

Shaking and Quaking

Matthew 28:1-10

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On this Easter morning the gospel of Matthew tells us the great day of resurrection began with a violent earthquake. With that violent earthquake the very foundation of the world in which we live was shaken in mighty ways that reverberate even now. The shaking of the foundation that took place with that violent earthquake Easter morning was and is unprecedented. But if we know the history of God's relationship with the chosen people of Israel, there are numerous precedents of the foundations of the earth being shaken. When the earth quakes and the foundations shake, you know God's mighty hand is at work. When the earth quakes and the foundations shake, those people and those structures that seem so formidable and inspire such fear get knocked right down to the ground. When the earth quakes and the foundations shake, the mighty crumble, and while the mighty crumble God lifts up the humble, the meek, and the lowly. What happens on Easter Sunday when the earth quakes and the foundation shakes is unprecedented. But if we know the history of God's relationship with the chosen people of Israel, there are numerous precedents of the foundations of the earth being shaken.

The ruler of Egypt had an enormous amount of power and his influence was felt far and wide. Unlike previous rulers of Egypt, previous Pharaohs, one Pharaoh rose to power who did not know Joseph or the God who directed affairs for the children of Israel. This Pharaoh used his power to enslave the children of God. This Pharaoh used his power to oppress the people of God. This Pharaoh used his power to ruthlessly rule the people of Israel and to make their lives bitter with hard labor. This Pharaoh commanded the midwives to kill the baby boys born to the Hebrew women. This Pharaoh authored the cruel edict that every Hebrew boy should be thrown into the Nile River.

Pharaoh was firmly established in power. Pharaoh governed Egypt with an iron fist. Two brothers, the younger one already being a ripe 80 years of age, made their way into the halls of power, into the courts of Pharaoh. They cleared their throats and said in a halting voice with a timid stutter, "The God of Israel says, 'Let my people go.'" Pharaoh fired back this bold and brazen reply, "Who is the Lord that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go." Pharaoh didn't even notice the first tremors as he mocked the Lord and the shabby servants he sent, servants named Moses and Aaron. Pharaoh did not notice the tremors but the earth had begun to quake. The foundations had begun to shake.

As rivers turned to blood and frogs piled up in houses and courtyards, as gnats came like a cloud of dust and flies swarmed the land, as livestock were laid low and boils burst out on the skin of the animals and the people, as hail ruined the crops and locusts came along to devour the little that remained, Pharaoh began to notice his swagger was starting to sway, his throne was starting to tilt, and in the chaos and confusion his crown had slipped awkwardly onto the side of his head. Pharaoh began to realize the foundation was shaking and the earth was quaking. By the time the Passover was complete, and the cries of mourning from all who lost their firstborn echoed through the land, you would think Pharaoh would have figured out his time was up. But during the height of the earthquake, as his reign of terror was crumbling beneath his feet, Pharaoh loaded up his chariots and chased the Israelites right into the Red Sea. That mighty earthquake parted the waters of the sea and the Israelites walked through on dry land. But when that earthquake was done separating the waters the waves crashed back down upon Pharaoh and his army of chariots. If we know the history of God's relationship with the chosen people of Israel, we know there are precedents for the foundations of the earth to quake and shake and for the mighty to fall.

The walls of Jericho must have cast an ominous shadow as the Israelites circled that imposing fortress. Some speculate the walls were structured on a three tiered plan. "The walls started with an earthen rampart, or embankment, which ran from ground level upwards on an incline to a stone retaining wall - the second tier. The stone retaining wall stood 12 to 15 feet in height (4-5m) on top of the earthen embankment. On top of the stone retaining wall, stood another wall made of mud-bricks, 6 feet (2m) thick, and 20 to 26 feet (6-8m) high. Together these two walls combined to form a fortification 32 to 41 feet high.¹

As imposing as Jericho was, we have witnessed the power of an earthquake as it brings tall buildings to the ground or collapses freeways into a heap of concrete rubble. But you have never seen the earth quake or foundations shake simply because of a trumpet blast and the shouts of a crowd. The Jericho story sets the precedent that when God is ready to bring the mighty to their knees all God has to do is give his people their marching orders. Following God's instructions Joshua told the people of Israel, "March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpet, have all the people give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse..." (Joshua 6:2-5) Sure enough, on that seventh day, after that seventh time circling the city, at the sound of the trumpet, when the people gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed...and Jericho...that mighty fortress of a city crumbled and was conquered. If we know the history of God's relationship with the chosen people of Israel, we know there are precedents for the foundations of the earth to quake and shake and for the mighty to fall.

¹ Israel-a-history-of-.com, The Walls of Jericho

When God causes the earth to quake and foundations to shake even the mightiest of giants will be brought to his knees. The perpetual enemy of the Israelites, the Philistines, put forth their champion in battle. His name was Goliath. Goliath was over nine feet tall. He had a bronze helmet and a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing the equivalent of 125 pounds. On his legs he wore bronze greaves, and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, complete with an iron point that weighed another 15 pounds. You can imagine the confidence the Philistines had in Goliath, that giant of a champion. Maybe he walked in a syncopated rhythm, with his footsteps crashing down into the earth sending shock waves of fear upon the Israelites, as the gloating Philistines chanted with glee. Stomp, Stomp Clap! Stomp, Stomp Clap! Stomp, Stomp Clap! We will, we will rock you!

After scrounging around for a champion of their own, after the king offered his daughter in marriage, after the king promised great wealth, and after he even threw in a tax exemption for the champion's whole family, the best fighter Israel could put forth was a shepherd boy who didn't even have the physique to fit into a coat of armor. The story of that little shepherd boy who squared off with the giant named Goliath made such a lasting impact that you can count on hearing about David and Goliath every year during the college basketball tournaments or when a single individual takes on a powerful corporation. David and Goliath is an example of the God who causes the earth to quake and the foundations to shake.

All David took into battle was his shepherd's staff, a pouch with five smooth stones, and a sling. Goliath saw that shepherd's staff and he lit up with anger and fury. The slobbering giant feigned indignation at a little pip squeak who would dare come at him with nothing but a stick. He shouted threats at David. "Come here and I'll give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field." The ground under David's feet might have felt like it was shaking as he stared up at Goliath and felt the rush of wind coming from the giant's mighty lungs as he breathed fire and disdain. But in an instant the foundations of the earth shook for Goliath. "As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground." (I Samuel 17) One little stone felled the giant. Who rocked whom? Stomp, Stomp Clap! Stomp, Stomp Clap! If we know the history of God's relationship with the chosen people of Israel, we know there are precedents for the foundations of the earth to quake and shake and for the mighty to fall.

So Jesus comes to Jerusalem, riding on a donkey and reveling in the acclaim of the crowds who shout, “Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest.” We know from the gospel stories that Jesus faces opposition in Jerusalem. Religious leaders have been plotting his death. Rome is firmly aligned against anyone who would try to take the title of Lord away from Caesar. Sin does not want to relinquish the vicious and violent grip it holds over human beings. Satan knows there is an impending battle and he has been waiting, waiting with all his evil intentions for just the right moment to strike at Jesus. And death, death which has reigned ever since the days of Adam, is fully intent on delivering its deadly sting and robbing human life of joy and victory. Despite all this opposition, Palm Sunday comes and we are completely confident that because of the precedent set when Moses delivered the Israelites and when the walls of Jericho came crashing down and when the intimidating giant tumbled to his death, we are completely confident when Jesus rides into Jerusalem that the earth is about to quake and foundations are about to shake for all those who oppose God’s kingdom.

Palm Sunday gives Jesus a bit of a running start as he hurls himself against the walls of opposition he will meet in Jerusalem. Like Jericho there are seven days of preparation for the walls to fall. Sunday there is the parade. According to Mark on Monday Jesus cleaned house at the temple. On Tuesday Jesus parried the pesky questions of the religious leaders as they asked him about the source of his authority. It is not exactly clear what takes place on Wednesday but some time in there Jesus teaches in the temple, he responds to questions about taxes and rendering unto Caesar, he affirms the great commandments of loving God and loving neighbor, he warns that a day will come when not one stone of the temple will remain standing, and more than that a day will come when Jesus himself will return to establish the eternal kingdom of God. Although the events of Wednesday are a little fuzzy, we know for certain where Jesus was Thursday night as he gathered with his disciples for the Last Supper. That night he prayed in Gethsemane. That night he was arrested. That night, while Jesus was facing false accusation and being spat upon his close disciple Peter was denying he ever knew him.

Then came Friday with the mocking of the soldiers, the crucifixion, the taunts that having saved others he really ought to save himself, the mournful cry of Jesus from the cross voicing the God-forsaken experience of dying a humiliating death and the darkness that covered the face of the earth for three excruciating hours. On that Friday Joseph of Arimathea placed the dead body of Jesus in a tomb and rolled a stone in front of the entrance to the tomb. By Saturday everyone was exhausted and in shock, emotionally, spiritually, and physically spent from watching Jesus endure his terrible death. By the seventh day with Joshua the people were circling the city seven times, spurred on by loud and triumphant trumpet sounds and

capped off with a shout that filled the air and caused the walls to come tumbling down. By the seventh day in Jerusalem there was nothing but disappointment and despair...disappointment, despair, and death. Once again death had won its victory. Once again death triumphed with its cruel and painful sting.

When we examine the work God did through Jesus Christ, it really is unprecedented.

- God had established a precedent with the Exodus that the halls of power are corrupt, that Pharaoh will be humbled, that a raised staff will do miraculous things and the whole experience result in triumph and celebration. But Jesus ran up against the religious leaders and the awesome power of Rome and as the hammers pounded the nails into his flesh they might as well have been hammering shut the lid of his coffin. No victory in Jerusalem. Caesar the Lord was doing just fine sitting on his throne in Rome.
- God had established the precedent at Jericho that the walls of hostility would come tumbling down with just the sound of a trumpet and the shouts of the people. But Jesus wasn't even around to march on the seventh day in Jerusalem. Jesus was already in the tomb. The walls of hostility stood just as firm and just as formidable they had ever been. Jesus not only did not bring down walls, he suffered the humiliation of dying outside the city gate, outside the walls, as the author of Hebrews writes so poignantly, "Bearing disgrace" he died outside the walls of the city. (Hebrews 13:13)
- God had established the precedent that when little old David stared down Goliath the giant would fall helplessly to his death, felled by one smooth stone. But when Jesus stood up against the powers of the devil, the powers of sin, the powers of death, Jesus was not the one slinging a stone. Crucified, dead, and buried, he was tucked quietly into a tomb and the powers of the devil, the powers of sin, and the powers of death slammed a stone tight against the mouth of the tomb. The giants of sin, of Satan, and of death threw out a stone that crushed the humble carpenter from Nazareth.

God had established a precedent for how his power and his might would make the earth quake and the foundations shake. But with Jesus there was no victory, no triumph, no dancing, no glory, and no rejoicing. Jesus died and the foundation of oppressive and proud kingdoms like Rome, the foundation of the walls of hostility, the foundation of the powers of sin, the powers of the devil, and the powers of death were all intact. Yes, God had established a precedent for how the earth would quake and the foundations would shake. But nothing before and nothing after prepared us for what God would do through Jesus.

Listen again to the great good news of the unprecedented blessing that comes through Jesus Christ. The God of all power and might took on human flesh, being born as a baby in a manger. Jesus displayed the power of God through healings and signs and wonders, but when it came to his own protection Jesus set aside all power. Jesus became weak on our behalf. Instead of following the precedent of victories at the Red Sea and victories at Jericho and victories over giants, Jesus chose the path of the Suffering Servant. “He had no beauty that we should be attracted to him...he was despised and rejected by human beings, he was a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.” (Can you hear the taunts of the guards, the jarring pain as a crown of thorns was jammed on his head, the deep wounds as hammer and nail pinned his flesh to the cross?) But his suffering and his death were not in vain. His suffering and his death brought an unprecedented victory for humanity. “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.” (The Suffering Servant passage is found in Isaiah 53).

When Jesus suffered and died the stage was set for God to make the earth quake and the foundations shake in a new and amazing way. Like Ezekiel the prophet had envisioned so many years before, during a time of total defeat, during the humiliation of the exile, when the people wondered if they would ever experience life again, somehow in the darkness of the tomb dry bones began to live and the Spirit began to work, Somehow in the darkness of the tomb, a place where death reigned supreme, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the dry bones came together, bone to bone. Tendons and flesh appeared, and in a miracle we will never completely comprehend the grave opened its mouth and Jesus burst forth from life into life. As Matthew said, on Easter morning there was a violent earthquake and the stone was rolled away from the tomb. It took an angel to explain what happened. “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.” God made the earth quake and the foundations shake and something unprecedented happened. The Son of God rose from the dead.

The suffering of Jesus, the death of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus were God’s means of shaking the foundations of this world.

- The earth shook and Caesar’s throne was rattled to the core. There is a new Lord in town, and his name is Jesus.
- The earth shook and those walls came tumbling down as Jesus destroyed the dividing walls of hostility and brought a peace to this earth that is lasting and true.
- The earth shook and the stone from the tomb rolled away, and rolled and rolled until it socked old Satan in the forehead, and he tipped over in defeat.

- The earth shook and the stone from the tomb came down on sin, covering all the sin of this world through the reconciliation and forgiveness found in Jesus Christ.
- The earth shook and the stone from the tomb came crashing down on the final enemy, the final obstacle, the final foe. The stone from the tomb crushed death, removing the sting of death and robbing death of its victory. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin...but thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (I Corinthians 15:55-57)

The stone that was rolled away from the tomb not only shook the foundations of this earth in an unprecedented way, the stone also became one of the foundational images the early church used to describe what God had done through Jesus. Drawing on the promise found in Psalm 118, the early church proclaimed that in Jesus, the stone the builders rejected became the capstone. Jesus was the ultimate piece in God’s puzzle, and his life, death, and resurrection was the crowning glory of the God who ransomed and redeemed his precious creation.

But capstone is not the only way to interpret the significance of the stone. Another way to translate the passage is to say, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” We need both images. Jesus is God’s crowning jewel, the capstone. And Jesus is the foundation for those who want to build their lives on something solid, something rock solid.

On this Easter Sunday, when the foundation of everything old and false and wrong and wicked has been shaken to its core, hear this. There is a foundation that has been revealed, a cornerstone that has been established, and you can build your life on that cornerstone, on that foundation, on that Savior and on that Lord we know as Jesus Christ. Jesus is the best gift God has to offer.

- Build on the foundation of Jesus Christ and you will experience life. You will experience God’s abundant life.
- Build on the foundation of Jesus Christ and you will receive the promise that nothing in all creation will ever separate you from God.
- Build on the foundation of Jesus Christ and you will find meaning and purpose in following him, learning from him, serving with him, and living in the fullness of his love and grace.

The foundations of this earth have been shaken. All that is false has crumbled to the ground. Now Jesus appears as the firm foundation for all who trust in him. Standing on the firm foundation of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, may our voices rise to God in a joyful affirmation of faith. “On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand...all other ground is sinking sand.”