

By Mike Cain, ISI Staff in Riverside, CA

I would like to tell you the “Legend of Nian”, the traditional story of the first Chinese New Year. The legend tells of a man eating beast called Nian. He was monstrously huge with a long horn, large sharp teeth and a mouth so big he could swallow two men at a time. He was very fierce and always hungry. He lived in the deepest part of the sea except for one night in late winter he would get so hungry that he would come out of the water and roam the streets of the village looking for someone to gobble up. So every year on New Year’s night the villagers would take their old and young and hide in the mountains.

One year just before the New Year an old grey haired man came into town and asked for some food and a place to stay for the night. The villagers told him this was the night when Nian came so he best come with them to hide but he claimed he could rid them of the monster forever. They begged him to come with them to safety but he insisted on staying so they said what they thought would be their last goodbye to the old man. But he had a plan. He lit candles which shown brightly through the windows of just one house and hung red paper above and on both sides of the door. When the monster came close to the house the old man, dressed in a red robe threw open the door and lit firecrackers. The monster was frightened by the red flags on the door and the bright lights and loud sounds that he ran away and never entered the town again.

When the villagers returned the next day, they were surprised to find the village undamaged. They learned from the old man what had transpired during the night. The villagers gathered around the house, looked at the red paper tacked to the door, and the remains of the firecrackers and candles.

From then on, the tradition of observing the conquest of Nian is carried on from generation to generation. The term “Guo Nian”, which may mean “Survive the Nian” becomes today “Celebrate the (New) Year” as the word “guo” in Chinese has both the meaning of “pass-over” and “observe”. So New Year in Chinese means “The night that Nian passed over”.

When I hear this legend it reminded me of an account in the Bible. You know the Bible is the story of the one all-powerful, creator God, the one ancient Chinese used to call Shang Di. This is the account of how Yahweh, God rescued

one group of people, the Jews. They had been enslaved for many years by the cruel king of Egypt. God came to one man, Moses, and told him he would use him to rescue his countrymen from slavery. God used Moses to take a message to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt to let the Jews go free but he refused. Moses came to him 9 times and each time a he refused and God cursed him in different ways. One time he turned the river to blood, then he caused a hailstorm to destroy all the crops, another he killed all the livestock in Egypt. But still Pharaoh said no so finally God, through Moses, said if you do not let my people the Jews go free tonight I will send a tenth curse; a terrible angel to kill every first born son in Egypt including your first born son! But God wanted to protect the children of the Jews so he told Moses to tell the Jews to kill a lamb and spread its blood on the sides and above the door of their houses. So they did spread the red blood of the lamb on their doors and kept their lamps burning all night. And the next day the Egyptians woke up to find every first born son including Pharaoh's son dead but the children of the Jews were safe. Pharaoh finally let them go free. So this night is celebrated every year near the first of the year in every Jewish household on earth. And do you know what they call it? Passover. Just like the red cloth on the doors of the Chinese houses caused the monster Nian to Passover and leave them safe the red blood of a lamb spread on the doors of the Jewish people that famous night caused the death angel to Passover and spare the lives of their children.

But there is one more story very similar to these and it comes from the Christian half of the Bible. It's the story of Jesus. The Bible says that just as the blood of a lamb save the Jews at Passover the blood which Jesus bled on the cross when he died can cover anyone who puts faith in him. In the New Testament Jesus is called "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". But Jesus' blood protects us not just for a night but forever and not just a village or a group of people but anyone who trusts him brings us into an eternal relationship with Shang Di, Yahweh, the one true God.

So that is the story of the Passing of Nian and some of the more profound lessons it points us to.