

## **The Father's Cup: A Crucifixion Narrative**

Written by Rick Gamache, Sovereign Grace Church, Bloomington, MN

Jesus is bowed and bloody, 110 pounds of lumber is strapped across his shoulders. The weight of the rough wood proves too much as it grinds against the lacerations left by the Roman scourging. Pain explodes like light in Jesus' brain. And he crumples under the beam.

When he comes to, Jesus feels somehow weightless and he realizes that the wooden crossbeam has been cut from his back. Another man is carrying it now, a dark man whose face he cannot see. But he does see the face of another.

Mercifully, a Roman centurion bends and takes Jesus under the arm to lift him gently to his feet again. Jesus looks up and holds the soldier captive in his gaze. The victim's eyes do not pierce the centurion with the hatred he expects. Instead, he finds love in those eyes. Love mingled with pain, yes — brokenhearted love — but love nonetheless. And not a love excited by one mere act of kindness. This love preceded the moment. This love preceded his existence. This love preceded the existence of the world. Somehow the centurion knows that these are the eyes of Eternal Love.

Jesus holds the soldier's gaze as long as he can. But the blood that dripped off the ends of his hair to the ground when he was bent low under the cross now drops into his eyes. The blood mixed with sweat stings, and Jesus blinks.

By this time Friday, Jesus is familiar with that sting. But it was a new sensation on Thursday night in the garden.

There, in the garden, he walked with his friends singing hymns and speaking quietly. They passed through the city gate and walked up the hill of Gethsemane through the olive trees. But there were only eleven friends with Jesus — not twelve. One of the twelve chosen proved no friend at all. Satan already held Judas, the betrayer, by the hand then and now he has him by the neck. Judas hangs pale and gasping swinging from the end of his belt under the limb of a tree. The flames of hell are already lapping at his feet. It would have been better if he had never been born.

Eleven remained then. But soon there would be none. Not one friend would stay. Strike the Shepherd and the sheep will scatter. One would run terrified out of the garden naked and the rest would follow.

Jesus fell on his face in prayer. He tasted the dirt as he fought for the eternal destinies of his eleven sleeping sheep a stone's throw away.

"Let the cup pass," he cried. "Father, if possible, let the cup pass!"

The Father gazed lovingly at his Son and the Son stared back knowingly.

"Your will be done, Father," whispered the Son.

And the Father held out the cup and Jesus looked in. What he saw there flung him into the throes of agony. He pressed his forehead deep into the dirt, which softened into mud when mingled with his tears. Jesus felt several small explosions of pain underneath the skin on his face. His tiny capillaries in the sweat glands burst under the stress and blood flowed through his pores and dropped into his eyes. And it stung.

Jesus lifted his head to the sky and cried out, "I will drink from this cup, Father. I will drink from this cup so that your glory may be vindicated and my name may be glorified. And so that the sheep that you have given me will see our glory and enjoy it forever. I will drink on behalf of our rescue mission."

Just then, through blurry eyes, Jesus saw the line of torches slithering like a snake up the hill to the garden. The mob arrived. Judas kissed. Friends fled. Soldiers arrested. And Jesus' world became a swirl of torment and mockery.

His trial was a sham as liars lied and mockers mocked. God claimed to be God, and it was called blasphemy. And the face that Moses longed to see — the face that he was forbidden to see — was slapped and spit on. More blood in the eyes; more stinging.

As he was dragged from the High Priest's house, Jesus managed a bloody-eyed glance at Peter. This friend ran from the garden, but this friend followed. And this friend had done the unthinkable three times. This friend denied the

Friend of friends. This friend denied the Friend of sinners. He invoked a curse to lend credence to his denials. And now the cock crowed. And Jesus held Peter in the gaze of Eternal Love. But Peter looked away and ran. Just outside the city gate he stumbled and fell to the ground heaving sobs and considered joining Judas on his tree. But he pleaded to the Father for forgiveness instead. And the Father looked a few hours into the future to Friday afternoon, and, on behalf of what he saw there, he granted Peter the forgiveness he requested.

The Governor of Judea was up early this cold, gray, wet Friday morning. The city still slept as the priests and soldiers led Jesus to the palace of Pontius Pilate. But soon the priests would have a sympathetic crowd as news of Jesus' arrest passed from house to house.

They leveled their charges: "This man forbids us to pay tribute to Caesar and he calls himself a king."

Pilate stared intently at Jesus. He questioned him. And found no guilt. Neither did King Herod. So Pilate offered to release Jesus to the swelling crowd. But they chose freedom for the murderer Barabbas instead.

"Then what should I do with Jesus of Nazareth?" Pilate shouted to the mob.

The mob thundered back: "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

And their voices prevailed. Pilate washed his hands and delivered the Innocent One to death.

Next, Jesus was stripped and his hands were tied above his head to a post. A large, shirtless Roman legionnaire stepped toward Jesus fondling a short whip. Several heavy, leather thongs hung off the handle weighed down by the small balls of lead attached near the ends of each. The muscles in the legionnaire's back and arms bulged as he brought down the heavy whip with full force again and again and again across Jesus' shoulders and back and buttocks and legs.

The Jews would have been more merciful — no more than thirty-nine lashes. But the Romans extended no such mercy. And the balls of lead yielded large deep bruises. Then the bruises were eventually broken open by the endless blows. The thongs cut through the skin and then they cut deeper into muscles. From behind, Jesus no longer looked human. His skin hung in long, bloody ribbons of tissue.

Fearing they had gone too far and killed Jesus before it was time, the soldiers cut him loose. He fell in an unconscious heap at their feet.

As Jesus came to he was forced to stand. A purple robe, not his own, was wrapped around him and clung to his open wounds. They made him hold a stick — a mock scepter. And now the King of the Jews needed a crown. One of the Romans picked up a thorn branch from a pile of firewood and braided it into a circle. Never did thorns compose so rich a crown — or so painful a crown. Another soldier took the scepter from the hand of the King of kings and beat the crown into his skull. Bloody sweat blinded him. And his stinging eyes momentarily took his mind off the pain in his back.

But then the purple robe was torn from Jesus. And ribbons of flesh that adhered to the cloth were ripped off with its removal. Each wound had a voice of its own to shriek its pain. And Jesus collapsed again.

Now Jesus is dressed in his own clothes. And before the merciful centurion can move Jesus along behind the dark man now carrying the cross, an old woman approaches and wipes Jesus' face with a linen cloth. Jesus looks her in the eyes and then looks to the crowd of weeping women behind her.

And he says, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. The days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.'"

And to the old woman he adds, "If they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it's dry?"

Then Jesus walks on beyond the city gates. It's nine o'clock in the morning, Friday.

Through the steady rain Jesus glances up from the base of a rocky hill. It's named Golgotha — the Skull.

At the top he sees several posts fixed in the ground. Three of those poles stand ready to receive their crossbeams and the tattered body of Jesus and the two criminals carrying their crosses behind him.

At the top of the hill the merciful centurion hands Jesus a cup. Jesus sniffs the liquid. It's wine mixed with myrrh, a mild narcotic to dull the pain. But Jesus is meant to feel all the pain. So he hands the cup back. This is not the cup of the Father.

A soldier strips Jesus. Again his back is set on fire as skin tears away with the cloth.

Jesus now lays naked in the dirt. The dark man places the crossbeam by Jesus' head. This time Jesus sees his face. It is Simon of Cyrene. Jesus knows him by name and did before there was time.

The beam becomes his pillow now. Two men take hold of his hands. The soldier on his left yanks his arm as far as it will go. But the soldier to his right is gentler. Jesus turns to him. It's the merciful centurion again. He picks up a cold spike and places it to Jesus' wrist. Then he picks up a hammer. Their eyes meet. Eternal Love shines forth again, and the centurion is undone. He looks away and lifts his hammer.

In that moment Jesus hears his own word of power: the word of power that holds the merciful centurion in existence, the word of power that causes the hammer to be. He's speaking it all into being: the soldiers, the priests, the thieves, the friends, the mothers, the brothers, the mob, the wooden beams, the spikes, the thorns, the ground beneath him, and the dark clouds gathering above. If he ceases to speak they will all cease to be. But he wills that they remain. So the soldiers live on, and the hammers come crashing down.

Jesus is lifted on his crossbeam to the post. He sags held only by the spikes in his wrists. Jesus designed the median nerves in his arms that are working perfectly now. The pain shoots up those nerves and explodes in his skull as the crossbeam is set in place.

His left foot is now pressed against his right foot. Both feet are extended, toes down, and a spike is driven through the arch of each. His knees are bent.

Jesus immediately pushes himself up to relieve the pain in his outstretched arms. He places his full weight on the spikes in his feet and they tear through the nerves between the metatarsal bones. Splinters from the post pierce his lacerated back — searing agony.

Quickly waves of cramps overtake him — deep, throbbing pain from his head to his toes. He's no longer able to push himself up and his knees buckle.

He's hanging now by his arms. His pectoral muscles are paralyzed and his intercostals are useless. Jesus can inhale, but he cannot exhale. His compressed heart is struggling to pump blood to his torn tissue. He fights to raise himself in order to breathe and in order to speak.

He looks down at the soldiers now gambling for his clothes. He pushes himself up through the violent pain to pray aloud, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they do."

Then he sags back into silence. But the crowd is not silent, though he can barely hear their taunts through the din of his pain.

"He saved others, let him save himself!"

"If you're the Christ, come down off the cross!"

"Save yourself, King of the Jews!"

The criminal on the cross to his left joins the mockery. But the thief to his right repents. Jesus pushes himself up to say to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

It's noon now. The rain falls harder and the clouds blacken. Jesus looks down through wet strands of hair into the familiar face of a woman. A new pain grips him — greater pain than all the whips and spikes in the Kingdom of Rome. It's his mother. She's sobbing so hard that her breathing is as labored as his. Without words she looks into his

eyes and begs to know why. He longs to hold her and to tell her that it's all for her. He pushes upward and says, "Woman." Then he looks his friend John in the eyes. John is standing behind her supporting his own weeping mother. "He is now your son."

Then to John Jesus murmurs, "And she is now your mother. Take her away from here."

And he sags back into silence, back into countless hours of limitless pain.

Then Jesus is startled by a foul odor. It isn't the stench of open wounds. It's something else. And it crawls inside him. He looks up to his Father. His Father looks back, but Jesus doesn't recognize these eyes. They pierce the invisible world with fire and darken the visible sky. And Jesus feels dirty. He hangs between earth and heaven filthy with human discharge on the outside and, now, filthy with human wickedness on the inside.

The Father speaks:

Son of Man! Why have you sinned against me and heaped scorn on my great glory?

You are self-sufficient and self-righteous — consumed with yourself and puffed up and selfishly ambitious.

You rob me of my glory and worship what's inside of you instead of looking out to the One who created you.

You are a greedy, lazy, gluttonous slanderer and gossip.

You are a lying, conceited, ungrateful, cruel adulterer.

You practice sexual immorality; you make pornography, and fill you mind with vulgarity.

You exchange my truth for a lie and worship the creature instead of the Creator. And so you are given up to your homosexual passions, dressing immodestly, and lusting after what is forbidden.

With all your heart you love perverse pleasure.

You hate your brother and murder him with the bullets of anger fired from your own heart.

You kill babies for your convenience.

You oppress the poor and deal slaves and ignore the needy.

You persecute my people.

You love money and prestige and honor.

You put on a cloak of outward piety, but inside you are filled with dead men's bones — you hypocrite!

You are lukewarm and easily enticed by the world.

You covet and can't have so you murder.

You are filled with envy and rage and bitterness and unforgiveness.

You blame others for your sin and are too proud to even call it sin.

You are never slow to speak.

And you have a razor tongue that lashes and cuts with its criticism and sinful judgment.

Your words do not impart grace. Instead your mouth is a fountain of condemnation and guilt and obscene talk.

You are a false prophet leading people astray.

You mock your parents.

You have no self-control.

You are a betrayer who stirs up division and factions.

You're a drunkard and a thief.

You're an anxious coward.

You do not trust me.

You blaspheme against me.

You are an un-submissive wife.

And you are a lazy, disengaged husband.

You file for divorce and crush the parable of my love for the church.

You're a pimp and a drug dealer.

You practice divination and worship demons.

The list of your sins goes on and on and on and on. And I hate these things inside of you. I'm filled with disgust, and indignation for your sin consumes me.

Now, drink my cup!

And Jesus does. He drinks for hours. He downs every drop of the scalding liquid of God's own hatred of sin mingled with his white-hot wrath against that sin. This is the Father's cup: omnipotent hatred and anger for the sins of every generation past, present, and future — omnipotent wrath directed at one naked man hanging on a cross.

The Father can no longer look at his beloved Son, his heart's treasure, the mirror-image of himself. He looks away.

Jesus pushes himself upward and howls to heaven, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Silence.

Separation.

Jesus whispers, "I'm thirsty," and he sags.

The merciful centurion soaks a sponge in sour wine and lifts it on a reed to Jesus' lips. And the sour wine is the sweetest drink he ever tasted.

Jesus pushes himself up again and cries, "It is finished." And it is. Every sin of every child of God has been laid on Jesus and he drank the cup of God's wrath dry.

It's three o'clock, Friday afternoon, and Jesus finds one more surge of strength. He presses his torn feet against the spikes, straightens his legs, and with one last gasp of air cries out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"

And he dies.

The merciful centurion sees Jesus' body fall far forward and his head drop low. He thrusts a spear up behind Jesus' ribs—one more piercing for our transgression—and water and blood flow out of his broken heart.

In that moment mountains shake and rocks spilt; veils tear and tombs open.

And the merciful centurion looks up at the lifeless body of Jesus and is filled with awe. He drops to his knees and declares, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

Mission accomplished. Sacrifice accepted.