



“Suffering Christ”

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Scripture (CEB):

Matthew 26, 27 (excerpts)

³¹ Then Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written,

‘I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’

³³ Peter said to him, “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.” ³⁴ Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” ³⁵ Peter said to him, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And so said all the disciples.

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.” 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? 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.

Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. ⁴⁸ Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him.” ⁴⁹ At once he came up to Jesus and said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him. ⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, “Friend, do what you are here to do.” Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him.

Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

⁵⁷ Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest

⁶⁹ Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, “You also were with Jesus the Galilean.” ⁷⁰ But he denied it before all of them, saying, “I do not know what you are talking about.” ⁷¹ When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.”^[h] ⁷² Again he denied it with an oath, “I do not know the man.” ⁷³ After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.” ⁷⁴ Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know the man!” At that moment the cock crowed. ⁷⁵ Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: “Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. ² They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

³ When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus^[a] was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.

¹¹ Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You say so.”

²² Pilate said to the crowd, “What should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?”^[i] All of them said, “Let him be crucified!”

²⁴ So when Pilate saw that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood;^[k] see to it yourselves.” And after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

²⁷ The soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor’s headquarters,^[l] and they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹ and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” ³⁰ They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. Then they led him away to crucify him.

³³ And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), ³⁴ they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall. ³⁵ And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots.³⁷ Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.”

³⁹ Those who passed by derided^[n] him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰ and saying, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” ⁴⁴ The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted

him in the same way.

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?" 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.

Sermon:

Jesus never wanted this.

Jesus never asked for this.

Oh, he recognized that the tension was building.

He recognized that he was straining against his culture and religion, and the imperial culture and religion of Rome; and neither would willingly tolerate his criticism much longer.

I will never believe that Jesus chose the cross.

Rather, it came to him, as the cost of being true to his deepest belief.

It was thrust upon him because so many around him were afraid of his world vision, his new practice of love and welcome, inclusion and freedom. In the world of Jesus, there were no slaves and free, no landless poor against wealthy elites. The table was set for the beggar, and for the Centurion. The healing came for untouchable bleeding women, and for leprous men.

People were important in their own right, Jesus saw them as the Children of God, first and foremost.

God's vision of the world was not the path the world had taken. Jesus shared that vision of the world.

And the world hated him for it.

He suffered for that vision, God's vision of creation and humanity. Yes, he was betrayed by friends. And that surely hurt him.

Yes, they ran. Yes, they cowered in fear. Yes, he was left alone with his enemies. And that surely hurt him.

Yes, he was abandoned and mocked and beaten, and led off to die on a cross like a common criminal. And that surely caused him terrible pain.

Because he would not abandon the promises of God, the vision of his Father.

In suffering and sorrow he would pray the desperate words of psalm 22, which begins, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me” and yet continues with these words also: “God did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried out to him.”

Jesus suffered, Jesus died.

But not in despair, and not alone, not when he had these words on his lips.

We did not ask to be born into this time of upheaval in the world.

We did not seek out this time of global death, of sickness, of widespread fear.

But even in this time of social breakdown, of world upheaval, of our world transformed in ways we can hardly imagine...so many carry a vision of:

The world filled with mercy. The world filled with bravery and kindness, and generosity for the stranger, as well as family and friend.

The world suffers, and like Jesus, so many respond with compassion, facing danger, facing betrayal...and still living out of the vision of the world that is God’s vision...health and life in its fullness, peace and welcome, joy and harmony, beauty and welcome.

Jesus suffered, and died on a cross. He did not choose it, but he did not run either. And Easter transformed all his loss

We do not know what form of new life lies on the other side of this time of suffering, this time of fear and death and social disarray.

But whether we live, or whether we die...we can do all of it out of our deepest values, our Jesus values; his trust in God, our trust in God and God’s values.

People matter. Generosity, caring, sharing, sacrificial love for others: this matters. This creation is beautiful and it matters to God.

This can change the world. It has. It does. As we live into these deep values, the world is changed, for the better.

In the face of death’s certain grasp on us, there God is. We are not alone, and Life is the promise of God.

Let us live, and if we must, let us die for it, as Jesus did. God will be with us.