

Teaching E-mail 76

Can you explain the "Greatest Friday" to unbelievers?

(March 16, 2015)

Dear Friends in Christ our Lord,
Every true follower of Jesus has three sure testimonies:

- (1) A clear and heartfelt articulation of what our Lord Jesus accomplished on their behalf through His life, death, and resurrection.
- (2) A clear and heartfelt articulation of their biblical responsibilities to Him as their Lord and Master because of His loving ownership of them.
- (3) A clear and heartfelt articulation of the transformational work His Spirit has done in them and continues to do, and how He has used them to bless others and point the way to belonging to Jesus as Lord.

It may not be evident to you, but (2) and (3) above hinge on your complete understanding of the biblical basis to (1): WHAT our Lord Jesus accomplished on the cross for you, and WHY He had to sacrifice His life on that cross.

So many within contemporary Christendom have either nullified the crucial importance of the Older Testament or are just plain ignorant of its foundational truths. Yet without the God-revealed, God-breathed witness of His commands, instructions, and prophetic warnings in the Hebrew Scriptures, the crucifixion of our Savior — the central point of our faith and hope — has been undermined. Unless you fully take in *why* our Father required the Israelites to put the blood of a lamb without defect on the sides and top of their house doorframes (see Exodus 12), you'll only dimly perceive and esteem Jesus as the "Lamb of God." Furthermore, if you don't fully understand *why* our

Father required the Israelites to keep the Passover annually as a remembrance, you won't appreciate *why* our Lord offered His disciples the Cup of Redemption after the meal and said, "*This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of Me*" (1Corinthians 11:25).

So let's see what you remember about the significance of Passover especially for us who follow Jesus as our Lord and King:

- What were the Israelites to *remember* at each Passover observance? (It wasn't the blood they smeared on their doorframe, but rather what God accomplished on their behalf. He *passed over* their homes to preserve their firstborn from death and then *delivered them from slavery* in Egypt.)
- What did our Lord Jesus, our "Passover Lamb", accomplish on *your* behalf on the cross? (He enabled you to be "passed over" in terms of the death your sins deserve, and freed you from slavery to sin and Satan's domain.)
- Examine your heart. What level of loving appreciation is within you for what He did out of love for you?
- Do you even *remember* the loving sacrifice of Himself for you each time you take communion? (The third cup of the Passover is called the Cup of Redemption because God told Israel, "*I will redeem you with outstretched arm*" (Exodus 6:6). As Jesus' arms were outstretched on the cross and His blood shed for all of humanity, through His sacrifice you can be forgiven and reconciled to our Father.)

How essential is it that you fully comprehend our Lord's crucifixion?

Paul left no doubt that the crucifixion of Jesus was the central point of his witness to others, whether Jew or Gentile:

- "...we preach **Christ crucified**: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1Corinthians 1:23).
- "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and **Him crucified**" (1Corinthians 2:2).
- "May I never boast except in **the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ**, through which the world has been **crucified to me, and I to the world**" (Galatians 6:14).

On what basis did the apostle make the crucifixion of Christ a matter of such extreme importance? It was his thorough knowledge of the *Hebrew Scriptures* (often called the Old, or Older Testament), the only Scripture in existence when Paul penned this instruction to his young helper, Timothy:

*"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be **thoroughly equipped** for every good work" (2Timothy 3:16,17).*

The instructional truth and prophetic words of the Older Testament were breathed by God into the men who wrote them. From Paul's perspective they were *essential* as a means to thoroughly equip Timothy and prepare him to serve according to our Father's will and purpose. Shouldn't the God-breathed words of the Hebrew Scriptures be *equally important* to us who follow Jesus today?

Here are some considerations to weigh in your spirit:

Do you recognize and value the 300+ prophecies in the Older Testament which directly point to both the first coming of our Lord Jesus and His future return as King, and to how He would join the human race and why He had to become a man and live a sinless life? Then you can't fully appreciate why the Son of God was born as a Jew in the first place and then obeyed His Father in dying on behalf of mankind. If you or those you look to as your teachers disregard the Older Testament as "the Law" and therefore irrelevant to you, then you'll totally miss recognizing and treasuring the grace, the love, the compassionate mercy and the long-suffering heart of our righteous Father that is revealed throughout the Hebrew texts.

It's within the framework of His choosing the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to produce a people as His treasured possession to be holy to Him (Deuteronomy 7:6) that we see His purpose in choosing and redeeming a people called out of the world system through their union in our Lord Jesus (1Peter 2:9). If you can't clearly articulate your Father's character, nature and purposes using solely the Older Testament, then you can't clearly articulate Who He is from the Newer Testament either.

You could say that your own faith is made stronger in direct proportion to your understanding why our Lord Jesus had to be crucified for you. And the "why" is found in the Older Testament, as well as the stipulations for walking in the authentic Gospel of the Kingdom. Keep in mind that there was no Newer Testament when the thousands at Pentecost repented, nor was there a Newer Testament as Paul, Timothy, Titus and others took the Gospel to heathen

lands. Everything they needed to make clear about God's grace (for instance, His accepting a spotless, sacrificed animal as a substitute for a penitent sinner's death) and justification by faith (as demonstrated by Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his own son at God's command) was written in the Older Testament — and upon that building block these apostles could then testify to the all-sufficiency of the crucified Lamb of God, Jesus, to reconcile repentant believers to His Father.

"But how then would the Scriptures [the Older Testament] be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"
(Matthew 26:54).

Because so few Christians today hold in high regard the Older Testament and its unfailing prophecies about our Lord Jesus, the crucifixion has been restricted to nothing more than God's means to get people to heaven. This perspective is so limited, however, from our Father's purposes and goals for His children. And sadly, it removes from you a necessary sense of *grateful responsibility* for the sanctification He wants to accomplish in you each day during your life journey as His obedient child and willing servant.

So how can we more fully align our very limited perspective with our Father's greater and far more loving purpose for His Son's crucifixion on our behalf?

- First, recognize that our Father's desire since the Garden of Eden was to have children on this earth who could fellowship with Him as their Father.
- But because humanity's sinfulness violated His holiness and justice, this kind of intimate Father/child relationship couldn't exist.

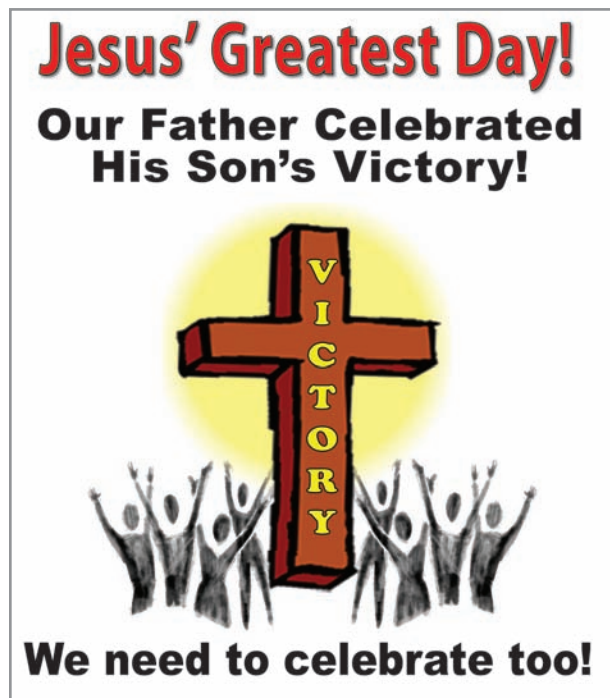
Therefore He sent His own Incarnate Son Jesus to redeem sinful man and restore intimate Father/child fellowship with all who repent and trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

- As a loving and intentional Father He gave His children the responsibility to tell the world about Who He is and His plan for His Creation — the same purpose He had called the Israelites to fulfill. But in order for His children to carry out this assignment, they themselves need to know Him as He has revealed Himself especially in the Hebrew text, because that then becomes the basis for complete revelation and fulfillment in His Son Jesus as recounted in the Newer Testament.
- As a Father He wants the joy of helping each of His children put aside their worldly values and goals so that they might be transformed and take on the virtues and character of His Son. That is, through the Holy Spirit, our Father operates in and around and through their lives on a daily basis helping them become Jesus-in-the-flesh to others in character and purpose. This is the sanctification process of growing in the holiness of Jesus—a Father/child cooperation of character change by grace as more and more of Jesus is reflected in His own.

Let's review some important truths from God's Word:

Your quest and desire to fully cooperate with your heavenly Father and grow more like your Lord by His grace begins with the *Greatest Friday*. If it weren't for our Lord Jesus living and dying as the perfect, sinless Lamb (1Peter 1:19), the penalty for each of your sins would still be held against you — which means that you would be required to pay by your own death.

But that reality grieved our holy and righteous Father. Compassionate, full of grace, and merciful in every sense of the word, He utterly recognized humanity's incapability to redeem themselves and atone for their own wrongdoing. Therefore He set into motion the loving plan He'd established from before the creation of the world (1Peter 1:20), a plan which He set forth clearly in the Older Testament and which culminated on the Greatest Friday with Jesus as THE final Passover Lamb. You now have the awesome privilege to be a child of the heavenly Father. And if that isn't cause to celebrate on this upcoming Greatest Friday, nothing else on earth or for eternity is!



Even as this year's celebration of the Greatest Friday approaches, too many congregations focus on our Lord's Passion with grief and sorrow, as if He is still being crucified. Any and all celebration of the *victory* of the cross is diminished as individuals and faith communi-

ties feel they must somehow suffer on that day, as if they can gain acceptance by our Father for what they add to the cross in their own suffering. Many Christians so focus their attention on our Lord's agony (for example, Mel Gibson's "The Passion of Christ") to the point that they disbelieve that His once and for all death was fully sufficient in our Father's sight (Hebrews 7:27; 9:26). Yet by that focus they are *discrediting the victory and the joy in heaven over the accomplishment of our Lord to break sin's bondage and its penalty of death.*

"Passion"-obsessed Christians are deceived that Jesus suffers still, and fail to celebrate with our Lord that His sinless life and crucifixion honored His Father and fulfilled the righteous and holy requirements of God's justice (1Peter 3:18). Through the indwelling Spirit of Christ, our Father could enjoy intimate fellowship with countless children on earth who experience spiritual rebirth. Our Lord's death fulfilled the longing of our righteous Father:

That through His Son the penalty for the sins of hopeless and helpless humanity would be paid in full. Victory indeed!

Christians who don't place their complete trust in Jesus' atonement on the cross and share in the victory He achieved for them are misguided by religious doctrine that His sacrifice and crucifixion are insufficient for salvation.

Who misguided and deceived so many to believe they have to *add to* the work of Christ in His death and resurrection? Roman Catholicism, many centuries ago. Up until Vatican II, dogma emphasized that "If anyone believes that the death of our Lord on the cross is suf-

ficient for salvation, *let them be eternally cursed.*" As a result, generations upon generations have been hoodwinked into believing they needed in some way to pay a price for their own sins. Whether through penance to offset their sins, or through self-denial and flagellation, or even through suffering in Purgatory after their earthly life, countless suffering churchgoers were robbed of Christ's victory as they were compelled to embrace practices inspired by the father of lies.

These very practices repudiate our Lord's victory of the cross!

That's why the *Greatest Friday* is such a somber event for them: Jesus wasn't the perfect Lamb Whose sacrifice paid the penalty for all mankind's sins. For those who can't believe that the death of Jesus is all-sufficient and acceptable to our Father for salvation, the crucifix is a visual image to remind especially Roman Catholics that the atonement of Jesus on the cross isn't "finished" as He proclaimed — because He's still hanging on it!

At the same time, many Protestants share a distorted view of the crucifixion, but theirs is just more subtle. Whenever grateful appreciation that our Lord's death reconciled us to become His Father's children is replaced by emphasizing *how Jesus died*, you'll find a "Christian" who can't fully receive or cherish His forgiveness. Denying the sure truth of Scripture, these sad individuals believe they have to earn it. And once you start laboring to earn our Father's forgiveness through trying to be "good" or be a "better person," you won't experience our Father's love, grace and compassion for you.

Even if you don't say it, you can perceive God more like a hard taskmaster than a loving and compassionate Father.

Why? Because like the wicked servant who owed the king a vast sum yet insisted he'd pay it through his own efforts (Matthew 18:23-35), you've arrogantly convinced yourself that you can pay the cost of your own sins. Leaning on your own merits and self-perceived goodness compared to all the "bad" people out there, you're well on the path of pride that causes your Father to oppose you (James 4:6). Maybe you think you're more spiritual than other people are and find it easier to identify what's wrong in them than being redemptive and helping them. Beware! You've taken the prideful path!

Our Father knows that no person can pay the penalty for their own sins. That's why in the Hebrew Scriptures He foreshadowed Jesus as the Passover Lamb by accepting the substitution of an unblemished lamb from the Israelites as a sacrificial payment for their sins.

"If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23).

Many Christians have been erroneously taught that our Lord is telling His disciples they need to live carrying a cross of personal trials or pain day-in and day-out. Yet what that cross is designed to kill is **self**, whether *self*-will, *self*-idolatry, or *self*-promotion! Jesus is speaking pointedly to the sanctifying work His Father wants to work in each of His children through His Spirit. And it is a death of sorts, producing glorious life in which our Lord's character and virtues become increasingly yours. Paul effectively addresses the "death" of our old selves and ways so that new life without wickedness may prevail:

"Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed for us" (1Corinthians 5:7).

Over 100 years ago Oswald Chambers wonderfully captured the vital element of sanctification: Stop relying on human qualities, no matter how good they seem to us, and by His grace fully replace them with those of Jesus Christ. Because of His crucifixion and out of our deep, loving appreciation that He completely fulfilled His Father's plan that's revealed in the Older Testament, we adamantly and persistently seek to be transformed to grow more and more like Jesus. Chambers writes,

"The life God plants in us develops its own virtues, not the virtues of Adam but of Jesus Christ. Watch how God will wither up your confidence in natural virtues after sanctification, and in any power you have, until you learn to draw your life from the reservoir of the resurrection life of Jesus. Thank God if you are going through a drying up experience!

The sign that God is at work in us is that He corrupts confidence in the natural virtues, because they are not promises of what we are going to be, but remnants of what God created man to be. We will cling to the natural virtues, while all the time God is trying to get us into contact with the life of Jesus Christ which can never be described in terms of the natural virtues. It is the saddest thing to see people in the service of God depending on that which the grace of God never gave them, depending on what they have by the accident of heredity.

God does not build up our natural virtues and transfigure them, because our natural virtues can never come anywhere near what Jesus Christ wants. No natural love, no nat-

ural patience, no natural purity can ever come up with His demands. But as we bring every bit of our bodily life into harmony with that new life which God has put in us, He will exhibit in us the virtues that were characteristic of the Lord Jesus."

Please consider this:

When you understand our Father's purpose for the crucifixion, you will gladly pursue Christ's virtues by His transforming grace at work in you.

Picture this time between now and celebrating the *Greatest Day* like the passengers on the Titanic just after it hit the iceberg. Some didn't understand the situation and kept rearranging the deck chairs as they slid across the deck. Others were well aware of the impending disaster and prepared themselves to disembark. You still have *time to prepare yourself so you can truly commemorate with heaven our Lord's Greatest Day*. Prepare yourself and your family by understanding the Greatest Day through the Older Testament prophecies about our Lord Jesus and how He so wonderfully fulfilled them. Then celebrate gladly!

Mike & Sue