

Good Friday Surprises

The first surprise, Simon

Good Friday was a day of surprises, the day Jesus was killed, Luke, the physical and historian, recounts several eyewitness accounts of that fateful day. In each case, there is an element of surprise.

It certainly was a surprise for Simon. He was from North Africa, from Cyrene (modern-day Tripoli) and to be in Jerusalem for the Passover was a dream come true. When a crucifixion parade crossed his path on those unfamiliar streets, it should have been only a brief delay. But a surprising thing happened. Jesus stumbled under the weight of the cross, right in front of Simon. The cross Jesus was required to carry fell to the ground right at Simon's feet.

Because Jerusalem was an occupied city, Roman Law gave the soldiers the right of conscription (call into compulsory duty). They could draft anyone into their service instantly with the touch of a spear blade. Simon the Tripoli was the closet person, so he was forced to pick up the cross and carry it, a humiliating task.

Luke says nothing more about Simon, however, he does appear directly and indirectly two more times in the New Testament (Mark 15:21 & Romans 16:13). Mark recounts the same story but adds another detail - Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus. It's unusual for a father to be identified by his children, unless of course the children are quite famous. By the time Mark's Gospel was circulated, two of the most famous Christians in all of the empire must have been Alexander and Rufus.

In Romans 16:13, Rufus, son of Simon, is describe as the son of a woman whom the apostle Paul considered his surrogate mother. Put the pieces together and it's obvious that when Simon returned home, he told his wife about Christ and the crucifixion. She became not only a godly woman, but an influence to Paul. Simon told his sons Alexander and Rufus about what he had witnessed, and they became two of the greatest believes in the first-century church. The surprising embarrassment Simon endured that day turned out to be a great good for Simon and for his family.

The second surprise: "Don't Weep For Me"

As Jesus slowly made His way to Golgotha, a group of women followed Him, crying and mourning. In all probability they were not acquainted with Jesus, but were professional mourners who dared to come out when men were crucified often "*representing*" the convicted person's family who might not be present.

Though it was a job that doesn't mean they were unsympathetic. They always carried a liquid narcotic to help take the edge off the excruciating pain that accompanied crucifixion, a drug offered to the condemned person. There were women who had made this journey often. But this time, something unexpected happened.

What a surprise it must have been when Jesus turned and expressed sympathy for them, "*Don't weep for Me, weep for yourselves and your children*" (Luke 23:58). He anticipated a difficult future for them and their children.

It doesn't seem that they knew Jesus personally. But if they had they would have quickly realized that this was just like Him. His concern wasn't about His own problems or his own pain, but He focused quickly and clearly upon the problems and pain that others face.

The third surprise: Unforgettable last words!

The Roman soldiers – Jesus' executioners – had crucified many men by nailing them to wooden crosses. As the dying men would scream and suffer, the soldiers would sit at the feet of the crosses and play games – desensitized to the incessant curses and pleas. They prided themselves on being men not caught by surprises. Yet never before had any of them heard what Jesus said.

Soon after his hands and feet were nailed to the cross and it was lifted and dropped into place in the ground, Jesus prayed audibly for His executioners, *"Father, forgive them because they do not know what they are doing"* (Luke 23:34).

It was enough to shock the toughest veteran. It was enough to make a man think before he went to sleep that night.

So it's no wonder that when the centurion made his final inspection after Jesus' death, he paused at the cross and praised God by saying, *"Surely this was a righteous man"* (Luke 23:47).

The forgiveness of Jesus was a surprise then, but it is still a surprise today. I'm surprised by His forgiveness. He knows our worst sins so well, yet Jesus' heart still seeks to forgive.

A gasp and celebration

On the day Christ died, the angels must have been struck speechless at God's sacrifice. But perhaps even more amazing to them was the conversation between Christ and a common criminal (Luke 23:42-42)

For the condemned thief on the cross, time was running out. Regardless of what he had said or done before, in the end, he did fear God. He realized that his judgment after death would be totally determined by God.

Like the convict on the far side who insulted Jesus (Luke 23:39), this man must have come to the cross with some advance knowledge of who Jesus was and what He could do. He understood Jesus was no criminal. Even more important, he must have realized Jesus was God's Son who was headed back home, to Heaven, by way of Paradise.

Believing this, the thief decided to make one last request. He asked Jesus to remember him when he arrived in Paradise. What an interesting contrast between the criminal who mocked Jesus to save him physically and this man who sought Jesus to save him spiritually.

Of course, Jesus said *"Yes!"* He was being crucified for this very purpose – to save sinners and to promise heaven to all those who ask.

Two thousand years later, the invitation still stands!