

Jesus' Death and Resurrection

The Story so Far

We are heading towards the climax of God's dealings with his people and his creation. We have learned that in the beginning he created everything good, but that through their sin Adam and Eve marred creation and ruined their relationship with God. God then sets about reversing this, first by making promises to Abraham that he will have **innumerable offspring** who will inherit a renewed **land**, enjoying a restored **relationship with God** and spreading the blessing out to **all nations**. All this will be achieved through a descendant – the **One Offspring**.

When Israel finds herself in slavery in Egypt God delivers her at the Exodus in order to keep his promises. David almost sees God's promises fulfilled but his sin leads to a decline which finally results in the exile. Meanwhile the prophets begin to see a miraculous new Exodus in which the **One Offspring** who is God himself will lead his people into a miraculous new **land** of resurrection and recreation, in which **all nations** will enjoy **God's presence**.

When Jesus is born and begins his ministry it becomes clear that he is bringing this moment near. He begins to bring the blessings of the new Exodus in a new **land**, particularly as anticipated by Isaiah. There are hints of the blessing going to **all nations**, but during his life they are no more than a foretaste. Most importantly he is clearly portrayed as the **One Offspring**, who brings the **presence of God**.

The gospels and the rest of the New Testament, however, do not focus on Jesus' life, but his death. It is to this that we must now turn.

The Death of Jesus in the Gospels

The crucifixion of Jesus is the central drama of all the gospels. Underlying all the scheming and injustice is the grand plan of God coming to its great central focal point in scripture. All the gospel writers¹ portray Jesus as enduring the curse which has overshadowed the world since Adam's sin. But through enduring it on our behalf, Jesus destroys the curse.

The Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke

Matthew helps us get our bearings by carefully recording a series of events surrounding Jesus' death. Firstly darkness covers the land.

From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. (Matthew 27:45)

¹ And the NT letter writers particularly the apostle Paul as we will see in our next session.

Darkness has perhaps the most unambiguous symbolic significance in scripture. It always signifies evil or judgment upon evil.² In particular we must remember that the penultimate judgment on Egypt was a plague of darkness,³ the final judgement being the death of every firstborn son. On that occasion, however, the Israelites had light,⁴ but here God's judgement extends to "all the land". The fact that the darkness comes over the **land** is very significant. When Adam sinned God pronounced that the ground was cursed and now this curse has symbolically appeared over the whole land.⁵ This in turn was how the prophets described God's judgement, which would be like a reversal of the blessings of creation and a repeat of the judgment on Egypt.⁶ As Jesus hangs on the cross the cumulative curse of history hangs over him.

On the cross Jesus then cries out to God.

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46)

This expression of desertion by God is a direct quote from Psalm 22.⁷ Perhaps more significantly it indicates Jesus' state of profound desertion by God. Abraham was promised that his descendants would enjoy **God's presence**, but here Jesus endures the opposite.

Matthew seems to have specifically highlighted two aspects of the blessings promised to Abraham – land, and enjoying the presence of God – and shown how Jesus endures their opposite. Indeed more widely Jesus is carefully described as oppressed by the priests and elders, and deserted by his disciples, leaving no **offspring** either biologically, or spiritually. And **the nations** are not blessed by him, rather, as with Israel in Egypt and Babylon, they oppress him as Pilate condemns him, soldiers beat him and mock him and passers-by insult him.

The final culmination of this cursed existence is his death. Death was the ultimate consequence of the curse in the Garden of Eden, and now death confirms the curse on Jesus.

But it is at Jesus' death that a series of significant events occur. Firstly the Temple curtain is torn.

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. (Matthew 27:51a)

² See (1998). *Darkness. Dictionary of biblical imagery*. L. Ryken, J. Wilhoit, T. Longman et al. Downers Grove, Ill. ; Leicester, InterVarsity Press: p.191.

³ Exodus 10:21-29.

⁴ Exodus 10:23.

⁵ Genesis 3:17. The word for ground in the LXX of Genesis 3:17 is γῆ (*gē*) which is the same word used here. He can mean "ground" or "soil" but also "land" (i.e. region as "the land of Israel") or "world". Thus both in Genesis 3:17 and Matthew 27:45 there is a fluidity in meaning. Matthew's use of the phrase "all the land" suggests that he means to indicate the whole world.

⁶ Jeremiah 4:23-28, Isaiah 5:30, Amos 8:10.

⁷ Psalm 22:1.

The curtain in the Temple, of course, had always stood as the solid reminder that Israelites could not fully enter **the presence of God**. However, now there is no barrier. The people can go in, or maybe God can come out!

Secondly there is an earthquake.

The earth shook and the rocks split. (Matthew 27:51b)

The earth had been covered by darkness, but now the same earth is shaking. Something is happening which shakes the **land**, the very creation itself.⁸

Matthew alone records the reanimation of various “holy people.”

The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus’ resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. (Matthew 27:52-53)

This is not a full scale resurrection (indeed these living people presumably died again, since they are not widely mentioned) but it is a hint that the promise of **innumerable offspring** can now be fulfilled. Not even death can defeat it.⁹

Finally Matthew also records the reaction of a Roman centurion and his friends.

When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, “Surely he was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:54)

Thus a gentile, from the **nations**, proclaims Jesus as the Son of God.

The climax of Matthew’s gospel, therefore, shows Jesus enduring the loss of all the promises to Abraham as the curse envelopes him, but the amazing events at his death indicate to those with eyes to see, that through his cursed death all the promised blessings are about to become a reality.

Mark’s gospel tells essentially the same story of the death of Jesus, including darkness and the final cry.¹⁰ Mark selects only the tearing of the Temple curtain and particularly the witness of the Centurion to mark the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham. God is now accessible to his people, and the gentiles recognizing Jesus.

Luke sees the theme of innumerable offspring as essentially focused on outcasts. It is therefore no surprise that it is Luke who records that the thief on the cross, was promised paradise.¹¹ In most other respects Luke’s account follows Matthew and Mark.

Matthew, Mark and Luke, therefore, all present Jesus losing the blessings promised to Abraham, in particular focusing on the curse of darkness over the **land** and his loss of **the presence of God**. They follow this with first hints that Abraham’s blessings are about to burst into life. In particular gentile professions of faith hint at numerous **offspring** and the torn curtain of the temple suggests a new freedom to **enjoy God’s presence**.

⁸ The prophets expected this to happen when God came as mighty conqueror Isaiah 2:19, 21, 13:13, 24:18, Haggai 2:21, and to bring the nations into the kingdom Haggai 2:6.

⁹ See Isaiah 26:18-19 for an example of resurrection being the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham.

¹⁰ Mark 15:33-34.

¹¹ Luke 23:43.

John

John's demonstrates in his own way that Jesus' death is the fulfillment of scripture. He ironically records the Jews saying

We have a law, and according to that law he must die.¹²

Of course, they did not realise that the law pointed to the necessity of Jesus' death as a sacrifice for sin. The preservation of Jesus' undergarment points to the fulfilment of the suffering described in Psalm 22:18.¹³ His request for a drink is because he knew that "all was completed" and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled.¹⁴ John especially records that unlike the thieves on either side of him, Jesus' legs were not broken,

so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken."
(John 19:36)

This quote is from the instructions concerning the Passover lamb in Exodus 12:46.¹⁵ Hence John continues his earlier emphasis specifically in the Exodus and the Passover.¹⁶ Since the original Passover lamb took the curse of death which otherwise would have fallen on Israelite families, and the Passover itself was in order to fulfil the promises to Abraham, John is telling us essentially the same thing as Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Jesus' resurrection: the new world order

Mark's curiously truncated ending simply records the fact of the resurrection and the fear and confusion of the first witnesses. However all the other gospels record Jesus' resurrection and explain its significance. Once again Matthew is most explicit in demonstrating that the resurrection is the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham. In particular the Great Commission¹⁷ has all the elements of the Abrahamic promises. The promise of **land** has now been extended to the whole universe.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."
(Matthew 28:18)

The hope of **numerous offspring** from **all nations** is now beginning in earnest.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, (Matthew 28:19)

And the promise of **enjoying the presence of God**, now transferred to Jesus, the Son of God, is contained in Matthew's very last words.

¹²John 19:7

¹³ John 19:24

¹⁴ John 19:28, though which Scripture in particular he was speaking of is uncertain.

¹⁵ There immediately follows a second quote, from Zechariah 12:10, which, in context, describes people grieving "for a firstborn son." This also harks back to the Exodus theme in which the firstborn sons of Egypt died.

¹⁶ See for instance John 1:14 where Jesus "tabernacled" amongst us, or John 1:29 where he is the Lamb of God, or the "I am" sayings which echo Exodus 3:14 etc.

¹⁷ Matthew 28:16-20.

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)

When Luke records the resurrection of Jesus he repeatedly asserts simply that the Jewish Scriptures had to be fulfilled,¹⁸ but hinting that the fulfilment was going to be more than the physical redemption of Israel.¹⁹ Luke will write a whole book to set out the fuller implications of the resurrection. The book of Acts is the record of what the risen Jesus continues to do.²⁰

Once again John follows his own path. He carefully records that the first disciples initially “believed” without understanding it “from Scripture”.²¹ Some commentators suggest that when Mary mistakes Jesus for a gardener John is suggesting that Jesus is now like the first gardener, Adam. Perhaps Eden is almost restored, fulfilling the promise of **land!** The large number of fish caught in the Sea of Galilee has fascinated scholars.²² Could the number 153 have significance? And the fact that they are all successfully landed in contrast to an earlier occasion?²³ Undoubtedly John sees a significance to this miraculous catch of fish. Perhaps it does symbolise their role as “fishers of men.”²⁴ If so it may be significant that it is a large number but *they can count the fish*. As in the book of Numbers the promise of **innumerable offspring**, is on the horizon but it has not yet become a reality.²⁵

John’s main emphasis, however, seems to be that Jesus truly is “the Lord”²⁶ and even God.²⁷ He is solidly, bodily, risen from the dead, with wounds that can be touched, and a healthy appetite for a barbecue.²⁸ The hopes of a new creation, with God at the heart of it, has dawned.

Exercise

Examine the resurrection accounts in the gospels and consider whether the resurrection of Jesus points to a restoration of creation or a totally new creation.

Questions

¹⁸ Luke 24:6-8, 25-27, 32, 44-48.

¹⁹ Luke 24:21.

²⁰ See Acts 1:1 in which Luke tantalisingly says that his gospel was “all that Jesus began to do and to teach.”

²¹ John 20:8-9.

²² See Carson, D. A. (1991). The Gospel According to John. Leicester, Apollos. pp. 672-3.

²³ See Luke 5:6-7.

²⁴ Matthew 4:19, Mark 1:17, though never specifically mentioned by John.

²⁵ John certainly is aware of the significance of counting God’s people and of the promise of innumerable offspring in Revelation 7:4-9.

²⁶ John 20:2, 18, 20, 25, 21:7, 12.

²⁷ John 20:28.

²⁸ John 20:27, 21:12.

1. Why do you think Mark's gospel contains such a truncated account of the resurrection? Is there a theological purpose, or has final piece of the gospel been lost in an accident of history?
2. Examine Luke's record of the resurrection. What misunderstandings is Jesus refuting amongst the disciples? How does this fit with the hope of the disciples that he would "redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21)?
3. Compare the different mandates given to the disciples at the resurrection in the four gospels. Does this shed light on the interests of each gospel writer?