

# THE WAY OF THE CROSS

## Part 3 - The Stone

Easter is not simply a journey toward sacrifice, but a knowing journey toward selflessness. Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf is the greatest gift we can receive and it's not just life forever in relationship with God, but it's an invitation to purpose, to be together on His mission, of setting the world right. And laying down His life for the sake of others is the way He sets the world right. And so, we, as His followers, love the world the same way – by denying ourselves and living His way.

### Signed and Sealed

When Jesus died on the cross, Matthew's gospel tells us that He was then placed in the grave of Joseph of Arimathea, sealed with a large heavy stone, according to the Jewish custom at the time (Matthew 27:57-61).

Worried about Jesus' prophecy of Him being raised from the dead in three days, the Jewish religious leaders gain official permission from Pilate, the governor, to take one more step to destroy Jesus' legacy (Matthew 27:62-66). They go to Jesus' tomb, make sure His body is still inside, and then seal the grave.

Jewish religious leaders have done all they can to eliminate any possibility that His followers can claim He has been raised from the dead. But it also acts as a seal to the hopes and dreams of Jesus' followers. He really is dead, along with all their hopes and dreams.

The fantastic irony of their efforts, however, will be revealed shortly. All they have done is rule out fraud and theft as explanations for an empty tomb: they have unknowingly added further proof that Jesus Christ did, in fact return from death in a supernatural miracle (Matthew 28:4-7).

What could be an image of hopelessness, the stone really becomes a sign of hope and an image of selflessness in the laying down of Christ's own life for ours. It then becomes the sign of invitation to die to self and live for Him and others.

## The Suffering Servant

Jesus, the suffering servant, lays down His life, and as we walk His way, we too must lay down our lives – like the stone that sealed the tomb, so we must lay to rest our plans and purposes for our lives and look to Jesus.

When we try to understand Jesus' selfless act, why He had to suffer, we start to gain a picture of the incredible sacrifice it was (Isaiah 53:3-9). But why? Why does the greatest rescue of humankind come by the way of a suffering God?

## A New Song - Philippians 2:5-11

Many scholars believe this text is an early Christian hymn, something written and used in worship by the first Christian churches and gives us insight as to how they understood and celebrated the person and work of God.

Three basic movements of the Christian story contained in Philippians 2:5-11.

- + Jesus in His pre-earthly existence with God and as God in Heaven.
- + The incarnation - Jesus taking the form of a human being.
- + Jesus being glorified - exalted by God the Father and acknowledged by all creation as "Lord".

A closer look reveals that at the heart of this three-fold movement is a decision by Jesus not to consider equality with God something to be grasped.

Grasped ≠ to take hold of or grab

Grasped = something to be exploited, or used for personal gain

Jesus, though He was fully God did not consider that being God was something to be exploited or used for His personal advantage. But instead, Jesus chose to empty Himself, taking the form of a servant, and humbled Himself to the point of death, even death on a cross.

## **He Suffered for Our Need Because We're Worth It!**

*The Need* - we were designed for good, to love God and others and to take care of the world that was created for our inhabitation. But having free choice we have become damaged by evil. We rebelled against our Creator and missed the mark for which we were created (that's sin). We are separated from God because of our sin. We are turned against each other because of our pride. We live in a world that is suffocating in its greed, hate and violence.

Left to ourselves, there's nothing we can do about it. We need someone to bridge the gap, to come find and transform us and our world. To do something that redeems our hearts and restores our relationships, and restores the world we live in.

That is what the cross is about. Jesus is creating a pathway from God to us. And He experiences the death and isolation that comes from sin so that we are able to experience intimacy with God and each other so we might be sent to heal this world together.

In spite of our sin, in spite of our flaws, in spite of our brokenness, Jesus looks at us and considers us worth this incredible sacrifice (Romans 5:6-8).

## **He Suffered Because He is a Servant**

The song of Philippians chapter 2 shows Jesus in His pre-earthly state contemplating what it means to be equal with God the Father. Contemplating what it means to be God.

Jesus comes to the conclusion that although being in very nature God, He did not consider equality with God something to be used for His advantage; but instead considered equality with God to mean that to be God is to be a suffering servant.

Jesus rightly defines who God really is. If we cannot see Him as He really is, we won't want to come before Him and seek to be restored in a relationship with Him.

## Dying to Self

In a strange way the stone that sealed Jesus' tomb, seems to seal off all hope of what He set out to do. But as we know from what happens on the third day (Jesus' resurrection), the stone becomes a sign of His laying down His life, His death and burial were necessary for this suffering servant to pay the price required. The stone gets rolled away!

We are invited into walking in His way, we are also called into allowing Jesus to re-orient our hopes and dreams to allow His life to be lived through us. The stone now becomes a symbol of us also dying to self. As His followers, we are asked to love the world the same way – by denying ourselves and living His way (Luke 9:23-24).

## Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the following statement. Jesus, though He was fully God did not consider that being God was something to be exploited or used for His personal advantage. Why is this important in understanding the nature of God?
2. Have you seen God as He really is? Not as the world would define Him, but as He is. Discuss considering the message of a suffering servant.
3. Read Luke 9:23-24. What does it mean to love the world the same way Jesus did – by denying ourselves and living His way? Give practical examples.
4. As we walk in The Way of the Cross, what can we put off (sacrifice/ crucify) so that we might intentionally make space to pray and reach those who God has placed in our lives?
5. It's common in the Christian faith to fast and pray as a part of the preparation for Easter. Consider what you could sacrifice so you can spend time in prayer for those who have not yet experienced God's love and accepted His sacrifice. Share in pairs so you can find encouragement to stick to your plans.
6. Spend some time praying for those who God places on your heart who need to know His love.