

Agony—John 19



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I often think of that old song, ‘Were you there when they crucified my Lord?’

And I say, no, I wasn’t there, at the cross. I don’t think I could have borne it.

In John’s Gospel, the narrative tells us that Jesus carried his own cross to the place of the Skull... and that’s where they crucified him, alongside two others. Jesus was in the middle. And on his cross, Pilate prepared a notice. It simply read, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews’ – in three languages – Aramaic, Latin and Greek [John 19:19]. It was the summation of his life, at the end.

Of course, the chief priests complained about it. “Don’t write ‘The King of the Jews’ but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.” [John 19:21]

But Pilate said no, “What I have written, I have written.” [John 19:22]. And the soldiers took Jesus’ clothes and they divided his garments among them... and it was just as it was described by the Psalmist, one thousand years earlier [Psalm 22].

But nearby, stood a group of women... including Jesus’ mother, and her sister, and Mary Magdalene [John 19:25]. How did they bear it, I wonder, standing there? How did they watch? Did they turn away? Did they want to flee, as the other disciples had fled, except for John? Did they want to scream, or run to him, and wail? And did Jesus’ mother quietly remember the words of Simeon, at the temple, when Jesus was a baby? “A sword will pierce your own soul too.” [Luke 2:35] Had she actually spent 33 years remembering those words, and wondering?

And then Jesus drank, and he spoke, “It is finished.” [John 19:30]. He bowed his head, and gave up his spirit. He died. Jesus breathed his last breath – the One who had formed breath and life in the beginning, who had spoken everything into being, in the universe... gave up his life, and his breath.

In that moment, I think Mary must have howled, or wanted to stop breathing herself. She must have felt the sword pierce her own soul. She must have felt agony.

And very soon afterwards, the sword pierced Jesus’ side. His blood and water flowed. The crowd saw it. John saw it. And Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus, and he took it with him, wrapping it in spices, and strips of lines – a dead body, already grown cold and lifeless. And they placed that dead body in a new tomb.

It was agony.

It was finished.

... but it wasn’t over.