

CHRIST'S RESURRECTION THE SIGN OF HIS COMING

By Paul Penno

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David Seamands tells of a Muslim who became a Christian in Africa: "Some of his friends asked him, 'Why did you become a Christian?' He answered, 'Well, It's like this. Suppose you were going down the road and suddenly the road forked in two directions and you didn't know which way to go, and there at the fork in the road were two men, one dead and one alive. Which one would you ask which way to go?'"

Death is the greatest of humankind's enemies, a relentless Grim Reaper that shows no respect for age or wealth. Today we are attending the funeral of twenty-six-year-old Justin Wright, who collapsed in his San Francisco office last Tuesday, of heart failure. He is the son of Janet Wright, a long-time teacher at the Napa Adventist School. Justin was a bright young man who had completed his college education and was launched into a promising career as a computer technologist involved in animation projects for Pixar. Death is a constant threat to everyone who treads this earth.

Dodging insurgent gunfire, a 19-year-old Lake Jackson, Texas, soldier used her body to shield five injured comrades after a roadside bomb struck her convoy in Afghanistan last spring. That act of bravery has earned her the Silver Star which she received on Thursday from Vice-president, Dick Cheney.

Army Spc. Monica Lin Brown is only the second woman since World War II to receive the medal, one of the nation's highest military awards given for gallantry in combat.

Monica Brown, a medic, was part of a four-vehicle convoy patrolling near Jani Kheil in the eastern province of Paktia when a bomb struck one of the Humvees on April 25, military officials said.

After the explosion, she braved insurgent gunfire and mortars to reach five wounded soldiers. She shielded them as she administered aid and helped drag them to safety, the military said.

"I did not really think about anything except for getting the guys to a safer location and getting them taken care of and getting them out of there," said Monica Brown from a U.S. base in the province of Khowst.

When He was asked for a sign from heaven, He said: "An evil and adulteress generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall be no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas; for as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Matt. 12:39, 40.

A period of three days and three nights covered Christ's betrayal, mock trial and humiliation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension to heaven to receive from the Father and the heavenly host the acceptance of His sacrifice and the acclamation of King of glory. He did ascend to heaven and return again, before He allowed the disciples to approach Him. John 20:17.

Christ was "crucified through weakness, but He liveth by the power of God." 2 Cor. 13:4. He said, "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me. This He said signifying what death He should die." John 12:32, 33. His being "lifted up from the earth" was His crucifixion. Now put the statements of the two texts together. It is when He is lifted up—crucified—that He draws all to Him; and He was crucified through weakness. Never could man be more absolutely helpless than when hanging on a cross. So we see that Christ's power to draw all to Him comes through His weakness. In His weakest condition He draws all to Him.

One morning the pastor was working in his study when the custodian came in and announced there was a man outside to see him, giving him the man's card. The pastor read the card, which indicated the visitor was the captain of the *Mauritania*, the largest passenger vessel afloat. So the pastor went out to meet the man. The captain said, "You have a very beautiful church here." The pastor replied, "We are very grateful for all that was done by our faithful predecessors 100 years ago." The captain went on, "It is very much like the Basilica at Ravenna in Italy." The pastor responded, "Actually, it's an architectural duplication. In fact, years ago they brought workmen from Italy to do the tessellated ceilings and the marble columns and the mosaic. But you didn't come to talk about architecture, did you?" The man said, "No. Twenty-three times a year I sail the Atlantic. When I come down the bank of Newfoundland, I hear your broadcast out of Boston. And as I came in this week I thought to myself, 'I've got twenty-four hours in New York, I'm going to go see Dr. Barnhouse.' And here I am."

Dr. Barnhouse was evidently very straightforward because then he said, "Sir, have you been born again?" The captain replied, "That's what I came to see you about." By this time they had reached a chalkboard in the prayer room, and the pastor drew three crosses on the chalkboard. Underneath the first one he wrote the word "in." Underneath the third he wrote the word "in." Underneath the middle cross he wrote the words, "not in." He said, "Do you understand what I mean when I say that those men who died with Jesus had sin within them?" The captain thought and said, "Yes, I do. And I know Christ did not have sin within him." Then over the first cross and over the third cross the pastor wrote the word "on" He said, "Do you understand what that means?" The captain wrinkled his brow. The pastor said, "Let me illustrate. Have you ever run through a red light?" "Yes." "Were you caught?" The man said, "No." "Well, in running that red light you had a sin *in you*. If *you* would have been caught, you would have had sin *on you*. The thieves were bearing the penalty of God." Then he wrote another "on" over Jesus Christ and said, "He bore your sins. There was no sin *in* him, but the sin was laid *on* him." Then he took the side of his chalk and over the first thief he crossed out the *on*, drew an arrow over to Christ, and said, "His sins rested on Christ by virtue *of* his faith in Christ." Then he said, "How about you?"

The captain was a very tall, distinguished man of British carriage, and as he stood there for a moment, the pastor could see he was fighting back tears. He said to the pastor, "By the grace *of* God, I am the first man." The pastor said, "You mean your sins are on Jesus?" He said, "Yes—God says my sins are on Jesus!" He shot out his hand and said, "That's what I came to find out!" The pastor invited him to lunch and shared further with him, and the man went back to New York City a glowing Christian.

"He liveth by the power of God." That is why He can draw all to Him in His weakness; for the strength of God is made perfect in weakness. He was "declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead." Rom. 1:4. The resurrection from the dead did not make Him the Son of God, but demonstrated that He was the Son of God. He was "quickened by the Spirit," the "Spirit of holiness" by which He lived. Thus the resurrection was only a manifestation of the power by which He had lived a holy life during the thirty-three years that He lived among men. He was raised from the dead, because "in Him was life." He Himself was, as He is now, "the resurrection and the life."

The proof of this is seen in the fact that by His words, which were Spirit and life, He brought people from the dead. The life that was in Him, made others live. So the wonder of the resurrection from the dead was continually manifested before the eyes of those with whom Jesus lived and worked, and they did not recognize it. He Himself was the sign, the proof, that the kingdom of God had come to them.

Christ was no weaker on the cross of Calvary than in the manger in Bethlehem; and as His weakness is His bearing of the cross for man He was Christ crucified even while lying in the manger. In fact, we cannot know Christ at all, except as crucified. He has never been revealed to mankind except as the crucified One. And as He is always Christ crucified, so He is always Christ risen from the dead.

Martin Luther once was so depressed over a prolonged period that one day his wife came downstairs wearing all black. Martin Luther said, "Who died?" She said, "God has." He said, "God hasn't died." To which she replied, "Well, live like it and act like it."

The power that raised Him from the dead worked in Him through all His life. Lazarus was raised from the grave of corruption by the power of the holy life that was in Christ. It was the Spirit of holiness in Christ, that raised the dead, and that raised Him from the dead. It took no less power than that which raised Lazarus, and brought Jesus from the dead, to keep Him day by day the perfect, sinless Man that He was.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a thing of a day, but of a lifetime; and therefore it cannot be celebrated by the observance of a day, but only by a whole lifetime. And here is where we come to the joy of the truth that Jesus has forever identified Himself with humanity. As proof that He is not ashamed to acknowledge His relationship to us, and to call us brethren, He says: "Behold I and the children whom Thou hast given Me." Heb. 2:11-13. But this is but a portion of Isa. 8:18, where we read, "Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given Me are for signs and for wonders in Israel, for the Lord of hosts which dwelleth in Zion." Christ was a sign to the generation in which He lived,—the sign of the prophet Jonas; He was the resurrection and the life manifested among them through the weakness of human flesh; and "as He is so are we in this world." He associates us with Himself as signs and wonders also. Is there not life in the very thought?

Charles Colson saw firsthand evidence that Christ did indeed rise from the tomb. It was not scientific proof, but the convincing

demonstration of the lives of men and women—those locked in the hopelessness of prison—as well as those on the outside. Events in the life of former Judge William Bontrager serve as one very powerful illustration.

Bill Bontrager's story is interwoven with that of Harry Fred Palmer, a young Vietnam veteran who accepted Christ in 1977 while in jail awaiting sentencing for a string of house burglaries. His offense carried a mandatory ten- to twenty-year sentence in Indiana, though that law, already acknowledged as harsh, was changed just eighteen days after his arrest. Judge Bontrager, who had himself been converted to Christ a year earlier, reviewed Palmer's case carefully. He realized the mandatory ten-year sentence would destroy rather than rehabilitate Palmer, so he declared it unconstitutional. Bontrager ordered him to serve one year in the state penitentiary and then, upon release, to reimburse those he had robbed and provide community service.

Palmer did just that. He was a model prisoner; after release he was reunited with his wife and family and began paying back his victims. The case seemed closed, a model of justice, restitution, and restoration.

But the Indiana Supreme Court swung into action; claiming that Judge Bontrager had erred, they ordered him to send Palmer back to prison—for at least nine more years!

For Bontrager, the order was clearly a case of choosing between the law of man and the law of God. He had been reading the Old Testament prophets; the words of Amos seared his conscience. He knew the Supreme Court's order did not meet God's standard of justice and righteousness, but would instead punish a man twice for the same crime, merely to satisfy a technicality of the law.

So Bontrager stepped aside, turning the case over to another judge. A nightmarish sequence of events followed. The Court slammed Palmer into Westville Correction Center, declared Bontrager in contempt, fined him \$500, and sentenced him to thirty days in prison. Though that sentence was suspended, proceedings were begun to remove him from the bench. Rather than allow his own case to endanger Palmer's appeal for release, Judge Bontrager resigned.

His resignation was not without cost. Bill Bontrager gave up a comfortable salary, the judgeship he had always wanted, a position of respect. His radical talk about obeying God, not man, raised eyebrows in his community as well; it wasn't as if he left his post in a

blaze of glory to open a lucrative law practice. In fact, clients for his small firm have been very scarce. But, as his wife told me, “We are waiting on the Lord to provide—so we’re learning patience . . . if only we could encourage the phone company and a few other creditors to be patient too!”

So it was that Charles Colson invited private citizen, ex-judge Bill Bontrager and his wife to accompany him church services. Bontrager said nothing as we waited for guards to unlock the entrance to the auditorium, but as the steel doors swung open he bolted ahead of me and made his way into the crowd of waiting inmates. Seconds later he found Harry Fred Palmer—and the tall, lanky ex-judge embraced the young ex-burglar in prison denims, as tears rolled down their cheeks.

As I watched their reunion, the witness was clear: a man giving up a respected, comfortable life to fight for what is right, against inexorable processes of an often hostile world, is evidence that Christ lives.

Bill Bontrager is no saint. He’s a country boy at heart who wears cowboy boots and string ties. None of us who watched Bontrager and Palmer, brothers embracing in a modern-day tomb, could doubt that Jesus—the Prisoner who was executed—rose from His tomb and lives today.

Not only can the resurrection not be celebrated by the observance of a set day, but the very setting apart of a day for that purpose tends to obscure the reality of the resurrection. It fixes the mind upon an historical event, instead of calling attention to the all-pervading life which we are to allow free course within us.

Vance Havner, a well-known preacher was once asked to go to the Holy Land. He said, “No thanks.” When asked why, he answered, “I don’t want to go where Jesus was; I just want to stay right where He is!”

The resurrection of the dead is not a thing that took place one day nearly two thousand years ago, but it is the vital force by which the universe is kept in existence. The air is full of it, the heavens declare it, and the tiniest flower reveals it. Christ was “raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father” (Rom. 6:4), and “the heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1); yea, “the whole earth is full of His glory.” Isa. 6:3. Therefore everywhere in all creation we have a continual celebration of the resurrection of Jesus; and even so it may and should be in our bodies.

Robert Ingersoll, the agnostic, after delivering one of his addresses, pulled his watch from his pocket and said, "According to the Bible, God has struck men to death for blasphemy. I will blaspheme Him and give Him five minutes to strike me dead and damn my soul."

There was a period of perfect silence while one minute went by; two minutes passed, and people began to get nervous; three minutes, and a woman fainted; four minutes, and Ingersoll curled his lip.

At five minutes, he snapped shut his watch, put it in his pocket, and said: "You see, there is no God, or He would have taken me at my word."

The story was told later to Joseph Parker, who said, "And did the American gentleman think he could exhaust the patience of God in five minutes?" God manifested His life in that old infidel.

But "ye are a chosen generation, . . . that ye should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9); and God says: "This people have I formed for Myself; they shall show forth My praise." Isa. 43:21. This we do when the Lord is risen upon us, and His glory is seen upon us (Isa. 60:2); and He rises and is seen upon every one who fears His name and receives Him.

When God raised Jesus from the dead, He set Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, as Lord and ruler over all; and the power by which He did this we experience whenever we truly believe. Eph. 1:18-22. This, the power of Christ's resurrection, is also the power of His coming again in His kingdom; and thus the sign of Christ's second coming is the development of the kingdom of God in His followers. They, with Him are for signs and wonders from the Lord of hosts that dwelleth in Zion.

Let every professed follower of Christ, then, get a larger, a true view of His resurrection. Let the eyes be taken from a certain day, and fixed upon the one event of the eternal ages, the motive force of the universe. Look not backward to Joseph's tomb in the garden; but look up and all round, and see in every opening bud in the gardens and fields now, the evidence that "now is Christ risen;" and then know that the same power waits to manifest itself in you in all its glory. For just "as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations" (Isa. 61:11); for those who believe "shall blossom, and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit." And thus by the ever-present resurrection

of Christ in those who believe will God's kingdom come, and His will be done in earth as it is in heaven.

At the height of Desert Storm, that Ruth Dillow received a very sad message from the Pentagon. It stated that her son, Clayton Carpenter, Private First Class, had stepped on a mine in Kuwait and was dead.

Ruth Dillow later wrote, "I can't begin to describe my grief and shock. It was almost more than I could bear. For three days I wept. For three days I expressed anger and loss. For three days people tried to comfort me, to no avail because the loss was too great."

But three days after she received that message, the telephone rang. The voice on the other end said, "Mom, it's me. I'm alive." Ruth Dillow said, "I couldn't believe it at first. But then I recognized his voice, and he really was alive." The message was all a mistake!

She said, "I laughed, I cried, I felt like turning cartwheels, because my son whom I had thought was dead, was really alive. I'm sure none of you can even begin to understand how I felt."