

The Cross: Week 4

Steve Watson | Daily Bible Guide | 2020

Monday, March 16

Matthew 27:45-56 (NRSV)

⁴⁵ From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶ And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ⁴⁷ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." ⁴⁸ At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹ But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." ⁵⁰ Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. ⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³ After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴ Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

⁵⁵ Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. ⁵⁶ Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

Points of Interest

- I think the darkness Matthew mentions is emotional and spiritual and metaphorical. But who knows, maybe big storm clouds drifted in. More later in the passage - splitting curtains, shaking earth, emptying tombs. Which of these did or didn't *literally* happen is beside the point. Matthew is making it clear that this moment held massive significance; even bystanders were aware that this was more cosmically and historically important than they knew how to fully express in words.
- Jesus' cry of "Eli, eli..." tells us so many things:
 - Jesus lived a long time ago. He spoke a language (Aramaic) that is almost extinct, with the few people who still speak it speaking a different form. And Jesus was Jewish. He did not speak or know English. Jesus is no one people's possession -

we come to Jesus humbly, across divides of time, space, culture, history, and religion.

- Jesus was terribly lonely and in immense pain. Our own experiences of pain, suffering, angst, doubt, loneliness, and fear are familiar to him - we come to Jesus who knows us and is near to us.
- Jesus knew his Bible really well. He quotes the first line of Psalm 22 as he is dying. We'll read that psalm later this week.
- What Jesus' words don't tell us is that Jesus was actually forsaken by God. Some theories about the cross depend on this idea - that Jesus' Father God abandoned him as part of his punishment he suffered in our place. Many other Christians - including me - don't think this makes sense. 1) Jesus can feel abandoned without that actually being true. 2) He's quoting the first line, which is also the title, of Psalm 22, which says many other things that show the speaker is not really abandoned. 3) If God the Father and God in the person of Jesus are One, such abandonment might not even be possible! I think that just like us, Jesus can feel terribly abandoned by God and know that isn't true at the same time, even while God is doing something great and important, as God was in this moment.
- Who didn't abandon Jesus, for sure? His most loyal and loving and courageous women followers. I love being a man, but I've got to note that some things don't change.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for family and friends who feel alone or abandoned, that they will know God with them through many means.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Write a Collect – Write a prayer, in the form called collect. A collect is a short written prayer that collects/gathers the people for prayer, and writing a collect can help us gather up ourselves and what we know about or hope to be true of God as well. To write a collect, think of something you want to ask God, and think of something you hope or know to be true about God that is related to that request. Then write and pray your prayer - keep it short.

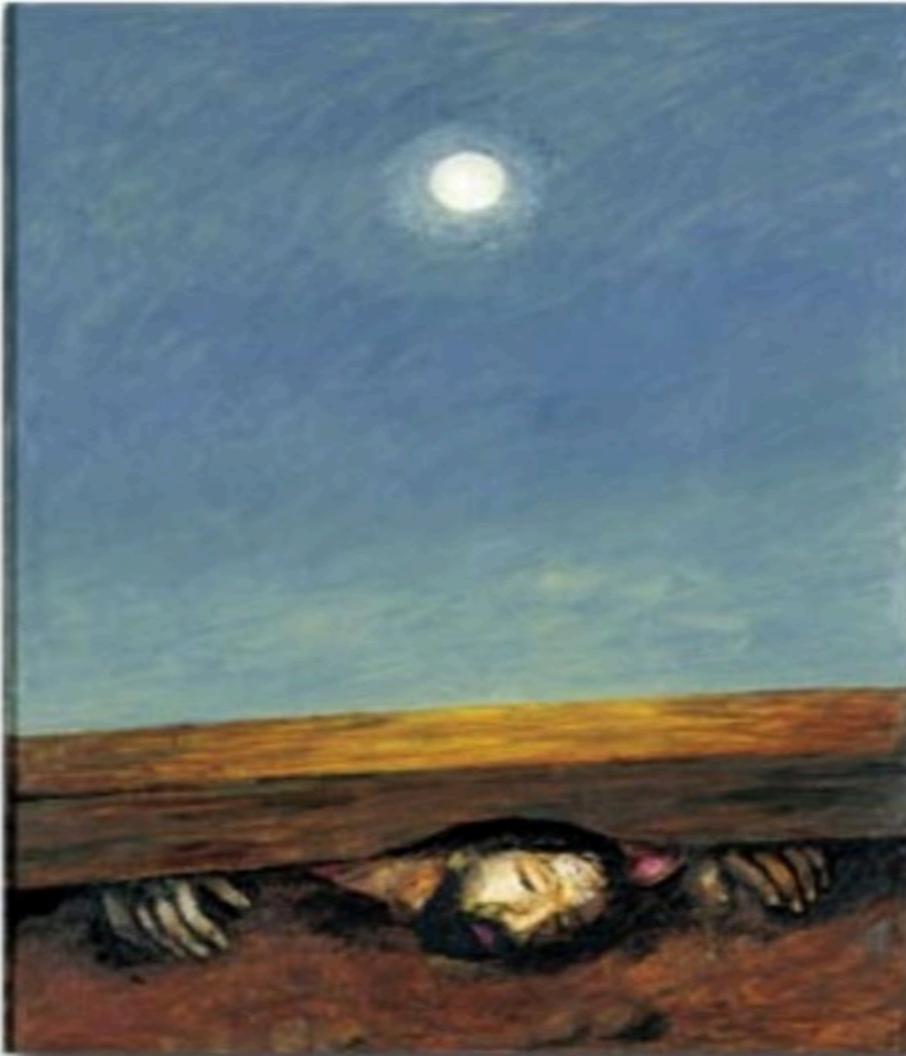
Here's the structure for your prayer:

- I) Address God by Name
- II) Briefly describe what you know or hope to be true of God.
- III) Make your request.
- IV) Say why you're asking - the deeper hope or result or purpose in mind.
- V) End with a very short word of praise, addressing God by name one final time, or simply say Amen.

Tuesday, March 17

Today we offer to you a short poem to supplement our Bible readings. It is in the form of a collect - a short prayer in which we collect words of praise and request and offer them to God. The poem, by Padraig O'Tuama, and the artwork by Sieger Koder can be found here:

<http://www.padraigotuama.com/news/stationsofthecross> and in Padraig's short book [Daily Prayer with the Corrymeala Community](#).



God of the ground,
whose body was - like ours - from dust,
and who fell - like we fall -to the ground.
May we find you on the ground
when we fall.
Oh, our falling fallen brother, may we find you, so that we may inhabit our bodyselves.
Amen.

Points of Interest

- In this painting, there's so much empty sky, and on the very bottom - almost below our view -- lies Jesus, crushed by the wooden beam he'd carried until it was too much for him. We only see Jesus' face and hands. Though he has only fallen, he looks already dead. He certainly hasn't yet found strength to push up and rise again. In a way, he even appears to be drowning - the sky like water that will engulf him as soon as his head and hands drop.
- Crucifixion was brutal. People hung naked from wooden beams. Most victims lived for many hours - each strain for breath causing more pain to hands, wrists, and feet bound by ropes or punctured by nails or both. As hunger and thirst and exhaustion set in, people eventually died of asphyxiation, an inability to breathe. The whole process was designed to humiliate and terrorize, including sometimes a march to the site of execution, carrying the wooden cross beam you would soon die upon.
- On the march up the hill, scripture and tradition tell us that Jesus fell more than once. He was hungry and thirsty and sleepless and beaten down.
- Pdraig O'Tuama prays into God's solidarity with us in Christ. To our sometimes failing and falling selves, to failing and falling humans everywhere, Jesus is our fallen brother. Jesus' body was dusty and weak and breakable like ours, and Jesus still holds this memory and sensation in his mind and spirit. God is always with those on the ground.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray that your church will have eyes to see those who are on the ground, hearts to care, hands to help.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

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Wednesday, March 18

Psalm 22 (NRSV)

- ¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
- ² O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.
- ³ Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
- ⁴ In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
- ⁵ To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.
- ⁶ But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
- ⁷ All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;
- ⁸ "Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!"
- ⁹ Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
- ¹⁰ On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
- ¹¹ Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.
- ¹² Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
- ¹³ they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravener and roaring lion.
- ¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
- ¹⁵ my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
- ¹⁶ For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;
- ¹⁷ I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
- ¹⁸ they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.
- ¹⁹ But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
- ²⁰ Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!
- ²¹ Save me from the mouth of the lion!
From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.
- ²² I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:

²³ You who fear the Lord, praise him!
 All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
 stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
²⁴ For he did not despise or abhor
 the affliction of the afflicted;
 he did not hide his face from me,
 but heard when I cried to him.
²⁵ From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
 my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
²⁶ The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
 those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
 May your hearts live forever!
²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember
 and turn to the Lord;
 and all the families of the nations
 shall worship before him.
²⁸ For dominion belongs to the Lord,
 and he rules over the nations.
²⁹ To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
 before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
 and I shall live for him.
³⁰ Posterity will serve him;
 future generations will be told about the Lord,
³¹ and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
 saying that he has done it.

Points of Interest

- This is a long psalm, and I didn't want to cut any verses, so we'll keep comments short.
- Jesus prays this psalm as he's dying. He cries out the first line, but he likely knew it by memory and was likely praying it at times before and during his dying hours.
- Praying psalms as Jesus did can still be very powerful - you read or say the words out loud, freely making them your own or changing them here and there if you need to.
- It's a psalm of abandonment and pain. Sad songs say so much - it's good to give words to our feelings, especially our hurt ones.
- It's a psalm of uncanny details - Jesus could the soldiers betting over his clothes and mocking him and know this was foretold. All humans can pray the psalm like this. One who can see one's own bones while starving, or suffering from chemotherapy or an eating disorder can know this is not a sign of abandonment. Others have suffered, and God sees and knows.
- It's a psalm of vindication. The psalmist, and Jesus, and others will get a chance to tell their story and again be satisfied and know joy and praise God.
- And it's a psalm of an anchored past and a resilient, muscular hope. No one can take away from a person the love and nurture and care given to them as children. And no one can take away the redemptive possibilities God always has for all life.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for any family or friends going through hard times, that they will remember the ways they have been loved and cared for by God and people in the past, and that they will find hope that God can bring future good out of their current bad.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Write a Collect – Write a prayer, in the form called collect. A collect is a short written prayer that collects/gathers the people for prayer, and writing a collect can help us gather up ourselves and what we know about or hope to be true of God as well. To write a collect, think of something you want to ask God, and think of something you hope or know to be true about God that is related to that request. Then write and pray your prayer - keep it short.

Here's the structure for your prayer:

- I) Address God by Name
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Thursday, March 19

Matthew 26:36-46

³⁶ Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." ³⁷ He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. ³⁸ Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." ³⁹ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." ⁴⁰ Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? ⁴¹ Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." ⁴² Again he went away for the second time and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." ⁴³ Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. ⁴⁵ Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

Points of Interest

- This week, we're looking at Jesus in all his loss and limitation. Here we find Jesus limited in his knowledge of and peace over what the future holds. We also find Jesus losing sleep, losing support, and losing patience with his not very good friends.
- Gethsemane means "olive press" in Hebrew. This was likely a garden in a grove of olive trees just outside the city. As someone that grew up in a rural to suburban environment but has lived adult life in cities, I appreciate that when Jesus went to the big city, he found a quiet, green place for retreat. For whatever reason, I also appreciate that Jesus liked gardens and trees.
- In the Hebrew scriptures, the cup is often an image of pain, as in the phrase "cup of suffering." There are two major interpretations to Jesus' prayer. The majority read is that he asked to not suffer and die as he was about to, but that it was to be, and Jesus surrendered to what had to be. A minority read is that Jesus asked to not die and stay dead forever, and that God answered his prayer, resurrecting him from the dead in due course. Both possibilities inspire me - that we can and should pray all that is in our heart, that God always hears even if God doesn't do what we ask, that God is a God of life and hope and love always winning, that surrender to what is or must be but that we do not want can bring peace and strength. All that.
- Jesus' friends fall asleep when he needs them awake. They say they'll pray for him and don't. One has conspired with others to do him harm. They disappoint him radically and thoroughly. I have had these friends and I have been this friend. There's solace knowing Jesus faced this.

- The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Truer words have never been said, Jesus. Jesus is telling us to be aware of our weakness and when it really counts, to do what it will take to plan for and overcome our weakness so that we don't drop the ball when it counts most. And at the same time, Jesus is accommodating our weakness, signalling in this statement that we can get up and try again without shame after we fail.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray that your city will steadfastly preserve green spaces and beautiful spaces that are accessible to all city residents. Even if everyone can't have good friends, pray they can walk to a garden with some trees.

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Friday, March 20

Philippians 2:1-11

2 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, 2 make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Points of Interest

- This passage encourages imitation of Jesus that produces humility, generosity, and love that seeks others' highest good. This teaching in the wrong hands, at the wrong time, has done harm. People already inclined to overlook ourselves and to always serve others don't need to be told to never think of our own needs or dignity and to give more until nothing is left. That self-effacing, burn out way of living doesn't look or feel like the way of Jesus. And yet others of us at other times badly need to get out of our own heads and our own needs and ego, and to love generously. There is life in that, for all of us. A couple of lessons here. One is that wisdom is important, for both teachers and students, and especially around spiritual communities. Two is that self-giving love is the holy way of God, and yet we should cultivate forms of it that grow rather than reduce joy and strength.
- One thing that is striking in this poem about Jesus is its symmetry. There is a downward path Jesus travels to death and a corresponding upward path to glory. Jesus begins and ends his life in honor and power. We think this is Paul quoting a very early praise song

about Jesus. It also highlights how shocking it is that someone like Jesus would ever come to be a slave or to die anywhere, let alone in one of the most humiliating, painful, dishonorable ways people had ever thought to kill one another.

- Something else interests me most about this passage these days. Kenosis is the fancy word for the self-emptying of God. It comes from the Greek work in verse seven that means “to empty.” At minimum, the person of Jesus says that God has at one point chosen to love in this way. The spirit of God, before being embodied in the person of Jesus of Nazareth - the one who toilet trained, who caught colds, whose friends were really awful sometimes - thought that the disinvestment it took to go from eternal God to this was a good idea, that the love in that, the solidarity in that, the life-giving mission for us in that was worth it. That births gratitude in me, and that frankly inspires me as well.

But there’s more. Some of us think this is no aberration for God, but what God is always like. When the scriptures teach us that God is love, perhaps this is what it means to be God - to be self-emptying love: to always be in more relationship, to always give and heal and push for the other’s good, to be limited in certain types of power so that other wills can be expressed and flourish. This is a God who loves as a servant, as a partner, as one who inspires and woos, not as one who dominates and controls.. That to me is a beautiful picture of God that helps me to love God and want to be more like God as well.

A Direction for Prayer

Many of us have never imagined a God whose nature is self-giving love. Many of us have also not known many friends or leaders that have looked much like this God. Pray for your family and friends that have been burned by people who were not humble and self-giving, but more interested in their own needs, ego, or power. Pray that your friends will have their old wounds healed and will experience better, both from other people and from God.

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

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