

# 1. Pascha

It was the Thursday afternoon before Easter. Teacher William of the fifth grade of the Christian Primary School ‘The Cornerstone’ thought it would be a good idea to use this afternoon to discuss what exactly Christians celebrate during the coming long weekend. That is why he asked his class: “Why is tomorrow a holiday?”

“Because it is Good Friday”, Sophie answered almost immediately. “Tomorrow is indeed a Friday”, responded teacher William, “but why is this Friday called ‘good’?” There was a long silence.

“What happened about two thousand years ago near Jerusalem on this Good Friday?”, asked teacher William to help his students on their way. Sophie knew that: “Then the Lord Jesus was crucified”, she answered. “But that is *not* good at all”, Leon responded spontaneously. Teacher Willem was very pleased with this reaction, and therefore turned a blind eye to the fact that Leon had not raised his hand first. The teacher looked attentively at his students, to see who was able to see through this paradox. That turned out to be Jesse: “Jesus had to die as a sacrifice for our sins, so that all people on earth could be saved from evil.” Not only were his classmates impressed by this answer, as also teacher William could hardly believe his ears. He couldn’t have put it better himself.

Jesse raised his hand. “Do you want to ask something, Jesse?”, said the teacher. “Indeed, Sir,” Jesse replied. “Go ahead,” said teacher William.

Jesse began as follows: “When Jesus was the same age as I am now – namely 12 years old – he was allowed to come along for the first time to the celebration of Easter in Jerusalem. We now celebrate at Easter that Jesus rose from the dead. But what did Jesus himself celebrate at Easter?”

Teacher William thought that this was a good question, which he immediately passed on to the other students. “Who knows this?”, he asked. Deborah knew this, because her parents had Jewish friends. She had once eaten a large round cracker at those people’s house. Deborah had simply put cheese on it. This flat bread is called ‘matzah’, if she had remembered it correctly. She answered: “Jesus celebrated the Jewish Easter. I believe it is called Pesach.” Jesse immediately raised his hand again. When he was allowed to speak, he asked: “But what do the Jews celebrate during Pesach?”

The teacher also passed this follow-up question on to the class, but no one knew. So he gave the answer himself: “The Jews celebrate at Pesach that their slavery in Egypt came to an end a long time ago. But it was only after the tenth plague of God that the evil Pharaoh really gave in and let the people of God go free.” Satisfied with his answer, he looked at Jesse, expecting him to be impressed by his teacher’s knowledge. Teacher William saw instead that Jesse had raised his hand again.

“Yes, Jesse?”, he said with some reluctance. Jesse began as follows: “Yet there is something I do not understand, Sir. In the twelfth chapter of the book of Exodus we read that the people of God put the blood of the Pesach offering on their doorposts, so that the Angel of Death would not enter through those doors that night. But just as the 12-year-old Jesus could not have celebrated his own resurrection on Easter, so the slave people in Egypt could not have celebrated their own liberation on Pesach. Therefore I do not understand what the Jews in Egypt would have celebrated during the Pesach before the Exodus?”

Teacher William had to think about that for a moment. To be honest, he had never thought about it before. But suddenly, fortunately, the answer came to him. He said: “That evening, the Jewish slaves were already celebrating that they would be allowed to leave the land of Egypt the next day, after all the Egyptian firstborn would be killed that night.”

“But, Sir,” Jesse responded immediately, who in his enthusiasm had completely forgotten to raise his hand first, “after every plague so far, the heart of the Pharaoh became hardened, and he suddenly did *not* let the people of God go after all. How could the Jewish slaves have known in advance that the Pharaoh would keep his word after this tenth plague? Perhaps 12 plagues were needed for that, as many as the number of sons of Jacob, from whom the 12 tribes of Israel originated. Who knows?”

Teacher William sat up. He had the uncomfortable feeling that the tables had turned. He, a highly educated man of 48 years old, was questioned by a 12-year-old boy. What was happening here?! He took a deep breath and said: “Dear Jesse, the plagues were getting worse and worse. The tenth plague is death. There is nothing worse than death. That is why the people of God knew that Pharaoh would let them go after the tenth plague.” Somewhat relieved, and even a little proud of himself, the teacher looked around the class, to look at Jesse last.

But Jesse was still not satisfied. He raised his hand again. “Yes, Jesse?”, said teacher William with a deep sigh. “What does the name ‘Pesach’ mean, Sir?”, Jesse asked. Fortunately, teacher William knew that immediately. He answered: “This Hebrew word means ‘skipping’, because during their exodus the people of God skipped over the Red Sea, by walking across the bottom of it, with a wall of water on either side.” As he looked around the class with a smug look, his face suddenly turned bright red. He looked at Jesse, who had asked him this trick question, in alarm. Jesse looked back with compassion. He didn’t want to make it difficult for his teacher at all. He just wanted to understand what the Bible says, because he felt that it was very important to know this.

As his classmates looked at him questioningly, because of their teacher’s red face, Jesse said to them: “On the eve of the tenth plague, the Jewish slaves could not possibly have known that they would be going to skip over the Red Sea on foot during their exodus. Yet they already celebrated the Feast of the Skipping that evening, since that is

indeed the meaning of the name ‘Pesach’. That is why I asked our teacher what this name means.” But even after this brief explanation, his classmates continued to look at Jesse questioningly.

Now that the roles had been reversed, it seemed to teacher William a better idea to question Jesse. He said: “You have obviously thought about it well, Jesse. What do you think was the first and therefore original meaning of the Feast of Pesach that we now call Easter?”

Jesse asked: “Can I stand in front of the class to tell it?” The teacher allowed it. While the teacher sat down on Jesse’s chair, Jesse walked forward. He began his explanation as follows: “The name ‘Pesach’, or actually ‘Pascha’, is first encountered in the twelfth chapter of Exodus. It not only describes *what* the Jewish slave people had to do before the night of the tenth plague, but also *when*. This Pesach had to be celebrated from sunset on the day of the full moon of the first month of the sunyear, with this sunyear beginning in spring. This is therefore a different beginning than that of our current calendar year on January 1<sup>st</sup>.”

“But what does this have to do with ‘skipping over’, Jesse?”, Sophie wanted to know. “First raise your hand”, said teacher William correctively. Jesse replied: “From the beginning of winter, the days become a little longer, and the nights a little shorter. But only from the beginning of spring is there more light than darkness in a natural day of 24 hours. We can then say that the light has skipped over the darkness. That is therefore the first and original reason for the celebration of the Feast of Skipping Over”, concluded Jesse.

Teacher William could not find a word to say. However, this explanation sounded quite pagan to him. What was the best way to respond? Suddenly it occurred to him that Muslims always pray towards the East, and that Easter also refers to the East. For Muslims this symbolizes Mecca, and for Jews and Christians it must be Jerusalem, he reasoned. That is why he asked Jesse: “Do you know why this feast is called ‘Easter’, Jesse?” However, he did not get the answer he expected.

Jesse replied: “We also call it ‘Passover’, which indicates that the amount of light in a day then has *passed over* the amount of darkness in a 24-hour period.” Teacher William was at a loss for a moment. That is why Jesse continued: “I am very glad that you started discussing the meaning of Easter this afternoon, Sir. I have many more questions, for example about those flatbreads that the Jews eat then. However, I would prefer to just start at the beginning, and discuss all the chapters of both Genesis and Exodus one by one here in class. In order to take enough time for that, I propose that we come to school tomorrow, so on Good Friday, as well as on this Saturday, and on the Sunday of Easter, to discuss this together.”

Not only did his fellow students think that Jesse had gone crazy, teacher William thought so too. But before anyone could react, Jesse said: “Of course I don’t really mean that. I just wondered how it must have gone when Jesus was allowed to go to the celebration of the Passover in Jerusalem for the first time? He had stayed behind after the celebration, without first asking permission. Then we read in Luke 2 verse 46: ‘And it came to pass after three days that they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both hearing them and questioning them.’ This is what I have tried to imitate in our class this afternoon. That is why I am now standing in front of the class, just as the 12-year-old Jesus was there in the center of attention. Only I am just standing here for a few minutes, and while Jesus was there for three days in the center of attention, although he probably slept at night, as well as eating and drinking something in between, and of course he also went to the toilet now and then.” Jesse paused for a moment. “May I ask you something, Sir?”, he continued.

Teacher William nodded. “How did you feel when I asked you that trick question?” Teacher William did not know whether he should be honest about his shame about himself, or whether he should give a didactically sound response as a teacher. He chose the latter: “I did not think it was a trick question at all, Jesse. It was actually a very good question, through which we learned even more about Easter.” “But

then your face suddenly turned very red,” Jesse responded. Teacher William regretted that he had not answered honestly right away: “I suddenly realized that the answer I had given could not be correct, and I was ashamed of that”, teacher William revealed. “That is exactly what I mean”, Jesse continued. “Jesus was visiting the temple of the capital, where he entered into a conversation with the highest priests of the country. He may also have asked about the very first Pesach as described in Exodus 12. How much would his questions have embarrassed these widely respected high priests? And if that was indeed the case, would they have come back to that young boy the next day to be questioned further? And the day after that? And the day after that again?”

Most of the children sat there listening with their mouths open to what Jesse was saying. They didn't know Jesse like this at all. Teacher William hadn't seen this coming either. But Jesse wasn't done yet.

“And do you know what Jesus said to his mother, after she had finally found him after days of desperate searching?” Jesse continued immediately, because he didn't expect an answer to this rhetorical question: “Jesus answered his mother as follows: ‘Why is it that you seek me? Do you not know that it is necessary for me to be in what is of my father?’ So Jesus doesn't just say this to his mother, but also to her husband Joseph. In doing so, Jesus had also emphasized that Joseph is not his real father. All in all, a very cheeky reply, if you ask me. But perhaps 12-year-old Jesus felt like a big shot because he had spent three days teaching the highest priests of Judaism about the texts of the Old Testament.”

Now Jesse really went too far, thought teacher William. At a Christian primary school, Jesus is not mocked, certainly not on the day before the commemoration of His crucifixion. He therefore quickly put an end to Jesse's spontaneous lecture. “Thank you, Jesse”, he said. “You can go back to your chair now.”

As Jesse walked back, Leon raised his hand. After the teacher allowed him to speak, he asked Jesse: “How come you know so much about this?” Jesse answered: “Last night a good friend of my father was visiting, and he asked my father these questions, and many more. I sat with them, and sometimes got a question too. I found it so fascinating that I thought about it for quite a while in bed afterwards. And after I got up this morning, the first thing I did was to read Exodus 12 and Luke 2 very carefully. That man also said, when he left, just before I had to go to bed: ‘I have been studying the Bible intensively for almost ten years, have already translated about 10% of the Bible word for word, and written out its meaning verse by verse, but not one church community has asked me to give a presentation, while the highest Pharisees at the time let themselves be questioned for three days in a row by a 12-year-old boy. I find this very hard to believe.’ These words made such a deep impression on me that I had to seize my chance this afternoon to see if that good friend of my father had a point.”

Whether that was true, teacher William did not know, but most of Jesse’s classmates thought so.

*And you? What do you think?*