



# IT HAPPENED IN THREE DAYS

AND OTHER ESSAYS BY JIM SHELBURNE

THE CHRISTIAN  
**Appeal**

## Preface



Curtis Shelburne

**“A** couple of thousand years ago, something truly amazing happened in only three days,” writes Jim Shelburne. “A man was killed and buried on a Friday, and then on Sunday, he walked out of the tomb alive.” Our faith and hope center on the death, burial, and resurrection of the risen One, our Lord Jesus Christ. We hope you enjoy Jim’s essays in this issue as he focuses on the blessings that are ours because of those three days.

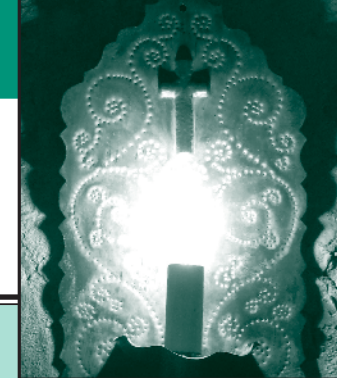
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## RESURRECTION: The Tomb IS EMPTY



Curtis Shelburne

**H**e is not here;  
he has risen,  
just as he said.  
**Come and see  
the place where  
he lay.”**

✱ Matthew 28

Curtis Shelburne



# seasons of LIFE

**ONE OF THE WISEST** things ever said by the wisest man who ever lived was this: “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

I guess if you wanted to paraphrase this in a more modern bumper-sticker-ish vernacular, you could say, “Seasons happen.” This simple reality is loaded with impact and import for our lives. One thing it points to is that everything changes, whether we like it or not. Everything that

is physical or temporal in nature changes! If you want proof, just look in the mirror or take a walk in a cemetery.

I’m not someone who always rolls with change especially well. Changes in government? Wow, we could use a few of those! Hurry please!

But often change impacts us in the more trivial

areas of life, areas that really don’t matter at all. I get a little grumpy when, for some reason, manufacturers decide to change the packaging on my toothpaste or shampoo after thirty years. It makes it hard to find, and it just doesn’t look right in the cabinet or taste the same. (I don’t recommend tasting the shampoo.) They don’t care what I think. They never ask. They just change away.

I work as a pastor for a

church. Of course, change never causes any problems in churches . . .

But as hard as change can be, can you imagine how difficult and dreadfully monotonous life would be if nothing changed? The late

“Everything changes, whether we like it or not. If you want proof, just look in a mirror or take a walk in a cemetery.”

great author C.S. Lewis wrote in his delightful *Chronicles of Narnia* series that one of the earmarks

of a land controlled by the force of evil was that it was a place where “it was always winter, but never Christmas.” Ah, but when the power of the terrible witch is beginning to break, Christmas returns. It’s the great interjection of light and life and warmth into a world gripped by the gray monotony of winter.

In the same way, what if it was always summer, but never the Fourth of July? What if it was always fall, but

never Thanksgiving? What if it was always spring, but never Easter? You get my point? All of those seasons are made special as the days shift and march from one event toward another, and we learn to look forward to the special times

we long for. We call them holidays (“holy days”), and they stand apart, giving us a time to pause

and a reason to do something a little different from the daily flow.

I love the seasons, and I love living in a place where we actually have them! The old wag around here is that if you don’t like the weather . . . just wait! Sometimes we’ve been known to experience all four seasons in one afternoon! (As I write, we’re moving into fall, my very favorite season. May it be long and glorious!)

Yes, seasons bring change. I officiated at a funeral for a

dear friend and fine man not long ago. Don Stark lived through 300 seasons, some 75 years, 40 of those years spent in our church. As faithful as the changing seasons, he stood out in his dependability and genuineness, season in

and season out. As years and circumstances changed, he remained constant.

Maybe the secret of his success in life was that he learned to roll with changes but never changed in what mattered most. When the “season” of cancer came into his life a few years ago, it changed much in his life circumstantially but nothing at all substantively. We learned a lot from him about living well, running the race faithfully, through life’s seasons. He knew that seasons change, but even the one bringing cancer and death doesn’t last

“**Ever since Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave, death has been curable, reversible.**”

forever. Ever since Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave, death has been curable. Reversible. People of faith, like Don, know that and keep running the race. In all seasons, they run with hope.

I’m in a season of life now (God has given me around 236 seasons, so far) that is the busiest and most demanding through which I’ve ever lived. I love what I do and hope God lets me do it until my last breath. But we all catch ourselves living in seasons when days seem to blur by at light speed. Life can become a rodeo-ish hanging-on so as not to get thrown or gored by the monster to which we’re saddled. This is why, friends, that God invented the Sabbath, a weekly season of rest and refocus. We need it! I need it! (“Physician, heal thyself!”)

Just don’t forget to cherish the seasons. They do have a limit. You may get 300, or more. You may not get any more. Each one matters!

If you are in a particularly challenging season of life—unemployed, or parenting grandchildren, or fighting a health battle, or caring for aging parents, or trying to ride a bull named “success,” or daily dealing with skirmishes that are relational or spiritual in nature—whatever the battle, keep repeating to yourself four words: It’s only a season. It’s only a season. It’s only a season.

It is, you know. It won’t last forever. And each season brings lessons; the hardest are often the most valuable. The one truth you simply must remember is that the God of all seasons never changes and is ever-faithful. He’ll walk with you through all seasons. You are never forgotten, never abandoned, never alone.



# in the bleak MIDWINTER

**AS I WRITE**, it's February. I'm not really a fan of January, and I'm glad to see it go. February, at least, holds some excitement.

Today, for example, even as I am writing, somewhere in the frozen eastern United States, a thousand brilliant people are standing outdoors cheering on a grumpy groundhog named Phil, wondering if this stuporous rodent, so unceremoniously removed from hibernation, will be able to predict the weather in the

entire United States for the next six weeks. Now that's pretty exciting stuff. Phil bats .500, as a rule. This is high winter drama indeed, but, after today, February kind of returns to the same mid-winter malaise as January.

I'm not depressed.

Really.

Not much anyway.

This is just Jim in winter, after Christmas. I love Christmas, and I especially love the lights. If I had been born a bass (I mean, a fish, not the male equivalent of an alto), my penchant for shiny and sparkly things would have quickly sealed my doom!

Each year I fight my own little rebellion against the

stark, bland, blackness of winter by leaving my Christmas lights on much longer than the average neighbor. There's just something reassuring and winsome about turning

the corner onto Everett Street as I head home and, yes, my lights are still shining, a collective

beacon of hope in the drab darkness. It welcomes and reassures me, while at the same time probably reassuring my neighbors that the local pastor is perhaps a bit . . . strange.

All of this to mention the sad fact that last week I surrendered to winter as I succumbed to the aforementioned neighborly (and "wifely") peer pressure

**“We have God’s promise that his decrees for nature, seasons, and cycles, will endure as long as the earth endures.”**

and to the tyranny of the calendar, and I took down my outdoor lights, a task I find as enjoyable as, say, doing tax preparation. I carefully evicted those little piercers of darkness from

trees and shrubs, neatly coiling each string as I laid it out like a wreath of

expired joy on the bleak, dead, brown, freeze-dried bermudagrass. But I'm not depressed.

It is, of course, necessary to put away Christmas stuff or it wouldn't be special at Christmas. If it was never dark, never cold—well, we wouldn't appreciate the power of light and the sanctity of warmth. It is unavoidably true in our lives

that there are going to be seasons bright and shiny and warm and joyous, while others are “January” times, winter times. Cold. Hard. Brittle. Grey.

It's just life. And thankfully

it's just a season. And all seasons pass.

The nights are already getting shorter;

the brave daffodils have already stuck their own tender shoots skyward, as if cheering on the grumpy groundhog and betting, foolishly perhaps, that we will not have six more weeks of winter.

The tree and rose bush limbs in my yard are pregnant with buds, and the warmer days of late have the henbit and

“

**The cycle of seasonal change itself is powerful proof that the God who ordains seasons does not change.**

”

dandelion armies poised for their yearly coup attempt against the dictatorial bermudagrass. Winter has just about had its say, and spring will soon overthrow it, though the tempted-to-bloom-too-soon fruit trees are no smarter than they were last year and will likely feel winter's parting “Not yet, Bucko!” slap.

Very early in its pages, the Bible refers to a natural covenant: “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease” (Genesis 8:22). That is a guarantee from God that some things continue to change, just according to schedule, as they always have. It's also a proof that God and his decrees for nature, seasons, and cycles, will endure as long as the

earth endures. The cycle of change, I guess you could say, is a powerful statement that God won't change, that he doesn't change, and that this Creator who ordains the seasons and tells them when to shift is just as constant and just as involved in the simple and not-so-simple details of our daily lives. That puts us in very good hands.

So it's dark again on my street, and maybe the neighbors have stopped wondering so much about my oddness. January's over and February won't last. Word on the streets in Philly is that Phil—the “prognosticator of all prognosticators”—did indeed see his shadow and is predicting six more weeks of winter. Rats, Phil! Nothing personal, but I hope you're wrong.







everything's going to be **OKAY**

**I SAW SOMETHING** that got my attention in the eastern sky last evening. Something rare. Something unexpected. It was a rainbow.

Now I know that rainbows are a fairly common occurrence; scientists would tell you that they are the result of the refraction of light through droplets of water vapor in the air, the result of a prism effect that in essence splits the light into different colors and wavelengths which then become visible in the distance.

Curtis Shelburne

And they would be right. That's how and why they happen, partly. Around these parts we consider them miraculous; it takes rain to make rainbows. We are always immensely thankful for rain, and we almost never have enough of it.

We had an inch yesterday

morning, and then, about 6:30 last evening, the sky darkened and the heavens opened again for a short burst of blessing.

It was over

fast. But it didn't leave without leaving also one sweet benefit—a well-defined half-rainbow in the northeastern sky, beautifully framed amidst the brownish-gray clouds, remnants of the tiny storm already blown through.

If you've read your Bible at all, you probably remember another storm and the story of Noah's flood in Genesis, and that afterward God makes a promise that he will never again destroy all life on earth with a flood. The conditions of that covenant are repeated a few times there

in Genesis 9, specifically, that the rainbow is an "everlasting covenant" between God and all living creatures. Interestingly enough, it is a one-sided covenant that depends only on God and his "never again" promise.

I admit that I've never worried

much about that promise. Where I live it would take a flood of Noahnine proportions to wet the dirt for more than a few days! And, even without a

“Where I live, we consider rainbows miraculous because it takes rain to make them, and we almost never have enough of it.”

flood, a very angry God could wipe the disease off the planet—or at least the part I inhabit—in a variety of ways: a tornado, a hailstorm, a wildfire, closing all the coffee shops, no donuts at church, etc. Natural disasters, you know.

I remember very well learning the story of Noah and the flood as a child, at the feet of my parents who faithfully read us Bible stories. I remember doing the same thing for my own children. What never dawned on me until many years later was how frightening that story might be to a child and that a vivid

imagination picturing everyone on the planet except for eight people drowning in a terrible flood might fuel some serious nightmares.

I don't know why it didn't bother me. Perhaps in my childlike understanding I could easily accept that if God had made all of humanity, it was within his right to "un-make" them. Maybe I lost the gruesome images in the more exciting details of the great ship and all of those two-by-two animals inside. Maybe I was more focused on the happy ending wrought by God's grace than the horrible ordeal wrought by man's sin and God's wrath.

In any case, the story didn't scar me for life, didn't make me fear God's wrath, or even make me prone to worry during thunderstorms that I might be missing the boat somewhere. But it did make me take notice of rainbows, then and now, reminded by them of God's gracious long-ago promise. Even as a child, rainbows made me

realize that God is first and foremost a God of love and mercy whose ultimate desire is reconciliation, not war; pardon, instead of vengeance; rainbows, and not devastating torrents.

As parents, my wife and I didn't shy away from this story of wrath

and grace as we taught our own kids. Once I asked my daughter Jamie what the rainbow means. In her five-year-old wisdom she quickly answered, "It

means everything's gonna be okay!" For a five-year-old, that's pretty deep theology. And she was right!

In spite of how "out of whack" life can get, how hard, how grueling, how difficult—God has promised us a hope that ultimately will not be disappointed. In spite of our sins and fallen-ness, through the amazing blood of Jesus Christ, we who were once "far off" have been "brought close" as brothers and sisters of Jesus and sons and daughters of God (Ephesians 2:13-14). Another one-sided covenant! But that is the nature

of God, and also the story of our relationship with him in spite of the fact that he could justly wipe us out at any moment, no explanation required.

A little later in the Old Testament, in Exodus, it's after Moses has seen the terrible wrath of God and has "begged" God to stay the hand of his wrath against the Israelites, that God introduces himself to Moses by name. "I am the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exodus 34:6). On the heels of his anger, God offers to Moses, and to us, the best picture of his essence.

I remember, uh, more than a few times from my childhood when after, with excellent reason, my mother had spanked me, the very first thing she did was to embrace me in her arms and remind me that I was loved and accepted. Not because of my evil, or my corrected state. Not because I would never disobey again, but even knowing I certainly would! I got spanked hard, but then I got loved harder. She really did "love me too much" to "let me act that way," but she was letting me know

that "everything's gonna be okay."

We need to hear that. Even as the tears and pain of our sinful choices or the cursed remnants of our fallen natures sting and burn. It's the message of Jesus on the cross—another brutal, gruesome, terrifying story.

The wrath of God is visited fully upon his own Son so that you and I would not have to pay the penalty for our sins. Or earn our salvation. Another one-sided covenant. Another exacting picture of justice and mercy, punishment and grace. And another storm that led to another rainbow, as the Light of the world's tears and blood were prism'd by the laser focus of first God's wrath colliding head-on with his love, then magnified by the Son's sacrifice and displayed as a masterpiece of grace.

Every rainbow is worth stopping to look at, as we remember where they really come from and what they really mean, these testaments of God's glory, reminders of God's grace. They are messengers of God's love. He wants us to know that after the storm—even when the storm has been brutal—everything is going to be okay!

“  
**Maybe I was more fixated on the happy ending wrought by God's grace than the horrible ordeal wrought by man's sin.**  
”





# what can happen in three **DAYS?**

**AS I'M SITTING HERE** this cool spring morning in my office, I'm a little numb to the fact that only three mornings ago I woke up in the desert of Puerto Peñasco, Mexico, where last week our group of almost fifty intrepid nomadic carpenters spent a *hot* week building a couple of houses during spring break. (We actually spend four days traveling and three days building.) It's always a blur looking back, and it's always amazing to me that over the span of three days two entire houses can be

Jim Shelburne

built from scratch. Here in the States you can spend three days on hold just trying to find a human who can answer a question about your cell phone bill.

I've done this nineteen times now, but the whole process still thrills me.

This house-building "miracle" our church group participates in every

spring is truly a "something from nothing" story. But can you imagine how much more amazing it must be to be the recipients of the house?

When we roll up on Day One, all that's there is perhaps an ancient trailer or a dilapidated shanty tacked together from scavenged pallets, tin, a few boards, and some tar paper. (This year's recipients already had very small homes, but very large, growing families. They needed

more space!) By our standards, the best of these houses are rather pitiful and forlorn—but it's the product of what they can do by themselves.

Nearby we find the staked-out footprint of the 242-square-foot house we'll

build for them. Only a footprint. No foundation, no walls, no roof, no house—nothing but a

huge pile of sand and gravel, thirty sacks of cement, a stack of lumber, and a couple of boxes of nails. These are raw—very raw—materials, to which we will add buckets of sweat.

To the folks living in that shanty, what we are about to accomplish in three days is, in most senses of the word, impossible—personally, practically, physically. While I have no doubt the resourceful people of Mexico could certainly build a house

“**Salvation is not about our merit; it's about our need. It's not about our effort; it's about our being chosen.**”

themselves, the folks we build for could never imagine being able to afford it. So to them it must seem a miracle. Not about their merit, but about their need. Not about their effort, but about being chosen. Not about repayment or debt—completely about acceptance and gratitude.

We drive up to a shanty and some bare ground and a carefully-guarded precious pile of materials that miraculously appeared in the last day or two, then three days later we leave behind a small but sturdy house with a door, windows, foundation, and roof. And some very happy homeowners!

Now hang with me as I'm changing lanes. The Christian life is really the same story. We start with our own old nothing and end up with a new everything that is

amazing and priceless and incredible—far beyond what we might ever have imagined. Spiritually speaking, before Christ found us, we were living in the dilapidated shanty of our own best efforts, a life that was the cobbled-together, pitiful

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**Before Christ found us, we were living in the dilapidated shanty of our own best efforts, a mess of our own making.**

”

mess of our own making. Trusting in our own resources, wisdom, and strength, we built on a foundation

as flawed and inadequate as its builders. The pallets and tar-paper of our do-it-yourself domains were obvious: pride, greed, lust, anger, fear, ignorance—the list of human building materials is long. It's the best we can do by ourselves.

And then something incredible and impossible happens. Against the backdrop of our abject poverty, we learn that we've been chosen for a “new house”—a new and better and brighter and richer existence than we'd ever

dreamed possible! But it comes to us in an unexpected way. It's not about our merit, it's about our need; it's not about our effort, but about our being chosen; nor is it about something we could repay as a debt, but is completely about our acceptance and gratitude.

Paul explains it this way in Ephesians 1: “He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and his will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us . . .”

It's about grace, purely and simply. It's about the pleasure of our Father. It's all his sweat, all his equity, all of his blood. And none of our own—because all of ours would never be even more than a miniscule fragment of “enough.” But his is absolutely that: enough!

A couple of thousand years ago something else truly

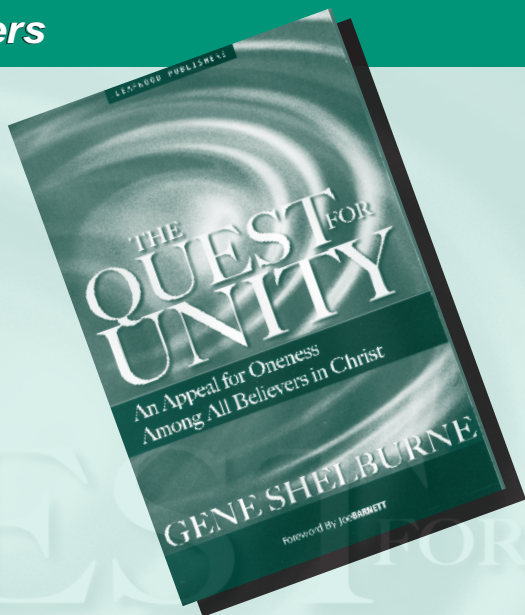
amazing happened in only three days: a man was killed and buried on a Friday, and then on Sunday, he walked out of the grave alive. It seemed impossible, too good to be true—but it was true. And it is because of that very truth of all truths that we are able to step from the old house we've built ourselves into the new one provided for us entirely by the grace of God. In the words of Watchman Nee, “Our old history ends with the cross; our new history begins with the resurrection.”

As we move toward the blessed season of Easter, I hope you'll spend some time considering the “house Jesus built” for you, and allow yourself to marvel and be amazed at the simple fact that you were chosen even before the foundations of the world were laid. And as you think about his power over all creation, including you, think about what can happen in three days.



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