

*Press the grapes
of the promises into
your cup and drink of
this wine of the
kingdom. It will make
you partaker of the
Divine nature.*



Be still.

**“THIS CUP IS THE NEW
TESTAMENT IN MY BLOOD.”
LUKE 22:20**

THE FINAL WEEK

from
“THE JESUS
I NEVER KNEW”
by Philip Yancy

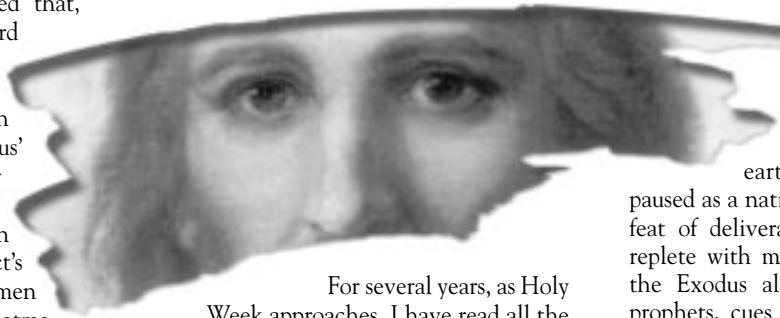
WHY DID PROVIDENCE HIDE ITS FACE “AT THE MOST CRITICAL MOMENT”... AS THOUGH
VOLUNTARILY SUBMITTING TO THE BLIND, DUMB, PITILESS LAWS OF NATURE?

Fyodor Dostoevsky

The church I grew up in skipped past events of Holy Week in a rush to hear the cymbal sounds of Easter. From the Gospels I learned that, unlike my church, the biblical record slows down rather than speeds up when it gets to Holy Week. The Gospels, said one early Christian commentator, are chronicles of Jesus' final week with increasingly longer introductions. Of the biographies I have read, few devote more than ten percent of their pages to the subject's death—including biographies of men like Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, who died violent and politically significant deaths. The Gospels, though, devote nearly a third of their length to the climactic last week of Jesus' life. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John saw death as the central mystery of Jesus.

Only two of the Gospels mention the events of his birth, and all four offer only a few pages on his resurrection, but each chronicler gives a detailed account of the events leading to Jesus's death. Nothing remotely like it had happened before. Celestial beings had slipped in and out of our dimension prior to the Incarnation (remember Jacob's wrestler and Abraham's visitors), and a few humans had even waked from the dead. But when the Son of God died on planet earth—how could it be that a Messiah should face defeat, a God get

crucified? Nature itself convulsed at the deed: the ground shook, rocks cracked open, the sky went black.



For several years, as Holy Week approaches, I have read all the Gospel accounts together. Each time I feel swept away by the sheer drama. The simple, unadorned rendering has a grinding power. No miracles break in, no supernatural rescue attempts. This is a tragedy beyond Sophocles or Shakespeare.

The might of the world, the most sophisticated religious system of its time allied with the most powerful political empire, arrays itself against a solitary figure, the only perfect man who has ever lived. Though he is mocked by the powers and abandoned by his friends, yet the Gospels give the strong, ironic sense that he himself is overseeing the whole long process. He has resolutely set his face for Jerusalem, knowing the fate that awaits him. The cross has been his goal all along. Now, as death nears, he calls the shots.

One year I came to the Gospel narratives just after reading the entire Old Testament. Working my way through the books of history, poetry, and prophecy, I had gotten to know a God of muscular power. Heads rolled, empires toppled, entire nations disappeared from the earth. Every year the Jews paused as a nation to remember God's great feat of deliverance from Egypt, an event replete with miracles. I felt aftershocks of the Exodus all through the psalms and prophets, cues to a beleaguered tribe that the God who had answered their prayers once might do so again.

With those accounts still ringing in my ears, I arrived at Matthew's scene-by-scene description of Jesus' final week. Once more Jews had gathered in Jerusalem to remember the Exodus and celebrate the Passover. Once more hope sprang eternal: *Messiah has come!* ran one rumour. And then, like an arrow shot into the heart of hope, came Jesus' betrayal, trial, and death.

How can we who know the outcome in advance ever recapture the dire end-of-the-world feeling that descended upon Jesus' followers? Over the centuries the story has grown familiar, and I cannot comprehend the impact of that final week on those who lived through it.

From an upstairs room in Jerusalem, stuffy

with the smells of lamb, bitter herbs, and sweaty bodies, Jesus and his band of eleven arose and headed for the cool, spacious olive groves in a garden called Gethsemane. Spring was in full bloom, the night air fragrant with blossoms. Reclining under the moon and stars in a peaceful setting outside the bustle of the city, the disciples quickly drifted asleep. Jesus, however, felt no such peace. "He began to be sorrowful and troubled," says Matthew. He felt "deeply distressed," adds Mark. Both writers record his plaintive words to the disciples: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Often Jesus had gone off by himself to pray, sometimes sending the disciples away in a boat so he could spend the night alone with the Father. This night, though, he needed their presence.

By instinct, we humans want someone by our side in the hospital the night before surgery, in the nursing home as death looms near, in any great moment of crisis. We need the reassuring touch of human presence—solitary confinement is the worst punishment our species has devised. I detect in the Gospels' account of Gethsemane a profound depth of loneliness that Jesus had never before encountered.

Perhaps if women had been included in the Last Supper, Jesus would not have spent those hours alone. Jesus' mother, presciently, had come to Jerusalem—her first mention in the Gospels since early in her son's ministry. The same women who would stand by the cross and wrap his stiff body, and hurry to the tomb at daybreak surely would have sat with him in the garden, held his head, wiped away his tears. But only male friends accompanied Jesus. Drowsy with dinner and wine, they slept while Jesus endured the crucible, alone. When the disciples failed him, Jesus did not try to conceal the hurt: "Could you not keep watch for one hour?" His words suggest something more ominous than loneliness. Is it possible that for the first time ever he did not want to be alone with the Father?

A great struggle was under way, and the Gospels describe Jesus' torment in a way quite unlike Jewish and Christian stories of martyrdom. "Take this cup from me," he pled. These were no pious, formal prayers: "being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." What was the struggle, exactly? Fear of pain and death? Of course. Jesus no more relished the prospects than you or I do. But there was more at work as well, a new experience for Jesus that can only be called God-forsakenness. At its core Gethsemane depicts, after all, the story of an unanswered prayer. The cup of suffering was not removed.

The world had rejected Jesus: proof came in the torchlight parade then snaking through the pathways of the garden. Soon the disciples would forsake him. During the prayers, the anguished prayers that met a stone wall of no response, it surely must have felt as if God, too, had turned away.

John Howard Yoder speculates on what might have happened if God had intervened to grant the request "Take this cup from me."

Jesus was by no means powerless. If he had insisted on his will and not the Father's, he could have called down twelve legions of angels (72,000) to fight a Holy War on his behalf. In Gethsemane, Jesus relived Satan's temptation in the desert. Either time he could have solved the problem of evil by force, with a quick stab of the accuser in the desert or a fierce battle in the garden. There would be no church history—no church, for that matter—as all human history would come to a halt and the present age would end. All this lay within Jesus' power if he merely said the word, skipped the personal sacrifice, and traded away the messy future of redemption. No kingdom would advance like a mustard seed; the kingdom would rather descend like a hailstorm.

Yet, as Yoder reminds us, the cross, the "cup" that now seemed so terrifying, was the very reason Jesus had come to earth. "Here at the cross is the man who loves his enemies, the

THE ONLY ULTIMATE WAY TO CONQUER EVIL IS TO LET IT BE SMOTHERED WITHIN A WILLING, LIVING HUMAN BEING.

man whose righteousness is greater than that of the Pharisees, who being rich became poor, who gives his robe to those who took his cloak, who prays for those who spitefully use him. The cross is not a detour or a hurdle on the way to the kingdom, nor is it even the way to the kingdom; it is the kingdom come."

After several hours of torturous prayer, Jesus came to a resolution. his will and the Father's converged. "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things?" is how he would later put it. He woke his slumbering friends one last time and marched boldly through the darkness toward the ones intent on killing him.

Even after watching scores of movies on the subject, and reading the Gospels over and over, I still cannot fathom the indignity, the shame endured by God's son on earth, stripped naked, flogged, spat on, struck in the face, garlanded with thorns.

Jewish leaders as well as Romans intended the mockery to parody the crime for which the victim had been condemned. *Messiah, huh? Great, let's hear a prophecy. Wham. Who hit you, huh? Thunk. C'mon, tell us, spit it out, Mr. Prophet. For a Messiah you don't know much, do you? You say you're a king? Hey, Captain, get a load of this. We have us a regular king here, don't we. Well, then, let's all kneel down before hizzoner. What's this? A king without a crown?*

Oh, that will never do. Here, Mr. King, we'll fix you a crown, we will. Crunch. How's that? A little crooked. I'll fix that. Hey, hold still! My, look how modest we are. Well, how about a robe then—something to cover that bloody mess on your back. What happened, did your majesty have a little tumble?

It went on like that all day long, from the bullying game of Blind Man's Bluff in the high priest's courtyard, to the professional thuggery of Pilate's and Herod's guards, to the catcalls of spectators turned out to jeer the criminals stumbling up the long road to Calvary, and finally to the cross itself where Jesus heard a stream of taunts from the ground below and even from alongside. *You call yourself a Messiah? Well, then come down from that cross. How you gonna save us if you can't even save yourself?*

I have marvelled at, and sometime openly questioned, the self-restraint God has shown throughout history, allowing the Genghis Khans and the Hitlers and the Stalins to have their way. But nothing—nothing—compares to the self-restraint shown that dark day in Jerusalem. With every lash of the whip, every fibrous crunch of fist against flesh, Jesus must have mentally replayed the Temptation in the wilderness and in Gethsemane. Legions of angels awaited his command. One word, and the ordeal would end.

As always, Jesus was thinking about others. He forgave the men who had done the deed. He arranged care for his mother. He welcomed a shriven thief into paradise.

The Gospels record different snatches of conversation from Calvary, and only two agree on Jesus' very last words. Luke has him saying, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," a final act of trust before he died. John has the cryptic summation of his entire mission to earth, "It is finished." But Matthew and Mark have the most mysterious saying of all, the woeful quotation, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

This time only, of all his prayers in the Gospels, Jesus used the formal, distant word "God" rather than "Abba" or "Father." He was quoting from a psalm, of course, but he was also expressing a grave sense of estrangement. Some inconceivable split had opened up in the Godhead. The Son felt abandoned by the Father.

"The 'hiddenness' of God perhaps presses most painfully on those who are in another way nearest to Him, and therefore God Himself, made man, will of all men be by God most forsaken," wrote C. S. Lewis. No doubt he is right. It matters little if I am rebuffed by the checkout girl at the supermarket or even by a neighbour two blocks down the street. But if my wife, with whom I've spent my entire adult life, suddenly cuts off all communication with me—that matters.

No theologian can adequately explain the nature of what took place within the Trinity

on that day at Calvary. All we have is a cry of pain from a child who felt forsaken. Did it help that Jesus had anticipated that his mission on earth would include such a death? Did it help Isaac to know his father Abraham was just following orders when he tied him to the altar? What if no angel had appeared and Abraham had plunged a knife into the heart of his son, his only son, whom he loved? What then? That is what happened on Calvary, and to the Son it felt like abandonment.

We are not told what God the Father cried out at that moment. We can only imagine. The Son became “a curse for us,” said Paul in Galatians, and “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us,” he wrote the Corinthians. We know how God feels about sin; the sense of abandonment likely cut both ways.

Despite the shame and sadness of it all, somehow what took place on a hill called Calvary became arguably the most important fact of Jesus’ life—for the writers of the Gospels and Epistles, for the church, and, as far as we can speculate on such matters, for God as well.

It took time for the church to come to terms with the ignominy of the cross. Church fathers forbade its depiction in art until the reign of the Roman emperor Constantine, who had seen a vision of the cross and who also banned it as a method of execution. Thus, not until the fourth century did the cross become a symbol of the faith. (As C. S. Lewis points out, the crucifixion did not become common in art until all who had seen a real one died off.)

Normally we think of someone who dies a criminal’s death as a failure. Yet the apostle Paul would later reflect about Jesus, “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” What could he mean?

On one level I think of individuals in our own time who disarm the powers. The racist sheriffs who locked Martin Luther King Jr. in gaol cells, the Soviets who deported Solzhenitsyn, the Czechs who imprisoned Václav Havel, the Filipinos who murdered Benigno Aquino, the South African authorities who imprisoned Nelson Mandela—all these thought they were solving a problem, yet instead all ended up unmasking their own violence and injustice. Moral power can have a disarming effect.

When Jesus died, even a gruff Roman soldier was moved to exclaim, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” He saw the contrast all too clearly between his brutish colleagues and their victim, who forgave them in his dying gasp. The pale figure nailed to a crossbeam revealed the ruling powers of this world as false gods who broke their own lofty promises of piety and justice. Religion, not irreligion, accused Jesus; the law, not lawlessness, had him executed. By their rigged trials, their scourgings, their violent opposition to Jesus, the political and religious authorities of that day exposed themselves for what they were: upholders of the status quo, defenders of their

own power only. Each assault on Jesus laid bare their illegitimacy.

Thieves crucified on either side of Jesus showed two possible responses. One mocked Jesus’ powerlessness: *A Messiah who can’t even save himself?* The other recognised a different kind of power. Taking the risk of faith, he asked Jesus to “remember me when you come into your kingdom.” No one else, except in mockery, had addressed Jesus as a king. The dying thief saw more clearly than anyone else the nature of Jesus’ kingdom.

In a sense, the paired thieves present the choice that all history has had to decide about the cross. Do we look at Jesus’ powerlessness as an example of God’s impotence or as proof of God’s love? The Romans, bred on power deities like Jupiter, could recognise little godlikeness in a crumpled corpse hanging on a tree. Devout Jews, bred on stories of a power Jehovah, saw little to be admired in this god who died in weakness and in shame. As Justin Martyr’s “Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon” shows, Jesus’ death on a cross made a decisive case against his Messiahship for the Jews; crucifixion had fulfilled the curse of the law.

Even so, over time it was the cross on the hill that changed the moral landscape of the world. M. Scott Peck writes,

I cannot be any more specific about the methodology of love than to quote these words of an old priest who spent many years in the battle: “There are dozens of ways to deal with evil and several ways to conquer it. All of them are facets of the truth that the only ultimate way to conquer evil is to let it be smothered within a willing, living human being. When it is absorbed there like blood in a sponge or a spear into one’s heart, it loses its power and goes no further.”

The healing of evil—scientifically or otherwise—can be accomplished only by the love of individuals. A willing sacrifice is required... I do not know how this occurs. But I know that it does... Whenever this happens there is a slight shift in the balance of power in the world.”

The balance of power shifted more than slightly that day on Calvary because of who it was that absorbed the evil. If Jesus of Nazareth had been one more innocent victim, like King, Mandela, Havel, and Solzhenitsyn, he would have made his mark in history and faded from the scene. No religion would have sprung up around him. What changed history was the disciples’ dawning awareness (it took the Resurrection to convince them) that God himself had chosen the way of weakness. The cross redefines God as One who was willing to relinquish power for the sake of love. Jesus became, in Dorothy Sölle’s phrase, “God’s unilateral disarmament.”

Power, no matter how well-intentioned, tends to cause suffering. Love, being vulnerable, absorbs it. In a point of convergence on a hill called Calvary, God renounced the one for the sake of the other. †

The Cutting of a Covenant

from “Betrayed!” by Stan Telchin

“I believe that Jesus is the Messiah!”

I was speechless. Many parents might have welcomed Judy’s words, but they absolutely crushed me! You see, we are Jewish! For any of us to believe that Jesus is the Messiah is to betray our people, to join the enemy and to desecrate the memory of all of our ancestors over the last 2,000 years...

I became more and more determined to finish my analysis of the Bible so that I could convince Judy how wrong she was. It had become a mission of the highest order. One morning I came across the passage in John which so jolted me:

“Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust. For if ye had believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me.”

I was suddenly convicted anew of the fact that I didn’t know my own Bible, the Tenach, much less anything about the Christian Bible. *Admit it, Stan*, I said grimly to myself. *At age 50 you’re virtually a spiritual pauper.*

I knew a little of the Torah but not the spiritual story line or history of our people. So I left the New Testament temporarily to start at the very beginning, Genesis...

It had been twenty-four years since God had first spoken to Abram who was still childless.

“And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before, and be thou perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and thee...”

What did the word “covenant” mean then between God and man? Between men? At the time Abram lived and for centuries before and since, there has been what is called “the cutting of a covenant.” This was the highest form of agreement which could be made between two people. It was used on occasions such as when two tribal chiefs wanted to enter into a peace treaty with one another or when they wanted to enter into a mutual defence treaty or when they wanted to demonstrate their love and trust for one another as brothers. A covenant between

two people involved total commitment from each to the other.

Invariably “the cutting of a covenant” involved a formal ceremony. The partners would exchange weapons, exchange robes and exchange names. By so doing they were stating that they pledged to one another their strength, their substance and their identity. Then they would recite the blessings for keeping the covenant and the curses which would come if either of them broke the covenant.

Next came the actual “cutting.” Blood must be shed. Sometimes they would cut faces or arms and then rub their faces or arms together so that the blood would be mingled. Sometimes they would let the blood drip into a bowl, where it was thoroughly mixed to indicate that they were now all one blood. Then each of the partners would drink of the blood.

To “seal” the cutting of the covenant they would rub ashes or some other material into the wound so that it would not heal without leaving a scar. Following the “sealing” of the covenant a “memorial” would be established to remind all who saw it of the covenant. Then the covenant partners would sit together for the “covenant meal.” During this feast friends and family members would come and share in their joy as they all formally celebrated the covenant between them.

When God offered to cut a covenant with Abram, Abram was so overpowered that he fell to the ground on his face. Abram knew what cutting a covenant with God meant.

“As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. This is my covenant which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised... and it shall be a token of the covenant between me and you.”

God had covenanted to be the God of Abraham’s seed, and circumcision was the seal of that covenant. On the day Abram became Abraham, he and every male in his house was circumcised.

They were without all of the medical equipment and painkilling drugs that we have today. If these people allowed something so painful to be done to them, they had to have strong motivation—they had to have been deeply aware of the importance of this covenant.

To Abram it meant that God was offering Himself as Abram’s shield, his defence, his strength. God was giving to Abram His assurance that not only would He prosper Abram safely into old age but that He would make certain that Abram would have sons and heirs and that he would be extremely fruitful. He would be the father of many nations. And God had promised to give to

Abram and to his sons all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession. And then the final promise: not only would God do these things for Abram, but God would be the God of Abram’s seed throughout all their generations. No wonder Abram fell on his face!

To dramatise the seriousness of this covenant—that definitive act which created the Jewish people—God changed Abram’s name. He placed an “h,” the breath sound of His own name, “Jehovah,” into Abram’s name. From that day forth he would be known as Abraham. When He changed Abram’s name, God modified His own. He would henceforth be known as the God of Abraham to all the world.

Later, God confirmed His covenant with Isaac; still later, with Jacob. No sooner had Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt than he constantly had to remind his people of their covenant with God. Moses recognised that under the terms of the covenant, the Jewish people would no longer be as before. God now directly told them how they were to live. He directed them to be separated from all other people of the earth. They were to obey Him and Him alone.

The people of Israel received these instructions, promised to obey them and then decade after decade they violated them, committing all manner of sins, including intermarriage with Gentiles. The Gentiles were aliens. They were aliens to the people of God and aliens to the covenant of God. They were helpless. They were hopeless. They were without God.

For the next 1,500 years, the separation between the Jews and the Gentiles became more and more rigid. This separation caused distrust and suspicion, hostility and fear, anger and hatred. Then Jesus came!

As I sat in my den late one night pondering all I had learned about the covenant, I realised I had not been threatened by my review of Jewish history. These were facts. But what was I supposed to do with Jesus? What did Jesus have to do with the covenant?

A thought rammed into my mind. If a covenant between two parties usually called for a “cutting” between them, and God had asked His people to be circumcised as their “shedding of blood,” then what was the “cutting” on God’s side? The image of Jesus being pierced and bleeding on the cross swam before my eyes. I tried to set it aside but it wouldn’t go away.

I could not run from the issue. I had to get back to my reading of the New Testament and the facing up to the question:

Is Jesus the Messiah?



How deep the Father’s love for us,
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss,
The Father turns His face away.
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory.

Behold the man upon a cross,
My sin upon His shoulders;
Ashamed I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished;
His dying breath has brought me life
—I know that it is finished.

I will not boast in anything,
No gifts, no power, no wisdom;
But I will boast in Jesus Christ,
His death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer;
But this I know with all my heart,
His wounds have paid my ransom.

STUART TOWNSEND

“At the bush Moses was forbidden to draw nigh, but afterwards on the mount he went up into the very presence of God. What made the difference? At the bush there was no sacrifice.”

“There is nothing the devil is so much afraid of as the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son.”