

EASTER

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

A Prayer Devotional by Stephen G. Derges



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INTRODUCTION

For many people Easter is synonymous with an extended holiday weekend, chocolate and small furry animals with long ears and bob tails! It's often viewed as an archaic celebration with its roots shrouded in historic mystery and no longer relevant to modern day living and culture.

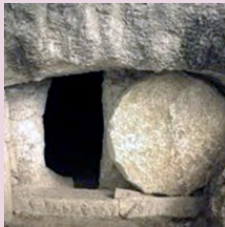
Yet Easter is considered the most significant festival in the Christian calendar so in this Prayer Devotional I'm aiming to determine the reasons why.

The question was once asked, *'What's Jesus got to do with Easter?'*

The answer as we'll see, is everything – absolutely everything!

Over the next 8 days leading up to Easter Sunday, often termed **“Holy Week”**, I'd like us to *'go back to basics'* and establish why Christians believe the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is of such vital significance.

- ◆ A life that demonstrated the incredible love of a Heavenly Father.
- ◆ A sacrificial death that ushers in a new relationship for everyone.
- ◆ An empty tomb and miraculous resurrection that defeats the power of death and its hold on us.



This is not a fictional story about a good man or inspirational teacher; it's not about a miracle-maker who stood up for the rights of the oppressed or even established a new *'religion'*. Yes, it does include those aspects but it's much more about someone who, as we will explore, claimed to be the Son of God and though divine in nature was also fully human.

This isn't going to be a conventional walk through the events leading up to Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday but more an exploration how Easter fits into the glorious plan of salvation – God's rescue strategy for humanity.

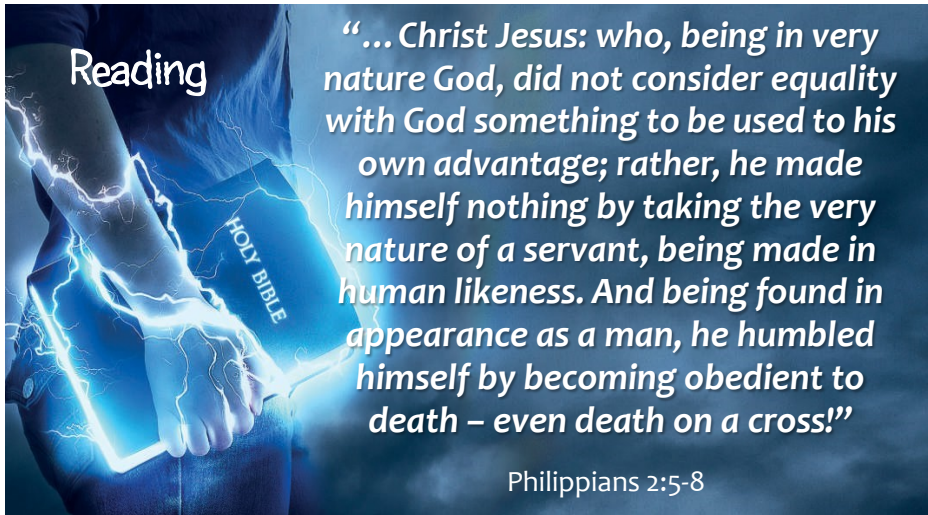
Each day there will be a relevant Bible passage and a few comments of explanation to consider, culminating with a short prayer. My hope is the outcome won't merely provide information but that it will result in life transformation – an understanding that points us to belief and a desire to leads to the practical outworking of faith in every aspect of our lives.

I hope and pray, we'll enjoy journeying together.

Stephen G. Deryes



DAY 1: WHO IS JESUS?



“... Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!”

Philippians 2:5-8

Christians believe in a Trinitarian God (often referred to as the Godhead) – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – all co-equal and in perfect unity, yet with different attributes.

This may be a mystifying doctrine to get our finite minds around, but it’s affirmed in several places in the Bible – e.g., Genesis 1:26 uses the plural **“we”** to describe the Godhead at work in creation and in 1 Peter 1:2, Ephesians 3:14-21 and 2 Corinthians 13:14 we see all three Persons of the Trinity working together.

Some people find it difficult to reconcile that in Jesus we see both the divine and humanity, but our Bible verses today explain Jesus was willing to give up His divinity and become a man, ‘God in flesh’, because there was a plan for Him to achieve. That plan – death on a Cross and resurrection – is the focus of Easter.

Of course, anyone can make claims about themselves so let’s look at three verses from John’s Gospel to examine whether what Jesus said and did can be substantiated.

- ➡ John 1:1, referring to Jesus as being the **“Word”** says, ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”***.
- ➡ Jesus told His followers in John 10:30 that He and the Father were

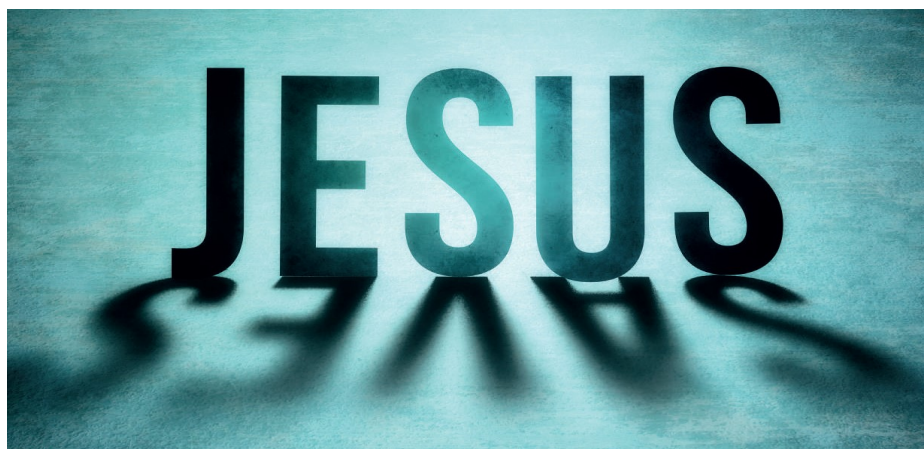
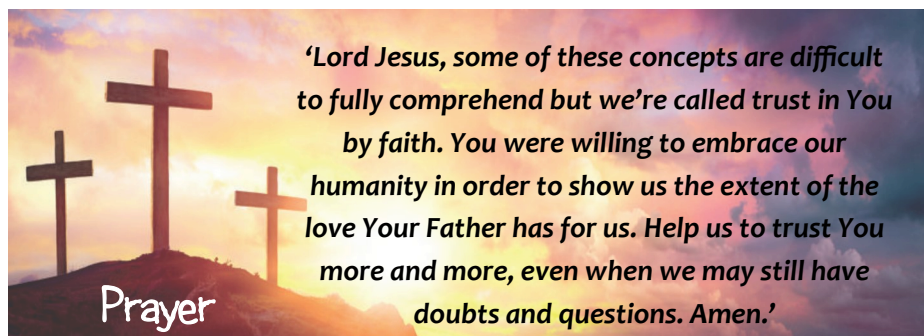
one – a phrase that denotes not just unity but equality. When Jesus was questioned about His authority and ability to perform miracles, he declared, “... **the Father is in Me, and I am in the Father [that is, I am One with Him]**” – John 10:38 (Amplified Bible).

- ➡ In addition, Colossians 1:15 affirms, “**The Son is the image of the invisible God.**” Jesus replicates God in all His fullness – like Father, like Son!

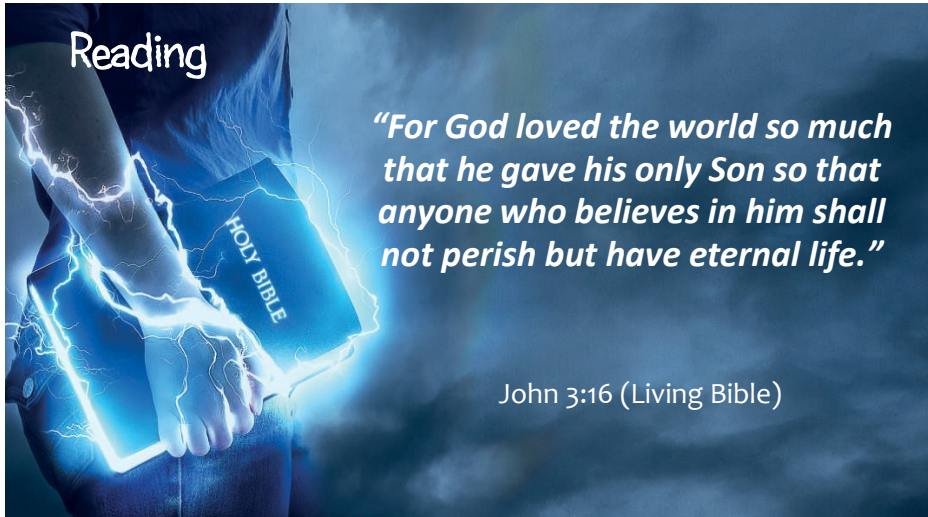
And what He said about His claims of divinity Jesus backed up with amazing human compassion, empathy and miraculous power.

- ➡ He restored to life three people who had died.
- ➡ Numerous people were healed.
- ➡ He exercised control over natural, physical and climatic conditions.

In Jesus’ life here on earth, He demonstrated that He is totally credible, authentic and genuine. He was the ‘*real deal*’ and what He said and did proved without doubt, His claim to be God’s one and only Son.



DAY 2: THE REASON WHY



Reading

“For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that anyone who believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

John 3:16 (Living Bible)

Our verse today is probably the most well known in the Bible and sums up the reason why Jesus came to earth.

There are at least three questions that come to mind.

Firstly, what is love?

There's no doubt that love is difficult to define. We use the word to describe not just the feelings of emotion we have for someone but also to indicate our appreciation of say, chocolate or a favourite pastime or even the football club we support. There are so many connotations.

But remember we're thinking about Easter here and the Bible has a definition of love that's appropriate in this context. John 15:13 says, **“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.”** When thinking about acts of heroism we sometimes refer to the 'ultimate sacrifice' – that's exactly what Jesus did when He went to the Cross on that first Easter.

Secondly, what does belief in Jesus look like?

Again, let's refer to a verse from the Bible. Romans 10:9 affirms: **“if you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”** We'll look at what **“saved”** means later in this Devotional but for now let's realise that belief cannot be inactive – it's necessary for our faith to be spoken out, and by inference, lived out.

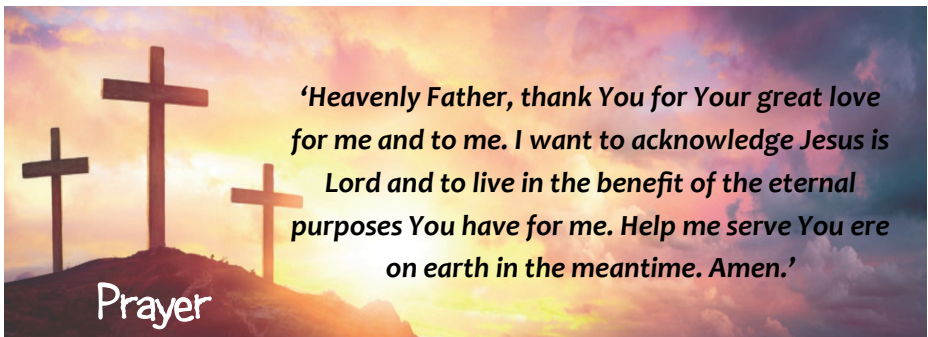
Thirdly, what is eternal life?

I don't believe there are many people, if any, who never wonder what happens when we die. Is life here on earth all there is? Are there consequences for our choices and actions? And if there are, how, when, where and what does that comprise? Some people work on the 'balance of probability' – if the so-called good I do on earth outweighs the negative effects of my life, then it will 'probably work out okay'.

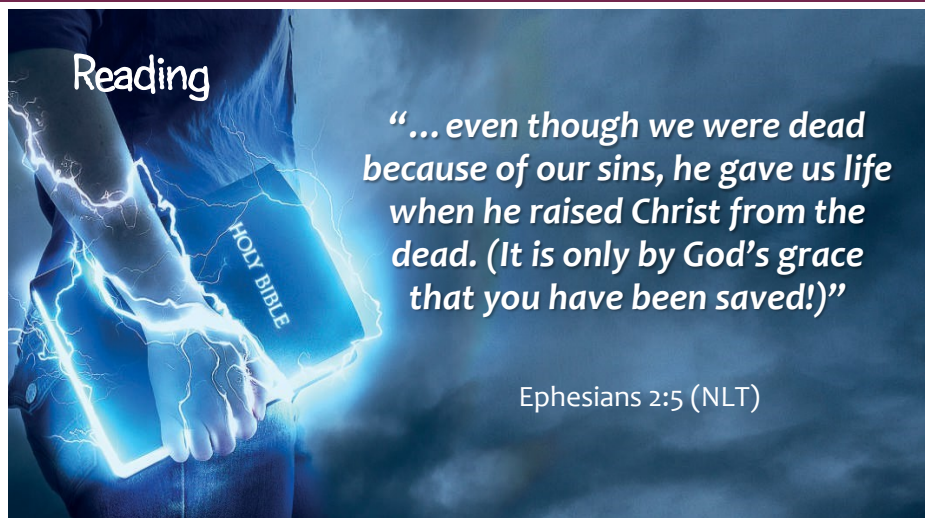
But the Bible is explicit – our lives on earth have significance and purpose and we will have to give an account to God. Rather than being concerned about scales of justice, He wants to know whether we've acknowledged and accepted that Jesus is the only way by which we can have an eternal future with Him.

Thankfully, John 3:17 assures us, ***“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”***

That offer is still open today!



DAY 3: SAVING GRACE



I said yesterday that we'd look at what the Bible means by 'being saved'. It's sometimes referred to as being 'born again' and the Apostle Paul talks about Christians becoming **"new creations"** – see 2 Corinthians 5:17. Here comes the tricky bit – we need to talk about a topic that we'd rather avoid! Yes, it's what the Bible calls **"sin"** or **"unrighteousness"**.

Let's be candid – none of us when we think about our lives rationally can convince ourselves that we match up to our own moral or ethical standards. We know we let others down, make false claims or promises and we hurt people.

And if we can't manage to achieve our own self-imposed benchmarks of behaviour, how will we ever match up to the higher standards that a righteous, holy God requires?

Two verses from the book of Romans emphasise the point:

- ➡ **"For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard"** – Romans 3:23 (NLT)
- ➡ **"Sin pays its servants: the wage is death. But God gives to those who serve him: his free gift is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"** – Romans 6:23 (J.B. Phillips New Testament)

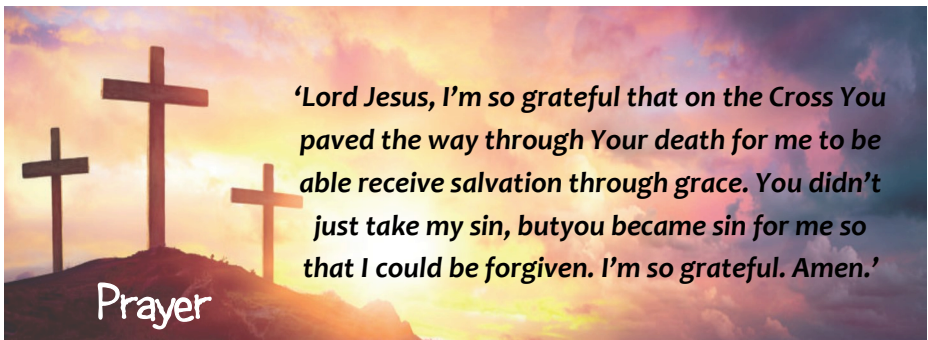
Thankfully then, help is at hand – another reason for Easter.

There's one huge difference between Jesus and us – He lived a perfect, sinless life. Hebrews 4:15 tells us He experienced the same kind of trials

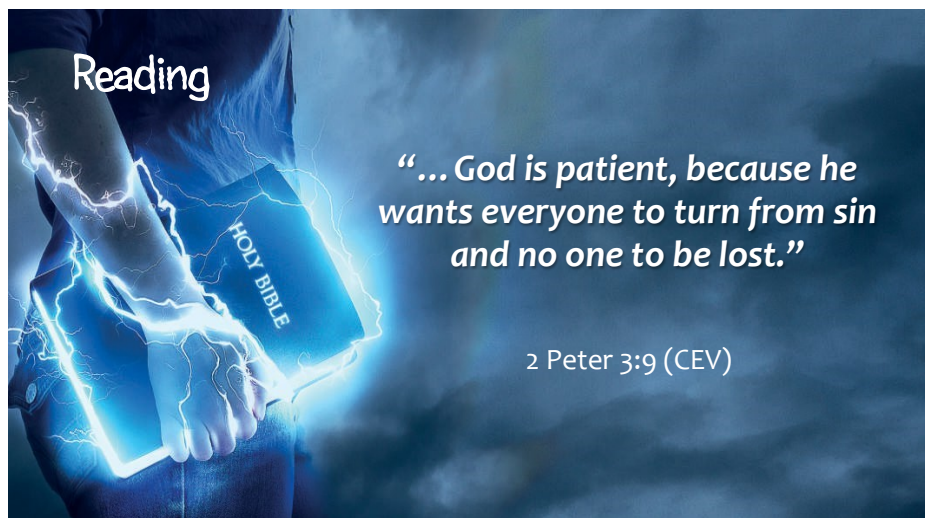
and tribulations as we do and yet He never gave into temptation. Even when He was severely provoked at His crucifixion, He prayed forgiveness for those who mistreated Him.

And because of that sinless, righteous life, on the Cross Jesus was able to pay the price for everything that humankind has done wrong. 1 John 2:2 in The Message Version says, ***“When (Jesus) served as a sacrifice for our sins, he solved the sin problem for good – not only ours, but the whole world’s.”***

But here comes another tricky bit. Today’s verse says that we are ***“saved by grace”***. We’re unable to save ourselves and many of us find that difficult to accept. We want to do it ourselves – to be responsible for our own destiny. But this grace is a free gift that we either accept or reject – there’s no half-way house.



DAY 4: GOD'S LOVE FOR US ALL



Moving on, I'd like us to consider the immensity of God's love.

I've often heard people say Christianity is boring, rigid and full of rules and regulations, that The Ten Commandments are a kill-joy list of 'Thou shalt nots' designed to limit our enjoyment of life.

My perspective is quite the opposite. I believe The Ten Commandments offer us protective boundaries and rather than seeing them as negatives, they can become positive, life-affirming and commendable principles for us to embrace. For example, why would we steal from others and so subject them to an experience we'd not want to happen to us?

As we've established, in God's eyes, none of us is faultless so we need a remedy for our imperfection. Here comes another theological term – repentance.

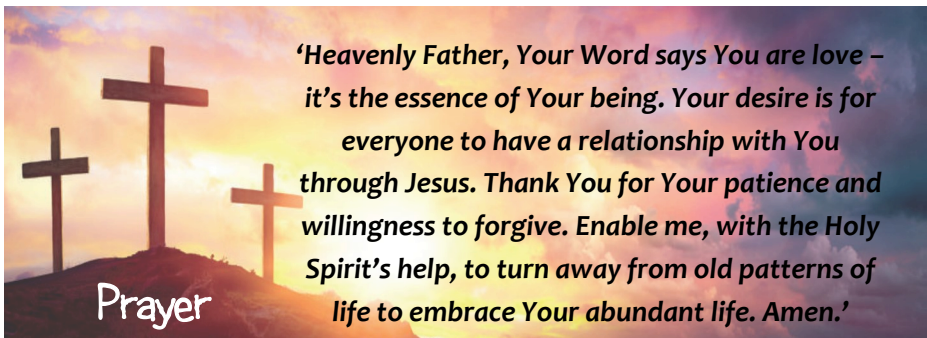
It may be thought the Contemporary English Version of today's verse somewhat sanitises other older translations which use words such as 'repent' and 'perish'. But I chose it because we need to appreciate that just being sorry and asking forgiveness for what we've done wrong, isn't sufficient. Repentance involves a total U-turn – a complete change of direction in the way we live.

I don't believe our Heavenly Father is watching over our lives waiting to catch us out for every misdemeanour we commit. There's no big stick hanging over us. As our rendition of this verse says, He's patient, giving

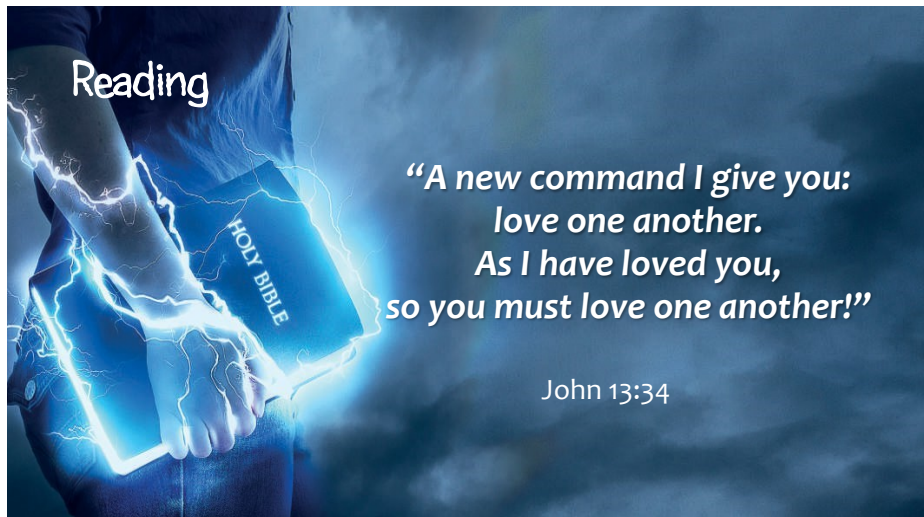
us time to change our ways and He wants us to enjoy a personal, intimate relationship with Him. But He won't force Himself on us - He gently draws us towards Him.

Jesus said in John 10:10 His purpose was to give us **“abundant life”** or as The Message says, **“real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.”** Part of that ‘lavish life’ involves understanding and putting into practice Godly behavioural values and principles, including those of the Ten Commandments, but we do so out of love for Him rather than out of fear. The first part of 1 John 4:18 in the New Century Version declares, **“Where God’s love is, there is no fear, because God’s perfect love drives out fear.”**

In 1 John 4:19 we read, **“We love because he first loved us”** and there’s a direct correlation between our love for God and our love for other people – we radiate His love because He took the initiative and loved us first.



DAY 5: LOVE AND SUFFERING



Today is Maundy Thursday – a day that has special significance at Easter. ‘Maundy’ is an old Anglo-French word derived from the Latin ‘mandatum’ or ‘commandment’ and refers to the instruction Jesus gave to His disciples when He washed their feet at the Last Supper – the First Communion.

As He washed their soiled feet, Jesus modelled sacrificial humility, giving His followers a practical demonstration of the kind of love He was advocating.

But what does a lifestyle of ‘*loving one another like Jesus*’ look like? We don’t have time and space here to look at this in detail but let me suggest four key attributes of the way Jesus loves us.

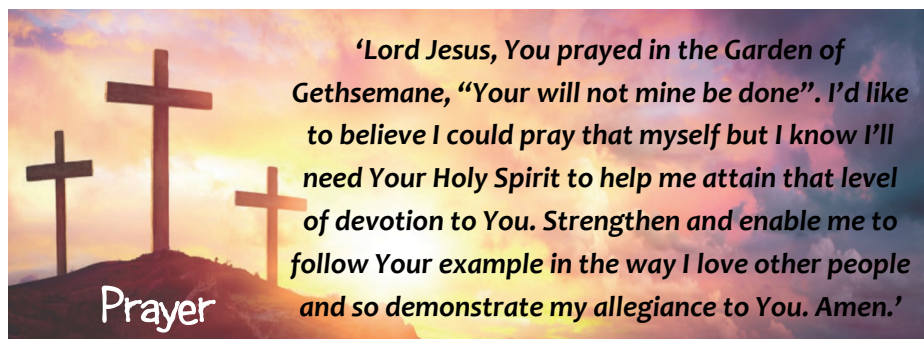
- **Jesus’ love is unconditional:** 1 John 3:16 invites us to “*lay down our lives*” in the same way Jesus did. Unconditional love can’t be earned – it’s freely given – ‘no strings attached’.
- **Jesus’ love is unlimited:** Romans 8:39 (NLT) says, “*...nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” It’s a love without boundaries or barriers. It never fails, never gives up on us, is never depleted.
- **Jesus’ love is unchangeable:** we’re told in Hebrews 13:8 that “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.*” We change our minds often depending on our mood or other external influences but

Jesus' love for us is defined by who He is – not by who we are or how we're feeling.

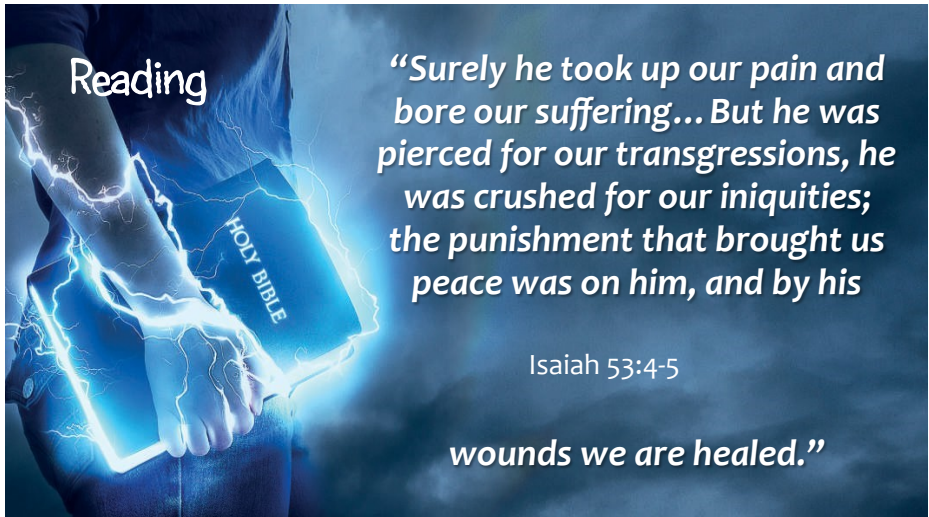
- ➡ **Jesus' love is unselfish:** in Matthew 20:28 we read that Jesus didn't come to earth to be served but to give His life as a ransom for many. At Easter, He exchanged His life for ours – He paid the price.

The authentic Christian life isn't a 'cop out' for weak people who need a crutch to lean on – it's a challenge involving personal sacrifice, of 'going the extra mile' and potentially hardship and even persecution.

We're called to deny ourselves and **"take up our cross daily"** (see Luke 9:23). Now that may be a metaphorical cross as opposed to the literal Cross Jesus had to bear, but that's the standard to which we're called – the same type of sacrificial love which Jesus displayed.



DAY 6: THE SUFFERING SERVANT



“Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering... But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his

Isaiah 53:4-5

wounds we are healed.”

We now come to one of the focal points of Easter – Good Friday – but what was good about it?

Overnight Thursday to the early hours of Friday, Jesus was betrayed by one of His followers and all the rest of them reneged on Him. Even Peter, probably His closest earthly follower, denied ever knowing Him on three occasions.

Jesus then faced three Jewish trials and was summonsed to three separate Roman court appearances. In the Jewish trails, He faced false charges of blasphemy and although the witnesses against Him couldn't get their stories straight, He was found guilty. Without the power to carry out the punishment, the Jewish leaders accused Jesus of sedition against the Roman state. However, although He was found not guilty, to keep the peace, Pilate, the Roman Governor, condemned Jesus to death. Beaten to an inch of His life, mocked and reviled, Jesus endured probably the most hideous form of execution ever devised – crucifixion – a process that took at least six hours before He died.

Why not read the context of today's verse taken from Isaiah 53, a graphic prediction of these events written some 700 years earlier, and then examine the actual account of Jesus' death in Luke's Gospel chapters 22 and 23?

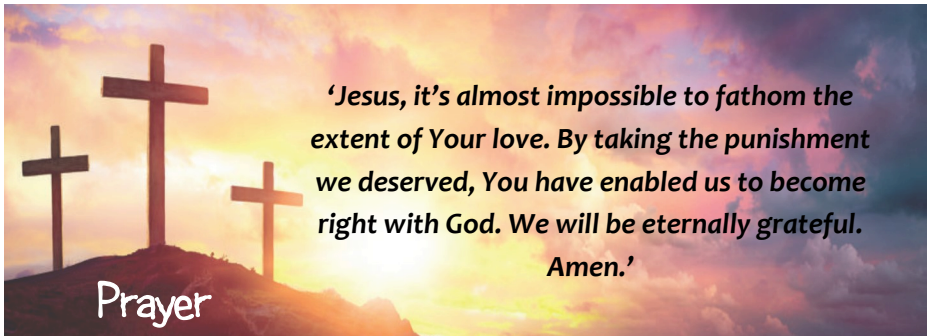
In Hebrews 12:2 we read, ***“For the joy that was set before him [Jesus]***

endured the cross, scorning its shame."

Joy? What joy? Three possible thoughts initially come to mind:

- ➔ **The joy of a completed job:** as He breathes His last breath Jesus triumphantly exclaims, ***"It is finished!"*** (John 19:30), although it really wasn't the end!
- ➔ **The joy of a return to heaven:** today's verse, Hebrews 12:2, goes on to say Jesus now sits ***"at the right hand of the throne of God."*** We'll talk about what He's doing now a little later in this Devotional.
- ➔ **The joy of knowing He had secured an eternal future for everyone who believes in Him.** In fact, I'd suggest that we are His joy!

Good Friday is good because of the good that ultimately resulted from it. Jesus paid the price for our rebellion against a holy, righteous God. Justice was served. We are redeemed. Or as 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NLT) declares, ***"For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ."***



DAY 8: THE EMPTY TOMB



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

Matthew 28:26

Because Resurrection Sunday is so essential to Easter, today's Devotional is slightly longer – there are several implications we need to think through.

The tomb is empty. There's no body. The stone sealing the entrance removed. The guards have gone AWOL and are nowhere to be seen. Astonishing? Impossible? Unbelievable? Implausible?

Conspiracy theories abound:

- ➡ Jesus couldn't have died on the Cross – He must have gone into a coma through loss of blood and the pain of crucifixion, but somehow in the cool of the tomb, He revived and escaped.
- ➡ His followers took the body away and hid it somewhere so it can't be found. Jesus was never put in the tomb – He was buried somewhere else.
- ➡ Those who went looking for Jesus went to the wrong grave.
- ➡ His followers were so overcome with grief, they imagined it all – they were deluded or the victims, maybe even perpetrators, of mass hallucination.

Each of these 'fake news story' theories can be refuted.

- ➡ Firstly, Roman soldiers didn't make mistakes about death – they were specialists in crucifixion.
- ➡ It's also inconceivable that Jesus could have somehow recovered,

then unravelled the tightly bound linen cloths around Him and removed a sealed stone, which was probably the same weight as a medium sized car, from the inside, especially as there were soldiers stationed outside.

- ➡ Jesus' followers knew which tomb it was and the Jewish leaders certainly did – they'd asked for a guard. But His followers were totally surprised to find the tomb empty and over the next few years every one of them was persecuted, and most executed, for their faith.
- ➡ Faced with the probability of imprisonment or death, it's highly likely someone would have 'broken ranks' and called it out as a lie or that it was an hallucination hoax, if they weren't absolutely assured Jesus was alive.

But perhaps the most convincing proof of Jesus' resurrection is eye-witness accounts.

Take a few minutes to read Luke 24 and note Jesus appears to several women at the tomb. Later that day, He meets up with two of His followers walking home and then with at least 10 of His followers in an Upper Room. A week later, to prove this wasn't an isolated event, He meets them again, this time with Thomas who was absent on the first occasion (see from John 20:26 onwards).

He spoke to them; they touched Him; He ate fish with them – He was very much alive and present.

Later, in John 21, we read Jesus met with His followers on a beach and cooked breakfast for them.

Finally, Paul records in 1 Corinthians 15:6, that Jesus gathered with over 500 people on a single occasion. How likely is it that more than 500 individuals on several different occurrences could be deceived, hoodwinked or mistaken?

Yet no matter what evidence we can put before someone, it all boils down a personal decision. We need to come to our own conclusions – whether the accounts of Easter are fact, fiction or a matter of faith.

One other thought. In Revelation 1:18 (New Living Translation) we read the words of Jesus, ***"I am the living one. I died, but look — I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave."***

If Jesus did die and rise again this gives us incredible hope. Physical death is not the end. Because He rose again, we can too – there is an eternal future for those who put their faith in Him.

AND FINALLY

Thanks so much for journeying with me through this Advent period – I trust these brief reflections will have been beneficial.

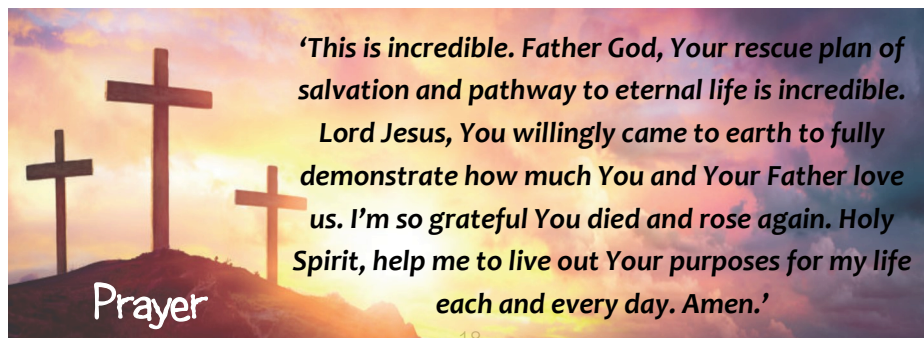
But of course, this isn't the end. Why? Because eternity isn't just a long time - it's forever! Time may help us regulate our lives but it's merely a subset of eternity. Eternity existed before we arrived on earth and will continue after we leave it. Eternity never ends.

The Bible tells us that prior to the world being created, in eternity, before time existed, a plan was conceived and crafted to enable us to enjoy God's presence forever. That plan encompassed the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and includes His anticipated return in due course.

The Message Version of Ephesians 1:4 puts it this way: **“Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.”**

Right at this moment, in time and eternity, we're told Jesus is *‘interceding on our behalf’*. Romans 8:34 declares, **“Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us”** and Hebrews 7:25 says of Jesus, **“... he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”**

Just like a barrister defending a client in court, Jesus is now pleading our cause in heaven. He is our mediator before His Heavenly Father and declares that we are innocent of all charges against us because, He, Jesus, paid the price on our behalf. Let's rejoice that we have such a wonderful Lord and Saviour.



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