

# **BIBLE AS SECOND LANGUAGE,**

## **SESSION NINE**

### **PART A**

My name is Ron Baesler, I am a pastor at Messiah Lutheran Church in Yorba Linda California and I welcome you to Bible as Second Language, Session Nine.

This session is entitled the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In our last session we looked at the life and ministry of Jesus as seen in the stories of the four gospel writers. I reminded you that all of these gospels or ‘good news stories’ were written some years AFTER the events they narrate. They were written by people convinced that this Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises God had made to the people in the Old Testament.

### **SLIDE**

In fact, they believed that Jesus was Emmanuel, a Hebrew term meaning ‘God with us’. Jesus was the human face of God. Now how did they come to believe this?

It wasn’t because Jesus taught with great authority, although he surely did that. It wasn’t because Jesus healed many people, though he did that too. It wasn’t even because Jesus fed huge crowds with a few loaves and fishes or

calmed raging storms. All of these were powerful actions but they were not the key to their faith, or to the faith at the heart of the Christian church.

To find the key that inspired the Gospels and created the Christian community we need to look at the final week of the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth. Look at the four gospels and notice how much time is given to the final week of Jesus earthly life. Of Matthew's 28 chapters, 8 of them focus on the final week. Mark devotes 6 of his 16 chapters to that dramatic week. Luke 6 out of 24 and John 7 out of 21. One Bible teacher noted that the 4 Gospels are actually death and resurrection stories with extended introductions.

That's probably a bit of an exaggeration but there is no doubt that the Gospels give great attention to this last week of Jesus' life and there is no doubt that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the founding events for the Christian faith. They are the fundamental, defining events for us, just as the Exodus was for the people of the Old Covenant.

In our last session I mentioned that the gospels are like instant replays of a race that has been completed. Well, after the death and resurrection of

Jesus, when the gospel writers looked back upon Jesus' life and ministry, they saw new meaning in events and words that had seemed confusing when they first happened.

Take a look at Matthew, chapter 16, verses 15 to 28. Read Peter's bold pronouncement to Jesus: you are the Messiah, the son of the living God. Then read how when Jesus describes what he will have to deal with in Jerusalem, Peter protests and Jesus calls him "Satan". It was impossible for Peter to see how the Messiah, the Son of God, could suffer and be killed. Whenever Jesus talked about those things, the followers of Jesus were baffled.

In Mark's gospel especially, we see the disciple's confusion regarding the trajectory of Jesus' ministry:

*They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.' But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. Mark 9:30-32*

We ended our last session by noting that Jesus' words and ministry generated opposition. The religious leaders who benefited from the status quo actively plotted to get rid of this one who spoke of a loving God and who freely forgave and healed the outcasts. The Roman rulers and their Jewish appointees also were anxious about this man's ability to gather crowds. They feared that his talk of setting free the oppressed, bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives could lead to an insurrection. It is very possible that some of Jesus' disciples may have hoped for that very thing.

So, opposition was building, Jesus knew it was building, but he did not play it safe. He had been charged with a mission: proclaim and make real the loving rule of God. He was determined to do that no matter the cost. Here is how Luke describes it: *When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. Luke 9:51*

Jerusalem was the scene of the dramatic confrontation between this human face of the loving God and the powers of this rebellious world. The Gospel writers aren't so concerned about giving us a historical chronology of these critical events so there are some differences in the details of these final days.

Our Christian tradition has highlighted several events and remembered them in what we call Holy Week. It begins with Palm Sunday, or the Sunday of the Passion. (from the Latin *passio*, meaning suffering.)

All four gospels tell the story of Jesus' entry in to Jerusalem. Jesus makes a 'grand entry' riding on a donkey. This is a purposeful political act by Jesus. He chooses to enact the words spoken by the prophet Zechariah about a new king who would come bringing peace

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!*

*Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!*

*Lo, your king comes to you;*

*triumphant and victorious is he,*

*humble and riding on a donkey,*

*on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

*He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim*

*and the warhorse from Jerusalem;*

*and the battle-bow shall be cut off,*

*and he shall command peace to the nations;*

*his dominion shall be from sea to sea,*

*and from the River to the ends of the earth. Zechariah 9:9-10*

Jesus enters the country's religious and political capital as a conquering king! The crowds are made up of those who have suffered at the hands of the Romans and groaned under the burdens of the religious sacrificial system. They shout *'Hosanna to the Son of David!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!*'

They are claiming Jesus as God's promised Messiah. What do they expect from him? Will he lead an insurrection against the Romans? Will he set them free from their oppressors? The Bible doesn't report their hopes directly. But it does tell us what some of the leaders thought of this event. The Pharisees, one of the leading Jewish groups, said to Jesus as the crowd shouted its adoration: *'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.'* He answered, *'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.'* Luke 19:39-40.

In John's gospel these leaders declare in frustration: *'You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!'* John 12:19

So, when Jesus enters the city, the expectations of the masses have been raised to a fever pitch. What is more, we are told that the Passover is coming. If you remember from session four, the Passover was the great

celebration of God's liberation of the people from slavery in Egypt. The spirit of freedom is in the air and many pilgrims came to Jerusalem for the festival. You can bet that the occupying Roman military forces are on alert.

But though Jesus enters the city as the promised king he makes no move to challenge these pagan forces. According to the Synoptic Gospel, he instead heads directly for the temple, strides in and begins to throw over the tables of the money changers and drive out those who were buying and selling animals for sacrifice. You can imagine the ruckus: coins clattering, animals squawking and bellowing, men shouting. Here Jesus attacks the entire religious system of sacrifice. He denounces those who forced the poor people to exchange so-called pagan Roman coins for temple coins so they could buy the sacrificial animals they needed to get right with God. Now opposition crystallizes:

*And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching. Mark 11:18*

The leaders decide that they need to get rid of this guy but they can't do it openly without causing a riot. They need to act undercover and act quickly.

Enter one of Jesus' disciples, Judas Iscariot. He offers to show them where Jesus is at night, away from the crowds, and easy to grab. Looking back at Judas, the gospel writers declare that he was a thief and a lover of wealth and that he betrayed Jesus for money. It is also possible that he was one of those zealous Jewish patriots who hoped that by forcing a confrontation between Jesus and the soldiers, Jesus would initiate a revolution. Or perhaps he was simply disappointed that Jesus hadn't taken a stand against the Romans and so betrayed him out of anger. Whatever his motives he set in motion a plot that would soon lead to Jesus' death.

## **PART B**

As this Holy Week progresses, Jesus continues to teach daily in the temple. People are getting up early to hear his messages. I almost imagine a revival atmosphere with the crowds growing daily. He challenges the faith of the leaders, he matches wits with those who try to out smart him. He delights the crowd. Meanwhile, the priests, the scribes and the entire religious leadership are growing more and more uneasy. This Jesus is challenging their power, that is obvious.

But, if Jesus does set off a spark and ignite resistance against the Romans, the entire Jewish community will suffer terribly. Here is how the Gospel of

John puts it: *So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.'* But one of them, *Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.'* John 11:47-50

So, as they plotted on how to kill Jesus, they could argue, they were acting for the ultimate good of the people. How often have leaders before and since used that argument!

Finally the day for the festival of the Passover comes. This festival was celebrated in homes with a ceremonial meal that recalled the chosen people's bitter slavery in Egypt 1300 years earlier. The meal celebrated God's mighty act of salvation that had freed them and led them to the promised land. According to Exodus chapter 12, death came to the first born in every household, except in those households whose door posts were marked with the blood of a lamb.

Jesus charges his disciples to make special plans to celebrate this Passover. It is very possible he's trying to keep the location hidden from enemies. At any rate they occupy a second floor room and they begin the ceremonial meal. The gospel of John tells us that Jesus begins this meal by washing the feet of his disciples, thereby doing a humble servant's job and giving them a clear command to love and serve one another.

In John's gospel Jesus uses the context of this meal to give a long sermon or farewell discourse. It begins in chapter 14 and goes through chapter 17.

You might want to read this very poetic, almost philosophical discourse as Jesus reflects not only upon his ministry but upon the ministry of the believers who will follow him.

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that Jesus uses the context of this meal to share what has come to be called the Lord's Supper or the Last Supper. Can you imagine the scene? The week has been full of conflicts, confrontations and jubilant crowds. The city is simmering with plots of revolution, frustrated hopes and desperate dreams. At the center of it all is Jesus, in an upper room with these 12 men who have been following him, learning from him, wondering about him for the past couple of years.

The meal begins with Jesus' announcement that one in the group will betray him. Impossible! Everyone glances at everyone, wondering who might be the one. Then Jesus begins to do something very ordinary. He takes the unleavened bread of the Passover and he gives thanks (the greek word for thanks is eucharisteo, from which comes the word eucharist). This is all very ordinary, a normal part of the Passover ritual.

But then Jesus does something extraordinary. He breaks the bread, gives it to his friends and says, "this is my body given for you." Then, he takes the cup of Passover wine and says "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:19-21)

Did these disciples understand what was going on? I can't help but think they were confused. After all, Jesus was sitting right in their midst. His flesh and blood were right there. This is another one of those moments that could only make some sense AFTER the death and resurrection. But looking back, the gospel writers declare that Jesus defined his own death in terms of sacrifice: in particular the sacrificial lamb of the Passover. A Life is given, blood shed so that others might be free.

After the meal they head out to the Mount of Olives, beyond the city gates to the east of the temple. According to Luke, Jesus has been spending his nights there during this week. In a garden called Gethsemane, Jesus wrestles with his God given mission. He prays that he might be spared the death that seems to be looming ahead of him, but above all prays that the Father's will be done. He asks Peter, James, and John, his inner circle of disciples to stand vigil and pray for and with him, but they fall sleep.

The dark and quiet garden is suddenly invaded by the chief priests and the Jewish elders, all led by Judas. By pre-arranged signal, Judas kisses Jesus and Jesus is grabbed by the crowd. One of his disciples tries to fight back and manages to cut off the ear of the high priest's slave. Jesus chastises him and reminds them all that those who take up the sword will perish by the sword. He declares that this moment too has been foretold by God's prophets and is part of his mission. They lead him away and as Matthew and Mark succinctly put it: "Then all the disciples deserted him and fled." So much for commitment!

All four gospels remind us that one of the twelve, Peter, follows this crowd through the dark and when they arrived at the house of Caiphas the high

priest, he hangs out in the cold courtyard trying to see what will happen. A few hours earlier in the coziness and safety of the upper room he had declared his willingness to fight and die for Jesus. Now, faced with that possibility, he denies that he even knows the man. He denies him not once, but three times.

Do you remember the Old Testament stories of David? Although he was recognized as one of Israel's great leaders, and one of God's favorites, the Bible does not hold back from showing us his dark side.

Peter later became a leader in the early Christian church but in keeping with the Biblical pattern, we are made to see his dark and weak side. The Bible keeps reminding us that God works through flawed and imperfect people to reach God's goal.

OK. Back to our story. In the middle of the night, at the house of the high priest, Jesus is tried for blasphemy: that is for doing and saying things that offend the holiness and power of God; in his case they charge him with claiming for himself the title of Messiah. Though witnesses contradict each other, and Jesus' answers are somewhat cryptic, they declare that he is indeed a blasphemer and deserves to die.

Jesus is bound, battered and spit upon. But there is one problem. The Jewish leaders do not have the authority to impose the death penalty on anyone.

That power belongs to the occupying Roman government.

So, once morning arrives, they parade the bound Jesus to the palace of Pilate the roman governor.

They want **him** to issue the death sentence. But Pilate is reluctant to get involved in what he sees as religious infighting. He sees that jealousy is the main motive for their hostility. By now it seems that the chief priest and the elders have mustered some more support and very possibly some of the crowd that hailed Jesus as messiah a few days earlier are now shouting for his death.

The gospel of Luke tells us that Pilate tries to avoid this Jesus by passing him over to Herod Antipas who had jurisdiction over the region of Galilee. Since Jesus was from Galilee, Pilate dumps the problem in to his lap. So now Jesus is dragged to Herod. Herod tries to get something out of him, tries to get him to perform some miracles, but Jesus remains mute and refuses to respond. A frustrated Herod sends him back to Pilate.

Pilate is now feeling cornered. He tries another angle. Every year during the festival of the Passover, the governor would grant a pardon to one criminal. He brings out Barabbas who'd committed murder during an uprising against the Romans and says, which one shall I free? Barabbas this murderer or Jesus the king of the Jews? By now the people have been whipped in to a frenzy and they ask for Barabbas to be free and they demand that Jesus be executed. They also play the political card. They declare that since this Jesus claims to be king he sets himself against the emperor. Then they throw out trump card: Hey, Pilate, whoever sets Jesus free is no friend of the emperor. Pilate can see where this is going. Though each gospel tells the story a bit differently, the bottom line is the same: Pilate issues the death warrant at the request of the religious authorities. Jesus is put to death by the civil and religious powers because ultimately he is a threat to both.

### **PART C**

Jesus is flogged, mocked and spit upon. The Gospels do not dwell on these actions nor present them in gruesome detail as some movies have done lately. The Gospel don't try to convince us that Jesus suffered more than any other person who was executed at the hands of the Roman government. What they do insist upon is that Jesus was an innocent sufferer.

Jesus is led out of the city under Roman guard accompanied by a crowd, some jeered and some wept. He is taken out about half a mile west of the temple to a place called Golgotha or the place of the skull. The details of the last few hours of Jesus' earthly life vary according to the four gospels. All of them agree that he was crucified, that is nailed to a cross which was the preferred Roman method of execution for those convicted of crimes against the state.

He was crucified between two other criminals, and he was mocked by the observers. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that he was placed on the cross at 9AM. At noon it became dark over the whole land and about 3PM Jesus died. All three tell us that the curtain of the temple was torn at the moment of his death. This curtain had separated the world from the holy of holies, the place of God's special presence. The barrier between God and the world had been ripped in two. The death of Jesus is presented as an event with global, even cosmic significance.

Each gospel writer tells us that Jesus spoke while on the cross. What he said however differs according to which Gospel you read. The Christian tradition has pulled them all together into the "seven last words of Christ".

I prefer to understand each of these phrases in the context of the gospel where it stands. For the gospel writer these words were important in his effort to promote the faith of the people in his community.

According to Mark, Jesus' last words were the agonizing cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:33) I see here God's chosen one entering into the darkest night of all, that sense of abandonment, for our sake. God now knows human pain at its deepest. I find comfort in that.

According to John, Jesus' last words are the almost serene and victorious: It is finished! (John 19:30) I see this as Jesus recognizing that his earthly mission for our sake was completed and he could surrender peacefully into God's hands. I find comfort and hope in that too.

I encourage you to read these accounts in all four gospels. Again remember they were all written after the resurrection. And for that reason, every detail is presented because the writer believes it bears witness to the good news.

Now we come to the resurrection. This is not the resuscitation of a dead body, nor is it the reincarnation of a spirit into a different body. Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth was executed on a cross, his corpse was laid

into a tomb on a Friday evening and on a Sunday morning, this Jesus emerged from the tomb with a life and a body that was new and eternal.

If we deny the resurrection of Jesus, we deny the heartbeat of Christianity.

Of course people have denied the resurrection from the beginning. The Bible tells of an early and persistent argument: *The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation,(the Saturday before Easter)) the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, ‘Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, “After three days I will rise again.” Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, “He has been raised from the dead”, and the last deception would be worse than the first.’ Matthew 27:62-65*

The gospel writers are insistent. No, his body was not stolen away. No, we did not conjure up a vision of Jesus out of our own broken hearts. Luke says, he sat down and ate some fish with us and everyone knows ghosts and visions don't eat!

Some have argued that the disciples simply BELIEVED so strongly in Jesus that they saw him fulfilling all expectations, even without any proof.

But, the fact is the resurrection of Jesus did not fit Jewish expectations at all. When the Jewish tradition talked about the coming of the Messiah it never expected the Messiah to die. The Messiah was going to wipe out the pagans, clean up the temple and bring God's kingdom to the world. Whenever they talked about the resurrection it was more as a symbol of the renewal of the entire nation. (Remember that story of dem bones, dem bones in Ezekiel?) Israel as a whole would be resurrected. That was the Jewish hope of the time.

But the gospel writers are insistent. Maybe it doesn't make sense. Maybe it doesn't fit with what we expected as Jews, but nevertheless, it is true: Jesus is alive and he is alive in a way goes beyond this earthly life. And what is more, now we are sure, Jesus IS the Christ, the anointed one, the one who is God with us.

All four Gospels tell us that this event happened on the Sunday after the crucifixion. The disciples are evidently still in hiding but a group of women (or one woman according to John) go to the tomb which was a small cave covered by a stone. The stone is rolled away and the body is gone. The stories have this much in common. The rest of the details differ according to

the information available to each gospel writer and the message he sought to proclaim.

One of the most intriguing endings is in Mark. Most scholars, and most translations of the Bible, recognize that Mark chapter 16 verse 8 is the original end of the gospel of Mark. *So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.* Is it really possible that Mark ended his gospel with these words? Obviously he knew more than he wrote down. Someone said something to someone, otherwise how would the good news have spread? Isn't it possible that Mark was writing to a community of believers that wondered if they dared to speak out, if they dared to tell the good news? Isn't it possible to see this ending as a challenge to the reader: are you going to be like these women or are you going to tell the story?

The Gospel of John, in the farewell discourses of Jesus, chapters 14 through 17, hint at what the resurrection means for the world. But generally speaking, the gospel writers don't spend a great deal of time telling us what the resurrection of Jesus MEANS. They suggest that it means victory and

the vindication of God's love over the world's evil. But it will be up to later believers to spell this out more clearly.

Matthew, Luke and John end with stories that look into the future. Like Mark they understand that when God raised Jesus from the dead, something shifted, something new happened between God and humans. Jesus, the new Israel has been resurrected and a new community has been created. The gospel writers only hint at this because they themselves are just now experiencing it.

But we catch glimpses: In the Gospel of John, the risen Jesus foresees a new community and says to a repentant and restored Peter, "Feed my sheep".

John 21:17

In Luke, the risen Jesus reminds his disciples: *'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem Luke 24:46*

And Matthew ends his gospel with a grand commission from the risen Lord: *And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and*

*teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'* Matthew 28:18-20

All of the gospels agree: The good news of Jesus does not end with the resurrection. Like them, we Christians say **it begins with the resurrection.**

We will explore what that means when we look at the book of Acts in our next session of Bible as Second Language.

### **SOME QUESTIONS TO PONDER:**

Read the words of Jesus on the cross in each of the gospels. Which ones speak particularly to you?

Read the gospel accounts to find out what happened to Judas. Why was his end different from Peter's?

What makes 'resurrection' so difficult to accept?

### **SOME WEBSITES FOR FURTHER STUDY**

<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtPassionSunday.htm>

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1794>

<http://www.drbilllong.com/Lectionary/Lk24.html>

[http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/11-1\\_Death/11-](http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/11-1_Death/11-1_Koester.pdf)

[1\\_Koester.pdf](http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/11-1_Death/11-1_Koester.pdf)