



# MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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## WHAT IS YOUR FOX?

In the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta promising young men were taken from their homes at age seven and assigned to a barracks to begin their training as soldiers. One of the facts of barracks life was that soldiers were expected to forage for their own food; there were no mess halls. Another fact of life was that a soldier who was caught stealing or otherwise obtaining food would be disgraced, and possibly demoted to the status of *helot*—made a serf working to grow food rather than serving the state honorably. A story is told that a young Spartan had captured a fox, which he intended to be his next meal. Unfortunately, he heard some of the older boys coming. He knew that, at best, they would take his fox. At worst he would be disgraced. So he stuffed the fox inside his tunic as the older Spartans appeared. These fellows may have suspected that he had food, or they may have just been indulging in their normal baiting of younger boys. In either case, they stood talking to the young Spartan for a long time. He stood at attention in front of them, showing no emotion, until he fell dead at their feet. The fox under his tunic had eaten out his stomach and intestines as he stood talking. Like a good Spartan, he had expressed no pain as he was being eaten alive.

There are many people who are just like that Spartan youth. They express no pain, or in many cases feel no pain, as they are being eaten alive. What is their fox? It is called sin. The fox of sin comes in a variety of species and sizes. Some are cute as foxes; others are ugly as sin. All share one characteristic, sharp teeth that will kill you.

Not all foxes attack in the same way. Hatred, for instance, disguises its approach, attacking the person while it looks like it is attacking others. Those others get hurt as well, but not as much as the one doing the hating.

Fornication and adultery are closely related species of fox, and do serious damage. “Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.” (1 Cor 6:18) While fornication is a sin against one’s own body, its relative, adultery, has been known to damage families, communities, and even churches.

Samson once caught three hundred foxes and tied their tails together in pairs with a firebrand between them. “And when he had set the brands on fire, he let them go

into the standing grain of the Philistines.” (Jdg 15:5) We sometimes think Samson’s was a clever trick, but it is not so clever when we set fire to whole congregations by our foxes. “And the tongue is a fire: a world of iniquity among our members is the tongue, which defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the wheel of nature, and is set on fire by hell.” (Jas 3:6) When we tie together gossip and backbiting, slander and *lashon hara* (evil speech), we use foxes to destroy God’s crops.

The Spartan boy had a fox that ate his insides. We have that fox, too. It goes by the name of anger. Anger is a fox that eats us from the inside. Actually, anger can be a useful fox, but when it is held inside, it begins eating at its owner. This type of anger has its own subspecies, vengeance. “Avenge not yourselves, beloved, but give place unto the wrath of God.” (Rom 12:19) If “vengeance is a dish best served cold,” it is a dish composed of the server’s own intestines.

Many people try to make pets of foxes; we show a good face, but in the back yard we harbor our own pet sins. It is also hard to hide a fox for long. Just when you think you have it hidden, it raises its voice, to be heard by the whole neighborhood. Worse yet, foxes stink. Even if you silence your sin, it will raise a stench that attracts attention. Soon the neighbors are wondering, “what is that smell?” They begin to investigate and find your pet sin. Even if they don’t, the fox begins to stink, literally, “to high heaven.” God wants the pleasing odor of our prayers, not the stench of our foxes.

Not everybody keeps the same variety of fox. What is yours?

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# AND YOU SHALL KNOW

One of the characteristics of secret societies, and many religions, is that they are secret. Only a few select people are “in the know” about the organization. Sometimes this is to protect the activities of the organization, as with the mafia. Sometimes it is to restrict outside interference, as with, for example, the Masonic Lodge. At other times it is to protect the power or prestige of the leaders of the organization. Often that is the reason for some religions to be secretive. If everyone knew what the priests knew, the priesthood would have no power. If everyone knew how to interpret the sacred utterances, the priests could not manipulate their interpretations to keep themselves in power.

Throughout time, even to this day, there have been what are called “mystery religions.” While some of us religiously read Agatha Christie or Ngaio Marsh, that is not what is meant by a mystery religion. In these religions the higher you got in the hierarchy the more of the hidden secrets of the religion you were allowed to know. The word “mystery” has the meaning, here, of that which is

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hidden or secret. It is certain that the followers of Jim Jones in Guyana, David Koresh in Waco, or Marshall Applewhite of Heaven’s Gate were not granted the inside knowledge enjoyed (?) by those men. Otherwise they may not have stuck around to kill themselves.

The Gnostics of the first century were another such religion. Even their name implied that they had “knowledge” that others did not. At least five books of the New Testament were written to counter the idea that some people could have certain knowledge that was not afforded to others. Judaism and Christianity are based on the idea that everyone, even those not in the religion, may have complete knowledge. That is, the knowledge is readily available to those who will make the effort to obtain it. It is not hidden, but revealed. God says and does things, “that you may know.”

## That I am the Lord

Although the most familiar phrase from the book of Ezekiel may be “son of man,” the theme of the book, repeated over twenty times, is that God does what he does “that you may know that I am the Lord.” False prophecy was to end in the land for this reason. The Babylonians would attack Judah solely for this reason. Jerusalem would be burned and the Temple destroyed “that you may know that I am the Lord your God.” Even other nations would be similarly brought down so that Judah could have this knowledge. God did not just use destruction for this purpose, either. The spiritually dead would be raised, the people would return to Jerusalem, the nation would again be blessed with prosperity “that you may know that I am the Lord.”

Why did Ezekiel have to tell the people that this was the reason God was doing what he did? After all, God had all along told his people that his purpose in everything was that they might know him.

And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. (Ex 6:7)

Even under the wicked King Ahab, God delivered the northern tribes of Israel from the Syrian army. This was done not because Ahab was righteous, but rather to try to teach him a lesson.

And there came a man of God, and spake unto the king of Israel, and said, Thus saith the Lord, Because the Syrians have said, the Lord is God of the hills, but he is not God of the valleys, therefore will I deliver all this great multitude into thine hand, and ye shall know that I am the Lord. (1 Kings 20:28)

Joel was possibly one of the earliest of the so-called “minor prophets.” (Or possibly one of the later pre-captivity prophets.) He had predicted the destruction of Israel, either through a locust swarm or through an army which he portrayed as a locust storm. He promised that, if the people would turn back to God, God would turn back to them and restore them to prosperity. “And ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, that hath dealt wondrously with you: and my people shall never be ashamed.”<sup>27</sup> And ye shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God, and none else: and my people shall never be ashamed.” (Joel 2:26-27) Not only would God show them that he was Lord, but that he dwelt among them.

In spite of all of these promises, the people ignored God's word. They replaced God with non-gods, or at least gave the idols the same status as God. They oppressed widows and orphans and let money affect their judgements. In essence, they refused to listen to God.

Is this generation any different? The psalmist said, "The fool has said in his heart there is no God." (Ps 14:1) Paul spoke of all generations when he said, "Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened." (Rom 1:21) He pinpoints the problem. When we exalt ourselves over God, when we make ourselves to be gods, when we become vain, then we refuse to hear, acknowledge, or thank God. The past couple of centuries have been characterized by humanistic movements, exalting man as the pinnacle of creation or evolution. No wonder it is hard to convince men of the truth of the Bible. They want no truth higher than themselves. The danger, though, is that God will do something like he did to Israel, so that "ye may know that I am the Lord."

## Jesus promised knowledge

Jesus came to reveal God to man, and man to God. Therefore, he promised knowledge. Admittedly, he taught in parables so that those who chose not to understand would not do so. Even so, he said that those who would choose to listen could know the meanings of the parables. He also promised knowledge in other areas.

One such area was that we will know between good and evil that men do. Adam and Eve got in trouble for eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Jesus, on the other hand, says that we must now make a clear distinction, and tells us how. "Ye shall know them by their fruits." (Matt 7:16, 20) This is a knowledge that is available to all, not just the disciples of Christ. Who, after all, is quicker to judge a Christian who does wrong than one who will not follow Christ? If the world judges us by our fruit, should we not also do so, both with those without and within? In fact, we probably have a greater responsibility to know between good and evil actions done by our own spiritual brothers. "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." (Rom 16:17) We will know between good and evil, and must react to that knowledge.

Jesus made a related promise about our knowledge. "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." (Jn 8:32) This promise was not just to a few special followers, but to all his disciples. Jesus promised that all could know the truth, not just the apostles, the priests, the hierarchy. That is a comfort to those of us who are not among the spiritual "upper crust." No matter how short a time you have been following

Christ, no matter who you know or don't know, you can know all the truth. The real comfort therein is that all, not just a few, will be free. All may live with God for eternity.

## We are not reprobate

Paul mentions another area in which we may have knowledge. He tells the Corinthians that they can know of his, and their, salvation.

Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobate? But I trust that ye shall know that we are not reprobate. (2 Corinthians 13:5-6; mistranslated in the King James Version with the word "reprobates.")

Reprobate is a term from metallurgy. It means "failing to pass a test." It was originally used for metals that were not pure enough for use, like impure gold or silver. Here Paul has told the Corinthians to test their own purity of faith. They will know their faith is pure, he continues, if they "do no evil," and do "that which is honest."

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# Jesus came to reveal God to man, and man to God.

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There are religions, and even some Christian denominations, that teach that individuals can not know until after death whether they are saved or not. Since their doctrines teach that man is saved merely by a whim of God regardless of what he does on earth, they really have no hope. Paul disagrees with that doctrine. He says we can test ourselves and know for sure that we are pure, that Jesus Christ is in us. Each of us can have that knowledge, not just a few.

God has revealed himself to us. He is not hidden. He is knowable. In fact, he is eager for us to know him. God is not some "old man in the sky." He does not live on some inaccessible mountaintop in Greece or a hall of heroes that can only be reached by crossing a rainbow. He wants to live among, even in, his people. He even sent his own and only son to be one of us so he could know us better.

Every one of God's people can know of him, and know him. Only his priests have the important knowledge, but each of his followers is a priest. Christianity is not a classic mystery religion. The only real mystery is why so many who could know him choose not to.

# ***AS IF WE WERE THERE***

The Passover Haggadah, the “telling” of the Passover story each year, quotes the passage in the Talmud that says to retell the story every year as if the events of the story happened to those present. Thus the readers use the words “we” and “us” rather than “they” and “them” in recounting the story. This makes the story fresh and personal each year. Why do this, and what can we get out of this practice?

It is very easy to make the Bible a book of ancient history. These events happened to others thousands of years ago. What have they to do with us today? We become like the “wicked child” of the four children mentioned at the *seder*, who asks, “What does this mean to you?” He is called wicked because he pictures himself outside of history and separates himself from the people of the book. These events don’t effect me. They have no meaning to me. The message is not for me.

Many, many Christians take that attitude toward the events of the Torah. “Why study the Old Testament? What is in it for me?” That was the same attitude of some of the Jewish leaders that talked to Jesus. “They answered him, We be Abraham’s seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free?” (John 8:33) Ignoring their subservience to Rome, they even forgot their history. They did not approach Passover as if they had been there. Otherwise they could never forget that they were slaves in Egypt, not to mention Babylon, Persia, and Greece.

We Christians, some of whom participate, at least in part, in a Passover *seder* every week, should also remember the events of Passovers past as if we had been there. Obviously we should remember the events of a Passover a mere two thousand years ago as

if we had been there. We are told that if we eat and drink “not discerning the Lord’s body,” then we are eating “unworthily.” (1 Corinthians 11:29) That word, “discerning,” means to make a distinction of the Lord’s body, to see it clearly. Paul says, then, that if we don’t consider ourselves as if we were truly at the cross then we are not in a worthy attitude to eat of our Passover lamb, Jesus the Messiah.

Even Christians, though, should picture themselves at that earlier, original Passover as well. Why? For one of the same reasons that we should picture ourselves at the cross. We need to understand that, even if our ancestors were not part of that Passover, we were in slavery and God took us out “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” What did Jesus answer to those men who said they had never been enslaved? Did he remind them of Egypt, or of Babylon? No. He told them, “Whoever commits sin is the servant of sin.” That means every one of us was in bondage in Egypt. We were all enslaved with no hope of redemption. But God gave us more than hope; he gave us freedom. The same God who freed Israel from Egypt and Babylon “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” has not had his arm shortened, nor his hand weakened. The Pharaoh of the exodus and Belshazzar were mere men, albeit powerful men. God is stronger than men, and God is stronger than man’s greatest enemy.

“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor 15:55-57)

*(Passover begins April 6, 2004)*

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