

Text: Matthew 27:46
(Additional Texts: Lamentations 3:1-24, 2 Corinthians 5:14-21)

 4th Lent Midweek

Word of Desolation

*“Stricken, smitten, and afflicted, See him dying on the tree!
This is Christ, by man rejected; Here, my soul, your Savior see.”*

Dear friends in Christ: Thus far in our Lenten meditations, we have considered the first three words of Jesus from the cross: his prayer of forgiveness for his persecutors, his assurance of Paradise to a dying thief, and his statement uniting Mary and John as mother and son. Tonight, we reflect upon the fourth word, and as we do, we see immediately that it is quite a bit different in character than the first three. Everything Jesus has said up to this point has been about someone else; it’s been for someone else’s benefit. He’s been taking care of others. In these first three words we have seen his great love directed outward; that in his hour of deepest need and distress his focus is still entirely on other people. And we’ve seen how we are included among them: he prays for our forgiveness, he promises Paradise to us, and he unites us with a “mother” which is his holy church.

But in the word we hear tonight, Jesus is not thinking about other people; and the reason for that is that he is all alone. Having discharged his human responsibilities to his nearest kin and closest disciple, he has effectively dismissed them. And now he’s moved on into a deeper and more intense phase of his passion where there are no others to be concerned for. Though he is still present before us, hanging right there on the cross, he is in a place dark, incredibly oppressive, and totally isolated. It is a place none of us ever wishes to be, and by God’s grace will never come to be.

Up to this point we have seen the Lord’s suffering primarily from a physical point of view—and to be sure, it is horrific. Crucifixion was designed by the Romans to be the slowest, most painful, most humiliating, and most frightening way to die imaginable. It was intended to make a statement in the strongest possible terms: submit to Rome or this will happen to you. Moreover, we’ve seen in many ways Jesus was abused far more than the typical man condemned to die by crucifixion. Much more abuse and violence was inflicted upon him than would normally be the case, so we expect his physical suffering to be that much more severe.

And yet I think all of us are keenly aware that there are other ways to suffer that are much worse than anything that can be felt in the body. In our day and age, suicide accounts for a large number of deaths. In our nation it is the leading cause of death for teenagers and adults under thirty. You have to ask, “Why?” Why do all these people who for the most part are young, healthy, reasonably prosperous and successful, and who are in no apparent physical distress ... why do they feel the need to end it all by taking their own lives?

And you know the answer: it’s to escape from a suffering within, an agony within the mind and spirit. It’s inside of us that we feel the all-consuming torments of despair, and loneliness, and hopelessness, and emptiness ... it’s there that we ache for meaning, purpose, and fulfillment ... that’s where we know the shame of disgrace, relive our humiliations, and where we feel the fears and terrors that can so overwhelm us. Jesus suffers immensely here too. And when you combine spiritual and physical suffering, the effect is to amplify both exponentially. The end result is a suffering far greater than the sum of the parts. For three seemingly infinite hours, from noon until three in the afternoon, while

the sun hides its face in shame, our Savior endured anguish unknown; and in this state he cries out:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

It's telling that in the first and last words from the cross, Jesus directs his prayer to his *“Father”*. There's closeness expressed there, a certain confidence born of personal intimacy. He knows the one to whom he makes his request, and because of it he is sure that he will be heard. But here in the center of his passion, he calls out repeatedly to the far less personal *“God”* who does not seem to hear. The loving Father-Son relationship that he has rejoiced in from eternity past has come to an abrupt end. It's not only the sun that hides its face; for Christ, the Father is strangely absent from him. The light of his love is no longer shining. He no longer feels the warmth of his good pleasure and approval. In its place all he feels is God's wrath and burning hatred. It's a side of his Father he has never known.

And so, he asks *“why?”* He's in total bewilderment. You know, when we feel the hand of God's discipline we too ask *“why?”* When things aren't going right or when we suffer loss, very often the first question on our minds is, *“God, why are you doing this to me?”* But we also have a sense of our guilt. We *know* what we've done wrong. And if we forget, Satan is always close at hand to remind us. And to a certain extent, when God disciplines us, as painful as it is at the time, we feel a kind of comfort. A child who knows he deserves a *“whuppin”*, though he dreads it and may protest loudly, at a much deeper level finds security in knowing that someone cares enough about him to try to correct his bad behavior. It may take many years for a child to realize how much he appreciates it—or he may never realize it at all; but nevertheless, it's true: there is comfort in knowing that there are limits and someone loves us enough to enforce them.

But Jesus has no consciousness of his own guilt or shame. He has never sinned. And yet on the cross he is the sin *bearer*. And as such from his Father's perspective, he is *the sinner*. That's the way he is being treated. But Jesus himself is at a loss to understand. Sinners like you and me can always accuse themselves. Those who end up in Hell will know forever that they deserve to be where they are; but Jesus, who is completely innocent, can't comprehend God's righteous anger directed against him. Even though he knew what his mission was, now that he actually feels the fire of the trial and his Father's burning fury, it doesn't make sense to him.

The best biblical example I can come up with is Uriah the Hittite. (I know, *“Uriah the who?”*) Uriah was a soldier in King David's army and the husband of Bathsheba. (Oh, *that* Uriah.) You remember the story: while Uriah is off fighting the king's war, David has an affair with his lovely wife. She becomes pregnant. So, to avoid a national scandal, David has Uriah sent back from the front, ostensibly to report on the progress of the war. David hears the report and sends Uriah home for a few days leave. This, David thinks, will ensure that when the child is born, Uriah will believe that it is his own. But Uriah is a real soldier's soldier. He can't bear the thought of enjoying the comforts of hearth and home while his buddies are out there in the trenches. So, he stays instead at the military barracks – he doesn't go home. David, frustrated, then resorts to plan B: he sends Uriah back to the front with a sealed letter for his commanding officer. *“Put Uriah in the thickest part of the battle, and when the fighting is the fiercest, have everyone pull away from him so he has to face the enemy without support.”* So, here's a man faithfully serving God, king, and country, putting himself in harm's way for love of all that he holds dear, not knowing that those he loves and trusts the most have betrayed him and ordered his death. If you can imagine the confusion Uriah felt when his army buddies all backed away from him in the midst of the battle ... those

few seconds before he was cut down when he was on his own and asking, “Why?” then you might understand a little of how our Lord felt to be forsaken by his Father.

We sometimes use the term “God-forsaken” to describe certain people, places, or circumstances. We use it to speak of things that are ugly, desolate, joyless, or miserable; but we use the term far too lightly. There has only been One who has ever been utterly forsaken by God, and there is only one place that truly meets the description of being God-forsaken: and that is Hell itself. And it’s important for us to understand that that is where Christ is when he speaks these words—where indeed he must be if he is to be our Savior and pay the penalty of our sin.

We deserve to spend all eternity in the hopeless despair and burning fires of Hell. Our sin has cut us off from God, and his righteous anger for our rebellion against him must be poured out for God to remain just and holy. God has to keep his own law. So, if each of us deserves an eternity of mental and bodily torture (and we do), then Christ must experience all of it to settle the account. That is to say he must accept for himself the equivalent of the sum total penalty that all of us together collectively deserve. And if you ask, “But how can one man suffer in three hours the equivalent of billions of people suffering forever?” The answer is that one man can’t ... *unless that man is also God.*

And here we see the need for the incarnation of the Son of God – why the Word had to become flesh to save us. And here too we see the very heart of the Gospel: that Jesus as man and *God* suffered and died for our sin. If we make the mistake of seeing the passion of Jesus as just one righteous man suffering on the cross for the six or so hours it took him to die, we will have missed the point. We may fall into the errors of thinking that it was just a token atonement, that God accepted it as *if* it were all that was really required; or we may think that it was limited in some way, that Christ didn’t really die for the sins of all. That in turn may lead us to succumb to doubt wondering if Christ really died for me.

This evening, in these words of Christ, I want you to see the crucifixion within the crucifixion. There is much more going on here than meets the eye. What we are seeing is just the tip of the iceberg of our Lord’s suffering. On the cross, the Son of God who is *infinite* suffers *infinitely*, if not in time then in magnitude. It is the Son’s being forsaken of the Father that guarantees the price has been paid for all. And when he calls out in agony wondering why, we can be sure that it’s because the answer cannot be found in himself. No, the answer lies within each of us—it’s for your sin that he is forsaken.

*You who think of sin but lightly Nor suppose the evil great
Here may view its nature rightly, Here its guilt may estimate.
Mark the sacrifice appointed; See who bears the awful load;
It’s the Word, the Lord’s appointed, Son of Man and Son of God.*

Soli Deo Gloria!