



THE EASTER EXPERIENCE

“Accepted By A Few”

Luke 23:26-56

April 10, 2011 P.M. Service

Our Response:

1. Tonight, do you realize who Jesus is and what He did for you on the cross? Have you given Him your heart and your life? It's as simple as ABC. **Admit** to God you are a sinner, **Ask** for His forgiveness, **Believe** Jesus is God's Son, **Confess** Him as Savior & **Commit** Your Life to Him as Lord. (the Boss of your life)
2. Have you asked Christ into you heart, but never made it public? Have you been baptized? If not, you can make that decision today and be obedient and follow through and become a part of the Bethsalem Family.
3. Do you need a church home – without one a Christian is an orphan. Don't just attend – step over the line today and join this family! We need you and you need us.
- 4.

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I guess I understand our reluctance to accept the reality that we are given. We grow up thinking certain things are true, and we accept them without question. But eventually, we become less trusting, we start to question what's true. We want more than an explanation—we want evidence. We take pride in the fact that we are not easily fooled. I want to test your ability to discern fact from fiction. I have a number of statements and I want you to either accept or reject them.

We'll call this game: **Accept or Reject.**

1. Life Savers® candy was invented by a man whose daughter died choking on a mint. The hole in the middle allows you to breathe, even if it gets stuck in our throat. **Reject.** That's what I was told as a child—but I did a little research and that's not true.
 2. The Jelly Belly Candy Company makes jelly beans flavored like soap, spinach, and sardines. **Reject.** They do make black pepper and ear wax flavors—I have no idea why.
 3. The kid who played “Mikey” in the Life cereal commercials died when his stomach exploded after consuming Pop Rocks candy & a Coke. **Reject**
 4. The combined weight of all the world's ants is equal to that of all the humans on earth. **Accept.** What ants lack in size, they more than make up for in sheer numbers. There are an estimated ten TRILLION ants on earth, and their combined weight is equivalent to the entire human population. That's roughly 1.6 million ants for each person.
 5. Swallowed chewing gum takes seven years to digest and pass through your system. **Reject.** Even though my mom taught me that is truth. But upon further research I have learned that though chewing gum is largely indigestible, it will make its way through your digestive system at the same rate as anything else you consume.
- I have one more statement for you to accept or reject.
6. Jesus is the Son of God who died for the sins of the world and rose again. **Accept or reject?** How you answer that changes everything. The most common response to the person Jesus is rejection.

These individuals were completely transformed by their experience that day. They each came to a place in their journey where they accepted Jesus. These two people we're going to study did not know when they got up that morning that anything different was going to happen to them, but they were about to be completely changed. Their lives would never be the same. That same transforming power is available to us today. Maybe today you awoke and this day seemed about the same as every other. But as you consider life's ultimate question, maybe this will be the day where everything changes. So, let me ask you, what will you do with Jesus? We've seen the soldiers dismiss Him, the people reject Him, the Romans torture Him, the disciples desert Him, but today we'll study a handful of people who accepted Him.

Simon of Cyrene

One of those unsuspecting bystanders was a man named Simon. Look at Mark 15:21 and notice he went from observing the story of Jesus unfold to becoming part of it. A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. Cyrene was a fairly large city in Libya, North Africa. It had a significant Jewish population. Evidently, Simon had traveled all this way to Jerusalem to participate in the Passover Feast. Maybe he had saved for years. Maybe he had a dream of one day eating at least one Passover Feast in the Holy City. But on Friday morning when he was there, he got caught up in the pedestrian traffic. People had lined the streets to watch a march to execution, and Simon stopped to watch the parade. As he watched, he witnessed a man called Jesus of Nazareth, carrying His cross to Golgotha. Jesus had already been beaten and endured a scourging so severe that many men died from it. He was beyond exhausted as he stumbled and fell right in front of Simon. Now the Roman soldiers had the authority to force any citizen into temporary service. They looked in the crowd and at random they picked out Simon, and they said, "You! Carry the cross!" Now I am sure Simon didn't want any part of that humiliating, gruesome experience, but he didn't have an option. He couldn't refuse. This close encounter with Jesus transformed Simon forever. He looked into His innocent eyes. He felt the

blood of Jesus run off the cross onto his neck. Perhaps he heard Jesus whisper, “Thank you, Simon.” And then I wonder if he stayed and listened as Jesus prayed from the cross that God would forgive these people for what they had done. And it appears that Simon accepted Jesus and was transformed. In his Gospel, Mark writes about Simon and says, “Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus.” When Mark introduces Simon as the father of Alexander and Rufus it is safe to assume that Alexander and Rufus had become known to the readers. In fact, Romans 16:13 reads, “Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.” It seems likely that as he went from watching the story to participating in the story Simon was forever changed. He and his family were converted. Simon came to the Holy City to sacrifice his Passover lamb, but instead he came face-to-face with the Lamb of God who was sacrificed for him. Like Simon, Maybe initially, you had no choice, you had that drug problem as a child, drug to church every Sunday and Wednesday. In some ways like Simon, he had no choice initially, but it was he did after that fact that makes all the difference in the world! changed.

Thief on the Cross

The 2 Thieves Shared in Common

They were Criminals, Crucified, Critical of Jesus & They had a Choice

Thief #1

- ✓ **Rationalized his decision to reject Christ.**
- ✓ **Refused to Admit His Need for a Savior.**
- ✓ **Ridiculed Christ Rejected the offer**
- ✓ **Result – He died without Christ**

Thief # 2

- ✓ **Angry Attitude was changed**
- ✓ **Amazed – Awe**
- ✓ **Aware of his position and what he was now facing**
- ✓ **Ashamed of His Sin Asks the Right Question**
- ✓ **Asks for Forgiveness & Accepts Christ’s offer of eternal life.**
- ✓ **Awarded the gift of eternity**
- ✓ **Astounded that it could possibly be offered to Him.**

The Roman Centurion

Another bystander at the cross accepted Jesus as the Son of God. We don't know his name, only his rank. He was the Roman centurion. Mark 15:39 reads, And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" Here is a man who was changed from a hostile skeptic to a humble believer. This centurion was the commander of the Roman execution squad. Now the Gospels tell us that the Roman soldiers brutalized Jesus. They struck Him with their fists in the face; they spit on Him; they scourged Him; they mocked Him. And this centurion had done nothing to prevent that. Presumably, he had been part of it. At the very least he allowed his men to mock and abuse this Jewish insurrectionist that some said was the Son of God. But as he watched Jesus something happened to his hard heart. I wonder what it was. He had seen hundreds, if not thousands, die such a death. What was it about Jesus that was so different? He had been there for all of it. Had it been the composure of Jesus? As He was falsely accused and violently beaten, He kept His cool. Maybe it was the meekness of Jesus. Did He seem like a man who had the power to put a stop to all of this with a single word? I'm sure he had never heard a man pray for forgiveness for His executioners like Jesus did. He would have been one of the few close enough to hear Jesus say to the thief being crucified beside Him, "Today you will be with Me in paradise." And then in the middle of the day as Jesus hangs on the cross the sky turns to black. The ground begins to tremble under his feet. Never had he heard a dying man in his last breath cry out the word *Talesti*, translated "*It is finished.*" That translation loses something. When we picture Jesus saying, "It is finished," we picture a general losing a difficult battle. We picture a losing coach in the tournament when there are only a few seconds to go and his player misses a free throw to tie the game. He turns to his assistant and says, "*That's it. It's finished.*" For us "*It is finished*" sounds like a cry of defeat. In reality this was a cry of victory. After a battle was won this is the word that would have been shouted in the streets—*It is finished* means *the battle has ended, let the celebration begin.* After witnessing these things this Roman soldier understood what the religious leaders missed. He believed what the crowd refused to accept. He is confronted with life's ultimate question and concludes, "Surely, this man is the Son of God."

Joseph of Arimathea & Nicodemus

- ✓ Both of these men were wealthy, well respected, religious leaders, had power and authority, prestige and respect from everyone around them.
- ✓ **They were Single Minded** – they were looking for Jesus
Both of these men were looking for one thing, one person, their passion was focused on the most important thing, an Audience with the Creator of the Universe, Jesus. They had been looking for Jesus
- ✓ **They didn't Play it Safe or Settle**– They didn't stay where they were, they moved, they got up, they didn't miss the moment, they responded. That is our tendency, to just settle, to not want to ruffle anyone's feathers, it won't happen anyway, to just exist, just move from one day to the next, but these people didn't. They all did the exact opposite, what they did was anything but safe.
- ✓ **They seized the day**, they were in the moment, **they ignored Someday**
They grabbed the moment, jumped at it, didn't wait 1 more minute, for if any of them had, it could have been their last. They would have missed their divine moment!
- ✓ **They changes they made were Severe** – drastic, they changed something. They risked their lives. For some of us they may not be so drastic, and for others of us they will have to be severe changes to be where God wants us to be, to live like we were dying!
- ✓ **They removed the Stumbling Blocks** – they let nothing stop them from getting to Jesus – put aside their power, their position, their possibility of ever going somewhere in the Jewish world
- ✓ **They Surrendered** – they abandoned everything, and it was immediate. They didn't make anymore excuses, there was not rationalizing, no bargaining, they waved the white flag and surrendered even their passion to Jesus.
- ✓ **It's never too late as long as it today.** Look at the life of Joseph of Armathea and Nicodemus, it wasn't too late, they stepped out of the shadows, took their stand and the world knew they were His followers. It's no too late while it is still today. You can seize the day!!

Disciples & Follower of Christ

We read about these 120 followers of Christ that were in the upper room that day waiting for Pentecost to come. Think about these people – most again as we talked about had deserted Him, they had fled in fear, and yet after the resurrection everything changed – they were never the same. We see in Acts 2 how truly everything had changed! There was no doubt in their minds or their hearts. They were convinced completely!

There is a long list of hardened skeptics that became committed followers when they took an honest look at Jesus.

As we approach Easter I would encourage you to pick up the book by Lee Strobel titled *A Case for Easter*. Lee Strobel was an award-winning journalist for the *Chicago Tribune*. For most of his life he was an atheist. But after his wife became a Christian, he started to see positive changes in her life. So after a few months, Lee decided to attend church with his wife, partly because he was curious and mostly because he wanted to poke holes in her faith. However, in that worship service he was confronted for the first time with Jesus' claims. And after that service he made a decision. He vowed to check out the Christian faith as a journalist would. He decided to examine the evidence and see for himself. He began his search with a prayer asking a God he didn't even know if he believed in to reveal Himself if he did, in fact, exist. In that moment Lee Strobel began a journey to answer life's ultimate question. After two years of intensive research, Lee Strobel became a Christian.

Or like Josh McDowell. He was so annoyed with his friends' attempts to evangelize him that he decided to disprove Christianity. He studied history. He flew to Israel and participated in archeological digs. He did all kinds of research. Years later he was fully convinced and became a Christian. He wrote two volumes on the evidence that convinced him called *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*.

Then there's Viggo Olson, a surgeon who felt compelled to study the evidence for Christianity to try to disprove it to his in-laws. After his research he was firmly convinced, and gave his life to Christ. He wrote a book about it called *The Agnostic Who Dared to Search*.

And don't forget William Ramsey. Ramsey is considered probably the greatest archeologist our country has ever known. He decided to disprove the veracity of Luke's account of Jesus' life in the Bible. He went to do

archeological digs to disprove certain unverified elements of the Gospel of Luke. His conclusion? He considers Luke to be the most accurate and preeminent historian of all time.

Simon Greenleaf was the Professor Emeritus of Evidence at Harvard Law School. He set out to disprove Christianity from a legal, evidential outlook. As he gathered the evidence to make his case he became convinced, this man is the Son of God. He wrote a book, *The Testimony of the Apostles*.

Or like Steven Masood. He was raised strictly Muslim, but wanted to know the truth for himself. He studied the Muslim religion at length. He was never convinced. He began to study Christianity. Finally, he was convinced. He became a Christian. He was beaten and nearly killed by people in his hometown because of his change of religion. But he stuck to it. He wrote a book called *Into the Light*.

Let me tell you about Ravi Maharav. A Hindu. He had advanced in his religion to the degree that people believed he had nearly evolved to the point of Nirvana. People in his home town worshipped him when he walked by. But he never knew for sure that what he believed and taught was true. So he set about on a pursuit of truth. And finally he was convinced. He became a Christian. He wrote a book about his search called *Death of a Guru*.

Dr. James Allan Francis writes about Christ's life and influence in the excerpt from his poem entitled "**One Solitary Life**":

He was born in an obscure village, The child of a peasant woman.
He grew up in still another village, Where he worked in a carpenter shop
Until he was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher.
He never wrote a book. He never held an office.
He never had a family or owned a house. He didn't go to college.
He never visited a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles
From the place where he was born. He did none of the things
One usually associates with greatness. He had no credentials but himself.
He was only thirty-three. When the tide of public opinion turned against
him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to his enemies. And went
through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two

thieves. While he was dying, His executioners gambled for his clothing,
the only property he had on Earth.

When he was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a
friend. Twenty centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central
figure of the human race, And the leader of mankind's progress.

All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed,

All the parliament that ever sat, All the kings that ever reigned,

Put together have not affected the life of man on Earth

As much as that one solitary life.