

The Priests' Passover 3-23-08

Easter 2008 - Matthew 27:45 – 28:10

Video of the interrogation room at Caiaphas' home, Jerusalem.
Video of the holding cistern and Psalm 88 reading.

Passover was approaching. The crowds were beginning to fill Jerusalem and every available space was used to capacity. The buzz that filled the streets was about the prophet from Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth. He'd been arrested and tried and was about to be crucified. It had only been a few days earlier when they had hailed Him as Messiah, but after hearing His messages they had doubts. How could they restore the kingdom of David if they loved their enemies? He was too idealistic.

Many in those crowds must have now thought, "He probably wasn't the One. How could He be the Deliverer and not even be able to take on the little mob that arrested Him? He wouldn't even let his disciples fight for him. Barabbas isn't afraid to stand up to Rome. We made the right choice!" (Matthew 27:21)

As Jesus was crucified, there was a sense of satisfaction among most of the Sanhedrin, the rulers of Israel. They had saved the nation from a potential uprising that could have developed from people who believed Jesus was Messiah. In doing so, they kept their power and positions intact. There would be no more miracles to incite the crowds. Jesus' body hanging accursed on a tree would be proof enough that He was not the One. (Deuteronomy 21:23) Things would get back to normal.

But then the sky began to darken. By noon a shroud of darkness enveloped everything. (Matthew 27:46) At the time of the evening sacrifice, 3PM, panic ensued. Jesus yelled from the cross, "It is finished!" and breathed His last breath. (John 19:30) The earth began to shake. The curtain in the temple that set apart the most holy place tore in half from top to bottom. (Matthew 27:51) Then, as suddenly as it started, it stopped. It was light again.

The temple priest quickly tried to recover. They continued with the afternoon sacrifice while others tried to cover the tear in the great curtain. Others scattered to assess the damage to the Temple. Slowly, things returned to a semblance of normality.

Did it cross their minds or the minds of the people that they had committed a terrible error? Did they think for a moment that they had killed their Messiah to maintain the status quo? But then, Jesus was dead. You couldn't go back now, so don't think the unthinkable. Just throw yourself back into the daily routines and forget about it.

A couple of the men from the Sanhedrin (Israel's ruling council) dared to associate themselves with Jesus. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were even going to take Jesus' body down and bury Him in one of their own tombs. (John 19:38-39) They could forget about keeping their place on the council.

Commented [notes1]: Matthew 27:21 (NIV)
21 "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor. "Barabbas," they answered.

Commented [notes2]: Deuteronomy 21:23 (NIV)
23 you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

Commented [notes3]: Matthew 27:45 (NIV)
45 From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land.

Commented [notes4]: John 19:30 (NIV)
30 When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Commented [notes5]: Matthew 27:51 (NIV)
51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split.

Commented [notes6]: John 19:38-39 (NIV)
38 Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away.
39 He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.

I suppose that most of those religious leaders went to sleep that night trying hard not to think about what had happened that day, but probably ended up dreaming about it, the earthquake, the torn curtain, and Jesus' prayer from the cross to forgive them.

The next morning they went to the temple before dawn to begin their service. It was the Sabbath. Something wasn't right. The inner doors were already open. The scarlet cord hanging from the door was still red. It usually turned white after the Passover sacrifice, a miraculous sign from God. It had been worn on the head of the scapegoat and taken off before the goat was driven into the wilderness. Then the cord was hung on the Temple door. The people of Israel took great comfort in knowing the cord turned white. Their history had shown them that it was a miraculous sign that the sins of the people were covered. But there it was, as red as the day it was hung.

Then, after properly washing and dressing, the priests entered the Holy Place. Everyone's face registered the horror they witnessed. The western most lamp of the Menorah had gone out. It was the one lamp that was to be kept burning at all times. It was the lamp from which the other lamps were lit. But more importantly, it was the lamp closest to the Holy of Holies and represented their communion with God. Special preparation was made to see that it never went out.

Perhaps it was the earthquake or the aftershocks, or maybe a trick by Jesus' disciples. Again, the unthinkable began to nag at their minds and hearts. What had they done? But the day was uneventful. The western most lamp was relit. The gate hinges were checked. Nothing could be done, however, about the scarlet cord. It would turn white or it would not.

It was another night of tossing and turning until they finally woke and went to do their morning rituals. The gates were open again! How could that be! The scarlet cord was as red as ever. Sure enough, the western lamp was out again. What could it mean? The hinges were checked again and the latch for the gate. Special efforts were again made to see the lamp would not go out. The wick was replaced. The channel for the oil was cleaned. Everything that could be done was done. Now they would have another restless night, wondering what the morning would bring.

The next morning they awoke to another earthquake just about dawn. They ran to the temple and there again the same signs they had seen before. The door was open wide, the cord was still red, and the western lamp was out again. Suddenly, soldiers came running in and demanding to speak to the High Priest, Caiaphas. He immediately called the chief priests and elders together. One of the many elders who later became followers of Jesus (Acts 6:7) later told the whole story of what took place.

Matthew 28:11-15 (NIV) ^{11b} *...some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.* ¹² *When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money,* ¹³ *telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'"* ¹⁴ *If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."* ¹⁵ *So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.*

Commented [notes7]: Acts 6:7 (NIV)
7 So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Everyone was very nervous about what might happen next. Every morning the same signs appeared, no matter what was done to remedy the situation. After awhile they just got in the routine of expecting the door to the temple to be open and the western lamp to be out. Except for the rumors among the followers of Jesus about Him being alive, things went pretty much back to normal. That was the case until the next great Jewish feast, Pentecost. Then all heaven broke loose, but that is another story. (Acts 2:1-4)

For forty years the door in the temple opened each night, and the cord of each Passover remained red. The western lamp went out each and every night. Over time the priests began to see another sign. Every year in the Fall the priest drew lots for the lambs on the Day of Atonement, and every time they drew the black lot for the scapegoat instead of the white one for the sacrifice. The white one was never drawn in 40 years. The odds of that happening are one in five billion five hundred million.

This is significant to the Jewish people because in the days when Simon the Righteous was the High Priest (3rd Century BC), for forty straight years he drew the white lot. They knew during that time that God's favor was upon them. This 40 years of drawing the black lot was an ominous warning of God's displeasure. Yet His merciful grace extended for forty years. The miracles called out to the people and the priests to recognize their sin and repent. Some did, but most ignored the signs. One of the great Jewish leaders predicted that the open doors of the temple was an indication that the Temple was about to be destroyed. He was right.

At the end of that 40 years the people of Israel chose false Messiahs, revolutionaries, just as Jesus had predicted. (Matthew 24:24) Rome came in and leveled the Temple, putting an end to the whole sacrificial system. What Jesus had cried over as He came down Hosanna Road had come to pass. (Luke 19:43-44)

What I have shared with you has come from the Scriptures and the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud. Jesus rose from the dead! It was not possible that death could hold Him. (Acts 2:24) He is alive and His gates are open to all who will enter in. (John 10:9) He is the light of life that illuminates the soul in darkness. (John 1:9) He is the light that never goes out. He is your communion with God. Though your sins are as scarlet, in Christ they can become as white as snow. (Isaiah 1:18)

God chose the white lot. The sacrificial Lamb of God was Jesus. No other sacrifice will suffice. The danger is that we, like the priests of old, go about things business as usual. God is as patient with us as He was with the Jews of the first century, but His patience has limits. He will not restrain us from our own destructive ways forever. He gives us all enough proof for the honest and willing hearts to believe.

Will you be one of the few that sees the clear signs recorded even by those who do not believe, and become one of God's chosen that hears what He has revealed, or will you shut your ears and go back to routines? "If anyone has ears to hear," Jesus said, "let him hear." (Matthew 13:16) He is risen! (Matthew 28:7)

Commented [notes8]: Acts 2:1-4 (NIV)

- 1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.
- 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.
- 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.
- 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Commented [notes9]: Matthew 24:24 (NIV)

- 24 For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect--if that were possible.

Commented [notes10]: Luke 19:43-44 (NIV)

- 43 The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side.
- 44 They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

Commented [notes11]: Acts 2:24 (NIV)

- 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Commented [notes12]: John 10:9 (NIV)

- 9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.

Commented [notes13]: John 1:9 (NIV)

- 9 The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

Commented [notes14]: Isaiah 1:18 (NIV)

- 18 "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.

Commented [notes15]: Matthew 13:16 (NIV)

- 16 But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.

Commented [notes16]: Matthew 28:6 (NIV)

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