

## Jesus - His Death

One of the most amazing influences of the life of Christ has been the strange fascination associated with His death. Untold numbers of crucifixes have been erected in churches and other places, and even greater numbers of ornamental crosses are worn as pieces of jewelry. The death of Christ has received far more attention in literature, art, and music, *than have all the deaths of all other great men combined.*

There was certainly nothing beautiful about His sufferings and death. He died as a common criminal on a cross between two thieves. He had been beaten almost beyond recognition, and then the death by crucifixion itself was one of the cruelest of all possible ways to die.

Jesus had said, "*But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself. He said this to show the kind of death He was going to die*" [John 12:32-33]. Jesus also said, "*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life*" [John 3:14-15].

In spite of the shame, cruelty, and apparent futility associated with Jesus' death, millions of people down through the centuries have been attracted to His cross. His words have been fulfilled in spite of their apparent unreasonableness. And all those who have looked upon His cross with true eyes of faith . . . in the way that the ancient Israelites, dying from the sting of the serpents in the wilderness, looked upon the brazen serpent erected by Moses on the great pole in the center of their camp . . . have received assurance of cleansing and everlasting life.

This is surely a remarkable phenomenon. Nothing like it exists in all human experience. That the ugly death of a man on a cross two thousand years ago - a man who, by all common standards, was uneducated, poor, and insignificant - should exert such a universal, age-long attraction for men of all nations and times and that faith in the meaning of His death should give *joy and peace* to multitudes, is something which simply can have no rational explanation at all - except the one that He Himself gave, "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*" [John 10:11].

### PROPHECIES OF CHRIST'S DEATH

It is easy, of course, to prophesy that someone will die. Everyone must die sooner or later, and it surely takes no gift of prophetic insight to predict death. For that matter, many men and women, especially those who have a morbid interest in the occult, make death a very frequent subject of prophecy.

Some of these prophecies may seem to have come true. For instance, Jeane Dixon's famous prophecy of John Kennedy's assassination seem to come true, perhaps suggesting that demonic forces do have some limited knowledge of human plans and can occasionally forecast the events which they know about, though, of course, most such soothsaying predictions are never fulfilled at all.

There is nothing in all human history, however, comparable to the prophecies associated with the death of Christ. These were not vague and hidden, like those of fortune-tellers, nor were

they given only a short time before they were fulfilled, as are those of modern occultists. There are scores, perhaps hundreds, of such prophecies in the Old Testament that focus on the death of the coming Messiah, and many of them are very detailed and specific. All were recorded hundreds of years, some over a thousand years, before they were fulfilled.

1. The time when Christ would come into Jerusalem to die was prophesied in Daniel 9:24-26, and this was fulfilled exactly 483 years later, as predicted, when He entered Jerusalem for His last week before death, as recorded in Luke 19:37-44. After this, as Daniel [or rather, the angel Gabriel] had prophesied, He was "*cut off, but not for Himself.*"
2. Christ's betrayal by one of His close friends was forecast in Psalm 41:9, and even the price of thirty pieces of silver for His betrayal was given in Zechariah 11:12-13. The shameful mockery of the judicial process which constituted His trial is prophesied in Isaiah 50:6 and 53:7-8. The false witnesses are mentioned in Psalm 35:11.
3. The awful details of His sufferings on the cross are portrayed graphically in the 22nd Psalm, written by David almost 1,100 years before its fulfillment. The Psalm begins with the cry from the cross, "*My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?*" [Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46]. The darkness is pictured in verse 2 and also in Amos 8:9. The mocking by the priests and others at the foot of the cross is described in verses 7-8. The terrible bodily sufferings induced by the crucifixion process are recorded in verses 14-15. The piercings of His hands and feet to receive the nails binding Him to the cross are mentioned in verse 16. The stripping of His garments and gambling over their possession by the soldiers crucifying Him is predicted in verses 17-18. His awful thirst is mentioned in verse 15 [and even the vinegar which was offered to Him, in Psalm 69:21]. The collapse of His heart cavity, leading to the strange emergence of mingled blood and water from His side, is suggested in verse 14 [note John 19:34]. There is no need for a detailed exposition of Psalm 22 here, however, it surely is one of the most marvelous passages in all the Word of God, and will richly repay detailed and prayerful study by each individual Christian.
4. The fact that, despite the intensity of His sufferings, none of His bones would be broken, is foretold in Psalm 34:20, as fulfilled in John 19:36. The piercing of His side is suggested in Zechariah 12:10. The wounds in His hands may also have been noted by Zechariah, in 13:6.
5. The 53rd chapter of Isaiah [actually beginning at Isaiah 52:13] is also a marvelous chapter devoted to the future death of the Savior, written by Isaiah **750** years before it came to pass. Especially emphasized in this chapter [which is quoted in at least six different places in the New Testament] is the fact that the death of the Messiah would be a substitutionary death, offered up in sacrificial substitution for the sins of others.
6. He is called by Isaiah, God's "*servant*" [52:13] and His "*righteous servant*" in 53: 11. Yet it is also said that "*it pleased the Lord to bruise Him,*" and to "*put Him to grief*" [53:10]. This apparent insult to the character of a holy and just God can only be resolved in the light of the fact that this was God Himself, in the "*form of a servant*" [Philippians 2:6] who was making "*His soul an offering for sin*" [Isaiah 53:10].

This emphasis on substitutionary suffering is repeated over and over in this remarkable chapter, Isaiah 53. It says, for example, that "*Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows*" [verse 4], that "*He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our*

*iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed" [verse 5]. Verse 6 says, "The LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." Verse 11 says, "He will bear their iniquities," and verse 12 that "He was numbered with the transgressors. for He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."*

As a matter of fact, the Christian Gospel - that "*Christ died for our sins*" [1 Corinthians 15:3] - finds its clearest expression in the whole Bible right here in Isaiah 53, recorded long before Christ came into the world to bring it to pass. Herein is surely a most marvelous evidence of the truth of God's Word, and the sure fulfillment of all His promises!

Other details of His trial and death are also given in Isaiah 53. the awful bruising He bore at the hands of the soldiers and others is graphically portrayed in 52:14, "*His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and His form marred beyond human likeness.*" His silence before His accusers at His trial is predicted in 53:7. The result of His mock trial is given in verse 8, and His death with the criminals, and His burial by a rich man, is recorded in verse 9.

And then, after His cruel death, His resurrection is prophesied in verse 10, "*He will see His offspring and prolong His days.*" Again, as with Psalm 22, we cannot give a detailed exposition of this chapter, Isaiah 53, however, it is certainly one of the richest and most profound in the Bible, and has been a great source of unique blessing to multitudes through the ages.

There are many other prophecies in the Old Testament Scriptures which were fulfilled when Christ died on the cross. It must be clear to even the most skeptical that this is an absolutely unique phenomenon. There is nothing else comparable to this in all the realm of literature or of religion. The death of the Son of Man, on Calvary's cross, is an event of unique interest in heaven and of unique importance to man on earth.

### **THE MIRACLES OF CALVARY**

As clear physical evidence of the cosmic importance of the death of Christ, certain marvelous events occurred at that time, for which no naturalistic explanation will suffice. The records of these events as given in the Gospels must be, as we have seen, based on eyewitness accounts. They are events which would have been known to multitudes of people and which, therefore, if they had not occurred, would quickly have been revealed as a lie by the listeners of the Gospel writers who reported that they *did* occur.

For example, there was a supernatural darkness which enveloped all the land, from the sixth hour until the ninth hour of that date [Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44-45]. It may be that this darkness veiled the entire earth, as God for a time withdrew even the physical evidence of His providential care for the earth, as His Son was bearing in His own body the sin of the world and suffering Himself the judgment of separation from God.

There is no evidence in astronomical history of a normal solar eclipse at this time, though there are certain traditions in other lands of a period of darkness. Yet the fact of this supernatural darkness was apparently well known to all those that dwelt in Jerusalem, and to those who read first the accounts of it in the Gospels.

Another miracle, of course, is the earthquake. In fact, there was an earthquake both at the time of the crucifixion and again at the time of the resurrection. Earthquakes are natural

phenomena, so that the miraculous aspect of these quakes was in their peculiar timing. They were significantly violent quakes is proved by the statement of Matthew, "*The earth shook and the rocks split*" [Matthew 27:51].

Another notable miracle, recorded in three of the Gospels [Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45], was the rending of the veil in the temple. This veil was a very heavy, thick drapery, that would have required tremendous force to tear, and it is recorded that it was "*torn in two from top to bottom.*"

No explanation suffices for this occurrence, and its recording in the Gospels in this way, except that an unseen angelic hand ripped it in two, symbolizing that the way into the holiest place, the very presence of God, was now open to all who would come. The veil had as its purpose the separation of the place where God met once each year with the high priest, keeping out all others. But now, Christ has opened the way for all to come to God by Him. "*Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is His body...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith*" [Hebrews 10:19-22].

It is also important to note that Jesus died at exactly the time He was ready to die, not before, and not later. "*When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, He said, 'It is finished:' and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit*" [John 19:20]. Before He could die, one last prophecy had to be fulfilled [John 19:28], and then He could simply dismiss His spirit [Luke 23:46] from His body.

Although the Jews and Romans condemned Him to death, and the soldiers carried out the death sentence, it was not really they who put Him to death. He had said, "*The reason My Father loves Me is that I lay down My life - only to take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.*" [John 10:17-18]. Even at the time of His arrest He said, "*Do you think I cannot call on My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?*" [Matthew 26:53-54]. When Pilate told Him that he had the power to have Him crucified, He answered, "*You would have no power over Me if it were not given to you from above*" [John 19:11].

Now, although all men eventually die, no man can simply decide to die, and then die! It is not easy even to commit suicide, but certainly no one can simply expire by an act of his own will. But that is exactly what Jesus did. When every last detail of His mission had been accomplished, He committed His spirit to His Father and merely dismissed it from His body. The physical death of Christ is thus absolutely unique in history.

### **THE SURPRISING CIRCUMSTANCES OF CHRIST'S BURIAL**

The great defining passage on the Gospel is 1 Corinthians 15:1-4. Here, the Gospel is defined as the good news that "*Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; And that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.*" Thus the Gospel involves three main parts - the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ - and this passage of Scripture further emphasizes Christ's post-resurrection physical appearances in confirmation thereof.

It is obvious that the death and resurrection are basic to Christianity, but why should there be equal emphasis on the ***burial*** of Christ? Undoubtedly, the reason is that it is of vital importance for men to realize that Jesus Christ "***is come in the flesh***" [1 John 4:2]. As His burial was an actual physical burial, with His body placed in a physical tomb, so His resurrection must therefore be a physical resurrection with His body coming out of the tomb.

The deadly heresy of the gnostics, as of numerous other ancient and modern philosophies, was that the man Jesus and the great "*Christ-spirit*" were somehow united only in a very superficial way, so that when Jesus died the "*Christ-spirit*" returned to the Father. Thus, Christ did not really die - only Jesus died. Further, Jesus did not really rise - only Christ arose!

Neither demons nor unbelieving men have been willing to acknowledge that "*Jesus is the Christ*" that "*Jesus is the Son of God*," and that "*Jesus, the Christ, is come in the flesh*" [1 John 5:1; 5:5; 4:3]. The Son of God is also Son of Man, with both the divine power and the human nature enabling Him both to represent man and to set men free from the evil one.

It is absolutely vital for all men to *know* beyond any doubt that it was the human Jesus who rose from the grave. Therefore, it must be certain that His body was carefully buried after His death, and that this burial was known to all, both friend and foe. Then, on the great morning when He arose from the dead, the emptied tomb would stand forever as the infallible proof of His bodily resurrection.

Such an important ministry as the burial of the body of Jesus could not be entrusted by God to the Roman soldiers, who would merely further defile it and then throw it in with the bodies of other executed criminals, nor to the Jewish authorities who would probably do even worse. Nor would these authorities have permitted Christ's body to fall into the hands of His disciples, as they were afraid the disciples would seek to hide it and then claim He had been resurrected [Matthew 27:62-66].

The solution was for God to have the body buried by one or more of the authorities themselves who were also disciples. For this purpose, God chose two of the members of the governing Jewish body, the Sanhedrin, Joseph and Nicodemus. Thus, they would have access to the necessary information about the time and circumstances of His death, they would also have access to the Roman governor in order to make the required arrangements to acquire the body before the soldiers could dispose of it, and they would have enough wealth of their own to be able to make the needed preparations for a suitable resting-place for the body until it could be raised from the dead.

Of course, they would have to be prepared ahead of time for this ministry. God, therefore, somehow touched the heart of Nicodemus, as he listened to John the Baptist, then later to Jesus, and as He saw the miracles which Jesus did. Eventually, he made his way into the presence of Jesus one night, where the Lord spoke to him of the necessity of being born again, even though he was already the greatest "*teacher in Israel*" [John 3:7, 10].

The Scriptures do not tell us the outcome of that interview, except that sometime later Nicodemus defended Jesus on one occasion before the Sanhedrin [John 7:50-51]. Similarly, we read that Joseph did not concur in the decision of the Sanhedrin to condemn Jesus [Luke 23:50-51].

Somehow these two men had become friends and had resolved to make preparations for Jesus' burial. It seems likely that they may have had other interviews with Jesus, (though the Scriptures are silent on this), and perhaps learned from His own lips about His approaching crucifixion. He had, indeed, told Nicodemus that He must be "*lifted up*," as Moses had "*lifted up the serpent in the wilderness*," in order that men might have everlasting life. It hardly seems likely that Nicodemus, Israel's great teacher, would not try to learn much more about these things, and where better than from Jesus Himself? If nothing else, however, he would surely have gone back to an intensive study of the Messianic Scriptures to learn all he could about the prophesied sacrificial death of the coming Messiah. These earnest studies most likely would have been shared with his friend, Joseph.

Some such background as this is necessary to understand the otherwise inexplicable presence of Joseph. Why, for example, should he, a rich man of Arimathea, buy a burial ground in Jerusalem instead of his own home town? And, especially, who should he purchase it in such a place as this - adjacent to the hill of Golgotha, where day after day there would come the cries of dying criminals and the wails of mourning families? Furthermore, it was a brand new tomb, not one in which others of the family had been buried [John 19:41], one that Joseph himself had hewn out in the rock [Matthew 27:60], perhaps not wishing others even to know about its preparations.

Strange also was the fact that Joseph knew exactly when Jesus died, and was immediately able to rush to Pilate with the request for His body, before others even realized He was dead

[Mark 15:43-44]. Even stranger was the fact that immediately thereafter came Nicodemus carrying one hundred Roman pounds (A Roman pound was equivalent to twelve ounces) of ointment for the burial [one does not carry even one hundred Roman pounds very far!] Then, while the women watched from a distance, no doubt in amazement, these two respected members of the Sanhedrin gently lowered the body from the cross, wound it in the linen clothes, applied the spices and ointments, laid the body in the tomb, and then departed. Never, so far as the Biblical record goes, were they ever heard from again, but there can be little doubt that this one act, with all probability, cost them their positions and, even, their possession, and possibly even their lives.

Probably in their studies together during the many months following Nicodemus' first meeting with Jesus, the two friends spent much time in the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. They would have especially read of the sacrificial and saving work of the Messiah foretold, as this had been the great theme of Jesus' words to Nicodemus [John 3:14-21].

And in the heart of that great passage is the statement, "*And He made His grave with the wicked* [thus near the execution and burial grounds of the condemned criminals], ***but*** [a better translation in this context than "*and*"] *with the rich man* [therefore. a rich man must somehow provide a grave for Him even in these unlikely circumstances] *in His death*" [Isaiah 53:9].

Did Joseph somehow decided himself to assume this prophetic obligation? He did, proceed to purchase the land, cut out the tomb, plant a garden, purchase the required materials for the burial and hide them there, and then wait with Nicodemus until they could perform that service for the Lord for which he had been born.