

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EASTER

WEEK 1: BATTLE LINES

I won't blame you for thinking these titles don't have much to do with an Easter Bible study, but I hope to convince you over the next six weeks that they are entirely relevant. What set me along this path was a comment by Christine on the last Wednesday of the Christmas Bible study. She said that we associate Christmas with children, and in the human version of Christmas that is very true. But Christine went on to observe that, in the Bible version, 4 of the 6 main characters in the Christmas story were elderly folk. And that made me think further. Even in the story of Mary and Joseph there are adult themes – unmarried mother, adultery, divorce, even potential capital punishment. We saw to a certain extent how images about Christmas have been sanitised on Christmas cards and other events. Have we done the same to Easter? Have we reduced the Easter story to a simple one of the tragedy of Jesus' crucifixion and the triumph of His resurrection? And this just to be preached about in the two or three weeks leading up to the Easter weekend. Have we reserved Christmas and Easter for once-a-year celebrations, without giving more consideration to their significance for the whole of the Christian life?

Another thing that pointed me in this direction was David's sermon on 16th December. That was the Sunday following the tragic shooting of those young children and their teachers in a school in Connecticut. David said that evil caused that tragedy and that evil is all around us. The following Sunday, again that evil was mentioned. Now in a Christmas sermon it would not have been appropriate for David to go down that path, but it is entirely appropriate to deal with that theme at Easter, for the significance of Easter has much to do with evil. It is quite literally a life or death situation and it is a time when we have to face what David referred to in his second Bible study on Psalm 2 as "the whole counsel of God" – the worst case scenario as well as the best one.

Two verses came to mind. Paul, speaking to the Corinthians addressed those who still were "babes in Christ" even though by this stage they should have progressed further in the faith. ***1Corinthians 3:2-3 I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh.***

The writer to the Hebrews also refers to those who are still on a milk diet, but goes on to say they should be mature in the faith as those who have already understood and believed the basic tenets of the Gospel. ***Hebrews 5:14 (KJV) But strong meat belongs to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.***

I see you all as in the second category. You are no longer on a milk diet because you have understood and believed the reality of the Easter event. You all know and believe Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was crucified, died and was buried and on the third day was raised from the dead by the power of God. I don't need to tell you the details of that story again. But as adults, I do believe we have to move on from the story to the "strong meat" of understanding the significance of that story, not just for a short special time of the year, but for the daily, lifetime experience of the Christian. For it is in understanding that significance that we can begin to make sense of what is happening in our world – both the good and the evil. Significance means we have to know why there was the necessity of such an event as Easter; why the event happened in precisely that way; what were the consequences of the Easter event and also what would have been the consequences had Easter not happened. So in these 6 weeks I'm assuming that you are all the kind of people the writer to the Hebrews classes as **"those, who by reason of use, have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."**

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I hope you have some Gaviscon or Rennies at home because tonight and for the next three weeks we will be dealing with very “strong meat.” What will be covered is the disastrous effects of a world without God and how He started to turn the situation from disaster to victory. The underlying significance of Easter is that the event was the most decisive battle in the war between good and evil. That is a war that is raging all around us, and, until we understand the nature and the power of evil, and, more precisely, the source of evil, we can have no true appreciation of what God achieved, through Jesus’ death on a cross at Calvary. Without the existence of this war between good and evil, Easter would never have been needed. So what caused this war in the first place.

Firstly, we have to recognise that an enemy, implacably opposed to God and everything that God holds dear, does exist. If we admit that God is the living entity behind everything that is good and just and right, then we have to come to the logical conclusion that there is a living entity behind everything that is evil, unjust and wrong. The reality that lies behind our physical existence in this world, is that every word, thought and deed, is either a victory for good or a victory for evil. Quite literally, if you are not for God and all that is good, you are against him on the side of Satan. That is the kind of strong meat that people nowadays cannot stomach. So, in a sense Christians are all part of a Salvation Army for Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:12 that our battle is not against flesh and blood (in the first instance) but “***our struggle is against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.***” He tells Timothy (1 Timothy 6:12) that we must fight the good fight of faith. But, until you know what you are fighting for or against, you have no strategy for determining the best way to defeat the enemy and gain victory. When we understand who the enemy is and the tactics he adopts, we are in a much better position to identify the threats and take action to avoid, neutralise or eradicate them. And the first maxim of war is “Know your enemy.”

The Bible tells us explicitly that the devil exists and he is our enemy. Today, the devil is a figure of fun. People flippantly say “The devil made me do it” when they do something that is not appropriate. That is not the view of the Bible writers. 1 Peter 5:8-9; **Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.** Satan is the name used in the Old Testament and there it is more of a title than a name for it means “the accuser.” Satan was the one who accused Job of serving God out of self-interest. Take everything he has away and see if he still remains faithful was his ploy. God allowed that to happen, but Satan got no victory for Job uttered one of the most tremendous statements of faith in the whole Bible. **“I know that my Redeemer liveth.”** Zechariah 3:1 mentions Satan accusing the high priest Joshua while he was standing before an angel of the Lord. That means in the actual presence of God Himself. 1 Chronicles 21:1 tells us that **“Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census...”** This had previously been forbidden by God.

In the New Testament, the terms Satan and the devil are interchangeable, but refer to the same entity. No one spoke more about the devil and hell than Jesus Himself. There are 23 titles attributed to Satan in the Bible and 21 of them are in the New Testament. Lucifer is mentioned in Isaiah and the Psalmist calls him a “fowler” (Psalm91).

Matthew	enemy, tempter, Beelzebub, the wicked one, Sower of Discord
John	Prince of this world, Thief, Father of Lies, Murderer, Destroyer, Wolf

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2 Corinthians	God (Prince) of this world, Belial, Serpent
Ephesians 2:1-3	Prince of the power of the air
1 Peter	Adversary (enemy), roaring lion
1 John	Sinner from the beginning
Revelation	Devil , Satan, Accuser of the brethren , Dragon, serpent

By using such names and characteristics, Biblical writers clearly believed in the existence and activity of this figure.

The writers of the New Testament not only use the titles, they also give us the explicit teaching that Jesus dealt with him as a real being. We have all heard of Jesus' temptation by Satan in the wilderness. On that occasion he had the effrontery to offer Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would bow down and worship him. This confirms the titles "god" and "Prince of this world." That means we are living in enemy territory and, without Easter, Satan's hold on this world would be impregnable. And none of us are immune from his attacks. When Peter tried to dissuade Jesus from going to Jerusalem, Jesus' reply was **"Get thee behind me Satan."** We are told in John that Satan entered into Judas who then went out to betray Jesus. So real was he to the disciples that they subsequently warned the saints in Ephesians 4:27 not to give the devil a foothold. And above all, why, if this figure did not exist did Jesus tell us to pray to be delivered from the evil one?

Secondly, the Bible tells us how Satan came to be an enemy and this takes us to the heart of the questions "When did the war start and why?" We get so caught up in the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience that we perhaps gloss over too easily the other two figures involved in that episode. The Genesis story clearly indicates that two powerful spiritual entities were involved in what was going on on the earth - God and Satan. Two entities whose enmity had already been established in eternity. The war in heaven when Lucifer rebelled against God resulted in a standoff - a sort of Cold war - whereby God remained the superior force in terms of divine power and heavenly support - two-thirds of the angels remained on God's side.

Why did this conflict occur? A one-word answer - Pride. Lucifer was a magnificent being but chose to ignore the fact that he was a created being. His self-confidence, self-love and supreme arrogance led him to directly challenge the sovereignty and authority of his Creator. His aim was to dethrone God and put himself on the throne. The evil that this event gave birth to was 'pride'. Just look at the middle letter of that word - "I". Today, the root cause of all evil is putting 'self' before God.

Had this state of affairs remained in the heavenly realms, the Easter event would have been unnecessary. However, Lucifer's defeat on this occasion left him and his followers to wage war by other means. His golden opportunity came with the creation of Adam and Eve. You all know about Garden of Eden disobedience, but if you look behind the headline story, you will see that Satan's strategy was the same as what led him to rebel against God - self-interest. Adam and Eve believed the lie of the "father of lies" that they would become like God if they ate the fruit - self-interest took precedence over God's commands.

The creation of Adam and Eve gave Satan the opportunity for a pro-active assault on everything God had created and planned for His creation. It was Satan's encounter with Adam and Eve that moved the battle lines from the purely spiritual realms into the physical

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realm of humanity and it led to all-out war between God and Satan. The battle ground was to be planet earth. The spoils of war were to be the immortal souls of every man, woman and child who would ever walk this earth. Satan achieved his objective of spoiling God's perfect creation using the ultimate weapons of mass destruction – sin and death. Humanity was infected with its toxic effects, effects that were intended to be passed on to every succeeding generation. It was a massive victory for it erected an unbridgeable gap between God and humanity. Satan cut off people's way back to God for, whether we are aware of it or not, we are trapped in enemy territory and are under the constant bombardment of sin and subject to both physical and spiritual death because of it. Without the blood of Christ shed at Easter, we have no effective defence against it. We are trapped in an increasingly downward spiral. That can be said because very time God's commands are ignored or disobeyed – Satan wins. Disobedience shows the absence of righteousness and an attitude of enmity against God. Disobedience is also the sign of the denial of divine sovereignty. It is the denial of the right of God to impose limits on human conduct. As Hudson Taylor once said of Christ - "If He is not Lord **of** all, He is not Lord **at** all."

When sin introduces these kinds of attitudes into the human psyche, then it becomes impossible for human beings to live up to God's standards. As Paul puts it "**All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.**" In other words, sin prevents us ever attaining, by human effort alone, the perfection God once gave us. In fact, the weapon of sin aims to take us further and further away from that standard. Someone has said that all vice is perverted virtue. Sin is the perversion of all that is good. For example, it is said that the first casualty of war is truth and we have already seen how sin entered this world as a result of lies and deception. Satan's lies and deception lead further into the darkness that believes the lie and distorts the truth of all that God is and does. This leads eventually to the defilement and corruption of the soul and once ensnared by Satan in this way, a person is left empty and a slave to sin. And the gulf which Satan created between God and humanity in the Garden of Eden means that escape from this condition is humanly impossible.

This is how the Bible describes the dangers we face in this war. How is that being played out in the world as we know it today? We know that Christianity is under sustained attack at present coming from government policies, media pressure, judicial decisions and divisions within the Church itself. Revelation 13 makes it clear that Satan is behind every authority that seeks to impose on people a way of life that is contrary to God's standards. That chapter also has the image of Christians suffering for their faith under these pressures. We all know how difficult it is today to even publicly express our faith and our belief in God, and to struggle against the worldly values and attitudes that are being forced upon us. We see the despair and desperation of those that have been ensnared by Satan via alcohol, drugs, gambling. And he doesn't care about the collateral damage to family, friends and society that this causes. We see how millions are being seduced by the deceptive attraction of the false gods of secularism, atheism, humanism, materialism and other 'isms.' We see the greed and corruption in national governments, banking and commercial businesses and public bodies, that leave people without the basic necessities of life. We see the sectarianism, racism and hatred of people who are different to us, leading to discord in our society and world. We see the destruction and death caused by cruelty, violence and war directed towards people, animals and the environment. As far as God's Word is concerned, Satan is the source and the instigator of all these manifestations of evil. Unfortunately, through ignorance of what the Bible teaches about him or refusal to listen to what it says, the vast majority of people in this world are living their lives blinded by Satan's strategies directed at preventing them finding God. And too many people, it has to be admitted, knowingly and willingly, co-

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operate with him in bringing all manner of evil into other people's lives. That is how the world is and the Bible gives us no indication that that is going to change. It is a situation that leaves humanity without hope of the victory of all that is right and just and good. It leaves humanity helpless in the face of the onslaught of evil. That is the situation of the world without the death and resurrection of Jesus at Easter.

It has been said that all it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. Had God, the source of all that is right and just and good not decided to intervene in this situation and set in motion a counter attack, this is all we could expect from life in this world, with no hope or expectation of remedy in the next one. But God has intervened. In Christ, He has re-defined the battle lines. Yes, the battle will still be fought on earth. God has brought the war into His enemy's territory and He will fight Satan every inch of the way for the soul of every human being. It is the Easter event that gives humanity hope and provides a means to resist the devil and counter the evil he inflicts. God has devised a strategy that will eventually lead to a resounding victory. Best of all He has revealed that strategy to us and has given us the means to fight back. Everything that God did through the Old Testament Covenants and what He did through the Easter event and what He is still doing through the power of the Holy Spirit is designed to firstly, bring about the final defeat of Satan – a defeat that will last for all eternity. Secondly, His plan is aimed at demolishing the power of sin that holds people captive under Satan's regime. Lastly, as a consequence of that, He will provide a safe passage back into His presence. Through His word, God has revealed to us these very specific war aims; and the strategy He has put in place to achieve them is nothing less than the death and resurrection of His only Son, Jesus Christ. Given the presence of Satan and the power of evil, none of us can afford underestimate or gloss over the significance of the Easter event. The significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus is that it provides us with a choice between becoming soldiers of Christ or remaining slaves of Satan. Because of the Easter event, we have the opportunity to seize the escape route that offers us guaranteed safe passage into an eternal future which can never again be overcome by Satan, and can never again be penetrated by any form of evil.

Easter is significant because it brings us face to face with the challenge Joshua 24:15 put to God's chosen people over 3000 years ago - **“Choose this day whom you will serve.”** For us that's a clear choice between God and Satan. In this war, neutrality is not an option!

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WEEK 2: THE CITIZEN ARMY

Have you ever tried those puzzles that give you three or four widely differing images and ask you to find the link between them. Here's one. Leonardo de Caprio, shipyard cranes and a sheet of music. Link anyone? Well, the answer is 'the Titanic'. Leonardo di Caprio starred in the film. The cranes are in Harland and Wolff shipyard where the ship was built. 'Nearer my God to Thee' was what the band played as the ship went down. Here's another one. El Alamein, Stalingrad, Guadalcanal, a manger, a cross and a fire. You probably make the Christian connection between the last three but what links them to the other images. All of them are turning points in a war. Up until 1942 Nazi Germany and Japan had conquered everything in their path. These three battles are what turned the tide in favour of the Allies and opened the way to final victory in the Second World War. The three Christian images similarly were turning points in the war between God and Satan. Just as the Second World War battles kick-started the counter attack against the Axis powers, so the birth of Jesus, His death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, turned the tide against Satan.

I know it is stating the obvious but turning points in any war cannot be accomplished without the forces to carry out the battle plans. We saw last week that the forces of evil are in the ascendancy in this world. But Satan's forces in one sense are conscripted through lies, deception, blinding, entrapment and violence and by appealing to the basest instincts in human nature – in short pandering to self-interest. Of course, the most convincing lie to modern minds is that the devil does not exist. And, if the existence of God is denied, there is no need to believe in the existence of Satan.

But we saw also last week that God has not stood by and allowed this situation to go unchecked. In launching a counter-offensive He has very precise aims and has devised the strategy that will eventually lead to a triumphant victory. The groundwork for this divine counter-offensive started with the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. It intensified when both men started their public ministries for those ministries were aimed at drawing together a force that would be accused of turning the world upside down – Acts 17:6. John Stott has a chapter in his book called 'The Conquest of Evil.' He refers to Jesus' earthly ministry as 'the conquest begun.'

Just as those second world war victories came as a result of prior strategic planning, and the gathering of personnel and equipment, preparation had to be made for the Easter victory and what would follow it. The appearance of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth on the public stage was that preparation. This is something which appears to be only mentioned in passing in Christian circles, but without this interim period between Jesus birth and His death and resurrection, the fight against Satan could not have been carried on beyond the Easter event. So, in order to see the significance of Easter we have to give attention to this three-year ministry for, essentially, this period was used to give people the training needed to distinguish God's strategies from Satan's and choose whose side they were on.

We tend to see the Christian era beginning at Easter, but only really advancing after Pentecost. But the strength and power of the growth and development of Christianity owes everything to the preparations made during Jesus' three-year ministry and the gathering of a citizen army. **"Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand"** was the rallying call of both John the Baptist and Jesus. Those who responded positively to this call turned their back on Satan and came under the sovereignty of God's Kingdom. Eleven of the twelve disciples would become the leaders of the citizen army gathered into the Kingdom both before and

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after the Easter event. In fact, Easter would have had little significance had Jesus not gathered a force around Him, capable of taking the battle further. During those three years of preparation, the characteristics of that force was firmly established

Firstly, Jesus clearly and unambiguously set out the command structure of the Kingdom of God forces. He pointed people to the Supreme Commander, the One who was setting up and ruling this Kingdom and He taught that it came into being as a result of the sovereign activity of God. **“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”** is a perfect example of what is meant by God’s sovereignty. When a person makes the will of God the rule of his life, then he/she becomes a citizen of the kingdom of God. That person ceases to be part of Satan’s domain. It is very true that, physically, Satan’s territory is visible to all while the ‘Kingdom of God’ is only visible in the lives of believers. However, every time someone commits to the sovereignty of God, Satan loses that piece of territory. Light replaces the darkness he has cast over this world. During Jesus’ earthly ministry advances against Satan were being made. Victory over Satan at the temptation, casting out demons, miraculous healings and raising Lazarus and the widow’s son from the dead were all signs of God advancing His Kingdom through the work of Jesus. Jesus, Himself confirmed this when He was accused of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub. (Luke 11:14-21). Jesus rightly points out that Satan would hardly weaken his kingdom by sacrificing his own servants. Logically therefore, what Jesus was doing was through the power of God. But Jesus went on to say in verse 21 that He was the one stronger and more powerful than Satan; the One who **“attacks and overpowers him [and] takes away the armour in which the man(devil) trusted.”** Jesus own words point to an all-out assault on the devil’s hold on this world. And Satan’s assaults on Jesus during His ministry showed how hard he was going to fight to maintain his hold.

Then, Jesus showed people the character of the One they would be serving. In his dealings with people Jesus demonstrated the love and compassion of God for fallen humanity. And it was His understanding of and empathy with people that attracted people and gave them the option to once again have a relationship with God which had been severed due to the Fall. In contrast to the characteristics we mentioned last week of Satan’s rule, God’s Kingdom and rule are derived from the **character** and **action** of God as summed up in John 3:16-21. God **LOVED** the world to such an extent that he **GAVE** (sent) his only Son. Note especially verse 21 – everything that the earthly Jesus said or did “has been done through God.” In sending Jesus, God has **PERSONALLY** acted in history – Jesus is God Incarnate. In Jesus, God has taken the initiative to provide the means by which all who respond positively to his action can enter his kingdom.

But Jesus’ life also demonstrated that loyalty and obedience had to be the key characteristics of the citizen army. Jesus was God’s agent and acted on God’s behalf. But supremely, Jesus manifested the character and action of God. Jesus always maintained that he came to do God’s will and could not do anything apart from the Father. His role was to inaugurate the Kingdom of God by firstly the preaching of the need for repentance for the forgiveness of sins. To those who chose this path, Jesus, through His own life and ministry demonstrated what it meant to be completely loyal and obedient to God. God’s sovereignty was paramount and Jesus’ allegiance was such that it led to Him making the ultimate sacrifice of His life by death on a cross. Jesus’ life demonstrated a selflessness and self-sacrifice which was the complete opposite of Satan’s – a regime where ‘self’ was sovereign. A regime of “do your own thing” and “I’m all right Jack.”

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After this, crucially, Jesus made it clear that entry into the Kingdom had to be done God's way. God's force was to be one characterised by clear rules, discipline and unity of heart, mind, soul and purpose. It's strength was to be directed towards the twin aims of bringing glory to God and reversing the effects of Satan's Garden of Eden victory. People who joined God's side had to accept that God will establish His Kingdom through the life and work of Jesus. Response to Jesus is the standard by which God will decide who is and who is not a citizen of his kingdom. God intends to build his kingdom through Jesus Christ and in no other way. "No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6). God's purpose in sending Jesus was to **"seek and to save the lost."** (Mark 2:15-17; Luke 15). In Jesus, **God has taken the initiative** to seek out those under the power of Satan with the aim of bringing them into the blessing of his reign. God knows human beings cannot escape sin's hold on them by their own efforts, so through Jesus, He was providing a means to break that hold. Charles Wesley hit the nail on the head when he described humanity as an "imprisoned spirit" lying "fast bound in sin and nature's night." In Jesus, God was enabling the chains to fall off, to set the heart free, in order for people to rise up and follow Him. In other words, through Jesus, God is inviting fallen humanity to choose to reject Satan and enter his kingdom.

Importantly too, Jesus showed the major difference between Satan's oppressive means of gathering his forces and God's way. God issues an invitation. If you've ever wondered about all the references to meals and banquets in the Gospels, they are symbols of this invitation. For the Jew, to have table fellowship with another person was the evidence of an intimate relationship with that person. And we can see that it played an important role in Jesus' ministry. (e.g. Mark 2:15; Luke 15:2; Matthew 11:19). In Matthew 22:1-14 the Kingdom is likened to the invitations sent out to attend a great Wedding Banquet. It was a picture of Jesus calling on men to accept an invitation to enter His Kingdom and come under His sovereignty. God will not force anyone to accept His invitation. He uses no subterfuges or underhand or coercive methods to gather His forces. His is a true volunteer army.

And volunteers were left in no doubt about the precise details about their conditions of service. During Jesus' earthly ministry, repentance and baptism constituted a commitment to God. The word repentance is used often but what does it consist of. For a start repentance is not regret for past wrongs although it may include that. True repentance is an act of will to turn your life around – to make U turn. It is the rejection of one lifestyle and acceptance of its opposite. It is tantamount to an oath of allegiance and an agreement to accept the sovereign authority of a greater Power as the standard for a person's life and conduct. Repentance was not something taken lightly in Jesus' day. It denoted a deep introspection of not just outer conduct but also of heart and mind, the desires and motivation. It still means the same today and that is why people who realize this, are often honest enough to say that they could not keep up the Christian life. The significance of Easter for those who repented in Jesus' day, and ever since, is that people have now been given the means to do so. It was a huge undertaking, but Jesus also told people what they could expect in return for their commitment and allegiance.

Immediately repentance was genuine, people entered into a relationship the key characteristic of which was **the Fatherhood of God**. All the blessings of the kingdom are bound up in that relationship. Jesus taught his disciples to call God 'Father.' Clearly in the Lord's prayer the kingship and Fatherhood are closely related concepts. But this relationship can only exist between God and **"whoever believes"** (John 3:16) in and follows, the One he has sent. And here's another example of the 'strong meat' that is very unpalatable both within and without

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the Church today. Liberal scholars have taken Jesus' teaching to mean that God is the Father of all mankind **but that is not what Jesus taught.** The Fatherhood of God belongs to those who have responded to the divine seeking love by repentance and have submitted themselves to God's Kingdom. God seeks men, not because he is their Father, but because he would become their Father. Thus, when a person becomes a believer in Christ, he/she automatically enters into a son/daughter – Father relationship with God. And this is a guarantee for all eternity for the future blessing of the Kingdom is dependent upon a present relationship. If God is not your sovereign king and Father in this life, then he will not be so in eternity.

A second condition is the free gift of salvation/redemption. Those who receive Christ are 'saved' from separation from God both in this life and in eternity.

The term 'salvation' includes the forgiveness of sin, the gift of being regarded as righteous by God and entry into God's eternal kingdom. We mentioned last week that these were two of God's specific war aims. "But it is the blessing of the forgiveness of sins which is most prominent in the proclamation of the kingdom. This was granted by Jesus, although it was recognized to be the prerogative of God. It has to be said however, that forgiveness of sins and acceptance into the Kingdom depended before Easter on the personal presence and say so of Jesus. How could that be achieved when Jesus was no longer earth? Something had to be done in order to make God's advances continue into the future and that could only be achieved by a major blow being directed towards the source of sin. And that is why Jesus' death and resurrection plays such a significant role in the war against Satan. Through God's strategic planning, since the time of Jesus, forgiveness of sin has depended on the belief that the shedding of Jesus' blood on the Cross, atoned for the sins of humankind. His resurrection secured the gift of righteousness. These are things we'll look at in more detail in the next two weeks. But for tonight, we just need to realize that Jesus' earthly ministry was a revelation of truth. In the face of the devil's lies, Jesus broadcast the truth of a guaranteed redemption of the whole person and the restoration of communion with God that had been broken by sin.

But there was also a downside to this message. All wars have consequences and these are rarely, if ever, pleasant for the vanquished side. The same is true in the war between God and Satan. God has offered people the opportunity to be on the winning side. Choosing the losing side leaves people facing judgement of God at death. And I hope you did take the advice about Gaviscon and Rennies seriously, because here come another large helping of very "strong meat." Warning of judgment came first from John the Baptist. The coming Messiah would baptize with fire, which speaks of judgment. Jesus confirmed this in His own ministry, talking about the broad road leading to destruction. In Matthew chapter 10, Jesus referred to the justifiable fear of the one who could destroy both the soul and the body in hell. The fate of those who falsely claimed they served Him is graphically told in Matthew 25. In chapter 22 there is reference to the domain of Satan – a place of darkness where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Many references explicitly talk about the loss, death or destruction of those not in the Kingdom. Other references to judgment and the separation of those faithful to God from the followers of Satan are to be found in Mark and Luke also.

During His ministry, Jesus made no secret of the fact that the choice between service to God or Satan would result in either the salvation of the Kingdom or judgment. Importantly, Jesus also made it clear that judgment was not just for an occasion in the distant future. It could occur in history as well. In Matthew 11 Jesus pronounced judgment on Chorazin and Bethsaida saying judgment would be more tolerable for the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon.

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He said of Capernaum, His home town, that it would be **“more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”** Judgment was also pronounced upon Jerusalem, a city over which Jesus had wept. Matthew 23:37-39; Luke 13:34-35).....Because the offer of the Kingdom has been rejected, Jerusalem, which the Jews expected to be the capital of the redeemed world, and the temple, the only sanctuary of mankind, are to be forsaken by God and to become a desolation. The Kingdom of God had drawn near to Israel in grace and mercy. But Israel rejected the offer of mercy and chose the road that led to disaster. Scholars see Jesus’ prediction of the total destruction of the city in Luke 19:41-44 as being fulfilled in AD70 when the Romans destroyed the city.

It was said last week that truth is the first casualty of war, but in sending Jesus into the world with the message of the coming Kingdom, God was totally open and transparent about what people could expect if they chose to follow Him and the consequence of choosing not to. Jesus made it clear that bringing people into the Kingdom was going to be a long term strategy and, while there were great rewards and a guarantee of victory, there would also be casualties. Choosing God’s side was a massive risk. You just have to read what Jesus and His followers suffered for making that choice. Often, it meant making the ultimate sacrifice. I simply cannot imagine the courage it would have taken during Jesus’ ministry and in the following few centuries to struggle against the evil forces of paganism. We may think we have things hard today in the West, but I sometimes wonder, could I have withstood the pressures those first Christians battled against, and remained loyal to Christ, even in the face of the kinds of persecution and deaths they endured. But reflection on what gave them that courage and perseverance takes us back to the significance of Easter. They had the absolute confidence and assurance that, although some battles were going to be lost, the war against Satan and evil had been decisively won. God’s war aims had been achieved in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And we’ll see how in the next two weeks.

The question, the challenge and the assurance we finish with tonight are found in the hymn. Who is on the Lord’s side? The conflict may be fierce, the foe strong, but chosen to be soldiers in this alien land, we have the assurance that the King’s army cannot be overthrown and His triumph is sure.

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WEEK 3: Holy War 1 - DEATH

Because we missed last week, I thought it might be a good idea to recap on the story so far of the significance of Easter. We saw that this topic means we are dealing with some very strong meat because we are coming face to face with some of the more unpalatable teaching in the Bible – what lies behind the headline Easter story of the tragedy of the crucifixion and the triumph of the resurrection. The first week we saw how the enmity between God and Satan started before the creation of the world and but that the creation enable Satan to achieve a massive victory against God. By appealing to the self-interest of Adam and Eve he was able to introduce the ultimate weapons of mass destruction – sin and death – into the world. As a result he was able to separate humanity from its Creator and keep people trapped within his domain, for the Bible calls Satan the Prince and god of this world. But God was not prepared to allow this situation to continue, hence, behind everything that is going on in this world, is the war between God and Satan. At stake are the immortal souls of every man, woman and child who will ever walk this earth.

Because of humanity's helplessness and powerlessness against Satan and the powers of evil, God devised a strategy, started in the Old Testament, whereby Satan could be defeated, the power of sin and death could be destroyed and access would once more become available to humanity. Last time we saw that, in John Stott's words, the conquest of Satan's territory began with the birth of Jesus. It intensified during His earthly ministry because Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God on earth and gathered together a citizen army "**fight the good fight of faith**" against Satan and evil. We saw that Easter would have been meaningless if there had been no-one to take what Christ achieved to future generations – for this is a battle that will be continued by that 'army of ordinary people' until Christ comes to claim final victory.

But victory could not be achieved unless Satan's most formidable weapons were destroyed and tonight we come to the next stage of the conquest – which John Stott calls 'the conquest achieved.' You all know by now that one thing I share with David is the realisation that profound spiritual truths are often expressed in one line of a hymn. And if you were to ask the question "What did Christ's death on the cross achieve", the answer is to be found in the great Welsh hymn that David mentioned in his sermon on 20th January. "*Death of death and hell's destruction*" Those are the victories won on the Cross. I know that death and sin are not pleasant topics and can sometimes be taboo subjects because they conjure up the spectre of "hell and brimstone" preaching. But I don't think we can have any true appreciation of the significance of Easter until we see the blood of Christ shed the cross as the weapon which achieved this. And it is only as we understand the power of sin and death that we can begin to appreciate why the Evangelists and the early Church paid so much attention to the Easter event. The New Testament writers recognised something that the modern church appears to have lost – just how stupendous a victory Jesus' death on the Cross was, a victory authenticated, validated and ratified by His resurrection from the dead. So, let's see tonight if we can perhaps re-capture the awesomeness of what Jesus achieved by death. For that we need to go back to Paul's stark statement – **The wages of sin is death.**

The New Testament is very open and transparent about sin and death because in the message of the New Testament the two are inseparable. But what does the Bible mean when it talks of sin and death? According to the Bible, there are two types of sin. The kind of sin that is inherent in human nature and the kind of sin that is directed against God. Generally, people see sin as the wrong things we do and say. That is only partly true because people could

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become righteous just by stopping doing and saying wrong things. According to the Bible sin comes from the place we can't fix ourselves - the inner selves we are born with.

The Bible writers explain it like this. Matthew 15:19 tells of the time when Jesus' disciples were accused of breaking the Judaic law by eating with unwashed hands. To the Pharisees this was a sin, but Jesus dismissed with these words: **“What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”** These words are another way of expressing His Sermon on the Mount teaching in Matthew 5 when He said that hatred was tantamount to murder and lust in the heart was tantamount to adultery. In Romans 1 Paul goes further. He speaks of thinking becoming futile, foolish hearts darkened and people being given over to the sinful desires of the heart. Paul talks of those **“filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.”**

If you look at these other examples you will see that all manifestation of sin come from the inside.

Read Paul in Colossians 3:8-9

But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another,

Peter in 1 Peter 2:1

Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.

Listen to James 4:1 **What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?**

John in Revelation gives a catalogue of those who will be excluded from heaven – 21:8 **the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murders, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars.** Magic arts, the sexually immoral, murders, idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood are mentioned again in 22:15

They could all be talking about our own world and society for that is exactly what is still happening today.

Jesus, Paul, James, Peter and John point us straight to the source and seat of sin for everything they mention originate in human hearts which the Bible regards as the inner self and includes the mind and the will. And, as far as the Bible is concerned, if the heart is corrupt then the whole person is corrupt. Paul himself admitted in Romans 7

“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.”

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So, when someone like Paul highlights the internal nature and power of sin and that even he is in a constant battle to control it, we start to get a picture of a truly malignant and evil force at work in human existence. And, like the New Testament writers, we all have to decide whether or not we fight our sinful natures or surrender to them. Both James and Peter see this as resisting the devil. (James 4:7 and 1 Peter 5:9) Failure to do this results in rebellion against God for sin is a breach of His law.

And, John's first letter talks about those sins that are specifically against God. He talks of those who are walking in darkness but claim to be in the light – the hypocrites, the false prophets, false believers. Then, those who hate believers, thus displaying a hatred for God and His work in those believers' lives. Lastly, and, above all, the denial that Christ is the Messiah. We don't have to look far to see any of that in our world today. Paul's recognition of those inner attitudes and beliefs that leads to all the external manifestations of sin, convinced him that they were deserving of death. John's observations show us that resistance to all God stands for and especially, in the denial of all that Easter stands for was especially deserving of damnation. This was regarded as particularly heinous because the Cross was the means by which sin was defeated and death avoided.

And like sin, the Bible refers to two kinds of death and both originate in the Garden of Eden. The first kind is physical death. Adam and Eve need never have suffered death because they were given free access to the Tree of Life. Through Satan's deception however, banishment from the Garden meant that this was no longer available to them and they became subject to physical death. Disobedience was the sin that ensured that this would be the fate of every human being who would ever exist on this earth. The Bible accepts this as, no more and no less, than a fact of life. **“It is appointed unto men once to die and after that the judgement.”**

What the Bible is much more concerned about is spiritual death. In Revelation this is referred to as the 'Second death'. It is what Jesus was referring to when He warned people not to fear the death of the body, but to fear the one who could destroy the soul in hell. Both physical and spiritual death entered this world through Satan, hence removing the fear of physical death and the prevention of spiritual death would be the ultimate victory, not just over the sin which caused death, but over death itself and the one who instigated it in the first place. It would bring about the total annihilation of Satan's weapon of spiritual death which was the power to destroy the immortal soul of a human being. Hence the hymnist's words – *death of death and hell's destruction*. The significance of Easter is that Jesus' death achieved both. The forgiveness of sin which prevented spiritual death and as a result of that, the prospect of eternal life. This is what destroyed the powers of Satan over death. That is why Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:54-56 could exultantly proclaim **“When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”**

But we also need to see the strategy used to bring about that victory. The focus of the Easter victory is rightfully the blood of Christ but it is also significant because of the character of the One who shed that blood for in the history past, present and future, of humanity, quite literally, *“There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.”* Jesus was the only Person whose sacrificial blood was acceptable to God. Looking at Jesus we see why this is so. Looking at Jesus also sets the strategy by which all battles against Satan and the evils of

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this world must be confronted if victory is to be achieved. And for that we need to recap on something that was said in the very first week.

Satan's pride led to rebellion against God. As a created being, Satan attempted to dethrone God and put himself on the throne. For Satan, self became his god. Essentially, that is the condition of the sinner. A self that refuses to accept God's sovereignty, a self that resists all efforts of God to remedy the ills of the world, a self that so often actively fights against all that God is trying to achieve. Easter highlights the completely opposite strategies used to achieve victory in this struggle for souls. Easter demonstrates Christ's self-abasement confronting self-exaltation; self-sacrifice confronting self-serving; putting others before self, confronting self before others; selflessness leading to life confronting selfishness leading to death.

Firstly, Christ's self-abasement. We need look no further than the words of Paul for that. In complete contrast to the self-exaltation of Satan who aspired to seize the glory of heaven for himself, Jesus **“did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing taking the very nature of a servant....[and] humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross.”** Philippians 2:6-8.

In terms of sacrifice we must never forget that Jesus voluntarily sacrificed Himself and was fully conscious of the cost. Three times in the Gospels He predicted His death. He could not have been more explicit when He said in John 10:18 **No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”**

Leviticus 17:11 brings out the significance of His sacrifice.

For the life of the creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.

Again a hymn brings out the significance. *“There is a fountain filled with blood, flowing from Emmanuel's veins. And sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains.”* No stain – no death. And Jesus realised that His death for the forgiveness of sins was a life saving action for as the writer to the Hebrews 9:22 points out **“according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission.”**

The Leviticus verse then takes us on to the next step, because sacrifice is linked to atonement and that means one life is taken so that another might live. That is what is meant by saying that Jesus' death was vicarious. Jesus was dying on behalf of others. He was making atonement for the sins of humanity. John's Gospel highlights the 'Lamb of God' pointing to the Passover lamb sacrifice. John 15:13 **No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.**

All of this demonstrates the utter and complete selflessness of both the deity and the humanity of Jesus. And when we consider that a deity died on that cross Easter takes on even more significance. I think Charles Wesley must have been truly inspired by the Holy Spirit when he wrote the words *“Tis mystery all, the Immortal dies.”* How can an immortal being die? Anybody who watched 'Highlander' could probably give me an answer to that. But we are not talking here of a fictional being, but the eternal God who is from everlasting to everlasting, the Alpha and the Omega. *“In vain the first born seraph tries to plumb the depths of love divine.”* The angels tried in vain to understand what God was doing in this

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event. To us today it is still a mystery and must remain an article of faith that it was God, Himself, in human form, who died on that cross. God put Himself on the front line. He was willing to experience the physical death which we all go through and in a particularly horrific way. That to me is mind-blowing.

But this goes even further. The Apostle's creed says that Jesus descended into hell. I was asked last year what was happening during those three days that Jesus lay in the tomb. The honest answer is 'I don't know' because the Bible does not tell us that. What I do know is that Jews of the time believed that the dead entered a realm known as Hades to await judgment. It was where the fate of their immortal soul would be decided. If this is the case then Jesus fate was going to determine that of the rest of the human race. Satan appeared to have won because his machinations had resulted in the death of the One God had sent to defeat him. Listening to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we see that their hopes had been dashed by Jesus' death. The disciples too were scattered and in despair. This was the moment when outcome of the war between God and Satan would be finally settled. We don't know what went on during these three days. But we do know that whatever happened it resulted in *"death of death and hell's destruction."* Jesus' sinless, selfless obedience enabled God to declare that spiritual death no longer had power over those who entered the safety of His Kingdom through the sacrifice of Christ. That in turn destroyed the power of Satan and hell over the fate of humanity. John 5:18 tells us that **"the one who was born of God – meaning Jesus – keeps [the citizen army] safe and the evil one cannot harm him."**

How can we be sure of this? Listen to Luke, Paul and the writer to the Hebrews. They were in no doubt that the final and permanent defeat of Satan, hell and evil had become inevitable.

Acts 2:24 But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

Romans 6:9 We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

1 Corinthians 15:26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

2 Timothy 1:10 This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Hebrews 2:14 Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.

These declarations show that these writers were in no doubt that God had achieved His first two war aims - defeat of Satan, death and sin by means of Christ's death and the shedding of His blood.

But had that remained the end of the Easter events, one aim still would have remained – that of access to God. What the death of Christ achieved was the introduction of a new covenant which God was prepared to enter into with humanity. That covenant's authentication, validation and ratification necessitated a second phase of this Holy War – the Resurrection – which we'll come to next week.

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WEEK 3: Holy War 2 – RESURRECTION

The good news this week is that I think you can put away the Gaviscon and Rennie's now. We're still on 'strong meat' but it's much more palatable now.

We saw last week that the death of Jesus was phase one in God's counter-offensive and we saw that it dealt a devastating and permanent blow to Satan's plans for the destruction of God's creation through sin and death, both physical and spiritual. We finished by saying that God had brought into being a new covenant by the shedding of Jesus' blood on the cross. Had we been left with that situation, we could certainly have been assured that a victory had been achieved, as belief in Jesus' sacrifice would have cleared the slate with God as far as our sins were concerned. We could have logically concluded that if sin was no longer an issue, then spiritual death, which was the penalty for sin, would no longer apply to us. We could then go on to believe that these measures of God's grace meant He wasn't going to condemn us because of our sin. But, at the end of the day, we could go no further than that with any certainty about where we stood with God. God's first two war aims were met through the death of Christ. But what about the third one? Sin and death were no longer the issues, but what about access to His presence and a personal relationship with Him? The significance of Easter is that God dealt with that too by raising Christ from the dead. And it was that action that not only consolidated the victory over sin and death, but ratified the blood covenant, and thereby became the means by which God could restore the relationship He had intended to have with humanity from before the foundation of the world.

There is a saying that "hearing is deceiving, seeing is believing." To some extent this is true – at least it was before the advent of photoshop software. We've all heard of selective hearing and I won't be sexist about who might be more prone to that. But when it comes to seeing – it's hard to dispute what is right there in front of you. That is why Jesus' resurrection from the dead is of paramount significance for God's continuing battle against Satan, for that resurrection authenticated God's acceptance of the sacrifice made. And all the evidence of the Bible points us in this direction.

Firstly, we don't have to concern ourselves any more about how we can relate to God. Jesus is doing that for us by taking on a role which only the resurrection made possible – the **mediator between God and man** in 1 Timothy 2:3 This was a restatement of Jesus' own words in John 14:6 "**I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.**" But it is the writer to the Hebrews who spells this out for us.

Hebrews 9.15 - For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance – now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

Only the mediation of one who is acceptable to God and yet has a human perspective has the necessary qualities and qualifications to arbitrate a covenant relationship. The function of the mediator is to take action on behalf of the people he represents and, in the case of Jesus, this also means taking action on behalf of God. This is what makes Jesus absolutely unique. Only One who was both truly God and truly human could have stepped into this mediation role. Jesus, as the Son of God and as the Son of Man, is the only representative capable of establishing a covenant which fulfills the complete requirements of each party.

According to Hebrews this makes Jesus our High Priest

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Hebrews 7.26-28 Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.

The writer to the Hebrews takes great delight in showing the superiority of the New Covenant over the old one. In this verse we see the uniqueness of Christ because He is both the priest who offered the sacrifice and the sacrifice itself. It also points out that no further adjustments need to be made for this is a 'forever' situation. That is highlighted later in the text when Jesus is mentioned as being a priest after the order of Melchisedek. This this mysterious, but impressive OT figure represents an indestructible life (Heb. 7.16) and he therefore does not need any successors. This quality is possessed by Christ alone. Furthermore, Melchisedek is not attached to any tribe or nation, hence he can represent the whole of humanity. Melchisedek is also associated with a royal priesthood and the writer of Hebrews makes several references to Jesus' enthronement, for example in 8.1-2.

Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up.

Unlike the Jewish High Priest who could enter God's presence only once a year, those who have entered into the Kingdom of Heaven have a High Priest who lives in the very presence of God and is in constant intercession for them. Through belief in the resurrection of Christ we have 24/7 access to God's presence. An access which can never again be broken by Satan.

Secondly, we need to see that the resurrection was the foundation upon which the disciples and Paul based their ministries, which led to the emergence of Christianity. It is very true that the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost provided the dynamic for the apostolic ministries. But if there had been no inspirational message, all the effort in the world could not have had the impact the disciples and Paul had on their world. Because of the resurrection they were able to preach the forgiveness of sins resulting in the gift of eternal life. This message had impact because the ancient world had great respect for eye witness accounts and that is why we find emphasis on the actual sight of the risen Christ.

Acts 4:33

With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

Acts 3:15 Peter and John healing of lame man

and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.

The assertiveness of the first letter of John 1:1 was based on the fact

That which was from the beginning which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life.

Paul's vision of the risen Christ led him to proclaim to the Corinthians

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1 Corinthians 15:12-13

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.

He takes this further in 1 Corinthians 15:19:22

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

And in verses 42- 44 and 49 he can argue that

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.⁴⁹Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

And the resurrection was the grounds of his defence when he was on trial for his life. When Paul was standing trial before the Jews, he noticed Pharisees and Sadducees in the council. The Sadducees did not believe in life after death, the Pharisees did. And Paul expertly exploited that division.

Acts 23:6 “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead.”

When he stood before the governor Felix he declared

Acts 24:15 I have a hope in God—a hope that they themselves also accept—that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous.

Acts 26:6-8 And now I stand here on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors, a promise that our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship day and night. It is for this hope, your Excellency, that I am accused by Jews! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

Paul’s complete defence of what he preached and taught was based on his unwavering belief that God had raised Christ from the dead - his Saviour was alive.

When you think of the task the disciples and Paul faced in spreading the Gospel throughout the Roman world and the hardships they endured, including making the ultimate sacrifice of their lives, you have to wonder at their courage and perseverance. It is true the strength of the Holy Spirit was at their disposal, but given their own emphasis on the truth of the resurrection, could the words of one of our hymns been nearer to the thoughts of their own hearts

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow
Because He lives all fear is gone
Because I know He holds the future
And life is worth the living just because He lives.

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And that brings us to a third aspect of the significance of Easter. Easter involved physical death and dealing with spiritual death, the death of Christ was not the end in itself. It was the means to an end. Where everything to do with Satan eventually ended in death, God used death to restore Life. This is the connection Jesus Himself made when

He told Martha John 11:25-26

“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Earlier, Peter had anticipated this when he said to Jesus John 6:68 **“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.**

After the resurrection, it was no longer a matter of words, it was the realisation of the reality of eternal life.

1 Peter 1:3-5 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

And that is the testimony of Jude 21 21

keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.

1 John 5:11-12

And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Hebrews 5:8-9

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,

Paul to Titus 3:6-8

This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is sure.

Romans 3:23

....and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

I've left the reference to Paul to the end because of one particular word. Justified. The great Pauline doctrine of justification by faith opened the eyes of Martin Luther and led to the Protestant reformation. But although forgiveness of sins was made possible by the shedding of Christ's blood, justification only came through God's acceptance of that sacrifice. And proof of that acceptance was raising Jesus from the dead. The resurrection validated and authenticated the sacrifice and gave God the grounds upon which to pronounce a 'not guilty' verdict on those who accepted the cross as an atonement for sin.

I've talked about justification before, but it is one of those Christian beliefs that needs to be repeated over and over again, because our eternal destiny is dependent upon it. David gave

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us another way of seeing it when he said in a sermon a few weeks ago that God has provided us with “a new wardrobe” – the righteousness of Christ. In God’s eyes we are clothed with the holiness, blamelessness and purity of Jesus. Put another way, you could say that the citizen army has a new uniform. Now I know this is something that you cannot actually see and that in spite of it, we are still all prone to sin. That is something we’ll come to next week, but tonight we need to look again at something that has been covered before but is THE major factor in making sure Satan can never again destroy the new creation God has brought into being through the Easter event. Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith is an unassailable and impregnable barrier against all the weapons Satan can muster. By it, God has declared Jesus’ followers as righteous. It gives the believer a legal status before God and because of that it cannot be challenged.

It cannot be challenged because God is the ruler who makes the laws and is the judge of whether or not those laws have been kept. Since it is God’s nature that determines His standard of righteousness, it is only God who can decide who meets that standard. Even in Paul’s day this was controversial. How can a Holy God declare sinful people righteous? The answer is that when Jesus, who was sinless, accepted death on the cross He knew He was paying the penalty for all the sins of all the people in the world. It is because God’s holy, righteous and just standards were met in the life of Jesus that He was accepted as a substitute for us enabling God in perfect justice to pronounce our acquittal in the matter of sin. One commentator has said that “When all the evidence is in and the case has been adjudicated, the God of the universe who is both lawgiver and righteous judge pronounces the verdict of acquittal. Therefore in the sight of God a believer is not a sinner but a righteous person.”¹ Satan’s role as the “accuser of the brethren” is now defunct because, through justification and by the grace of God, believers are “a new creation, no more in condemnation.”

And that means that humanity now is reconciled to God with all the blessings that brings. In other words, God no longer looks on them as sinners or hostile to Him. The barrier of sin has been swept away and God can thus adopt a different attitude to believers. God is reconciled in the sense that His will to bless us can be realized because of Christ’s death and what is achieved in justification. And the greatest blessing is love.

Christ’s death shows that God loved His enemies and the reconciliation achieved by Christ’s death allows God to bestow on believers the gifts of His love.

1 John 7-11

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

And believers also have peace with God. (Rom 5:1-2)

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand;

¹ Ladd p447

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And lastly, the love and peace leads to the joy of victory for what was achieved through the death and resurrection of Christ meant the final defeat of cosmic powers. In order for the Kingdom of God to be ultimately triumphant, the spiritual powers of darkness had to be defeated. We have already seen how Jesus' earthly ministry began this process through exorcisms. The crucifixion which seemed to be the triumph of evil is instead its defeat. (Col 2.15). **“And having disarmed the powers and authorities he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”**

Death on a cross was the cruelest and most humiliating public spectacle known in the Roman world. It was a highly visible sign of the utter defeat and destruction of its victims and all they stood for. But the resurrection was God's triumphant and even more spectacular public proclamation of His victory over Satan, sin and death

It is the risen Lord who gives the message of the New Testament the themes of victory, conquest, triumph and overcoming. That is why Paul can assert that we are **more than conquerors** in Romans 8:37. That's why he urges Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:12 to **“Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called...”**

That is why John can declare.

1 John 5:4-5

for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

But regardless of how weak or strong our faith may be in Him, ultimately, every victory stems back to the fact of the resurrection. As the hymn puts it –

Up from the grave He arose with a mighty triumph o'er His foes
He arose a victor from the dark domain and He lives forever with His saints to reign
He arose, He arose, Hallelujah, Christ arose.

Thine be the glory, risen conquering Son.
Endless is the victory Thou o'er death has won.

The question for us today, is what are we going to do with that victory? That's coming next week.

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WEEK 5: HOLDING THE BRIDGEHEAD

Last week we ended on a really high note. We celebrated the victory that gives Easter such significance in Christianity. One of the most significant features of “*the death of death and hell’s destruction*” through the shedding of Christ’s blood, was the resurrection which endorsed all that Christ had achieved on the cross, and which led to an emphasis on life rather than death. We even went as far as saying that God’s three war aims – victory over Satan, and over sin and death and providing a way back into a relationship with Him for sinful humanity had been achieved. The logical conclusion is that the war against Satan and Evil has been decisively won. The glory and the crown, the high renown, the eternal Name – all can be attributed to God who achieved this through the sinless perfection and obedience of His Son. In every sense of the words, Easter was the time when the battle belonged to the Lord alone.

It would be lovely to continue on that theme but unfortunately this week we have to come down to earth again. And I suppose the basic questions that face us all now is “If the war is won, why are the battles against evil still continuing?” “Why is Satan still at work in the world?” “Why are God’s people and God’s ways still suffering defeats?” We can get answers to these questions from two different perspectives. Firstly, from God’s perspective, the war is won in the spiritual realm. The imagery in Revelation chapter 12 makes this point. From Judaic beliefs of the time, scholars believe that the war in heaven depicted there was the spiritual counterpart of what was happening in the physical world during the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Both events were the two sides of the one coin. And what is said in this chapter appears to bear this out. First, there is the good news

Revelation 12:10

**Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,
“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.... they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb.....Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them!**

This is the level of rejoicing over that victory in heaven. It also shows that Satan has been permanently expelled from God’s domain and can never again threaten anyone who dwells there. Even if he did have access to accuse believers before God, he would not succeed because the “blood of the Lamb” is the cast iron defence against all that Satan can do or say against us.

The bad news is:

But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

What this makes clear is that the heavenly counterpart of the Easter victory has created an even greater anger in Satan. It is an anger, which, excuse the expression, is hell bent on causing maximum damage and destruction to anything God is doing on the earth. It is said that a cornered animal is more dangerous for it will then literally fight to the death. That is the picture we have here. Satan now knows God will only let him go so far and his days are numbered. If you are wondering about the ferocity of opposition to Christianity in the world, it stems from this one fact. Satan is on the backfoot, fighting a last desperate campaign against God.

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Remember two or three weeks ago I mentioned three battles that were turning points in the second world war. Those victories gave an almost certain, as far as anything can be certain in this world, guarantee that victory would eventually go to the Allied powers. Yet further battles had to be fought. It took another two years before victory in Europe came and three years before victory over Japan came – and that only after a unique event in the world – the dropping of two atomic bombs. Easter guarantees an eventual Christian victory, but Easter did not bring the war on earth to an end.

Battles have to be fought until Christ's return and every generation has to heed the call to "Stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross." Because, as Christians, who know and understand the significance of what Easter stands for, we have entered God's kingdom, we are commissioned to make disciples of all nations. We have been told that God is not willing that any should perish but that all should have eternal life and it is our duty to do what we can until God has gathered to Himself all who will come to Him - as we have been told in Ephesians 1:9-10 **he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.**

John Stott refers to the post-resurrection period as the 'conquest extended'. Every generation until God's "fullness of time" has come, is charged with extending the conquest in this world. It is still Satan's territory and it is now our generation's turn to hold the bridgehead established by the Easter event and to extend it as and when we can. Previous generations brought about those advances through the Reformation and through revivals. We are facing an uphill task today. If anything, it seems we are being pushed back rather than advancing. That is true in our society, but there are advances being made in other parts of the world. Our duty here is to make a stand. Paul tells Timothy to "**fight the good fight of faith**" 1 Timothy 1:18 and in 2 Timothy 2:3 to "**endure hardship ... like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.**"

The question then is "How do we do our duty." God has provided us with two major weapons – His Word – the sword of truth and the Holy Spirit. Our success both individually and corporately will depend on how much confidence or belief we have in the strength and power of these equipment, how much reliance we put on it and how effectively we deploy it in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

The third verse of "Stand up, Stand up for Jesus ye soldiers of the cross", in particular, encapsulates what the Christian is called to do in every age

Stand up, stand up for Jesus. Stand in His strength alone
The arm of flesh will fail you, ye dare not trust your own.
Put on the gospel armour, each piece put on with prayer.
Where duty calls or danger, be never wanting there.

Last week we saw that by His death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus earned for us a 'not guilty' verdict and as a result, His righteousness was given to us. That is the foundation of our strength. The breastplate of righteousness is one item of armour mentioned in Ephesians 6:13:17. It guards our hearts – the core of our being; and to guard our minds we have been given the helmet of salvation. We have the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God to guide our conduct and the belt of truth assuring us that our cause is just. The shield of faith is needed to help us persevere when the going gets tough and to deflect the fiery darts of doubt

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and lies that Satan wants us to believe about God. And we have shoes to take us forward to bring the gospel of peace to others. Some say prayer is another piece of the armour because Paul goes on to mention this. When you think of it, together with the gift of the Holy Spirit, prayer keeps the lines of communication open to heaven. In any battle, if the lines of communication are broken, not only the individual soldier, but the whole army is in trouble.

And that brings us to the fact that we cannot fight these battles alone. Yes, we will have individual conflicts, but we are meant to be part of an organisation that Jesus Himself envisaged. Some scholars dispute this, but it was Jesus who said **“I will build My church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”**

In John 17 there is the concept that faith in Jesus will be the basis upon which all believers would become one with the Father just as Jesus and the Father are one. The common purpose of the disciples is a vital factor contributing to the sense of oneness. Through them, Christ was to be glorified to the glory of the Father. They would be in the world, yet not of it. The sense of solidarity between God, Jesus, the disciples and those who would believe through their testimony is unmistakable. This also makes no sense if a prospective community was not intended. Paul, is in no doubt that a community of believers was envisaged by Jesus when tells the Corinthians that we are all a part of the ‘body of Christ.’ As individuals, I think we are all aware of how much we have benefitted from being members of the church here. I can honestly say I don’t know how I would have got through these last 20 or so months without it.

But Jesus did not envisage a community just to offer mutual support to each other. He envisaged it to be a witness to Himself. To take His message of salvation to the world around us and through that to bring glory to God and extend His kingdom. In this kind of battle, it truly is a case of ‘united we stand, divided we fall.’ How much damage to the mission Christ entrusted us with has been done through dissension and schisms among Christians? The church will never be perfect in this world – it is run by imperfect people, but we can wholeheartedly give it our loyalty when its members are agreed that:

The church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord
She is His new creation by water and the word
From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride
With His own blood He bought her and for her life He died.

That brings us face to face with the significance of Easter, because if the community of believers was not envisaged by God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then the Easter events are meaningless and have no goal. Why did Jesus commission the disciples to **‘make disciples of all nations’** and to **be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth?** Why too send the Holy Spirit to galvanise the disciples and Paul to endure all the hardships and even to make the ultimate sacrifice, if God did not intend to gather together “an army of ordinary people in a kingdom where love is the key”? It was the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus which makes all of this possible. Christ’s Easter victory gave the impetus and the purpose to extend the conquest and battle against the world, the flesh and the devil. We are sitting here tonight/today because that started over 2000 years ago and has been faithfully fought down to the present day.

The last census found that church attendance was in sharp decline. Christianity is weak and under increasing attack from political policies, the media and worldly philosophies. It’s a

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controversial point, but is this happening because Christians have failed to maintain their corporate identity and mission? How in the face of this can we hold on to the bridgehead, when we seem to be being forced into retreat?

The answer lies in the strategies of the early church which had to make advances in a totally pagan world. In the first place dependence on the powerful strength and guidance of the Holy Spirit was the foundation of the apostolic mission and message. Secondly, they required a change of heart on the part of those who accepted their message, a commitment which was publicly acknowledged by baptism. Once those two conditions were in place, priority was given to meeting for the preaching and teaching of the Word, prayer, the Breaking of Bread and what the Bible calls 'almsgiving' – helping those in need. This was undergirded by both an individual and corporate lifestyle which made the first communities so distinctive that their methods of doing things became known as 'The Way.' It led to these believers being given, what was probably originally a derisory nickname – the name by which believers have been proud to be known to the present day – Christians – followers of Christ.

Reading about these things taught and practiced in the early church sounds so simple and straightforward. Yet today they have become bogged down in doctrinal and denominational differences with the result that Christianity is no longer presenting a united witness to the world. I sometimes wonder if, by some miracle of grace, God would grant a revival tomorrow, what united and consistent message could the church deliver to those looking to it for the knowledge and understanding of salvation through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Has there been no revival because it would be more likely to lead to more confusion and differing forms of Christianity?

There have always been heresies and differences of opinion but heresies were quickly identified as being contrary to the Word as were wrong opinions or interpretations of it. The letters of the New Testament were written to counteract people's own versions of what they had heard. Today, perhaps more than ever, we need to get back to "the Word" - what are the non-negotiable elements of our faith and like Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms declare "Here I stand. I can do no other".

And we do have a record of those foundational beliefs. One commentator has affirmed that the speeches in Acts can be taken as substantially accurate, giving us the beliefs of the early church. He goes on to say that "the Epistles do not depart from these basic premises and although there was no fixed creed, it is not unreasonable to expect that there was general agreement among believers regarding the tenets of their faith."

For a start. The early church believed itself to be the age of fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies which is evident in constant appeals to them for example in - Acts 2 & 3.18.24. Crucially the death and resurrection of Jesus are mentioned in all the speeches. The sinless perfection of His sacrificial death for the forgiveness of sin and His resurrection giving the guarantee of eternal life are the foundation stones of the apostolic message. They mention both the Divine initiative in Jesus' death, (Acts 2.23) but also the human responsibility for it.

The exalted Christ's position is recognized. Jesus was seen as the Davidic Messiah, Lord and Christ, Servant (2.33-36), prince and saviour. (5.31) Then, the Holy Spirit was the binding force in the community and the source of witnessing power. 2.33; 5.32. For the early community this was an undeniable fact of life and it must be seen as the impetus of the

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apostolic mission. Last, but not least, was the belief in the return of Christ. (3.21; 10.42). Christ's return would bring the present age to an end.

Based on these beliefs, preaching and teaching were exhortations to repent and believe and thereby to receive salvation. This basis of the new community was the work of Christ but the qualification for membership was repentance and faith. On profession of this, baptism followed.

As far as baptism is concerned, it has to be said that there was no set formula in the New Testament. Jesus told the disciples to baptise in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit but the practice in Acts was to baptise converts into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ - Acts 2.38, 8.16, 10.48, 19.5. The main point about baptism is that it was commanded by Jesus and it publicly demonstrated the repentance and faith required for admittance into the community of believers. Several references to baptisms administered in the early Christian community are found in the book of Acts. In each case baptism was a vital part of people's response to God's gracious offer of salvation. Those baptized include: the believers on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41); the Samaritan believers (Acts 8:12-13); Saul (Acts 9:18); Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:48); the Philippian jailer and his household (Acts 16:33); and Crispus with his household (Acts 18:8). In all these instances baptism was administered only after the people had heard the gospel and confessed the lordship of Christ. Baptism was the seal of their faith. In Paul's teaching it also was symbolically associated with the burial and resurrection of Christ and the new creation lifestyle which should result from that. Col 2.12, 3.5,8, 10, 12. In this sense, belonging the community and a new lifestyle were two sides of the one coin.

The significance of Easter was most plainly seen in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, called the Breaking of Bread in Acts and also known in subsequent ages as the Eucharist and communion. Apart from the continued existence of the Church, probably no other tangible action proves that significance of Easter more than the continued practice for over 2000 of this sacrament. There is no record of Jesus giving a specific command that the supper was to be observed in future in Matthew and Mark, although Luke adds Paul's words of remembrance in 1 Cor. 11.25, to His account. However, Jesus repeated the breaking of bread with the men He met on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24.30) and this same term is used in Acts 2.42, 46 and 20.7. Because of the implication of the Emmaus Road event, the church may have perpetuated the act as a means of fellowship and a recognition of the presence of Jesus. Paul sees the Lord's supper as a 'remembrance' of the Person and especially of the death of Jesus. But for Christians, Jesus' death was a past fact and also a present reality. In participation, a person is again confronted with the whole meaning of Christ's saving work on the cross and what it achieved for him/her. Jesus' death and its achievements were of unique significance and something which should not be forgotten. 'Until he comes' shows the future aspect of the Lord's Supper. When Christ returns there will no longer be a need for a memorial of Him.

So much more could be said about all of these things. And if we are to hold the bridgehead secured by those who have gone before us and to make the kind of advances the early church did, we need to get back to God's strategies based on the assurance of what Christ achieved at Easter. This battle ultimately belongs to the Lord – but the duty God has assigned to believers of every age is to hold the bridgehead and extend the conquest?

The order in Ephesians 6:13 is clear

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Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

In heavenly armour we'll enter the land – The battle belongs to the Lord
No weapon that's fashioned against us will stand – the battle belongs to the Lord

When the power of darkness comes in like a flood – the battle belongs to the Lord
He raised up a standard, the power of His blood – the battle belongs to the Lord.

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WEEK 6: FINAL VICTORY

Last week we saw the significance of Easter for the generations that will exist until Christ's return. Tonight we will see the significance of Easter for that future time. The fact of the matter is that without the events of the death and resurrection of Jesus at Easter, He would never have ascended into heaven and be in the place where He would have a decisive role to play in God's final victory over Satan. Tonight we will be dealing with that event and this is where I could get into real trouble and find myself in the middle of a battle of views about the end of the world. I am inclined to the view that it is better to be a live coward than a dead hero, but if I am to be true to the "whole counsel of God" regarding the war against Satan, this is one topic where I have to lift my head above the parapet and risk being shot down. So, here goes.

At the outset, it we need to see that this topic needs to be approached with caution. Many sincere and committed Christians have different views on the sequence of events before the end of the world. Debate usually focuses on whether or not the church will be "raptured" before or after the return of Christ; whether the church will go through the "great tribulation" and whether or not Christ will physically reign on earth for 1000 years after His return. No one knows which one of these is right, or indeed, if any of them are right. So, rather than be swayed by the, sometimes, very persuasive arguments of those who write and speak about these things, we need to go back and see what the Bible says about how God is going to bring the struggle against Satan to a victorious and glorious end. The problem is that we have to go to the book of the Bible that has given rise to so much controversy about this.

The best way to deal with any controversy is to try to establish facts and there is one about the Bible that has to be taken seriously if we want to get a clearer picture of what the New Testament writers are actually saying about the end of the world. There is a consensus among Biblical scholars that the Book of Revelation is unique in the Bible. It is indisputable that, compared to other Biblical books, this one is a bit weird and definitely hard to understand. Some of the mists clear however when we see that the Book represents a special kind of genre that was prevalent at the time. That means that it uses a very distinctive literary style and type of language to get its message across. Scholars call this 'apocalyptic literature' and it was as common in Judaism as a fantasy or science-fiction book would be to us today. Just as we expect certain things to appear in these types of books, so we have to realize that when we read an apocalyptic work, we are dealing with images and symbols. Most controversies arise because people take some of these Revelation literally – like the 1000 year reign; and other things symbolically. In apocalyptic literature, you really can't make this kind of choice and be certain you are right. Let me give you an example. Artist's impressions of three portraits of Christ in Revelation - Son of Man; Lion of Judah; slain Lamb. Are any of these what Jesus actually looks like? That's the problem of taking things literally. The other thing that needs to be mentioned here is that the word "Rapture", which plays a prominent part in many of the end of the world interpretations, does not appear in the Book of Revelation. In fact, it doesn't even appear in any of the major English translations of the Bible. Because of these two facts alone – the nature of apocalyptic literature and the lack of mention of the word 'rapture' in the Bible - we need to be very careful about what we accept as fact about the end of the world events.

More positively, there are facts we can rely on, first and foremost because Jesus gave them to us.

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Fact 1, there will be an end to human history. In Matthew 24:3-14 we are told the disciples asked Jesus about the signs of His coming. Jesus tells them that before the end there will be wars and rumours of war, earthquakes, famines, false prophets, increased lawlessness and even apathy among the people of God, and then adds, **“13But the one who endures to the end will be saved. 14And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.”**

In Matthew 28:20 Jesus told the disciples **“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”** But He did not say when the end would be. In Matthew 24:36 Jesus is very emphatic. **“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”** There is no time-table in Revelation or anywhere else in the Bible for calculating when the end of the world will be.

Fact 2. What we are told according to every reference to the end of the age in the New Testament, it will be marked by the second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in glory. Jesus in John 14:1-3 told the disciples to **“Trust in god, trust also in Me. In my Father’s house are many rooms;I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.** The passage already quoted in Matthew suggests that Jesus had already said something about His coming as marking the end of the age. Mark 13:26 gives us a flavour of this.

“At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.” When Jesus was challenged by the High Priest to say whether or not He was the Christ, Jesus replied– Mark 14:62 – **I am....and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.** This was endorsed by the two men dressed in white who appeared to the disciples after Jesus’ ascension – Acts 1: 11 – **Men of Galilee.... Why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back, in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.** Read Revelation 14:14 **“I looked and there before me was a white cloud and seated on the cloud was one like a son of man with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, ‘Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.”**

And Paul also makes a contribution to these references. Paul mentions the ‘Parousia’ 14 times in his writings. 1 Thessalonians is regarded by scholars to be one of the earliest letters. In chapter 4:13-17 he tells the people there not to be concerned that the people who are already dead will miss out on Christ’s second coming. The dead will rise first and **“the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God...After that we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.”** This text is particularly important because it is the one that has given rise to the idea of the ‘rapture’. As mentioned, Paul is addressing the believers’ concerns about those who are already dead missing out on the glories of Christ’s second coming, but it has been lifted out of this context in Thessalonians and combined with completely different contexts in Revelation to produce this interpretation of end of the world events.

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If we are looking, however, for facts, we do not have to take something from one context and put it in another. When there is something so important as Christ's return, you will find the Biblical writers all singing from the same hymn sheet. We've already seen from references mentioned the power and might that will accompany that return. And there are others more specific references. Mark 8:38 - talks of him coming **"in his Father's glory with the holy angels."** 2 Thessalonians 1:7 Paul describes the coming from heaven **"in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He goes on to mention in verse 10 **"the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed.**** Titus 2:13 is told to live with the hope of **"the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ."** Revelation 1:7 tells us **"he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him"** and Paul gives people's reactions in Philippians 2:11 – **"every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."**

Fact 3. It is indisputable from these references that when Christ comes again He will come as a victor King of Kings and Lord of Lords. These titles are not exaggerated in any way for Paul tells the Ephesians that as a result of the resurrection God has seated Jesus **"at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age, but also in the one to come."** Revelation chapters 1-3 give us indications of those titles and the study of these alone adds up to unimaginable might and power. We are familiar with the Alpha and Omega and John reminds us that these speak of the eternal one – **"who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."** The description of the Son of Man in verses 12-16 defy attempts to summarise the might, power and glory of this figure. Many of the attributes mentioned by the Speaker in chapters 2 and 3 correspond with that description. And if we just look for a moment at what is said, we get a very powerful picture of the Lord of the churches. The first two show that He is the one who walks among them (Dan. 3:25) as an eternal being (2:8); who has tasted death and yet is alive forever more having conquered death and escaped from the tomb.

Then, the sword reference speaks of the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. In Heb. 4:12f, the Word of God is said to be **"sharper than any two edged sword....discerning the thoughts of the heart."** Jesus is called the Word of God in 19:13.

The next reference is significant because it is the only place in Revelation where Jesus is called the 'Son of God', and mentioned in this context suggests what is being said comes from God Himself because the One who speaks these words, with such piercing scrutiny, discerns exactly what is going on in each community. Eyes are for seeing and eyes of blazing fire suggest spiritual insight which is shown by the appropriateness of the approval/accusation and advice which address the spiritual condition of the churches.

No one is sure of what the term "feet of burnished bronze" represents. In 1:15 the feet of bronze are associated with a furnace and fire is the usual symbol of judgement. Ephesians 1:22 states that - **And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church.** And in chapters 2 and 3 Jesus is judging the churches.

3:1. Scholars believe the seven spirits are John's way of saying the Holy Spirit and we are told in 1:20 that the stars are the 'angels' of the churches - which could denote the spiritual character of Christ's church. Whatever the explanation, the verse implies that the spiritual character of the churches is of major concern to God.

3:7 By contrast, the next reference is relatively straightforward. The key of David refers back to 1:18. David is the model for the Messiah. Keys signify control.

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3:14 As is the last description. Faithful and true witness who is the ruler of God's creation, the 'Amen' signifying both divine affirmation and human response. Also AMEN meaning absolute truth, reality and fact.

We thus have a powerful picture of a being who is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. And that is why, in verses 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15, the Speaker is able to state "I know....."

And it is that omniscience which brings us to Fact 5. There will be judgement when Christ returns. Paul's words are stark. **"It is appointed unto men once to die and after that the judgement."** Revelation 14:7 at Christ's return an angel will proclaim, **"Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."**

I feel enough has already been said about judgment in relation to sin, but this is another end-time fact that is prominent in the Revelation account. Again there are differing opinions regarding the nature of judgement but Jesus gave us the principles upon which it will be based. In the gospel references it is Christ who will judge on the basis of what peoples' response to Him as been. Matthew 25:31-46 makes it clear that there will be a separation between those who have followed Christ's way and those who have not. Luke 9:26 makes it clear that Jesus will reject those who have denied His Lordship over their lives now. Matthew 7:23 also makes clear that Christ will be able to distinguish between His true and false followers. What Revelation makes clear is that regardless of the actual reason, there will be those who have put themselves outside the ultimate purposes of God and so have no part in God's future. Their fate is described in a variety of ways, but it is clear that their self-chosen destiny is not God's intended purpose for them. They suffer the fate of those cosmic forces implacably opposed to God, 'the devil and his angels' (Matt. 25:41), being separated from the source of light and life (Rev. 20:15).

But although end-time judgment is a Biblical fact, the significance of Easter, as David has repeatedly reminded us, is not about a response to God based on the fear of hell and damnation. God doesn't want people following Christ as a kind of insurance policy, or God forbid, just hedging their bets regarding the existence or otherwise of an afterlife. Above all, we have seen that Easter is the battle God has personally fought in the Person of His Son, because of the love He bears for humanity. Easter is an outpouring of divine love, grace, mercy, compassion and a willingness to abundantly bless a humanity helpless and powerless because of the strength of the evil instigated by Satan which leaves people, in Paul's words, "dead in trespasses and sin." Easter is primarily about our rescue from that condition and our rightful response should be of the wonder and awesomeness of that divine concern that demanded such a high price to be paid for our ransom. At Easter God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. Is it any wonder that the hymnist wrote "*Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*" This is the heartfelt response the realization of the true significance of Easter leads too. And this is especially the case when we realize the equally clear facts in Revelation and elsewhere in the New Testament that those who believe and accept Christ's work are now freed from all condemnation (John 5:24; Rom. 8:1-3, 33-39).

2 Corinthians 9:17-21

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was

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reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

And that assurance is why this is a battle worth fighting because the final fact to be considered tonight/today is that regardless of the actual logistics of the end of the world events, the ultimate setting for that “new creation” is clear. Revelation 21 and 22 gives us a picture of the new heaven and new earth in which the holy God dwells in the midst of a holy people. It is a picture of the presence of God and everything that is good. Nothing evil can ever enter there. It is a picture of love rather than hate, light rather than darkness. A picture of freedom from hunger, thirst, pain and death. A picture of eternal peace and contentment, safety and security.

Even if countless details of biblical eschatology are open to different interpretations, its central facts are clear enough. If nothing else, these six weeks have shown that Easter is not just a simple story of the tragedy and triumph of the cross. Easter is the most significant event, not just for God’s plan of salvation which could not leave humanity under Satan’s oppression, but for the eternal fate of humanity. Easter became necessary through events before the beginning of time and its effects reach beyond the end of time. No other event in world history has, or ever will have, such far-reaching consequences for humanity. The Easter event became necessary because of a battle for supremacy in heaven before the beginning of time. According to the New Testament, those who choose to follow Christ are part of that continuous power struggle that Revelation reveals will only end with a final and decisive battle. Armageddon will happen – we just don’t know how or when. We do know the result however. In the aftermath, as the result of what Christ did for us at Easter, we will see Him face to face. Perhaps, what will summarise the significance of Easter past, present and future, then, are words from the throne room scene in Revelation 5 and our response to them.

Revelation 5:9-10, 12

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise....because you were slain and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

**Worthy, oh worthy are You Lord,
Worthy to be thanked and praised and worshipped and adored.....**

**“Hallelujah, Lamb upon the throne
We worship and adore You, make Your glory known.
Hallelujah, glory to the King.
You’re more than a conqueror, You’re Lord of everything.**