

Paschal Mystery webpage (printable)

The Paschal Mystery occurs when 1) something dies and 2) later receives a new life that 3) is finally followed by the gift of a new spirit to go with that new life.

This mystery threads its way through the accounts of Adam/Eve, Noah, Abram/Sarai, the Exodus, the fall and rebuilding of Jerusalem, and all the way to the New Testament story of Jesus. The word "Paschal" originates from the "passing over" in Exodus at the culmination of the 10th plague when God freed his people from Egyptian slavery and launched their new life as a nation. And the word "mystery" indicates a religious truth that we know only by revelation and cannot fully understand through reason or science.

The Paschal Mystery¹ framework derives from the 5 elements in the Easter season:

- Good Friday – Jesus suffered and died.
- Easter Sunday – Jesus received new life.
- 40 Days – Jesus finished his work on this earth, and prepared his disciples for a new future. The disciples mourned the loss of their previous hopes and prepared for a new reality.
- Ascension – The disciples let their past years with Jesus bless them as he bid them "farewell" in the body.
- Pentecost – The disciples received a new Spirit to go with their new life.

In life, we all suffer our own interim "deaths," such as:

The death of our youth. There was a time when I could play competitive, physical sports. There was the discouraging transition to the more passive sport of golf. Then there was the heart attack, after which I traded in my "carry bag" for a cart until arthritis in my left wrist ended my golf forever. Now I play pickleball with a few men my age, and every month one of us seems to come up lame and needs a few weeks recuperation. My youth died in stages. Now I am alive as a 72-year-old, not as a 20-year-old. My Good Friday has occurred; my youth died many times. My resurrection, too, has happened, many times.

With each death of my youth, I have a choice. I can grieve and let go of my lost youth, but if I only do that I may become a fearful and frustrated senior citizen. Or I can let my youth ascend. God helps me say, "It was good to be 20, good to be 30, but now it's time to be 72." Some of the most soul-satisfied people in the world are 72, and some of the most forlorn people in the world are 72. The difference is not in who keeps themselves

the most youthful-looking, but who embraces the new spirit for someone their age. In other words, the difference is in embracing the Paschal Mystery.

The death of our dreams. As a kid, I dreamed of playing professional basketball. But by my junior year in high school I was only 5'9" tall, I could only jump high enough to touch the net but not the rim, and my hands were too small to palm the ball. So I watched that dream die with high school graduation. And I watched a few other dreams die over the decades.

Some of the most soul-satisfied people in the world have lost a much bigger dream than the one I described, and some of the most restless people in the world are still mourning the death of a dream. Soul-satisfaction is not determined by who makes it to the big time and who ends up in small jobs. It depends on embracing the Paschal Mystery.

The death of our wholeness. The world has many people who were badly hurt, abused, or unfairly treated earlier in life. They believe it was unfair. Many become angry and bitter. They want their life back. They want justice. They want the one who hurt them to pay for their hurt. And they are right. Some of the most soul-satisfied people in the world have been abused, and some of the saddest people have been abused. The difference is not in the trauma of the abuse or the quality of the subsequent therapy, but in experiencing the Paschal Mystery.

The death of our honeymoons. Imagine a man and woman meet, fall in love, marry. The honeymoon of their relationship is right out of Romeo and Juliet. Fifteen years go by and each gain 15 pounds. They look at each other across the breakfast table and both sense that the honeymoon is over. But their relationship is not dead, in fact, they are bonded more strongly than ever. They are living the life of a couple married for 15 years, not 15 days. They can cling to what they once had – accuse each other of the loss of the passion, give in to temptation look for passion with another person, or lose themselves in their work or a hobby. Or they can grieve and let go of the honeymoon period and receive the new life and the new spirit God is offering them as a 15-year married couple. Some of the most soul-satisfied couples in the world have been married 15 years, and some of the most disappointed. The difference is in undergoing the Paschal Mystery.

There are other deaths. I'll leave it to readers to fill in their own. Perhaps it is the death of a relationship, or the death of a job/career, or something else. Whenever we experience these deaths, God's prescription for soul-satisfaction is to embrace the Paschal Mystery. But there is one more I've saved for last because I want to expand on it a bit.

The death of our innocence. Many years ago I mourned the deaths of my innocence from previous decades, by reflecting on my life in 15-year increments going back to my youth. In the process, I realized that nobody took my innocence. Unlike Jesus in the desert, I gave it away. In the process of mourning those old sins, I remember acknowledging that even if I could re-live those years, I'd succumb again. The temptations came faster than my spiritual formation could

possibly grow. I was a “sitting duck” for Satan. Eventually, God seemed to reveal to me that he knew this was the case all along, and that this has been the case for all of us humans since Genesis 3.

Despite this dismal realization, God's Spirit responded to my mourning by lifting the weight of those sins and re-affirming my identity in Christ.² The Holy Spirit blessed me with the realization that, even during those troublesome years, I was his beloved. This greatly enlightened my relationship with him.

In hindsight, I realize that God used this whole process so that I could empathize with and minister to others who are burdened with the death of their own innocence. Of course, temptations come faster than our spiritual formation - falling to temptation and receiving redemption through the Paschal Mystery is how God grows and forms us to be your reconciling agents in a fallen world!³

So how do we experience the Paschal Mystery?

Perhaps you are thinking about a death you still cling to, one that is dragging you down, maybe making you angry or depressed or worse. It's time to discover the Paschal Mystery. Here's how:

1. Name your deaths.
2. Claim your new births.
3. Grieve what you've lost and adjust to the new reality.
4. Release the old, let it ascend AND let it bless you in the process.
5. And the Lord Christ will offer you his Spirit, the spirit of the life you are now living.

Blessings,

Tim

Notes:

1. I first learned about the Paschal Mystery from *The Holy Longing*, a book by Ronald Rolheiser. I've preached and taught these concepts a few times. You can find [preaching and teaching notes here](#).
2. For more on this, see [Identity in Christ](#).
3. For more on this, see [Beyond Conversion 1](#) (the Redemptive Loop).