

## “The Suffering and the Sacrifice”

### Mark 15:20-34

For five weeks now we have been walking with Jesus day by day and minute by minute through his suffering—through his sorrows unto his glory. Today we come to the very center. This is the center of the central event in human history. Except for the cross, human history would lack meaning, and we—we would be adrift in the solitude of our own sinning. This becomes one of the most important moments, then, in what happened to human beings from the beginning to the end of time. This is the center. Stay with me as we use the verses from Mark to experience Jesus' own approach to this moment of the cross.

#### *Mark 15: 20c-21*

*And they led Jesus out to crucify him. And they compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.*

I saw you walk in the early dawn to the governor's palace. You were so tired then. Now you are torn! Your robe is stiffening with your own blood! O my Lord!—they scourged you! O my Lord. You will never lie down to sleep again!

Four soldiers and a Roman centurion lead you through the city. Such a tiny force. Scarcely noticeable. Who notices? It's mid-morning. The streets are crowded -- citizens and merchants and the festival pilgrims busy, busy, crying their wares in that high voice, indifferent to another execution. Who notices? I see the high priests amid the faces, moving parallel to you, making sure the deed gets done. And I see pockets of your friends peering from the side streets, startled and helpless. Women mostly. And I am here. I notice.

The soldiers are impatient. They dart their eyes here and there through the throng. What do they expect or fear? Your eyes are half closed, your legs slow and leaden, and your body is caved around a rough piece of timber. You are carrying your own cross beam at the stomach! You're dragging it beside your feet, moving with an awkward, side-shuffling motion— pulling the thing! Another man would have heaved it onto his shoulders. Not you. I know why not, and I hate this world: your back and your sides have been ripped by the hooks of the whip. You can't even touch the flesh, let alone lay wood on it! You slouch over it, laboring. Once you walked upright, dignified. Now you shuffle, dust on your lips, shaking with exhaustion, hugging that wood as if it were a dying child. You will never sleep again! Yet these soldiers are impatient. You move too slowly. Why don't they carry the cross beam for you? Oh, I hate this world!

You stumble, a soldier yells at you. I am crying. I can't watch. I can't watch! People keep blocking my vision. Oh, God! The sun has risen halfway to heaven, dead-white, round, hot. There are some black clouds in the west. They're coming here to Jerusalem. I don't even feel the wind, but it's blowing, and they are coming.

Oh, how can I *not* watch? How can I *not* be with you, my Lord?

I have pushed myself right into the soldiers' path. I can be bold because I love you. I make them notice me by standing in the way, and I beg them, "Let me carry his cross. He can't! Let me!"

But another finds it practical and claps the closest pilgrim on the shoulder and commands him to take your cross and follow them out of the city. O Jesus! But then I am left with nothing to do. Does that stranger understand the honor? You glance at him—I see this, my hand on my

mouth—you glance at him when he lifts the beam from your arms. How dearly I long for such a glance! What can I do for you? Please look at me, Jesus. Jesus, what can I do for you now?

***Mark 15: 22-23***

*And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull).*

*And they offered him wine mingled with myrrh; but he did not take it.*

As a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so Jesus has been silent. In Mark's account, Jesus has revealed nothing of his private thought or of his personal feelings since Gethsemane. He spoke a few words last night and then again this morning; but these were responses to his inquisitors. His spirit has been mute. The body is before us, but the mind is hidden in a mystery.

But now, finally, on Golgotha, comes a spontaneous gesture, and with it an insight into the spirit of the Savior. We see what he's been doing in the solitude of his interior self.

Jesus, stripped of his clothes, is lying on his back, his head and hands arranged on the *patibulum*, the cross beam by which they will lift him bodily to a thick post for execution. His eyes are shut. The wood beneath his head might seem a pillow; but soldiers stand with spikes beside him. They make a rough motion, a sign of assent as if to say, "*Now—but right now or you'll miss your chance. Go ahead, do it. Hurry!*"

So, then a woman rushes over and kneels by the figure of Jesus and offers him a drink. She's performing a merciful ritual, not unusual among the Jews: "Give strong drink to the dying," commands the thirty-first chapter of Proverbs, "and wine to those in bitter distress; let them drink and remember their misery no more." So, the woman is seeking to ease the torment of the crucifixion. She's offering Jesus myrrh, which is a narcotic.

And here is the gesture, the revelation, the mind of the dying Christ: He shakes his head. He will not drink from her cup. He will in no way dull his senses or ease the pain.

And so, we know. What are the feelings? What has the spirit of Jesus been doing since Gethsemane? Why, suffering. With a pure and willful consciousness, terribly sensitive to every thorn and cut and scornful slur: suffering—this Jesus has chosen. This he is attending to with every nerve of his being—not for some perverted love of pain. He hates the pain. But for a supernal love of us, that pain might be transfigured, forever.

Or what has the Lord been doing since Gethsemane? Drinking. Not from the woman's narcotic cup, but from the cup the Father would not remove from him: drinking. Swallow by swallow, tasting the hell therein, not tossing it down in a hurry: "So that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."

Or, what has the Lamb been doing since Gethsemane? Bearing our griefs. Carrying our sorrows. By the stripes he is truly and intensely receiving, healing us all.

***Mark 15:24-28***

*And they crucified him, and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them to decide what each should take. It was the third hour when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." With him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left.*

I stand apart I draw no one's attention. I have covered my head. These are the things that I see:

I see four soldiers on a low hill, their greater labor done, their duty now to wait. They are hunching over the few benefits of the morning's assignment. That is, by a grim tradition they

can keep the final possessions of those they crucify; so now they are casting lots for an undergarment, a robe, a belt, sandals. No money here, not even a pouch. No matter: the soldiers are passing time. It's nearly noon.

A centurion stands over them with his arms folded, gazing up at a coming thunderhead of cloud, squinting, figuring.

Above the soldiers, above the centurion, but yet beneath the sun and the lowering cloud, hang three men on crosses, each of them stripped to a loincloth: a robber, a robber, and you.

The wind is picking up. Dust blows by. And this is what I see:

A wooden board is nailed roughly over your head, chalk-white and burned with the indictment: "The King of the Jews." I say, *Yes!* In my soul I cry, *Yes, yes!* I keep my face impassive for fear of the centurion and the chief priests, but I say, *Yes, it is what we've called the Messiah: King of the Jews.* The Romans are right. They mean to mock us, to mock all the Jews as a single people, but their scorn tells the truth and I take a bitter satisfaction in it. Let the chief priests burst their bellies with indignation—I'll just laugh. Oh, I hate this world!

*But if you're the Messiah, why are you crucified? How can this be?* Oh, Jesus, Jesus, forgive me. My mind rejects the things that I see. Nothing fits! I call you King. I called you Master and Lord. You are the Lord! No one has loved as you do—no, not ever, Lord. But I never imagined Goodness to be so broken. Jesus, you grieve me. Jesus, you confuse me.

This is what I see:

Your knees keep buckling. You push yourself up with your legs—to breathe, I think—but the legs lose strength and pop at the knees, and your body drops. The arms stretch out. The hands clutch the spikes. Your shoulder-joints separate. Your muscles draw out like ropes. Your

rib cage splays. I can count the bones! How do you breathe when your chest is stretched flat? Jesus, you're not breathing! Your own body, when it drags on your arms like that—why, your own weight is suffocating you!

Breathe!

Sweet Jesus, please breathe!

Make fists on the spike-heads! Lift yourself up. Open your mouth, Lord Jesus, please!

Don't die! Don't stop breathing! Breathe! What? What are you—? Oh, no—

No, don't do that now, not while you hang so low, not in surrender, no: *Jesus, don't look at me! Don't look at me like that!* I can't stand it if you look at me. My whole body burns like fire. You make me too much here. You're wasting yourself. You should fight for your life, Lord! You cannot die! Rise up! Rise on your arms! Fight! Fight! Breathe—

***Mark 15: 33-34***

*And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour; and at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabach-thani," which means, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me."*

It is noon. The sun at its zenith is hidden.

That great black, frowning range of cloud from the west has killed the sunlight, closed the sky, swallowed the earth in a yellow darkness. The wind is still. The city stops breathing. Animals grow so restive they rear against their ropes, rolling their eyes. Owners shout through the darkness the names of the beasts. Parents stand in the stone doorways and cry out for their children, "*Miriam! Yeshy? Yeshy?*"

There descends from heaven a long, low muttering. Another. The commanders of the elements are taking counsel together.

Suddenly, lightning! The crack shatters the dark: blinding light, a splitting sound as cedar twists and screams and breaks from its trunk and tumbles down—and the boom of that thunder batters the houses of Jerusalem.

*"Yeshi, Yeshua come home now! Now!"*

"And it shall come to pass in that day," saith the Lord God, "that I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day—and I will make it as the mourning for an only son, and the end thereof as a bitter day."

BOOM! The rain dots the dust with big drops. BOOM! Now it falls hard and straight and heavy. BOOM! The wind screams down and hurls raindrops like pellets flat-out at the faces of the running human beings, stinging their flesh. The black between the lightning is the darkness Egypt knew, thick darkness, even darkness which may be felt.

*"Yeshua! Yeshua! . Where are you?"* This is a pure, bloody panicking. But the weeping child cannot be heard. The weeping mother weeps in vain.

BOOM!

No human mockery can match the voice of the storm. Lightning flashes. The hill outside the city is white wet and empty. Silhouettes stutter and black out: three crosses, the guards, some women at a distance. Those who laughed at the central figure this morning are gone. No one is laughing now.

Thus, the first hour of the afternoon, and the second hour, and the third.

The few who stood the storm are still on the hill at the end of three hours—the ninth hour of the day. lightning has fled. The thunder has exhausted itself. But the blackness persists—and suddenly a voice worse than the thunder because it is a human voice, a horrified wailing, arises: *'Eloi! Eloi! My God! My God!'*

Who is that? It's the one in the center. The one in the perfect center of elemental darkness, the focus of the storm, him: *"Eloi, lama sabach-thani?"* Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, him! He hangs in an abyss! That one—him!

*"My God why hast thou forsaken me?"*

*Who answers him?*

The thunder is silent. The city holds its breath. The heavens are shut. The dark is rejection. This silence is worse than death. No one answers him. No, not even God his Father, because he who has become hateful in his own eyes now is hateful likewise to God, his Father.

Jesus. Him. It is against *him* that heaven has been shut.

In this terrible moment of storm, the loss of light for humanity is at once the loss of love and life for its Christ. He has entered the absolute void. Between the Father and the Son now exists a gulf of impassable width and substance. It is the divorce of despising. For, though the Son still loves the Father obediently and completely, the Father despises the Son completely because he sees in him the sum of human disobedience; the sum of it from the beginning of time to the end of time. He hates the Son, even unto damning him.

Now, this is a mystery, that Christ can be the obedient, glorious love of God and the full measure of our disobedience, both at once. But right now, this mystery is also a fact. And the fact must seem to last forever, because hell's horror is that it lasts forever.

And this, precisely, is the bitterest drop in the cup: that crying down eternity unheard, separated absolutely from God—from the God he cannot help but love even now, even still—Jesus is in a hell. The darkness that covers Jerusalem from noon till the middle of the afternoon is no less than the damnation of the Messiah, who wails and gnashes his teeth in an utter solitude from now unto eternity. Hell is eternal. And he has descended into hell.

Those were very strong words at the end of the meditation, that Jesus would be in hell, or that Jesus would suffer rejection of the Father. We made them dramatic, but they arise from what Paul says regarding this moment: in II Corinthians 5, verse 21, St. Paul writes, 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'

This is a terrible insight but a true one: that in the moment that Jesus died on the cross, all the sin of the world was wrapped up in him. There it found its completion. There it took its punishment so that we would not have to suffer that punishment but rather, that we might be made righteous.

How horrible it must have been for Jesus at that point, then. And how hard it must have been for the righteous God, the pure and righteous God, ever to look upon such a pile of sinning, all in one place. I often think that this must have been the very depth of Jesus' suffering. Not the death, not that he died, but that before he died, he bore all of our sin and therefore had to bear the contempt of the righteous God, who cannot accept sin like that. Hard words, but remarkable for the measure of the love that Jesus had for us.

## ***Prayer***

*Jesus, we cannot fathom what you went through on our behalf by your grace, we need not fathom it. You took upon yourself the suffering that should have been ours, that should have been the end of all of our sinning. Because you took it upon yourself because you put yourself in our place, because you closed the books on sin, we now don't have to suffer, but rather can see in your face healing and joy and love after all. You, you went down so low, that you might lift us so high. AMEN*

#337 – Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed