jesus understood what the prophets had written concerning him. We didn't understand Jesus when he said he'd be crucified and then rise again from the dead. It made no sense to us. We were so caught up in our sorrow—and in fear for our own lives. That's why, when the women returned from the tomb early on Sunday saying, "He is risen!", our thoughts didn't turn to the scriptures or to Jesus' words, but rather to doubt.

But then... Oh, but then, we saw him!

We were frightened at first, thinking perhaps it was a spirit. But he showed us his hands and his feet. He showed us his side where they pierced him. And he looked into our eyes, down into the depth of our souls. That's when we knew... it was the Lord! Oh, the hope, the joy we had when he was in our midst again. And the beauty of those words, "Shalom a lay chem!" Peace be unto you!

And he opened our minds to the scriptures, explaining how it was necessary that he first suffer and then come into his glory. Here we had known him nearly three years—but it wasn't until after he died, it was until after he was buried, it wasn't until after he rose again from the dead and appeared unto us that we finally, yes we finally understood who Jesus really is! He is the sacrificial Lamb of God. The one who died that we might live. The one who lives!; that we might never die.

Yes, there are those who count my generation fortunate—having lived in the day of Messiah. But he wasn't given for my generation alone, just as he prayed for all those who would believe through our message. And this is the message: Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed of God. He died on the cross for our sins, he was buried, and he rose again from the dead as the scriptures foretold.

(John 3:16)

It is good to remember the cross, and the one who died on it. But let us never fail to remember the cross no longer holds our Savior. Nor does the empty tomb that could not hold back that power that declared Jesus to be the Son of God.

Salvation is not borne of our works, but by the Grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. There is no other name under heaven given to us by which we must be saved. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. And so we implore all on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God!

So let us think of Jesus – not only as the one who was, but also as the one who is, the one who presently intercedes for us, the one who is coming again in all the power and glory of Heaven to gather up those of faith. And so we shall ever be with the Lord.

In the meantime, let us be faithful to his command to be his witnesses. Let each day be like the day Jesus was born—as we witness to the newness of life that is born within us. And let each day be like the day Jesus rose from the grave, as we witness to the power of his resurrection... and await his glorious return.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!