

Three Days That Shook The World

by Joel Stephen Williams

See, my servant shall prosper,
he shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high.
Just as there were many who were astonished at him
--so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of mortals—
so he shall startle many nations;
kings shall shut their mouths because of him;
for that which had not been told them they shall see,
and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.
Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him (Isa. 52:13-53:2).¹

Introduction

The central figure of the three days that shook the world, and of all history, Jesus, certainly has, as Isaiah said: "Astonished many." He has "startled many nations" and continues to do so. As an old story tells, even "kings" are amazed when they hear the story of Jesus, kings like the chieftain Kazinak of Greenland. Kazinak entered the hut of a missionary many years ago while the missionary was translating the gospel of John. Kazinak demanded to know what the missionary was doing. The missionary explained that the marks on the paper were words that told a story. Kazinak asked to hear the story, so the missionary read to him the story of Christ's death. The chief immediately wanted to know: "What has this man done?" Has he robbed anybody? Has he murdered anybody?" "No," he was told. "Then why does he suffer? Why must he die?" The missionary told him that this man had to suffer, not for his own sins, but because Kazinak had sinned. Kazinak the chieftain was speechless: "Who has believed what we have heard?"

You are invited to take a journey back to the three most important days of all human history, three days that shook the world. What happened on these three days is so significant that years later Paul and Silas were speaking of these events in Thessalonica, Greece, and the whole town was thrown into an uproar. Some believed. Others did not and started a riot. Unable to find Paul and Silas, the unbelievers dragged Jason and some other Christians before the city authorities and proclaimed: "These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also" (Acts 17:6). The situation was explosive and the charges and accusations were loaded: "They are...saying that there is another king named Jesus" (Acts 17:7). The truth that Jesus was not a secular king and that his kingdom was not of this world was lost on the crowd. Jason and others were temporarily detained, and Paul and Silas had to escape to another city that same night.

The message which was so electrifying in Thessalonica has lost none of its power after almost 2,000 years. That message can still turn the world upside down, it can still turn lives upside down, and it can still save souls from eternal death. Some Christians have responded to the accusation from long ago in Thessalonica and said that the message of the gospel does not turn the world upside down, rather, it turns it right side up. The world lives by the wrong values. It is the world that calls "evil good and good evil, who puts darkness for light and light for darkness" (Isa. 5:20). Any disturbance or shaking of the status quo which is caused by the gospel is essential and necessary in order to turn the world right side up (Mt. 10:34-39).

God has shaken the world before. He literally shook the ground when he gave the law at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:18). One of the psalmists celebrated it in this way:

O God, when you went out before your people,
when you marched through the wilderness,
the earth quaked (Ps. 68:7-8).

Since God is an almighty, powerful God, and since he shook the ground at Mount Sinai, it became commonplace in the Old Testament to associate the shaking of the ground with the day of the Lord or any inbreaking of the power of God, especially in judgment of the nations (Isa. 2:19-21; cf. Joel 2:10; Hag. 2:21-22).² "The earth will be shaken out of its place," said Isaiah the prophet (Isa. 13:13). Haggai the prophet declared, in the name of God, "Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come" (Hag. 2:6-7). This was a message of assurance in the days of Zerubbabel at the dedication of the new temple in 516 B.C. The writer to the Hebrews used these words to describe the end of the present world order which will occur at the second coming of Christ (Heb. 12:25-26). But if God has shaken the world many times throughout history, literally and metaphorically, which three days in particular are our focus in this study?

The three days of which we speak should be evident to anyone who knows even a little of the gospel story. They are the same three days which are the focus of all of history. The prophets pointed forward to these three days and the evangelists point backward to them. At just the right time after many centuries of preparation, in "the fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4), Christ came into the world. Then at just the right moment in his life, his "hour" arrived (Jn. 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1). It was a time for which heaven had been preparing since before the world was created (1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8). Day one is Friday when Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. Day two is Saturday when he was in the tomb. Day three is Sunday, the Lord's day, when he rose from the dead.

Matthew tells us that at the very moment when Jesus died on the cross, "the earth shook, and the rocks were split" (Mt. 27:51). On Sunday morning at the same moment Jesus rose from the dead, "suddenly there was a great earthquake" (Mt. 28:2). This literal shaking of the earth was emblematic of the powerful working of God which was taking place on these three days. The events which were happening in Jerusalem, in an obscure city on the edge of the Roman Empire, were of such great consequence that the God of heaven was shaking the ground. The Son of God was dying. Atonement was being made. Satan was being defeated. Sin and death were being overcome (1 Cor. 15:54-57). The hope of eternal life was being realized in the firstfruits of the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:20). These events were truly earthshaking, and they led to something which cannot be shaken. Because of these three days we have received "a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (Heb. 12:28).

How important are these three days? Here is what the apostle Paul said of them: For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

Let us, then, remember the three days that shook the world. Let us remember the three days when our "salvation that is in Christ Jesus" was accomplished (2 Tim. 2:10).

Let us remember the three days when our hope was made firm by Christ, the "hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). Let us do this to the honor and praise of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul wrote: "To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen" (2 Tim. 4:18). And as the apostle Peter wrote: "To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen" (2 Pet. 3:18). And in the Apocalypse of John we read that those in heaven proclaim: "To the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" (Rev. 5:13).³

The Crucifixion of Christ

He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.
Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth (Isa. 53:3-9).
When they came to the place that is called The Skull,
they crucified Jesus there with the criminals,
one on his right and one on his left (Lk. 23:33).

While tremendous emphasis is given in the four gospels to the death of Jesus, few details of the crucifixion itself are provided. How tall was the cross? What shape was it? Did Jesus carry only the crossbeam or the whole cross out to Calvary? How was Jesus positioned on the cross? What was the size of the nails or the spikes? There is a good explanation as to why the details of the crucifixion are absent. The original readers of the four gospels needed no instruction in these matters. Crucifixion was all too common in the ancient world.

Crucifixion was probably borrowed by the Romans from the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians. It certainly was not the traditional, ancient method of execution among the Israelites, but it had become known to them. During the lifetime of Jesus, Varus

crucified two thousand people while crushing a revolt in Galilee. Earlier during the Jewish civil wars Alexander Jannaeus crucified eight hundred men on one single occasion. In the war between Rome and the Jews which led to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Titus crucified so many "that there was no space left for crosses, and no crosses for the bodies."⁴ Crucifixion was a cruel, painful way to execute a person. It was usually reserved for slaves, rebels, and the worst of criminals. Yet, this is the way the sinless lamb of God was put to death.

Where do we begin to even try to summarize in capsule form this centerpiece of all history? Maybe the most worthwhile exercise is to try to grasp the essential element of substitutionary atonement which Isaiah stressed. He bore "our infirmities and carried our diseases." He "was wounded for our transgressions." "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Not only was our guilt, pain, and sin transferred to Jesus, he has provided healing for us by taking our place. As Isaiah said: "Upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed."

John Stott declared:

The notion of substitution is that one person takes the place of another, especially in order to bear his pain and so save him from it. Such an action is universally regarded as noble. It is good to spare people pain; it is doubly good to do so at the cost of bearing it oneself. We admire the altruism of Moses in being willing for his name to be blotted out of Yahweh's book if only thereby Israel might be forgiven (Ex. 32:32).... Similarly in our own century we cannot fail to be moved by the heroism of...Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish Franciscan, in the Auschwitz concentration camp. When a number of prisoners were selected for execution, and one of them shouted that he was a married man with children,...` Kolbe stepped forward and asked if he could take the condemned man's place. His offer was accepted by the authorities, and he was placed in an underground cell, where he was left to die of starvation.⁵

The most shocking part of this gospel story of good news, though, is that it is God who volunteers to die for us at Calvary. The death of Jesus was one of heroism and courage of the first rank no matter who he was, but when we take into account the incarnation of Christ, the implication of it all should take our breath away. God the Son, the eternal Word (Jn. 1:1), the one in whom "the whole fullness of deity" (Col. 2:9) was pleased to dwell, the Lord who "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited" (Phil. 2:6), this very same Jesus became a human being and suffered death for sinful, rebellious mankind, "even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8).

In my travels I have watched many people light a candle for various deities as they sent a silent petition up toward heaven. I have seen them light incense and buy garlands of flowers to lay on an altar. I remember distinctly a young lady, maybe still a teenager, walking up to a small altar and placing some food and drink on it. She then got on her knees and reverently said a prayer. Elsewhere we see animals offered to God or even human suffering, often self-inflicted, to appease the deity. But all of

mankind should stop and stand in humble awe at the scene presented to us at Calvary: God incarnate dying for mankind; the Son of God suffering for us. We ought to ask God: "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" (Ps. 8:4; cf. 144:3). What foolish wisdom is this that God would sacrifice himself for his own rebellious creation (1 Cor. 1:18-25; Rom. 5:6-10)? It is no wonder that Paul told the Corinthians: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). And again, "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14).

In his book *The Great Boer War*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle tells of a small detachment of British troops who were surprised by a much larger force. They withdrew under heavy fire. Their wounded were exposed in a dangerous position and faced certain death. One of them, a corporal in the Ceylon Mounted Infantry, later told that they all realized that they must put themselves under the protection of a Red Cross flag if they were going to survive. They found a piece of white cloth, but they had no red paint. They used blood from their own wounds and made a large red cross on the white cloth. Their attackers respected the flag as it was held up, and the British wounded were transported to safety.

We will find safety only in the blood of Jesus shed for our sins. It is "the blood of Jesus [God's] Son [that] cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn. 1:7; cf. Acts 20:28; Col. 1:20; Heb. 10:19). We are ransomed "with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish" (1 Pet. 1:20). The redeemed host in heaven gave praise to the "Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered" (Rev. 5:6), saying: "You were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). Christians are those who "have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:15). We not only escape destruction, as the British soldiers did, but also we win the victory and conquer "by the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 12:11).

The Resurrection of Christ

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.
Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors (Isa. 53:10-12).⁶

The story does not end at the cross. There atonement was made. There the innocent substitute suffered for us, but then Christ was buried. His coming back to life on Sunday morning was proof of the deity of Christ (Rom. 1:4) and that the payment for our sins had been accepted by the God of heaven (Acts 2:31-36). While it was "the will of the Lord" for him to suffer, the cross was going to lead to the crown for Jesus. He was going to see "light" and win the victory, while his death would "make many righteous." Furthermore, the cross was not the end for Jesus. It was the beginning. He has "offspring" in the millions in the church, and his "days" were prolonged in that he was raised from the grave and lives forever. The resurrection of Jesus is the wellspring of our hope, because he is the "firstborn from the dead" (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5; 1 Cor. 15:20-23; Eph. 2:6; Jn. 14:19; Phil. 3:10; 1 Pet. 1:3).

Every word of emphasis on the centrality of the cross of Christ for Christianity can be repeated verbatim for the resurrection. As Gunther Bornkamm said, "There would be no gospel, not one account, no epistle in the New Testament, no faith, no Church, no worship, no prayer in Christendom to this day without the message of the resurrection of Christ."⁷ Similarly, J. S. Whale writes: "Belief in the Resurrection is not an appendage to the Christian faith; it is the Christian faith."⁸ More importantly, the apostle Paul said the resurrection was of "first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

The following story came to me by way of that great superhighway of information both good and bad, important and trivial, true and false, namely, the Internet. [Since preaching this lesson the first time, I found out that this story was included in one of the *Chicken Soup* books, and it has been reproduced many times from there. All quotes from Kempel's original story as popularized there.]⁹ Jeremy was born with a twisted body and a slow mind. At the age of twelve he was still in second grade, seemingly unable to learn. His teacher, Doris Miller, often became exasperated with him. He would squirm in his seat, drool, and make grunting noises. At other times, he spoke clearly

and distinctly, as if a spot of light had penetrated the darkness of his brain. Most of the time, however, Jeremy just irritated his teacher.

One day she called his parents and asked them to come in for a consultation. As the Forresters entered the empty classroom, Doris said to them: "Jeremy really belongs in a special school. It is not fair to him to be with younger children who do not have learning problems. There is a five year gap between his age and that of the other students." Mrs. Forrester cried softly into a tissue, while her husband spoke. "Miss Miller," he said, "there is no school of that kind nearby. It would be a terrible shock for Jeremy if we had to take him out of this school. We know he really likes it here."

Doris sat for a long time after they had left, staring at the snow outside the window. Its coldness seemed to seep into her soul. She wanted to sympathize with the Forresters. After all, their only child had a terminal illness. But it was not fair to keep him in her class. She had eighteen other youngsters to teach, and Jeremy was a distraction. Furthermore, he would never learn to read and write. Why waste any more time trying? As she pondered the situation, guilt washed over her. "Here I am complaining when my problems are nothing compared to that poor family," she thought. "Lord, please help me to be more patient with Jeremy." From that day on, she tried hard to ignore Jeremy's noises and his blank stares. Then one day, he limped to her desk, dragging his bad leg behind him. "I love you, Miss Miller," he exclaimed, loud enough for the whole class to hear. The other students snickered, and Doris's face turned red. She stammered: "Why, that is very nice, Jeremy. Now please take your seat."

Spring came and the children talked excitedly about the coming of Easter. Doris told them the story of Jesus, and then to emphasize the idea of new life springing forth, she gave each of the children a large plastic egg. "Now," she said to them, "I want you to take this home and bring it back tomorrow with something inside that shows new life. Do you understand?" "Yes, Miss Miller," the children responded enthusiastically--all except for Jeremy. He listened intently; his eyes never left her face. He did not even make his usual noises. Had he understood what she had said about Jesus' death and resurrection? Did he understand the assignment? Perhaps she should call his parents and explain the project to them. That evening, Doris's kitchen sink stopped up. She called the landlord and waited an hour for him to come by and unclog it. After that, she still had to shop for groceries, iron a blouse, and prepare a vocabulary test for the next day. She completely forgot about phoning Jeremy's parents.

The next morning, nineteen children came to school, laughing and talking as they placed their eggs in the large wicker basket on Miss Miller's desk. After they completed their math lesson, it was time to open the eggs. In the first egg, Doris found a flower. "Oh yes, a flower is certainly a sign of new life," she said. "When plants peek through the ground, we know that spring is here." A small girl in the first row waved her arm. "That's my egg, Miss Miller," she called out. The next egg contained a plastic butterfly which looked very real. Doris held it up. "We all know that a caterpillar changes and grows into a beautiful butterfly. Yes, that is new life, too." Little Judy smiled proudly and said, "Miss Miller, that one is mine." Next, Doris found a rock with moss on it. She

explained that moss, too, showed life. Billy spoke up from the back of the classroom: "My daddy helped me," he said.

Then Doris opened the fourth egg. She gasped. The egg was empty. Surely it must be Jeremy's she thought, and of course, he did not understand her instructions. If only she had not forgotten to phone his parents. Because she did not want to embarrass him, she quietly set the egg aside and reached for another. Suddenly, Jeremy spoke up. "Miss Miller, aren't you going to talk about my egg?" Flustered, Doris replied, "But Jeremy, your egg is empty." He looked into her eyes and said softly, "Yes, but Jesus' tomb was empty, too."

Time stopped. When she could speak again, Doris asked him, "Do you know why the tomb was empty?" "Oh, yes," Jeremy said, "Jesus was killed and put in there. Then his Father raised him up." The recess bell rang. While the children excitedly ran out to the schoolyard, Doris cried. The cold inside her melted completely away. Three months later, Jeremy died. Those who paid their respects at the mortuary were surprised to see nineteen eggs on top of his casket, all of them empty.

The death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are the center of history and our hope for salvation. But how does one appropriate these ancient events for self? The apostle Paul explains:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3-4).

There it is in a nutshell. In the watery grave of baptism our old sinful self dies. The cleansing blood of Christ washes away our sins (Acts 2:38; Rev. 1:5), and we rise from the waters of baptism born again (Jn. 3:5), sanctified (Eph. 5:26; 1 Cor. 6:11), and with hope of eternal life.

Notes

¹All scripture quotations from the *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1990. This lesson was delivered at University City Church of Christ, Gainesville, Florida, on April 23, 2000.

²William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1991) 479.

³Brooke Foss Westcott, "On the Apostolic Doxologies," *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Reprint edition: Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974) 464-65.

⁴Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* 6.18; cited by William Barclay, *The Apostles' Creed for Everyman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 95. Also see Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

⁵John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986) 136.

⁶On the interpretation of Isaiah 52:13-53:12, see John T. Willis, *Isaiah* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1980), and Homer Hailey, *A Commentary on Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985).

⁷Gunther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, translated by Irene and Fraser McLuskey (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960) 181.

⁸J. S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: University Press, 1941) 73.

⁹Ida Mae Kempel, "What was in Jeremy's Egg?" in *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*, by Jack Canfield, et. al. (HCI, 1997), 239-42.