

Easter Sunday

By
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Happy Easter! Every Easter we as Christians are asked to memorialize and celebrate the reality of Christ's resurrection. By doing this, we can meditate upon the deeper elements of a familiar truth, namely the reality of the gospel. An occupational hazard for many Christians is the *familiarity* of our belief. Meaning that since the message of the gospel is, at the surface, very simple, it is easy to approach it in familiar terms without any expectation of discovering anything new. Unfortunately, when we have this attitude we are shut off from any new perspective or experience within our faith. We approach the majesty of the gospel with an old and tired perspective that becomes almost boring to us.

What doesn't help this problem is that holidays are treated as outreach events. I am all for using the Christians holidays of our culture to bring people to know God; but we have to remember that these days are more for the Christians than they are for non-Christians. Meaning that if we only treat these days as outreaches, it precipitates this problem, as opposed to doing what it is intended to do, which is helping this problem. In reality, the reason why we take this day to meditate on the gospel is not to reiterate the message in its simplest possible form, but it is instead to study it from a unique perspective and to try to embody it in a way that creates a fresh experience with Christ.

This is why on holidays we are asked, not merely to understand the gospel, but we are asked to *enact*, or *embody* the reality that we are meditating on. Whether we know it or not, this is why "attendance" at church tends to skyrocket on these high holy days. We all intuitively know that it isn't sufficient to merely think about the truth of Christ's resurrection, we in some way have to participate in it by emerging from our own homes and sharing and embodying our worship together with a local gathering of saints at church. This is also why we have embodied rituals that surround this day, be they easter egg hunts, or a family easter dinner that happens after.

The reason for this is quite simple: by embodying familiar truths, we can experience them in new and unique ways which can stir us up towards greater appreciation. Take an anniversary for a couple as an example. The couple obviously *knows* that they are married, and they are obviously very familiar with one another. The purpose of the anniversary is to allow them to *embody* their vows and their intimacy in a fun way.

Whether that is going on a trip or merely going to a nice dinner. These simple actions allow us to re-experience the wonder and the majesty that we had when we first committed ourselves to one another.

Holidays like Easter have a similar purpose, and can have a similar effect if we approach them correctly. So while it would make me happy if a non-believer surrendered their life to God as a result of reading this, my main goal is for those who are already believers to have a fresh experience with God and the gospel through this study. With that, let's get into our Easter text:

“Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. Then they went in and did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. And it happened, as they were greatly perplexed about this, that behold, two men stood by them in shining garments. Then, as they were afraid and bowed their faces to the earth, they said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? “He is not here, but is risen! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, “saying, ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.’” And they remembered His words. Then they returned from the tomb and told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them, who told these things to the apostles. And their words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them. But Peter arose and ran to the tomb; and stooping down, he saw the linen cloths lying by themselves; and he departed, marveling to himself at what had happened.”

-Luke 24:1-12

All the Resurrection accounts give us the same basic details. The Sunday after the crucifixion, several of Jesus' female followers go to His tomb with the intent of giving His body the proper rituals and anointings of burial within their culture. But instead of finding His body in the tomb as they expected, they find it empty and later encounter the risen Lord. As I was studying this account over the last week, the element that really struck me was the empty tomb itself. Wouldn't the story have been far more dramatic if, when the women entered the tomb, instead of finding the angels, they had instead encountered Christ Himself in all His glory. To put it another way, why would Christ send angels to let the women know He had risen when He could have easily done it Himself?

While I believe there are several answers to this question, the one that stood out to me has something to do with the need to die to our expectations in order to have a genuine encounter with God, which is one of the main themes of Holy Week.

The Fall and Expectations

“Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’ Hosanna in the highest!’ And when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, ‘Who is this?’ So the multitudes said, ‘This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth of Galilee.’”

-Matthew 21:9-11

It seems to me that one of the main themes of Holy Week is the relationship between our ability to receive Christ and our need to hold on to our own expectations. On Palm Sunday, the start of Holy Week, the crowds eagerly welcome Jesus as “the Son of David”, which is a recognition of His Messianic role, and declaring “Hosanna” which roughly translates to “oh save now!” The expectations were set from the start of this week. The crowds had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ and even were anticipating a divine salvation brought by Him that would culminate during the week of Passover.

However, the same crowd that welcomed Jesus into their city with such high expectations was either silent during His condemnation or contested with Pilate to have Him crucified:

“Then the governor said, ‘Why, what evil has He done?’ But they cried out all the more, saying, ‘Let Him be crucified!’ When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, ‘I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it.’ And all the people answered and said, ‘His blood be on us and on our children.’”

-Matthew 27:23-25

This would include Christ’s own disciples, one of which betrayed him to death, while the other eleven fled during His arrest, with only one returning to the foot of the cross to witness His death. How do we explain this sudden shift, and how does it relate to the Easter narrative that we are studying?

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, But when the desire comes, it is a tree of life.”

-Proverbs 13:12

Hope is a powerful force. It allows for us to maintain courage and strength in the most cruel and despondent of circumstances, however, as this Proverb warns us, if our hope

is deferred or even crushed, it can turn a blessing into a curse. The hope of the Messiah's victory gave strength to the oppressed people of Israel, a people group that had been oppressed for centuries under various occupying world powers. This hope was most powerful amongst the followers of Jesus. Having witnessed His incredible miracles and His public declarations to be the prophesied Messiah, they were all but convinced that all their highest hopes and anticipations would be fulfilled during this particular Passover feast.

But, when Jesus spent the entire week cleansing the temple and arguing with the religious elites, instead of unifying the nation to fight against Rome, the expectations that had once nourished these people began to turn bitter and caustic. Then, upon witnessing His arrest by the Jewish authorities, who hated Him so much that they were willing to partner with Rome to have Him executed, the hopes of the people were dashed to the floor and trampled underfoot. At this point, this failed hope turned many of His followers apathetic towards Him, but some turned vindictive and hateful towards Him, literally begging the Roman authorities to crucify Him.

This pattern is mirrored in the narrative of the Fall. Mankind begins their life in the presence of God, and welcomes Him and His blessings with open and eager arms. However, when it is shown to them that they were prevented from a particular "blessing", the once loyal followers of God rebel against His commands and flee from His presence. They don't consider that God might have a higher purpose in His prohibition, nor are they willing to question their desires, instead all they see is unfulfilled longing and this leads them to turn against the God whom they loved.

Encountering the Risen Lord

As long as they held onto their false expectations they were prevented from seeing the true ministry of Christ and His glorious Resurrection. This helps us understand why the angels were sent, and why Christ is even hidden from the disciples later in Luke 24 when they are walking to Emmaus. As the angel put this:

"Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, saying, 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.'"
And they remembered His words."

-Luke 24:5-7

The women had not come to seek a risen Lord, but instead a dead, failed messiah. This in spite of the fact that Christ had been clear to them about His mission and the means

by which He would accomplish that mission. And until they could let go of their previously held convictions, they could never find Christ as He really was. But this isn't a simple transition. To let go over our hopes is likened to a type of death. When we make plans for the future, our hopes and expectations are the boundaries that our dreams dwell within, to die to our hopes, is also to die to our dreams. To let that part of ourselves that was living in our dreams to die as well. As Christ taught His disciples before His death:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. "If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor."

-John 12:24-26

It is this "dying" that Jesus spent His entire earthly ministry living into and teaching His disciples how to do the same. To truly let go of our lives, to die to what we think they ought to be so that we can receive from God the purposes that He intends for us.

Exceedingly Abundantly Above All We Ask

"For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

-Ephesians 3:14-21

Just as Paul prayed above, we need to understand that the purposes of God, though foreign to us, and though they require us to die to what we want, are always exceedingly abundantly above all we ask or think. This might be hard for us to comprehend, but it is exactly what the Bible purports.

What the followers of Christ were asking for at the beginning of Holy Week was an earthly king that they could anoint, not understanding that the King of the universe had come to anoint them and forgive them from their sins. They eagerly awaited a political deliverance, never considering that He had come to deliver them from sin and death.

They waited for a sign of God's power and never anticipated receiving the ultimate sign of God's love.

Even on Easter Sunday we see the effects of their misplaced hope. It may seem as though they are being realists by seeking the corps of their Lord, in reality, they would rather cling to their defeated hope than believe that they had hoped for the wrong thing. They thought they were coming to serve God by tending to the corpse of His Messiah, not knowing that He had already risen in victory and was waiting to celebrate with them.

As difficult as it is to let go of our most closely held hopes, it is the only way to encounter the power of our risen Lord. I think it's beautiful that we are told at the end of the world, Christ allows His followers a chance to repeat Palm Sunday as it should have been:

“After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

-Revelation 7:9-10

Their hopes, now correctly centered on the true salvation of God, can honor His work and celebrate with Him. So let's take the remainder of this paper and think through some areas of our own lives where we need to let go of our earthly hopes in order to encounter God's heavenly glory.

God

“Jesus answered and said to her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.”

-John 4:10

This is the primary expectation that we have to let go of before we can meet God. The Samaritan woman is portrayed by John as the representative of Christ's bride upon the earth. In the book of Genesis, and Exodus, most of the patriarchs encounter their future brides at a well. Christ does the same thing. That means that this conversation becomes symbolic of each and every Christians encounter with God, and what prevents us from seeing Him as such.

The water in the well becomes a picture of what we go to for nourishment, or to put it another way, what we serve in order to be filled. We find out that for this woman, the “god” she was serving was romantic relationships:

“Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come here.’ The woman answered and said, ‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You have well said, ‘I have no husband,’ ‘for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly.’”

-John 4:16-18

This woman was seeking her worth and value in marriage and family. This desperation had obviously wreaked havoc in her personal life leading to five failed marriages. This is why Jesus warns the woman that the “water” she was drinking only produced more thirst and not true contentment:

“Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, ‘but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.’”

-John 4:13-14

Christ is telling her that she is unsatisfied because she hasn’t found the true and living God yet. Even when she encounters Him, she doesn’t understand what He is saying and assumes that He merely wants something from her. It is this that prevents her from encountering God. This is true for all of us. We are seeking God in our jobs, our families, our success, our fame, our power, and so on. In all instances we are seeking a god who we can please through our own efforts or power, and there is no shortage of religious and philosophical systems that feed that innate desire of mankind.

In fact *all* other systems of religion present us with a system in which we, through our own effort, can become good enough to please our version of God. And so many will miss God because, like the Pharisees, they believe they have already pleased God and are living in a right relationship with Him. While others, like this woman, are living with a constant thirst. She knows innately that what she is doing is not working, which is why she is driven by a constant “thirst” to try to appease a God that she feels she never can. This is why she can’t understand Jesus when He says:

“Jesus answered and said to her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.’”

-John 4:10

Deep down we would like a needy god, a dependent god that relies on us and therefore can be benefited by our service. But the truth of who God is, is that He doesn't need us, but we desperately need Him:

"If I were hungry, I would not tell you; For the world is Mine, and all its fullness. Will I eat the flesh of bulls, Or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God thanksgiving, And pay your vows to the Most High. Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me."

Psalm 50:12-15

While our God yearns zealously for righteousness and is filled with wrath at the sins that we commit, it is a mistake to believe that He "needs" us to be righteous, or that He is in some way benefitted by our good deeds. God's delight in us is as a father delights in their children. It is right for the father to demand respect and obedience from his children, but he does this out of love and not because he needs his children.

The earthly father disciplines his children for their own sake. His care for them is what moves him to correct them, even when doing so is painful for him. God works in a similar fashion to us. It is His forgiveness that redeems us, not our good works, it is His love that makes us whole, not our love for Him, and it is His works that will redeem the earth, not our own. We are asked to participate with Christ's finished work, not to seek salvation and redemption by our own strength. It is this same lesson that Christ is trying to teach His disciples on His last night with them:

"Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?" Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

-John 13:6-8

Peter is still under the impression that Jesus is a political revolutionary in need of brave soldiers. He hasn't yet understood that Christ does not need him, but that he desperately needs Christ. Like the woman at the well, they missed an encounter with the true God, even though He was literally speaking to them face to face.

This is what all of us have to struggle through. Whatever expectations we have of God, or vision of what we think He is or should be, we have to let these go. For the proud amongst us, we have to accept that our good deeds amount to nothing in light of the righteous standards of God. That even if we think that we have pleased Him, we have

only pleased our own standards and haven't even touched the lowest standard of righteousness within the kingdom of heaven. This is what the apostle Paul discovered when he encountered Jesus:

"If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith..."

-Philippians 3:4-9

In order to find the peace that came from knowing Christ, Paul had to hear Jesus tell him that he had fallen short. That in spite of all his ritual purity, moral zeal, and intellectual prowess, he had not come near to God, nor had he pleased God through his behavior. Like everyone else, in order to truly encounter the risen Lord, he had to humbly seek His forgiveness. For others, we are more like the unclean woman in Matthew 9:

"For she said to herself, 'If only I may touch His garment, I shall be made well.'" But Jesus turned around, and when He saw her He said, "Be of good cheer, daughter; your faith has made you well." And the woman was made well from that hour."

-Matthew 9:21-22

This woman saw herself as so unclean that she didn't feel she merited to even speak to Jesus let alone touch His flesh. She settles for touching the mere edge of His garment, hoping that this could heal her body, but never believing that there could be hope for her soul. This represents those of us who feel, unlike Paul, that we could never please God. That we are unclean and rejected, and therefore unworthy to approach Him. But like the woman at the well, Jesus upsets her expectations. Far from rebuking her and sending her way, He praises her faith and absolves her of her sins.

Whatever our view of God may have been, we were unable to encounter Him until we first died to our expectations. But even for the believer this continues to be true. We all wrestle with our conscience and the question if we are good enough. Our pride will continuously seek justification in our own strength, and our fears will always find reason to see that we are unclean and unworthy. To regularly encounter the Son of God, we

must always die to what who we think God is, and receive Him as He actually is, on the basis of grace and not our own merit.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”

-Ephesians 2:8-10

“It is an item of faith that we are children of God; there is plenty of experience in us against it. The faith that surmounts this evidence and that is able to warm itself at the fire of God’s love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness. . . . We are not saved by the love we exercise, but by the love we trust.”

-Richard Lovelace

Personal Identity

“But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. “To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”

-John 10:2-3

This encounter with God inevitably teaches us to let go of our view of identity. When Jesus says that he “calls his own sheep by name...” He is telling His people that God has the right to name, or assign identity, to His children. In some sense it is right that modern culture is so obsessed with this concept of identity. Identity is something like our innate sense of self, who we feel we are, and who we feel we should be. Without a sense of identity, there is no way to grow or develop.

A way to think about this has to do with physical growth. Organic life is, necessarily, growing, otherwise it is dying. But not all growth is healthy or good. For instance, a child can grow taller and this is considered “good” growth and this will inevitably make them weigh more. However, if they start to accumulate fat, although this also increases their weight, we consider this “bad” growth. But how can we tell the difference? It has to do with identity. Because we know what a human being is, and how they normally grow, we can rightly discourage some forms of growth, and encourage others.

Our character works in much the same way. We are almost always growing in our character. However, some of this growth is good, and some is bad. But in order to know

which is which, we have to have some sense of who we are, which tells us who we ought to be. This is why teenagers are especially concerned with “finding themselves”. Though I think this phrase is misused, there is a sense in which it can be good. When we transition from being children, who are simply told what they ought to be, and adults, who must now decide what we ought to be, this will necessarily fill us with anxiety and worry to find a path for ourselves.

It is our sense of self that gives us our impression of “righteousness”. Meaning that if we are living as we feel we ought, we feel good about ourselves, as though we are living into our purpose. But if we fail to be who we ought, this is when we are filled with shame and self-doubt. For the non-believer, the first encounter with God is the first time we are asked to confront the truth that who we feel we ought to be, and who God thinks we ought to be are two very different things.

Encountering God means submission and humility. Letting go of our views of self, and embracing His view of who we are. Only in this process do we find healing and truth, since only our Creator can rightly tell us what we ought to be. Though this idea of identity does relate to ethics, they are not exactly the same things. Ethics simply refers to moral prerogatives. The concept of identity certainly intersects with what we ought to do, but it actually goes deeper than this.

Identity refers to our spiritual nature, that harmonizes all of our physical qualities. To make this personal, in a material sense, I am a man, a father, a husband, a brother, a son, a friend, a pastor, and many other things. My sense of self has something to do with my ideals of these particular things. What is a good man, a good father, a good brother, a good friend, a good pastor, and so on. To feel good about myself, I have to be living up to my personal expectations of my various ideals. But if I fail to live up to these ideals, I see myself as a failure, regardless of how other people view me.

To come to Christ means that I have to radically re-evaluate what it means to be a good man, father, friend, pastor, and so on. I have to die to my personal views on these things and accept God’s calling in all these areas. This is a gradual process, and one that I will find is far more particular than I could imagine. However, once I do begin to do this I find that God’s standard for all these things is far greater than any standard I could put on myself, but that His love and acceptance for me, as I am, are far higher than my wildest dreams.

This concept scandalizes our modern culture, because we are taught to find our sense of self by looking within our own desires and trying to live authentically towards those

desires. But the call of God is different. Christ asks us to “take up our cross”, to constantly die to our views of ourselves and to daily seek His wisdom and truth for us.

Our Lives

“This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.”

-1 Timothy 1:15-16

Still more difficult than the previous two is the ability to accept God’s plan for our lives. I believe, more than anything else, this is what is truly on display for us on Holy Week. When Christ comes into Jerusalem, and sees the amazing welcome He receives in the city, He is gladdened by His reception, and then immediately saddened by the knowledge that the warm reception would not last long:

“Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, “If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. “For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, “and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”

-Luke 19:41-44

Jesus, who loves the nation of Israel, wants nothing more than for them to have peace in receiving His coming. But also, as the perfect man, He dreads, the coming cross:

“...saying, “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done.”

-Luke 22:42

The “cup” that Jesus is asking to pass is not merely death itself, but it is the apotheosis of all human suffering. It is betrayal by one of His closest friends, abandonment by those who cared for the most, public mockery, false condemnation, physical pain on a scale that is almost unfathomable, public execution in front of many strangers and even His own mother, bearing the sins of the world, separation from His Father, and death itself at a young age. Even though Christ has an advantage over us, knowing the end from the beginning and seeing the results of His suffering, this doesn’t change the fact

that this is not the life that anyone would willingly choose for themselves, and it is not the end that Christ wanted for Himself.

This is the same truth that God asks all His people to accept. While none of us know the exact life that God will ask us to live, what we know is that it will be colored through by both good and bad, suffering and exaltation. When we go through good times, it is easy to know that our life is from the Lord and it is easy to embrace what He has given to us. But Christ doesn't just ask us to embrace what is good, but to embrace and bear our cross before Him. Meaning, to accept not only the blessings of the Lord, but even the normal curses and reversals of fortune that will inevitably come to all of us.

“But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.”

-Job 2:10

This is the hardest thing that we are asked to die to. Though it is difficult, we can understand fairly easily why we must accept God as He is, and even when we must accept ourselves as God would want us to be. But to accept our lives as God sees fit, to receive from Him not merely blessing, but cursing, is arguably the most difficult. This is more than mere suffering, it is “perplexity”, it is accepting a destruction of hopes and dreams due to various unforeseen circumstances.

While the apostles were ready to suffer for Christ, they were only willing to suffer in accordance with their dreams, to be successful revolutionaries against Rome. For this, they were all willing to fight and die. But upon seeing Jesus' suffering for the kingdom of heaven, they ran for their lives. To die, not a glorious death in the name of a successful movement, but to be brutalized in a seemingly meaningless act of unjust cruelty was not what they signed up for, nor was it what they would receive, but it is what Christ promised them:

“But Jesus answered and said, “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They said to Him, “We are able.” So He said to them, “You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with...”

Matthew 20:22-23

Virtually all the apostles of Christ were murdered in inglorious ways by a cruel and unjust system. And none of their deaths resulted in Rome's overthrow or Israel's liberation. In fact, many of the apostles suffered, not under Rome, but under the corrupt

religious leaders of Israel. By the time most of them died, Rome was more powerful than ever before, Israel had been all but destroyed, and the church that they helped found was under severe persecution and constant threat of suffering and death.

But, like with the other points that we have made, the intent of God was greater than the expectations of their hearts. If they got what they wanted, their names would be remembered as the start of a golden age in Israeli politics. But history tells us that no matter how great a victory they may have won, and how strong a nation that they could participate in founding, like all other nations and empires before it, it would eventually become corrupt and die.

Instead, Christ asked them to serve a kingdom that has no borders or boundaries upon the earth. And while their deaths didn't achieve what they wanted, it achieved far more than they could have dreamed. It isn't a mistake that the Greek word for "witness", (martyr) became a term of endearment, a picture of fidelity to the truth of the gospel even under the reality of torture and death.

But this level of submission is not available to everyone, only those who have seen the supreme beauty of their God and found redemption in their identities. This is why the apostles were not yet ready to receive the call of Christ, until after His resurrection. It was only after they had received Him as He was, not as they wanted Him to be, that they could receive from Him their own destinies.

*"Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish." This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, "Follow Me."
-John 21:18-19*

While most of Jesus' followers couldn't accept this until after the resurrection, we know of one woman who understood this before:

*"Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial."
-John 12:3-7*

Mary of Bethany, who is always depicted as sitting at the feet of Jesus, is the only one who accepted the words of Christ, even if she didn't fully understand them. When Jesus said that she did this "for the day of My burial", He is signifying that she, unlike the rest of them, knew that He was about to die. The one who sits at the feet of Jesus in total submission is the one who can accept from His hand whatever He might give, regardless of how painful it might be.

They weren't able to do this because God showed them the results of their fidelity, but because the resurrection showed them the power of God to transform death into life. That, like the tomb itself, instead of corrupting their Lord, it instead served as a cocoon for Him in which He transformed into the glorious resurrection that was promised to all the faithful of God.

Most of us run from suffering at all costs. We can't accept the suffering of our past so we repress it and pretend as though it didn't happen. We can't accept the suffering of our present and so we desperately seek any and all ways to avoid it. And we can't accept the suffering of our future, so we live as though we aren't mortal, refusing to think about the various "deaths" that we will have to suffer all the way up to our eventual literal death. This is not to say that we shouldn't try to live wisely and avoid unnecessary suffering, we are commanded to do this. It is only to say, that no matter how wisely and righteously we choose to live, suffering and death are unavoidable parts of this life.

But that is not how Christ lived. He didn't live in denial of His fate, nor did He live a stoic life of apathy that only looked forward to His eventual death. Instead, Jesus embraced all the life He could from His Father's hand. He rejoiced during the times of blessing, but He wept during the times of sorrow. He didn't avoid any of it, but accepted all as a part of His Father's good and perfect will for Him.

But for us, this is done in the act of faith. We don't know why God is asking us to go through what He is, we only believe that He has a purpose, and that whatever we encounter has meaning in the purposes of our Lord:

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

-2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Paul pictures suffering like a seed that falls to the earth. In the ground it “dies” but in its death it is allowed to change, to transform and enter back into the light, to experience transformation and rebirth. I like the song “Uneven Odds” by the band “Sleeping at Last”. The song is sung from the perspective of an older friend who tries to comfort a boy who just lost his mother, and the song ends like this:

*“Maybe your light is a seed,
and the darkness, the dirt.
in spite of the uneven odds
beauty lifts from the earth.
You're much too young now
so I'll write these words down:
darkness exists
to make light truly count.”
Ryan O'neal - “Uneven Odds”*

What he is expressing here is a very Christian idea. We don't pretend as though suffering is good, but nor do we experience it without hope or meaning like this world does. We accept the grief that suffering entails, but we also trust that even in the worst suffering, the power of the resurrection is at work within us and our circumstances. We don't even know what God is doing, but like the tomb of Christ, we know that the hidden work of God will be manifest in His timing and for His purposes.

When the pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was facing his death at the hands of the Nazi's after a failed assassination attempt on Hitler's life, he wrote a short poem called “Stations on the Road to Freedom”, and this is how it ended:

Suffering

“Wondrous transformation. Your hands, strong and active, are fettered. Powerless, alone, you see that an end is put to your action. Yet now you breathe a sigh of relief and lay what is righteous calmly and fearlessly into a mightier hand, contented. Just for one blissful moment you could feel the sweet touch of freedom, Then you gave it to God, that God might perfect it in glory.”

Death

“Come now, highest of feasts on the way to freedom eternal, Death, lay down your ponderous chains and earthen enclosures walls that deceive our souls and fetter our mortal bodies, that we might at last behold what here we are hindered from seeing. Freedom, long have we sought you through discipline, action, and suffering. Dying, now we discern in the countenance of God your own face.”

-Dietrich Bonhoeffer - Stations on the Road to Freedom

Bonhoeffer, facing torture and death, reflects on the cross. He imagines the nailed hands of Christ and sees his own hands bound in chains. And instead of feeling the deep unfairness of being arrested and killed for doing the right thing, he sees the transformative power of the cross and the resurrection. Instead of despairing over his own life cut tragically short, he sees death as the means to encountering God fully. This isn't Bonhoeffer claiming that suffering and death are good, but merely his hope that even suffering and death can be transformed from their earthly image, into heavenly glory.

This made me think of a recent interview with the actor Shia LaBeouf. While I didn't listen to the whole interview, nor do I know much about Shia LaBeouf and his personal life, or his faith, I was taken by his answer to the question, "what would you say to Jesus if you met Him face to face?" He responded that he wouldn't say anything, he would just "kiss His feet".

Once again I have no idea how authentic these words are for Shia, but this is the correct, and only answer for those who have really encountered God. When we see Jesus we will finally have an answer to why we have suffered the way that we have. At that moment, we won't have words or questions, only thanksgiving and praise. We will sit at His feet and weep, knowing, finally, who He is, what He has done for us, and the meaning behind all that we are and all that we have been through.

"And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He said to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful."

-Revelation 21:3-5