



BORN TO BE KILLED

He was beaten, he was tortured,
but he didn't say a word.
Like a lamb taken to be slaughtered
and like a sheep being sheared,
he took it all in silence.
Justice miscarried, and he was led off—
and did anyone really know what was happening?
He died without a thought for his own welfare,
beaten bloody for the sins of my people.

They buried him with the wicked,
threw him in a grave with a rich man,
Even though he'd never hurt a soul or said one word that wasn't true.
Still, it's what God had in mind all along,
to crush him with pain.
The plan was that he give himself as an offering for sin
so that he'd see life come from it—life, life, and more life.
And God's plan will deeply prosper through him.

(Isaiah 53:7-10 *The Message*)

ONE OF THE EARLIEST SIGNS OF SPRING is the sight of new calves in the pasture. Even while there still may be snow on the ground the diminutive heifers and bulls are being born and nuzzling beneath their mothers to reach a teat. Full-grown cattle are generally lethargic and lumbering, not known either for high spirits or a quick wit. But their brand new offspring are effervescent with life, prancing about on wobbly legs, playing tag and “whatcha doin’?” with their mates. After the cold, hard slog of winter, the newborns bring to the reawakening countryside a much-needed exuberance for life.

Driving past and seeing the new calves—off by themselves, playing with a mate, or clustered in the “nursery” under the attentive gaze of one or two of the mothers—the heart is lifted. It is hard not to smile at the sight of the cute little ones, so full of energy and life. But it is equally hard not to be reminded that these adorable calves have been born to be killed. For they are beef cattle, mostly black angus. Once they are grown and filled out, they will be transported to the packing plant, where they will be slaughtered for the dinner table.

THE UNPLEASANTNESS BETWEEN

Even for the meat eater, there is something offensive about the process that occurs between pasture and plate. Too much cruelty, too much blood, too much death. It is more palatable to the senses to skip directly from the bovine pastorage to the steak sizzling on the grill, ignoring the unpleasantness between.

And in a similar way many believers like to skip directly from the cute baby in the manger to the risen Christ, ignoring the unpleasant and unsightly death between. For Jesus, too, was born to be killed. He was born to be slaughtered for man.

Somewhere between Incarnation and resurrected Majesty lies the dark, ugly reality of the cross. Even more hideous a contemplation than that which occurs in the bowels of the packing plant, the torture and death of Jesus is too frightful to behold. But behold it we must, for in that gut-twisting scene dwells everything that gives true balance between God and man.

AT THE CROSS

Man, by nature, thinks well of himself. Given time it is easy and natural for him to believe that he is all-sufficient in himself, the pinnacle of goodness, and his own savior. Even the believer can, over time, begin to rise higher in his own estimation, paying lip-service to his Maker even as the Christian makes God smaller in relation to his own magnificence. It is in man's nature to forget. It is in man's nature for his own brilliance to throw into shadow the Light of God.

It is at the cross that man is brought back to hard reality. The truth is, at the cross we are reminded in a most uncomfortable way that Jesus suffered a hideous death on our behalf. He—the spotless Lamb—was brutally slaughtered, because it was for that “end” He was born.

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

(Mark 10:45)

At that moment of realization, whatever pedestal we have erected for our own glory begins to crumble beneath our feet. No sane believer can remain proud and unmoved before the truth of what Jesus did. For that reason we humans of short memory must periodically and often revisit Golgotha—that sickening place where Jesus hung and died. There, at the foot of the cross, we will say with John the Baptist, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John

3:30)—as might have one of Jesus’ disciples as he witnessed the crucifixion...

I had seen it so many times before and had passed by it almost unaware, but on this morning Golgotha seemed the most imposing, depressing site on earth. There was nothing grand about the execution field. It was little more than a sad, trampled expanse of rock and thin soil just outside the city wall, upon which people died in hideous torment—and, under the Roman oppression, with alarming regularity.

The place called “The Skull” was littered with the fragmented sticks and poles of past deaths. The used and re-used wood was coated with old blood reduced to many shades of ochre by the burning Judean sun. Below the old upright poles were heavy stones jammed into the soil for support; they, too, were splattered the same ugly shades. We hung back, Peter and I, still fearful for our sorry lives, but we saw everything. We saw too much. We saw things that are now burned permanently into our brains—images and memories that will be our companions until we die.

The soldiers pushed Jesus down and laid Him out over the ground. While several held Him there, one brute with practiced strokes drove thick rusted spikes through each of His wrists and into the crosspiece timber. Jesus was silent throughout. I would have cried out, pleading for mercy, saying anything that might help me avoid such an awful death. But Jesus, though experiencing every bit of the pain, accepted it silently. He would not revile those who reviled Him.

Several picked Him up, pinned now to the beam, and attached the crosspiece to the top of the upright pole. It dropped into place with a sickening thump. While two soldiers braced against the backside of the cross, a third shoved Jesus’ lower legs up until both knees were bent and pushed out to one side. Then the executioner drove one last spike that passed through both his ankles.

I cannot describe my misery. I cannot describe the hollow, aching ring of my guilt. No, I had not renounced Jesus, as Peter, but I have no doubt that my words would have been similar to his, had anyone so inquired. Not having the courage to speak them out loud only compounded my shame.

The sight of His tortured body hanging before us stabbed into my heart like a slowly twisting knife. I wanted to be anywhere else but there, but I felt compelled to remain, as if this silent vigil—this tortured communion—would somehow relieve me of my complicity in His death.

Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.
But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.

(Isaiah 53:4-6)

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*Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!
Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured,
There where the blood of the lamb was spilt.*

*Sin and despair, like the seawaves cold,
Threaten the soul with infinite loss;
Grace that is greater, yes, grace untold,
Points to the refuge, the mighty cross.*

*Dark is the stain that we cannot hide,
What can avail to wash it away?
Look! there is flowing a crimson tide;
Whiter than snow you may be today.*

*Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace,
Freely bestowed on all who believe;
You that are longing to see His face,
Will you this moment His grace receive?*

*Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within,
Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin.*
(Julia H. Johnston)