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EASTER SUPERBOWL 2000 YEARS AGO

- a) **“And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted. And he saith unto them, Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: He is risen; He is not here: behold the place where they laid Him” [Mk 16: 5-6]**
- b) **“And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. And He laid His right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last. I am He that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and death” [Rev. 1: 17-18]**

In North America, Superbowl Sunday has become an annual ritual since 1967. On that day, the two best football [not soccer] teams face each other in “mortal combat” to determine the “World Champions”! It is staged during the winter [usually in January] in one of the sunshine states, stretching from California to Florida. This year’s 36th Superbowl was staged in New Orleans, Louisiana, on 3 February 2002 [moved to February because of the 11 September 2001 events].

The Superbowl is the most televised event of the year, which is watched all over the world. Unlike the other popular American sports [baseball and basket ball], which are decided on a seven-game play-off format, the Superbowl is a straight knockout. No matter your record all year, one little mistake can make the difference. In fact, the underdog teams tend to spring surprises, as happened this year when the New England Patriots defeated the formidable St. Louis Rams. Consequently, the event is unusually hyped [i.e., played up]. It attracts fans, tourists and gamblers, prostitutes, criminals and beefed-up security, and millions of television viewers. In the 35th Superbowl played on 28 January 2001, a 30-second television commercial spot cost US\$2 million just for airtime, and 69 commercials were aired!¹

Two thousand years ago, another kind of Superbowl took place. It was not televised, but it remains the biggest and most popular event in human history. The contest was between Jesus Christ and Satan, and it took place over a three-day period. It was finally decided on Easter Sunday in the year 33 A.D., or thereabout. As we mark this year’s Easter Sunday, it would be fitting to reminisce on that great event, the outcome of which has made us “more than conquerors through Him that loved us” [Rom. 8:37].

¹ “SuperBowl Commercials,” http://www.superbowl-info.com/super_bowl_commercials.htm

1. Background

The battle lines were drawn in the Garden of Eden. Satan had just succeeded in snatching the keys of life and access to God from Adam and Eve [Gen. 3; 6-7] after he himself had been locked out of heaven [Rev. 12:7-9]. God let Satan know with certainty: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, *and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel*” [Gen. 3: 15]. Over the next 4,000 years, Satan held sway, and the children of God were sustained by prophecies in the Law of Moses, the Psalms and the prophets concerning the Messiah [Lk 24: 44]. In due season, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born in flesh in Bethlehem [Lk 2: 1-14]. At the age of 30, He began His public ministry, which lasted for three years.

Even when His family members, disciples and temple leaders did not know who Jesus was, the satanic forces did. For example, soon after His water baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit on Him in the form of a dove, He encountered a man with an unclean spirit inside the synagogue at Capernaum. The evil spirit in the man screamed: “Let us alone; what have we to do with Thee, Thou Jesus of Nazareth? *Art Thou come to destroy us? I know Thee who Thou art, the Holy One of God*” [Mk 1:23-24]. As He went on His numerous healing missions, “unclean spirits, when they saw Him, fell down before Him, and cried, saying, *Thou art the Son of God*” [Mk 3: 11]. So, clearly, Satan and his forces knew that Jesus was not the kind of opponents that they had handled in the past! They knew that His earthly ministry was to rescue the world from the clutches of Satan, and to reconcile man back to God [Rom. 5:10], but they had no clue how God would carry out the plan through Jesus. Therefore, as the fateful weekend approached, there was heightened tension on both sides.

2. The Stakeholders

With the possible exception of the fans, most of those who participate in the American Superbowl are not there for the game. The team owners want to make profits on their franchise investments. The advertisers are selling their products. The pools bettors want to gain instant wealth. Prostitutes are these days called commercial sex workers! The players themselves want to earn fame and fortune. So, who were the stakeholders at the *Easter Superbowl* of 2,000 years ago?

Here are the key ones:

a) *The Roman authorities*

Palestine had always been a rebellious post for Roman soldiers and those posted there were always on red alert. The authorities had monitored the activities of Jesus in the last three years. Although He was known to preach peace, love and forgiveness, the huge crowds that followed Him was a cause for concern. The recent unrest instigated by Barabbas had led

to the death of several Roman soldiers [Lk 23: 18-19], and the authorities would not want to take chances with Jesus.

b) *The temple leaders*

Jesus was a mortal challenge to the authority of the Sanhedrin, the Council of the religious leaders who wanted Him killed [Matt. 26: 3-4]. They kept Him under close watch in order to obtain incriminating evidence against Him [Lk 20: 1-8].

c) *The disciples*

As they marched towards Jerusalem, the disciples were already jostling for key positions in Jesus' coming kingdom [Matt. 18:1]! The sons of Zebedee chose the right and left seats of Jesus in that kingdom, and their mother joined in the lobby game [Matt. 20:20-28; Mk 10:35-45]. His talk about His impending suffering and death did not make sense to them because a man who could raise Lazarus and others from the dead could not be killed by anybody!

d) *The people*

These were the 'fans'. In the past three years, Jesus had provided the best welfare scheme [healing, free food, spiritual comfort] that neither the Romans nor the Sanhedrin could match. Jesus was so popular among them that the temple leaders dared not lay their hands on Him [Lk 19:48]. However, Jerusalem crowds were never known to be loyal. When a cause failed, the popular cry was "to thy tents, O Israel" [1 Kgs 12:16].

e) *The loyal Marys and some friends in high places*

A group of intensely loyal women, notably Mary the mother of Jesus, her sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene, were there all the way to the cross and the tomb [Jn 19:25; Mk 16:1-2]. Among the highly placed friends of Jesus were Joseph of Arimathea, whose sepulchre was used to bury Jesus, and Nicodemus, the Pharisee who had come to Jesus by night. Without these influential people, the body of Jesus might have remained longer on the cross, or been buried in an unknown place [Jn 19: 38-42].

3. The hype!

Ordinarily, Jesus avoided Jerusalem because it was hostile territory. However, a few days to His crucifixion, He headed for that city with a determination that baffled His disciples. That heightened their expectation that "the kingdom of God should immediately appear" [Lk 19:11]. You can then imagine His disciples' elation when Jesus rode triumphantly into the city, and the people celebrated, singing, "Hosanna; Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord" [Mk 1: 1-11]. He went straight into the temple, cleansed it of traders and their goods [Mk 11: 15-19], and took the temple leaders head on. During the next two days

[Tuesday and Wednesday], Jesus came in and out of Jerusalem, preaching, teaching and healing in the temple, and nobody seemed to be able to stop Him [Lk 19: 47-48; 20: 1-8]. At night, He would stay outside of Jerusalem, in the Mount of Olives. In the morning, the people came early to the temple to hear Him [Lk 21: 37-38].

On Thursday, the day of the feast of the Passover, Jesus moved into Jerusalem from the suburb. In the evening, He ate with His disciples and instituted the Lord's Supper [Matt. 26:26-29], and washed His disciples' feet [Jn 13: 4-14]. Meanwhile, Satan was also building up his team, plotting how to arrest Jesus [Matt. 26: 3-5].

4. The Match begins!

The American Superbowl is a daylight event. The superdome where it is held is filled to the brim with thousands of spectators. Television crews from all over the world are ready. The tension is razor-sharp. Then, the two teams come out and the atmosphere becomes electric! The *Easter Superbowl* of 2000 years ago was different. By the time the spectators woke up on Friday, the first half was almost over. At dawn on Easter Sunday, the second half was over and the result was being rumoured in hushed tones!

Here is just a glimpse of the whole match:

a) *Satan is off to a clear lead!*

Remember what Jesus had earlier told His disciples: "Therefore doth My Father love Me because I lay down My life, that I might take it again. *No man taketh it from Me, but I lay it down Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again*" [Jn 10: 17-18]. Therefore, as the appointed day got closer, Jesus divested Himself of His divinity so as to face Satan as a man of flesh and blood like us. We can then appreciate why He agonized so much in the Garden of Gethsemane, "and being in agony He prayed more earnestly: and His sweat was as it were drops of blood falling down to the ground" [Lk 22: 44].

Satan moved quickly because he was sure that this Second Adam would fall easily like the first Adam. He entered into Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus [Lk 22:3]. He grabbed Peter and shook up the usually bold man who went on to deny His master three times [Lk 22: 31-34]. Then, being the "prince of this world" [Jn 14:30], Satan had no problem rallying the high priest and his council, and the Roman authorities to arrest Jesus on Thursday night. All the disciples of Jesus forsook Him and fled [Mk 14: 43- 50].

All that night, the Jewish leaders questioned Jesus but they could not find anything to hang on Him, except that He claimed to be the Son of God. On that basis they condemned Him to death [Lk 22:66-71]. However, since the Sanhedrin had no authority under Roman law to try criminal cases, the leaders beat up and mocked Jesus before bringing Him to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. There, they charged Him with calling Himself king [Lk 23: 1-5], a direct affront to the Roman Emperor!

Here as in the Sanhedrin, Jesus refused to defend Himself. By this time, the people who had gone to bed the night before with the picture of an indestructible Jesus might have been shocked to see a pathetic figure, bound and in tattered clothes the following morning. Their allegiance shifted immediately! So, when Pilate then asked whom to set free between Jesus and Barabbas, they preferred the latter [Lk 23: 13-25]. By 9.00 a.m., that Friday morning, Jesus had been crucified [Mk 15:25] and by 3.00 p.m., He was dead on the cross [Lk 23:44]. That was the end of the First Half of the *Easter Superbowl*, and Satan and his forces celebrated! Little did they know what Jesus had in store for them during the Second Half.

b) *Jesus wins!*

From 12 noon that Friday till 3.00 p. m. when Jesus died, God made it clear to everyone around Calvary and, in deed, Jerusalem, that His Son was the one on the cross. With His blood shed on Calvary, Jesus “entered in once into the Holy Place, having obtained eternal redemption for us” and “for this cause, He is the Mediator of the New Testament” [Heb. 9: 12, 15]. As evidence of this truth, the whole earth was in total darkness for the three-hour period and the veil of the temple was torn in halves [Lk 23: 44-45], symbolic of man’s access to God once more!

Where was Jesus after His death on Friday and before His resurrection on Sunday? He was playing the Second Half of the *Easter Superbowl*! Remember, He had told one of the thieves crucified with Him, “Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise” [Lk 23:43]. Remember also that heaven had been shut against human beings after the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden. That is why in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the dead saints went into “Abraham’s bosom” while the wicked went to hell [Lk 16: 22-23].

Jesus “descended first into the lower parts of the earth” [Eph. 4:9], “by which also He went and preached unto the spirits in prison” [1 Pet. 3:19]. “Having spoiled principalities and powers, He made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it” [Col. 2:15]. Then, He grabbed the “keys of hell and death” [Rev. 1:18] from Satan and “led captivity captive” [Eph. 4:8]. David captured this epic battle in one of the Messianic Psalms as follows:

Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle... Who is this King of glory? The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of glory [Ps. 24: 7-8, 10].

Matthew's gospel records the events of that Friday afternoon as follows:

And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom, and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who slept arose, and came out of the graves after His resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many. Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God [Matt. 27:51-54]

Satan could not believe what he saw! He made a final feeble attempt. Through the Sanhedrin leaders, he went to Pilate to order that the grave of Jesus be sealed so that His disciples would not steal His body and claim that He had resurrected. His request was granted. The Emperor's seal was put on the tomb, meaning that it could only be broken under pain of death, and Roman guards were placed there! [Matt. 27:62-66]. On Easter Sunday, the vibration from the resurrection of Jesus was too much for the Roman seal! [Matt. 28:2]. The guards knew that Jesus had defeated death, even when they took bribes to say otherwise! [Matt. 28:11-18]. As the angel told Mary Magdalene, the first of the faithful to hear the good news, "He is not here; *for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay*" [Matt. 28: 6].

After ascending to show His resurrected body to His Father [Jn 20:17], Jesus appeared to numerous witnesses in Israel, all believers, until He finally ascended to Heaven. Now, He remains with us always, "even unto the end of the world" [Matt. 28: 16-20]. Defeated, bruised and battered, Satan is still shamelessly making war on those who "have the testimony of Jesus Christ" [Rev. 12: 17].

5. Postscript

Jesus rose from the dead. That is irrefutable. That has established His credibility, and validated His ministry and divinity, and our faith. However, His greatest gift to us is His atoning death on the cross. By it, He has reconciled us to His Father, and with His stripes, we are healed [Is. 53: 5]. Alleluia!