

A Dramatic Good Friday Worship Service

“The Testimonies of Pilgrims”

The service will proceed unannounced

Narrator: We extend an invitation to each one who is here today to walk with us as we retrace the steps our Lord took in the final hours of His life. Experience with us the emotions of those who were present and observed His agony. Our journey begins in an upper chamber; the top floor of a house, accessible by an outside staircase, above the noise and bustle of the city of Jerusalem. There Jesus has gathered with His twelve disciples, including Peter, James, John and Judas, to take part in the Jewish feast of the Passover. That which began simply as a Passover meal was changed as they sat around the table together, for it became

The Last Supper

Hymn Behold the Lamb

Scripture Reading Matthew 26:26-30

(Communion could be celebrated at this point if desired)

Gethsemane

Hymn 230 Go to dark Gethsemane (verse 1)

Peter: My name is Simon. By trade I am a fisherman. That is, I was a fisherman until our Lord called me to follow Him. He gave me a new name and called me Peter - a name which means "rock ". But I was far from being a "rock" in the final hours of his life.

My wife always told me that I was headstrong and impetuous and I guess she was right. For weeks before His actual death, Jesus had told us countless times that He was going to die. Personally, I just couldn't see it. God had given me a special insight into the character of this man. I knew that He was literally "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," and I had great difficulty accepting the picture of a Messiah who was going to die. On one occasion I took Jesus aside and tried to point out to Him that this should never happen. I received a severe rebuke for my trouble.

On His last night with us, as we sat around the Passover table He spoke once again of His death and how one of us would betray Him. The atmosphere in that room was so tense it could almost be cut with a knife. What really disturbed me was when He told us that we would all desert Him. I knew that this was not true. I had given up everything for this man. I would not leave Him. When Jesus replied that that very night I would disown Him three times, my mind refused to accept it. Then when we gathered later in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, I was so tired that I couldn't even stay awake with Him.

When they came to arrest Him, I made a desperate show of force and slashed at one of the servants of the High Priest with my sword. Jesus intervened and forbade me to continue.

The Judgement

Hymn 230

Go to dark Gethsemane (verse 2)

Peter: What happened in the judgement hall is history now. The whole world knows that I did exactly what Jesus had predicted. But no one knows what I felt inside. To this day I do not know what caused me, as I stood there in the courtyard, to deny emphatically that I even was acquainted with Jesus. When I heard that rooster crow, a wave of revulsion swept over me. Never in my life have I felt more bitterly ashamed. Never have I felt more lost. I remembered only too well that our Lord had once said: "Whoever denies me before men, I will deny before my Father in heaven."

As I stood and watched the sun creep over the Judean hills that morning, I was convinced my life was over. I felt that the kingdom our Lord had promised had slipped from my grasp.

That He was able to forgive and once again use a tainted vessel such as myself is the most powerful witness I know to this Man's saving and redeeming power.

Pilate: As procurator of Judea, I, Pontius Pilate, have been judged very harshly by you Christians for my part in the death of this Nazarene, Jesus. The fact of the matter is, I doubt that you would have acted any differently if you had been in my position. You see, it's all very well to speak of justice and fair play and doing what is decent when you are sitting in a corner reading a religious scroll. It's something completely different when you have to make decisions in the real world.

Believe me, there is no more stubborn and difficult people to rule over than the Jews of Palestine. Of all the procuratorships, Judea is without a doubt the toughest. For some reason I don't understand, Rome saw fit to give these people a measure of political independence - partial self-rule it was called. It makes little sense in view of the number of revolts and uprisings we are forced to quell. But even worse than this was their religious fanaticism. Their ridiculous beliefs and practices can be downright exasperating.

Take, for instance, the case of this Nazarene who claimed to be the Son of God. We Romans have no difficulty with such a claim. If the man wants to make such a claim, then let him. Live and let live we always say. Apart from this one thing, Jesus was harmless - and innocent; but His claim drove the Jews into such a frenzy, that I was afraid I would have another revolt on my hands. So I had a choice - let an innocent man die or allow many to be killed while I quell an uprising. It's not a hard decision to make. When it's One or many, I feel that the One is expendable.

What about truth and justice, you ask? I ask you, "Exactly, what is truth? It's different for every person you meet.

Now, don't get me wrong, it isn't that I did nothing to help this Jesus. I tried to set Him free. I sent Him to Herod to try and get Him off my hands, but Herod sent Him back. I offered to just punish and release Him, but those fanatical Jews would have none of it. My wife sent

me a message about a dream she'd had. She said she was convinced He was innocent. But it was of no use.

I had no other choice. I had to hand Him over to the Jews. I washed my hands of any responsibility and do you know what they actually said: "Let his blood be on us and on our children." What more could I do?

The Crucifixion

Hymn 230

Go to dark Gethsemane (verse 3)

Simon of Cyrene: Of all the characters who played a part in the drama of the Crucifixion, mine was the most insignificant . I'm a businessman from North Africa. They call me Simon of Cyrene and I was in Jerusalem on business. Being a Jew, I had arranged my visit so that it coincided with Passover. Like a lot of other people who were around Jerusalem at that time, I had difficulty finding accommodation; so I had to go to an outlying village in the country to secure lodging.

I was returning from my lodgings that particular morning when I came upon this large procession making its way out of the city gate. The group was made up mostly of religious authorities, a few soldiers and what best can be described as rabble. I couldn't help but notice this pathetic figure in the middle. And I mean pathetic. His back had been lashed into a blood pulp - it looked just like ground meat - and on His head, and pushed in until it drew blood, was a ring of thorns. He was struggling along under the weight of the wooden crosspiece to a cross. When I saw that I knew what was happening. I had seen too many Roman crosses in my travels, with the bodies still lashed and nailed in place.

Just as this criminal got opposite where I was standing, He collapsed. It was sickening. But I didn't have time to dwell on the repugnant aspect of the whole affair. A Roman centurion collared me and forced me into carrying the crosspiece.

It was only a short walk from the gate to the hill that the people of Jerusalem called Golgotha, but it was a walk that changed my life. I was only a chance participant in that drama and I have often wondered what my life would have been like if I had left my lodging five minutes earlier or walked a little faster? What if I had found lodgings on the other side of the city or had taken another road and entered a different gate? What if that centurion had picked someone else to carry the crosspiece? I know this is all sheer speculation and I guess it really makes no difference. The fact of the matter is that things happened as they did. My life changed utterly and completely that day, for on that road I met the Messiah; and He became my Lord and my God. It changed my family, too. My two boys, Alexander and Rufus, also made the decision to be followers of this Man and The Way.

Hymn 233

Were you there (verses 1 & 2)

Roman Centurion: When you have my kind of profession, you get hardened to the spectacle of death. To get to my position as the commander over 100 men you have to be tough. As part of my job, I've watched a lot of men die. You may feel that death by crucifixion was uncommon, but let me tell you, it wasn't. Judea was littered with crosses

during those years. Mind you, we were rather exclusive in who we crucified. Death by crucifixion was reserved for slaves, robbers, assassins, and the like. Oh, and for rebellious subjects too. But we had a lot of both types among the Jews.

Now, like I said, I've stood at the foot of countless crosses and watched many men die. It's a very slow and excruciating form of death. But I tell you, I have never seen any man die like this One. I've heard their rants, their screams, their curses, and their Whimpers. But I had my eyes opened that day on Golgotha. He said very little as He hung there. There were no curses or rants. Towards the last He cried out - "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Shortly after that He cried out again and then died.

I tell you, this was no ordinary man. The pall of darkness that hung over that hill; the supernatural manifestations; the manner of His death; all these things point for me towards the fact that: "Surely, This man was the Son of God?"

Mary, mother of Jesus: I have frequently been asked, especially by new believers who are hearing the story for the first time, what my thoughts were as I stood at the foot of the cross that day. I guess I felt just as any mother would who watches her Son accused of crimes he never committed and then tortured to death without a fair trial.

I had previously lost my husband, so I know well the feeling of shock that hits a person when they are told of a death that is near to them. With Joseph's passing it was bad, but this was so much worse. With my boy Jesus there had been the promise of God and His miraculous birth. He was so special and the promises were so great that I had such high hopes for Him. Oh, I know He tried to warn us, but a mother has trouble accepting that kind of thing. And then to have it all end so suddenly on a criminal's cross.

Because of the task He was called too, I sometimes felt that Jesus didn't really have much feeling for me. Some of the things that He said in front of others were almost harsh. But that feeling disappeared as I stood at the foot of the cross. That day I experienced the depth of His love for me. Even as He hung there, suffering incredible pain, He showed that His concern was not for Himself but for others. He asked John to look after me from then on.

As I watched the last breath of life slip from His lips, I was struck once again by how different my Son was from other men. My heart was broken at Golgotha, but it was also once again confirmed to me that I had borne the very Son of God.

Hymn 239

O sacred head, sore wounded

Narrator: Today you have been eyewitnesses to the greatest drama in all of history. You have listened to the testimony of those who were direct participants, as they shared their thoughts concerning this event. Certainly we have witnessed a tragedy - the brutal torture of a Man who was without sin and who harmed no one; a man who was without question the wisest and best Man who ever lived. You have heard the verdict of those who knew Him over a numbers of years - and those who knew Him for a brief few hours. With one voice they declare that this Man was the Son of God.

The paradox of the cross is that the greatest of all tragedies became the greatest of all

victories. As one of the early Christian preachers proclaimed:

"Be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

It is only fitting then that we close on a note of victory and triumph. Join with me as we sing:

Hymn The power of the cross (Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, available through CCLI)
or Hymn 643 Lift high the cross

Benediction

My brothers and sisters in Christ, why do you stand looking so sorrowful? This same Jesus, whose crucifixion we have witnessed, is not dead. For shortly He shall return in Resurrection Power. Hallelujah. Amen.

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