



EASTER

IN THREE WORDS



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Ask most people to give you three words that sum up what Easter is all about, and the words they are likely to come up with are chocolate, chocolate and, well... chocolate.

OK, if you're slightly older, and don't have an addiction to the sweet brown stuff, you might have included words like eggs, chicks, flowers—or perhaps simply “a holiday weekend”.

But at its heart, Easter is about something more significant and much more lasting. It's about who we are as human beings. It's about the love of the God who made each one of us. And it's about the possibility of meeting God in this life and the certainty of meeting him in the next.

All of these things come into focus when we look at the man called Jesus, and especially as we think about the events which Easter marks in our calendars.

The first Easter

In his brief 33 years on earth, Jesus of Nazareth set in motion teachings, values and principles that have impacted and undergirded empires, cultures, leadership patterns, business models and the lives of literally billions of followers around the world today. Without doubt he is the most influential person who has ever lived. No serious student of history or current world affairs or literature or architecture or art or science or philosophy can

afford to ignore Jesus of Nazareth. And yet at Easter, the principal celebration of the Christian church, we remember not so much his life, teaching or influence—but his death. For he died, condemned as a criminal, while still a young man.

I work in the City of London, a fast-paced, busy and money-driven culture, where almost half a million people work daily. And yet we hold instinctively to the teaching of this Jewish carpenter. The motto of the London Stock Exchange is “My word is my bond”—it is an essentially Christian virtue on which the careers of countless suited young executives will either float or flounder. But Jesus’ influence doesn’t stop at integrity.

“Love your neighbour.” “Do good to those who hate you.” “Turn the other cheek.” “Love your enemy.” All these powerful moral ideas come from the lips of this one man. And these values aren’t in decline. There is a feeling in Europe and North America that the Christian faith is in its twilight years: something that is outdated and has outstayed its welcome. But that is to suffer from cultural myopia. There has been an exponential rise in people converting to Christianity in China, India and Latin America, which means the influence of Jesus will continue to grow as we move through the 21st century.

And yet Jesus of Nazareth ended his life in shame on a cross outside Jerusalem, crucified between two common criminals. *How can this be?*

John, one of Jesus’ closest friends, set out to explain the life, teaching, and death and resurrection of Jesus, when he wrote his Gospel. John was an eyewitness, and he recorded for us not only the facts, but the *meaning* of Jesus’ death. But John didn’t simply write down his own thoughts about these

things. Jesus had explained carefully to John what his life was all about. Furthermore, what Jesus explained was in line with thousands of years of God's promises, which we can read in the Old Testament.

In his Gospel, John wants us to see the meaning both of Jesus' death and of his resurrection from the dead. Easter can be summarised in these three words, none of which is chocolate: Royalty, Sacrifice, and Victory.

1. ROYALTY

The theme of the royal rule of King Jesus is central to all of the Gospel stories.

Many years ago, through a strange set of circumstances, I shared an apartment with someone who had strong connections to one of the European royal families. When I moved in, I had no idea who he was. But over time, the evidence began to mount up. It wasn't just the letters that arrived from abroad, or the telephone calls at unusual times of the night from people who sounded important. It was the way his visitors dressed and the invitations he received and the places he went on holiday. Eventually, his identity became undeniable!

And as we read the Gospel accounts, though we may not initially see who Jesus is, Jesus' divine royal credentials spring off every page. We may not think of him as God's King now, but a survey of the evidence demands this conclusion.

Jesus was born of royal descent from the line of King David—Israel's greatest king. The name we know Jesus by today—"Christ"—is not a name, but a title. It simply means

“the anointed one”, or King. But Jesus didn’t simply *claim* a title; he lived the role of divine royalty. John recounts how he turned water into wine, caused the paralysed to walk, fed 5000 people with a few scraps, walked on water, raised the dead to life...

Wherever he went, Jesus banished disease, demons and disasters with his powerful word of command. And people asked, “Who is this man?” But it was not just his power that impressed people. With that astonishing strength came a life and a character that were humble, purposeful, compassionate and wise. And on top of this, his teaching kept thousands spellbound for hours on end under the hot Middle-Eastern sun.

When asked, “Who are you?” Jesus never replied directly. Instead, he pointed people to the Jewish Scriptures—to countless prophecies about a coming king who would rule his people as a shepherd looks after and cares for his sheep. The conclusion is inescapable. Jesus is God in the flesh: God’s Son, who came into the world to rule the world with truth, justice and love.

A royal death

Over the last 20 years I have read through John’s account of Jesus’ life with dozens of individuals. Many of them have come from positions of extreme scepticism about Jesus’ claims. Time and again they have found themselves convinced by the evidence. One top-ranking lawyer said to me, “I have read the evidence. I can’t deny it. I am compelled to believe.”

Everything about Jesus speaks of divine royalty, but nowhere was his royalty more carefully and deliberately on display than at his death on the cross. Jesus was arrested and tried by the Jewish leaders, but because they could not execute him, they

handed him over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, claiming he was a rebel and a traitor.

And as the events unfolded, Pilate was manipulated by the roaring crowd into executing someone he knew to be innocent, and in whom he recognised the marks of royal greatness.

As Jesus was pinned to a cross of wood with rough-wrought iron pegs driven through his wrists and ankles, Pilate commanded a sign be placed above his head, written in three languages. Normally such a sign would detail the crimes for which the prisoner was being executed: “murderer” or “thief”. But Pilate commanded this to be written instead:

“JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS”

John 19 v 19

No doubt Pilate meant this to taunt the Jewish leaders who had demanded Jesus’ death. And yet in doing this, Pilate unwittingly fulfilled ancient prophecies about God’s King, who would come to die. One thousand years earlier, Israel’s greatest king, David, had written songs (Psalms 22 and 69) which talked about a future royal ruler who would be perfect: untainted by the normal frailties of human power with no moral, political, financial or personal scandal attached to his name. This king would stand uncompromisingly for truth, justice, purity and integrity. And yet, this king, who would live in absolute allegiance to God, would suffer at the hand of humanity.

In his account John shows us the specific ways in which Jesus *precisely* fulfilled the details of these two songs and many other parts of the Old Testament. The piercing with nails and

spear. The gambling for his clothes. His death by crucifixion at the hands of foreigners.

The answer to the question, “*Who is Jesus?*” asked by the crowds, by Pilate, and by any thinking person today, has only one resounding answer. He is divine royalty—God’s chosen King of the whole world. The Scriptures show it. His life, his miracles and his teaching confirm it. Those who knew him testified to it. And even in his death he demonstrated it.

It is not just lawyers who come to believe in Jesus. That sentiment, “I am compelled to believe”, has been repeated again and again to me as I have looked at the life of Jesus with numerous other city workers: by a Yale-educated East Coast American lawyer; by a security guard; by a Cambridge-educated London City banker; by insurance brokers and civil servants; by university scientists and historians.

But this still leaves hanging in the air the question, “*Why did he die?*” For if Jesus was God’s King, what did his crucifixion accomplish? Or is what we are remembering at Easter just another royal tragedy, like we remember, perhaps, the death of Diana, Princess of Wales?

2. SACRIFICE

I was once conducting a short course helping people to explore the claims of Jesus. In the first session, we explored the evidence for Jesus’ divine royalty. There was a very sceptical man sitting in the back row. He heckled throughout the presentation, so I wasn’t really expecting him back for the second evening. However, as we gathered, there he was, sitting in the front row.

I went through the events of Jesus' death and explained that Jesus was unjustly arrested by the Jews, unfairly tried by Pilate, brutally beaten by the Roman soldiers, betrayed and denied by his closest followers, given over by the mob, and nailed to a cross to die. As I came to the end of the presentation, he sat spellbound by the story. Then he whispered quietly, "What a tragedy!"

So, is that it? A wonderful life—a tragic death. The evidence seems to suggest not.

A tragic death?

On the one hand we could say that Jesus died because of the wickedness of humanity. The ugly, dishonest, cowardly act perpetrated by all of the people mentioned above exposes the most unpleasant truths that lie below the surface in all of our characters.

Pilate acted unjustly for reasons of political expedience. He wanted to save his skin. The soldiers acted brutally, egged on by one another. The disciples acted out of cowardice, Judas out of greed, and the religious leaders out of envy; and the crowd simply behaved as so many mobs do—they were whipped into an unthinking frenzy.

So at one level we have to say that Jesus, God's chosen King, was murdered because of our corporate, shared human wickedness. I find that as I look at the life of Jesus—his moral purity, his integrity, his courage, his love—I see myself falling far, far short of his perfect standard. And as I explore the reasons why each group of people participated in putting Jesus to death—hatred of God's right to rule my life, cowardice, greed, jealousy, pride—I find myself mirrored in their actions.

I'm sure that this is what John intends as he recounts the

events of Jesus' death. He wants to expose our human desire to reject God's rule, to hold him at arm's length, and to do anything necessary to keep him and his claims out of our lives.

I have a friend who is in the army, and led his battalion in Helmand Province in Afghanistan at the worst point in the recent conflict. He has seen life at its very worst, and is one of the bravest men I know. He is also a Christian, and I have heard him speak personally about "the dark side" that is within each one of us: a dark side that we find exposed by the perfection of Jesus and reflected in the actions of those who crucified Jesus. This dark side is what the Bible calls sin: a refusal to recognise God as God and, consequently, a rejection of his rule.

So on the one hand we could say that Jesus died because of our human sin. But on the other hand we have to say that Jesus died as a deliberate sacrifice.

Finished!

Notice what happened when Jesus died:

Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. *John 19 v 30*

This is no cry of defeat: *I've had it!* nor merely the announcement of imminent death. He says *It's finished! I've done what I came to do.* And what Jesus came to do is clear, both from his own teaching, and from the Old Testament Scriptures. He died to pay the price of God's judgment against human sin, and to cleanse his people—so that we can come under his royal rule.

Jesus died on a significant day in the Jewish calendar, in the middle of a festival known as Passover. At the Passover God's

people were remembering God's promise to provide a sacrifice which would carry the judgment that they deserved to enable them to enter his perfect kingdom. The sacrifice was known as the Passover lamb. Jesus is referred to in the Gospels as "the Lamb ... who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1 v 29). He died willingly at the Passover in order to carry God's judgment for our rejection of his rule.

There are many other pictures and ideas in the Gospels that all repeat and reinforce the same central message about why Jesus died. John quotes another Old Testament prophet who talked of a day when the people of Israel would be rescued by a king who is "pierced"; and then the quote goes on:

**On that day a fountain will ... flow ... to cleanse them
from sin and impurity. *Zechariah 13 v 1***

John is telling us that, at the cross of Jesus, we can be made clean again. The blood of Jesus washes away my guilt before God, my failure before God, my lies and lack of integrity—everything that so differentiates me from the perfect King who speaks the truth to me about myself and the world.

The problem is this: how can I possibly have a part in the kingdom of the King of truth when my failure is laid bare by the truth of Jesus? He shines the spotlight on my life, and as I look at myself, I realise that I fall far, far short of his perfect standards.

But as the spotlight shines on the cross, I see that Jesus' death is a **royal death** and it's also a **sacrificial death**. The King of love and truth died to carry God's judgment and wash away my sin and failure so that I can have a place in his kingdom and live under his royal rule.

I still remember the day I first realised that Jesus Christ, God's only Son, had died on the cross to carry God's judgment on my personal sin, in full. It means I now no longer need to fear God's judgment. It means that all my guilt over everything I have done wrong has been washed away. It means friendship with God. It means a fresh start, and a new life lived with God.

But still, we haven't yet gained a complete answer to the question: *Why did Jesus die?* What does this sin-bearing, judgment-carrying, sacrificial death actually achieve?

3. VICTORY

Easter does not end with the final breath of Jesus on the cross. John tells us that, after the Roman soldiers had made doubly sure he was dead by thrusting a spear into his side, he was taken down, wrapped in linen strips and buried. The following day, the Jewish Sabbath, all was silence and fear and bewilderment for the shocked and traumatised followers of Jesus. And then this...

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...

John 20 v 1

The tomb was empty. The body gone. And angels announced that Christ had risen from the dead—just as Jesus and the Old Testament writers had repeatedly promised and predicted.

All the Gospel writers go on to describe a series of encounters as the risen Jesus appeared to astonished disciples one after another. He met some, like Mary, alone. He showed

himself to groups as large as 500 people together. He met doubters and grievors, whose moods turned from bewilderment and sadness to belief and joy.

Many people find it helpful to look at the very strong evidence for the resurrection as they think about what it means to follow Jesus—this is a good thing to do. But the Bible writers are concerned not only to show the evidence that Jesus rose from the dead, but also to explain what the resurrection *means*.

- **His resurrection proves that he is Royalty.** The resurrection is God’s vindication of everything that Jesus did and said and claimed to be. God raised Jesus to life as the ruler of the whole world.
- **His resurrection proves that the Sacrifice was accepted.** The resurrection is God’s resounding “Yes!” to Jesus’ sin-bearing death. He paid the price, and the price was accepted. Cleansing and forgiveness is now possible through Jesus.
- **His resurrection proves his Victory over human sin and death.** There is life beyond this life, both for those who accept and for those who reject Jesus’ rule today.

This changes *everything*, both for those who accept Jesus as their King and for those who will not.

For those who accept Jesus as their King, Jesus promises to cleanse us, lead us, teach us and guide us. But he promises so much more than this: he promises to *transform us*—to change us from within. And he promises a life with him in his perfect kingdom beyond this life either when we die or when he returns.

It is this victory that we celebrate on Easter Sunday. There is a new life now for those who trust Jesus, who become forgiven members of his eternal kingdom, living with him as our loving

Lord today. And there is new life then as we look forward to his perfect kingdom to come.

But it also changes everything for those who refuse to accept Jesus as their King—even if we won't recognise this now. For Jesus has been shown to be God's royal ruler for all eternity—through his royal life, through his sacrificial death, and through his victorious resurrection.

Jesus' Victory confirms that he is the person he claimed to be. This means that every one of us who has ever lived, whether we like it or not, and whether we believe it or not, will meet him as our Lord and Judge at the end of our lives. If we have rejected him, his royal rule, his loving sacrifice, and his victorious resurrection... we will have to answer to him for it in eternity.

But there is one final question we need to think about and understand about Jesus' death, and it's this: *How should we respond?*

We've seen who Jesus is: *the King*. We've seen why he died: *to cleanse us*. We have seen that Jesus offers to welcome us into his kingdom and to transform us for eternity. But how should we respond to the events of the first Easter?

There is a fourth word we need to consider...

4. RESPOND

One of Jesus' disciples provides us with the "model response". At first Thomas didn't believe the other disciples when they told him that Jesus had risen from dead. That's why he's sometimes known as "Doubting Thomas".

Then Jesus appeared to Thomas and commanded him to

put his fingers into the holes where the nails had pierced Jesus' hands and to put his hand into the spear hole in Jesus' side.

Thomas said to him, "My Lord, and my God!"

John 20 v 28

Here is the appropriate way to respond. It is to recognise the royal King Jesus, who gave his life on the cross as a sacrifice for our sin and rose victorious as, "**my** Lord, and **my** God".

In one sense this statement is just five simple words. But said sincerely to Jesus Christ, they are five words that will change your life for all eternity.

An Easter prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, I recognise that you are Lord and King, and that you have the right to rule over my life.

Lord Jesus Christ, I recognise that there is a dark side to all of my life in which I have failed to live in a way which acknowledges you and pleases you.

Lord Jesus Christ, I thank you that you came in all your divine majesty to die on the cross as a sacrifice for my sin.

Lord Jesus Christ, please cleanse me from my sin as I turn to you, my Lord and my God.

Amen

How would you sum up Easter in just three words?

William Taylor takes us to the heart of Easter and the meaning of the death of Jesus on that first Good Friday. He shows us how his death was:

- Royal – it reveals Jesus' identity
- Sacrificial – it means we can be forgiven
- Victorious – it shows how death is defeated

Reading this booklet could change the way you see Easter forever...

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