

The Surprising Darkness of Easter

Origins of Easter	1
Origins of Passover.....	3
Why Everyone Would be Lost Without Easter	3
A Struggle Through the Ages	4
The War on Jesus	5
Easter Week—Final Battle Lines are Drawn	6
The Crucifixion Part 1—Satan’s Full Fury Unleashed.....	7
The Crucifixion Part 2—A Divine Bombshell.....	8
The Great Exchange—Yours to Accept or Reject.....	10
Sources.....	11

[Note: Throughout the text, you will see bracketed green text insertions. These are suggested discussion questions for small group leaders, who would like to review these topics in an interactive group setting.]

[Discussion: Can you explain the significance of Easter or Holy Week?]

Origins of Easter

Some time ago, my wife and I were sharing lunch with a very lovely Jewish couple. They mentioned having attended a Jewish Passover dinner the previous night. This piqued our curiosity, so we started conversing about the details.

The next day, this conversation got me thinking about how during Easter, we often brush over its deep history and meaning. We may superficially think to ourselves, “Yes, Jesus died on the cross for our sins on Easter about 2,000 years ago,” but we don’t reflect on the depth of what *happened*. The details of Easter are quite intricate and the story started long before Jesus was even born.

The first of the three passages we’ll be covering today, is from John 14:30-31. Just before his arrest, Jesus tells his disciples:

I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. (John 14:30-31)

Shortly after, when they come to arrest him in Luke 22:53, Jesus remarks to his arrestors:

When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness. (Luke 22:53)

Then, when Jesus had been nailed to the cross for 3 hours, we read from Luke 23:44–45:

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. (Luke 23:44-45)

If you think you already know everything about these passages and Easter, here are just two questions:

1. Why did Satan change his strategy of preventing Jesus from going to the cross through Peter to getting Jesus on the cross through Judas?
2. Why was it dark during the final three hours Christ was on the cross?

Let me set the scene by bringing you back in time to the first ever Holy Week. It was around the year 30 and most of civilization was ruled by the mighty Roman Empire.

In the case of Israel, Rome allowed practicing Judaism and *permitted* the priests to continue overseeing many daily social matters. Although Israel was under Roman occupation, the Jewish priests wielded *considerable* power over society, where daily life was strictly controlled by religious law and rituals. Rome hadn't given Israel total freedom though. Caesar had sent *his* governor, Pontius Pilate, to oversee its interests, especially collection of taxes and prevention of rebellions.

[Discussion: Do you know the name of this Roman Governor of Israel?]

The governor's name was Pontius Pilate. The Bible, along with official Roman historians, Josephus and Tacitus, tells us he ordered Jesus, also known as the Messiah, meaning "savior", to be crucified during the Jewish Passover celebration. Josephus and Tacitus were not Christians, by the way, and Tacitus was a Roman senator known for hating them. Thus, they were not writing to confirm some fabricated Christian legends.

This historical fact sometimes comes as a surprise to atheists who claim Jesus Christ never even existed. Often, they are speechless when they hear that *secular* historians and encyclopedias agree that not only did Jesus Christ, the Messiah, exist, but also that he was crucified by Pontius Pilate during Passover.

Origins of Passover

On the other hand, what often surprises Christians, is when they hear the Jews had been celebrating during the days of Easter for more than 1,000 years before Jesus was *born*. This was called the feast of Passover.

[Discussion: Do you know when and how the Jewish celebration of Passover started?]

In the second book of the Old Testament, Exodus, the Jews were enslaved in Egypt. Moses repeatedly asked the Pharaoh to let them go, but to no avail. As a result, the Egyptians experienced devastating plagues, such boils on their skin and devastating hail. Finally, God, through Moses, warned the Pharaoh a most terrible plague would come if he didn't let the Jews go: All the firstborn sons in Egypt would die. However, to those who wished to believe God's word, he promised a way of salvation from this.

[Discussion: How could one have prevented the firstborns of one's household from getting killed?]

By God's instructions, if one killed a spotless lamb and brushed its blood on his doorposts, all the firstborns in that house would be safe. Furthermore, in Ex. 12:14, God instructed the Jews to keep this feast throughout generations. Thus, over a thousand years later, during the time of Jesus, the Jews were still celebrating Passover. And today, around 2,000 years after the time of Jesus, the Jews are still celebrating Passover.

Why Everyone Would be Lost Without Easter

[Discussion: How does the Jewish celebration of Passover tie into the Christian celebration of Easter?]

Just as 3,000 years ago the Jews needed the blood of a sacrificial lamb spilled for salvation, so we today need the same. Why do we need to be saved from judgment? Unlike the Egyptians, we haven't enslaved the Jews nor are we preventing them from going among us. True, but by default, we are still under judgment. Here's a 10-step summary explaining why:

1. Adam and Eve were created holy and perfect;
2. God's enemy, Satan, an angel who rebelled against God, hates God and his creation;
3. Satan tempted Adam and Eve to sin, disbelieve God, and rebel against him;
4. As a result, man lost his status as Earth's ruler and Satan became ruler;
5. Due to man's disobedience, mankind and Earth were cursed. This is why we die, this is why Earth has trouble, disasters, sickness, earthquakes, etc;
6. Worse, after Adam's fall into sin, mankind is born evil with original sin inherited from Adam. As anyone with kids knows, we don't have to teach kids to be bad; they learn it by themselves. We teach them to be good. If you don't, they'll likely end up monsters. That's original sin at work;
7. This is a big problem, because when we sin we are committing crimes against our creator.

- Since God is fair, justice must be served;
8. Ultimately, our sins are against God, and since God is infinite and perfect being sins against him deserve the harshest penalty;
 9. We can rejoice, because God has provided a solution to this unfortunate destiny. Although God is just, he is also love. Since Adam's fall, God promised a redeemer yet allowed his justice. This was possible by a savior who volunteered to take the judgment we deserve. This allowed God to be just, punish sin, and give us a free pass to his love;
 10. To accomplish this, the potential redeemer would have to live a perfect life, never committing *one* sin, to not have any sins to answer for himself. In other words, he would be a spotless lamb. This way, he could qualify to take our sins upon himself. The redeemer takes our judgment and credits us with his perfect life;

What happened in Egypt 3,000 years ago foreshadowed the ultimate spotless lamb to come, whose blood would cover our sins—the redeemer, Jesus Christ. This returns us to the first question of our introduction:

Why did Satan change his strategy of preventing Jesus from going to the cross to getting Jesus on the cross through Judas and the chief priests?

A Struggle Through the Ages

We will look at this question in two parts. First, we'll start with Satan trying to prevent Jesus from going to the cross. He started this way before Jesus was *born*—back in time to Adam. In the beginning, Adam was perfect too, holy. Satan, however, got Adam and Eve to distrust God's word and fell into sin. So, when Jesus came on the scene, I can imagine Satan thinking to himself:

Ok, no problem, I've seen this before. I made the sinless Adam fall into sin; I'll get the sinless Jesus to fall into sin. Besides, I've had a few thousand years to perfect my methods.

Furthermore, compared to Adam, Satan was likely far more motivated to get Jesus to fall into sin.

[Discussion: Compared to Adam, why was Satan more motivated to get Jesus to fall into sin?]

Not only in Genesis chapter 3—when Adam and Eve plunged humanity into sin—God promised a redeemer but also in verse 15 God said the redeemer would strike a fatal blow to Satan. Thus, if Satan wanted to prevent this fatal blow, he had to stop him. This was a life and death matter to Satan and he didn't waste any time.

Adam and Eve had two sons, potential redeemers. Satan got one to kill the other. Luckily for us, Adam and Eve had other children.

Fast forward a few chapters to Genesis 6:1–8 describe how Satan executed a very evil plan to plunge humanity into such extreme wickedness God decided to wipe out everyone by flood.

Game over right, no redeemer? No, there was a small group of people who remained faithful to God, Noah and his family. Satan struck out again.

Not much later, Satan got some good news. He became aware of God's promise to Abraham that a redeemer will come from his bloodline. Now, Satan could focus his disqualification and extermination attempts to *one* bloodline, the Jews, who descend through Abraham's son, Jacob a.k.a. Israel. That's where the nation of Israel got its name.

Have you ever wondered why Jews and the nation of Israel have experienced such systematic persecution and attempted genocides from the Old Testament times up until Hitler? Here's your answer: Satan worked hard throughout history persecuting and attempting the genocide of Israel. In some cases, God *allowed* them as punishment for Israel's disobedience, for example during Babylonian captivity, but God never permitted their extermination.

The Bible is filled with various foiled plots: Esther and Naham, Pharaoh's ordering the killing of all newborn Jewish males, Jewish captivity in Babylon, and King Herod's killing all the babies in Bethlehem—the city where the redeemer was to be born. Satan identified Jesus as a potential redeemer, because his attacks on Jesus *showed* he thought he could disqualify Jesus as he had every potential redeemer.

The War on Jesus

[Discussion: After which event does Satan ramp up his attacks on Jesus?]

In the third chapter of Matthew, Jesus went to be baptized by John. Immediately after his baptism we read in verse 17:

And behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

The significance of this announcement wasn't lost on Satan! So, do you think that Satan attacked Jesus right after his baptism, after which Jesus was probably on a spiritual high, feeling pretty good? Of course not, Satan was smarter than that! He waited until in the next verses when Jesus went to fast in the wilderness. After fasting for 40 days, when he was mentally exhausted and starving, guess who paid him a visit?

Mat 4:3, And the tempter [Satan] came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

Satan was up to his old tricks. He tempted Eve in the garden by appealing to her physical senses with the fruit that was "good for food". Now, after Jesus had been fasting for 40 days, Satan tempted the physical senses of Jesus by trying to get him to turn stones into bread and use his powers outside of God's plan for him. Any deviation from God's plan—disobedience—would have been sin. This would have disqualified Jesus as the spotless sacrifice for our sins—Satan's objective.

This is something for us to keep in mind as well. We should be *careful* about temptation when we are sleep deprived, hungry, or exhausted. That's when the missiles of temptation are likely to come at us hard. God wisely commands us to rest every seven days, so don't burn yourself out, keep alert, and minimize the chances of falling into temptation.

Lest anyone doubt Satan's capabilities of temptation and deception, remember, that before Adam and Eve, Satan convinced a third of the holy angels, who were in the presence of God, to rebel against him (Rev. 12:14). That couldn't have been an easy feat to pull off but the master tempter did it.

Unlike one third of the holy angels, and unlike Adam, and Eve, Jesus held strong and walked away victorious from every battle with Satan, which must have been quite disappointing to Satan. The second Adam¹ had successfully resisted the temptations that made the first Adam fall. Satan didn't relent though, as each minute brought him closer to the ultimate defeat God announced in Genesis 3.

Easter Week—Final Battle Lines are Drawn

As time was running out, Satan was likely getting increasingly desperate. But just when things looked very gloomy for him, he got presented with perhaps his best opportunity yet.

Jesus was arrested on the day before his crucifixion. Shortly before his arrest, he warned Peter that Satan had demanded to attack him, Peter, —to sift him like wheat (Luke 22:31)—and God granted this request. However, some verses later, we discover that God apparently had also granted Satan a special permission concerning his Son. When the authorities came to arrest Jesus, listen carefully what Jesus said to them in Luke 22:53:

When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness."

This brings us back to the second part of our first question from the introduction:

Why did Satan change his strategy from preventing Jesus from going to the cross to getting Jesus on the cross?

[Discussion: Why do you think Satan changed strategies from preventing Jesus from going to the cross to getting him on the cross through Judas?]

Earlier on, Satan had tried to prevent Jesus from going to the cross by killing or disqualifying any would be saviors right from the days of Adam, trying to annihilate the Jews, then while Jesus was still a baby, trying to get him killed by Herod.

Then, Satan tempted Jesus to be disobedient to God's will, but that didn't work either. Through Peter (Matt. 16:23), he *tried*, unsuccessfully, to keep Jesus from going to the cross. But now, it

¹1. Cor 15:45 uses the term "Last Adam" when speaking of Jesus.

appears that God may have permitted the enemy a specific time period (“this is the hour”) and power² to attack Jesus. Perhaps certain limits on what could be done to Jesus were deactivated for a fixed amount of time (this hour).

What these limits were we do not know other than, at a minimum, it was now possible to kill and torture Jesus.³ Consequently, it appears that Satan now thought that he would have the best odds of defeating Jesus, if he could get him on the cross. With apparently only a fixed amount of time at his disposal, he’d better act fast. The clock of God was ticking.

The Crucifixion Part 1—Satan’s Full Fury Unleashed

Now Satan wanted to get Jesus on the cross ASAP, and he didn’t waste time. He entered in Judas (Luke 22:3), who conspired with the chief priests to determine the best time and place to arrest Jesus. He was arrested and tried during the night behind closed doors, which was illegal according to Jewish law, and brought in front of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, the next day.

[Discussion: Why do you think the Jewish leaders brought Jesus to the Roman Governor instead of killing him themselves to get it done quickly?]

The pretext for bringing Jesus to the Roman governor was *he* had the authority to hand out death penalties. However, elsewhere we do see the Jews taking justice into their hands.⁴ Thus it seems that the Jewish authorities *wanted* to have the Romans do their dirty work.

Pontius Pilate saw through the Jews’ plans, realized they were *jealous* of Jesus (Matt. 27:18), and so he tried to get him released (Luke 23:14). However, the Jewish leaders incited the crowd witnessing this event (Matt. 27:20) and Pilate, seeing he might have a riot on his hands (Matt. 27:24), yielded to the crowd’s wishes, but not before saying (Matt. 27:24-25):

*"I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves."
And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"*

Indeed, the blood of Jesus was on the Jews and their children. It’s not a coincidence a few decades after Jesus’s crucifixion, after enough time passed for Gospel spread throughout the Roman empire, Emperor Titus wiped Israel off the map. More than 500, 000 Jews were said to have been killed or taken as slaves while a remnant escaped to places such as Europe.⁵ God did not take the crucifixion of his son lightly and brought judgment upon the nation.

Jesus, the perfect sacrificial lamb, was sentenced to crucifixion and “coincidentally” that week

²Also compare to Job 2:6: “So the Lord said to Satan, ‘Behold, he is in your power, only spare his life.’” New American Standard Bible.

³Joh. 7:30, 7:44, 8:59, 10:31, 10:39; Luke 4:29–30.

⁴They tried to catch Jesus to stone him (John 8:59), and later they stoned Stephen (Acts 7:54-60). In both cases, there was no concern of involving the Romans.

⁵<https://www.britannica.com/event/Siege-of-Jerusalem-70>;
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_\(70_CE\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_(70_CE))

Passover lambs were being sacrificed. Did the Jews and Satan realize the irony or divine providence in this? Regardless, Satan pressed forward with his assault.

With Pilate's having yielded to the crowd's wishes and Jesus being sentenced to crucifixion, the final battle between Satan and Jesus commenced. Before, Satan attacked Jesus with temptation (Mt. 4), but Jesus stood strong against the one that he called "the ruler of this world". Now, Satan rallied again with a furious onslaught to gain by terrors of the cross what he did not by allurements.⁶

[Discussion: What do you think would have happened if Satan would have been successful against Jesus?]

If at any point Jesus would have said *stop*, the battle would have been over, humanity would have been doomed, Satan would have continued to be the "ruler of this world," and death would have reigned forever. There would have been no redeemer.

So, what happened when Satan unleashed his full fury and power against Jesus? Exactly what Jesus had predicted would happen. During his final Passover meal, before his arrest, Jesus remarked:

I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. (John 14:30-31)

Jesus knew *who* was coming for him. It wasn't Judas, the chief priests, nor the Romans. It was the ruler of this world, Satan.

However, Satan would find no claim on Jesus, no sin nor point of entry to get him to sin. Not only didn't Jesus fall to Satan's attacks but also during it all he demonstrated his compassion towards the humans who were crucifying him. He prayed for their forgiveness and extended salvation to the criminal next to him.

So, game over, right? Victory for Jesus? No, the worst was yet to come.

The Crucifixion Part 2—A Divine Bombshell

Now, we come to the second question from our introduction. Why was it dark for the final three hours while Christ was on the cross? After Jesus extended salvation to the criminal on the cross next to his, we read this in Luke 23:44-45:

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

[Discussion: Why do you think darkness came upon the whole land? What was going on?]

⁶ See Matthew Henry's commentary on John 14:30.

We are accustomed to thinking of God as light, but do you remember any instances in the Bible where darkness is associated with God?]

Recalling 2 Sam. 22:10, “He bowed the heavens and came down; thick darkness was under his feet.”

When God made a covenant with Abraham we read in Gen. 15:12, “As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram...”

When God made the Mosaic covenant at Mount Sinai we see in Deut. 4:11, “And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. Then the LORD spoke to you... Deut. 5:23, And as soon as you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness.”

In all cases, God *chose* to manifest in darkness.

This is not to say darkness is required to ratify a covenant. There was none mentioned when God ratified the Noahic Covenant in Genesis 9. However, in two important Old Testament events, when God was sealing two eternally important covenants, he was present in darkness.

Why specifically in darkness? Maybe if he would have manifested himself as light, it would have been too much to bear. This is just a guess though; we do not know. We know that during the crucifixion of Jesus there was darkness on the whole land when the sun’s light failed and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

If God, the Father, was present in darkness during crucifixion, what *was* he doing? Isaiah 53:10 says, “But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief.” This was not just *permission* to let the Romans and Satan kill Jesus; God was actually pleased to crush him.

In Matt. 26:31, after the last supper and before his arrest, Jesus predicted to his disciples, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'

Text doesn’t say *they* will strike the shepherd, but “I” will strike the shepherd. God is doing the striking.

Imagine the scene of Jesus’s crucifixion in your mind. First, Jesus endured the horrible physical suffering and everything Satan could unleash upon him. There he was with his feet and hands nailed by huge spikes to a wooden cross, with pieces of flesh likely missing from his back due to the earlier scourging. Suddenly, darkness so intense it overpowered sunlight.

God, the Father, was at the cross. The text said the sun’s light failed. This is the only time in the Bible where darkness overcomes light.⁷

⁷ Harris, Greg, *The Darkness and the Glory* (The Glory Series, Book 2) (Kindle Location 1049).

It's possible that Satan and his forces saw God the Father approach the cross, where God the Son was. If so, they were likely totally confused about what was going on. They might have been thinking that they were in a whole lot of trouble now! With their human accomplices they had just been attacking God's son. Now the Father was there and he wasn't happy, in fact he was full of wrath!

If Satan had a time to attack Jesus ("This is your hour, and the power of darkness"), it ended. Jesus had endured indescribable horrors up to this point of his crucifixion. The movies always make a big deal about the physical suffering he endured, but, as mentioned by many commentators,⁸ Satan may have been unleashing a more devastating spiritual attack behind the scenes. Regardless, everything to then was nothing compared to what happened next.

About 2,000 years before the crucifixion of Jesus, God told Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. God stopped Abraham from doing it and provided a substitute animal sacrifice. This was only a symbol of what was to come. Abraham's son wasn't the redeemer—God's son was.

On the cross this came to be. God, the Father, started striking God, the Son. I can imagine Satan and his minions having been in utter disbelief. What in the world was going on? This didn't make any sense! But it did. Jesus absorbed the wrath of God that we deserve.

The ultimate sacrifice that the Old Testament spotless lambs were pointing toward was now being sacrificed. Jesus had lived a perfect sinless life for this *moment*. Unlike anyone else, he had qualified to become our redeemer.

The Great Exchange—Yours to Accept or Reject

On the cross, the perfect sinless life of Jesus was being credited to every person, past, present, and future, who would believe in him. Likewise, Jesus was experiencing hell on earth as he was absorbing and suffering the equivalent of every believer's eternal punishment. This may seem cruel.

What father would strike *his* son with unimaginable torture and horror? What we must remember is that the Son, Jesus, volunteered, and God, the Father, selflessly gave his beloved son for this mission. This is the only chance we have to avoid suffering the punishment for our sins in Hell.

Furthermore, God made it clear Jesus's sacrifice was satisfactory. He raised him up from the dead, after which he appeared to hundreds of eye witnesses during 40 days, until he was taken to heaven, in front of their eyes, where he rules on the right hand of God, the Father. Within three centuries, the Roman Empire changed from persecuting Christians to having Christianity as its official religion. Unlike many religions, Christianity transformed the empire not by force but from within, through their lives.

When the unbelievers looked at Christians, they saw transformed lives. This is what Easter is about. It's a story about a savior who was prophesied in the *first* chapters of the Bible.

⁸ Reformation Study Bible, Pillar New Testament Commentary, Henry, Matthew, on Luke 23:46.

It's about a perfect, sinless, sacrificial lamb to whom the Old Testament's sacrificial system was pointing. It's about Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, who is offering you the great exchange: his perfect life credited to you, and all your past, present, and future sins suffered for by him on the cross. He asks you to come as you are, with nothing to offer him, with all your brokenness and sinfulness.

Yet, he asks you for everything should you choose to accept him as your lord and Savior—your life dedicated to him. Yet, he will also power you with the Holy Spirit, that will transform your life. “The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”—2. Cor. 5:17.

For more sermons and study guides, visit www.ReformedPreacher.com

Sources

I drew heavily from the book, *The Darkness and the Glory*, by Greg Harris, especially regarding God's appearing as darkness and smiting his son: <https://smile.amazon.com/dp/B00HM8I2DU/>