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EASTER

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question

To all those looking for an answer to
THE QUESTION

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Forward

Thank you for taking a look into this timely book for yourself or as a gift to another. It reads differently than most other books because each of its three parts involves a particular and distinct reading style.

However, its aim remains the same. The Easter Question invites you into the story of the very first Easter.

The Easter Question contains three concise parts. The first part is a thirty-page short read intended to acquaint you with the Easter story and the message of Christianity. It introduces the question worth asking and answering at Easter time.

The second part is about the truthfulness and historicity of the resurrection. This section reads like a series of arguments with quotes and rationale. It allows the reader time to ponder and process through the resurrection claim of Christianity.

Finally, the third part focuses upon the Easter Question itself as asked by Jesus, "But who do you say I am?" This is the most important question a person will ever answer and the final part of the book invites you into its answer. Enjoy your read!

Part 1



Easter

Did you know?

(visit www.storyofeaster.net for answers)

- Marshmallow is the second most popular non-chocolate candy sold at Easter time. Do you know which form it takes at Easter?
- Besides chocolate, which candy will be most consumed on Easter morning? (38 million of them)
- Cadbury is the second-largest confectionary in the world behind Mars. Which UK city was its birthplace?
- 76% of people eat the ears off of a chocolate Easter bunny first. But which part holds the second highest percentage?
- Although the Easter Bunny is the most common Easter animal association. Sweden celebrates with an Easter...
- On average, how much will every household spend on their Easter celebrations?

Fat Tuesday (or Marci Gras) has passed and the season of Lent has just begun. Many will give up chocolate and suffer from cocoa-withdrawal until a big bunny arrives on Easter Sunday. But don't worry. If the figures are right, you will probably be one of the recipients to partake in the

couple hundred million Easter eggs sold annually in the US. Thank you, Mr. Cadbury!

How will you celebrate Easter? Will you observe? Easter will come with chocolate and jelly beans for some. It will come with Easter bunny sightings and egg hunts for others. It will bring families together for feasts to enjoy good food. But for others, it will just come and go. It will not have any more appeal than any other day. But for about a fifth of the globe, it will be a considerable day worth celebrating. Almost two billion people on the planet will gather to celebrate the Easter story in churches around the world with utmost reverence – even more than Christmas. Have you heard the story? As Christmas is the story of God's birth into our world, Easter is the story of God's death *in* our world and *for* the world. It begins with an intimate meal, then a betrayal, and continuous court hearings. Incessant charges are made, questions and incriminations mount, but it is met only with silence. There are beatings, denials, and a cross-carrying walk through the city. There will also be constant mocking, darkened skies, an earthquake, and opened graves. Then death, burial, and nothing for three days. Until...

The history of the story

(How did Easter originate?)

Easter had always been the unrivaled and only real Christian holiday. It was not until the secularizing of Christmas that the society's interest in it eclipsed Easter. Easter has and will always be the preeminent and prominent day of a Christian's calendar. Easter Sunday culminates the season of Lent. Lent is a forty-day observance leading up to Easter Sunday. On the front end, Lent is bookended by Mardi Gras. Mardi Gras is historically the day all of one's eggs, and dairy-rich foods are consumed before the Lent fasting season would be observed. Though secular society has turned Mardi Gras into another reason to party, it still leads many into a reflective and somber forty-day period. The fasting person identifies with Jesus' death by process of self-denial and abstaining from frequently consumed foods. It is not a requirement, but a remembrance practice.

When is Easter anyway?

So, this explains the relationship between Easter, Lent, and Mardi Gras (or Fat Tuesday), but why is Easter not celebrated on the same day, each year like other holidays? (Actually, did you know that a motion was passed in the English Parliament in the 1920s to celebrate

Easter on the second Sunday of April annually, but it was never implemented.)

Historically, Lent has coincided with the beginning of the traditional spring harvest periods in early centuries (which is why some people regularly fast from foods for a short period during Lent because, in the early times, food was in short supply having been consumed all winter). But Lent also overlaps with the Jewish observance of Passover which is calculated by their lunar calendar. Passover is the Jewish observance of God saving His people from Egyptian slavery during ancient times, and the world's first Easter events happened in Israel during the Passover weekend celebration around the turn of the first millennium. Therefore, Christians have continued to celebrate Easter over this Jewish remembrance holiday, and due to the lunar calendar's shifts in the year, Easter is never celebrated on the same day annually.

Just as Christmas was a Christian holiday celebrated around the time of the ancient winter solstice and surrounded by pagan religious festivals, Easter also occupies a place crowded by ancient spring harvest parties and pagan rituals as well. Therefore, Easter probably gets its date of observance either from a wish to redeem a pagan holiday called "Eostre" or from "Ostern," which is a German translation of a Latin festival named "white sunrise." Ostern was a celebration of the risen *sun* of God. Though Easter and Christmas do not mark the

actual dates of Jesus' birth and resurrection, they are the annual holiday dates the church has chosen to observe the most significant days in their religion.

The Man behind the story

It is undeniable that the Easter story has its history linked to the birth and life of a man from Israel named Jesus. He was a man who lived in the days of the Roman occupation of Israel around the turn of the first century. He was a carpenter by trade, but tragically died at the age of 33—he died so young. But before His death, He left a legacy that will last till the end of time. History states that He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, preached a message of love, and confronted the religious hypocrites of his day.

He was not unpopular, but one of, if not the most popular man who ever walked the earth. To be around Jesus was to feel safe and strengthened all at the same time. He was kind and gentle, yet bold and mighty. He taught with an uncanny sense of authority and seemed to defy nature with His feats. He fed thousands, advocated for the downcast, and fought for the oppressed. He was a social-justice phenom who confronted corruption in His day. He defended women, the poor, the lame, the blind, and children. He was a religious man, but also rebuked the traditional religious establishment during His time.

He taught many things. He showed us how to love the unlovable, and look at our own lives before judging

another. He taught us to weep over the helpless and carry the burdens of others. He showed us humility and not a “holier than thou” attitude. His life invites us to forgiveness and mercy, not just judgment. Jesus modeled a life that was truly good and worthy to emulate. But did He show us more?

Did Jesus *just* do good, or was He good to the core? Was He only good externally or good throughout? Jesus was good without a doubt, but was He more than good? You see, Jesus’ life existed to point clearly to something. His humanity pointed to His deity. His goodness existed to show us His God-likeness.

Perhaps, nothing points to Jesus’ God-like goodness more than His death on Easter weekend. We get a glimpse of what others concluded about Him after His death. A Roman centurion soldier, who had mocked and ridiculed Jesus beforehand, put Him to death with the unlikeliest of comments when Jesus breathed his last. He uttered, “Certainly this man was innocent” (Luke 23:47). It was unthinkable to imagine someone more opposed to Jesus than a Roman executioner. He had witnessed how Jesus had died, and it led the centurion to change his perception and conclusion about Jesus. The same eyewitness account quoted above also recorded that the crowds observing the spectacle “returned to their homes in agony over what had happened.” It had so affected the crowd that they returned home utterly grieved over what had

happened. We know the importance and influence of someone's life, but Jesus shows us something spectacular of Himself in His death. No one has ever lived perfectly and innocently, but Jesus showed the crowd that day what it was to die perfectly. He gave us both.

Quite possibly, he lived flawlessly because he was perfect. His goodness might have existed because he was more than a good man, but the God-Man.

The Man of the story asks, "Who do you say that I am?"

Jesus. What do you make of Him? Really, what will you do with this innocent man who changed the world as we know it? It is historically proven that He walked, lived, really did wonderful things, and made significant statements. Do you know what He did? Do you know what He said? It would do you well to read about this man who affected so many lives up to today.

In the gospel of Luke (a story about Jesus' life), Jesus presented His followers with a very pointed question about Himself, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They gave Him some responses. But then, He asked them, "Who do you say that I am?" (Luke 9:18-20). You may know a lot, a little, or nothing about this historic and influential figure, but do you know who He is? This is a question worth pursuing, especially at Easter time.

The Easter story

(Part one—His death)

²⁶As the soldiers led him away, they seized a man called Simon of Cyrene, who had come in from the countryside. They put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. ²⁷A large crowd followed him, along with women who were mourning and lamenting him...

³⁵The people stood and watched and the leaders sneered at Jesus. "He saved others, let him save himself, if he is really God's Messiah, the Chosen One," they said.

³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up to him and offering him wine vinegar, saying, ³⁷"If you're the King of the Jews, then save yourself."

³⁸Above Jesus was a sign on which it was written, "This is the King of the Jews..."

⁴⁴By this time it was around noon and darkness fell over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁵The sun's light was shut out, and the Temple veil was torn in two.

⁴⁶Jesus called out in a loud voice, "Father, I place myself in your hands." Having said this he breathed his last.

The gospel of Luke 23:26-27, 35-38, 44-46

Easter is a story

The above is part of the Easter story—which is a narrative of what happened during that fateful day. The second and

third parts of the story (which will we read a bit later) are about some of His dialogue on the cross and an account of the resurrection Sunday events. But the above verses give us a straightforward account of His death minus any of the verbal exchanges.

But that Easter death was not a surprise because Jesus was born to die to save humankind. He died so that we might live. This is the crux of the Easter story. But the natural question that proceeds is, "Why did Jesus die? And how does His death offer us eternal life?" The Easter story sheds light on this perplexing question.

Easter is, in a real sense, a story. Labeling it a story does not make it necessarily true or false, but what we do know is that the Easter story is one of the most familiar, yet debated stories on earth. If you remember, from your primary school days, each story has essential elements. All stories have a setting, characters, and a plot. Each plot has a conflict, climax, and a resolution (like all good stories). The Easter story is no different from all of these.

However, this story is a solution to a dilemma that everyone faces as part of the larger human story. Before you can jump into the Easter story, you need to understand the over-arching story which is a part of us all. Do you know the larger story? How would you summarize the story leading up to the Easter story?

The Entire story

(How it all began)

The Easter story is part of a larger story. It is the story found in the Bible that begins with the creation story of the Bible's first chapters. The creation story depicts God birthing humanity into His world where they enjoyed one another, life, love, and freedom. But, as with many stories, this happiness eludes them with a fatal step. In a decisive moment, humanity distrusts God as perfectly good and doubts whether He is acting with their best interest in mind (not too different from how people feel today). They doubted God's love for them (as do many of us) and the good He meant for them. Therefore, broken relationship with God ensued and with it came deception, doubt, and disgust. But the distrust germ continued to spread and broke down other human relations in the process. What began as a major earthquake which separated man from God resulted in distrustful aftershocks that pulled people away from other people as the story unfolds. People are no longer for others, but only for themselves. They are wholly distrusting, which results in independence and isolation. But the story not only tells of relational fractures but physical ones as well. The world is beset with disease, death, doubt, hate, selfishness, and manipulation. The world we all wanted was lost, then...

God birthed Himself into our world in Jesus at Christmas time. God entered our world to reverse and redeem the situation. Why? Since trust was lost, it was paramount that faith needed repairing. God was not going to wait for humanity to get himself out of His tailspin, but took personal responsibility for reversing the distrust and brokenness that existed relationally and physically. God knew He must enter the world in the form of Jesus Christ to fix the situation. In Jesus, we see a man who loved God and loved others. He did not break relationships but restored them. He did not distrust God but trusted Him fully. He did not pass on sickness or shame but provided healing cures and heartfelt compassion. Jesus came to live the life that we should live, but could not live. He came to show us who we were meant to be but had failed to be.

But this was not enough. Jesus showed us perfection, but how about our rightful and fair consequence? There is always a just consequence for a humanity that is responsible for the rift in relationships and brokenness in our world. Jesus, at Easter, became our substitute and stood in line for our sake. He took the consequence of our wrongdoing upon Himself and satisfied the just punishment as if it were His own. This is how Jesus offers Heavenly forgiveness. Easter is His stepping in and receiving our fair and right consequence. Without Easter, there is no forgiveness and redemption.

The start of the story of Easter

When Jesus was hanging on the cross, He uttered two very profound statements. One was by His initiation, and the other was a response. These statements capture the essence of Easter. Read below and observe the surprising statements made by Jesus:

³²They also took two others who were criminals to be executed with him. ³³When they reached the place called the Skull they crucified him together with the criminals, one on his right, and the other on his left.

³⁴Jesus said, "Father, please forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." They divided up his clothes by throwing dice for them. ³⁵The people stood and watched and the leaders sneered at Jesus. "He saved others, let him save himself, if he is really God's Messiah, the Chosen One," they said.

³⁶The soldiers also mocked him, coming up to him and offering him wine vinegar, saying, ³⁷"If you're the King of the Jews, then save yourself."³⁸Above Jesus was a sign on which it was written, "This is the King of the Jews."³⁹One of the criminals hanging there joined in the insults against Jesus. "Aren't you the Messiah?" he asked. "Then save yourself—and us too!"

⁴⁰But the other criminal disagreed and argued with him, "Don't you fear God even when you're suffering the same punishment?" he asked. ⁴¹"For us the sentence is right since we're being punished for what we did, but this man didn't do anything wrong."

⁴²Then he said, "Jesus, please remember me when you come into your kingdom."

⁴³Jesus replied, "I promise you today you will be with me in paradise." ⁴⁴By this time it was around noon and darkness fell over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁵The sun's light was shut out, and the Temple veil was torn in two.

⁴⁶Jesus called out in a loud voice, "Father, I place myself in your hands." Having said this he breathed his last. ⁴⁷When the centurion saw what had happened he praised God and said, "Surely this man was innocent." ⁴⁸When all the crowds that had come to watch saw what happened they went home beating their chests in grief.

Gospel of Luke 23:32-48

There was nothing quite like it. On that hill came some of the most deeply moving words that had been heard, especially at an execution. Onlookers and soldiers were familiar with insults or selfish pleas uttered from the ones they were executing, but little did they expect to hear blessings and love being showered over them by Jesus. If there was ever a time to be selfish or self-concerned, it was while Jesus hung on that cross. But not Him. It was during the most unfair, unjust, and unfortunate execution that Jesus thought of others and not Himself. As they nailed Him and lifted Him to the cross, no one expected to hear what they heard from His lips. There were not words of vengeance or repayment, just unconditional and

unending forgiveness for the unaware, “Father, please forgive them, they don’t what they’re doing” (Luke 23:34).

Jesus was pleading for their forgiveness. They were not asking, but He was asking for them. How could He ask? He could ask because His imminent death was the satisfaction of their rightful consequence or penalty. He was purchasing their freedom and forgiveness of their wicked acts in that very moment. Do you need God’s mercy? You think you may or you may not, but Jesus knows we all do. If He asked for the soldiers, then no matter what you have thought, done or considered, you can ask for it too.

I promise

The next saying follows a dialogue the two criminals had with Jesus during their execution. One of the criminals insulted Jesus, but the other rebuked him and said, “For us, the sentence is right since we’re being punished for what we did, but this man didn’t do anything wrong” (Luke 23:41). This same criminal then proceeded to request Jesus, “Jesus, please remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). What were the bystanders thinking? I would bet they were thinking, “Yeah, right.” How could Jesus let this man off the hook? No one in their right mind would pardon someone so deserving of punishment—except Jesus. “Jesus replied, ‘I promise you today you will be with me in paradise’” (Luke 23:43). The statement must have been extraordinarily startling and

surprising. I can hear the criminal bewildered under his breath, “Really? You mean me?” Jesus made a point that day on the cross. Christianity was not deserved. It would always and ever only be an offer of grace and mercy. The very definition of grace and mercy is that it is not earned. Jesus did not offer what the criminal earned, but He provided him what he did not nor could have ever deserved, which was eternal life in paradise.

The door of Christianity is broader than anyone could have predicted. The Christian faith received the most unlikely and most undeserving of all men with open and inclusive arms. He was the perfect poster-child for this young religion. He entered through forgiveness. He had no other option. Did this criminal deserve it? Not a chance if you would say. But this is what made him the perfect example of a Christian, and not a disgraceful one. His story is a testimony of the foundation for the Christian faith—grace. A religion based on good works and a model life would not have welcomed a man like this. Jesus did welcome him and set a precedent for what Christianity is and who it’s for.

The point of the story

How does that story make you feel? Like most, we might think it’s unfair. It’s unfair because no one with such a horrid life should go scot-free based off a prayer uttered seconds before they die on their death bed. We do not like the thought that those on death row can somehow be

acquitted right before their punishment. But why? It's because we have such an aversion to grace and such an attraction to justice—at least for others.

We do find ourselves much more pleased with a system of merit. The reason we find it hard to let the criminal go free seconds before their execution is because it's not fair. Well, according to who? Whose system of fairness or morality are you judging him with? We often judge others by a standard we can meet ourselves which makes it easier to look down on others. But how would you fare according to another moral standard?

What if it were a moral standard held by your ex-partner? What if it was the one held by your ex-boyfriend or girlfriend? What if it was a standard that held not only your actions, but your thoughts and motives accountable? How about the criteria of the Ten Commandments or Mother Theresa? What if it was Jesus' standard?

You might be human, but humans still need forgiveness. Being a human does not justify you and give you a free pass when immorality or lack of love rears its ugly head. Consider Jesus' standard. Jesus' standard was Himself. No one lived perfectly as He did. Remember the Roman soldier's conclusion about Jesus just after death, "Certainly this man was innocent." Could your enemy say that about you on your deathbed? Probably not. We all have our immoral imperfections and chances are we think

we are not as bad as we are. We always tend to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt and excuse ourselves more than we accuse ourselves. Besides, Jesus' substitutionary death tells us how bad it is.

Capital punishment upon a cross was Jesus taking personal responsibility for our moral fall out and shortcomings. He was not given a stern warning on our behalf, a slap on the hand, or a time out. His stepping in and taking our rightful place on the cross satisfied our just punishment. So, indirectly, the Bible tells us that we may not be as deserving as we think we are.

So, how good are you, really? If you evaluated yourself according to the moral standard of Jesus where do you lie? Maybe you have not done a lot of bad things, but have you done a lot of good things to curtail evil and immorality in our world. It's not just what you have done, but are there things you should have or could have done that you have not? Good morality is both doing, thinking, and feeling what ought to be done, thought, and felt, but it is also abstaining from what should *not* be done, thought, or felt.

If forgiveness is not available, then there is not much incentive, to be honest. But if Jesus is offering it, then we are free to fess up. We almost always accept a pardon when we are caught speeding, cheating, or lying. But why not with God? This Easter, He is offering you the pardon of a lifetime. You could take Him up on it.

Our story

(the need for Easter)

If you remember the over-arching story, (of which Easter is a part), the creation story contained some conflict. It was the conflict that existed between God and humankind. Doubt and distrust plague the relationship between God and humanity. The conflict (like any conflict) resulted in a rift in the relationship. Where there is no trust, there is indeed not much of a relationship.

With conflict comes blame-shifting, pointing the finger, pride, and fault-finding.¹ We know the natural dialogue that accompanies many quarrels. It goes back and forth with both parties disagreeing, defending, and deflecting any guilt:

“It wasn’t me.”

“Well, it wasn’t me.”

“No, it was you,”

“Actually, it’s always you.”

“No, you’re to blame...”

The only thing that stops the endless arguing (whether out loud or just possibly what we do in our heads with one another in a slightly more socially acceptable and adult-

¹Some of this chapter’s sections were abbreviated and adapted from Tim Keller’s contributions to Nancy Guthrie’s, [Come Thou Long Expected Jesus](#). Crossway, 2007.

like way) is basically stopping, admitting fault, and taking the blame for the current situation. Unless someone pauses to accept the responsibility, the conflict will always continue. For true reconciliation to happen, one party must lay down their defenses and say, "I'm sorry. It's my fault. Will you forgive me?" Those are magical words and generally diffuse high conflict situations. When someone interrupts with these words, conflict often gets off-course, and the disagreement gets killed. It's hard for it to continue when one party has lowered itself and humbled itself before the other.

But it's just not that easy—not easy at all. It is extremely uncomfortable to have the words, "I'm sorry. My fault. Will you forgive me?" come out of your mouth. But when done in this manner, it is undoubtedly powerful. The argument stops when these words get uttered. At this point, there is no one to argue with since the air conflict breathes has vanished. But it will cost you. You must accept wrong and absorb the hurt you have caused. You don't deflect blame but accept responsibility. You don't point the finger outwards, but inwards. Can you do that? If you do, you preserve and reconcile a relationship. If you don't, then pride will overcome you, and you will lose. You might be right, but you will be alone and without the other person. You may have won, but you will certainly lose them. The great English author C.S. Lewis comments on the vulnerability that must accompany loving relationships,

“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.”

The conflict that led to the cross

God, at Easter, became vulnerable to kill conflict. He did that by loving the world that broke a relationship with Him. The most famous verse in the Bible explains God's love, “For God so loved the world, that he gave His only Son...” (John 3:16) God gave His Son to end the conflict. He gave the blame to His Son and took the point of the finger. He came to display God laying down His defenses and lowering Himself to serve humanity. Jesus was the fault-taker for us. He accepted the blame for us in our place. Jesus swallowed the air that conflict breathes and held it unto death so we would not have to breathe that air. The picture of Easter portrays Christ lowering Himself to us and being the scapegoat to put an end to the conflict between God and each other.

When we look at the end of Jesus' life, we see that cross. The little babe born in Bethlehem began in a cradle but ended on the cross. A bright-shining star hung over Him at birth, but the darkened sky of blackness hung low at His

death. His life came to complete the story. His death is the story's climax. It all pinnacled on the cross. God planned to erase humanity's conflict with one another and with Him. Distrust, doubt, lovelessness, and selfishness could now suffocate if God were willing to say with His life, "I've got it, this one I take for you. Point the finger at me. I'll take the blame and the fall. I will shoulder it all. I will take the slap of sacrifice so that the relationship can be repaired. Just don't waste this moment." Jesus did all of this that day, and spoke some of the most memorable words that put an end to the conflict,

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

JESUS in Luke 23:34

The Easter story

(part two—His Resurrection)

¹Very early on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb, taking the spices they'd prepared. ²They found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb, ³but when they went in they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus.

⁴While they were wondering what was going on, two men suddenly appeared dressed in clothes that shone brilliantly. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed down, their faces on the ground.

They said to the women, "Why are you looking for someone who is alive among the dead? ⁶He's not here; he's risen from the dead! Remember what he told you while you were still in Galilee: ⁷'The Son of man must be betrayed into the hands of evil men, be crucified, and on the third day rise again.'" ⁸Then they remembered what he'd said. ⁹When they returned from the tomb they reported all that had happened to the eleven disciples and to all the others. ¹⁰Those who told the apostles what had happened were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women with them. ¹¹But it seemed like nonsense to them, so they didn't believe the women. However, Peter got up and ran to the tomb. Bending down, he looked in and saw only the linen grave-

clothes. So, he went back home, wondering what had happened.

The gospel of Luke 24:1-11

No one expected an empty tomb. No one. Not even Jesus' closest followers, but the biblical account says He rose from death. When Jesus said to the criminal on the cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise" he was making a colossal prediction (Luke 23:43). A living God was offering life forever. A dead God cannot make such an invitation.

Millions will flock to church on Easter Sunday to worship under an outrageous claim, "God died, but then rose on Easter Sunday." If a virgin birth was not far-fetched enough, how about a self-resurrected life? While the claim seems ridiculous, this point of view isn't as absurd after considering the evidence. Have you considered that no one has ever produced a body that would disprove the resurrection? Did you know that over 500 eyewitnesses gave testimony to seeing Jesus over a forty day span? Did you know his followers died to defend the claim of his resurrection? Why would all the biblical gospel writers have included this far-fetched account in their narrative (that could have easily disproven their writing), unless it were true? How do we account for all of Jesus' resurrection talk during his life if it was just a sham? What if it was true? A pastor named Tim Keller says,

“If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that he said; if he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead.”

Are you willing to accept all He said? Or is your unwillingness to accept His resurrection primarily a smokescreen for entertaining what He said? If He did rise, He is worth listening to. If He rose, then He can help you and forgive you. The evidence seems to suggest that if anyone could have, it would be Him. Maybe He did.

What do you make of this Easter Story?

Just as no one expected the tomb to be empty, few people expect Christianity to be a story of a loving reunion. Easter weekend shows us that God will stop at nothing to be reunited in relationship with His created people. Yet, few people understand Christianity this way. Most people have previously held beliefs about Christianity which are not consistent with the Christian worldview. Could you have any misconceptions about Christianity that are skewing your opinions of it? The chances are that you have more in common with Christians than you think. The “God” you are unwilling to believe in, most likely, is a god Christians do not believe in either. This happens quite frequently. Consider your assumptions and definitions you employ toward Christianity. Are those assumptions

and definitions consistent with those of your Christian friends? If we are going to discount Christianity, then we must make sure we have a full understanding of what it entails to be a Christian before we draw conclusions. It's only when we understand accurately that our deductions can be credible.

It is one thing to poke at Christianity from afar and make incriminations about it based off of misinformation, misunderstanding, or general prejudice. But what if you were to know and experience it first-hand like the soldiers who stood just steps away from Jesus during Easter weekend?

Standing beneath the cross some two thousand years ago, changed two men's hostile attitude toward Jesus. Before this experience, they could only base their opinions off here-say, but after that weekend they made new judgments built upon personal, real-life experience. They began the weekend thinking that Jesus was a guilty fraud, but ended with a very different conclusion. Upon observing His death, they said, "Truly this was an innocent man" and "Surely this was the Son of God" (Matthew 27:54; Luke 23:47). Easter challenged their previously held beliefs about Christianity. How do your opinions measure up and hold up against the story of Jesus at the cross?

Our beef with Easter

Christianity is archaic, outdated, and irrelevant.

Christianity is manipulative, controlling, and bigoted. The life of Jesus is just a myth, and His life was only a fable. The Christian God is self-consumed. Christianity is not inclusive, and Christians are hypocrites anyways.

These are some of the common critiques against Christianity in today's world. But how do these critiques measure against the central event in all of Christianity – the cross of Easter weekend? We have discussed a couple of Jesus' statements during the last moments of His life, but we will consider a few more below.

Jesus responds to our critiques at the cross

As Jesus agonized and fought for life, we could see His inclusive and unconditional invitation for humanity. Whether it was Roman soldiers in need of forgiveness or criminals who wanted heaven upon death, Jesus held the door wide open. Christianity was not for white, middle-class Americans exclusively, but the cross shows us that Jesus opened His arms wide to include all types of people. He welcomes the majority culture and minority culture. Jesus teaches us by His interactions on the cross that Christianity is for everyone, everywhere, and at any time. Your morale record, your upbringing, your worldview, sexuality, or ethnicity are not conditions for acceptance by Jesus. The only condition Jesus holds for entry is that you realize you meet no conditions and that you need total restoration in your relationship with God. Most religions require you to be good and exclude the bad, but not Jesus.

You need not be good, but just needy. He does not withhold, but says, "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43)

If there was ever a time for Jesus to be self-consumed, it was at the cross. His deathbed was *the* time for thoughts, desires, and wants to drift inward. No one would have faulted Jesus for being absorbed in His situation. But we just don't see that at the cross. We see Jesus, even in a seemingly selfish situation, embody selflessness without hesitation. It's as though His instincts kick in. The Bible records, "Standing near the cross was Jesus' mother...When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Mother, this is your son." Then He said to the disciple, "This is your mother" (John 19:25-27). Jesus' interest in his last moments was the care of others, and not Himself. We see God in Jesus, who is not self-consumed, but genuinely caring and compassionate.

Just a few lines below this account we hear Jesus utter, "I'm thirsty" (John 19:28). Jesus is not enduring suffering and pain effortlessly but is feeling the tangible effects of dehydration and suffocation. Jesus is not a God who sympathizes but empathizes as one who has been there. He is not a God who is distant, unattached, and irrelevant. He is close, understanding, and personal to our real world situations. A God who substitutes Himself on the cross to

assume His people's rightful consequence is not numb to our lives, but near.

Do you know this Jesus? You may have heard of an alternate version, but there is no one quite like Him. If a man's actions ever validated or authenticated His message, now is the time to reflect deeper. He did say, **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"** (Luke 23:34). What if we don't know what we are doing and Jesus is right? He might be right about a lot of things. Use this Easter to get to know Him. Try out the Bible and judge Him for yourself. You might come away as the soldier did, "Surely he was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54)

Part 2



Risen

He has Risen

(Mark 16:6)

This was the testimony from all who witnessed the tomb that very first Easter morning. This is how the book of Matthew tells the story,

“Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.” (Matthew 28:1-7)

There are two very difficult truths the Bible makes clear about Jesus. One, is that he was born of a virgin. Two, that He died, but rose from the dead. The biblical writers remind their audiences of this fact again and again.

Sentences about the resurrection of Jesus fill the pages of the Bible and no fair reading of the Scriptures can conclude that Christians believed anything otherwise.

So, if the resurrection was false, why would the biblical authors have included such a preposterous claim? If they were trying to make the identity of Jesus believable, why would they take such a controversial stand? Maybe it's because they were committed to reporting truth, no matter how unlikely it seemed.

That is what we all should be after—the truth. Would you consider the truthfulness (or not) of the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the following pages? The subsequent pages include 7 statements about the resurrection. To respect the truth, we should be asking, “Is it true?” rather than, “Do I want it to be true?” Only after answering the former can we really decide what to do in response to it.

1) If the resurrection is not true, how do we account for the testimony of over 500 eyewitnesses?



“The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is one of the best attested facts on record. There were so many witnesses to behold it, that if we do in the least degree receive the credibility of men’s testimonies, we cannot and we dare not doubt that Jesus rose from the dead.” “The resurrection is a fact better attested than any event recorded in any history, whether ancient or modern.”

Charles Spurgeon

“I claim to be an historian. My approach to Classics is historical. And I tell you that the evidence for the life, the death, and the resurrection of Christ is better authenticated than most of the facts of ancient history . . .”

E. M. Blaiklock, Professor of Classics, Auckland University

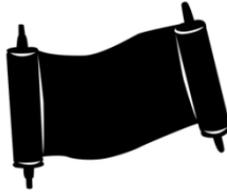
For the New Testament of Acts, the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. Any attempt to reject its basic historicity, even in matters of detail, must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted.”

A. N. Sherwin-White , Classical Roman Historian

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you - unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

1 Corinthians 15:1-8

2) If the resurrection is not true, why would the biblical authors have placed such a preposterous event in their narrative?



"The New Testament writers speak as if Christ's achievement in rising from the dead was the first event of its kind in the whole history of the universe. He is the 'first fruits,' the pioneer of life,' He has forced open a door that has been locked since the death of the first man. He has met, fought, and beaten the King of Death. Everything is different because He has done so."

C.S. Lewis

"If all the evidence is weighed carefully and fairly, it is indeed justifiable, according to the canons of historical research, to conclude that the sepulchre of Joseph of Arimathea, in which Jesus was buried, was actually empty on the morning of the first Easter. And no shred of evidence has yet been discovered in literary sources, epigraphy, or archaeology that would disprove this statement."

Paul Maier

"I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times...I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the

understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God hath given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead.”

Professor Thomas Arnold, chair of modern history Oxford

This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true.

John 21:24

3) If the resurrection was not true, why would the biblical authors have tried to establish its credibility on the basis of women's testimonies?



“It’s safe to say that, if the apostles wanted to convince their fellow Jews that Jesus is the Messiah, they likely would have said that Peter, or even Joseph of Arimathea, had discovered the empty tomb. The fact that all the Gospels list the potentially embarrassing detail that women were the primary witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection greatly adds to the credibility of their accounts.”

Cale Clarke

“But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex...since it is probable that they may not speak truth, either out of hope of gain, or fear of punishment.”

Josephus, Antiquities 4.8.15

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. 2 And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. 5 And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? 6 He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, 7 that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." 8 And they remembered his words, 9 and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. 10 Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, 11 but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 12 But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.

Luke 24:1-12

4) If the resurrection was not true, why was a body never put forward to dismiss the absurdity?



“No matter how you want to interpret the evidence, the fact remains that historically the tomb was empty. The resurrection proclamation could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact.”

Paul Althus

“The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the crowning proof of Christianity. If the resurrection did not take place, then Christianity is a false religion. If it did take place, then Christ is God and the Christian faith is absolute truth.”

Henry M. Morris

While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. 12 And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers 13 and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' 14 And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." 15 So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

Matthew 28:11-15

5) If the resurrection was not true, how else do we give an account for his follower's incredible turnaround from fear and flight to emboldened faith?



"Why would the apostles lie? Liars always lie for selfish reasons. If they lied, what was their motive, what did they get out of it? What they got out of it was misunderstanding, rejection, persecution, torture, and martyrdom. Hardly a list of perks!"

Peter Kreeft

"I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Everyone was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world- and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible."

Charles Colson

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, 9 if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, 10 let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. 11 This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. 12 And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." 13 Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.

Acts 4:8-13

6) If the resurrection was not true, how do we account for the conversion of the greatest persecutor of the Christian faith months later?



I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities. In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the

things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you,

Paul, the apostle

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. 20 And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." 21 And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" 22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

Acts 9:19-22

7) If the resurrection was not true, how should we interpret Jesus' endless talk of resurrection during his lifetime?



"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

Jesus

"See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise."

Jesus

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate 63 and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' 64 Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." 65 Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." 66 So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

Matthew 27:62-66

Part 3



The Question

The Question

(Who do you say I am?)

Easter begs life's biggest question but offers life's best news. Who is Jesus Christ, really? And, if Jesus *is* who He says He is, then He is the best thing that could happen to us. Before we judge what He did or what He said, we must first answer who He was. His identity changes how we evaluate all that He said or did.

Buddha never claimed to be God. Moses never claimed to be Jehovah. Mohammed never claimed to be Allah. Yet Jesus Christ claimed to be the true and living God. Buddha simply said, "I am a teacher in search of the truth." Jesus said, "I am the Truth." Confucius said, "I never claimed to be holy." Jesus said, "Who convicts me of sin?" Mohammed said, "Unless God throws his cloak of mercy over me, I have no hope." Jesus said, "Unless you believe in me, you will die in your sins."

—Unknown

"If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that he said; if he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead."

—Timothy Keller, author of [Reason for God](#)

The end of the Easter story in Luke's gospel account provides the reader with a natural identification with one of three people.

The Crowd

When we consider the death of Jesus we view three responses from those who witnessed it. One was the bystanders in the crowd (Luke 23:48). They left the crucifixion shocked, grieved, and "beating their chest over the horrors they observed. I'm sure they left the crucifixion horrified over what they had seen. Although they were in agony and grieved, were they changed? They showed an emotional response, as many would after viewing such a barbaric act, but the event did not change their view. They were sad it had happened, but sorrow does not necessarily translate into trust or heart change. They walked away upset with such a display of human suffering but unchanged in their estimation of Jesus. They simply and sadly walked away and would soon forget it ever happened. But that's not how Jesus wants you to leave. He wants your pity to point in the right direction. You might feel pity, even sympathize with Jesus, but if you do not pity yourself as the real reason Jesus was on the cross, you will not find the salvation you desperately need. On the way to the cross, Jesus told those who were weeping for Him, "Weep for yourselves..." (Luke 23:28). Jesus' sadness for the sin of the world led Him to suffer as He did. Let Him suffer for you as your sin-taking substitute.

The Criminal

Then there was a criminal on the cross next to Jesus. He mocked Jesus and berated Him about being a fraud and impotent to do anything about His crucifixion on the cross (Luke 23:39). He acted with such superiority toward Jesus and discounted Him because Jesus did not act according to his expectations. The criminal had exclusive expectations which he placed on Jesus and when Jesus acted differently, he dismissed Him. You can do your best to discount, discredit, and dethrone Jesus, but His identity, being, and authenticity do not need your nod of approval or vote for validation. Jesus is who He is because of who He is, not because of you or what you think, decide, or postulate. Do not let your unmet expectations or disapproval of Him disqualify you from salvation by Him. The other criminal on the cross reprimanded his counterpart with a very interesting argument. In summary, he said, remember who you are and who you are not. Don't forget that. His criminal counterpart said, we deserve this, but Jesus is the only one among us who does not. So, do not set yourself up as superior against one like Jesus. Let Him humble you gently. But let Him humble you, so you can truly be helped and not humiliated. As we remember from some of His last words on the cross, He is merciful to the meek.

The Centurion

Finally, we view the Roman centurion. As bands of bystanders walked away with sadness and one of the

criminals held to his superiority, the Roman soldier was humbled by his sinfulness and in awe of the sinless one. He exclaimed, "Surely this man was innocent...was the Son of God" (Luke 23:47; Matthew 27:54). This Roman soldier was not merely sad over what had happened, but he was genuinely sorrowful over his sinfulness which was brought to light by being in the presence of a sinless one. There is nothing quite like being in the presence of perfection that shows you your imperfection so starkly. And we certainly see this in Jesus' death.

Perfection struck down the superiority of the centurion. His moral record was powerfully exposed at the cross by a moral record of pure innocence. A man can live perfectly, but one who dies perfectly can only be God.

Unimaginable selflessness, humility, forgiveness, love, and sacrifice were what Jesus embodied. The existence of innocence and love in the presence of such intense agony testify to the God of the universe coming down at Easter to be reunited with His creation. Don't be merely sad, or heaven forbid, superior, but be broken. See your lacking moral record in the presence of the only entirely moral one. He is God, and He is God sacrificed for you. This is the answer to the question. He is God. But it's also the best news because he is God sacrificed for you. Believe and be saved. Be stunned over the one who lived, died, and now lives for you!

“He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered up for us all, how will he not also—along with him, graciously give us all things.” **Romans 8:32**

Consider using the song lyrics, “Have Mercy on Me” as a next step for processing and praying through all you’ve read and considered so far.

HAVE MERCY ON ME

VERSE 1

I am a sinner; You're blameless, Lord
My sins against You can't be ignored
They will be punished, I know they must
Your law demands it for You are just

VERSE 2

If You would count
Everything that I've done wrong
Who could stand?
But there's forgiveness with You, God

CHORUS

Have mercy on me, have mercy on me
A broken and a contrite heart
You won't turn away
Have mercy on me, have mercy on me
Because of Your steadfast love

VERSE 3

Father of mercy, You gave Your Son
To make atonement for wrongs I have done
What You required, Jesus fulfilled
I don't deserve it—I never will

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If you would like to hear more about the Easter story you may visit www.storyofeaster.net to read and learn more in depth about the death and life of Jesus Christ at Easter. You can download a portion of this book for free and share it with others in order that the Easter story might become part of their story as well.



www.storyofeaster.net

But who do you say that I am?

Jesus