

Were You There?

By Peter Marshall

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Deeper Walking With God

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Peter Marshall Ministries is pleased to present the incomparable preaching of the late Dr. Peter Marshall, pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC in the late 1930s and 40s and chaplain of the United States Senate from 1947 until his death in 1949. This is one of the very few actual recordings of Dr. Marshall's voice and we hope that your soul will be richly ministered to by listening to one of America's greatest preachers.

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And now Dr. Peter Marshall.

Change of Voice:

Dr. Peter Marshall our guest speaker of this week who is the pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC will now speak for us, his subject being the [?] a moment ago, "Were you there?"

Change of Voice:

The morning sun had been up for some hours over the city of David. Already pilgrims and visitors were pouring in through the gates, mingling with merchants from the villages round about, with shepherds coming down from the hills, and the gnarled streets were crowded.

There were the aged, stooped with years, muttering to themselves as they pushed through the crowd, and there were children playing in the streets, calling to each other in shrill voices. There were men and women too, carrying burdens, baskets of vegetables, casks of wine, water bags and there were tradesmen with their tools. Here a donkey stood sleepily beneath his burden in the sunlight and there, under a narrow canopy, a merchant shouted his wares in a pavement stall.

It was not easy to make one's way through the crowd. But it was especially difficult for a procession that started out from the governor's palace. At its head rode a Roman

centurion, disdainful and aloof, scorn for the like of child or cripple who might be in his way. His lips curled in thin lines of contempt as he watched through half-shut eyes the shouting, jeering crowd.

Before him went two legionnaires, clearing the crowd aside as best they could with curses and careless blows. The procession moved at a snail's pace. The soldiers tried to keep step, but it was evident that the centurion guards did not relish this routine task which came to them every now and then in the government of this troublesome province.

The sunlight glanced on the spears and helmets of the soldiers. There was a rhythmic clanking of steel as their shields touched their belt buckles and the scabbards of their swords.

Between the two files of soldiers staggered three condemned men each carrying a heavy bar of wood with its cross piece on which he was to be executed. It was hard to keep step for the pace was slow and the soldiers were impatient to get it over: left, right, left, right.

“Come along. We don't have all day to spend!”

The crosses were heavy, however, and the first of the victims was at the point of collapse. He had been under severe strain for several days. Moreover, he had been scourged, lashed with a leather whip in the thongs of which had been inserted rough pieces of lead. The carpenter followed them with his ladder and his nails and they all moved forward out of the courtyard of Pilate's palace and made for one of the gates leading out of the city.

The sun was hot. The sweat poured down the face of Jesus and he swayed now and then underneath the weight of the cross. A depression had fallen on the soldiers, and they marched in silence as if reluctant.

A group of women went with the procession, their faces half hidden by their veils, but their grief could not be hid. Some of them were sobbing aloud. Others were praying, others moaning in that deep grief that knows not what to say or what to do.

Some of them had little children by the hand and kept saying over and over again, “What harm hath he done? Why should they put him to death? He healed my child. A touch of his hand and this little one could see.”

Another mother would chime in, “He brought my child back to life. She had all but died. What harm could there be in that?”

And so they wondered, and so they went.

And there were men too who followed as closely as they could, men who walked with the strange steps of men to whom walking was not yet familiar, and others who still carried sticks in their hands but who did not use them as once they had to tap their way through villages and towns and cities, men who had been blind and now through habit carried

sticks and who strangely enough were blind again, but this time they were blinded by tears. Their lips were moving in prayers and their hearts were heavy, but there was nothing that they could do.

Once when the procession halted for a moment, Jesus turned and spoke to them, but they could not hear him for the shouting of the rabble. For most of the crowd hardly knew what was going on. They could not understand. They had caught the infection of mob spirit. They shouted to the first of the three victims, the one with the ridiculous crown on his head, twisted from a branch of the long thorned briar that had lacerated his scalp and caused blood to mingle with the sweat. They shouted at him until they were roughly pushed aside by the soldiers and in some cases they began to shout at the soldiers. Some of the children, encouraged by their elders, joined in the shouting as the procession went along the way that will forever be known as the *Via Dolorosa*.

Meanwhile outside the city gate, all unsuspecting, Simon of Cyrene had almost reached the gate. He had just arrived in Judea and was about to enter the holy city as a pilgrim for the festival. He had spent the night in a village nearby and rising early this morning he had bathed and dressed himself carefully with a tingling excitement because soon he would be in Jerusalem and all the sights that had been described to him by exiles far from home he would see with his own eyes and all the sounds of Jerusalem that seemed to be wafted across the miles to be murmured by the waves of the sea and to be sung by the wind as it moaned through the trees he would hear with his own ears. And yet he tried to keep calm.

And as he set out on the short walk that lay between him and the city, he was very thoughtful. He walked along the winding path that sometimes ran through the fields and sometimes along the tortuous course of a dried up river bed, sometimes wound up a jagged hillside to twist down again among giant boulders and huge rocks behind which highwaymen could easily hide. He walked along beside the tall rushes and through the divided crops. He could hear the sheep bleating on the inhospitable hillside while the morning sun climbed higher and higher and chased away the mists that had lain for rest upon the hilltops until now they trailed down into the valleys like a tulle scarf thrown over a lady's shoulder.

Already he could see ahead of him the domes of the temple gleaming gold in the sunshine and he thought of his own city, Cyrene, looking down from the elevation over the turquoise blue, sun flecked waters of the Mediterranean.

As he neared the city gate, he began to hear shouting that grew louder and louder and there seemed to Simon to be a sort of beat to it a time in it, a rhythm, a sort of chant that he thought sounded like "Crucify, crucify, crucify."

And they met right at the city gate, Simon of Cyrene and the crowd.

He found that the procession was headed by some Roman soldiers. He could recognize them anywhere. He knew a legionnaire when he saw one, the insignia on their shields and

their uniforms. He could not be mistaken. It was official, this procession. But he had little time to gather impressions and as for asking questions, that was impossible. He could not make himself heard in all this noise, in the confusion that seemed to be so violent and so terrible. There was a sinister, throbbing malice in the atmosphere and Simon shuddered.

And then he was aware of two moving walls of Roman steel between which there staggered a man carrying a cross. And then he saw there were three men. But it was one, one in particular that attracted his attention.

He thought there must be something strange about it all, but before he could understand it, he was caught up in the procession and swept out through the gate again. He was excited, afraid somehow and helpless. He was puzzled and ill at ease. He scanned face after face, quickly looking for some light of welcome, some word of explanation, some smile, some friendliness, but he found none. The whole atmosphere was drama and cruelty. The horror of it all crept over him like a clammy mist and he shivered.

He had been captured by the procession, stumbling along, tightly wedged in the very heart of it, walking along beside the three men who staggered under the weight of crosses of heavy wood on which Simon knew they were soon to be put to death. Each man was bent beneath the burden he carried. Perspiration moistened each drawn face.

But that one to which he had been so attracted, that one that was strangely appealing, it was a face that arrested him and Simon felt his gaze returning again and again to that one face. He noticed that blood was trickling down from wounds in the brow and then he saw what caused it, a twig of long thorned briar twisted round, in the shape of a crown, and pushed down on the forehead.

But it was his eyes, it was the terrible look in his eyes, that fascinated, awed, and frightened Simon. He watched with bleeding heart as they shuffled along. My, but the look in those eyes. Simon could see nothing else, and as he walked everything was forgotten: the feast, the celebration, the temple, his mission, friends he was to meet and errands he had to accomplish. Everything was forgotten as he watched the man carrying the cross.

And then he looked up, his eyes almost blinded by the blood that trickled down from under that grotesque crown on his head. Why didn't somebody wipe his eyes? And as Simon looked at him, he looked at Simon, and the eyes of these two met.

How did Christ know what was in Simon's heart? What was it that made him smile that slow, sad smile that seemed to say so much to Simon, that seemed to calm his wildly beating heart? The look that passed between them Simon never forgot as long as he lived, for no man can look at Jesus and remain the same.

Again, just as these two looked at each other, the man with the cross stumbled, and the soldiers, moved more by impatience than by pity, seeing that the Nazarene was almost

too exhausted to carry his cross any farther, laid hands on Simon and forced him to lift it up.

Simon's heart almost stopped beating. He was too excited to speak. Why just a few minutes before: a lonely pilgrim quietly approaching the holy city.

See him now. His shoulders stooped under the weight of a cross on which this man—this man with the arresting face—was soon to die. In the midst of the procession of howling men and women walking between two moving walls of Roman steel and carrying on his shoulder another's cross.

The look of gratitude and love that flashed from the eyes of Jesus as Simon lifted the load from his tired, bleeding shoulders did something to the man from Cyrene. And in an instant all of life was changed. Simon could never explain it afterwards. There are some things you can't explain. He could never tell exactly how it happened, how all at once he saw the meaning of pain. He understood the significance of suffering. The meaning of prayer was unveiled.

And the message of the Scriptures—why, the passages he had memorized as a child: the messianic songs, the prophecy of Isaiah, why, whole passages of Scripture—now came to life. He saw what they meant for the first time. It were as if a light had been turned on in his heart and soul, as if divine illumination had given to him meanings and significances he had missed until now. He understood. And somehow he was glad. And yet his joy was deeply touched with sorrow.

And so they came to Calvary. They called it Golgotha. And visitors to Jerusalem would be asked if they agreed that, seen in silhouette, it suggested a human skull. It was a place to be avoided. It was where two great highways converged upon the city of Jerusalem—and down in the valley below a place of stench, a place of horror, an ugly place where refuse always burned. And the evil smelling smoke curled up and was wafted over the brow of Golgotha. That was the place of public executions. And there the procession stopped.

Only as the nails were driven in did the shouting stop. There was a hush, because most of them were stunned and horrified, even the hardest of them was silenced. It is not pleasant to watch nails being driven through human flesh. Mary, his mother, stopped her ears and turned away her head. They could hear the echo across the Kidron valley—the hammer blows. Simon of Cyrene from time to time wiped away his tears with the back of his hand. Peter stood on the fringe of the crowd—until hot tears filled his eyes and his heart broke in pieces. John stood beside Mary and supported her. The other women were weeping.

But as soon as the Nazarene had mounted his last pulpit, as soon as the cross had fallen with a thud into the pit they had dug for it, the shouting broke out again. There were some who had followed him once, who had been attracted by the charm of the wonderworker. There were many among them who had accepted loaves and fishes at his hands. And now

they shouted taunts at him. They remembered what he had said, and now they hurled his sayings back in his teeth. They threw up at him, like barbed arrows of hate and malice, promises he had made, predictions and eternal truths that had fallen from his lips. Now they taunted him. They stabbed and wounded him with things he himself had said:

“Aye, he saved others, himself he cannot save. (And you will note, that they admitted here and now all the miracles he had ever performed.) Aye, he had brought back the dead to life again. He had given sight to blind eyes. He had straightened withered limbs. He had caused the cripples to leap and to walk and to praise God in their joy. Aye, he saved others, himself he cannot save.”

“Miracle man, come on down from the cross and we will believe—one more miracle, the greatest of them all!”

“Ah ha! Thou who wouldst build the temple in three days, Mr. Carpenter: thou hast nails in thy hand, thou hast no hammer. Thou canst not build a temple up there. Come on down from the cross and we will believe thee!”

“Older than father Abraham! Thou art very old now but young enough to escape if thou would work another miracle. Come on down, and we will believe thee.”

They shouted until they were hoarse. The noise was so great that only a few of them standing near the cross heard what he said when his lips moved in prayer: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

One of the thieves, crucified with him, drugged and half-drunk, cried out to Jesus, “Can’t you see how we suffer? If thou art the Son of God, save thyself and us!” He twisted himself upon his cross, he writhed his shoulders, and he leaned on the crosspiece. And then he begged and taunted Christ, if what they said were true, to save all three in great redemption pain. (What he sought was salvation from the nails, not salvation from sin; salvation from pain and suffering, not salvation from punishment.)

Then a spasm of pain gripped him and he slipped until his weight once again fell upon the nails that held his hands, and he began to curse and to swear until his companion turned his head and rebuked him: “What has this man done that thou should curse him so? Seeing that we are in the same condemnation, dost not thou fear God? They have some excuse putting us to death for we broke the laws. We sought to start a revolution. But this man hath done nothing.”

Then he said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”

And Jesus, his face drawn with pain but his voice still kind, answered, “This very day, when the pain is over, we shall be together again. Verily I say unto thee, thou shalt be with me in paradise.” And the man, comforted, set his lips to endure till the end.

The sun rose higher and higher. Time oozed out like the blood that dripped from the cross.

Jesus opened his eyes and saw his mother standing there and John beside her. He called out the name of John, who came closer. And Jesus said, “You will take care of her, John.” And John, choked with tears, put his arm around the shoulders of Mary.

Jesus said to his mother, “He will be your son.” His lips were parched, and he spoke with difficulty. He moved his head against the hard wood of the cross as a sick man moves his head on a hot pillow.

A thunderstorm was blowing up from the mountains, and the clouds hid the sun. It was strangely dark. The people looked up at the sky and became frightened. Women took little children by the hand and hurried back to the city before the storm would break. It was an uncanny darkness. It had never been as dark before. Something terrible must be about to happen. Women stood praying for Jesus and for the thieves.

The centurion was silent, although every now and then he would look up at Jesus with a strange look in his eye. The soldiers were silent, too. Their gambling was over. They had won and lost.

Suddenly Jesus opened his eyes and gave a loud cry. The gladness in his voice startled all who heard it, for it sounded like a shout of victory. “It is finished. Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” And with that cry he died.

Now we were all there that day on the top of the hill: the friends of Jesus and his enemies. The church people, they were there, as well as the people who never went to church.

The priests were there and the scribes, the greedy Sadducees, the hypocrites, the proud Pharisees, with their robes, their broad bordered phylacteries on which golden bells were sewn with golden thread—they were there, drawing their robes more tightly around them and standing with arms folded approvingly. They were there.

The people who were always talking about the church and always talking about the Lord, the pious people on whose lips there were always glib quotations from the Scriptures—they were there.

The unbelievers were standing beside them. The harlots were there, and their customers were there. They were all there.

Simon of Cyrene was there, and the soldiers, too. Peter was there, and John and Andrew and James and Thomas and Philip and Matthew and Bartholomew. They were all there.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

When we consider who were there, and when we are honest with ourselves, we know that we were there and that we helped to put Christ there. Because every attitude present on that hilltop that day is present in our midst now. Every emotion that tugged at human heart then, tugs the human heart still. Every face that was there is here too. Every voice that shouted then is shouting still. Every human being was represented on Calvary. Every sin was in a nail or the point of a spear or the thorns. And pardon for them all was in the blood that was shed.

Nineteen hundred years have passed away. But the range of the centuries with our callused tears have not yet washed away the blood from the rotting wood of a deserted cross. Nor have the winds covered his footprints in the sands of Judea. Calvary still stands, and you and I erect the cross again and again and again every time we sin. The hammer blows are still echoing somewhere in the caverns in your heart and mine. Every time we deny him, every time we sin against him or fail to do what he commanded, he is being crucified again and again and again.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? I was. Were you?

O Lord Jesus, have mercy upon us. Grant us thy forgiveness. Make our hearts to be contrite before thee. And by thy grace make us clean.

And now may the love of God the Father, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the abiding fellowship of God the Holy Spirit rest upon us all now and abide with us forever more. Amen.

[singing]