

“Great Expectations”

Matthew 21:1-11 ¹

It was a fine Sunday afternoon in April. A motley procession made its way north on I-75 through central Georgia toward Atlanta. The caravan was made up of several cars—perhaps a dozen—mostly late-model, but some were older. One or two were borrowed. The leader of the group was a carpenter from Gainesville, Georgia, who had been much in the news of late, and with him were many of his closest associates.

It was rumored that the carpenter was going to be a shoo-in as a dark-horse candidate for governor in the May primary. The media reported that strange occurrences had been noted in places where this unschooled laborer went. His name was Jesus—Jesus, the carpenter from Gainesville.

The caravan passed the Atlanta Stadium just as the crowd was hitting the freeway from a Braves’ Exhibition game. Some of the people recognized the carpenter’s car, and the crowd snowballed as the group neared downtown—I mean, it was a really BIG crowd. The caravan exited at North Avenue, and people thought Jesus was heading to the State Capitol for a rally . . . or maybe to the stadium at Georgia Tech . . . perhaps the Convention Center. But no, they turned down Peachtree Street, and stopped in front of old First Church.

It was Sunday afternoon, and the church was open, though most folks had gone home. The huge crowd piled out of their cars and swarmed the stately grounds. Jesus got out of the lead car amid political chants that spontaneously arose from the crowd, which was still in good voice from the ball game. To the crowd’s amazement, Jesus took little notice of them, walking quickly into the building toward the office suite.

When Jesus reached the church office, he took a sledge hammer—which seemed to come from nowhere—and broke down the door to the church office, where he set fire to the file cabinets in which the endowment records, the records of contributions, and the long-range expansion plans were housed. After this, Jesus turned over all of the racks and tables in the Christian gift shop and book sales area. All of this caused *quite a tumult*, as you can well imagine. Jesus barely avoided being arrested.

A couple of days later, Jesus *was* arrested after dark in the rock garden behind Jerry’s restaurant on Piedmont Road, and by the end of the week, he was dead—murdered. The *Atlanta Journal* said he was lynched by the Klan. . . .

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Somehow, Easter is different from Christmas. Most people would really LIKE to believe that the Christmas story is true, and it’s easy to see why this is so. Every child loves Christmas. Families come together to renew their bonds and to give and to receive gifts. No holiday fills the hearts of adults or children with nostalgia as Christmas does. But the celebration of Easter, with its Passion Week and Good Friday, creates no such joyful memories. Not even the Resurrection theme of Easter can begin to rival the warm, fuzzy appeal of Christmas.

So it is that the drama of what that April week was really like is often lost on us, and even when it is not, the pageantry of Palm Sunday and the Resurrection generally overshadows the events that lie between. It’s deceptively easy for us to neglect—or to AVOID—the enormous struggle, the dreadful agony, and the lonely choices of this week.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 29, 2015, Palm Sunday.

Passion Week is a week commemorating the cataclysmic collapse of truly great expectations. The people were looking for a governor . . . and all they got was a bloody, tortured corpse.

Great Expectations . . . the death of dreams. We know more than we care to know about such things already. Perhaps that is why Easter is so unattractive to us.

A young missionary writes home . . . “Since the time we came to Nigeria, there have been times when we have felt like running from the pressure, and temperature which pushes down feelings. Tears have come at times when students were not as responsive as fantasy would entertain or water has not come for weeks, or electricity is off again, or the night watchman for the compound is sleeping again. In this first year the question has surfaced: *Joy in ministry? Where is it?*”

- A young man has his heart set on graduate school and is not accepted . . .
- A young woman has a motorcycle accident and her leg is amputated in the prime of life . . .
- A dashing Captain in the Army loses his hand in combat . . .
- A young wife, married only 5 years, dies of cancer . . .
- A young man, enormously successful early in his career, loses his mother to cancer and his health to diabetes . . .
- A missionary family returns to the United States and their oldest daughter suffers a severe emotional breakdown . . .
- A teen-age girl is killed in a car wreck . . .
- An itinerate preacher, said by some to be God’s own Son, is executed on trumped-up charges . . . .

All of these persons are real. All are or were followers of Jesus. All had Great Expectations. **Where is God when our dreams die?** Perhaps a return to that singular week in a long-ago April will add light to our darkness.

In order to understand the Resurrection, we must recognize that the God of the “average American” never did exist. The God-is-dead theologians were almost right, for the American God is only a handy tool that can safely be allowed to lie unused on the workbench until such time as we need him. Then, for this and that purpose of our own, we call upon God: God is necessary for the preservation of democracy; or the capitalist system; or a stable society of law and order; or a truly fulfilled life. In desperate moments of great sickness or overwhelming catastrophe, God is handy to have around.

But this god, the occasional helper in time of need, is not the God revealed in the Bible. The God of the Bible is no tool to be used at our convenience, but is the sovereign Lord of the universe. Our failure to understand the difference between these two concepts has a lot to do with our failure to understand Easter.

Why did Good Friday happen? Why could God not simply choose to forgive us? The answer is found in the nature of this God with whom we must deal. God is not a sinful person like ourselves, who takes wrongdoing lightly and can therefore lightly forgive. God is holy, and God takes sin with deep seriousness. God can see, as we so often cannot, that sin is like radiation unchained: invisible, intangible, disfiguring, deadly.

And the New Testament tells us that Jesus’ death was the way by which God set us free from this evil. This was also the way in which God became free to forgive us. We will never comprehend this. We either believe it or we do not.

It's important to know that the events of Easter week were not play-acting for Jesus. The week of Jesus' Passion was a terrifying experience, and it was a battle fought both in the Garden and on the Cross. It was in the Garden that Jesus cried out, "*My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death*" (Matthew 26:38). His labor was so great that Luke records that His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

Because we live on **this** side of the Resurrection, we may sometimes come to consider death a friend, particularly if we pass through extended and painful illness. For Jesus, though, death was no friend. Death was an ugly enemy to be conquered, a trail of blood and tears, with its source in Eden.

In this second Garden, the central question was whether Jesus would save Himself, or whether He would save us. "*My Father,*" Jesus pleaded, "*if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.*" We can only guess at the bitterness contained in that cup. But then Jesus went on to say, "*My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, **may your will be done***" (Matthew 26:42).

There is no prayer more difficult to speak than this. In the first place, to pray for **God's will** to be done means that we must give up the battle to achieve **our own will** and desire. Further, to pray for God's will to be done requires that we put ourselves at God's mercy; and we will only do this if we believe that God really IS love. Who would submit to the will of a cruel and capricious tyrant? You and I can neither seek nor follow God's will in times of crisis (or at any other time) unless we deeply believe the Bible's affirmation that God is love.

Gethsemane was a CRISIS. All of human history hung in the balance. The disciples were all asleep. Yet Jesus was not alone while the disciples slept in the Garden. His heavenly Father, the great Companion of all His years, was there. Jesus did not have to improvise a fellowship, for it had run through all His life, on lonely hills and in busy crowds. Jesus came to—and came through—the Garden in the strength of an established relationship.

For us as well, preparation for critical situations must be made in the quiet moments that come before the time of testing. Morris Ashcraft, for many years a Southern Baptist seminary professor, has written about testing times as a Naval aviator during World War II. Ashcraft wrote that in those days, before radar was widely available or very sophisticated, fighter aircraft flew in formations of twelve planes. The planes flew with their wingtips overlapping, so that in those times when the formation entered a cloud bank, pilots would be quickly able to tell that they were drifting toward each other. It was pretty unnerving to be unable to see the sixteen-foot propellers which sliced the opaque clouds only a few feet away.

"The secret," Ashcraft wrote, "was to have the airplane on course and steady before entering the clouds. Then, when visibility was lost, we kept everything just like it was. No climbing, turning, or diving. No changes! Straight ahead. The undisciplined pilot was tempted to bolt. That would have led to certain disaster. The safest course: Go right on doing what you were doing," saying to each other, "I'll see you on the other side!"<sup>2</sup>

In the life of the spirit as well, the secret of a successful journey is to be "on course and steady" before entering the clouds. When the storms come, and their waves break over us, there will be no time to establish a relationship with God that will sustain us.

As we look at the events of Easter Week, we see that when it is not God's purpose to remove the "cup," God will give us the strength and the courage to drink it. In the crisis of Gethsemane, Jesus **was** faithful . . . faithful unto death. When Jesus died, the sun went dark,

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<sup>2</sup> Morris Ashcraft, *The Will of God* (Nashville: Broadman), pp. 142-144.

the earth quaked, the tombs opened, the curtain of the Temple was ripped from top to bottom . . . and God's power of redemption—that would save US—was set free.

The dark experiences you and I must face can be compared with Calvary neither in their origin nor in their effect. But they may perhaps be compared in the sense that, **when our dreams die, God is able to redeem us**. Our lives may be redeemed in ways different from our dreams, but we must remember that God is in the Resurrection business! **We can begin again!!** Our Great Expectations need to be centered, not in ourselves, but in **God!!**

God raised Jesus from death, and by so doing gave us His life! How about the rest?

- The family of the girl killed in the car wreck has begun a joint project in ministry that draws them closer together . . .
- The daughter who suffered an emotional collapse has a family and a happy career . . .
- The young man who developed diabetes is a seminary professor . . .
- The husband of the young woman who died of cancer has blessed thousands by his writing about God's presence through their love . . .
- The soldier who lost his hand is a pastor with a lovely family . . .
- The girl who lost her leg has become a champion skier in the special Olympics . . .
- The man who didn't get into graduate school went to another school where God touched his life, and he is also a pastor . . .
- The discouraged missionary writes:

“Rains do come, and the hot day turns to cool breezes. Dry season gives way to rainy season, and things are green again. The one you least expected to respond asks, ‘How can I come closer to God?’ The birth of a baby helps Mama to look beyond her time of pregnancy which coincided with her first year on the mission field. Nigerian friends who were unknown to us a year ago come to the house: ‘Well done, Ma! We thank God!’ A small village turns out for the baptism of twenty-two of its own, and a tiny delta tributary forgets its muddy character to demonstrate ‘newness of life.’ Joy in ministry? We praise God!”

Yes, Easter IS different from Christmas. Do you begin to see the difference? Testing and struggle is more where we live, anyway, than is the idealism of Christmas. So, I ask you, as I ask myself, in the words of Bill Gaither,

Have you had a Gethsemane? Have you prayed in despair in the dark of those weary hours, did the Lord meet you there?

Have you had a Gethsemane? Have you prayed the night through? Have you shed tears of agony when no hope was in view?

Have you prayed, “If it be thy will, may this cup pass from me . . . but if it's thy will, dear Lord, I will bear it for Thee.”

Some of us in this room understand these words. Perhaps many of us do. I suspect that much of our lives can be described by the cycle from Hosannas . . . to Gethsemane . . . to Calvary . . . to the Resurrection . . . to the journey onward . . . to Hosannas once more. Times of struggle come again and again, don't they? How is it with you? Are you on course and steady in your relationship with God? With other persons whom you love? What course corrections do you need to make right now?

As Ken Medema sings, “Lord, if you speak a word, new life is created, day begins to dawn, and the darkness runs away. We are your hungry children, dying for your speaking. Come and speak a word, Lord. Speak it here, today.”