

As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, 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!" For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

On the day that Jesus Christ died, there were all too few sympathetic faces in the crowd. You could almost count them on one hand: Mary, Mary Magdalene, the disciple John, the penitent criminal. On the other hand, there was no lack of hatred for the Man of sorrows on that day.

So you would think that it would be no hard task to find six separate groups of Jesus' enemies to speak about in our six Wednesday evening services. And you have to wonder why, of all people, we should include in this series of meditations some of the very few people who actually felt sorry for Jesus as he struggled with his cross to the place of the skull. Why are we considering today/tonight the women of Jerusalem who wept for him?

Well, of course we don't number them among Jesus' enemies! But we do number them among the many people who stood that day in need of the forgiveness that Jesus earned for us all on the cross. Their sorrow for him was sweet and admirable; it seems all the more beautiful when we see the stark contrast between their tears and the mad shouts of the mob just minutes earlier, crying out for Christ's crucifixion. The angels themselves may well have been weeping on that day. There was no fault to be found in these women's tears.

Yet it was this very man for whom they were lamenting with such heartrending sobs who told them that they were crying for the wrong reasons. Their sympathy for Jesus was heartfelt and genuine, to be sure. But there were other tears to be shed, tears that these good women had no idea they should have been shedding. And it can happen that we too sometimes might cry the wrong tears. It is then that we must take to heart what our Savior said to the women of Jerusalem. It is then that we must pray:

Forgive Our Misplaced Sorrow!

The sentiment that the women displayed was truly heartfelt. Never think otherwise. They truly felt sorry for Jesus as he struggled under the weight of the cross. And this wasn't just a sudden jolt of pity as you might feel as you pass the scene of an accident. These ladies felt their sorrow deeply. Some of them, indeed, had put their money where their hearts were. It was a custom of some of the women of Jerusalem to keep up a fund to buy the drink of wine mixed with myrrh to be offered to those who were condemned to the cross.

How deep did their sorrow for Christ's sufferings run? Our text tells us that they mourned and cried. They made those gestures of woe with which the people of the East display their sorrow: beating their chests, throwing their hands up in despair. They cried out in misery, loudly, as Christ passed them on the Via Dolorosa, the Path of Sorrows.

Yet Jesus told them that the sorrow God truly looked for was something different. **“Do not weep for me; weep for yourselves,”** he told them. What God truly sought from the people of Jerusalem, and these dear women too, was repentant, not sympathetic, sorrow.

Jesus foresaw the destruction to come upon the city that finally and irrevocably rejected its God. In the words of the prophets, he spoke of the terror and despair that would overtake all the inhabitants of Jerusalem in those days:

The time will come when you will say, “Blessed are the barren women, 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!’” For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?

Jesus himself was the green tree, the very picture of spiritual health and vigor, the one man in whom the Lord God was well pleased. And Israel was the dry tree, lifeless now in her spirit. Israel had proven to be a nation that was clinging to a form of religious piety while denying the very God who alone could give it life. And if Christ, the perfect one, had to suffer as he suffered in this dark world, what might the sinful people of Jerusalem expect?

The sin of rejecting their Messiah would have horrid consequences for the people of that city. The earthly consequence would include great suffering at the hands of Rome. On a day not 40 years in the future, the legions of the great general Titus would sack the city and burn the temple to the ground. An eyewitness account of that siege and its ending reads like a horror story. How much happier the people of Jerusalem would have been to be swallowed up by the hills!

Yet even worse would be the eternal consequences to be suffered by the nation that had rejected their Messiah. They had had every opportunity to repent and believe in Christ, who had walked among them for three years, preaching and teaching and performing signs and wonders. Yet they had refused to do so and in the end had screamed for his blood. On the day of judgment, when, as Scripture says, they must look upon him whom they pierced as he comes in the clouds of heaven, what excuse can they offer? How can they escape the eternal flames and torments and regrets of hell?

You would have to be made of stone if the many pictures of Christ's suffering—the word pictures in the Scripture, the works of art, sculpture, and films that we have seen about Christ's passion—did not bring forth some pity for the man who had to undergo such torments. If they did not, we could hardly call ourselves human beings. Yet from

us, as well, the Lord wishes to see a different and deeper sorrow, a godly sorrow over our sins. This is not in place of sympathy for the suffering of the Savior, but it truly ought to precede it.

Our Lord would tell us, as he told the women, that he does not seek our compassion but our repentance. After all, it was our sins that brought him to suffer in the first place. If our sins had not been as scarlet, then it would not have taken the blood of Christ to make us as white as snow. Do we give that fact the amount of thought it deserves? We have been so bad, have done such evil, that the only thing in all the universe that could keep us from the eternal fires of hell was the sacrifice of the Son of God.

What God seeks from us is a true and godly sorrow over our sins, a sorrow that confesses our many wrongdoings. God wants us to say with the psalmist, **“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge” (Ps 51:4)**. When the Scriptures condemn all people as sinners against the commandments of God, it is not our place to deny the truth of that statement. We too have done what is evil in God’s sight, and it is our duty now to admit that.

Yet repentance is a hard thing, and not all of us are very fond of participating in it. This is a sorrow that can be more than we want to bear. We would rather try to belittle our sins, as if they were not that serious a matter. We would rather try to hide them behind the greater sins of others, as if, in comparison, they are not that bad. We would rather distract ourselves with the pleasures of the world so that we don’t have to think about our guilt. We would rather try to convince ourselves that, by some scale of divine justice, we have done more good than bad, so our merits can wipe out our guilt. But none of that is what our Lord calls for. **“Weep for yourselves,”** he told the women of Jerusalem. And to us he says, *“Repent of your sins. Don’t hide them. Don’t ignore them. Don’t try to make them less serious than they are. But confess them, and then come to me for full and free pardon.”* That is the path he sets before us, and that is the path we ask to be led on when we pray, *“Father, make us truly repentant!”*

The sight of Christ upon the cross should impress upon us once more the dead seriousness of our sins so that we might come to understand what a grave matter they are before the Lord God. How could our guilt be considered a slight thing when we consider the great cost of its atonement? The ordeal was so great a thing that, on the night before, Jesus had prayed that the Father might find some other way, even at that late hour—but there was none.

An unrepentant attitude would be an insult to Christ. The cost of our salvation was great—greater than we could ever hope to imagine. But Jesus paid that cost out of selfless love for us. In return, the first thing we must do is confess our sins. In such confession we honor him who took all our sins onto his back and paid for them with his

innocent sufferings and death. Don't try to excuse them or rationalize them in any way. Just confess that you too are one of the sinners whose transgressions were that great. But the second part of Christian repentance must then also follow: We trust in that Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. He did not, after all, offer up his life to make us feel guilty but to make us guiltless in our judge's sight. **“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him,”** John 3:17 tells us. Our forgiveness is a sure thing now, as Paul tells us in Romans 8:1: **“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”**

Believe this great promise and you are saved. This faith will lay hold of the forgiveness Jesus won for us and grasp it as our own. His Word has promised it to us, and we know his Word is true. And once again we honor him when we place all our hope and confidence in that beautiful gospel message.

After that will come the fruits of repentance. These are the loving acts of obedience to God that will display to those around us that we truly have repented of our sins. They show that we no longer want to be servants of sin but we want to be servants of God. Such saving faith, after all, is not just some idea inside us but is a living and active thing. It must shine in our lives as surely as the sun must shine in the clear blue sky.

In the words of Scripture, we have become new creatures through faith, created by God to do good works in accordance with his law. We have been made new through faith in Jesus Christ. These good works are the evidence that our sorrow has indeed been a godly and God-pleasing repentance, a confession of sins coupled with faith in the forgiveness purchased by Christ. And, once again, our new lives will honor him who so generously and graciously gave his life for us.

“Do not weep for me,” Christ told the women of Jerusalem, **“weep for yourselves.”** May we take these words to our own hearts, but in the right way. Let us pray to our Father in heaven that he might fill our hearts with truly repentant sorrow over our sins so that we might honor Christ's death for us all the more. Pray that we might trust in him with all our hearts, showing true respect for our Savior. And pray that we may always bring forth lives filled with the fruits of repentance, showing those around us our love for the Lord Jesus Christ who first loved us. Let this be our prayer: *“Lord, let this holy season of Lent bring the right kind of tears to our eyes, the tears that lead to eternal life in your Son. Amen.”*