



EASTER

THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

WELCOME TO YOUR 2021 EASTER READER

Amidst all the changes and turmoil in our world in this past year it is good to anchor ourselves afresh in the unchanging truth and wonder of the Easter Story.

The Easter Story is the heart of the Christian gospel: the good news that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, born at Bethlehem, grew to be a man who died on a cross for our sins, and was raised to life three days later. It is a story in which there is darkness and death. But it is not death and darkness that win in the end. Instead, the resurrection of Jesus declares a message of light and life. It is, therefore, an urgent and vital story for our times.

As we emerge from the darkness of winter, and from a long shadow of death cast across our world, we need the light and life of Jesus as never before. The cross and the resurrection speak an eternal word of rebirth over our lives, our land, and our world. Our wonderful and gracious God comes to us through Christ to renew, to restore, to help us begin again. In Jesus are all the resources we need for our personal, national and global rebirth. As we emerge from winter darkness, Easter announces a new season of hope. We hold forth the unstoppable light of the Gospel as we proclaim Jesus Christ to our needy world.

He is the one through whom we too can share in the resurrection and the life.



THE SON

8 MARCH

A GOOD AND FAITHFUL GUIDE

I am the good shepherd;
I know my sheep and my
sheep know me – just as
the Father knows me and I
know the Father – and I lay
down my life for the sheep.
I have other sheep that
are not of this sheepfold. I
must bring them also. They
too will listen to my voice,
and there shall be one flock
and one shepherd. The
reason my Father loves me
is that I lay down my life –
only to take it up again.

JOHN 10:14-17

In our world today, the need for good leaders has never been more urgent.

In the ancient world, the shepherd was a commonly used image of leadership. The Biblical story is full of leaders, some good, some not at all good. By contrast, God is seen as a consistently good and faithful shepherd, always with us, providing for us, protecting us. Israel's leadership ultimately fails, and the nation is overrun by their enemies and taken into exile. And into this story of faltering human leadership, God steps in and promises to be their shepherd who searches for his scattered and lost sheep, to draw them back to himself (Ezekiel 34).

Jesus, the Son of God, is the ultimate fulfilment of this promise. He is wonderfully good and faithful. Jesus invites us into the security and the love of the Godhead – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – promising that through him, we can know God and be fully known. The depth of God's love for us is seen in Jesus: God comes looking for us in Jesus – no matter how far we've strayed – and calls us home by name. The cost of us being found is the death of Jesus; the hope of new life for us made sure by his resurrection.

Amidst the clamour of our noisy world, may we today listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd, calling us by name and drawing us deeper into the love of God. Whatever our needs today, may we bring them to Jesus, the good and faithful Shepherd.

PRAYER

Our loving heavenly Father, thank you that you love us. We praise you for your goodness and faithfulness. This world is so busy and noisy, it can be hard to hear your voice. Please speak to us today, calling us by name, that we might know you more, and that we might be fully known. Amen

9 MARCH

GOD'S MESSIAH

Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, 'Who do the crowds say I am?'

They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.'

'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?'

Peter answered, 'God's Messiah.'

Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. And he said, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.'

Who is Jesus? That is the question at the heart of this conversation between Jesus and his closest followers. The "crowds" – who have followed Jesus, heard his teaching, seen his miracles, and seen him drive out demons – have several possible answers: John the Baptist, that wild preacher with his message "repent for the kingdom of heaven is near" (John 3:2); Elijah, the prophet of God who performed miracles and stood against evil in his day; one of the prophets, who proclaimed messages of judgement and hope from God. All these characters pointed forward, speaking of one who God promised was to come.

Peter has a different answer. Jesus is the one to whom all these characters were pointing, "God's Messiah", the long-promised saviour of Israel. Having heard this confession of faith, Jesus explains what his identity as Messiah will mean. The disciples were not able to understand at that point. Yet this is exactly what was ahead for Jesus: suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection.

Over the years many have sought to rebrand Jesus: to recast his identity without a cross and an empty tomb. But the Bible does not give us that option. In the accounts these same disciples left for us, they made clear the centrality of his death and resurrection.

How would we answer Jesus' question today? Do we believe, as Peter did, that Jesus is the Messiah? And what do we make of Christ's death and resurrection?

PRAYER

Our wonderful Saviour Jesus Christ. Thank you that you came to earth to live among us. We pray that you might reveal yourself to us afresh today through the Bible, and that you would show us more and more of who you are and why you came.

LUKE 9:18-22

11 MARCH

GRACE IN OUR TIME OF NEED

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

HEBREWS 4:14-16

Have we ever passed through difficulties, and someone has said to us “I know exactly what you are going through”? Often, those words are said in comfort without true understanding. This passage from Hebrews points us to the wonder of the incarnation – the truth that in Jesus, God became a human being. God does know exactly what it is like to be human.

The writer says that Jesus performs a role on our behalf – a high priest – one who intercedes between humans and God. As one who has been on earth, Jesus knows our human weakness, our frailty. He knows the temptations that come our way. So, when we come to God with our troubles, our weaknesses, our failures, and our needs, it is not to some stern and distant figure, but rather to one who understands.

We come, in the words of the writer, to “God’s throne of grace”. And we can come in confidence because Jesus, who died for us, intercedes for us. At this throne of grace, we receive the mercy and the grace we need in our times of need.

Sometimes we hold back from God’s presence, all too conscious of our weakness and our failings. Jesus has done everything necessary for us to be accepted in God’s presence. So, let’s bring our needs to God today, confident of his grace and his help, because of Jesus.

PRAYER

Dear Lord Jesus, thank you that you lived a fully human life, and lived it perfectly. Thank you for making it possible for us to come to God. Thank you for the welcome we receive in God’s presence because of you. We come today, confident of your grace and mercy to provide everything we need.

12 MARCH

KEEP GOING!

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

HEBREWS 12:1-3

Perhaps, given how this past year life has slowed for so many of us, life does not feel like a race. Given the number of hazards that the writer mentions here, the Christian journey is portrayed more like an epic quest!

The writer presents two great encouragements, whatever difficulties we face on the journey: the cloud of witnesses (the heroes and heroines of the faith recited in Hebrews 11) and Jesus' own example.

The testimonies of others – both living and dead – provide encouragement to us to keep going on the journey of faith: stories of choices made to get rid of things that hinder the Christian journey; decisive moves to get rid of the sin that erodes our relationship with God. They are witnesses to the faithfulness of God in times of trial, reminding us that those who put their faith in God ultimately triumph.

The example of Jesus helps us when we are weary and discouraged: reminding us that Jesus endured the suffering of the cross, and passed through death to life, before ascending to heaven. Jesus was willing to go through all of this for “the joy that was set before him”. For us too, the knowledge of what God has promised us in Christ is a source of joy that enables us to keep going.

Most of all, our eyes are to be on Jesus. It's easy to get distracted or to give up hope on this journey. But keeping focused on Jesus, who went before us and was victorious over all that threatens life, enables us to keep to the right path and fills us with joy and hope as we journey.

PRAYER

Our loving heavenly Father, thank you that you call us to follow Jesus. We thank you for the journey we have begun and which with your help we will complete. Thank you for the testimonies of others, who tell us of your faithfulness. Thank you for Jesus, our living example. Help us today, we pray, to know your help, and fill our hearts with joy and hope, as we look forward to the day when we see you face to face.

13 MARCH

SERVING OTHERS

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

In this extraordinary passage, the Apostle Paul outlines the journey that Jesus took: God humbling himself to become human, and then the ultimate humiliation and sacrifice of the cross, before his resurrection and ascension. Christ's humiliation, his servanthood, leads to glory: seated at the highest place, a name that is above every name.

It is through this humiliation and service that Jesus becomes the gateway to everyone acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the glory of God the Father. Paul is explicit: "in your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus". In a world full of pride, how hard it is to embrace a calling of humility. In a world where we are encouraged to always put ourselves first, how hard it is to fulfil our calling as servants.

Yet just as Christ's journey of humiliation and service resulted in resurrection and glory, so, as we follow Jesus' example, our suffering will give way to glory. The aim of our service is always that Jesus Christ will be acknowledged as Lord and God the Father will be glorified. Our lives as Christians are to be a revelation, that through our humility and service, others might come to know and believe in Jesus.

How might we reveal Christ to others in how we engage with them today?

PRAYER

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for your life, given so freely for us. Forgive us our pride and self-centredness. Help us today, to be willing to serve others wholeheartedly, and that through our service you might be made known to others in all we think, say, and do.

***HIS
KINGDOM
COMES***

14-27 MARCH 2021

The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad;
let the distant shores rejoice.
Clouds and thick darkness surround him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
Fire goes before him
and consumes his foes on every side.
His lightning lights up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.
The mountains melt like wax before the LORD,
before the Lord of all the earth.
The heavens proclaim his righteousness,
and all peoples see his glory.

PSALM 97:1-6

14 MARCH

THE KING COMES TO SET EVERYTHING RIGHT

Our reading today begins with an astonishing and anchoring truth, “the LORD reigns”. Light and darkness, the heavens and the earth – all of life is under sovereign control.

The truth of this, says the writer, is a source of gladness and joy for all creation. Why? Because of the character of this God who is king: “righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne”. This king is not some absentee landlord. Instead, the psalmist sees God as actively involved in his creation, every part impacted as God moves.

Those who oppose the God who is right and just are consumed, and creation itself, in reverent fear, seems to shrink back as he approaches. There are aspects of God’s character, like his righteousness and justice, that we cannot work out for ourselves. Instead the truth of who God is must be revealed to us, proclaimed from the heavens. But it is a generous and hospitable proclamation as “all peoples see his glory”.

Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, puts v6 like this, “The heavens announce that he’ll set everything right, and everyone will see it happen – glorious!”

As we look at our world, as we look at our own circumstances, there is a lot that needs put right. Our confidence in a world gone wrong is that there is a God who is in control. He is king and the news of his coming amongst us in power to set all things right causes every heart that accepts this revelation to soar with gladness and joy.

PRAYER

Our loving heavenly Father, we praise you that you are king over all the earth. Thank you that you are a loving, kind and just God. We thank you that you are at work in the world to set everything right. Help us to trust that, no matter how things may seem, you are in control.

15 MARCH

HELD SECURE IN GOD'S HANDS

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD;

let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.

Let us come before him with thanksgiving

and extol him with music and song.

For the LORD is the great God,

the great King above all gods.

In his hand are the depths of the earth,

and the mountain peaks belong to him.

The sea is his, for he made it,

and his hands formed the dry land.

Come, let us bow down in worship,

let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;

PSALM 95:1-6

With so much uncertainty in our world, do we truly believe that we are held secure in God's hand?

The Psalmist declares that in God's hands are the depths of the earth and the mountain peaks; the sea and the dry land belong to him. From the tip of Mount Everest to the Challenger Deep of the Pacific, every part of this beautiful planet is held in God's hands.

We too are part of this creation that is held in God's hands, for he made us. Coming before the LORD in worship requires humility, that we kneel before God recognising his sovereignty over our lives.

The Psalmist overflows with praise not only that God is our creator, but that God is present within the creation as the sure and certain "Rock of our salvation".

It has always been important for God's people to gather and to declare the truth of who God is; singing and shouting these truths out loud, reminding one another that God is in control. He is "the great God, the King above all gods," and inviting others to join us, "come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song", "come let us kneel before the LORD our Maker". These are essential faith-strengthening exercises in a noisy world.

How can we take these words to heart today so that our faith is strengthened? And how can we share these words with others today that faith may begin in their lives? In an uncertain world, we – and our neighbours – urgently need to hear them.

PRAYER

Almighty God, we praise you that you created this world, and that you hold it in your hands. We thank you for this gift of life, that you made us. Help us today, in a world in which there is so much uncertainty, to trust you, our creator and saviour.



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