

The significance of Easter

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[0 : 00] Matthew 26 verses 17 to 29. Now, on the first day of unleavened bread, the disciples came to Jesus saying, Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?

He said, Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, The teacher says, My time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples. And the disciples did as Jesus directed them, and they prepared the Passover.

When it was evening, he reclined at table with the twelve. And as they were eating, he said, Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.

And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him, one after another, Is it I, Lord? He answered, He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me.

[1 : 14] The Son of Man goes as it is written of him. But woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed.

It would have been better for that man if he had not been born. Judas, who would betray him, answered, Is it I, Rabbi?

He said to him, You have said so. Now, as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, Take, eat, this is my body.

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, Drink of it, all of you. For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

I tell you, I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.

[2 : 32] Thanks very much for reading. Well, my name is Benji. I'm on staff here. Before we start, let me say a prayer. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Father, we thank you that there is not a single corner on this earth that is not yours. Lord, these are familiar words to many of us, but I pray this morning that you would give us a fresh view of the majesty, the beauty, and the outrageous reality of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. Is Christianity a kingdom of life or of death? And of course, as Christians, therefore, we are part of that kingdom, and so we are subjects, therefore, of life or of death.

Now, of course, the Sunday school answer that I'm sure we're all thinking at this point in time is life, obviously. But pause. We walk around, many of us, with symbols of execution on our clothes or our jewelry or tattooed on us, which I'm sure is many of us in this room.

We perform a ritual regularly where we symbolically drink blood and eat flesh. In fact, I imagine, probably, we are the community, the biggest community ever in human existence to celebrate cannibalism as much as we do.

[3 : 58] I wonder if you've ever thought about that. We encourage one another with words like, thank God for the death of Jesus. We call the day of our Lord was executed Good Friday.

We baptize to symbolize death in water. We rebuke one another with kill sin, kill worldliness, for we have died and our life is hidden with Christ in God.

We love death. Seems like all we can talk about is death. We are a kingdom, it seems, of death. And do we want that?

Do we want that? Do we want to be subjects of a kingdom of death? Now, this would have been right at the forefront of Matthew's initial readers. I want us to imagine few in number in that first century, heavily persecuted, viewed as some kind of strange Jewish cult.

And Matthew's gospel is telling them that instead of some weird offshoot of Judaism, obsessed with the death and resurrection of some carpenter, you are actually, in fact, the end of the age kingdom.

[5 : 06] You are actually, in fact, the kingdom that has authority over every single place under the sky. Matthew wants them to know that, no, you are not just some weird kingdom of death.

You are the end of the age kingdom under the end of the age king. And just to show us why Matthew's so concerned with that flick, as we start our series in Matthew, it would be helpful to flick to Matthew chapter one just to see where Matthew starts.

Matthew chapter one, give us a few seconds to get there. Matthew chapter one, which is a very, very exciting thing for historians, which is a lovely genealogy. Genealogy, I'm sure some of us might glaze over when we get to Matthew chapter one.

But I want us to notice the repetition of David, chapter one, verse one, the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David. Verse five, and Salmon, the father of Boaz, by Rahab and Boaz, the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed, the father of Jesse, and Jesse, the father of David the king.

Two, two references. And then again, and David was the father of Solomon. Three. And then if we jump to verse 17, so all the generations from Abraham to David were 14 generations.

[6 : 15] And from David to the deportation to Babylon, 14 generations. And from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ, 14 generations. In other words, over and over and over again, this is a gospel about the king.

David the king. Jesus the king. And that's really reinforced at the end of Matthew's gospel. So flick right to the end for us, to the very final few verses, Matthew 28, verses 18 onwards.

Matthew 28, verses 18 onwards. And Jesus came and said to them, that's the disciples, all authority. Notice the alls, three alls.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age. This is a kingdom manifesto, in other words. Jesus Christ is the king. And whatever Jesus Christ has done, it has given him all authority, which he hands to his kingdom people, to go out and make followers of Christ, the king of all nations.

[7 : 25] But of course, that isn't what it looks like to this little group of Israelites, huddling together under persecution. And the question that Matthew wants them to think about is, are you going to choose the kingdom of the world?

Or are you going to choose this kingdom of death? Are you going to follow the king Jesus? Or are you going to fear the world? And that leads us on to our first point.

Passover, life through death. Death, Passover, life through death. So we are in Matthew's gospel just to place us in where we are. We're near the beginning of the final section, which Matthew has begun in 26 verse 1.

And Matthew basically breaks into five big blocks of material, of narrative, and then it finishes with a block of teaching. So five blocks of narrative, and then finishes with a block of teaching.

But here, at the end of Matthew's gospel, there is no more teaching. The time for teaching has finished. And we pick up the narrative at verse 17 with preparation for Passover.

[8 : 26] And this will now run uninterrupted from this point onwards in the narrative, right up until the death of Christ on the cross. No more teaching to be given. Now Christ sets himself to the great final work of what he came to do.

And Matthew wants to frame this final piece of material firmly in view of the Passover. Do we notice when the reading was given in 17 to 19, just how many times the Passover comes up?

Have a look with me. Now on the first day of unleavened bread, the disciples came to Jesus saying, where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover? Jesus said, go into the city to a certain man and say to him, the teacher says, my time is at hand.

I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples. And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them. And they prepared the Passover. It's almost slightly, okay, Matthew, we get it. Passover, Passover, Passover. Passover. So three times in these few verses, Matthew labors the point that now is the time for Passover. And notice that this is precisely what Jesus wants to happen.

[9 : 31] Verse 18, we see that Jesus has already prepared for this. Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, the teacher says, my time is at hand. I'll keep the Passover with my disciples.

He's already planned for it. But Jesus knows that this needs to take place. And he's ready for it to do so. Now, for those of us who aren't familiar with Old Testament language, the Passover is basically, in many ways, primarily about death.

I wonder if you've ever thought about that. God commanded, this is in Exodus, all of Israel to reenact and celebrate the Passover every year. It was to commemorate Israel's rescue from Egypt, where the angel of death is his name, entered the Egypt in the dead of night and killed every firstborn son of every house it entered, animals included.

The only households that the angel of death did not enter, the ones, in other words, he passed over, were the houses who had killed a lamb and painted the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of their house.

So, in other words, the death of the lamb replaced the death of Israel's firstborn. It is an event largely about death. But, of course, it's also an event supremely about life, of course.

[10:46] The Sunday school answer is still true, because the lamb's death spared the firstborn and the Passover led to Israel's release from slavery. So, in other words, the Passover is an event of life achieved by death, life through death.

Now, we're familiar with this as a culture, so we celebrate every year in November Remembrance Day, as we wear a little red poppy, don't we? Which is to symbolize that because people died for us in the past, we now have freedom today.

We're used to this concept. And that's what the Passover was like for Israel. It was something kind of like, I don't know, Remembrance Day for us or America's Independence Day. That's what the Passover was like.

So, Matthew is preparing us for something equally as momentous, equally as paradigm shifting, something that will bring life through death.

Second point, betrayal, life through death. Betrayal, life through death. So, the scene is set.

Matthew has brought the categories of life and death firmly into the foreground, and the Passover meal begins in verse 20.

[11:55] Verse 20, have a look with me. When it was evening, Jesus reclined at table with the 12. It's an intimate affair, a private room with 12 of Jesus' closest followers celebrating the most important festival of the year.

And so, can we imagine the hammer blow of verse 21? And as they were eating, Jesus said, Truly I say to you, one of you will betray me.

The disciples are so stunned that they start babbling like chicks, so dumbfounded that they need to kind of clarify with Jesus, Are you talking about me, Jesus?

As if you could just, am I going to betray Jesus? No. Simple answer. Verse 22, and the disciples were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, Is it I, Lord?

Is it I, Lord? I don't really know what the equivalent would be, but I imagine that we're at Christmas dinner and we're having a wonderful time together and the turkey is great and we've managed to avoid having to eat Granny's Christmas pudding because she forgot to make it this year.

[12:57] Thank goodness. And then suddenly, the dad of the family suddenly stops and says, One of you at this table is going to betray me. Gosh. It's that sort of level of, What do we say?

Where do we go from here? But the pain of this betrayal grows. Verse 23, Jesus answered, He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me.

In other words, He who has had open fellowship with me at this very meal will betray me. And jumping to verse 25, Judas, who would betray him, answered, Is it I, Rabbi?

And we know from the beginning of Matthew 26 that Judas has already planned to betray Jesus.

And the term Judas uses, did we notice? He uses teacher or rabbi.

And it stands in stark contrast to how the rest of the disciples referred to Jesus in verse 21 as, 22, sorry, as Lord. It's a hollow question.

[13:56] It's a base question. It's a cowardly question. Is it I, Rabbi? And Jesus confirms Judas by saying, You have said so, which is an idiom sort of like, You got it, but with way less positivity, obviously.

Yes, Judas, it is you. And that is right. But the pain of this betrayal has not yet become fully felt until we realize that first, to have dipped his hand in the same dish, and for Judas to have had this private conversation where Jesus confirms to him that, yes, it is you who is going to betray me, that must have meant that Judas was lying right next to Jesus, right next to him, side by side, a picture of intimacy, a picture of friendship, and yet Judas has already set himself to give Jesus over to death.

And we saw earlier in Matthew 26, we would see if we read it, for 30 pieces of silver, no less, Judas is betraying Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Why is that significant?

Well, 30 pieces of silver in the Old Testament was the amount of money that you would have to pay someone if your ox killed your slave. So it's a meaningless bit of money. Jesus is worth nothing more than some slave to Judas.

And so this, on many levels, looks like abject failure and weakness on the part of Jesus, betrayed to death by a closest friend for pocket change, the value of a dead slave.

[15 : 34] And yet, we will have noticed that Matthew has woven details around this betrayal of death death that reveal everything is not what it seems. First, because Jesus knows this is going to happen.

Obviously, that would be the thing that probably stuck out to us. Jesus knows that this is going to happen. Verse 21, he's the one who says, one of you will betray me. But more than this, it is not just that this does not surprise Jesus, but rather, the betrayal of Jesus must happen.

Must happen. Verse 24, the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed.

It would have been better for that man if he had not been born. Jesus is referring to a psalm, Psalm 41, and in that psalm, King David was to be betrayed and yet vindicated.

And that is what Jesus is saying, that I'm going to be betrayed, but I will be vindicated. Because Judas' betrayal is not some kind of unfortunate hiccup in the grand story of Jesus on his way to the cross, but it is integral, essential, to the plan of God.

[16 : 48] This becomes apparent if we just for a second together pause to think, what would have happened if Judas had not betrayed our Lord? What would have happened if Judas decided at the last minute to think, actually, Jesus is probably worth more than 30 pieces of silver, probably worth more than a slave.

I'm not going to betray him. Well, there would have been no cross, no death, and therefore no life. No, the betrayal of Judas is not some kind of bug.

It is the plan of God. And just for our own application and encouragement as we pause, how powerful is the Lord Jesus Christ when we think about this?

Every war, and Matthew basically presents two kingdoms at war with one another, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of Satan. In every war, you have a force on one side and a force on the other and they fight.

And whoever has the greater force wins. That's basically how war works. And so there's like a war of attrition, whether it's Russia, Russians against the Germans in World War II. Whoever basically can keep going and has the most force wins.

[17 : 59] Well, do we see that the Lord Jesus Christ does not fight in that way? And the enemy, Satan, has managed to grab a hold of Judas. He's managed to get Judas to betray him for the price of a slave.

And Jesus says, let it happen. Not only let it happen, but this must happen. So rather than fighting the force of the enemy, Jesus flips it and turns it towards his ultimate purposes.

As in, Jesus doesn't even have to engage with the enemy, with his enemy. He just simply uses it to his means. What a powerful God that we have. Betrayal, life through death.

Final point, and this is potentially very pretentious on my part, but I thought it had a nice ring to it, which I've entirely ripped from a different author. The death of death in the death of Christ.

The death of death in the death of Christ, life through death. We come to the climax of the Passover meal, where Jesus finally throws into sharp relief the meaning of everything that has come before.

[19 : 04] Jesus stands as is custom to lead the Passover prayers, except he says something equal parts shocking and I guess equal parts disturbing. Verse 26.

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to the disciples and said, take, eat, this is my body. And he took a cup and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them saying, drink of it all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Now we're so used to this, aren't we? Because when we do communion, this is what we say. I think we skim over it. But I want us to imagine that we have a defunct kidney. Okay? We have a defunct kidney and we need a kidney transplant.

Okay? And we're struggling to find someone but eventually we come across a long distant cousin and our long distant cousin has a match. She has a kidney for us and she's willing to give it to us. And we think, hooray, we're going to get a kidney. That's really wonderful. But our cousin is slightly too invested in this transaction. So she says, what I want to happen is the week before we have this operation, I want you to come over to my house and we're going to have kidney.

[20 : 14] Okay? We're going to eat kidney together. So I've prepared some lovely beef kidney for us and some lamb kidney. I don't know which kidney you eat but a lot of kidney, basically. So it's going to be kidney. But I also, I really want us to get in the mindset of this transplant.

So what I've done is I've taken quite a lot of my blood over the last kind of couple of months. I've got it, I've frozen it in some nice plastic bags and I've made us some Christmas pudding.

I've made us some Christmas pudding. It's going to be wonderful from my blood. And also, I've made us some cocktails, some Bloody Marys, which, yes, you guessed it, made from my blood. That's the sort of thing that the sort of perverse, what are you saying? And when we throw into the mix that Israelites thought that blood makes you unclean, can we then imagine Jesus standing up and saying, drink my blood?

It is a bizarre, potentially perverse thing to say. Imagine everywhere else in Jerusalem, families were gathering around with little Jimmy and Timmy and Philly and whatever the case may be to have their Passover meal together, lovely lamb, bread.

[21 : 22] And yet, whilst this is happening in this one room, here and only here, the Lord Jesus Christ is standing up and saying, forget the lamb, forget the bread, my blood, my flesh.

It would be like, I would imagine, our youth minister, Andy, right now running in, interrupting this sermon, grabbing the Bible, ripping it up, saying, thank you Rachel, so much for the prayers earlier, but that was a waste of time.

God no longer talks to us actually in that way. Waste of time. It's now all about whether or not you eat me. That's the sort of level of shock that we would be grappling with here.

That the Lord Jesus Christ is saying that there is a new meal, a new Passover, that the old age has ended and the new age has begun.

And note with me three things that this meal achieves. First, this is the blood of the covenant that we see, verse 28, poured out for many. This is a reference to where in Exodus 24 the people were sprinkled with blood to mark them as the people of God, the true people of the kingdom.

[22 : 32] Now Jesus is saying you must drink my blood to be a member of my covenant people. This is a kingdom birth certificate in other words, the blood of Christ.

That's the first blood of the covenant and new kingdom people. Second, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. And here wonderfully, these are the words that are probably most precious to us in this room.

We see the price for sin has been paid once and for all. Imagine the infinite value that must be attributed to this blood. Once poured out and done.

One look at the Old Testament sacrifices and a bull and another bull and another bull and oh, you sat on a dirty chair. Guess what? You're time to kill another bull. Think of the number of times that blood had to be spilled for sin in the Old Testament and the Lord Jesus Christ says, once and done, my blood, not just for one person, the whole world, the infinite value of the blood of Jesus, the unspeakable value of the blood of Jesus.

And so that's the second thing that this meal achieves, the forgiveness of sins. The third, verse 29, the death of death. Have a look with me at verse 29. Jesus says, I tell you, I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.

[23 : 55] Here finally, we see the great climax of what this first meal, this first Passover meal is achieving. The war of two kingdoms that we've been seeing in Matthew will be won forever in the death of this king.

Death will be dead in the death of Jesus. And those who drink his blood now and partake in his death will be with him forever in his heavenly kingdom.

The blood and death of Jesus achieves a new people forgiveness from sins and the death of death forever. And we can well imagine why our initial readers would need to hear that.

A small group of primarily Jewish Christians persecuted being told that you now need to go and make disciples of every single nation and every single people group under the face of the earth.

You can well imagine they might be feeling slightly daunted. But though it does not look like it, they are part of the eternal, death-crushing kingdom of Christ.

[24 : 59] All they need to do is partake in the blood and flesh of Jesus. Now for us, as we close, we started with the question, is Christianity a kingdom of life or a kingdom of death?

Now of course, the answer is both. So the Sunday school answer is correct. But it is both in an order. Life through death. Death first, then life.

That's the pattern of Christ's kingdom and that's the pattern here. Three implications. The first is identity. So all of us here in this room who partake of the death and resurrection of Jesus, who partake of communion, we are a community of death.

Or to put it another way, we are a cross-shaped people. Every time we take communion, as we will do next Sunday, what are we saying about ourselves? We are saying, I deserve, I need the death of Jesus to cover me, to define me, to forgive me.

We are saying that the fundamental thing about us as Christians is that we need and have received death. That the only way we could ever live is if the precious son of God was murdered for us.

[26 : 21] We are cross-shaped people. How can I say, this is the most liberating, freeing, wonderful truth. Many of us I would imagine in this room are told over and over that as soon as we leave these doors, in fact probably by the time you even reach this afternoon, that you are not good enough, that you need to work more and earn more and be more and say more and do more and your child only came second in the swimming gala.

Oh, your child only got a B in the exams that they got and more and more and more and if we're honest with ourselves, we probably might be tempted to believe them, to believe that our identity is primarily based in what we do, in what we achieve or what people perceive us to have achieved and it's very, very difficult in a world that tells you to be better, do more, prove yourself, it's very, very difficult to keep going sometimes as a Christian but shouldn't it be therefore as cross-shaped people that when we walk into the doors of church, when we partake in the blood and bread of Jesus we are saying I don't need to do anything, I don't need to do anything, it's been done for me. One of the most encouraging things that I've just seen was this Sunday when Elspeth, one of our young people stood up from the front and said I am a sinner and the Lord Jesus Christ has forgiven me. Yes!

Isn't that just the most glorious thing that you've ever heard that we don't need to come here and pretend and say I'm amazing, I'm amazing, you need to know I'm amazing, I'm amazing, I need to earn your favour, I need to earn your praise.

No, we can come here as Christians and say the Lord Jesus Christ has died for me. Period, end of story, there's my identity. I do not need to earn anything, I am loved, I am valuable, it is not to do with what I do.

[28 : 19] Identity. We're going to miss the second one and come to our final one which is the cross, final application, our attitude to the cross. Now, Jamie Price is one of our six formers and Jamie Price loves cold water swimming.

He doesn't, but for the sake of this illustration, he does. So Jamie Price loves cold water swimming. He also particularly loves cold water swimming where there's loads of sharks because he gets some kind of weird thrill from it.

That's his jam. And this one time, Jamie Price, he was cold water swimming, powering through, getting that dopamine, Wim Hof, whatever the case may be, and then he's bitten by a shark. It's utterly, it's a terrible story.

He's bitten by a shark, bitten right in the leg and it's terrible. Luckily, lifeguard Nicholas Wales is there, which is wonderful. And lifeguard Nicholas Wales, he swims out powerfully and he grabs Jamie around the waist.

Jamie's wrestling with the shark and then Nicholas in kind of one fell swoop knocks the shark out. Okay? And then he brings Jamie back to land and everyone's cheering and everyone's like, yes, Jamie's been saved!

[29 : 20] And then they ask Jamie, Jamie, what does it feel like? And Jamie says, well, I was dead in my transgressions. I was struggling and I was lost. And then the enemy, it attacked me, but luckily I've overcome.

Salvation came and now I stand in sanctification, having been brought by redemption through the waters of death to life. And we're all sort of thinking, I guess that's true.

You kind of missed out, Nicholas, in that entire story. You kind of missed out when Nicholas grabbed you around the waist, knocked out the shark and brought you safely home. In other words, when we talk about our identity and when we talk about these wonderful words of redemption and salvation, sometimes we might be tempted to think that grace is some kind of fuel pump that we stick in on a Sunday, get filled up and then it kind of recedes as we go through the rest of the week. And we forget that this is all based on the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, that it is his blood that saves, his blood that sanctifies, his blood that defines.

We are cross-shaped people. Allow me to lead us in prayer. Father, we thank you so much that because of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are free and free indeed, that death has been crushed and life is ours.

[30 : 37] Please, Father, in your great kindness, would you help us to love the Lord Jesus more?
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.