

# The Sorrowful Road

## Suffering the Steps to the Cross

Relentless Series: Good Friday

Holy Week - April 15th, 2022

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Numbers 9:11b-14

Psalm 34:15-22

Isaiah 53

Luke 23:1-25

Matthew 27:22-52a

John 19:31-37

Philippians 2:1-18

The Bible recounts in detail, and on repeat, the gruesome story of the Passion of the Christ. Not only in the four gospels but also continually referenced throughout the rest of the New Testament epistles, but it started before even that. Throughout the Old Testament, there are hundreds of prophecies that indicate the birth, life and death of the Messiah. That story was being told since the beginning.

This sermon is not for the faint of heart.

It is a horrid gruesome tale.

...and we will honour it as such.

Pontius Pilot gets a bad wrap for being the one who cold-heartedly killed our beloved Christ. But when you read Luke's story you see how many times he tried to get him off the hook and out of it. Several times he declared him innocent and the people kept accusing him. He even pulled Yeshua aside and had a private conversation with him saying: 'all you have to do is say this isn't true and I can let you go. Don't you know that I hold your fate in my hands?'

He found no guilt in him and Yeshua, like the lamb from Isaiah 53, did not open his mouth - did not defend himself. So, Pilot was left with no other option. He could let who he knew was an innocent man go freely, which was the right thing to do and he had publicly

stated so several times or he could stop the riot that was rising. The rebellion wasn't Yeshua's followers even though he was crucified as a political rebel. The rebellion was the Jewish leaders', they were making a mountain out of a molehill.

Yeshua's teachings challenged them, never Cesar. They accused him of telling people not to pay their taxes, yet in each one of the gospels, there's record of him saying to give to Caesar what is Caesars. He taught about obeying authority and trusting that God put those rulers in place for His own reasons.

Yeshua was not a political rebel. He was a religious revolutionary. But for so long the Israelites saw politics and religion as the same thing because the leading religious factions had been the political rulers. But the truth of the matter is that by Yeshua's time that had not been true for a very long time. When David took the throne, church and state had been separated and they were never married again.

Yeshua is recorded as being the permanent installation of David's dynasty. He was a descendant of David in the house of Judah. And yet he died one of the worst deaths the Romans had to offer: the death of a traitor. Although he never betrayed anyone.

There were hundreds of prophecies about what the Messiah was going to look like, be like. In our paintings, he's often depicted as a beautiful man like David was. In the passion crucifixion story, we see every element of Isaiah 53 coming to life. How his bones were not broken, he was pierced, he carried the weight of others' sins literally in the cross. The only part that doesn't match from the way he's been preserved in history is that the beginning part says that he's not an attractive person who doesn't pull any attention to himself.

He was built to blend in and be an average person. Likely not ugly, but definitely not a chiselled supermodel. He wouldn't have stood out in the crowd unless he wanted to - unless his glory was revealed. We often need to be reminded that he was a Hebrew man. He wasn't a white-skinned European. We're getting better at depicting him in culturally appropriate ways.

But this man was a bit of a vagabond. He was a rover who was constantly travelling. He was transient. He lived on the road, in tents and inns.

He was compelling because of his personality and the power of God rested within him. He had sharp human faculties because he was the best of both worlds, but he was wandering nonetheless. And so, when a wanderer gets too much attention and starts collecting crowds it becomes the Roman empire's problem. But he didn't even really have their attention. Right to the end the Roman empire was trying to stay out of it. They didn't want anything to do with it. They even noted that if they did crucify him, he would be martyred and that would be worse of a problem. But the Jewish leaders just kept pushing, because they were the ones who are threatened by him.

His own people had betrayed him, not just Judas. In the Passover readings, it shows that when Yeshua dipped the bread and handed it to him, the evil spirit entered Judas at that time. To me, that reads as though Judas was possessed, not an awful person. He was betrayed by his own destiny, and he followed step by step on a terrible sorrowful pathway. They each had no real choice but to accept.

As a prophet, there is only ever one choice. The choice is: do I accept a mission or do I not. Once you accept your ordination as a prophet, the rest of your life is a choice of no choice. You don't get to choose between options, you just get to discern in alignment or out of alignment. Prophets don't often turn around and abandon their mission. And he was perfect. He came knowing the story, and he lived every horrible moment of it as an embodiment and example of commitment and loyalty and genuine care.

Yeshua was the final Passover lamb. He was the continuation of the Passover story. The completion of the rite saving people from slavery, the fulfilment of the laws of the Hebrew tradition, and he was the first and final martyr. He was the beginning, middle and the end of the story.

I love the part of the story where Herod gets to meet Yeshua. It says he was delighted that he had the opportunity, but it was not because of some recognition of the power of his teaching. Herod wanted to be entertained by miracles or magic tricks. He wanted Yeshua to perform for him, to answer questions on demand. Yeshua refused to play the game. He only gave teachings and performed miracles when it was ordained by God when true conversion or healing was going to happen as a result. Neither of those results were destined for Herod, and so Yeshua remained standing there as a normal person who had nothing to offer. Which, at this point in the story, he was - as far as Herod was concerned.

Pilot washed his hands of him, literally and figuratively. He had him whipped hoping that that would satisfy their desires for punishing an innocent man. The soldiers mocked him, dressed him up like a king and beat him for fun. He was brought out and presented to the people, hoping that his humiliation and the pain he had already endured would be excused as 'time well served'. But unfortunately, the Hebrew people don't have the sarcastic humour of irony like the Romans do. Seeing him dressed as a king would have ignited their passion and their desire for punishment not satisfied it. For the Romans, the joke would've been enough knowing that he was innocent because humiliation was a form of punishment itself.

When that wasn't enough, finally he was handed over to be crucified.

At every turn of the story, the characters were each given a chance to back out of their part to play. Pilot's wife had been tormented with premonition nightmares and begged her husband to let Yeshua go. He agreed, but was powerless. He tried to wash his hands several times and pass the responsibility onto someone else. God always gives you the option of backing out. There is destiny but there's also free will.

We all have a choice in what part we play in the story. When it truly is destiny though, there is no avoiding that responsibility. As much as Yeshua couldn't avoid dying on the cross as the sacrificial lamb, everyone else had to play their part to bring the end of the story to fruition.

As the human embodiment of the Passover lamb, he was torn apart, tenderized and put to the purifying fires. He was carved up, divided up, and handed out to the people. The wounds he endured were both consistent and inconsistent with traditional crucifixion.

It wasn't necessary for him to carry his own cross. Usually, the cross was built on-site by the soldiers. And yet he had to drag his own all the way up to Golgotha. The Via Delarosa is a long walk.

That cross was built to hold up his weight, which meant it weighed at least 2 to 3 times more than he did. Being dragged on a back that had received many lashes. Lashes upon lashes tearing the flesh from his bones and then this weight resting upon that. He tried, and he endured every step, but he literally could not hold up the weight of the sins.

He kept falling. So an innocent bystander, Simon, got commissioned to drag the crucifix for him.

Small mercies of God were showing that He was still there in that moment, even though it didn't feel like He was.

Those are the moments that we need to pay attention to. Having help to carry the burden is what Yeshua was here to teach us and when it came right down to it in his final hours that is exactly what was provided for him. Although Simon was not a willing volunteer, reluctant at best, it was still help provided by God.

You may find that a lot of the help that comes your way is not treated as willing or an offering made on purpose by the person who has become your unwilling ally in the moment of your pain. But many times you will. Sometimes it's by necessity. Sometimes it's by pity. Sometimes it's by compassion. However, it gets there, it's important to recognize that it is helpful, and a blessing.

They say that God doesn't give you more than you can handle and that you can carry the weight of your own responsibilities. But that doesn't mean that your load wasn't so heavy that there was already an ally planned along the route. The burden that is given to you may be so that someone else can come into your life to help. God doesn't give you more than you can handle because He gives us support and allies.

One of the most dangerous things Christians can do is deny help from others in waiting for God to show up, not recognizing that the 'other' was how God was showing up. We are meant to be His hands and feet moving in this world, so we need to recognize the ways that God uses others to support and guide us, but also be fully available, present, and willing to be that support and guidance for others when He chooses us as the ally to insert in their story.

Upon the cross, the Passover lamb lived up to the instructions of the rite. It can take days to die on the cross. Essentially you dehydrate, your organs fail, and you die. His journey started early because it started the night before, but by midday, 2pm as tradition tells, he had already died.

We know that he died on a Friday because the Jews wanted him executed even though he was already in the process of execution because they wanted his body down before the Sabbath started. They didn't want him hanging there for the religious practices. They wanted their mess cleaned up so they could go into the Sabbath free and clear of any guilt.

When you break the legs of a crucified individual they suffocate under their own weight. And so the order was given to break the legs of the three men hanging to expedite their deaths. But when they came to Yeshua they recognized he was already gone. They weren't allowed to break his bones, just like the Passover lamb.

The instructions for the Passover lamb are that nothing can be left to the next morning, and so he had to come down. But you also can't break any of its bones, so he had to die before they had that chance. The journey to his death was horrible, but it was unnaturally swift. There's no reason why within a few hours a crucified individual would have died. It's about the equivalent of how being left out at a bus stop in an arid desert, a few hours isn't enough to die purely of exposure.

So to make sure that he was dead they pierced his side. Yet blood and water poured out. It takes a long time for the red blood cells and plasma to separate when a body has died. And yet potentially moments after death it has already separated. That shows us another small, though gruesome, mercy. When they pierce the side they're aiming to pierce the heart because you cannot survive that. When they punctured his rib cage the water and blood that poured out likely means that he had suffered an adema.

That whole time that he had been carrying that cross he was already dying. There was no saving him after the lashings. They were so brutal that it created internal damage. His organs had been bleeding and his lungs were filling with fluids. It only takes a few hours for internal damages to drown someone. It looks like that's how he died.

It wouldn't have mattered if they change their mind and pulled him down from the cross. But God chose a way for him to die swiftly. People often say that drowning is one of the most peaceful ways to go. Your consciousness separates from your body but it's because of the electrical charge in the waters you maintain consciousness without any physical experiences of pain. Those who have had near-death experiences through drowning often say that there's a peace that descends upon them. That they're OK with

the fact that things are over. They get a glimpse of heaven and see the world beyond. Even if they are revived.

So although we crucified him for our sins, our sins being projection and accusations and bearing false witness against another person. Although we crucified him for our sins it's not how the embodied Christ died. Even though he went through all the motions of that horrible experience, God gave him a swift and potentially peaceful death when it mattered.

He was taken down and given an honourable burial. The lifeless body was treated with honour. Then in a borrowed grave he sojourned to the land of the dead. We say that he descended into hell, and conquered death by rising again. For those days he took on the mission of fighting for our lives directly by battling the repercussions for our sins.

Just for today, we only take it to the moment of the cross, and that's because most of us are still treating it like we're still nailing him to that cross. He hangs there until we receive the rest of what he has done.

Most of us don't live as though we actually believe. So as he transits through hell in the underworld, how do you transition to a life lived as though his sacrifice is received, and was truly a purposeful death of honour?

Our final reading today recounts the qualities of someone who is living an embodied life that honours the sacrifice of our Lamb of God.

Take to heart those instructions, the guidance that he provided. And live a life that honours him as the way-shower on the Via Delarosa - the way of suffering.

He doesn't ask you to suffer, he asks you to rejoice for his suffering  
paid that toll so that you may have clear passage through this world.

Soli Deo Gloria,

*Selah*