

“The Last Words of Jesus: #4 - Desolation”

⁴⁶ περι δε την ενατην ωραν εβοησεν ο ιησους φωνη μεγαλη λεγων ελωι ελωι
λεμα σαβαχθανι τουτ εστιν θεε μου θεε μου ινατι με εγκατελιπες

“About three in the afternoon, Jesus cried out with a loud voice,
‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ which means,
‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’
(Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34)

Psalm 22; Matthew 27:45-49 ¹

I’m a big fan of Denzel Washington. An active Christian, family man and churchman, Denzel chooses movie roles that reflect decent values. One of these roles was that of Jerome Davenport, a Navy psychiatrist in the 2002 film *Antwone Fisher*.

The film is based on the true story of a young man who grew up in an abusive foster home. Angry at both his birth parents and his foster parents, Antwone enlisted in the Navy, but his anger got him into so much trouble that he was sent to Davenport for counseling. Over time, Jerome Davenport became a father figure to Antwone.

In one scene, after having Thanksgiving dinner at Davenport’s home, Antwone gave Jerome a piece of paper on which he had written a poem. The poem went like this:

Who will cry for the little boy, lost and all alone?
Who will cry for the little boy abandoned without his own?
Who will cry for the little boy? He cried himself to sleep.
Who will cry for the little boy who never had for keeps?
Who will cry for the little boy who walked the burning sand?
Who will cry for the little boy, the boy inside the man?
Who will cry for the little boy who knew well hurt and pain?
Who will cry for the little boy who died and died again?
Who will cry for the little boy? A good boy he tried to be.
Who will cry for the little boy who cries inside of me?²

In many ways, Antwone Fisher’s pain is our pain, because even though our lives may have been spared the particular kinds of pain that Antwone experienced, you and I know more than we want to know about what it is to be hurting and alone.

It was high noon. Jesus had been suspended on the Cross between earth and sky for three hours. And then *from noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land* (Matthew 27:45). Now you may remember that one of the ten plagues that fell on Egypt before the Exodus was a plague of darkness—a three-day darkness so thick that it could be felt (Exodus 10:21).

Do you remember which plague the darkness was? The darkness was plague number nine, after which there was only one more: the death of all the firstborn sons of Egypt. On this awful Friday afternoon, the God-sent darkness was once again a harbinger of death—this time of God’s own Son. *About three in the afternoon,*” the Bible says, *Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?”* (which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”)

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on March 18, 2012.

² *Antwone Fisher*, 20th Century Fox, 2002, written by Antwone Fisher, directed by Denzel Washington.

When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling Elijah.” (Matthew 27: 46-47).

Jesus’ cry of desolation was actually quoting the first verse of Psalm 22, which says, “*My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?*” The bystanders’ reference to Elijah had to do with God’s having transported the great prophet to heaven without his passing through death, and their wondering whether God might do that for Jesus also (2 Kings 2:1-12). But such rescue was not to be.

Jesus’ Fourth Word from the Cross, the anguished cry, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” may be the most perplexing sentence in all the Bible. Jesus had previously said that “*No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him*” (Matthew 11:27). He had also said, “*I and the Father are one*” (John 10:30). If these things were true—and they were—then what separation, what abandonment happened here, in the hour of Jesus’ greatest need?

One thing we do well to remember is that our failure to perceive God’s presence with us does not mean that God is actually absent. God is far more concerned that we trust Him than that we feel Him; and far more is actually going on in any situation than we actually perceive. That, of course, is the point of the familiar anonymous poem, “Footprints in the Sand”:

“One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord, and across the sky flashed scenes from my life. For each scene I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand—one belonged to me, the other to the Lord.

“When the last scene of my life flashed before us, I looked back at the footprints in the sand. I noticed that many times along the path of my life, there was only one set of footprints. I also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in my life. I questioned the Lord about it.

“Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don’t understand why in times when I needed you most, you would leave me.’

“The Lord replied, ‘My child, I would never leave you during your times of trial and suffering. When you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.’”

The truth is that we can only guess about what was happening during those awful hours on the cross, and it’s likely that we’ll never really understand it. But we do know that “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God* (2 Corinthians 5:21). What we do know is that somehow, in those last twelve awful hours of Jesus’ earthly life, all of the hatred, all of the murder, all of the betrayal, all of the abuse, all of the adultery, all of the warfare, all of the holocaust, all of the sin that humankind had ever committed or would ever commit was concentrated in Jesus’ spirit as He himself *willingly* paid the penalty . . . for us.

Horrible as Jesus’ physical suffering was, whether through the dreadful scourging, through the bloody journey of the *Via Dolorosa*, or through the agony of the crucifixion itself, it was this moment that Jesus dreaded the most. It was this moment of undiluted evil from which his soul recoiled when he asked his Father for release in the Garden (Matthew 26:39). And yet he had always known it was coming, because Jesus is “*the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world*” (Revelation 13:8).

We sometimes carelessly use the coarse phrase, “come hell or high water.” On that awful Friday afternoon, Hell did come, and all of Hell’s fury was vented upon our Lord in a final, desperate attempt to destroy him. And as the penalty for all of my sin, and all of your sin, was poured out upon the Father’s only Son, the Father turned away . . . and wept.

We’ll never know how much it cost to see our sin upon that Cross. No person has ever been so alone as Jesus was in those unspeakable moments, and no person will ever be again. As Rick Warren put it, “If God never did *anything* else for you, He would still deserve your continual praise for the rest of your life because of what Jesus did for you on the cross.”³

Brennan Manning is a Franciscan priest who has written many things that I find helpful. One of these is the story about how he got the name “Brennan.” While growing up, his best friend’s name was Ray. The two of them did everything together: they bought a car together as teenagers, they double-dated together, they even enlisted in the Army together, went to boot camp together and fought on the frontlines together. One night while they were sitting in a foxhole, Brennan was reminiscing about the old days in Brooklyn while Ray listened and ate a chocolate bar. Suddenly a live grenade flew into the foxhole. Ray looked at Brennan, smiled, dropped his chocolate bar and threw himself on the live grenade. It exploded, killing Ray, but Brennan’s life was spared.

When Brennan later became a priest he was told to take on the name of a saint. He remembered his friend, Ray Brennan, and took on the name “Brennan.” Years later, he went to visit Ray’s mother in Brooklyn. They sat up late one night having tea when Brennan asked her, “Do you think Ray loved me?”

Mrs. Brennan got up off the couch, shook her finger in front of Brennan’s face and shouted, “What *more* could he have done for you?!” Brennan said that at that moment he experienced an epiphany. He imagined himself standing before the cross of Jesus wondering, *Does God really love me?* And Jesus’ mother Mary pointed to her son and shouted, “**What more could He have done for you?**”⁴

John R. W. Stott was an Anglican clergyman who was ranked by *TIME* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. John Stott wrote that “**I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross.** In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I turn to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me. He set aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death.”⁵

Carl Bates, a former President of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, of the Baptist Convention of North Carolina, and of the Southern Baptist Convention, has suggested that the Cross of Jesus has a more fundamental meaning than that of human redemption from the evil we have created. According to Bates, the Cross is first of all God’s way of taking responsibility for having created a world in which evil is possible, taking into the Divine Being the enormity of suffering that has ensued and rendering it impotent with respect to eternity.⁶

³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), p. 112.

⁴ Lee Eclov, www.preachingtoday.com, adapted from James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 142.

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (InterVarsity, 1986).

⁶ Carl Bates, sermon at Lakeside Baptist Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, June 5, 1983. See also Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam, 1982), pp. 61-62.

I don't know about you, but I find myself agreeing with Dr. Stott and Dr. Bates. I don't want a God who is separate from my pain. I want a God who knows what life is like for me, who cares what life is like for me, and who transforms my pain into victory.

I want a God who takes responsibility for having made evil possible, even as God holds me accountable for having made evil actual, as I have done again . . . and again . . . and again. And the Good News is that this is indeed the kind of God we have.

Bjorn Nilsen was six years old. He had a temperature of 102.5. His parents gave him some Children's Advil, and over about an hour his fever went down to 100. At bedtime, his temperature was up again, so he got more Advil. But this time, Bjorn's fever continued to rise, and by midnight, his fever was 104.

When his father woke him to take him to the hospital, Bjorn asked quietly, "Am I going to die, Daddy?" Although he, too, was afraid, Bjorn's father answered, "No, Bjorn, you're not going to die. We just need some help in getting your fever down."

Long ago, from Calvary's Cross, Jesus cried out to his Father, "Daddy, Daddy, am I going to die?" And His Father's anguished response was "Yes."⁷

Antwone Fisher's question was "Who will cry for my pain?" Jesus' Fourth Word from the Cross tells us that God's answer to Antwone Fisher is also God's answer to you and me: *I will. I will.*

Tim Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church on Times Square, has put the Gospel in one sentence: "**My friend, you're more sinful than you ever dared to believe; and you're more loved than you ever dared to hope.**"⁸

When asked about his favorite Bible verse, Archbishop Desmond Tutu responded, "My favorite verse is Romans 5:8: *While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* It sums up the Gospel wonderfully. We think we have to impress God so that God could love us. But he says, 'No, you are loved already, even at your worst.'"⁹

We've already sung Charles Wesley's hymn of amazement at such love as this: "And can it be that I should gain an int'rest in the Savior's blood? Died He for me, who caused His pain? For me, who Him to death pursued? Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?"

This, my friends is the Good News: *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need* (Hebrews 4:15-16).

⁷ Per Nilsen, Burnsville, Minnesota, www.preachingtoday.com.

⁸ Tim Keller, in the sermon *Treasure Versus Money*, www.preachingtoday.com.

⁹ Desmond Tutu, "10 Questions," *TIME* (3.22.10), 4.