

## Prophecies of Easter

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Most people are familiar with the prophecies of the Old Testament which speak of the Lord's birth, but how many of us are aware that many of the details of Easter were also foretold in the Word? We should not be surprised, for the Old Testament in itself tells the story of the Lord's birth, His life, His temptations and victories. It tells also of His greatest and last temptation, the crucifixion, and His greatest victory, the resurrection. Most of these prophecies are deeply hidden in the Word, but there are some that, like the hands and face of a clothed person, are plain and clear. This morning we shall look at some of these prophecies and see their fulfilment.

Because Easter is the story of the people's rejection of the Lord, the first prophecies we must consider are those which speak of His rejection by the people of His own time. The clearest prophecy on this subject is given to us in the book of Isaiah: "He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him" (Isaiah 53:3).

Many people despised the Lord. The first indication that this prophecy would be fulfilled is given in the opening verses of the Gospel of John, where it is said that "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). This is confirmed in the actions of the Pharisees who watched the Lord with suspicion, and, when they were convinced that He had broken the commandments by healing people on the Sabbath day, they "went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him" (Mark 3:6).

When He preached in Nazareth, the people would not listen, they asked amongst themselves,

*"Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?" And they were offended at Him.... Now He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. And He marvelled because of their unbelief."*  
(Mark 6:3,5,6).

This rejection of the Lord continued throughout the course of His public ministry, and it reached its height on the day of His crucifixion.

Before that day dawned, however, the Lord allowed Himself to be put into the power of those who rejected Him. He began this with His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the day we celebrate as Palm Sunday. The prophecy concerning that day was given hundreds of years before the Lord's birth by the prophet Zechariah, who said, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9).

The Word quotes this prophecy when it describes that tumultuous day, and how the Lord, before entering Jerusalem sent His disciples to fetch a colt. As we read in the Gospel of Mark,

*Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their garments on it, and He sat on it. And many spread their garments on the road, and others cut down leafy branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Then those who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: "Hosanna! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" And Jesus went into Jerusalem and into the temple (Mark 11:7-11).*

In the days that followed the Lord was often in the temple at Jerusalem, and His enemies tried to trick Him into committing some blasphemy to make it possible to arrest Him. Yet the Lord knew what was in their hearts. He answered all their questions, but in such a way that they could not fault Him. He knew what they were trying to do and warned His disciples saying, "Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation" (Mark 12:38-40).

When it became obvious that the Lord could not be tricked, His enemies looked for another way to get rid of Him. They found one, as we are shown in the Gospel of Mark, when "Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Him to them. So when they heard it, they were glad, and promised to give him money. So he sought how he might conveniently betray Him" (Mark 14:10-11). This action was a fulfilment of a prophecy given in the Psalms, where it is said, "Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me" (Psalm 41:9). Even the detail of the betrayal is given in prophecy. For Zechariah wrote words that could have come directly from the mouth of Judas Iscariot himself, "Then I said to them, 'If it is agreeable to you, give me my wages; and if not, refrain.' So they weighed out for my wages thirty pieces of silver" (Zechariah 11:12).

Judas's betrayal came while the Lord was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, after the first Holy Supper. At that time, in the quiet of the evening,

*Judas, one of the twelve, with a great multitude with swords and clubs, came from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. Now His betrayer had given them a signal, saying, "Whomever I kiss, He is the One; take Him and lead Him away safely." And as soon as He had come, immediately he went up to Him and said to Him, "Rabbi, Rabbi!" and kissed Him. Then they laid their hands on Him and took Him (Mark 14:43-46).*

From that moment onward events progressed swiftly toward the Lord's crucifixion. There are many prophecies in the Old Testament that helped Him to prepare for this time. The Psalms tell us that "Fierce witnesses rise up; they ask me things that I do not know. They reward me evil for good, to the sorrow of my soul" (Psalm 35:11-12).

In fulfilment of these words, the Lord's trial before the High Priest, and the decision to condemn Him to death was based on the testimony of a false witness. The Gospel of Mark describes the event like this:

*And some rose up and bore false witness against Him, saying, "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.'" But not even then did their testimony agree. And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, saying, "Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?" But He kept silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "What further need do we have of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy! What do you think?" And they all condemned Him to be worthy of death (Mark 14:57-64).*

When He was deemed worthy of death, those who accused the Lord abused Him. Matthew describes those events in these words: "Then they spat in His face and beat Him; and others struck Him with the palms of their hands, saying, 'Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?'" (Matthew 26:67-68). The familiar parts of the story of Easter follow after this. The Lord was taken before Pontius Pilate, who, although he could find nothing wrong with the Lord, still delivered Him up to be crucified.

Many of the events which took place on the cross were also foretold in the pages of the Old Testament. Isaiah prophesied that the Lord would be crucified with criminals, saying that "He was numbered with the transgressors (53:12). When the Lord was nailed to the cross He was counted amongst those who had transgressed the law, for, as Mark says, "With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left" (Mark 15:27).

Psalm 22, which says many things about what happened to the Lord on the cross, describes how, having been nailed into place, He was mocked by the crowd. These verses could be the words from the Lord's own mouth, as He says, "All those who see Me laugh Me to scorn; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, 'He trusted in the Lord, let Him rescue Him; let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!'" (Psalm 22:7-8).

The actual events these words describe is given to us in the Gospel of Mark, where we read,

*And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, "Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!" Likewise the chief priests also, together with the scribes, mocked and said among themselves, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe." And those who were crucified with Him reviled Him. (Mark 15:29-32).*

Psalm 69 describes how when the Lord was thirsty on the cross, "for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink" (verse 21). Psalm 22 describes how the soldiers, "divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots" (verse 18).

Part of the tragic beauty of the story of Easter is that the Lord was still able, even in the midst of the tremendous cruelty being done to Him, to cry out forgiveness. Perhaps one of the most inspiring verses in the Word are the words of the Lord when He cried out, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). These words echo Psalm 109, verse 4, where it is said that "In return for my love they are my accusers, but I give myself to prayer."

Part of the cruelty of crucifixion was the way they broke the victim's bones, but in the Lord's case it was prophesied that "not one of them is broken" (Psalm 34:20). The fulfilment of this came about when they came to break the Lord's legs. We read in the Gospel of John:

*Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe. For these things were done that the Scripture should be fulfilled, "Not one of His bones shall be broken" (John 19:32-36).*

The story of the Lord's death on the cross would be of no importance if it were not for His resurrection. As the Lord said before, "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matthew 22:32). The Lord Himself was prepared for His resurrection, and He taught the disciples that He would rise again. The resurrection is mentioned twice in the Psalms, first when it is said, "For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:10-11). The second time is when it is said, "But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for He shall receive me. Selah" (Psalm 49:15). The fulfilment of these prophecies is shown many times, for after the Lord rose from the dead He showed Himself to Mary in the Garden, to the disciples in the locked room, and again beside the sea of Galilee.

These few examples of prophecies and how they came true teach us wonderful things about the Word. These prophecies are expressions of the Divine will, and as such they prepared the way for the Lord's life in this world. By allowing them to come true in His own life the Lord made it possible for the Divine will, which is the Divine itself, to be brought down to the very level we live on. And in doing this, the Lord made it possible for the entire human race to be saved from the very brink of spiritual destruction. The Heavenly Doctrine of the New Church tells us that unless the Lord had done this, not one single soul would have survived.

Amen.