



# MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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## IT'S A MYSTERY

Like many people, I am a fan of mysteries. There must be many of us, because the longest running play in history is a mystery by Agatha Christie, *The Mousetrap*. Albuquerque is home to one of the most popular mystery writers, Tony Hillerman. The mystery section in the bookstores is always popular, and well stocked. The Bible has some mysteries, too. Unlike the books of Ngaio Marsh or Faye Kellerman, though, we don't always get answers to these mysteries. They are not murders, but little nagging questions to which we may never know the answer. As it is fun when reading a whodunit to try to guess the solution, even if you are usually wrong, so it is sometimes intriguing to try to understand some of these mysteries.

The one that stands out in my mind is: How could Moses say that he was "slow of speech, and of a slow tongue" (Ex 4:10) and then make the grand speech that is the book of Deuteronomy? That is not an example of a slow tongue, when it appears to have been an oration of a single day. There are several possible solutions. Was Moses lying to God, when God called him? Was he just seeking an excuse when he could really speak well? Or did God heal his tongue, like he did with Isaiah (Isa 6:5-8)? Those are the two best known possibilities. There are others as well. Moses was probably raised bilingual, nursed by his Hebrew mother in the Egyptian palace. Perhaps he did not feel competent in either language. Moreover, he had been living as a Midianite for forty years. So now he is probably trilingual, but has not spoken his birth tongues for many years. Is he telling God that he is not comfortable that he would be able to communicate in either Egyptian or Hebrew after all this time? Is the "slowness" of tongue because he would have to remember words he has not thought about for half a lifetime? Was Midianite like American Southern, a slow, drawled language while Egyptian was spoken faster? (It took me years to fully understand what my Iowa/Arizona raised wife was saying; I always had to tell her to slow down.) It is not certain what made the difference in the subsequent forty years. Maybe God had a hand in it. Maybe living with the Israelites made a difference. Or maybe he really was just making excuses. Whatever happened, as the line

from *Fiddler on the Roof* says, "for a man of slow tongue he sure talked a lot." What made the difference? It's a mystery.

Another mystery. Why did Noah wait so long to leave the ark? Genesis 8 says that he sent out a dove, which brought back an olive leaf. A week later he sent her out again and she did not come back, so he knew the waters had gone down. A month and a half later he opens the ark and sees that the ground is dry. A day short of two months later he is still in the ark. God has to order him to leave (Gen 8:15-19). Why did he wait so long? Why did he not leave on his own, but wait to be ordered off the boat? Human nature offers us several options. Noah had lived for a year on this ark. It had become home. Why should he leave? And how did he know if God might not suddenly send another flood? Or, since God had ordered him onto the ark, was he just waiting for God to countermand the order? That is, after all, the Navy way, and he was the original sailor. Noah had become the ultimate animal husbandman. Was he spending all that time getting the animals ready to leave? Or did it take that long to convince the cows to leave their stalls, or get the donkeys to decide to do anything? Did Mrs. Noah tell him they couldn't leave until they had the ark spotless; she wasn't going to leave it in that condition for the next tenant? Why did he wait so long? It's a mystery.

God doesn't answer these questions. They have nothing to do with the main story. The answers are pure speculation, and you may come up with possibilities I never thought about. Still, such questions pop up. Sometimes it is just fun to speculate, knowing the answer really doesn't matter at all. Why? Because it is a mystery.

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# ***BASEBALL IS LIFE***

It is professional baseball season in America again. Some of us live by the motto: Baseball is not *like* life; Baseball *is* life. It is even worse for those of us who are lifelong fans of the Chicago Cubs. Every year we suffer through promising victory to crushing defeat. (One psychologist says that Chicago Cubs fans are masochists at heart.) Some of us who are baseball fanatics know that much of our sporting life is also played out in the Bible. After all, baseball is supposedly the first sport mentioned in the Bible. (Genesis 1:1 says that “in the big inning” God created.)

## **You don't always get what you want**

Chicago Cubs fans have been waiting for a century for their team to win a World Series. They have been waiting over half that time just to see their team play a World Series game. We are intimately aware that God doesn't always give you everything you want. Sometimes he gives you what you need even though it is the opposite of what you want.

Baseball general managers go into each season with a list of players they would like to get on their team. Sometimes they get most of them; other times they seem

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We have choices. Do I walk into sin, or run from it? Do I take a walk, or hit into a double play?

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to get none. After all, other teams are looking at the same players. Sometimes other people's choices affect what happens. That is why good people die at the hands of a drunk driver. And sometimes, but we never know exactly when, things happen just because that is the way God wants them to happen. In life, as in baseball, we cannot always have what we want. After all, every team wants to win every game every time, but somebody has to lose.

Paul learned this lesson. Sometimes God doesn't answer prayers the way we want in order to teach us an important lesson (like grace, or like patience).

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought

the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (2 Cor 12:7-9)

## **We make our own choices**

Professional baseball teams have a third-base coach. It is this man's job to control the base-runners and the batters. Each team has a set of signs that this man reveals to his players to tell them what to do. There may be a sign for a bunt, or a hit-and-run. Another sign might be for the batter not to swing at the pitch. Other signs tell a runner to try to steal a base, or to refrain from trying to steal. An important sign is to tell the runner on second who is heading for third base whether to stop or keep going. It is a serious mistake to “run through a stop sign,” even if you score by doing so. It is almost as serious to stop when the coach is waving you toward home plate. Every player on the team at bat must be aware of the third-base coach, and what he is signaling.

Even though this man is the brain of the team when they are batting, sometimes players disregard his signals. They make their own choices. On rare occasions the coach may give them a “green light” to do whatever they think the circumstances warrant. In such cases, they must make their own decision to swing, or steal, or not. Sometimes a player makes his own decision, even though the coach is telling him to do something. More often than not, when he does so he suffers. If the coach signs not to steal, and he chooses to run anyway, he may get caught stealing. If he ignores a bunt signal, he may cause someone else to be thrown out. In the baseball world, that may result in being fired or paying a fine. In God's world that is called sin, and brings its own punishment.

We all have choices to make. Do I walk into sin, or do I run from it? Do I take a walk, or do I hit into a double play? Sometimes we make the right choices; sometimes we choose wrongly. “But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.” (Jas 1:14-15) “And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.” (Josh 24:15)

We have choices to make. Do I follow God, or do I follow my own desires? Do I serve money, or do I serve

God? Who is the master in my life? The question is whether we pay attention to the coach (God) or choose to ignore his signs. Some people see the Bible as a rule book. Those of a less legalistic bent see it more as God's signs. In either case, when we ignore God's word, we are liable to punishment.

## Nobody's perfect

It has been said that baseball is the only undertaking in life where you are considered good if you are successful one third of the time. A .333 batting average, which is very good, means that the batter was successful in not hitting the ball to someone only one time in every three at-bats. Not only is nobody perfect, nobody comes close.

A "perfect game" for a pitcher is one in which no batter gets to first base. It is so rare that it has only happened once in World Series history, and few times in the regular season. But even a perfect game is defined in such a way that a pitcher does not have to be perfect. He is allowed to throw some really bad pitches, as long as the batter does not successfully get a hit off of one of them. Even when a pitcher is perfect, he isn't perfect.

Left on our own, we are certainly not perfect before God. "So death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." (Rom 5:12) If it were possible for a man to be perfect, then Christ would not have had to die. If any other man had been able to live without sin, God could have used him as the perfect sacrifice, and saved his own son from death.

We are not perfect, but like Don Larsen (who pitched a perfect game), we can be considered perfect. With all our faults, we can still be seen as sinless. That is because we are not left on our own. Jesus died on the cross, the perfect sacrifice, that we may be made perfect.

Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)

## No time limit

Baseball is the only major sport that is played without a clock. There is no time limit on a game. It normally continues until nine innings are completed, no matter how long that may take. Nevertheless, a pitcher knows there is a good chance he won't complete the game. He may last a short time or long. Still, he gives what he can to the game while he is in it.

We, likewise, don't know when we will be pulled from the game. "For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away."

(Jas 4:14) We will likely not see the end of our game. That is not an excuse for giving up. God still expects us to play to the utmost of our ability. "But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." (Heb 3:13) Even though the game has no known time limit, we know our limit is soon to come.

## We are a team

Every person in a nine-man lineup has a different job. The lead-off hitter is someone who can get on base frequently. The "clean-up" man (third or fourth in the batting order) is someone who may hit a home run. The number eight hitter (except in the "league that cheats"—the American League) should be someone who is less likely to get an out, thus ensuring the pitcher bats in that inning rather than leading off the next. Each batter has his own job. A pitcher does not normally hit home runs, but is often a good bunter. A power hitter is not expected to

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sacrifice. If everyone swung for the fence nobody would be on base to run up the score.

We know that Paul was a fan of Olympic sports. He would also have understood baseball.

For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body. (1 Cor 12:14-20)

Christ's church is a team. We each have a different function, but that is what makes the church work. We are all working toward one goal. "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." (Phil 3:14) Because we are God's team we will gain the victory. Oh, that the Chicago Cubs should be so blessed.

# *I'M SO CONFUSED*

Logic would say that Easter would fall on the first Sunday after the first day of Passover, or the Sunday during Passover week. After all, the gospels tell us that Jesus was crucified on or about Passover, and that he rose on the Sunday of Passover week. This year (2008) Easter fell on March 23<sup>rd</sup>. So why is Passover not until sundown on April 19<sup>th</sup>? Why almost a month discrepancy between the two supposedly related events? (To complicate the issue, Eastern Orthodox Easter is April 27 in 2008.)

The discrepancy is related to the formula for calculating Easter and to the nature of the Jewish calendar. Easter, according to the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, should never fall on the first day of Passover. By this time, the Gentile world had gained priority over the Jewish membership of the church. In an apparent effort to assimilate Jewish Christians into the Gentile Church, they made sure that the two dates would never coincide. In a compromise between the Eastern (Byzantine/Syrian) and Western (Roman) factions, the date for Easter was set roughly as the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. Thus the date would travel (a moveable feast), but could never be on Passover, which always begins on a full moon.

Both the Eastern and Western branches of the church followed this formula, even after the Eastern branch excommunicated the Roman Church in 1054. When Pope Gregory instituted the Gregorian calendar in 1582, the Eastern Orthodox Churches continued to follow the Julian calendar. Thus about a fourth of the time both Easters fall on the same day. Otherwise, there is a one, four, or five week difference.

But why is Passover so much later this year than Roman Easter? The Julian and Gregorian

calendars are solar calendars. They base their dates on the sun. The Jewish calendar is a lunar-solar calendar, and primarily lunar. The months of the Jewish calendar begin with the new moon. "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath." (Col 2:16) Since a lunar month is just over 29 days, Jewish months are always 29 or 30 days long. That means that there are almost 12 ½ lunar months in a solar year. But Passover must always be in the spring. Left to itself, the Jewish calendar would have Passover earlier every year, eventually going through all four seasons. So every second or third year (in a pattern that coincides, incidentally with the major musical scale) has an additional leap-month, called Adar I, just before the month of Adar, which in such a year becomes Adar II. This ensures that Passover does not wander into winter.

This year happens to be a year in which the leap-month is added. Since Adar I was added to the Jewish calendar this year, Roman (Western) Easter actually occurred before Purim, almost a month before Passover.

Why, you may ask, is any of this important? I'll tell you; I don't know. Every indication from the earliest writings of the Christian church is that Christians celebrated the resurrection every Sunday. (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2) Thus "Easter" is an artificial celebration added many years later. Paul still celebrated Passover. (Acts 18:51; 1 Cor 5:8) Whether a Christian celebrates Passover or not is of small importance. What is important is that the final Passover lamb has been sacrificed, in the person of Jesus. That is what Christians celebrate. That is what we should celebrate every day of the year.

Timothy J. O'Hearn  
737 Monell Dr NE  
Albuquerque NM 87123