

Luke 23:26-31

As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.²⁷ A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him.²⁸ Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.²⁹ For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’³⁰ Then “‘they will say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us!’”³¹ For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

Forgive Our Misplaced Sorrow!

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” Isaiah’s famous prophecy about our Savior’s suffering most definitely was fulfilled on Good Friday. The account of Christ’s passion is loaded with people who despised and rejected Jesus: the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who put into action the plot to kill Jesus, the Roman soldiers who whipped Jesus and mocked him-“Hail, king of the Jews!,” the cold and cowardly governor Pontius Pilate, the angry mob which shouted, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” He was despised and rejected by men. And yet, Jesus was a man of sorrows. In spite of all those haters and dissenters, there were a number of sympathetic faces in the crowd as Jesus made his way to Golgotha to be crucified. In our lesson, St. Luke mentions a group of women agonizing over Jesus.

These women stand in sharp contrast to the vile and hatred which Jesus had encountered up to this point. Their sorrow was genuine. There is no fault to be found in the tears of these women. And yet, it was the very man for whom they were lamenting who told them that they were mourning for the wrong reasons, that their sorrow was misplaced. Jesus tells these women that they should be mourning for other reasons, better reasons.

Please don’t misunderstand. The sorrow these women were demonstrating was not a sinful sorrow. It was common for some of the women of Jerusalem to mourn for those condemned to be executed. In fact, it was oftentimes this group of women who would collect funds in order to buy the painkilling drink of wine mixed with myrrh which was offered to those being crucified. This lamenting was a genuine act of compassion. But Jesus says that their sorrow was misplaced. You see, Jesus didn’t need their sympathy. He was going toward the goal for which the Father had sent him. Jesus resolutely journeyed to the cross for our redemption. Furthermore, Jesus knew that this journey would end in his resurrection. It would end in victory. There was no need to mourn for him.

Jesus said, “Do not weep for me; weep for yourselves.” What Jesus truly sought from these women was not *sympathetic* sorrow, but *repentant* sorrow. You see, Jesus foresaw the destruction which was about to come upon Jerusalem. Jesus knew it was going to be destroyed by the Romans. God was about to send destruction upon the people of Jerusalem because their time of grace was up. By and large the Jews had despised and rejected their Messiah. They were not truly repentant of their sin. They clung to their Old Testament ways of worship at the temple. What they failed to accept was that Jesus was the fulfillment of that OT temple worship-worship that had been emptied of true faith in God. They didn’t see that the great sacrifice that would take away their sins was Jesus, not some sacrifice of a goat or bull at the temple. But they didn’t want to see this truth. They shut their eyes to Jesus and remained in their empty ways of worship.

And so, because the Jews failed to repent, in the year 70 A.D. God brought about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. The temple was destroyed and many Jews who had worshipped there with hearts vacant of repentance perished. It was a horrible and gruesome end. That’s why Jesus quotes the prophet Hosea concerning the fall of Jerusalem: “The time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’” Being childless was looked upon as a horrible curse by the Jews. But Jesus says the childless will be blessed at that time of Jerusalem’s destruction because the childless people wouldn’t have to witness the deaths of their own children in the destruction. Jesus goes on to describe the terror of those days: “Then they (the inhabitants of Jerusalem) will say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us!’ For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

Jesus is the one who brings about the time of the green tree. In Jesus, God is patient and merciful to us and gives us a time of grace to grow spiritually and produce spiritual fruit, just like a well watered tree grows and produces fruit. In Jesus there is life and salvation. In Jesus we are saved from the fires of eternal destruction. But those who reject Jesus do not receive the water of life. Those who reject Jesus are like dry trees that will burn up in God's eternal destruction. And for those Jews who rejected Jesus when he was right there in front of them, offering them life in the time when the tree was green-for those Jews, their destruction-both physical and eternal destruction-came when Jerusalem was destroyed. They received the punishment which all who reject Jesus receive.

This is why the sorrow of those women was misplaced. It was not Jesus that needed their sympathetic sorrow. It was they themselves who needed to feel sorrow over their sins. What these women and their children and all the people of Jerusalem and all the people of the world need to know is that sin brings destruction-eternal destruction. Those dark and shameful thoughts which we think, the hateful words we speak, the loveless things we do make us worthy of God's eternal wrath. If we had to face God's wrath we would be wishing the mountains would fall on us and the hills would cover over us, too. Because nothing could be worse than the wrath of the holy God.

But that is a wrath which we will never have to face. We believe in One who suffered the full force of God's wrath in our place. Jesus resolutely set out on that road of sorrows which led to the cross because he knew that cursed cross of a tree would be a tree of life for us. Jesus has died for all the disgusting thoughts which we entertain. Jesus has died for the biting and hurtful words which come from our mouths. Jesus has died for all the times when our sorrow is misplaced-like when we're sorry we got caught in sin rather than being truly sorrowful and repentant for our sin. Jesus covered over all these sins with the greatest act of love ever to be known. He gave himself for us. Now we have life-eternal life-because we are branches connected to the vine, to the life-giving tree.

Because we are branches connected to the life-giving vine, Jesus has given us the strength to produce the good fruit of repentance which those connected to Jesus Christ will inevitably produce. Since we live our lives in Christ, we are able to approach God with an honest heart. We can come before God and confess all of our sins to him. We don't have to hide anything from him. We don't have to downplay our sin as if it isn't that big of a deal. We can come before God with a sorrowful and contrite heart that knows full well what our sins deserve. How can we approach the holy God like that? Because we know that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We come before God certain that Jesus is our Savior.

And so we also follow Jesus down the road-down this road that leads to Golgotha. And we watch the ugly procession that ends with the cross. And we weep tears of sorrow because we know that it was our sin that made this ugly procession necessary. And rightly so. But we do not weep for Jesus. Because this is his victory. Jesus is glorified in his suffering and death. Ultimately, this journey ends in our redemption and eternal life and peace with God. That's why Jesus went on this journey. That's why we embrace this journey. So follow Jesus down this road and watch saving love in action. And rejoice in your Savior's cross. Amen.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, thinking little of its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Amen.

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Midweek Lent #6

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