

## **THE DAY JESUS CHRIST DIED: THE DARKEST DAY IN HISTORY**

**By Sellers S. Crain, Jr.**

Among the first words in the Bible are, “The earth was without form and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep.” (Genesis 1:2) From the earliest recorded accounts darkness has been foreboding, feared, a time of evil deeds. Norman Carlson wrote, “Darkness, our most primeval fear: we fear darkness before we know death” (Jamestown Post Journal 1986).

There have been many dark days in American history when the sun refused to shine in various geographical locations. One such event occurred on May 19, 1780 in New England. It is reported that the sun rose as usual, but suddenly the sky darkened as far south as New Jersey. One observer wrote, “The dark day inspired terror, panic and puzzlement. Men prayed, and women wept. Thousands took off from work and took to the taverns and churches for solace, and children were sent home from school. Some feared the day of judgment had come.”

The darkest day in world history was the day Jesus Christ died. Although there are some minor differences in detail, the accounts of the Crucifixion by Matthew and Mark are very similar. Matthew’s account in the Greek text contains 200 words, and Mark’s has 150 words. Luke’s record has only about 100 words and John’s has only about 70 words. Mark’s primary focus is on three time periods: the third hour (nine o’clock; 14:25), the sixth hour (twelve noon; v. 33), and the ninth hour (three in the afternoon; v. 34). The Synoptic writers Matthew, Mark and Luke describe the sudden mysterious darkness which smothered the light of the sun at midday. This could not be explained by an eclipse since it was Passover, and the moon was full meaning the sun and the moon were too far apart for that to happen. Neither could it be explained by a volcanic eruption or sudden severe storm. It was a miraculous supernatural event brought on by God Himself.

On this darkness Mark wrote, “Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.” (Mark 14:33) While Matthew and Mark say the darkness was over “the whole (all) the land,” Luke records that the darkness was “over all the earth.” (Luke 23:44). The early church apologist Tertullian wrote, “this (darkness) had been predicted about Christ,” no doubt in reference to Amos 8:9 (Apology 1:21). The darkness that enveloped the earth was not only physical, but it was as if the sun could no longer shine on the terrible depravity of sin. M. K. Vincent wrote, “On Him (Christ), representatively, fell the collective consequences of sin, in His enduring the consequences of sinners against Himself.”

On Thursday night following Christ’s arrest by the temple guard in Gethsemane, He was taken first to Annas who had been deposed by the Romans but was still respected by the Jews. (John 18:13) He was then taken to Caiaphas, the son-in-law of Annas, who was the Roman appointed High Priest. After a night of mistreatment and abuse of Jesus, and being falsely accused of blasphemy, the Sanhedrin convened early on Friday morning to put together a case to convict Jesus of a sentence worthy of death. Since they did not have the authority to carry out that sentence, they took Him to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, the only person with the legal authority to condemn Him to death (Matthew 27:1-2) Pilate wanted nothing to do with the whole affair, and learning Jesus was a Galilean, sent Him to Herod Antipas, who was ruling over Galilee. (John 18:28-31; Luke 23:6-12) Herod, finding no fault with Him, sent Him back to Pilate. (Luke 23:15)

The interrogation of Jesus by Pilate began around 6:00 a. m. After Jesus was returned to Pilate by Herod, his wife sent a message urging him, "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him." (Matthew 27:19) Since Pilate had found no fault with Jesus, he had made several attempts to encourage the Jews to let Him go free. In keeping with the Romans tradition of releasing a prisoner to the Jews at the Passover, Pilate offered them a substitute for Jesus, a man named Barabbas who was an insurrectionist and a murderer. (Mark 15:11; Luke 23:17-21) Instead of having the effect Pilate desired, the Jewish leaders provoked the people to cry out, "Crucify Him, Crucify Him" in reference to Jesus. When Pilate saw he could not prevail, but rather a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude saying, "I am innocent of the blood of this just person. You see to it." (Matthew 27:24) They responded crying out, "His blood be on us and our children." (Matthew 27:23) At that point, Pilate yielded to the pressure and turned Jesus over to the Jews to be crucified.

Pilate allowed his Romans soldiers to mock and ridicule Jesus after He had been savagely beaten causing great blood loss which would cause circulatory shock. Mathew records, "And when they had mocked Him, they took the robe off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him away to be crucified." (27:31) John tells us that He left Pilate's hall, "Bearing His cross." (19:17) This was most likely the cross beam weighing perhaps 200 lbs. Matthew (27:32) and Luke (23:26) tell us that Simon from Cyrene was compelled to bear the cross. After already being weakened from a lack of sleep, being denied food and drink, and enduring the savage beating, it is easy to believe Jesus was too weak to bear the cross, and as tradition has suggested, may have fallen under its weight. Mark simply informs us that, "Then they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of the Skull... Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him." (15:22, 25)

Dr. Steven Findlay, a medical doctor, wrote that, "There has been a tendency to almost romanticize the crucifixion, to disguise the horror of what Christ went through. Death by crucifixion was, in every sense of the word, excruciating." The word crucifixion comes from the Latin *crucifixio* or *crucifixus* meaning "fixed to a cross." Crucifixion was the cruelest form of execution ever devised by men. It was not just to bring about death, but its primary purpose was to torture the condemned man until he died, and providing him with drugs, not to lessen the pain, but to lengthen his life. History says the Persians introduced crucifixion to the world, Alexander the Great brought it to the Mediterranean world, the Romans learned it from the Carthaginians and then perfected it. Constantine abolished it out of veneration for Jesus Christ.

Once they had arrived at Golgotha (Calvary, Luke 23:33), Jesus would have been quickly thrown backward with His hands stretched across the cross beam and nails would have been driven through the wrist and deep into the wood leaving some flexibility of movement. Jesus would again have been stripped of His clothing leaving only a loin cloth to satisfy the Jews. Having secured Him to the cross beam He would have been slowly raised and the cross beam dropped into the notch at the top of the upright post or tree. The sign as ordered by Pilate declaring His offence which He carried through the streets to His execution was nailed to the upright post. It read, "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." (John 19:19)

Jesus made seven statements from the cross. As He looked down from the cross seeing the

people below ridiculing and mocking Him, His first words were, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” (Luke 23:34) His next words were said to the penitent thief who hung next to Him, “Today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43) His third words were to His mother, and to the disciple He loved, “Woman, behold your son!” and “Behold your mother.” (John 19:26-27). “About the ninth hour, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.” (Matthew 27:46) Suffering in His humanity, and in agonizing thirst, He said, “I thirst.” (John 19:28) In a profound declaration of the reason He came into this world, and now that His mission was complete, our Lord cried out, “It is finished.” (John 19:30). His final words in keeping with His promise to “lay down My life,” He “cried out, with a loud voice...Father, into your hands I commit My Spirit” and “Having said this He breathed His last.” (John 19:30-35; Luke 23:46)

In His death, Jesus paved the way for sinful men to be “reconciled to God.” (Ephesians 2:14-16). Paul wrote, “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” (2 Corinthians 5:21). The full price has been paid for our sins, and all that we have to do to receive it is to believe and obey the gospel (Romans 6:17-18).