

ACTS

SEPTEMBER 12, 2017 – MEDITATING ON THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST - STEPHEN VENABLE

I. LOOKING AGAIN – FIXING OUR EYES

A. Knowing the Story

1. The first obstacle to enjoying intimacy with Jesus at the Cross is our *ignorance*. For most of us we possess only a very superficial knowledge of what happened during those three days.
2. Through diligent study we must devour every detail until His death moves from a disconnected, hazy progression of events in our minds to a clear, coherent, fluid story. We must know the people, places, and sequence with clarity and depth.
3. This knowledge will be *surprisingly powerful* in its effect upon your soul and your capacity to engage with Jesus in the Word.

B. Finding Nearness

1. The second obstacle we must face is *distance*. Even when we know the details the story can feel two-thousand years and six thousand miles away. All too often we have drawn near to the Cross with the gnawing sense that we should be feeling much and yet finding little response within.
*“Great thief of hearts, the strength of your love has broken even our hard hearts. You inflamed the whole world with your love. Wisest Lord, inebriate our hearts with this wine, burn them with this fire, pierce them with this arrow of your love. This, your cross, is indeed a crossbow that pierces hearts. Let the whole world know that my heart is stricken. Sweetest love, what have you done? You have come to heal me, and you have wounded me. You have come to teach me, and you have made me like someone mad. O wisest madness, may I never live without you. Lord, everything that I see on the cross invites me to love: the wood, the form, the wounds in your body; and above all, your love invites me to love you and never forget you.”*¹
2. Prayerful, Christ-centered meditation – often a stranger in the modern Church - stands as the bridge between our heart and finding Jesus in the drama of His story. This posture of *hearing* and *gazing* consists of simply conversing with Jesus in prayerful dialogue through the narrative until you are in a sense a participant in the story rather than a detached, remote observer.
*“His [Bernard of Clairvaux] continual exercise was meditation on the sufferings of Jesus Christ. He compared this exercise to the bundle of myrrh which the bride in the Canticles gathered, with pious care, to place in her bosom. He speaks thus upon this subject: ‘For myself, dear brethren, from the first beginning of my conversion, seeing myself to be wanting in all virtues, I took to myself this bundle of myrrh made up of all my Saviour’s bitter sufferings, of the privations He endured in His infancy, the toils He underwent in His ministry, the weariness He suffered in His journeyings, His watching in prayer, His fasting and testing, His tears of compassion, the snares laid to catch Him in His words, His perils among false brethren, the insults, the blows, the mockeries, the nails, the sorrows in short of all kinds which He endured for the salvation of men. I have found wisdom to consist in meditation upon these things... Therefore, also, it is that I have them always in my mouth as you know, and that I have them always in my heart, as God knows; they are ever on my pen as all men may see; and the most sublime philosophy which I have in this world, is to know Jesus, and Jesus crucified.’”*²
3. To those present that day the Cross was a scene unforgettable in its horror and yet somehow unthinkably beautiful. Memories of skin torn asunder, heaving sweat, dripping blood, and tear-stained eyes filled their minds.
4. Through the testimony of Scripture and the ministry of the Holy Spirit we, no less than they, should also know the feeling of this graphic scene bearing down upon our souls until our hearts are crushed.
5. Right now, Jesus sits exalted in the highest of heavens upon His everlasting throne and *He vividly remembers* those hours.

¹ Ibid (quoting John of Avila), p 9.

² St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Abbe Theodore Ratisbonne*, (Rockford: TAN Books and Publishers, 1991), 29-30.

6. We must remember the death of Jesus because *He remembers* and we want to fellowship with Him and know all we can about His life. Imagine standing face to face with Him in the age to come and He has to teach you about the details of His Passion because you never cared enough to get it clear.
7. When you join John at the foot of the Cross and behold the chest you leaned upon the night before now covered in blood and straining to be filled with breath, indifference is not plausible. If you kneel beside Mary and look up to see the One who entered your womb by the Holy Spirit, the One who grew before your eyes through the passing years, the One promised to sit upon the throne of David, now marred and reviled, your heart is flung into a torrent of emotion.

II. LOOKING RIGHTLY

A. Introduction

1. Thus far we have primarily considered our posture before the story. Yet of utmost importance is that we are viewing Him in truth. Thousands of crosses were raised on the slopes outside of Jerusalem during Pilate's reign. *His identity* is what makes this story so significant and precious.
2. Typically, if His identity is brought into view when considering the Cross, it is in relation to His innocence as the sinless sacrifice for iniquity. As biblical and necessary as this is, it is not sufficient to only see a perfect man before our eyes.
3. Within the Passion narrative itself, at each of its four major stages, we are beckoned to encounter His deity and reckon with the truth that it is God Himself who is enduring brutality and mistreatment.

B. Arrest and Capture – *John 18:1-12*

*When Jesus had spoken these words, He went out with His disciples over the Brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which He and His disciples entered. ² And Judas, who betrayed Him, also knew the place; for Jesus often met there with His disciples. ³ Then Judas, having received a detachment of troops, and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, came there with lanterns, torches, and weapons. ⁴ Jesus therefore, knowing all things that would come upon Him, went forward and said to them, "Whom are you seeking?" ⁵ They answered Him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "I am He." And Judas, who betrayed Him, also stood with them. ⁶ Now when He said to them, "I am He," they drew back and fell to the ground. ⁷ Then He asked them again, "Whom are you seeking?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." ⁸ Jesus answered, "I have told you that I am He. Therefore, if you seek Me, let these go their way," ⁹ that the saying might be fulfilled which He spoke, "Of those whom You gave Me I have lost none." ¹⁰ Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, and cut off his right ear. The servant's name was Malchus. ¹¹ So Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into the sheath. Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?" ¹² Then the detachment of troops and the captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound Him. *John 18:1-12**

1. This begins that story of Jesus' death in the formal sense, with the Last Supper and the agony of the Garden now passed – both of which John omits in his description. The Garden of Gethsemane was located opposite the Eastern side of Jerusalem on the slopes of the Mount of Olives.
2. Chronologically this would have occurred very late Thursday night or into first hours of Friday. As John describes, Judas had left the Paschal Supper hours earlier and had now led the group of Jewish authorities and Roman soldiers to the place Jesus frequented with His disciples.
3. At this point, all of the disciples fled with the exception of John and Peter who trailed behind at a distance. Of the twelve only John, the beloved disciple, would cling to Jesus through the entirety of His passion and witness His death.

C. Before the Sanhedrin – *Matthew 26:62-68*

⁶² *And the high priest arose and said to Him, "Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?"* ⁶³ *But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!"* ⁶⁴ *Jesus said to him, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the*

Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” ⁶⁵ *Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, “He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy!”* ⁶⁶ *What do you think?” They answered and said, “He is deserving of death.”* ⁶⁷ *Then they spat in His face and beat Him; and others struck Him with the palms of their hands,* ⁶⁸ *saying, “Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?”* **Matthew 26:62-68**

1. From the garden Jesus was taken first to the house of Annas. Nothing is recorded in Scripture of their exchange, with the next scene narrated being Caiaphas’ private inquisition of Jesus that John alone includes (John 18:19-23).
2. Jesus was then taken before a larger group comprised of some of the members of the Sanhedrin who had gathered at the palace of Caiaphas at that late hour.
3. In no sense were the proceedings recorded an actual trial. These representatives of the Jewish leadership had gathered for a judicial murder, hoping to secure some charge that would undermine any resistance and be sufficient for Pilate to sentence Him to death.
4. It was in the courtyard of Caiaphas’ house that the betrayal of Peter took place as he and John waited to see what would come of their master and friend.

D. Before Pilate – *John 18:36-38, 19:5-8*

³⁶ *Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.”* ³⁷ *Pilate therefore said to Him, “Are You a king then?”* *Jesus answered, “You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.”* ³⁸ *Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?”* *And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, “I find no fault in Him at all...”* ⁵ *Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, “Behold the Man!”* ⁶ *Therefore, when the chief priests and officers saw Him, they cried out, saying, “Crucify Him, crucify Him!”* *Pilate said to them, “You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him.”* ⁷ *The Jews answered him, “We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God.”* ⁸ *Therefore, when Pilate heard that saying, he was the more afraid,* ⁹ *and went again into the Praetorium, and said to Jesus, “Where are You from?”* *But Jesus gave him no answer.* ¹⁰ *Then Pilate said to Him, “Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?”* **John 18:36-38, 19:5-8**

1. After the inquisition and mistreatment of the Sanhedrin perhaps two to three hours passed before He was brought before the assembly again at daybreak (recorded in greatest detail by Luke). There were several reasons for this second hearing but the primary purpose was to allow a greater representation of the Jewish leadership to give their consent.
2. From Caiaphas’ palace Jesus was taken to the Praetorium (the governor’s headquarters in Jerusalem). The first scene describes an exchange that occurred after the Jewish leadership initially delivered Christ to Pilate and offered their allegations against Him.
3. After declaring that he found no fault in the captive, Pilate sent Jesus to stand before Herod Antipas (Luke 23:6-12). Face to face with the aristocratic weakling who had killed His cousin and friend, Jesus remained silent as He did throughout most of these absurd proceedings. Antipas was disappointed he did not get to see a miracle but like Pilate found nothing warranting death in the Galilean.
4. The second scene occurred after Jesus had been returned to Pilate. Following the customary release of a prisoner and Pilate’s attempt to abate the rage of the Jews by having Jesus scourged, the Lord stood once more before the multitude of Jerusalem assailed by calls for His crucifixion.
5. Pulling Jesus back from the teeming crowd into the chambers of the Praetorium, Pilate questions the Lord about His identity one final time before giving Him over to their debased desire.

E. Upon the Cross – *Mark 15:37-39*

³⁷ And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last. ³⁸ Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. ³⁹ So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, “Truly this Man was the Son of God!” Mark 15:37-39

1. From the Praetorium Jesus bore His cross (with the aid of Simon of Cyrene) outside the city to Golgotha where He was crucified. It was late in the afternoon at the time of this scene, approximately fifteen hours since His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.
2. Darkness had covered the land for three hours at this point and only the Roman soldiers and the acquaintances of Jesus remained to behold the final moments before His death. From the figure on the cross, now marred and broken, a loud cry came forth and then He breathed His last.
3. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two men of influence who had come to believe in Jesus, were entrusted with the task of caring for His body. Haste was necessary in order to prepare Him for burial and secure a tomb before the Sabbath began at six o'clock that evening.