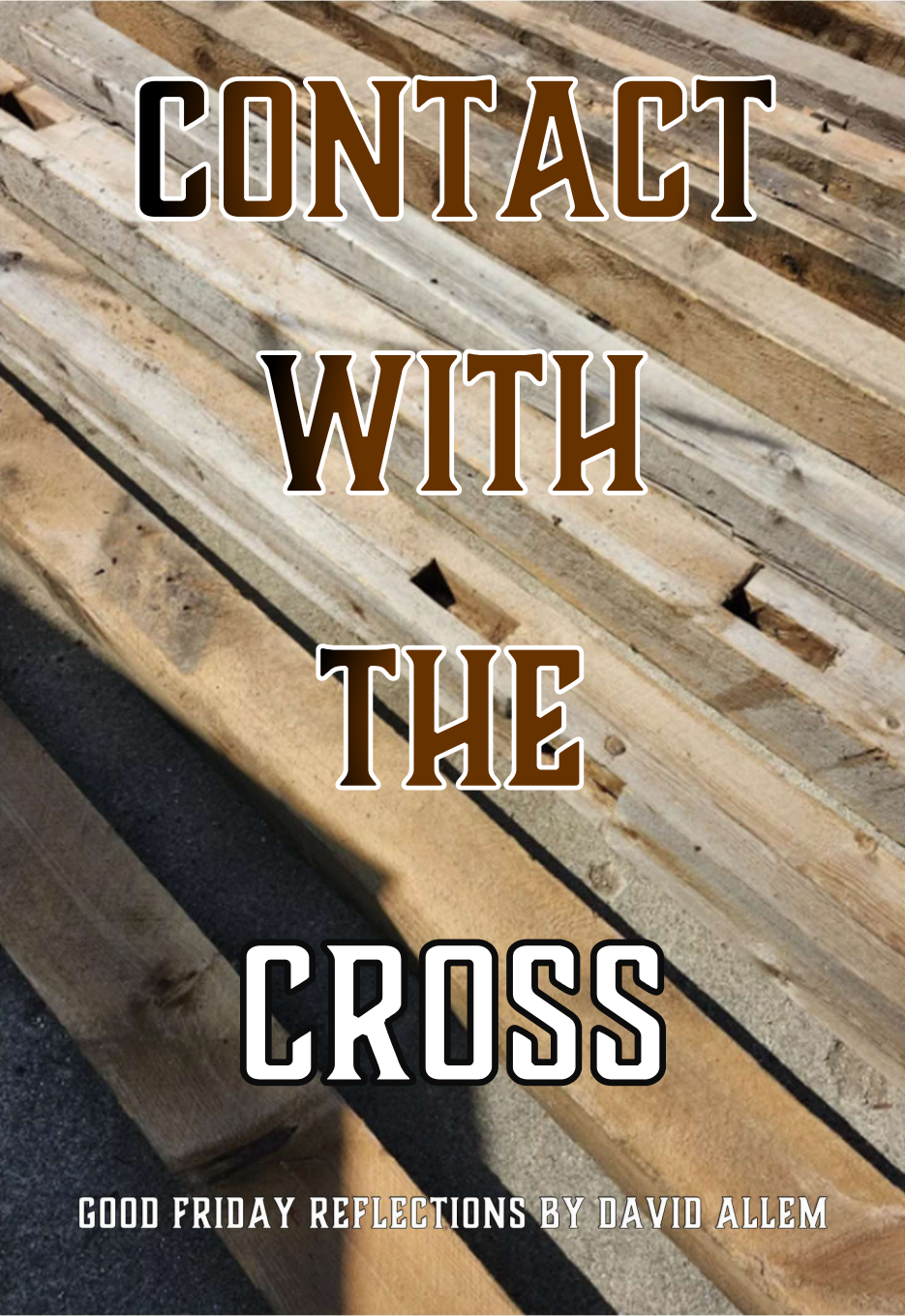




CONTACT WITH THE CROSS

GOOD FRIDAY REFLECTIONS BY DAVID ALLEM

The teaching about the cross is foolishness
to those who are being lost,
but to us who are being saved
it is the power of God.
1 Corinthians 1:18 (NCV)

The Muscle

The Carpenter

The Sign

The Centurion

The Covert

The Victim

The Muscle

850 miles from his home on the African coast, Simon is grabbed from a crowded Jerusalem sidewalk and forced into service by a Roman soldier. When he hesitates – defiant, he’s thrown to the ground into dusty submission.

Simon isn’t a small man. How could he be if the Roman chose him to carry some lumber out of the city and up a rugged hill?

He rises from the dirt, face to face with a bloodied and battered prophet – Jesus of Nazareth. He’s heard this man was causing trouble all week long. Arguing with the religious power brokers, expelling the cashiers in the temple courts and making Messiah-like claims of kings and kingdoms.

The soldiers growl out orders to move on and stop wasting time. Most convicts carry their own cross all the way to the execution site. The burden is designed to exhaust and humiliate the criminal. He became a walking billboard to the oppressed, heralding the dominance of Rome over everything and everyone.

As Simon shoulders most of the weight, he can feel the convicted prophet is already exhausted, physically unable to keep the sick parade moving. With one arm over the cross and his other arm under Jesus, he drags them both through the onlooker’s jeers, the crying crowds and the barking of soldiers’ orders.

His mind is reeling between pity and disgust. The prophet was already badly beaten. And the day is just beginning. Simon suddenly realizes, “I have his blood on me!” The

Passover in Jerusalem was a once-in-a-lifetime trip for his family and now – he is unclean! Jewish law says a person cannot enter the temple grounds if he comes in contact with blood. The trip was for nothing!

As they wind through narrow city streets, sympathizers and antagonizers confront each other across the procession. Jesus and Simon are struck by debris. Jesus stumbles after being hit and falls to the side. As Simon regathers the crossbeam and pulls at the prophet, Jesus looks into the crowd and says, *“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children...For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?” Luke 23:28,31*

“Don’t weep for me.” This Jesus is looking beyond his own demise to what will happen in the future. Simon thinks, “Where is this man drawing his strength from?”

As they exit through a city gate, the rocks begin to fly. The Roman soldiers did their best to shield them. However, Simon now endures cuts and bruises and exhaustion.

The climb to the deadly destination was short but steep. The spectators and mourners peeled away to find easier routes to the top. Simon was now dragging the cross and the Christ upward. As they reach the crest of the cliff, he sees the three poles already secured in the ground, each waiting for their crossbeam.

Drained of all strength, Simon supports the cross and slides the prophet to the ground. With one last push, he throws the beam backwards off his shoulders and collapses next to the Christ. One last look of pity. One final feeling of sorrow. And a lingering anger toward a Caesar’s cruelty.

As he straightens himself up, his eyes meet the bloodshot but still piercing eyes of Jesus, in a heap of exhaustion at his feet.

Simon doesn't read defeat; he sees silent Gratitude in Jesus face. He doesn't read despair; he sees deep Love. He doesn't feel pointless; he senses Purpose. Even on this hill of torture, this rock of death. The man looking up at him, without words, speaks Gratitude, Love and Purpose.

Simon stumbles down the hill and back into Jerusalem. Frantically, he searches and finds his wife and two boys. Even though his strength and emotions are nearly depleted, he narrates his last two hours for his family. The horrific climb, the violent crowds and the broken man, Jesus. He brought his family on a Jewish pilgrimage. Instead, he was forced to assist in an execution.

Only when he finishes recounting how he left Jesus on the ground does he begin to realize. This was no execution – this was an invitation.

An invitation to meet Jesus. Up close. Personally. Sacrifice, suffering, Savior.

An invitation to serve Jesus. To literally yoke together and walk together. Vitally connected.

An invitation to follow Jesus. Even on the most difficult of paths. The most unexpected paths. The beyond-our-earth path.

Outside the city, at the camp with other pilgrims, his wife examines his injuries. Simon washes off the dirt and the blood. He may be clean and safe now - but he'll never be able to shake off this gruesome morning. And try as he might, he will never forget Jesus. Or his invitation.



We have very good reason to believe Simon of Cyrene became a follower of Jesus. In Mark chapter 15 where his role in Jesus' life is introduced, it's also recorded that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus. When his sons grew up, Romans chapter 16 and Acts chapter 19 describes them as leaders in the church.

The Apostle Paul calls Rufus' mom (Simon of Cyrene's wife) "a mother to me". Simon's wife was part of Paul's team of missionaries and helped hold the group together, personally encouraging Paul.

Are Alexander and Rufus in the letters the same two as the sons of Simon recorded in the gospel of Mark? Scholars say there is no other reason why Mark would mention them unless they were well-known to the church at that time. Their father Simon would certainly be well-known as the only man to carry the cross with Jesus.

Some scholars believe that the prophet named in Acts 13, Simeon called Niger, is actually Simon (Simeon is a variant of Simon). More evidence to consider is that the next prophet named in Acts 13 is Lucius of Cyrene. Two prophets from the same region as the cross-bearer.

The record, then, leads us to believe that Simon who carried Jesus' cross also follows Jesus and His cross. His family follows him into the gospel and become missionary-leaders of the early church.

Besides the incredible story, what's the point in mentioning it? Think about this. What seemed like an unexpected random choice on a crowded street on an ugly day was actually a plan to save a family and raise up leaders for the infant church and minister affection and care to arguable the church's greatest apostle, Paul, while he was in Corinth where he wrote the letter to the Romans.

Simon's burden-bearing hike was one of the mightiest and most humble deeds ever done "literally" in Jesus' name, for Jesus' sake.

His situation and response reminds me of Colossians 3:17

*"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed,
do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus,
giving thanks to God the Father through him."*

Whatever you do through your words and whatever you do through your deeds – say it and do it so you can confidently put Jesus' name on it. If ever a man embodied this challenge, it was Simon. He sweated, suffered and sorrowed with Jesus – right next to Jesus.

What deeds and what words are you offering in the name of Jesus? What heavy lifting is on your schedule that you can do with Jesus? What ridicule will you endure? What pain will you put up with? What hill will you climb with Jesus?

I pray you can see the same face of Gratitude and Love that Simon found looking back at him when his work was complete.

And don't miss this other point: Simon didn't see it coming. He wasn't in on the planning – God sprung it on him! Many times God's plan is thrust upon us with no forewarning. We might not even see it as His plan – it's just a pain, an inconvenience, a real sacrifice. I'm sure it took Simon a little time to sort it out. Maybe three days later it started to make some sense.

Wipe the sweat from your eyes and see glory in the grind. Put your shoulder into it and you'll realize Someone else is shouldering the burden with you. When you sit for a rest on

the long climb, look back. Through the dust, God will reveal that even this is apart of His plan – even this is crafting the crown He gives you when the long climb is over.

MY PRAYER

Lord, grant me strength for the unexpected and patience to endure it. Give me grace for the grind – and wisdom to understand at least a small part of it. Give me the vision to see You climbing the hill with me. I want to carry my cross and see Your face of Gratitude and Love shining back on me. Amen.



The Carpenter

It's hard work – but at least, it's a job. I certainly didn't get into this business to fill a lumberyard for the Romans. I hate the Romans – but they pay well. And they're always building something.

So, here I am. Planing plank after plank. Beveling beam after beam. Collecting coins and more coins.

Most of the timber is junk wood. It won't form a dining table, an elder's chair or anything useful. They give me rough dimensions for rough lumber. And it is rough labor.

I remember the early days in my little craft shop. No stacks of lumber. Just searching, finding and carving the knotty olive branches and sweet smelling cedar branches. Those were the days. The days when I created beautiful things!

Every time I smell their rich scent it reminds me of why I love what I do. My favorite bowls show the brown and yellow sapwood swirls and the twisting grain of an olive branch. No two bowls end up the same. Each are well worth the time carving and polishing. The sheen is so smooth I could almost sell them as glassware! If it wasn't for the money they fetch, I would be sad to see them leave my shop.

And everyone loves the fragrance of cedar. My small cedar boxes can fill a room. They were bestsellers in my shop. My wife's jewelry box, the linen cupboard, Joanna's toy horse, even our Passover cups and the Menorah. I made them all. They're part of our home. My home.

But enough daydreaming about the good old days. Today, I'm not creating – I'm just supplying. My work isn't for

display or admiration – it’s for stacking and inventory. There’s no beauty in this wood. No staining or smoothing or smiling when my work is done.

Like I said to my wife this morning as I shrugged and sluffed off to work – “It pays the bills. And in this Roman economy, I’ll take it.”



I wonder...Did the carpenter who supplied the wood for the cross ever hear about his part in the story of God? We know the crucifixion of Christ was reported across the entire Middle East.

“We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross.”

They dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here.”

“We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect...Acts 10:39; 17:6; 24:5

In the space of 30 years, the message of the cross reached Rome itself. The carpenter who supplied for its construction certainly heard its message.

Did he shudder in shame when he heard who was betrayed on his lumber? Did he feel sad at all that he contributed to his death?

Did he drop to his knees when he realized his wood was stained - not with varnish but with the blood of an innocent prophet?

This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. Acts 2:23

Did the carpenter discover that the man pinned to his lumber suffered to free him from all oppression? He overcame an oppression much deeper than a Roman boot on the neck. He secured a victory and a peace far greater than freedom from Rome.

"Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." Colossians 2:15

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood...Making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Revelation 1:5; Colossians 1:20

Did he learn that beautiful things DID come from the rugged lumber he supplied? Beautiful not because it's decorative. Beautiful because the cross is transformative – freeing and healing.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." 1 Peter 2:24

MY PRAYER

Lord, forgive me. I've been unappreciative and apathetic. My heart so easily grows calloused. Thank you for freeing me of my sin and making peace between us by carrying my sins onto Your cross. For the healing You offer and the triumph You bestow, I am forever grateful. Amen.



The Sign

Sometimes I don't mind being identified. Like when I receive an award or win at bingo. It's not so nice when I receive a speeding ticket or a cold stare because I forgot – again – to fold the laundry.

I've never been singled out of a crowd as the ringleader of rebels. Jesus was identified like this. It was a betrayal by one of his friends, Judas. He gave the arresting authorities a signal to watch for in the garden of prayer. Judas marked Jesus for arrest – with a kiss.

The sign of a kiss.

A full day had not passed when Jesus was identified with another sign. Governor Pilate provided the sign, a billboard of sorts. He ordered it nailed above Jesus' head as he was suffering on the cross.

It hung in mockery of Jesus. It hung as a warning to all political agitators. It even hung in mockery of the religious elite who orchestrated the demise of the rising sect of Christ-followers. How did Pilate arrive at the wording of the placard staring down at the crowd?

“JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS”

Pilate prepared the notice and ordered it fastened to the cross. The religious powers protested the wording and asked him to change it to “He said he was...” Pilate's intriguing response was, *“What I have written, I have written.” John 19:22*

How did he arrive at the wording and why wouldn't he change it?

Hours before his death, Pilate had three private encounters with Jesus in the Governor's Palace. His aim was two-fold: find a way to de-escalate the raucous crowds and discern the true motives of the Nazarene.

He is already annoyed at the disturbance so early in the morning. Those prosecuting Jesus wish for a quick judgement and sentence. Surely, Pilate hopes for the same.

After making no headway with the Jewish leaders, he calls Jesus into the palace. In his first audience with Jesus he asks, "Are you the king of the Jews?" As governor, he is aware of what goes on in the districts. His reconnaissance and intelligence was current with Jesus.

"Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate repeated. His question is almost laughable. Look at the man. Abused overnight by temple guards and interrogated by his own subjects. Hardly a king. Definitely not their king.

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

"You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

Jesus answered, "You are right in saying that I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." John 18:36-37

Pilate finds no basis for charges and refuses to get into a debate about truth with Jesus. He hopes a disciplinary flogging will satisfy the crowds. He orders it to be done.

His second private encounter with Jesus is after the flogging. No conversation is recorded. Looking upon the beaten and bloodied Nazarene, Pilate is certain this tactic will satisfy the

leaders and the crowds will disperse. He retains Jesus inside under guard as he steps outside to make his offer.

A second time he shouts, “I find no basis for a charge against the man.” He motions to the guards to bring out Jesus, visibly and unjustly punished. Pilate listens for some cheers and a sense of relief that enough is enough. Instead, he hears, “Crucify! Crucify!”

A third time he declares, “I find no basis for any of this, certainly not for execution!”

Raising their angry voices and fists, religious leaders roar, “He claims to be the Son of God - and for this, he must die!”

Pilate retreats into the palace and stumbles into a chair. This is no ordinary rebel. He knows the reports about the Nazarene healing, preaching, even raising the dead – these are the kinds of things a god would do. And the Romans claim a real collection of gods – gods that intervene and need appeasement. He draws Jesus back inside for their third and final conversation.

The record says at this point, Pilate was afraid. *“When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid...Where do you come from?” he asked Jesus.” John 19:9*

He almost doesn’t want to hear the answer. The power struggle between the power-hungry priests and the bruised and beaten rabbi makes no sense. Jesus is silent, head bowed. He has no fight in him. Yet, he is unafraid.

He’s the only one with no fear. He looks up through the crown of thorns to meet the eyes of the governor.

“You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.” John 19:11

Pilate knows he could easily be stripped of power. The Sanhedrin and priests desperately cling to their power. But Jesus – his kingdom and his power? Pilate locks into Jesus' gaze. His power is inexplicably intrinsic, untouchable, unshakable – even in suffering.

Could he be offending a god and his son? “Am I on the wrong side of the truth?” he asks himself. There's no time to sort it all out. Pilate pushes Jesus out of the palace to face his accusers. “Here is your king!” he declares, hoping this last gesture prompts the mob to take Jesus away.

“Crucify him!” they chant. “Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate retorts. It's no use. Without a decision, these proceedings will soon become a riot. Finally, Pilate gives the execution order.

The courtyard empties. Jesus, the soldiers and the noise are gone. Pilate lost the battle for Jesus' freedom. But the battle rages inside. His gut tells him this suffering, unafraid prophet was no mere mortal. The fear of losing the favor of Rome, however, overpowered his fear of executing a good man, or something more than just a good man.

To both appease his conscience and vilify the populace, Pilate gives an order to construct a sign. He made sure it was written in three languages. Aramaic, the language of the locals. Latin, the language of Roman law. And Greek, the common language of the far-reaching Empire.

The Jerusalem festival draws people from every corner of the Empire. With this tri-lingual notice, Pilate guarantees every person who witnesses the crucifixion will contend with the claim of the man who hangs on the center cross.

“JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS”

Sickened by his duty to Rome, and haunted by a holy man's fearless gaze, Pilate whispers, "What I have written, I have written."

MY PRAYER

Jesus, I often wrestle with Your kingship. I go my own way, despite Your warning, and despite Your caring. Following You is too hard, too confusing. I'd rather be king of my world. Until I make a mess of it all. Thank you for Your love and power that scoops me up and places me back into the care of a wise King. Restore our friendship here below with Your power from above. Amen.



The Centurion

“Get ready for a third!” yelled the commander of the guard.

That explains all the noise at the governor’s palace this morning. I can tell already this won’t be a normal Friday.

Roles were assigned. Equipment was already issued. Teams are ready for dispatch. And now, a change in orders. Breakfast isn’t even finished.

Today’s orders were for two crucifixions. It’s already a 12-hour duty. The governor adds a third victim. More work for everybody.

Fortunately, I’m assigned to the forward unit. We’ll get the site ready to receive the accused. They’ll be paraded through the streets and exit the city gate below us.

I prefer the site preparation over the parade. The crowds along the route can be unruly. Some protest and others agitate. It doesn’t matter to me what side you’re on. We just demand order and justice served. Whatever it takes, we will enforce the law of Caesar.

Our climb up the hill is quiet except for the clanking of our tools in our equipment bags. The air is still but thick. “It’s going to be muggy, today,” my comrade states, as the horses arrive with the lumber.

The upright measurements and spacing are predetermined and followed exactly. Three soldiers start digging while I divide the necessary items into three locations.

Three sledgehammers and three sacks of spikes. Two ladders and ropes for hoisting the bodies to the top. One crowbar to dismantle the cross. We reuse everything – the nails and the lumber. Why waste anything on a few Jewish convicts?

From the mount, I hear the noise increasing at the governor's guard house. The parade has begun. We were told upwards of 100,000 pilgrims would fill the cityscape for the Passover. I wonder about the impact they'll have on our work up here.

The shouts and the dust snake their way through the city. Anticipating the eventual exit gate, a stream of angry protestors hurries along the outside of the city wall to greet our soldiers and the victims when they emerge. "Here they come," comments one of my comrades.

The mob is much larger than we expected. Security will be an issue on the hill.

People swarm around our site as the criminals crest the mount. Our whips and muscle keep them at bay. Two of the victims seem fairly strong still. It takes two of us to wrestle each of them to the ground. After we tie their arms to the crossbeam so they won't move, the worst part of my job is next. The nails.

The third victim, the one we are to place in the center, looks dead already. "What was his crime?" I thought. "He's already been punished to the maximum."

From his knees, heaving to catch his breath, he seems to resign himself to his fate. He lays down willingly, rolls to his back and stretches out his arms. He tells us that the ropes are not necessary. He promises he won't move.

No one has ever said that to me. I can't move. No one has ever forced me to question my duty. How did this helpless,

nearly-lifeless, self-sacrificing man introduce doubt into my mind?

I shake it off long enough to drive the nails. He kept his promise – he didn't move. One of the parade soldiers taps me on the shoulder and tossed a wooden plank to me. "The governor found no basis for a charge against this man," my fellow-soldier says. "So he gave me this. Post it."

Sometimes the criminal's charge was hung with the body. This wasn't a charge – it was his name and a title. Written in Latin, Greek and Aramaic.

Jesus of Nazareth
King of the Jews

The man who said he wouldn't move – his name is Jesus. Maybe he is or, rather, was a threat to King Herod. What strange judicial circumstance forced the governor to kill a man without a criminal charge, with only a weak claim to an occupied throne? More uneasy questions.

The quicker I can get this over with, the quicker my questions will disappear. We hoisted him up with the horses, ropes and ladders. I posted the sign on the pole above his head. As I climbed down the ladder, he spoke. Or prayed. I couldn't tell which.

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Luke 23:34

It was a prayer. An unnerving prayer. He prays for us – not himself. For us – the soldiers killing him!

When I reach the ground, the crowd is pressing in. Some of the Jewish elite, dressed in their elaborate garb, shake their fists at Jesus. They whirl to face the crowd, point up at him

and scream angrily, *“He saved others! Let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One! Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’”* Luke 23:35; Matthew 27:43

People are angry at crucifixions for many reasons – but never for this reason. The crack of a Roman whip scatters the crowd and forces them into submission. Control, order and justice served. That’s our mandate.

However, I’m not seeing justice served – at least not for this man in the middle. He makes no defense as if he needs no defense. He offers no opposition as if their attacks are powerless. If spits no anger upon us or his enemies. Instead, he prays for us.

When he prayed, he said we didn’t know what we were doing. We know exactly what we’re doing – a routine crucifixion ordered by our governor and commander, Pilate. Is there more going on than I’m aware of?

The hours drag on. Noon turns into afternoon. The mob begins to thin out and wander off, many to prepare for the Sabbath. An eerie darkness appears on the horizon and spreads across the landscape. One of the criminals cries out to Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom!”

What kingdom is he talking about? Is this connected to the title Pilate gave him on the sign I attached? What are they talking about? They’re about to die! What is there to remember after you die?

“Today, you will be with me in Paradise.” Luke 23:43

Who is this Jesus who promises Paradise to a convict? Who prays for his executioners? Who calmly, willingly lays down on his own cross?

The blanket of darkness thickens. The low rumble of thunder announces an approaching storm. “It’s like the gods are growing angrier by the minute,” mutters a soldier next to me.

We hear Jesus gasping and turn to see him gathering strength. He arches his back and I hear his voice over the rolling thunder, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”

His head drops. His body hangs limp. The ground grumbles preparing to quake and lightning explodes against the black clouds.

The earth and sky announce the loss of a holy man. Creation convulses, lost itself without the One who holds it together.

My arms and legs – and my heart – are weak. I hold onto the cross of Jesus just to steady myself. When I push away, I look down, see His blood on my hands and tremble. How has this man crept into my soul? A routine morning was oddly altered into a mysterious darkness with one solitary light – the Nazarene.

I am speechless and troubled. How can I explain any of this?

My comrade leans over and says, “This was a righteous man.” I don’t know. I just don’t know. Then I looked one last time into his face.

They said, “The Chosen One, Messiah,” in hateful mockery. Pilate proclaimed his innocence. He prayed while in agony. He promised Paradise to a sorry sinner.

Naw. They were wrong. Dead wrong. All of this was wrong. A travesty. But this isn’t over. I can feel it. There’s more to be said.



“When the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, ‘Surely this man was the Son of God!’” Mark 15:39

MY PRAYER

Jesus, You confront without a word. You challenge without a threat. You disrupt by just being – You. You draw me in without gimmicks. You speak through godly suffering in ways that defy reason, in ways that drive straight to the heart. Even when my heart becomes a stone, Your presence melts it, softens it. You suffered immensely to wield that consuming power over me – for me and my good. When I am weak, make me strong, Lord. Amen.



The Covert

It's over. He said it himself.

Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. John 19:30

The crowds are gone. A few mourners remain. It's time to erase this spectacle on the hill. Three limp bodies - dead convicts - need to be disposed of. Three crosses require dismantling and recycling.

Joseph from Arimathea is a Jesus-sympathizer. As a ranking member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph disagrees with the tragic turn of events. A good man arrested under the cover of night and forced to endure three mock trials. Out of fear of Roman retribution and damage to their reputations, the Sanhedrin votes to silence a non-violent preacher of truth-to-power.

Joseph tried his best to mollify the offense and anger of his religious colleagues. He argued the Nazarene was amplifying the teaching of the Torah, not opposing it. He was present when Jesus taught about loving enemies and doing good to those who had no means to return the favor.

He saw the same hypocrisy that Jesus saw in his religious order. Joseph saw it in the mirror, too. He also witnessed grace bestowed and not just grace preached. He heard of prostitutes transformed, demons chased and children healed. What good would it do to punish a man like this?

This was his impassioned, ignored argument. Jesus is dead now. And the Romans plan to treat him like a common criminal. Protocol demands his body be dumped in a mass

grave reserved for the destitute, undesirables and criminals. “He deserves better,” decides Joseph. “Much better.”

Even though it is two in the afternoon, Nicodemus sits alone at home in a dark candle-lit room. A strange darkness enveloped the region as the Nazarene hung from his cross. A similar but heavier darkness seeped into Nicodemus’s soul – quite without explanation. In sadness and confusion he wonders, “Where is this dark day taking me?”

He remembers fondly his late-night encounter with Jesus. He recalls his inviting smile and every precious word.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?”

“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to the spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’” John 3:6-7,10

With all of his religious knowledge, he hadn’t the wisdom to understand this Rabbi Jesus. With all of his religious tradition, he hadn’t found the secret of true life with God, friendship unfettered from his shortcomings and the sins within.

Nicodemus will never forget his declaration of his mission.

“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” John 3:17

If God sent Jesus, where did he come from? He didn’t come from a rabbinical school. He didn’t come from the priestly tribe of Levi. But he spoke and acted and lived like a son of God would.

He spoke, acted and lived. “It’s all past tense now,” he confessed to himself. Word reached Nicodemus that the

prophet died around noon on Skull Hill, when the darkness blanketed the sky and the ground grumbled in an earthquake. And so, he concludes, “The darkness is more than environmental. It’s spiritual. It’s personal.”

What did he say during our secret meeting?

“Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.” John 3:19

This is an evil day. Evil is turning the light of day into the darkest of nights.

What kindred spirits might still be left on Skull Hill? It’s time for Nicodemus to make his sympathy for Jesus public. This darkness cannot linger. This evil cannot win. It’s time to do something, anything.

As he rises to begin his walk up the trail to Jesus, there’s a quiet rap on the door. He opens it slowly to meet the face of Joseph of Arimathea.

“The governor has given us custody of Jesus’ body. Once he is confirmed – gone – we can give him a proper burial.”

Nicodemus sends a few servants to retrieve burial spices. Joseph shoulders a large sack of linen and his servants are carrying water. Nicodemus chides Joseph and the group and says, “We must be quick. The Sabbath is only a few hours away.”

The Empire’s military is well-trained in every aspect – administration, battle and force of any kind. Well-trained in the sentence of crucifixion especially.

This form of capital punishment was common. The Jewish King Alexander crucified 800 rebels at the same time in the

middle of Jerusalem. Alexander the Great crucified 2000 survivors of a city he placed under siege.

So the three men on the hill outside of the city were not unusual in regards to their method of capital punishment. It was also not unusual to hurry their death with suffocation by breaking their legs. But when the soldiers approached Jesus' body...

*[They] found that he was already dead; they did not break his legs.”
John 19:33*

To make sure he was truly dead, military protocol required a piercing under the ribs. When a person dies, the blood separates in what is called a hemothorax. The heavier red cells layer below the lighter watery plasma. With the withdrawal of the spear, the heavier red spills out followed by the lighter water. The fluid separation indicates the individual has been dead for awhile.

By the time Joseph and Nicodemus arrive, confirmation was complete. The soldiers, the apostle John and the grieving women who remained at the site witnessed the gruesome certification of death.

The soldiers methodically lower the cross and unceremoniously detach the Nazarene's hands and feet. Criminals remained the property of Rome upon death. However, when Joseph produces the permission he obtained from Pilate, he legally procured custody of the body.

With the help of servants, the secret followers of Jesus gently wash away the blood. Legs and arms, torso and back. And finally, his face.

Nicodemus steps back. It's too much for him – comparing the broken face laying silent before him with the gracious face

that looked at him across the table three years ago. Why did he tolerate such self-suffering? “Why did he allow them to extinguish his light?” he said aloud.

Joseph shook his head with no answer available. He directs the work to softer ground. The team works together to wrap linens, interwoven with layers of spices, around the wounded body – as is the Jewish custom.

A garden is nearby with a tomb that is new – and empty. Perfect. It is getting late and no other body will be disturbed by using it temporarily. The women agree to return on Sunday. The Sabbath would be over and Sunday morning gives them a full day to complete the burial process properly.

The Nicodemus, Joseph and their servants rock the stone covering of the grave down the slight embankment. It thumps with a dull thud. The hollow sound comes not only from inside the tomb. It seems to also come from inside their hearts. Their faith, their courage and their service arrived too late. Too late to make a difference. At the very least, they honor him at this late hour with a burial fit for a friend.

It's near sunset as they escort the women back through the city gates. They avoid the streets he suffered upon. They bypass the corners where they knew Pilate's police gather. The women are heading for John's house which was near the High Priest's home.

“There's no secrets anymore – after what we did tonight,” Joseph says. “Caiaphas and Annas will discover what we did at the cross tonight.”

It dawns on Nicodemus, “Our days are done with the Powers-to-be. Our titles, our privileges are no more. We're followers of Jesus now. Out of the shadows and into the light.”

“No turning back,” whispered Joseph. “I’m not sure what we’re turning toward. But there sure is no way we can turn back.”



It’s interesting that ten Jesus’ closest friends - ten disciples – were nowhere to be found when the cross came down. John was present – but not the other ten.

It was two frightful followers, two secret admirers who braved the hill and its guard to wash the blood away from the body and face of Jesus. One day they will realize the wonderful irony they experienced. Because it is Jesus’ blood that does the washing. His blood washes us!

“And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.” Hebrews 13:12

“And the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” 1 John 1:7

The pair of Jewish teachers calculated their service was too-little-too-late. Their calculations were correct up until Sunday morning. That’s when the math changes. The resurrection of Jesus recalibrates every calculation – even the too-little-too-late. Because when he was raised, we were raised! Nicodemus and Joseph were raised and rewarded for their loving and dangerous service to Jesus.

“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.” Colossians 2:4-6

Nicodemus asked the right questions but did not understand the answers. Yet, he knew Jesus was from God (John 3:2).

Joseph was a disciple but secretly because he feared the power of the Jewish ruling party of which he was a part.

Peer pressure and lack of understanding can impair many would-be disciples. Many are sidelined by far less. But they chose to lock arms and climb the hill of Calvary, stepping over loss of reputation, unanswered questions and a whole series of what if's. The person of Jesus called them upward – his truth, his authority, his power, his sacrifice and his extreme love.

Jesus is compelling still. He is calling still – not from atop a hill on a bloodied cross; but from atop an empty tomb in a garden. Will you climb up to meet Him?

MY PRAYER

Father, my obstacles and excuses are many. I sometimes prefer to follow in secret. Renew my fervor with a fresh view of Your suffering on my behalf. Topple my obstacles and flatten my excuses. By Your Spirit, match my commitment today to Your commitment on that dark Friday. Give strength for my legs on this climb called My Life. To Your glory, Amen.



The Victim

How could anyone in his right mind call the cross a victory?

After three years of life-giving ministry, Jesus was mistried, mistreated, sentenced unjustly and silent in his death. These are not the virtues of a victor. This is the trauma borne by a victim.

If we read the story in the Jerusalem Gazette, his demise reveals a man of tragedy, a victim of strong outside forces. Competing philosophies fueled by religious fervor and political conflict put this man Jesus in the crosshair.

His Jewish supporters were banking on a political revolution and independence from Rome. They hailed him as king when he rode a donkey into Jerusalem. Their own prophet, Zechariah, predicted this is how the Messiah would arrive...

“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Zechariah 9:9

After the cross, their political hopes of liberation from Roman rule were crushed. Imagine the American Revolution collapsing, fading into weakness and defeat. No declaration of independence, no voting, no self-governing.

Revolution was the hope of Jesus’ countrymen. Those popular aspirations were buried in the grave alongside Jesus, the political victim.

Physically, he was victimized. From the arrest in the garden to his burial in another garden, his path was out of his control. He was punched in the face, spit upon, hit with

soldier's staves and pierced with nails. How can anyone claim he had the upper hand physically?

Historically, he was one of many promising but failed messiahs in Judea's history. The Hasmonean Kingdom had momentum but eventually collapsed. During the early days of the church, a lawyer recounts...

"Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered." Acts 5:36-38

His point? Messiahs come and messiahs go. Like so many other messiahs, Jesus was gone.

Politically, historically, and physically Jesus lost - a victim of forces outside of his control. Pilate said it best: *"Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" John 19:10*

But all of Rome with her iron fist of power embodied in Pontius Pilate spouted orders – unaware.

The religious elite with fake piety manipulated its deadly plan – unaware.

History marched on from Egypt, to Babylon, to Persia, to Greece, to Rome crushing revolts and messiahs – unaware.

The soldiers methodically, brutally dominated the last hours and breaths of the Nazarene – unaware.

Unaware of what? Jesus put it best immediately after Pilate dangled life and death in his face...

“You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.” John 19:11

What did Jesus mean? “Pilate, you have nothing. You are only over me by permission. Permission from above.”

Remember what Jesus told Pilate earlier?

“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.” John 18:36

Jesus just told Pilate, “I’m the one giving you permission to wield power. My kingdom is from above where you received your permit for authority for this short moment in time.”

When we realize that Jesus, by his own kingdom-authority and power, permitted every human agent involved to carry out his crucifixion, he ceases to be a victim.

What appeared to be a tragedy out of his control was actually a prearranged prophecy permitted and carefully coordinated by Jesus himself.

Look at this amazing statement from Revelation 13:8. Jesus is called...

“...the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.”

The contact with the cross was anticipated from the beginning of the world’s creation! He was not a victim. This was an ancient battle plan and Jesus is the victor.

He did have a choice. And he chose to not end the victimization. He chose to endure it.

When he was arrested, he declared his choice to allow the suffering. Peter made a feeble attempt to stop it before it started. He took a sword-swipe at a guard. Jesus scolded Peter.

“Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” Matthew 26:53

Twelve legions were between 60,000 and 72,000 in number. If Jesus wanted to prevent the suffering, he could just raise his voice and the city would be surrounded by 72,000 angels.

So, he didn’t succumb helplessly to the cross – he endured the cross.

“Jesus, faith’s pioneer and perfecter. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God’s throne.” Hebrews 12:2 (CEB)

The path to the victor’s throne led through the cross. The cross was the final task in his mission, the last leg of his race.

Prophetically, he is the victor. The prophet Isaiah tells us he brings peace and healing through the cross.

*He was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed. Isaiah 53:5*

Spiritually, his cross breaks the bondage and the power of sin. Sin and its demonic tools that drag us down in depression, anxiety and fear – he laughs at them from the cross. His death on the cross short circuits the magnetic pull of sin. How?

As the innocent Son of God, he clothed himself with our sin and took its punishment and shame into the grave with him.

Now you and I can stand outside the grave – clean, forgiven, unashamed before a holy, loving God.

Personally, we can be victors with Christ. When we embrace Christ, we embrace forgiveness and a clean conscience. No evil whisper can penetrate that embrace. This is why Paul the apostle proclaims Jesus' cross to believers a triumph and a laughingstock to evil...

“He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” Colossians 2:13-15



To many people, the weekend was a festival interrupted by a parade of criminals. A Passover meal marred by news of three more executed Jews. To the government, just more of the same from an unruly and rebellious populace.

To the ones who met Jesus – even if only for a few hours – they were never the same. He changes you.

To the ones who met Jesus – and followed Him? Pity, despair and fear were soon displaced. Awe, wonder and joy will flood their hearts and friendships.

However, to follow the Risen King, to imitate the LORD as we are called to do – we must look back to the cross. And not just once – every day.

Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. Luke 9:23

MY PRAYER

Jesus, I want to hear You say, "Well, done." I do want to be Your disciple and follow You! Make me more and more like You - denying myself, my control, my prerogatives. Fix my eyes forward on You - ahead of me, leading me. When my cross appears, I'll carry it because - I want to be like You. You've climbed my hill. Climb with me I pray. Amen.

