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THE GOD WHO FEELS YOUR PAIN

AN EASTER MEDITATION ON THE CROSS



DENISON MINISTRIES

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“When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers” (Henri Nouwen).

How can a first-century Galilean rabbi be relevant to our challenges and needs today?

We are by no means the first people to ask this question. Even during Jesus’ earthly ministry, many questioned his authority to teach and act as he did (Mark 11:28). Others stopped following him when they did not like what he taught or when they found it irrelevant to their lives (cf. John 6:66). After his execution, many among the authorities dismissed claims that he had been resurrected (Acts 4:2) and viewed his followers as deluded (cf. Acts 26:24).

Now we look back at him across twenty centuries and wonder how his life and death could possibly be relevant to our world and to our modern lives. Think about it: Most people in the first century had no indoor plumbing, much less electricity or the internet. Medicine in their day was constrained by myths and misconceptions. Women were the possessions of their husbands, and children were the possessions of their fathers.

Add all the harm done in his name in our society, from horrific clergy abuse scandals to denominational infighting to political polarization. No wonder church membership has declined while the percentage of people who claim no religious affiliation has escalated.

In response, I’d like to convince you in this Easter meditation that Jesus of Nazareth is more relevant to your challenges and struggles than anyone who has ever lived. Not by focusing on his divinity, as we so often do during this resurrection season, but by considering his humanity. Not by reminding you of his omnipotence, but of his finitude. We believe Jesus was uniquely fully God and fully man. Both aspects of that nature are hugely important.

I’d like you to believe that Jesus suffered so deeply and felt our humanity so intensely that he understands our every problem and pain on a level no other human can claim. And that as a “wounded healer,” he offers you hope found in no one else today.

Let’s begin on a very personal level.

“Time helps”

My father died ten days before Christmas during my senior year of college. After his funeral and the holiday passed, I returned to the campus I had attended for four years, but something was off.

It was as if I was watching a play in which I no longer had a role. Everyone else was doing what they always did as if our family’s tragedy had not happened. They were laughing, going to class, and hanging out with friends, seemingly impervious to the suffering of my soul.

Then a friend walked up, put her arm around my shoulder, and said, “Time helps.” I’ll never forget that moment.

Here’s why: her father had died of cancer some months earlier, and then her pregnant older sister was killed by a drunk driver. She understood my grief in a way few could. Her sympathy and solidarity were God’s gifts to my broken heart.

This is the way of the world: The people who have been where we are have the most to offer us in our hard times. When our older son was diagnosed with cancer, those who had been through cancer could encourage us as others could not. When our youngest grandson was diagnosed with leukemia, parents and grandparents who had walked this path became our guides.

It just makes sense, really: I cannot help you learn Spanish unless I know Spanish. I can’t guide you very well to a place I’ve never been.

There’s a reason we always hired Israelis to be our tour leaders and bus drivers in Israel. As many times as I’ve been to the Holy Land and as much as I love the nation and her people, I could never guide Americans through Israel as well as those who live there.

All of this makes the cross and all that led to it profoundly powerful in our hard places. When we understand what Jesus suffered across all that he experienced in our world, we realize that he truly does know us better than we know ourselves and can be the friend, confidant, and healer our souls need most today.

The baby who chose his parents

In the first century, the poorest Jewish parents marked the birth of their children by bringing “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons” to Jerusalem for sacrifice and worship (Luke 2:24). By far the more preferred and socially acceptable sacrifice was the gift of “a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering” (Leviticus 12:6).

Only the very poor were permitted to replace the lamb with another turtledove and pigeon (v. 8). But this is all Joseph and Mary were capable of doing, offering the most meager offering of gratitude for the divine child they had been entrusted with parenting.

Here we have a glimpse of the home into which Jesus was born.

The story begins with his mother, a peasant teenage girl living in a town of Galilee called Nazareth (Luke 1:26). Today, Nazareth is a thriving city of some seventy-eight thousand people. I have traveled by or through it many times over the years. In Jesus’ day, the town was so small that it is not mentioned even a single time in the Old Testament or in the writings of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus.

It was, in fact, something of a joke: when Nathanael was invited to meet “Jesus of Nazareth,” he retorted, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:45–46).

And yet it was here that Mary was living when Gabriel invited her to become the mother of our Savior. And it was from here that they made their way to Bethlehem for Jesus’ birth.

Once again we see the lowliness of the story: By the time the pregnant woman and her husband traveled the ninety miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the only shelter available to them was a cave in which animals were kept. The only crib available to the child was a “manger”—a stone feed trough. The only people to attend his birth were dirty field hands whose jobs made them so ritually unclean that they could not attend synagogue services or temple sacrifices.

So, let’s add it up:

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- Jesus' parents, at his birth, were so poor they had to give the cheapest sacrifice permitted.
- They lived in one of the smallest, most obscure towns in the nation.
- Jesus was born in a cave, laid in a feed trough, and worshiped by unclean field hands.

In his day, it is hard to imagine circumstances that were more destitute and socially denigrated.

We might suggest a single mother as someone today who struggles more than Mary, who at least had a husband. But in her day, if Mary had become pregnant without a husband, she would likely have been stoned to death for adultery.

As it was, Jesus was born into the most impoverished circumstances a first-century Jewish baby could have experienced. No shelter for his birth could have been dirtier, smellier, or more obscure. No worshipers could have been more despised and ceremonially unclean.

Here's the point: Jesus chose all of this.

He was the only baby in human history to choose his parents, and he chose these. He was the only baby to choose the place of his birth and those to attend it, and he chose this cave and these shepherds.

If he would choose them, he'll choose you.

Your family cannot be more challenged or your circumstances more difficult than those the infant Christ experienced. He feels your pain, whatever it is, because he felt it himself.

"A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief"

Fast forward to his public ministry. Jesus had no home of his own, living with Peter and his family in Capernaum (cf. Mark 1:29; 2:1). As he told one would-be follower, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20).

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He experienced the full gamut of challenges we face:

- He was hungry (Matthew 4:2).
- He was thirsty (John 19:28).
- He was tired (John 4:6).
- He was tempted “in every respect . . . as we are” (Hebrews 4:15).
- He was “despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3).
- He was rejected by his hometown (Luke 4:28–29).
- His death was sought by the religious authorities (John 11:53).
- His torture and execution were implemented by the civil authorities (Luke 23:23-33).

Then came his arrest, trial, and condemnation. Here we especially see the depth of his humility and vicarious suffering for us:

- He was betrayed by one of his disciples (Matthew 26:49), abandoned by the rest (v. 56), and betrayed by their leader (vv. 69–75).
- He was mocked, spit upon, and beaten by the religious authorities (Matthew 26:67–68).
- He was scourged by the Romans (Matthew 27:26), a whipping that tore the flesh to the bone and often caused death due to blood loss and shock.
- His scalp and face were lacerated by a crown of thorns (v. 29).

His crucifixion was then horrific beyond our ability to comprehend.

When the Romans wanted a victim to die slowly on the cross, they nailed them through the palms and feet to the wood, tied their arms to the crossbeam with rope, and hung them there to die from thirst and exposure. In Jesus’ case, with the Passover imminent, they chose for their victims to die more quickly.

As a result, the nails were driven through his wrists and his feet into the cross. He then had to pull up on his crucified wrists to lift his body weight from his lungs

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in order to breathe. But the nails severed the ulnar nerves there, rendering his arms useless. The victim then pushed up on his crucified feet to breathe.

To hasten death, the Romans then broke their crucifixion victims' legs with a massive club called the *crucifragium*. This was what they did to the criminals crucified with Jesus (John 19:31–32). They would have done the same to him, but he had already given up his spirit in death (v. 30).

Crucifixion is the most horrific form of torture and execution yet devised. But, as with the circumstances of Jesus' birth, we need to note that he chose this.

The sinless Son who bore our sins

Jesus was the “lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8 NIV). Before time began, God's plan was for his Son to die in our place to purchase our salvation (cf. Acts 2:23; Romans 5:8). In so doing, he took our guilt on his guiltless soul and paid the price to atone for our sins (2 Corinthians 5:21).

But he could have done this through any manner of death. He could have been beheaded, which was how Rome executed its citizens (and how Paul was likely executed by Nero). He could have been stoned to death, which was how the Jews executed people (cf. Acts 7:58–60).

But Jesus arranged to be executed by the Romans and thus by crucifixion. He told his disciples he would be “lifted up from the earth” (John 12:32), which he said “to show by what kind of death he was going to die” (v. 33). His execution thus fulfilled remarkable biblical prophecy:

- “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5).
- “They have pierced my hands and feet” (Psalm 22:16).
- “I can count all my bones” (v. 17; as we noted above, the Romans did not break his legs).
- “They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots” (v. 18; cf. John 19:24).

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Another especially significant fact: Jesus' death on the cross took him to a place of pain and despair humans cannot understand, because it was on the cross that the Father transferred the guilt of sinful humanity to his sinless Son. As a result, he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). There is no way for sinners to understand the depth of revulsion and isolation he felt in that moment as he died for us.

Then came his burial. Isaiah predicted: "They made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth" (Isaiah 53:9). This was fulfilled when Joseph of Arimathea buried his body in his own tomb (John 19:38–42). Our Savior had "nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20) even in death.

You might think that Jesus had to die by crucifixion and be buried in a borrowed grave to fulfill these prophecies, which is true. But it is also true that the Holy Spirit could have prophesied his death by beheading or stoning as well. He could have predicted that Jesus would be buried in his own tomb or that of his family.

Instead, more than a thousand years before Calvary, Jesus' horrific execution and impoverished burial were planned and predicted.

Again, all of this was by his choice.

"Come and see the victories of the cross"

To summarize: Jesus truly experienced the deepest depths of human suffering on our behalf. In fact, it is difficult to imagine how he could have suffered more terribly for us.

- His birth and birth family could not have been more humble.
- His hometown could not have been more obscure.
- He fulfilled his earthly ministry as a homeless person living with a friend and a human who faced every emotion, pain, and temptation we face.
- He was wrongly accused and conv Jesus was truly a "wounded healer" on a level that transcends any other person in human history.

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- He was betrayed by a disciple he chose and abandoned by the rest of his friends.
- He died in the most tortured manner ever devised.
- He felt revulsion we cannot imagine as he bore the sins of all sinners of all time on his sinless soul.
- He was buried in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Jesus was truly a “wounded healer” on a level that transcends any other person in human history.

As a result:

We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:15–16).

What is your “time of need” today? What confusion dismays you? What pain are you feeling? What temptation are you facing? What guilt or grief are you carrying? What fears are you feeling?

Name them, specifically and honestly. Now bring yourself confidently and your burdens boldly to your Savior. You can absolutely know that he knows your suffering, for he has faced and felt it and worse. The cross is his invitation to his grace for your need and mercy for your guilt and shame.

Matthew Henry invited us:

Come, and see the victories of the cross. Christ’s wounds are your healings, his agonies your repose, his conflicts your conquests, his groans your songs, his pains your ease, his shame your glory, his death your life, his sufferings your salvation.

Will the “victories of the cross” be yours today?