

THEISM

How Marvelous Are The Ways Of God!

Imagine that you had lived during the time of Jesus' ministry; that you were a Palestinian Jew from a Galilean city; and that it was your custom to go to Jerusalem every year to celebrate the Jewish Passover Festival. Imagine that you were in Jerusalem the year Jesus was crucified.

Having lived in Galilee you would probably have heard much about Jesus of Nazareth (Matthew 4:23-24). You may have even heard him teach personally, perhaps at the synagogue in Capernaum (Mark 1:21-22), or even seen one of his miracles, such as the feeding of five thousand people. You may have known of his growing fame, or that some people even wanted to make him king of the Jews (John 6:15).

Because you always came to Jerusalem for the Passover festival several days early in order that you might purify yourself, you would while there on this occasion, have heard stories circulating about Jesus. You may have heard about his having raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:43-44), and that the Jewish council requested that if people saw Jesus in Jerusalem for the Passover, they should report his presence to them (John 11:56-57). You may have heard how that when Jesus did come into Jerusalem, great crowds laid their coats and palm tree branches in his path and shouted "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (Mark 11:8-9; John 12:13) You may have even heard Jesus teach in the temple and observed that his teaching upset Jewish leaders (Matthew 21:23 – 22:46; Mark 11:27 – 12:34).

But you had come to celebrate the Passover, and that you did. Then, because several days would have been required to journey back home, you would have waited until after the Sabbath day to start. Meanwhile, some strange things happened the day after the Passover. About noon, everyone in Jerusalem was surprised when the sun failed to shine and the sky was darkened for about three hours (Matthew 27:45-46). When the Sabbath came, you rested. Then, very early on the morning after the Sabbath, an earthquake had startled you. As soon as possible, you had begun your homeward journey.

Many other travelers would have walked along the same road with you. As you fell into conversation with some of them, you may have learned that Jesus was crucified the day before the Sabbath and that about the time he died the veil in the temple had suddenly and mysteriously been torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38). And then someone may have told you that early that morning during the earthquake, graves were opened and that some people came out of their graves, walked through the city, and were seen by many (Matthew 27:52-53). As you continued walking, you might have wondered what all this meant. At any rate, you surely had many interesting things to tell your family and friends when you got home.

And now, in your imagination, change your identity. This time, imagine that you are a Hellenistic Jew, and that you have traveled from Rome, or some other home city, to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, which came just fifty days after the Passover. Imagine that a friend, who had been at the Passover when Jesus was crucified, had returned and told you some strange stories related to Jesus of Nazareth. This would probably not have been the first time you had heard of Jesus, a man whom many claimed to have worked miracles of healing (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Luke

9:6, 11) and whom many supposed to be a prophet (Matthew 14:5, 16:14; 21:11; Luke 24:19). You might have thought that nothing so exciting as what had happened at the Passover would happen at this Pentecostal gathering. If so, you would have been mistaken.

As you stood in the court of the temple on Pentecost morning, suddenly you heard the sound of a rushing mighty wind (Acts 2:2). Looking around, you saw no storm clouds, but you did see twelve men with what appeared to be cloven tongues of fire on their heads, standing calmly and speaking in different languages (Acts 2:3-4). Someone jested, saying the men were drunk, but that didn't make sense because it was mid-morning (Acts 2:15), too early to have become drunk! One of those twelve men claimed that what everyone saw and heard was the beginning of the fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy (Acts 2:16-21; Joel 2:28-32). He then claimed that God had raised this Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. The spokesman and the men who were with him all claimed to have seen Jesus alive after his resurrection (Acts 2:22-24, 32). He quoted scripture from David to prove that one of the characteristics of the Messiah was that he would be raised from the dead. All this, he said, proves that Jesus of Nazareth, whom Jewish leaders had crucified, was indeed the promised and long awaited Messiah (Acts 2:25-31). He said, "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

Imagine how you would have felt when you heard this message. When people realized what they had done they were pricked in their hearts. When they asked what they should do, they were told to repent and be immersed for the forgiveness of their sins (Acts 2:38). Had you been among the crowd on that particular day of Pentecost, would you have done that?

Assuming that you had obeyed that command, you would have been one among three thousand (Acts 2:41). While enjoying the association of like-minded believers, you would have stayed in Jerusalem longer than you had intended in order to obtain a better understanding of how you should live with expectations of life after death. Because you had not come with provisions to stay so long, resident believers in Jerusalem would have provided for your needs and those of others by selling some of their possessions, even lands and houses (Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-35). You would have experienced the love of God in action, working through your fellow believers. After some time, however, when persecution arose from Jewish leaders (Acts 8:1), you would have returned home to Rome, or some other city. As you started back home, you may have thought of the many friends and family members whom you wanted to tell this good news. You might also have reflected on the marvelous ways of God.

When God sent forth his son to live among the people, He sent him to teach the love of God not only in what he said but also by miracles of healing. He sent him to teach not only that all men are sinners in need of salvation but also that God has provided for that salvation to those who believe in Jesus as the promised Christ. After the fame of Jesus had spread abroad throughout the land, God gave his son to die on the cross to pay for the sins of humanity. Moreover, God did this at the most prominent times of the year – during the Passover and the Pentecost festivals – when the good news would most readily spread throughout the world. The printing press was not yet invented. No newspaper, magazine, radio, or television was available for broadcasting the good news, but God, by use of these two major Jewish festivals and personal word of mouth, broadcast the gospel to the world. How marvelous are the ways of God!