

Good Friday

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John 18:1–19:42

What a day! Who in the world gave it the name “Good Friday”? Reading even the most sketchy and benign accounts of that day is enough to make even the strong shudder. No one there that day, including the Romans who did the deed, would ever have agreed to call it “Good Friday.” It was a terrible day by any standard of consideration.

Even dumb nature cried out against it. “When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon” (Mark 15:33). The stars hid their faces in shame and the sun refused to shine. The earth rebelled. There was an earthquake. Rocks split and graves opened and “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (Matthew 27:50-52). Good Friday? Nobody there that day thought so! It was a day of human infamy, when the very Son of God, who came in gentle love, was hurled back into the face of the Father who sent him. That day represents humanity at its worst, but God at God’s best. Good Friday? There certainly did not appear to be anything good about it! Whatever good there may have been was not to be understood on that day—only later.

No one present that day would have ever dreamed—not in his or her wildest imagination—the significance that day would hold for all the world. No single day in the history of humankind has touched so many for so long. Its importance to Christians is equaled only by the resurrection three days later. In truth, one can hardly see how those two days can be separated. They are two events of one fabric. They are indivisible with a symbiotic relationship of meaning. Either day would be stripped of its meaning without the other.

It was just another day to many who were there. Pilate was anxious and hesitant because it was a political “hot potato” and he had used up his political capital with Rome. He was superstitious about the matter, but he otherwise had no personal investment in the

outcome. It certainly was not the first time he had uttered those fateful words to a condemned man: "Ibis ad Crucem" ("You will go to the cross"), and it probably was not the last.

It was just another day for the Roman soldiers who happened to draw the duty of whipping and then crucifying a prisoner. They had done it before. They were obviously bored with the tedium of it all. They amused themselves by making sport of Jesus. They taunted him, placed an old purple cloak on him, and put a crown of thorns on his head. It was amusement to them. Only one of the execution squad sensed there was something special going on here. When the centurion who stood facing him saw how he died, he said: "Truly this man was God's Son!" But for all the other soldiers it was just "another day at the office." They had been there before. They would be there again.

It was just another day for the curious bystanders who came to gawk in some perverted amusement at the suffering and dying of the condemned. It was not their first time. It would not be their last.

It was important to the religious establishment that the problem of another disturber of "their peace" be silenced. To them Jesus was just another false messiah who was making trouble for them by getting the Romans upset. And he was disturbing their temple business of moneychanging and selling sacrificial animals. There had been others. He had to go. Really, just another day.

It was not just another day to the family and followers of Jesus. It was the most terrible day of their lives. Not only did they lose a dear and special friend, their faith and hope was lost also. It was just another horrible day, like other horrible days, except many times worse. It certainly was not a "Good" day! They were much too grieved and upset to remember that he had said to them earlier that it was "good" that he was leaving— to their advantage even. He promised that he would be more substantially with them in his absence than when he was there. They did not understand this when he said it, and if it crossed their troubled minds on that Friday, it was no comfort.

It was three days before the significance of that Friday began to dawn on the followers and family of Jesus. It was not long before the Romans and the Jewish religious establishment began to sense there was more going on that Friday than "just another day." Unbeknownst to them, they had played into the hand and plan of the great God Almighty in a way they could never have dreamed. None of those who were instrumental in putting Jesus on the cross had any idea of what they were really doing. Jesus was speaking a word of fact as well as a word of forgiveness when from the cross he prayed: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." They did not know!

Soon the whole world would know. Soon the message of Jesus would spread like wildfire across the civilized world. Soon the day that his enemies thought was just another day, and his followers thought the most awful day imaginable, would take on a significance that would justify the title of "Good Friday." For two thousand years the significance of that day has continued to grow. Banks close. The stock exchanges close. Thousands of books have been written about it. Movies have been made and television specials run to tell again the story of that day. Special services are held in churches and people who otherwise do not tend to be religious take off their hats and bow their heads and remember.

Those of us who know how the story ends tend to forget that those who were there did not and could not have known. God is always doing things in our world and in our lives that we do not understand, the significance of which will dawn on us later. None of us are ever far from painful events, which we do not understand. There are things that happen that seem to us like the end of the world, but we later see how they blessed us and saved us in a manner we could not see at the time. Suffering in our lives has the potential of either crushing us or refining us. And, we do have some modicum of choice when our world turns dark at midday as to its ultimate effect on us. When we go into the tumbler, we have some choice about whether we come out crushed or polished. The God who turned the most awful day in history into Good Friday is still at work in our world and in our lives.

Today, as we walk the *via dolorosa* with Jesus and weep at the cross, we are kept from despair in the sure knowledge that there is an ending we do not see. When faith in the power and wisdom of God is the theme and mood of our lives, we can live with the pain of the moment.

Several years ago I listened in rapt attention to Dr. Tony Campolo describe a sermon preached by his pastor on Good Friday titled: "It Is Friday, but Sunday's Coming!" The disciples are lost in pain and shame. Mary is crying. The crowd is jeering: "He saved others, now let him save himself." The Jews are strutting and laughing. The Roman soldiers are shooting dice for his garments. Jesus is dying. What they do not know is that it is just Friday. Just Friday! But, Sunday is coming! Do you understand that?

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