

The Third Day Phenomenon (Part 2)  
Read 2 Samuel 24

I am prone to avoid conflict. Not the conflict of a battle—I am, after all, King David. In personal relationships, however, I sidestep discord. Yet, when Joab, the commander of my army (and long time advisor), resisted my demand for a census, I argued vehemently with him—to the detriment of my people.

“My lord,” Joab said to me, his stance becoming as unyielding as the boulders that plague our land, “we have enough soldiers to defeat any who intrude upon our territory. Numbering the men eligible to fight is a faithless offense to Yahweh your God, and could cause disastrous results.”

“Your religious fervor is humorous, Joab, for you are more superstitious than God-fearing,” I said. I was inflamed at this obstacle to my desires and wanted the unending quarrel to cease, so my words became a command: “I must know that I am not vulnerable to the forces that surround my nation.” Joab suppressed a retort but exhibited his displeasure by spinning away from me and trudging heavily from the room.

Nine months later, after Joab’s men had traipsed along a circular route covering all Israel, the task of counting men fit for my army was completed. Only then did I feel the prickle of self-reproach. Had not Abraham, with merely three hundred and eighteen servants and Gideon, with only three hundred farmers, defeated their enemies? Remorsefully, I approached the Lord and then awaited, with trepidation, His response.

Gad the prophet, his face marred by a tangle of wrinkles, and body bending as though bearing the hideous weight of words yet unspoken, entered into my court. Though I was anticipating an unpleasant reply from the Lord, I was not prepared for the horror of the choices He presented to me through His prophet. The final one seemed at the time the least dreadful.

Instead, the plague lasting three days proved more unbearable than I had expected. It made me wonder if one of the other two options—a seven year famine or a three month flight from my enemies—might have been less catastrophic for my people. Messengers from the uppermost regions to the southern tip of our land raced to bring me devastating news: cartloads of corpses were being hauled out of homes and dumped outside the walled-in towns. So when the angel of the Lord arrived in the skies above Jerusalem on the third day, hysteria, like bile rising from the pit of my belly, threatened to overtake me.

The angel, almost spanning the entire heavens, had an appearance of a human with a face and a set of wings for each direction, making turning unnecessary. The form of one face was like that of a man, the second was like a lion, the third like a bull, and the fourth like an eagle (I say “like” because the reality was indescribable). Its legs were straight and its feet were like a calf’s hoof; and the whole being shimmered like polished bronze. No wonder the ancients quivered with horror at an approach of the angel of the Lord.

As this angel stood atop the mount on which Jerusalem was built, I wailed for the Lord to stay the angel’s striking hand. “It is I who offended, I who did wrong. And these sheep, what have they done?” My hope was that, on this third day of the plague, the Lord would again show His graciousness as He had on previous third days, even as He had prevented Abraham from sacrificing his son on the third day.

Thus, when the Lord replied, I rushed to obey: Build an altar at the place where the angel is. That very place, a threshing floor owned by a farmer named Araunah, was also

the ground upon which Abraham had prepared to sacrifice his son. I paid Araunah silver for the land, even though he wanted nothing (how could I offer to the Lord something without cost?). Constructing an altar and presenting burnt offerings, I cried out for the Lord's mercy. And, immediately, He prohibited the hand of the angel from striking my people--on the third day.

Something dramatic frequently occurs on the third day in the Old Testament. In the previous article, I presented the story of Abraham, who was prevented from sacrificing his son—on the third day. The present story is an illustration of this phenomenon from 2 Samuel 24, and the angel's description is from Ezekiel 1. Paul refers to these occurrences when he states, in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, that the Scriptures foretell a third-day resurrection. Therefore, God does awesome things in the Bible, on the third day, to prepare us for this ultimate third-day event: Jesus' resurrection.