

PURPOSE IN HOLY WEEK

24 March 2024: Palm Sunday

As we begin Holy Week, we cannot ignore the fact that Jesus was a man with a mission: a mission to liberate and save mankind from spiritual darkness and spiritual death. This mission was planned right in Genesis as a response to Adam and Eve's sin and it gives us the context to everything that happened in Jesus' life. At the start of Jesus's public ministry, He went to the synagogue and read this prophecy about the promised Messiah that was given to the prophet Isaiah about 700 years earlier:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Isaiah 61:1-2

Then He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on Him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Luke 4:18-21

The key word here is *fulfilled*. Jesus would be the one who fulfilled the prophecies about the promised Messiah. Jesus was the one who would be filled with the Holy Spirit, anointed to bring good news, freedom, healing and more.

But it wasn't just the Old Testament prophecies that Jesus came to fulfil. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus made it clear that He had come to *"fulfil the Law and the Prophets."*

Today, we are going to look at the ways in which Jesus fulfilled His mission during Holy Week.

1. 'BEFORE THE FEAST OF THE PASSOVER,' John 13:1

Earlier, we watched a video about the Passover, which relates events that we find in the book of Exodus. Israel was enslaved in Egypt and Pharaoh refused to let the people go. It became a battle between the God of Israel and the gods of Egypt.

God proved His sovereignty and power over all the gods of Egypt by sending nine plagues that impacted every area of Egyptian life and economy. God's final act would be to pass *through* Egypt, killing the firstborn son of every household, every flock and every herd. The people of Israel were given clear instructions on what to do to ensure that God passed *over* their houses without stopping. Each household was to sacrifice a year-old ram without blemish and put the blood around the doorposts of the house. The meat had to be roasted and eaten that night, with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. None was to be left over. In Exodus 12:11-14, we read:

This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover.

"On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

"This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord.

It is important to note that God knew exactly where His people lived, so the blood was not a reminder to Him of who lived in each house. It was not for God's benefit, but for His people. To escape the judgement that was to fall on Egypt's gods, the people of Israel had to choose to obey God's instructions. The blood would not appear miraculously on the doorposts of their houses. It had to be their choice to obey and come under the covering of the blood of a sacrificial lamb. They had free will in this.

Once they were out of Egypt, God wanted His people to remember this deliverance, so He gave instructions to Moses on how they were to do this. In Leviticus 23:5-6 we read,

“The Lord's Passover begins at twilight on the fourteenth day of the first month. On the fifteenth day of that month the Lord's Festival of Unleavened Bread begins; for seven days you must eat bread made without yeast. On the first day hold a sacred assembly and do no regular work. ⁸ For seven days present a food offering to the Lord. And on the seventh day hold a sacred assembly and do no regular work.”

It was as this annual festival approached that these last events of Jesus's life took place. All Israel was preparing to interrupt their usual routines in order to remember and commemorate God's divine deliverance of their ancestors.

Why is this important when we look at Holy Week? What is the relevance of this for us as Christians?

Whilst it is uncomfortable for us, blood sacrifice was a part of Old Testament worship. Sin has to be dealt with for us to be in right relationship with God. Adam and Eve were the first people to sin, and one of the consequences of that was that an animal was sacrificed to provide skins to clothe them. They were physically covered through the means of a blood sacrifice. We read in Romans 6:23 that 'the wages of sin is death.' Instead of the word 'wages' we could say that the legal and just punishment for sin is death. Legal process needs to be followed: that is justice at work. But God did not want His children to die for their sins, He wanted them to be restored to Him. Therefore, an atonement sacrifice was made to cover that sin and take the punishment in the place of a person.

God gave the Law to Moses for the people of Israel so that they would understand what behaviour constituted sin, thus leading to judgement. The process of atoning for sin was part of life and worship for Israel in the Old Testament because it was necessary to make them right with God when they sinned. This could be done for specific sins, but there was also an annual act of atonement called Yom Kippur, where the nation collectively dealt with their sins (Leviticus 23:26-32). That was part of the Law.

However, God did not intend this repeated process of atonement to continue indefinitely. He had a mission: to take the just and legal punishment for all sin upon Himself. Throughout the Old Testament, we find God sharing His plan with the prophets – clues and signs that would show that God was fulfilling His promises to them. One of my favourite verses of the Bible prophesies how God's salvation plan would vary from the deliverance of Israel in Exodus. Isaiah spoke these words of God:

“It is too small a thing for you ... to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” Isaiah 49:6

Holy Week coincided with the feast of Passover deliberately. Jesus's mission was to be the Passover lamb: not just to atone for the sins of Israel, but to be the perfect blood sacrifice that would cover the sins of all.

The apostle Peter wrote this,

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. (1 Peter 1:18-19)

God's plan to deal with our sin is mind-blowing. The glorious wonder of this is that the benefits are all ours! If we had obeyed God from the beginning, this would not have been necessary. It was entirely our fault that the situation arose. Yet, God acted on our behalf. He fulfilled the Law with His own blood. If we read the whole of Romans 6:23, we find that:

...the wages of sin *is* death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Jesus bore the pain and suffering that should have been ours, so that He could fulfil the Law. Because of His sacrifice, we can now receive the gift of eternal life and so much more!

Like the Israelites, who had the free will to choose to come under the blood of the spotless lamb or not, so we have the free will to choose to come under the blood of Jesus Christ or not. But the choice does not stop there.

The Israelites also had to obey the instruction to eat bread without yeast or leaven. That was also a freewill choice. We saw how the laws around getting rid of anything involving leaven were followed by the Jewish family in the video clip. This takes on new significance when we see how Jesus responded to the Pharisees and Jewish leaders of the time. In Matthew 16:5-12, Jesus warned the disciples to be on their guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. They were to understand that the religious authorities were bringing false teaching, acting out of hypocrisy, pride and self-righteousness. They were puffed up with their own sense of worth and superiority, arrogantly using God's temple as a place of commerce instead of heartfelt, humble worship. They preached about God whilst not loving Him or anyone else. These were the religious leaders who repeatedly challenged Jesus, who questioned His teachings and the authority by which He acted, who wanted Jesus dead. They kept the Passover laws, scrupulously getting rid of all leaven from their homes, but their hearts were far from God.

It was in this context that Paul wrote this to other believers in Corinth – not to atheists, but to followers of Christ:

Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. 1 Cor. 5:6-8

This is not about the type of bread we do or don't eat, but about what is in our hearts. Because Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed, our lives should not be infused with malice or wickedness, with self-seeking or self-righteousness or self-deception like the Pharisees. Our hearts need to be full of sincerity and truth as we daily and continually live for Jesus Christ. That is our worship to Him.

2. 'JESUS KNEW THAT HIS HOUR HAD COME...' John 13:1

Jesus had complete understanding of His role as the Passover lamb – the sacrifice without imperfection or sin, who would die in the place of the wrong-doers.

As He approached these final days until His death, He did so with three foundational pieces of knowledge. Jesus knew that:

- **v.1 His hour had come:** it was the right time for the events of Holy Week to be fulfilled by Him
- **v.3 the Father had given all things into His hands:** Jesus had God's authority and power to act in what was to come.
- **v.3 He had come from God and was going to God:** Jesus was entirely secure in His connection to the Father and in His ultimate destination.

Jesus was completely secure in His identity, mission and authority. In this security, He took on the role of a servant and washed the feet of His friends. With this incomparable authority and power, Jesus set in motion the events that would lead to His arrest and execution. It happened exactly when, and only when, Jesus said it could.

In reading a book called, *The Weekend that Changed the World* by Peter Walker, I was struck by how Jesus was forcing other people to work to His schedule. At the end of the meal in this chapter, Jesus knew that Judas intended to betray Him. What did Jesus do about that? He said to Judas, “[What you are about to do, do quickly.](#)” (John 13:27) I have always interpreted that to mean that Jesus wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible. But now I look at it as Jesus setting a fast pace. It was His schedule, His plan, His hour and the enemy needed to run around to keep up with Him. The Father had given all things into Jesus’s hands: even this.

It was already evening and there was much to do. Judas had to go to the High Priest to make a deal. The High Priest then had to make arrangements with both the Jewish and Roman authorities for Jesus’s arrest, for one pseudo-trial with the members of the Sanhedrin then another with the Roman Governor of the province, as only he could pronounce a death sentence. Just hours later, before daybreak, Jesus was arrested at Gethsemane (John 18:3). Jesus was to be the Passover Lamb. There was a divine schedule and Jesus intended to ensure that everything happened according to God’s plan and in His timing.

Jesus’s life was not taken from Him. As we read in Mark 10:45, He came “to *give* His life as a ransom for many.” The events of Holy Week only happened because Jesus set them in motion and allowed it.

3.‘WHAT I AM DOING YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND NOW...’

Sadly, of course, Jesus’s beloved friends did not have the same knowledge and understanding that Jesus did. These precious friends who had given up so much to follow Him, who tried so hard to keep up with what was going on but, even with Jesus explaining things to them, found that they still could not grasp what was happening or why. Jesus knew that they would struggle with what was to come, so He promised them that even though they did not understand at this point, they would in due time.

As it is Palm Sunday today, we can look at the odd events that befuddled the disciples on that occasion. They were to go into Jerusalem – fine, no problem. But Jesus wanted to ride into the city on the colt of a donkey. Of course He did. Why walk in like everyone else, when you can go on a colt that you don’t have! Two of the disciples were sent to the next village to find a colt that Jesus said would be there waiting for them. Maybe they hoped that the colt would not be there so they could do something ordinary. But the colt was there, just as Jesus had said.

This only makes sense when we remember that Jesus’s mission was all about fulfilling the law and prophecies of old. So, why the colt?

[The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet Him, shouting,](#)

[“Hosanna!” “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Blessed is the king of Israel!”](#)

[Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written:](#)

[“Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt.”](#) John 12:12-15

Where is it written? In the book of the prophet Zechariah, who had announced,

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. Zechariah 9:9

Jesus rode on the colt to fulfil the word of Zechariah, so that it would be clear that He was the promised Messiah *and King* who was coming to save Israel just as God had promised centuries earlier. What was obvious to Jesus was only made clear to the disciples after the resurrection when they were enabled to understand. We read in Luke's Gospel,

"This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures." Luke 24:44-45

There are numerous prophecies relating to the life of Jesus in the Old Testament, in the Psalms as well as in the books of the prophets. We are going to look at just a few of them from Isaiah 53, which relate to this week. You may spot a piece of card near you with a Bible verse on them. I am going to read out a part of Isaiah 53 and you need to look out for the verse that matches your verse from Jesus's life.

Activity matching prophecies of Isaiah 53 to New Testament fulfilment.

Conclusion

In one of his public speeches, the apostle Paul said this,

"The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus [as the Messiah], yet in condemning Him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. ²⁸Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have Him executed. ²⁹When they had carried out all that was written about Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead ... Acts 13:16-30

It was mankind who falsely accused Jesus and condemned Him. It was mankind who killed Jesus and shut Him away in a tomb. Isn't that what we see around us? Jesus has been treated as though dead and in a tomb. Part of history. Irrelevant in a modern world, which does not need or want a Saviour.

But that is so far from the truth. God raised Jesus from the dead. He is part of the present and the future, not just relevant but vital for those who want to truly live.

There is probably a great deal that we, like the disciples, do not understand now about why God does things in a particular way. But there will come a time when Jesus will once more know that His hour has come, and He will return to fulfil the prophecies to do with the final days. There will come a time when Jesus will open our understanding, just as He did with the disciples many centuries ago.

There will come a time when it is just before another feast: this time, it won't be the Passover seder commemorating the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, but the celebration feast of the Lamb. Everyone whose sin has been covered by the blood of the Lamb will be there, whether Jew or Gentile, sharing food and fellowship with our Lord, rejoicing and celebrating together in His presence.

I wonder if there will come a time at that feast, where Jesus will once more say the words, "It is finished!" as He did on the cross. For at that time, evil will be no more and all we will know is the goodness of life lived with Him.

Amen.