

Matthew 27:41-46

Chuck Swindoll tells the story<sup>1</sup> of what happened on a routine flight headed for New York. As the plane began the descent pattern, the pilot realized the landing gear was not engaging. He tried again and again to get the gear to lock into place, but without success. As the plane circled the landing field, the emergency landing crew and equipment moved into position.

Meanwhile, the passengers were informed of each maneuver and were told to place their heads between their knees and grab their ankles just before impact. Right before landing the pilot clearly announced over the intercom: "We are beginning our final descent. In accordance with International Aviation Codes established at Geneva, it is my obligation to inform you if you believe in God, you should--commence prayer!"

Commence prayer! Not a bad idea at any time, but certainly a good idea in the midst of a crisis. During this Lenten season we're examining some of the heartfelt prayers of people in crisis who were a part of the Passion Story, the events of the last week of Jesus' life here on earth.

On Ash Wednesday Jenifer reflected on Jesus' deeply poignant prayer in Gethsemane, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." Last Sunday, Cathy discussed Jesus' last words in prayer from the cross as recorded in Luke, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Today we consider Jesus' last words as recorded in Matthew and Mark. Hanging from a Roman cross, Jesus passionately cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We read these words and feel his despair because many of us have known times when we, too, have felt we were in a God-forsaken situation or place.

When I first read this scripture from Matthew, I immediately thought of the old folk hymn, *Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley*. You may remember; it goes:

"Jesus walked this lonesome valley.  
He had to walk it by himself.  
Oh, nobody else could walk it for him.  
He had to walk it by himself.

The song's tune and words, like Jesus' words from the cross, haunt us. What was Jesus thinking when he prayed them? Was he really forsaken and alone?

The story begins back in Galilee where Jesus spent most of his ministry. When he announced the time had come for him to go to Jerusalem, his disciples immediately protested. Peter said, "You're crazy! Don't go there!" Peter knew Jerusalem was the center of the powers trying to do Jesus in. As long as Jesus stayed in Galilee, his own country, his own people, he would be relatively safe.

But Jesus had a purpose to fulfill, so he left the safety of Galilee and headed for Jerusalem. Jesus' mission from birth was to die for our sins, to bridge the gap between a perfect God and an imperfect humankind. It's a love story and a mystery we will never fully understand. As feared, once in Jerusalem Jesus was lauded, betrayed, abandoned, arrested, and crucified by the people there.

But if Jesus made the journey and fulfilled his mission, why did he feel forsaken by God? There are three explanations offered by theologians:

**First**, these words are the beginning of Psalm 22, which describe the suffering of the Messiah sent by God and end with words of victory when the task is completed. Many believe Jesus recalled the beginning of the psalm to identify himself with it and the victory that was won in the end.

**Second**, we are reminded at that moment the weight of the world’s eternal sin was on Jesus. He who knew no sin bore it all AND it’s punishment - which is separation from God. Many believe this separation was what Jesus dreaded most during his prayer in the garden.

**Third**, in another unexplainable mystery, we know Jesus was fully divine and fully human. At that moment, in his humanness, he felt totally alone, bereft even of God. He had reached total despair. But it is also when we know he identified completely with our humanity.

Which explanation is correct? No one knows for sure. Personally, I believe it’s a combination of all three. However, I do know this: Jesus died willingly. He could have called upon all the angelic forces in heaven to escape the evil of the cross, but he didn’t. The cost of forgiveness was high but we can never say Jesus had it easy because he was the “Son of God.” Yet, we know, from our perspective now, it all ended in a perfect victory.

I also know this: Jesus didn’t just die for “the world.” He died for me. He died for you, for each one of us personally and individually. And we must each personally accept that gift of forgiveness so we will never experience that kind of separation from God. That’s why we sang, “I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene, and wonder how he could love me, a sinner, condemned, unclean.” It is marvelous. It is wonderful. Be amazed!

There’s something else I’ve learned about this passion story. When Jesus announced he was going to Jerusalem and the never speechless Peter told him not to go, Peter wasn’t just thinking of Jesus. Peter had just told Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.” I’m sure he wished he had qualified that a little bit with, “I’ll follow you under certain conditions.” Peter knew if Jesus went to Jerusalem, then he’d have to go there, too, and as modern disciples, so must we.

Philip Yancy, in his book, *Where Is God When It Hurts*, writes what many of us think, but seldom verbalize: that “the sole purpose of life is to be comfortable, to pursue life, liberty, and happiness.” So, we ask, if God is all love and power, why then doesn’t being a disciple preclude trials and problems? How often have we asked of God in the midst of our “Jerusalem experience,”

“Why me?”

“Why my loved one?”

“Why this?”

“Why now?”

But the reality is, we live in an imperfect world where believers and unbelievers alike suffer because of wrong choices—ours or someone else’s, or

because of circumstances beyond any earthly control--like earthquakes and tsunamis and we have felt forsaken--and alone.

A rabbi once observed, "If you believe in God, you have to explain one great problem: suffering. On the other hand, if you believe in no God, you have to explain everything else." Suffering is another mystery we can't fully explain.

Someone once said to me he didn't like the church season of Lent. He explained, "I'm just not into suffering." Duh! Like it's optional. Like it's an adopted lifestyle. Few choose to suffer, but the saying rings true: "Pain is inevitable, misery is optional." It's what we do with our pain that determines the misery.

Yancy goes on to say, "(The Bible) rarely answers the backward-looking question 'Why?' to the problem of pain. Instead, it raises the forward-looking question, 'To what end?' We are here to be changed, to be made more like God in order to prepare us for a lifetime with God. (And even though God doesn't cause evil or suffering, because of his love and power) "...evil may be transformed into good, and suffering may produce something of value."

The truth is, even though we don't like to admit it, we grow more through adversity than we do through pleasure and comfort. As parents we know if we give our children everything they want, if we rescue them from every problem, from every consequence of wrong choice, they will never mature in faith or character. And, at the time, they may feel unloved and abandoned.

I'm reminded of an incident in the war movie, "Blackhawk Down." During a huge battle assault a general jumps into a jeep and shouts to a private, "Get in the jeep and drive!" "But, General, I've been shot." To which the general barks back, "We've all been shot. Get in and drive!"

Do you hear that? "We've ALL been shot!"

We've all been wounded by life. So, our job is to move beyond self pity and see how God can use our pain to mature us and become aware of others' needs. This week I heard the head of Japan urging the people in the midst of this horrible tragedy to "help each other." Sounds like something Jesus would say! We can "be there" for others even if we're struggling. It's called the "ministry of presence." Not only does reaching out to help another bring relief and comfort to them, it can be instrumental in our own spiritual growth and healing. We gain perspective.

Yes, life is difficult and sometimes lonely for everyone.

I like the cartoon I saw some time ago showing a CEO sitting behind a big desk, in a huge leather chair. Standing meekly in front of the desk is a lowly employee in work clothes. The worker says to the boss, "I know they say 'it's lonely at the top,' but if it's any comfort, it's lonely at the bottom, too."

No one gets an exemption but no one's pain should be disregarded. A woman who was visiting a friend dying from cancer was hesitant to talk about her recent surgery, thinking it too trivial by comparison. But her friend lovingly embraced her and said, "In this house we don't compare pain."

So, pain is pain, whatever the cause, but what do we do with it in those dark, lonely hours when no one else is around? The Jews told Jesus "Come down from the cross and we'll believe in you." We scoff at their shallowness, but don't we try to

bargain with God sometimes, too? “God, change this situation, then I’ll believe in you; I’ll serve you more.” God doesn’t bargain. As Jenifer and Cathy affirmed, the most powerful response is--to surrender. God says, “Give me your situation, your pain, and I’ll do what will be good in the bigger scheme of things.”

I read where we could think about it like this:

A basketball in my hands is worth about \$12.

A basketball in LeBron James' hands is worth about \$12 million.

It all depends on whose hands it’s in.

An artist's paintbrush in my hands is worth about \$5.

A paintbrush in Picasso's hands is worth about \$5 million.

It all depends on whose hands it’s in.

Two fish and 5 loaves of bread in my hands make a few sandwiches.

Two fish and 5 loaves in God’s hands will feed thousands.

It all depends on whose hands it’s in.

As you see, everything depends on whose hands it’s in.

So put your concerns, your worries, your fears, your hopes, your dreams,  
your families and your relationships in God’s hands,

Because the outcome all depends on whose hands they’re in. <sup>2</sup>

When we put our lives in God’s hands, we are no longer alone. There will be valleys we must walk through in life that nobody can walk FOR us, but Somebody will be WITH us. Our God is faithful.

So when we're in a time of crisis and decide to "commence prayer," remember this promise from the Amplified version of Hebrews 13:5, “(God) Himself has said, I will not in any way fail you nor give you up nor leave you without support. I will not, I will not, **I will not** in any degree leave you helpless, nor forsake nor let you down, nor relax My hold on you. - Assuredly not!”

Now, that’s hope for any "lonesome valley."

<sup>1</sup> From *More Stories for the Heart*, compiled by Alice Gray.

<sup>2</sup> Author Unknown – updated by David Trout