

THE HANDS OF THE PASSION¹

Nail-Pierced Hands

In the name of Jesus, our suffering Savior, my fellow sinners, so dearly redeemed:

We sang that old African-American spiritual today for the Good Friday *Service of Seven Words: Were you there?* (CW 119) Haunting question: *Were you there when they crucified my Lord...when they nailed him to the tree...when they laid him in the tomb?* Remember some who were there on Calvary?

Roman soldiers had to be. It was their job to make sure no friends or relatives took the crucified criminal off his cross. It was their job to make sure he really died even if it took several days. Roman brutality prevented burial, except in Jewish lands because of Moses' law. None of the soldiers who were there realized that when they drove the nails and gambled for Jesus' clothing, they were fulfilling prophecies centuries old. But one soldier, a centurion, did recognize that the man hanging on the middle cross was different. He confessed that Jesus was the Son of God. (Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47)

Two other criminals were there, without a choice, being punished for their crimes. One even admitted they were getting what their deeds deserved. But after he confessed his sins, he also confessed his faith by asking, ***“Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.”*** Remember Jesus' answer? ***“Amen I tell you: Today you will be with me in paradise.”*** (Luke 23:42f EHV²)

Jewish leaders were there, making sure Pilate kept his promise. They'd plotted long and hard for this great victory. Nasty winners taunting, jeering, challenging Jesus to come down from his cross, ***“If you are the Son of God!”*** (Matthew 27:39-43) Not knowing He could and destroy them all.

Pontius Pilate making his presence known with that sign posted above the middle cross: ***“JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.”*** (John 19:19) What courage the Roman governor displayed by refusing the Jewish leaders' request to change that sign. Stubborn Pilate, too little, too late.

It would be nice if all the disciples were there supporting their Lord in His dying hours. But we only know for sure that they deserted the night before in the garden just as Jesus predicted. We know for sure of only one disciple, John, was there on Calvary. And another person Jesus dearly loved by his side.

Jesus' mother was there as we heard in the sermon this afternoon. What heartbreak for Mary. As a young girl she had received the amazing news from the angel Gabriel that God had chosen her to give birth to the promised Messiah, conceived by the Holy Spirit in her virgin womb. But soon after her miracle child was born, she heard old Simeon's news in the temple. While holding her perfect child in his arms, Simeon predicted that a sword would pierce Mary's soul. (Luke 2:35) Watching there her son, the Son of God, slowly dying before her eyes, Mary felt that sword pierce her soul.

Were you there? Thousands of years ago? But look again at another hymn with a different answer. Ending the Good Friday section of our hymnal (CW 140:2,3), “God Was There on Calvary.” “All the world on Calvary, crucified the Prince of life, pierced the hands of God's own Son, there on Calvary.” “Sin was there on Calvary, all the sin of everyone, laid upon God's sinless Lamb, there on Calvary.”

The Bible message behind those poetic words – all true. The entire world was there on Calvary on Good Friday. So were you; so was I. Not with charges to convict Jesus. Not with orders to crucify. Not with hammer and nails. But with the crushing burden of our sins that nailed Him to that cursed tree.

¹ Adapted from NPH 2021 Lent: *The Hands of the Passion* by Adam Mueller and Steven Pagels.

² EHV ~ *Evangelical Heritage Version* (wartburgproject.org) © 2019. NPH: 800-662-6022, Amazon-Kindle, LOGOS.

God's own sinless Son had to suffer and die because **"without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."** (Hebrews 9:22) **"The wages of sin is death"** (Romans 6:23a), wages we'd have to pay for our own sins suffering eternal torment in hell. None of us could redeem the life of another. Is it hard to accept that? Surely it is, especially if you try to be a good person. Like Jesus' disciples probably trying harder than any other time in their lives. The Roman soldiers just doing their duty. Jewish religious leaders thought they were saving the nation from a mad man. They didn't know they crucified the Lord of glory.

Look up at the cross. Look deep inside and examine your heart. Compared to them, we know so much that we do know. Every Christian husband knows God's command to love His wife as Christ loved the Church, but harsh words instead? A God-fearing wife hears God's command to respect her husband, but how easily she fails when she thinks he must deserve it first. Compare yourself with Jesus. And don't pound the nails deeper or press the bloody crown of thorns with that calloused answer, "But, Pastor, I'm not Jesus." *Were you there?* With careless indifference to your part in this?

There are billboards out there by Christians trying to do good with Bible references. Somewhere in Wisconsin: *Eternal life is only through Jesus Christ. You Must "Deny Yourself" Daily. Do you REALLY put Jesus FIRST "in everything"?* Is it Christians or Pharisees who think they can say, "Yes!" to that? What about this one deep in the north woods of Michigan? *Real Christians FORGIVE like Jesus.*

Encouraging? Think about Jesus' lessons on forgiveness ("turn the other cheek," "forgive not 7 times, but 70 x 7," the Parable of the Prodigal Son). And this prayer of Jesus on the cross: **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."** Jesus asked God to pardon the people who were putting him to death. How does my forgiveness compare with all that? How far from my hurt feelings to angry words? Getting even? Trouble forgiving? Holding grudges instead? *If real Christians forgive like Jesus,* what does that make me? If you claim to be a Christian, if you are held to the same standard of forgiving like Jesus, what does that make you? Guilty on all counts because Jesus not only forgives and forgets, He suffered for our sins. Not deserving God's love, we're in desperate need of a miraculous rescue from sin.

Hanging on that cross weak and helpless, stripped of his clothing and dignity, bloodied, beaten. Too weak to carry his own cross. Barely able to stand. Was Jesus defeated? Did the devil win? "The foe was triumphant when on Calvary the Lord of creation was nailed to the tree. In Satan's domain did the hosts shout and jeer, for Jesus was slain, whom the evil ones fear." (*Christian Worship* 143:2)

But that was one short party in hell. Talk about phobias! The Messiah performed his greatest miracle of all, declaring full victory over sin, death, and hell. Worldly reports of Jesus' demise have been greatly exaggerated. Your sins and mine have been forgiven. Just look at his **Nail-Pierced Hands**.

A couple days after Good Friday the disciples whom we can't see on Calvary, huddled behind locked doors, confused about what had happened. Fearful for the future and presently terrified when they thought they saw a ghost. But His greeting: **"Peace be with you."** And His proof of identity. He showed them his hands. Some scars not so attractive, but to the disciples those nail marks were the most beautiful thing they had ever seen. And for you and me too! Those wounds spell the high cost of our redemption. Jesus took on our flesh to feel our pain. Jesus endured the righteous wrath of God in our place. Jesus prayed for our forgiveness on the cross. Jesus suffered and died on the cross to earn it.

The unconditional, sacrificial love of Jesus is what makes this day "Good" beyond compare. When your sins condemn you, Jesus intercedes for you with **Nail-Pierced Hands**. When Satan accuses you, Jesus defends you with **Nail-Pierced Hands**. When you are feeling guilty, spiritually empty, totally unworthy of God's love, look up at Jesus' **Nail-Pierced Hands**. They prove that Jesus will never leave you or forsake you. With those same with **Nail-Pierced Hands** Jesus has stormed through cross and tomb and skies to ascend into heaven – all to prepare a place for you. Sound too good to be true? Looking for proof? Look to the cross. Look to Jesus. Look at your living Savior's **Nail-Pierced Hands**. **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."** Amen.