

"Saturday" - Luke 23:50-56

by Pastor Tim Dodson

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No one that walks the path of Christianity is today unaware that such is socially precarious to say the least. Never before in modern history has Christians and Christianity been more widely persecuted. More than just persecuted, many are simply being killed for the faith. This past week we saw terrorists storm a university in Kenya and kill 147 students execution style...most of them Christians...murdered for believing in Christ alone for salvation. Hardly a week goes by without such news stories gracing the airwaves. So often do they come now that the stories start to meld into one another, and the callus's of our souls have begun to build as we naturally attempt to insulate ourselves from the horror and the pain.



While here at home it has not yet come to widespread bullets flying, certainly the accusations, innuendos, and intense discrimination and verbal attacks are widespread. It's beyond *ok* to persecute Christians today. It's now apparently chic to do so. Discrimination against certain social groups and practices are now criminal in this country...and I can't say that such is not a good idea. However, where are the laws and the public outcry to protect *us*? Why is it suddenly socially and apparently legally acceptable to beat up Christians? The righteous anger that should arise at this point sadly so often gets lost along the way and frequently gets vented instead toward other believers...our own brothers and sisters that don't 'dot their I's' the way we do, so obviously they are heretics and should summarily be stoned outside the gates of the city! The truth be told, I can often become deeply overwhelmed by it all and I wonder how things will develop and how we as believers will fair in the coming last days. Many of us are truthfully just barely hanging on. We are frequently finding ourselves on our faces, and in truth the slightest breeze of temptation brings us to our knees. Even after years of faith community and biblical training we struggle to illicit even the most fundamental of Christian attributes and holy lifestyles. One can only imagine what is going to happen when the eventual and most certain storms arrive...

As believers we are starkly aware of "good Friday," and we are certainly spiritually cognizant of Easter resurrection Sunday. But do you ever wonder about Saturday? What was all of that about? If you've got the power to rise from the grave, why would you wait one whole long day to do it? Why not just rise from the grave, like, just a little later Friday night? Why endure it? Why make us endure it?

Even if it seems puzzling, something profound happened in the lives of Jesus' followers on Saturday.

Martin Luther said that Saturday was the day that God himself lay cold in the grave. Friday was death, Sunday was hope, but Saturday was that seemingly ignored middle day between them when God occupied a dirty grave in a little garden outside Jerusalem. Saturday is about waiting, about uncertainty, about not knowing what'll happen. Saturday is ambiguity. It's about, as one theologian put it, "muddling through" when the future isn't clear.

I call it “awkward Saturday”: that holy day to sit, wait, hope—unsure of what’s to come tomorrow. Saturday is the day that Jesus, and all understanding, lay dead.”

Despite today being Easter...as a culture...a society, it seems that in a greater sense, that today is a Saturday.

There was an ancient theologian by the name of Anselm, who spoke concerning a type of faith he referred to as *fides quaerens intellectum*: “faith seeking understanding.” He said that faith wasn’t truly something that was birthed from our increasing understanding but instead it was something...often the last thing, one clings to when understanding and reason lay dead. Easter Saturday was like that. The age in which we live is often like that. A day of waiting, a day of shadows and mystery, a day of quiet. A day when God is absolute and dominant even if our opinions and theologies and expectations about him are not. The fact is, our understanding...our heads, will always be at least one step behind Him. Forever reminding us that He is God. It is the Saturdays that cause us to take a position. To decide where we stand.

When we look into scripture...at the real players that moved the world in their day of God, all seemed to have dark days of spiritual despair. It seemed that so many of these guys at some point suffered some serious depression. They wanted to quit. Some even wanted to die.

There was Elijah. He was not only witness to the powerful hand of God, he in fact was incredibly participatory in such. He had experienced God in a dramatic earth moving way only to soon after be sitting under a bush asking God to kill him. He prayed, “*I have had enough, Lord. ...Take my life...*”

And then what about Jonah? God came to Jonah and told him to go to the wicked nation of Assyria and tell them that God loved them. He wasn’t happy about it but he went, and God poured out his power and mercy in the midst of Jonah. The whole city of Nineveh turned to Jehovah God and repented in sackcloth and ashes. It was a seriously successful missions trip. Incredible God! Awesome intervention. And yet Jonah like Elijah found a tree to sit under and he too told God “*just kill me now please.*”

What about Moses way back in the O.T? Here’s a guy that could rival anyone as to truly witnessing the miraculous supernatural power of God. The plagues of Egypt...the burning bush and the voice of God, not to mention the sea parting to allow for the people to escape Egypt’s slavery. But even after all of that, he eventually got so angry and depressed concerning the people and their behavior that in chapter 11 of Numbers Moses said to the LORD, “*Why are you treating me, your servant, so harshly? Have mercy on me! What did I do to deserve the burden of all these people? Did I give birth to them? Did I bring them into the world? Why did you tell me to carry them in my arms like a mother carries a nursing baby? How can I carry them to the land you swore to give their ancestors? Where am I supposed to get meat for all these people? They keep whining to me, saying, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I can’t carry all these people by myself! The load is far too heavy! If this is how you intend to treat me, just go ahead and kill me. Do me a favor and spare me this misery!*” (Num 11:11-15)

The list goes on with the likes of Job, Jeremiah, Saul, and others. And it didn’t stop there. Even the warriors of faith in the past few hundred years have shared such a hearts of despair. William Wilberforce (1759–1833), was a powerful believer who fought against and helped end the slave trade in Britain. He would often at night walk down to the ships to look at the terrible conditions the slaves had to endure to make it from Africa to England. In the end, Wilberforce changed the world. But the calling that he believed God had given him took such a toll on him that by the time he died Wilberforce could only get out of bed in the morning with the help of opiates and barbiturates. He got that depressed from his fight against slavery. His fight against *sin*.

There is an aspect of our Christian walk that frankly I think we simply refuse to acknowledge. Perhaps because we fear that speaking it out would free it to operate even to a greater degree, and that is something that we believe we simply could never endure. But pretending changes nothing: The fact remains in that *a very real aspect of holiness is hopelessness*.

So much of faith is living in the awkward Saturday, living in that dark twilight between the moments of hopelessness and those of utter blinding hope.

Often we live out like the two disciples on their way to Emmaus after the crucifixion. They had seen such power manifested around them in the past, yet now they had witnessed what seemed to be the unthinkable. They had literally seen their Lord and Master die on the cross. So they did the only thing they could think to do. They packed it all up and hit the road. Dejected, upset, hopeless, and broken. They took to the road to find the next stage in their lives and careers. Despite having lived intimately close to Jesus, these two guys walked away from Jerusalem, wondering whether any of it ever really mattered. The Gospels tell us that, on their way to Emmaus, the disciples were “downcast.” They were depressed. And literally at that moment Jesus was actually walking alongside them on their way to Emmaus. They were living in the realm of Saturday and the hope of Sunday hadn’t yet found its way to their reality. That experience is the kind of experience Saturday is all about.

Generally speaking, we Christians look at Friday and Saturday *through* the lens of Sunday. Meaning, we know the end of the movie. Once we know how it ends, the impact of the whole is forever altered. Thus we could never really experience Saturday as those first disciples did. The full significance of that moment is gone. We will only ever be secondary participants, only fractionally imagining that scene as it played out.

For most of us, all this Easter stuff is just a little extra time off work. Some family time maybe, with a thanksgiving-type meal and some sports TV. Maybe you picked up an Easter lily for your mom. Some chocolate eggs for your niece and nephew. We refer to Friday as “good” because again, we can see things only from our angle. Tell that to the first people who lost Jesus. They’d have called it “hell” Friday. But we want to move quickly from that sad event...that, yes, *horrific* scene of the cross, and get to the good part of the story...the epic and triumphant victory of the resurrection. But we should not...we cannot, forget about *Saturday*. Because Jesus frankly *took His time* on this matter, and thus so should we. He stayed dead for a whole day. It was quiet. It was bleak and depressing. Unless we understand that Saturday on some level, we will struggle through the Saturdays of our own stories.

The fact is, maybe we shouldn’t be too quick to move on to Sunday. Maybe we *need* to sit in Saturday for awhile because there is something here that Jesus wants us to know and see. Maybe we can never really embrace Sunday unless we first endure Saturday. Unless we *believe* on Saturday, will we ever really understand Sunday? See, we need to remember that those original disciples were devastated after watching up close and personal, their best friend...their teacher and Savior, hang helplessly on the cross of a criminal. And they just didn’t *know* what Sunday would bring. Their Saturday didn’t know Sunday was coming, any more than we know the details of the form ours will take. For them, Saturday was final. It was ‘all she wrote.’

But Saturday will come again. It always does.

Perhaps the place we should be looking is in the person and story of Joseph of Arimathea. We don’t have recorded much detail as to the disciples’ immediate response to Jesus’ death. But we do know that before the sunset on Friday, a man named Joseph of Arimathea came to Pontius Pilate and requested Jesus’ cold, dead body, that it might be properly buried. The text reads, “*Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus.... He came and took the body away.*”

So according to John's gospel—after the crowds had departed... gone back to their lives, it was this Joseph that made that journey to receive Jesus' body as Friday drew to a close. Slowly, carefully, Joseph would have lowered the cross, pulled the large Roman nails from the hands and feet of Jesus, and picked him up and carried him in his arms.

Can you even fathom this picture? What anguish... what sheer devastation of pulling those nails and along with them uprooting your greatest dreams and hopes. The darkness was never thicker. Hopes and dreams were dashed. It was no doubt years earlier that Joseph had left behind his life of predictability and safety to follow an unknown Savior to unknown places and unknown events, only to have his vision crushed. Now Joseph held his dead dream in his arms. He hadn't signed up for this. This wasn't in the fine print. What a failure. What a waste.

But Joseph still showed up.

Joseph *asked* for Jesus' body. It wasn't forced upon him. He experienced the burden of it by his own choice. The fact is, part of being a Christian is carrying the body of your God. And you know what, it's heavy. It's harsh. It's beyond awkward. There is nothing epic in it. There is no Hollywood movie here. But you have to be open to it, because it won't be forced upon you. Who would ask for the heaviness of Christ? Who desires the corpse of Jesus? Who asks for this kind of stuff?

A Christ-follower does...

At the Christian store, there's a painting illustrating a poem called "Footprints." We have all no doubt seen it. In the picture there is that one set of footprints in the sand along the seashore. The idea is that as we remember the moments from our lives, they are presented in the picture of those footprints in the sand. And while there are usually two sets of footprints, one belonging to us and one belonging to God, we see that during the heart-wrenching periods of our journey that there is only one set of footprints in the sand. And we are to come to realize that during those hard times Christ was carrying us.

It is of course a beautiful poem and an even more beautiful idea. Yet it fails to present another crucial truth and glory about Christian faith. God *does* carry us. That fact is undeniable. But sometimes faith is so hard that it feels like we are carrying Jesus. That we're carrying the weight of his very heavy body. Beholding his glory can be so heavy, so physical... so wearying. So hard sometimes.

See, there's another footprints painting that nobody paints and they'll never put up at the mall Christian bookstore. That one is about how everyone who's seeking to follow after Jesus will inevitably end up carrying Jesus too.

More of faith than we'd like to admit consists of sitting in that tomb and waiting in pain like Joseph of Arimathea. It is a side of faith we probably didn't sign up for. No doubt Joseph didn't. And while maybe we didn't anticipate those dark moments of waiting, they are nevertheless holy moments. Faith isn't just Good Friday and Easter Sunday; faith is those uncomfortable and enduring Saturdays too. Sometimes we find ourselves sitting in that tomb with the soon-to-be resurrected Lord. It's Saturday and it's so dark. So damp. So scary. The silence is deafening. But Jesus is in there too. And in that kind of darkness, there's a glory. A glory that we will never fully understand until Sunday. And gang... Sunday is coming. We will see Him, and touch the nail scars in His hands.

In the tomb, the darkness is thick. But that's where God is. And for the true servant of Christ, that's where we must be sometimes too. Waiting for Sunday...

Adapted from the article "Sitting, Waiting, and Hoping in the Tomb of Jesus" by A. J. Swoboda, presented in Christianity Today Magazine. His article is adapted from his book, A Glorious Dark: Finding Hope in the Tension between Belief and Experience (Baker).