

On Trial in Our Place: Sympathy

²⁶ As the soldiers 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 childless 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 people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

³² Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with Him to be executed. ³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified Him, along with the criminals – one on His right, the other on His left. ³⁴ Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up His clothes by casting lots.

There is perhaps no more heart-wrenching scene in all of Scripture than what we see before us today. Jesus endured a sleepless night unlike any other – falsely accused, unjustly condemned, hatefully mocked, and then mercilessly abused and brutally scourged. By now Jesus is so torn and weak that He cannot carry the cross beam from Pilate’s palace to His execution site. But He trudges onward with staggered yet determined steps. He must be so disfigured from the torture that seeing Him would draw a gasp from any of us. It’s no wonder the women mourned and wailed for Him! The scene evokes strong emotions.

But my dear friends who love the Lord, Jesus doesn’t want your sympathy. I realize that this is a jarring statement, especially in light of this scene in Luke 23, especially as you see His battered body nailed to that cross. But remember what He had boldly said to those who sought to kill Him: **“No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again”** (John 10:18). This is Jesus, God Almighty in the flesh. He is not the helpless victim – He is the willing sacrifice. So this sermon isn’t about evoking sympathy for “poor Jesus” – it isn’t about sympathy *for* Jesus at all but the sympathy *of* Jesus. It is my prayer that you see how 1) Jesus’ sympathy calls us to repentance, 2) Jesus’ sympathy takes Him to the cross, and 3) Jesus’ sympathy teaches us sympathy for others.

As Jesus walks the road to the cross, He is met with the sympathy of mourning and wailing women of Jerusalem. And their tears of sympathy and grief for the agonizing Jesus are understandable. But He redirects their tears: **“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children”** (Luke 23:28). In the Gospel Lesson (Luke 19:41-44), we saw Jesus weeping over Jerusalem as He foresaw the brutalities it would suffer when it would one day be besieged by Rome. Do you recall why Jesus said such atrocities would come upon the people of Jerusalem? **“Because**

you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you" (Luke 19:44), said Jesus through His tears. In other words, that terrible judgment would come upon Jerusalem because they rejected Jesus as the Christ, as the Son of God; they would not repent and believe in Him. Now on the road to the cross Jesus warns the women of Jerusalem that this judgment would be so horrific that He calls the childless women of that coming day blessed, a shocking statement to a people who considered it shameful to be without children. But it would be so horrific that the people would rather be crushed by the mountains and hills than to experience the unspeakable distress in besieged Jerusalem.

Jesus concludes His warning with a proverb: **"If people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"** (Luke 23:31). A green tree is a living tree; it does not deserve to be cut down. But a dry tree is a dead tree; it is deserving of the axe and fit for the fire. Jesus is like the green tree. Though He was in no way worthy of condemnation, Jesus was cut down and consumed at the hands of wicked men. If this is what was done to the innocent Son of God, how much more so would the guilty people of Jerusalem who had rejected Him be cut down and consumed by the judgment that was to come against them?

Jesus' warning of the coming judgment is a call to repentance. It was a call to repentance for the people of Jerusalem then, and it is a call to repentance for us now, for the great judgment that did come upon Jerusalem is a picture of the greater judgment to come upon the whole world. So Jesus' question still stands and applies today. *"If these things were done to the green tree, what will happen to the dry wood?"* This world – let's be blunt: It is deserving of the axe and fit for the fire. But this isn't about pointing the finger at the people of Jerusalem back then or at the wickedness in the world today. For there is a hard truth for us to face in the mirror of God's holiness: I have done plenty to add to the kindling; you have done plenty to add to the kindling. Our sinful nature reveals itself in ugly, selfish, defiant ways. We have loved ourselves and the things of this world more than our Lord. We have at times chosen rebellion, hatred, and lust over our God. Our hearts have gone astray from His holy commands. What judgment, then, should come upon us?

So to look at Jesus and weep tears of sympathy is to miss the point. To look at Jesus and weep tears of repentance – that is the point. A great preacher of the 19th century named Charles Spurgeon put it this way:

"You need not weep over the crucifixion, but weep over your transgression,
for your sins nailed the Redeemer to the accursed tree.

To weep over a dying Savior is to lament the remedy; it were wiser to bewail the disease."

To warn of judgment is never pleasurable, and the call to repent of sin is never pleasant, but it is Jesus' sympathy for sinners that leads Him to do so. Truly our Lord wants no one to perish! He didn't want Jerusalem to be overtaken by that judgment, nor does He want you or anyone today to be overtaken by the final judgment. So even on His death march to the cross He takes a moment to speak a call to repentance to ring throughout the ages that we may not be consumed like dry wood in the flames, but that we may have eternal life in Him. In the midst of His mostly silent suffering, Jesus speaks – He speaks that we may not die, but live, and take refuge in the mercy and grace and goodness of God.

But Jesus' sympathy goes further than words. Jesus' sympathy takes Him all the way to the cross. Again I say, He is not the helpless victim – He is the willing sacrifice. This is the deep, divine sympathy of your Savior for you. Relish that for a moment – Jesus had sympathy for you! Jesus' heart went out to you! And because His heart went out to you, His arms were extended for you, His hands and feet pierced for you. He took God's punishment for you. He shed His blood for you, to cover you from the judgment to come – to cover you in a way that all the mountains and hills of this passing world never could. You are covered, you are sheltered from God's holy wrath through the blood of His holy Son.

And if ever there is any doubt that this includes you, listen to His first words from the cross: **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”** (Luke 23:34). No matter what kind of enemy of Jesus you have been, you can know that Jesus' sympathy extends to you, that in repentance there is forgiveness for you. We hear the echo of Jesus' prayer from the cross in these blessed words of Scripture: **“God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners”** – enemies of God – **“Christ died for us”** (Romans 5:8).

Jesus' sympathy – heard in His words and seen in His selfless sacrifice – teaches us what sympathy is all about. We see in Jesus a heart that is not focused on self but on others even while enduring pain, fatigue, insults, and God-forsaken condemnation. He was thinking about the families of Jerusalem. He was thinking about those Roman soldiers who had no idea they were crucifying the Son of God. He was thinking about you and me. Jesus' sympathy teaches us sympathy for others.

Look around you – both in this building and in your life. We all carry burdens. Some struggle with pain, some battle addictions, some are challenged by physical limitations, some deal with loneliness, some fight mental health battles, some are harassed with persecutions for living boldly for Jesus, and the list goes on. Jesus would have us pray for each other, reach out to one another, to help as we can, and remind each other of our Savior's continuing sympathy, His embracing love, and His unfailing promises. We live out the sympathy of Jesus toward others in these words: **“Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers”** (Galatians 6:2 & 10).

Jesus would also have us direct our sympathy toward our enemies. There is a judgment coming that this world cannot fathom, infinitely worse than the terror that came upon Jerusalem. And too many people of this world – even the ones who make our lives harder as Christians – they don't know it's coming! Many of those who despise Jesus and mock His people are like the soldiers crucifying Jesus: They have no idea what they're really doing. They think they're fighting against outdated values or old-fashioned fairy tales or against the “brainwashing” of the church, and they think they are fighting for the rights of people to live as they please without any of this talk of eternal consequences. They don't realize they are fighting against the Son of God, and they have no idea how badly that fight will end for them. There will be no mountains or hills to cover them from the wrath of God.

With His prayer, **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,”** Jesus teaches us to view these people not as enemies or as obstacles but as fellow sinners in need of His forgiveness. We can have sympathy for them as sinners who have been taken captive by the devil’s lies, doing his bidding without even realizing it. With the sympathy of Jesus we can pray for them, we can warn them, and we can tell them of God’s forgiveness, of Jesus’ prayer for their forgiveness, which we as sinners treasure for ourselves. We can point them to the Savior whose sympathy knows no limit. We can speak of the power of the blood of Christ to cover them and save them from God’s wrath, to cleanse and clothe them for His heaven.

Dear friends in Christ, Jesus doesn’t want your sympathy when you view His sufferings, His cross, His death. He does want you to see the high cost of sin, and He does want you to see the heights of divine love. He wants you to see His sympathy for you as the willing sacrifice for your sins. He wants you to know and be secure in the fact that His sympathy for you means salvation for you. And He wants you to live and extend that sympathy toward others in His name. **“Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”** (Ephesians 5:1-2).

Amen!

This sermon was written by Daniel Dexter with portions adopted and adapted from a Lenten sermon series called “God on Trial” purchased from Northwestern Publishing House.