

Holy Saturday reflection
MORNING
LET HIS BLOOD BE ON US
Marshall Segal

Holy Week waits in relative silence on Saturday. The tomb has been sealed, the guards stand watch, the disciples likely hide in confusion, fear, and devastation. And the Saviour lies lifeless, having surrendered all to save his people from their sins.

How would you process the horrors of the last couple of days in the quiet, disturbing shadow of the cross? The disciples had to have a thousand painful questions. How could he be the long-awaited King if he was just killed? Is there something we could have done to stop it? If they tortured and slaughtered him like that, what will they do to us? It was all playing back through their minds while they waited on Saturday.

We too still hear the dark, sobering echoes of Thursday and Friday. But we wait with expectation for tomorrow—for the empty grave and risen King. Filled with hope, we can look back into the crowd that crucified Jesus and see our old selves, and then forward, in preparation for Easter, rejoicing in the transformation that's taken place in us because of his sacrifice. We've been covered by the blood that confounded those first followers.

The Pro-Choice Pilate

One of the echoes sounds from Matthew 27. Jesus has just been betrayed, arrested, tried, and handed over to the governor to be executed. St Matthew writes,

Now at the feast the governor was accustomed to release for the crowd any one prisoner whom they wanted. And they had then a notorious prisoner called Barabbas. So when they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up. (Matt. 27:15–18)

Pilate has the power to release one criminal from death row. Before him is Barabbas, a notorious villain and convicted murderer, and Jesus.

Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus. The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" And he said, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves." And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Then he released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered him to be crucified. (Matt. 27:20–26)

The Crowd's Suicidal Cry

It's envy and hatred and ignorance. How could they be so deceived and manipulated and corrupt to give the *Son of God* over to death and spare a known murderer? Pilate knew that what they were demanding was wrong, that Jesus was innocent. He wanted no part or role in his execution.

But *these people*, filled with unbelief, with rebellious hearts, with envious rage against their own Messiah, cried, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" "Pilate, if you won't kill him, *let his blood be on us!*" *Let his blood be on us?* Let the blood of God himself be on you? Let the blood of the eternal living and creating Word be on you? Their unbelief and their jealousy—their sin—led them to the ultimate act of defiance and rejection of God. They crucified his Son, the Promised One—the Son he had sent to save them from centuries of unfaithfulness.

Let his blood be on us!

The Sin That Nailed Him There

This is sin, to reject Jesus, to declare he is nothing but a delusional or deceitful man. And this was the condition of our heart, when filled with unbelief, we rejected God, his Son, and his sacrifice. *We* have screamed, “Crucify him!” with our unfaithfulness and disobedience. We have said with the crowd, “He is not our King!” “He is not our Messiah!” “Let his blood be on us!”

But God, being rich in mercy and being patient with us, his chosen people, “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of [this crucified] Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). And being alive by faith in him, we *cling* to the cross on which our Saviour died. It is by his precious blood that we are forgiven and freed from sin and its consequences.

Same Cross, New Cry

So, now, we say with an entirely different meaning, *let his blood be on us*, not *defiantly* as the crowds that crucified him, but *desperately*—with gratitude and hope and adoration—as those who depend wholly on his sacrifice. *Jesus, let your blood be on us. Let it cover us. Let the blood that flows from your head, your hands, your feet wash over us and cleanse us from all of our iniquity.*

We proclaim Jesus’s death. We rejoice in his death, *not* because we believe he was a fraud or a lunatic, but because it is by his death, by his wounds, *by his blood* that we are healed.

EVENING HE DESCENDED INTO HELL?

Joe Rigney

Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.
(Mark 15:46)

We all know that Jesus died. “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” And having said this, he breathed his last” (Luke 23:46). But what happened after he died? We know that his body was laid in Joseph’s tomb, but what about his human soul?

Reflecting on this question not only sheds light on the Bible’s teaching about death and the afterlife, but it also is a great encouragement to us, who must face death and seek to do so without fear.

What Is Death?

First of all, what exactly is *death*? Death is separation, a dividing of things that ought to be united. Fundamentally, it is separation from God. St Paul suggests as much in Ephesians 2:1: “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.” To walk in sin is to be dead, to be enslaved to dark powers, to be separated from God, to be children of his wrath. This type of separation is an estrangement, a hostility, an alienation from the life and hope of the living God. In this sense, all of us, by nature, are born dead, and it is this death that Jesus endured in his suffering on the cross.

But of course, death is more than just separation from God. Death also marks the separation of the soul from the body. God made human beings to be embodied souls and ensouled bodies, and death rips this union asunder. But what happens to these two parts after they’re separated? Psalm 16:10 gives us a window into the biblical teaching.

*You will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption.*

This passage directs us to the normal account of what happened when a human being died prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus. The soul was abandoned “to Sheol,” and the body saw corruption or decayed.

In Acts 2:29–31, St Peter tells us that David, in writing this psalm, foresaw the resurrection of Christ, “that he was not abandoned to Sheol (that is, his soul wasn’t), nor did his flesh see corruption” (notice that St Peter reads the second line as a reference to Jesus’s body or flesh). Thus prior to Jesus, at death, souls normally went to Sheol, and bodies (flesh) decayed. We’re all familiar with the latter, but the former is more opaque. A quick Bible study will show us why St Peter thinks that David’s prophecy in Psalm 16 is such good news.

What Is Sheol?

In the Old Testament, Sheol is the place of the souls of the dead, both the righteous (like Jacob, Gen. 37:35, and Samuel, 1 Sam. 28:13–14) and the wicked (Ps. 31:17). In the New Testament, the Hebrew word *Sheol* is translated as *hades*, and the description of Sheol in the Old and New Testament bears some resemblance to the Hades of Greek mythology. It is under the earth (Num. 16:30–33), and it is like a city with gates (Isa. 38:10) and bars (Job 17:16). It is a land of darkness, a place where shades, the shadowy souls of men, dwell (Isa. 14:9; 26:14). It is the land of forgetfulness (Ps. 88:12), where no work is done and no wisdom exists (Eccles. 9:10). Most significantly, Sheol is a place where no one praises God (Ps. 6:5; 88:10–11; 115:17; Isa. 38:18).

In the New Testament, the most extended depiction of the afterlife is found in Luke 16:19–31. There we learn that, like the Hades of Greek mythology, the biblical Sheol has two compartments: Hades proper (where the rich man is sent, Luke 16:23) and “Abraham’s bosom” (where the angels carry Lazarus, Luke 16:22). Hades proper is a place of torment, where fire causes anguish to the souls imprisoned there. Abraham’s bosom, on the other hand, while within shouting distance of Hades, is separated from it by a great chasm (Luke 16:26), and is, like the Greek Elysium, a place of comfort and rest.

While much mystery remains, the picture begins to take shape. All dead souls go down to Sheol/hades, but Sheol is divided into two distinct sides, one for the righteous and one for the wicked. The righteous who died prior to Christ dwelt in Sheol with Abraham, and though they were cut off from the land of the living (and therefore from the worship of Yahweh on earth), they were not tormented as the wicked were.

Where Did Jesus Go When He Died?

What, then, does this tell us about where Jesus was on Holy Saturday? Based on Jesus’s words to the thief on the cross in Luke 23:43, some Christians believe that after his death, Jesus’s soul went to heaven to be in the presence of the Father. But Luke 23:43 doesn’t say that Jesus would be in the presence of God; it says he would be in the presence of the thief (“Today *you* will be *with me* in Paradise”), and based on the Old Testament and Luke 16, it seems likely that the now-repentant thief would be at Abraham’s side, a place of comfort and rest for the righteous dead, which Jesus here calls “Paradise.”

Following his death for sin, then, Jesus journeys to Hades, to the City of Death, and rips its gates off the hinges. He liberates Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, John the Baptist, and the rest of the Old Testament faithful, ransoming them from the power of Sheol (Ps. 49:15; 86:13; 89:48). They had waited there for so long, not having received what was promised, so that their spirits would be made perfect along with the saints of the new covenant (Heb. 11:39–40; 12:23).

After his resurrection, Jesus ascends to heaven and brings the ransomed dead with him, so that now Paradise is no longer *down* near the place of torment, but is up in the third heaven, the highest heaven, where God dwells (2 Cor. 12:2–4).

Now, in the church age, when the righteous die, they aren’t merely carried by angels to Abraham’s bosom; they depart to be with Christ, which is far better (Phil. 1:23). The wicked, however, remain in Hades in torment, until the final judgment, when Hades gives up the dead who dwell there, and they are judged according to their deeds, and then Death and Hades are thrown into Hell, into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:13–15).

Good News for Us

What implications does this have for Holy Week? Christ’s journey to Hades demonstrates that he was indeed made like us in every way. Not only did he bear the wrath of God on our behalf; he endured death, the separation of his soul from his body. His body was in Joseph’s tomb (Luke 23:50–53), and his soul was three days in Sheol, in the heart of the earth (Matt. 12:40).

But as Psalm 16 makes clear, Jesus is not only like us, but different. Jesus’s body was buried, like ours, but it did not decay. Jesus’s soul went to Hades, like the Old Testament saints, but wasn’t abandoned there. God raised him from the dead, reunited his soul with a now-glorified body, so that he is the firstfruits of the resurrection harvest.

And this is good news for us, because those in Christ now bypass the land of forgetfulness, where no one praises God. Instead, when we die, we join with the angelic choir and the saints of old to sing praises to the Lamb who was slain for us and our salvation.
The Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed.