

FROM THE
Upper Room
TO THE
Tomb

***Meditation on the Suffering
and Death of Jesus Christ***

Content

1. 8:30 pm - 11:00 pm *Prayer in Upper Room* | John 13-17
2. 11:00 pm - 2:00 am *Prayer in the Garden* | John 18, Matthew 26
3. 2:00 am - 3:00 am *Betrayal by Judas and Arrest* | Matthew 26, John 18
4. 3:00 am - 5:00 am *Trials at Annas and Caiaphas* | John 18
5. 5:00 am - 6:00 am *Trial of Sanhedrin* | John 18, Luke 22
6. 6:00 am - 8:00 am *Trial before Pilate* | John 18-19, Luke 23
7. 8:00 am - 9:00 am *Road to Calvary* | Luke 23
8. 9:00 am - 12:00 noon *Ministry from the Cross* | Mark 15
9. 12:00 noon - 3:00 pm *Crucifixion* | Mark 15
10. 3:00 pm - 7:00 pm *The Tomb* | John 19
11. *Conclusion*

Introduction

That Jesus Christ died to redeem man from his sin and to offer him the gift of eternal life with God is a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith. The material in this booklet represents one person's thoughts, arrived at after much prayer and study, concerning the events of our Savior's last night and day on Earth. It is hoped that the words herein may move you beyond this time and place to seek answers for yourself and to receive your own personal revelation of the sufferings of Christ. The inspiration of Holy Scripture is a gift from God and is different for each believer; so if your thoughts and ideas differ from the ones found here, it is hoped that you will accept them as the blessings from our Lord that he intends them to be.

Prayer in the Upper Room

8:30 pm – 11:00 pm | John 13-17

As a dying father gathers his family around the deathbed, Jesus drew his "little ones" (John 13:33) to the cleared table of their last meal together. What were his thoughts this last time that he would have all of them all to himself? Unlike these men, he knew what the rest of that night and the next day would bring: agony and abandonment in the garden, accusation and humiliation at the trials, mockery and injustice before Pilate, torture and shame on the cross, and finally no answer from the Father who would seem to forsake him. Judas had left to do the thing that he would do, and final events were set in motion.

Surely the man, Jesus, was filled with dread for what lay ahead for him personally; and yet a kind of anxious urgency seemed to fill those last hours. Instead of voicing all that must have been heavy on his heart concerning his own end, Christ's only care was for those he had chosen for his own. There were yet things he needed to tell them, and he was free at last from guiding and directing events to this final night. Here and now he could devote himself to those who were most precious to him, to those whom he had chosen for his own, and to all those who would be his because of what these disciples would do, to you and me tonight because we have come, like all believers since that night, to call him Savior.

In that time and place, he called down through the ages to you and me. When the Son of God whispered your name on that night, these were his prayers for you:

"My little children, I will be with you only a little longer ... Where I am going, you cannot come. A new command I give you: Love one another. By this all men will know you are my disciples, if you love one another." - *John 13:33-34*

"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." - *Luke 22:31-32*

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." - *John 14:6*

"In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me." - *John 14:2-3*

"But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things, and remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." - *John 14:26-27*

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me, and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." - *John 15:5*

"You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." - *John 15:16*

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." - *John 16:33*

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you....Father I want those you have given me to be with me where I am..." - *John 17:20-21 and 24*

To feel his presence; to love our brothers; to be strong in fighting evil; to know that he will come again to take us home; to understand, through the power of the Holy Spirit, all that he has told us; to be connected forever to his power; to know he chose us for his own, to know that in the face of all our trials, he is praying for you and me.

These were his prayers on the last night of his life.

Prayer in the Garden

11:00 pm – 2:00 am | John 18, Matthew 26

It was late. The disciples were tired. Never had they heard their Lord speak so long about so much, so urgently about so many things. Weariness pressed upon them, and gladly would they have slept in the room where they had last dined together, where their Master's last instructions to them and his last prayer to the Father for them hung in the still air.

But Jesus had oilier plans. The Lord of the Universe had business to take care of, events to orchestrate, accusers to confront, and a decision to make. It was not a time to rest and not a place for decision making.

Down the dark streets, past the pool of Siloam, and out through the Fountain Gate into the Kidron Valley they walked. The brook they crossed would, they knew, nm red the next day as the blood of Passover lambs drained from the altar of the temple on the hill. Little did they know, however, that the blood coursing this night in the veins of their Master would drain from his back, and head, and side the next day also: blood so pure and undefiled that it would pay the last price ever needed for the last sin ever committed.

Their intention, when they reached the garden was to stay awake, to keep watch for their Master as he went in to pray. But with a weariness born of sorrow and the events of the long day, they fell into a deep sleep. Even his most trusted friends, the three who had walked closest to him, who had been given special insight into the God/Man who was their Lord, even these three slept. They saw the sorrow on his face, the heaviness in his steps as he walked a few paces farther. Faintly, beyond the gnarled limbs and roots of the olive trees, they heard his prayer. Confronted with his own torture and death, his uppermost concern that night was still for those he loved. He worried that, without him, they would be swallowed up by the wickedness of tl1e world. Their spirits, he knew, were willing, but their flesh was weak. He begged his God to protect them, to empower them in this life so that in the life to come, they might follow him home. They heard his prayer. And yet, they slept.

They heard the need in his voice when he asked them to watch and pray for him. They heard him pleading with his Father to be relieved of the agony which would be his the following day. And yet, they slept.

When he came to wake and to warn them, to plead that they stay alert and pray so as not to fall into temptation, they tried. Knowing that watchfulness and prayer were their only weapons against the weaknesses of the flesh, the only thing required of them this night by their Master, they tried.

When he went away again, not far this time, Peter, James and John heard through their fatigue the voice of a son pleading with his Dad that some other way be found. The man who was their Master was the child begging his Father to take away the hurt. In the silence that was his answer, they heard also as that pleading voice changed to one of acceptance, then resignation, then determination:

"Not my will but your will be done."

With those eight words, the decision was made, the power of Satan broken, and the salvation of the world accomplished.

And yet, they slept.

Betrayal by Judas and Arrest

2:00 am – 3:00 am | Matthew 26 and John 18

Man went into Gethsemane that Thursday night, but it was God who came out. So often we forget to remember that Jesus Christ was fully man and fully God; a living, breathing, touchable man; the omnipotent, holy I AM of history. And while we don't understand that reality, it is the only possible explanation for what happened in the garden that night.

Jesus the man surely was afraid, for Jesus/God knew what his disciples did not. Jesus the man needed the prayers and encouragement of his friends when he went to ask his Father not to make him drink the cup of bitterness that would be his the next day. Undoubtedly he was tortured by thoughts of impending death, but it must have broken his heart to know that he would suffer denial and abandonment that night at the hands of those who loved him, and whom he loved enough to surrender his life. A broken heart was far more painful than a broken body. That is why he asked them to pray, so that they might be strong and resist temptation.

But they slept. And Jesus fought the battle for our souls and theirs all by himself and made the only decision he could have made. For you see, he saw in them what they could not: he knew their weakness was stronger than their resolve, and their enemy was a powerful foe.

On that night, his was the power to see our weakness as well. He knew that without his sacrifice we were doomed, that unless he paid the price for our sin debt, we would never see him again. You see, he would leave this earth the next day, with us or without us. And he loved us too much to go to Heaven without us, so he decided that night to go to Hell for us. That was his decision, and it could only have been made by a God powerful enough to defeat the forces of darkness that reside in every human heart.

So, when Judas the traitor walked with his temple guards and Roman soldiers into Gethsemane that early Friday morning, it was God he met. How do we know? John 18 tells us that at a word from Christ all those men of armor fell to the ground.

So commanding was the power of this one, lone, prayer-wearied man that the sound of Godly authority in his voice knocked them to their knees. So, filled with the power of Heaven was he, that his touch healed the soldier's ear which Peter's sword had severed.

And so blind were those who witnessed this Heaven's power that they failed to see the Son of God in the sweat-soaked face of the "Man" they hauled away to the high priest.

Trials Before Annas and Caiaphas

3:00 am – 5:00 am | John 18

Make no mistake. It was his own people, the Jews, the ones chosen by God, who plotted against Jesus that night and early morning. Two thousand years before God had said to them:

"You are a people holy to your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. He has declared that he will set you in praise, fame and honor high above all the nations he has made, and that you will be a people holy to the Lord." - *Deuteronomy 7:6*

God also warned them through his servant Moses that ...

"They will forsake me and break the covenant I have made with them. On that day I will become angry with them ... I will hide my face from them and they will be destroyed." - *Deuteronomy 31:16-17*

But in his mercy he bade Moses to remind them that even though they would break their promises to them, he would keep his forever:

"There is no God besides me, I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand. Rejoice O nations, with his people, for he will avenge the blood of his servants, he will take vengeance on his enemies, and make atonement for his land and his people." - *Deuteronomy 32:39 & 43*

The promises were all there for Annas and Caiaphas to see. The old high priest and his young son-in-law, the two of all the Jews who best knew the history of their people, the history of the cycle of God's blessing, punishment and restoration; these two should have seen that this Jesus before them was the long promised Messiah. All the signs were there, and yet the Prince of Darkness had taken possession of their souls. Keeping the people quiet, their pockets full, and Pilate placated were their priorities, and an upstart rabbi was not going to interfere.

And so, Annas and Caiaphas were willing to break all the rules of Jewish law to accomplish their goal. The trial must go on, legal or not. In a hurry to do things "by the book," they broke the laws which they so zealously vowed to uphold. Everything was done backwards. The verdict already decided, it was now time to trump up the charges. When Annas failed to succeed, he sent Jesus on to Caiaphas, where the search continued for charges which might justify putting Jesus to death. Jesus refused to speak. They failed to find even two witnesses whose testimony condemned him. But when Caiaphas in a fit of exasperation asked, "in the name of the Living God" if Jesus was the Messiah, Christ's honesty bade him to answer, "I am." With that word, Jesus signed his own death warrant, for to claim to be God was blasphemy of the worst kind to pious Jews.

But what of Jesus' friends? Only five days before, hadn't he been hailed by thousands with, "Hosannas," and shouts of, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"? Where were those who followed so closely, who hung on his every word, who called him Lord, and who vowed that they would rather die than desert him? Where were his loyal companions of Sunday's sunshine on this dark and forbidding Friday morning?

They were gone. When the soldiers came in, they got out. Given the chance to be brave, they bolted. When they should have followed, they fled. The disciples deserted, and Jesus, who had promised to stand by them forever, stood alone.

Even Peter who swore he would never leave, denied knowing him, not once, but three times, just as Jesus said he would. At the crowing of the rooster, at the knowing look from the Lord he loved, the look that said, "Oh, Peter, I know your weakness, but I love you still," Peter's heart broke.

But let us be reminded that Jesus knew this would happen; it was the story of the people he had chosen for his own, the ones he had promised two thousand years before never to forsake. It is our story today, for he has chosen us as well. We are his, even when we break his laws, even when our actions deny his sovereignty. We are his even when we are too afraid to acknowledge him before an unbelieving world.

Jesus did not forsake them that night, and he does not forsake us now. He stuck it out, determined to endure the coming day. For it was in daylight that he would confront the Darkness. He would keep his promise. He had come to "avenge the blood of his servants and make atonement for his land and his people."

He loved them in spite of their sin. Daylight was coming and no one was going to snatch his people out of his hand.

Trial of Sanhedrin

5:00 am – 6:00 am | John 18 and Luke 22

Two trials down, with three remaining. Every back ached; every eye itched from lack of sleep. Condemning, trying and convicting the Son of God was no easy undertaking. The Jews had wrestled, prodded, beaten and cursed Jesus from the garden at midnight to the palace of Annas and then Caiaphas.

It had been a long night. When it seemed they might fail in their attempt to find a suitable charge against him, when their efforts to trap him into incriminating himself in some dishonesty or illegality came to nothing, Jesus himself spoke six short words and did the job for them. Strange, all through the night they had tried to trick him with their questions, never once succeeding in finding one thing he had done to deserve the death they decided he must face. And then, with one exasperated question, a question which seemed almost forced from his lips by a power that was not his, Caiaphas demanded, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the son of God." (Matthew 26:65)

When Jesus answered, "Yes, it is as you say," the trial was over. Blasphemy! The charge was found, the dawn had come, and the temple doors were at last unlocked for the morning prayers. All that was left was to drag Jesus into the courtroom of the Sanhedrin and make the charge "legal" and "official."

And so, the third trial began. It did not take long; the results were predictable. But several interesting events took place then which scripture records, and which give insight into the hearts of men—both good and evil.

One involves Judas. Where was he all night? He must have been, like Peter and John, lurking in the shadows, not far from Jesus. For Matthew tells us that when he, "... saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty coins to the chief priests and elders. 'I have sinned,' he said, 'for I have betrayed innocent blood.' " (Matthew 27:3-4) When they refused to accept the money, he threw it into the temple. Every clink and clang of silver on stone, every coin that rolled under the seats of those who sentenced Jesus to death, must have reminded them for years of their part in spilling this innocent man's blood.

But what of Judas? Matthew goes on to record that he went away and hanged himself. What if, instead of confessing his sin to the Sanhedrin, he had confessed to his Lord, the one who, even when he received the traitor's kiss, had called him, "Friend"? Jesus was there in that very room, and Judas missed his chance.

And then, there sat Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two respected members of the

Sanhedrin. Joseph, Luke tells us, had not consented to the decision in this trial. Since Nicodemus had questioned Jesus before concerning his teaching, it is thought that he too cast a negative vote that morning. And it was these two secret followers of Jesus, who had braved the hatred of their brothers, who so lovingly prepared his body for burial late that afternoon. Joseph and Nicodemus confessed him in the morning, blessed him in the afternoon, and have been honored in scripture for their acts of love to this very day.

Two souls won. One soul lost forever. If only Judas had understood that it was Jesus he had wronged, and that only Jesus had the power to forgive him, the power to be his Savior.

Trial Before Pilate

6:00 am – 8:00 am | John 18-19 and Luke 23

Indeed, politics does make strange bedfellows; and never was the adage truer than on that early Friday morning. The Jews hated Pilate, not only because he represented Roman rule over their land, but because he made no attempt to hide his disdain for their religious beliefs. Taking money from the temple treasury to build an aqueduct was bad enough, but when he defiled the holiness of Jerusalem with imperial images, their sense of religious propriety was insulted almost beyond bearing.

But they needed Pilate this day, for only in a Roman court could the death penalty be pronounced, and Pilate was the Roman court. So, they sucked up their pride and hauled Jesus next door to the Antonia Fortress where they stood in the courtyard and waited. Wanting Pilate's help in killing Jesus but being unwilling to risk ceremonial defilement by going this Sabbath eve into the house of a Gentile, they stood outside and waited.

Surely it was an irritable Pilate who faced them shortly after dawn. What was their hurry? Why get him out of bed so early to deal with an insignificant dirty Jew? And this prissy insistence of theirs, that coming into his palace, the very seat of Roman rule in Judea, somehow made them unclean, was insulting! The Roman prelate must have been in a bad mood.

But Pilate, unscrupulous tyrant that he was, was nonetheless an astute politician. Well aware that his heavy-handedness could backfire and that a formal complaint to Rome from the Jews might cost him his post, he was already feeling insecure. So, when the priests and scribes showed up at his door with a tattered and docile Jesus in tow, he swallowed his hatred and went out to hear their complaint.

They came not with a charge of "blasphemy," which their court had found, for they knew Pilate would never crucify Jesus for calling himself "God." Instead, in their scheming, they concocted charges which seemed, on the surface, to be serious, but which, when examined in the light of truth, were totally false.

On hearing these charges: that Jesus was subverting the nation by opposing the payment of taxes; that he claimed to be Christ, a King; and that he encouraged insurrection by stirring up the people, Pilate felt trapped into at least questioning the man.

In truth, all that Jesus had taught concerning the admonition to pay their proper tax to Caesar, his claim of heavenly kingship rather than earthly rule, and his encouragement that people live together in peace; all these teachings pointed toward brotherhood rather than rebellion.

Whether Pilate knew all these things about the man before him is not known. But the gospels

tell us that Pilate could find no reason to condemn Jesus, and that he knew that jealousy was the primary factor in bringing him to trial.

But those pesky rabble-rousers were still outside, a mob was forming and, if he knew anything about their leaders, he knew they were encouraging a commotion. Would he further anger the Jews by declaring Jesus innocent, thus risking his political future? Or would he give in to their insistent badgering and condemn a man he felt quite sure was innocent?

Pilate had to make a decision, and the pressure was mounting. Scripture tells us that he did almost everything he could to avoid having Jesus killed. When he learned that Herod, the part-Jewish ruler of Galilee, was in town for Passover, and that Jesus was from Galilee, he sent him to Herod, hoping that he would do his dirty work. But the old king, whom Jesus had called a fox, was only interested in toying with the Son of God, not in trying him. The Lord of the Universe would perform no miracles for the killer of his cousin, John the Baptist, so Herod sent him back to Pilate.

Jesus, bloody and weak from his ordeal, again stood calmly before the prelate, never once giving Pilate reason to punish him. Reading between the lines in Luke and John, we see Pilate's near desperate attempt to save Jesus and save face at the same time. He tried to placate the mob by having him beaten. They yelled, "Crucify him!" He offered to free Jesus as a Passover prize; they wanted the criminal Barabbas instead. Without realizing what he was admitting, he asked with incredulity, "Shall I crucify your king?"

And the Jews cried, "We have no king but Caesar!" The people of God reviled the Son of God so much that they broke the first and greatest commandment of the law they so ardently espoused.

So, feeling he had no choice, Pilate gave them what they wanted, but he made a last attempt to rid himself of blame for the death of Jesus Christ. He washed his hands and decided not to decide.

And isn't that often the case with us? We have no problem proclaiming Jesus Christ in church on Sunday, but to profess him in public on Monday is often too hard a thing to do. When the world insists that we turn our backs on Jesus, will our response be any different from Pilate's? Will we stand with him in the face of the mob, or will we turn our backs and wash our hands?

Road to Calvary

8:00 am – 9:00 am | Luke 23

When Pilate gave Jesus "over to them to be crucified" (John 19:16), it appeared that the Jews had won. Jesus would die, and the Romans would do their dirty work. In mocking disdain along the city's streets, the people hissed and shouted as our Lord stumbled under the weight of his cross. "Crucify him! Crucify him!" they shouted from the sidelines, while keeping their distance from the blood and filth that would make them unfit to eat the evening's Passover meal. This rabble-rouser would die, and they would appear as mere observers of Roman cruelty.

On the surface, all seemed to be happening as planned, but we must remember that God, not the Jews, was in charge that day. All of history had been moving toward what would happen on the hill outside Jerusalem that afternoon. Zechariah and Isaiah, among others of the prophets, had prophesied the very event hundreds of years before. God was indeed in charge, and his beloved Son, having made his decision in the garden the night before, was obediently faithful to his Father's direction. Every step, every word, every action of every person for the rest of the day was part of the plan, and scripture reveals God's majesty and love as well as his righteous judgment in all that occurred.

That Jesus was pronounced guilty in the temple and later hauled out of the city to die, came to symbolize the ancient Hebrew practice of atonement. The sins of the whole nation were placed symbolically by the high priest upon the head of a perfect young lamb which was then sent out into the desert away from the encampment because the sin it carried made the lamb unclean.

But Jesus Christ was no lamb. He was the Son of God, the only perfect payment for our sin, and it is only our belief that he willingly carried all our sin away for all time that frees us from the wages of that sin, which is eternal death. The catch is that the decision is made by individuals, not by a single high priest. It is for each of us to decide the truth of who Christ was and what he did on that day so long ago.

When Simon of Cyrene was forced by the soldiers to help Jesus carry his cross, he may have felt angry or inconvenienced at having his plans interrupted suddenly. He may have felt that he was too busy to take the time to walk with this dirty, blood-caked, condemned man. After all, Simon was from Africa and in Jerusalem just for the Passover. What did he know of local troubles? Did he fear that people would see him with this criminal and think him a convict too? We don't know what Simon's thoughts were that day, but scripture suggests that though Simon was compelled to the side of Christ unwillingly, he must have found himself drawn to the man in faith. For Mark 15:21 speaks of his sons, Rufus and Alexander, as men recognized for their faith in Christ. Even his wife is honored in Romans 16:13 for her loyalty to the Savior. So, Simon, who must have shared the day's

experience with his family, obviously was blessed for stopping to help Jesus that morning.

When have you been forced by circumstances to dirty your hands for someone in trouble? Have you ever been afraid of what others might think if you involve yourself with people different from you? Have you ever felt blessed like Simon must have been blessed by the look of gratitude on the face of a person in pain?

Just think, if Simon had been five minutes earlier or later, someone else would have been forced to stop and help our Lord. But it was Simon who was blessed for all eternity because he, while doing something he had not planned, chose to believe in the TRUTH he saw in a dying man's eyes.

Ministry from the Cross

9:00 am – 12 noon | Mark 15

Believers don't understand the mystery of Jesus' dual existence as both God and man, but it is a thing which we accept on faith. How it is is not so important as that it is, because without his "Godness," Jesus would never have been strong enough to break the power of sin in our lives.

We must remember that Christ was human also. He experienced pain, both physical and emotional just as he knew joy and great peace. The man was on the cross that day along with God. The man felt the nails, the whips, the sting of hurtful words. Surely the man wrestled with fear and doubt, for Satan was having a heyday on Golgotha. Oh, no scribe records a visible appearance by the Prince of this World, but we know through the words he hurled at Jesus through his sentries on the hill that he was there in all his meanness. And though he ultimately lost the war, there were several skirmishes where he inflicted great pain upon the soul of our dying Lord.

Jesus must have been tired, his energies playing out from the abuse he had endured since the early hours of the morning. The entire week, even his entire life, must have seemed a failure as he hung in abject loneliness upon his cross. No one appeared to have believed his words; friends and enemies alike had forsaken him; all he had attempted to do seemed to have come to nothing. Most of all, God was gone. He needed his Father's voice, not his silence.

But Satan was not silent. "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." Where had he heard those words before? Only before, he'd been on the roof of the temple instead of on the cross of Calvary. Then, Jesus had just begun his ministry, and all he planned to do and say lay before him. He had spent the last forty days in the desert with his Father, receiving God's instructions and blessing. Then, he knew his God loved him. At his baptism the month before, hadn't God anointed him with the words "This is my beloved son"?

But what of now? All his friends were gone, his Father wasn't speaking to him because of his vile cloak of sin. The passersby who spoke for Satan had practically called him a liar. Well, he could show them that he could do anything he pleased. Everyone might have deserted him, but he still had his power! But no, these were not his thoughts, for Jesus remembered his promise to God, and to yield in such a way would be disobedience and failure to finish what he had promised to do.

Next in the line of tormentors were the priests and temple rulers, the very ones who professed to be waiting for God's Messiah to come and save them from the Roman tyranny under which they lived. "You profess to save others; prove it by saving yourself." In other words, perform some magic trick and we'll believe you. Well, they had seen his miracles and not believed; and anyway, it was changed hearts Jesus was after, not a bunch of hangers-on waiting for another handout.

With those last taunting words, the priests, without realizing what they said, spoke the truth, "He saved others, but he can't save himself."

The late Peter Marshall once said that, "If anyone would save another, his greatest claim must be that he cannot save himself." And these words were especially true of Jesus that Friday. Knowing that he could not save himself if he was going to save you and me, he chose to die.

What a lesson for us all! Until the very end of his life on earth, Jesus Christ never stopped teaching us how to endure our trials in order to gain a greater goal. If we are to be like him in eternity, we must learn to live like him today.

Crucifixion

12 noon – 3:00 pm | Mark 15

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" After three hours of darkness, the most agonizing plea in Scripture tore from the lips of Christ as he hung near death. All the air was still, and the darkness was a pall upon the hill of Calvary.

Much has been written and said of this darkness; that it symbolized God's judgment on Jerusalem or even nature's pity for Jesus. In truth, this was the darkness of Hell. All through the Bible, darkness symbolizes the eternal state of being separated from God because of sin. In Exodus, one of the plagues upon Egypt was "a darkness that could be felt." And even earlier, in Genesis, the first creative act was God's gift of "light" to a dark and formless world. In contrast, Jesus is called the "Light of the World" by John, who went on to say that the "Light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it." (John 1:5)

Jesus had shone for thirty-odd years in a world darkened by sin. And on the day of his death, as his last hour approached, as the weight of the sin of mankind became heavier upon him, the darkness of Hell grew more oppressive. Christ must have realized the great danger posed by this clutching blackness; that because God had turned his back on him because of his burden of sin, he was in danger of being held in its grip forever.

For three hours, from the sixth to the ninth, Jesus suffered in silence as he struggled with Satan for our souls. In a desperate plea for help, in a fervent prayer not to be forgotten by his Father, Jesus Christ uttered that tremendous cry of faith. With the words, "My God, why have you forsaken me?", Jesus proclaimed before the whole watching world his unshakable relationship with God which no power on earth or in Hell could break.

In Heaven, the Father heard the voice of his faithful son. With a mercy born of the deepest love, God lifted the darkness from the cross on the hill. Jesus shouted in triumph, "It is finished!" He knew that his Father had heard his cry and confirmed with holy light that he had paid the price and completed the work he had been given. He then could allow his earthly body to breathe its last.

God in Heaven cannot gaze on our sin any more than he could look upon that which covered Jesus that late afternoon on the hill of Calvary. But he still listens for our plea, and that listening is a drawing, a wooing so powerful that few indeed can resist it.

The Tomb

3:00 pm – 7:00 pm | John 19

From the day his ministry began, the day of his baptism when the dove and God's Words of confirmation reached down to him from Heaven, the saving power of Jesus Christ has never ceased. Even in death, before the dawn of Resurrection Sunday, that power worked in the lives of those who had witnessed his agony.

As his lifeless body hung from the cross, we are told by Scripture that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two secret followers of Jesus, were given permission by Pilate to remove him from the cross for burial. With sweet spices and ointments, they reverently prepared his body for burial in a tomb in which no one had yet been laid. Wrapping him in fresh linen, these two men, who had been afraid to profess their belief in Jesus during his life, now honored him with the funeral of a king. And so at last, Jesus Christ, who had been despised in life, now lay in death in the graveyard of his beloved city, Jerusalem. Down through the ages, the kings and princes of his people and faith had been honored with such last rites in this very same city.

This act of reverence for the man who had become their Lord is a testimony to the power of the Son of God to save the souls of even the greatest doubters. We don't know for sure when Joseph and Nicodemus made the choice to believe all that he had said, and that is not important. What matters most is that these two wise men, so steeped in the knowledge and teachings of their faith, so surely trained in the Hebrew tradition of searching for meaning and understanding in the Holy Scriptures; these two men, at some point, decided to make a decision based on a bet.

For, you see, a decision to believe that Jesus Christ is who he claims to be cannot be made with logic. For his is not a logical story. In his book, Where the Rivers Flow, Scott Walker quotes Elton Trueblood, the great Quaker theologian and philosopher:

At the deepest points of his life it is required of a man that he be a gambler, and in our greatest gamble it is reasonable to allow the testimony of Christ to tip the balance. A Christian is one who bets his life that Christ is right.

Joseph and Nicodemus made a bet, and it was a bet whose outcome they could not know. They looked at the odds and came down on the side of Christ, for Christ had spoken to them in the deepest parts of their souls. What he said, they decided, was worth sharing with the world and they were compelled by the force of his story to proclaim what they had come to believe about him. Two thousand years after their generous act of reverence for the body of their fallen Savior, Billy Graham in his book, Storm Warning, expressed that belief in the most profound way possible:

"If Jesus Christ is not the son of God, nothing matters. But if He is, nothing else matters."

Conclusion

We must never view the crucifixion of Christ as the treacherous act of unbelieving Jews. We must never blame the Romans for killing him in cruel sport. And if we are to learn the lesson of the Cross of Christ, we must never think that Jesus had no choice but to obey the will of an angry God.

God was angry. He is still angry because of sin in our lives. The crucifixion was an act of His divine will. However, it was not an act of anger, but one of love.

Jesus had a choice as well, just as we have a choice. The only difference between Jesus that day and us today is that while we are mere humans, unable to avoid sin on our own, Jesus was both human and God at the same time, and thus sinless. God has not chosen to reveal the "how" of Christ's dual existence, just as He does not choose to explain so many of the things believers accept on faith.

Nonetheless, the story of the crucifixion is the story of sinless Christ, the Son of God and his choice to pay the price for our sin so that, in eternity, we might be with God. In that story we see Christ's submissiveness to the will of his Father, his compassion for all sinners, and his triumph over Satan. Every step of the way, Jesus had a choice, and every choice was made in the light of his love for you and me.

We too may participate in the triumph of the Son of God, but first we must see ourselves as Jesus does, for the sinners that we are, wholly unacceptable to God. We must choose to seek forgiveness, accept the truth that Jesus paid the price we owed, and like him, become submissive to whatever God demands of us. Then, and only then, will we be able to stand before the Throne of God in triumph, hearing his words, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."