

## The Way of the Cross: A Lutheran Primer

*For the sins of His own nation, / She saw Jesus wracked with torment, / All with scourges wrent:  
She beheld her tender Child, / Saw Him hang in desolation, / Till His Spirit forth He sent.  
Let me, to my latest breath, / In my body bear the death, of that dying Son of thine.  
While my body here decays, / May my soul Thy goodness praise, / Safe in Paradise with Thee.*

~ Selections from the *Stabat mater dolorosa* ~

### **Introduction: What is the Way of the Cross?**

The “Way of the Cross,” more commonly known as the “Stations of the Cross,” is a non-liturgical observance of the Passion of Jesus Christ. This means that it is not an official church service with a pre-set liturgy, but rather an extended devotion or meditation. The traditional observance itself is usually held on Good Friday and involves a slow procession around the sanctuary to stand before various “stations” of Jesus crucifixion, which represent events in the Passion narrative, and meditating upon each one with Scripture, a brief devotion, a prayer, and often a hymn stanza. Traditionally, the text of the *Stabat mater dolorosa* (“*Stood the sorrowful mother*”), a Latin hymn to the Virgin Mary, is associated with the Way of the Cross for its somber reflection on Mary as the sorrowful mother who stands at the foot of the cross and watches her son as he dies. In Mary there is a picture of the entire church before the cross.

### **History:**

Christian observance of the Way of the Cross may be dated back to as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD to such early Christians as Empress Helena (Mother of Emperor Constantine) of Rome, and Saint Jerome. The modern practice is an evolution of early Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem to walk the *Via Crucis* (“Way of the Cross”) and visit historic shrines associated with Jesus’ Passion. After Muslim invasions destroyed the historic sites of Jesus crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, the Crusades were initiated to reclaim the Holy Land. During this period, the number of pilgrimages declined sharply, and monasteries began constructing outdoor shrines to mimic the *Via Crucis* in Jerusalem. The modern method of observance dates to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when it was established by the Franciscans. The traditional stations are as follows, with extra-biblical inclusions marked as such (\*):

1. Jesus is Condemned to Death
2. Jesus Receives the Cross
3. Jesus Falls for the First Time\*
4. Jesus Meets His Mother\*
5. Simon of Cyrene Carries the Cross
6. Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus\*
7. Jesus Falls for the Second Time\*
8. Jesus Meets the Daughters of Jerusalem
9. Jesus Falls for the Third Time\*
10. Jesus is Stripped of His Garments
11. Jesus is Nailed to the Cross
12. Jesus Dies on the Cross
13. Jesus’ Body is Removed from the Cross
14. Jesus is Laid in the Tomb

### **Function: Why Observe the Way of the Cross?**

Many who are unfamiliar with this unique meditation are hesitant to observe it, since it is usually associated with the Roman Catholic Church. However, all Christians can reap great spiritual benefits from participating in the Way of the Cross since our Lord's Passion is the foundation for the meditation. During Lent, a time of reflection solely dedicated to the Lord's death helps to focus the Christian heart and mind upon that for which the Lenten season exists. Additionally, as Baptized Christians each individual lives a life joined to Christ and his sufferings. Therefore, to meditate upon such sufferings is one way that Christians can consider and remember their baptismal roots. The Way of the Cross is a powerful way to contemplate and enter into the sufferings of Christ. It removes the passion narrative from the confines of recollection, and projects it into a somber, tangible experience truly fitting for the Lenten season.

### **Station I: Jesus is Condemned to Death (Matthew 26:57–66; 27:22–23, 26)**

OT References: Exod 20:16; Ps 35; Isa 50:6, 53:5, 7; Dan 7:13; Lev 24:16

Many among that rabble were stirred up by indecision and weakness, choosing to go with the crowd rather than to stand up for truth and justice. Fear of what others would think drowned out the voice of conscience, and evil was made strong in indecision and weakness. We are the voice of that crowd condemning Jesus to death. Our sins today make us just as guilty of crucifying him as those of the Jews in Jerusalem, for when we drown out our own consciences and listen to other voices in its stead, we are joining the mob that falsely accused Jesus. In meditating upon Jesus trial, we see ourselves in that crowd, and remember our own shortcomings.

### **Station II: Jesus Receives the Cross (Matthew 27:27–31; Luke 9:18–27)**

OT References: Gen 22:8; Ps 69:19; Isa 53:3, 50:6, 52:14, 61; Mic 5:1

Jesus' willingness to receive the cup presented to him, despite the inner conflict between his divine and human natures (Luke 22:42), indicates God's undying love for us. In meditating on the burden Jesus accepts in this station, we note how grave indeed our sins are before God. Even our best deeds are as filthy rags (Isa 64:6) that fall short of what God demands. In the weight Jesus bears to Golgotha we see ourselves and the true weight of sin. The burden was so great that Christ sweat blood on our behalf even before his betrayal. This is a burden far too great for us to bear on our own. This is why Christ takes it from us. He does this out of his fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, which we can accept and appreciate but never fully understand. As Christ took up his burden, so too must we take up our burdens in order to follow him. This means that we must deny ourselves the pleasures of our carnal desires. We must turn from sin and follow him in righteousness. Those who wish to hold onto their sinful ways of living will be separated from God, for we cannot serve God and man (Matt 6:24). To give up the old ways is difficult, and it is truly a burden. But Christ bears all burdens, and the mystical communion of the saints bears the burdens of each individual within Christendom (Gal 6:2).

### **Station V: Simon of Cyrene Carries the Cross (Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26)**

OT References: Exod 17:11–13; Ps 69:19–20

The weakness of Christ in needing the help of another to carry the cross is an indication that the strength of earthly understanding is not God's strength, and that his strength is made manifest in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). Simon does not volunteer to assist our Lord. Rather, he is forced into that position. He does not go willingly to aid a condemned man, yet Christ goes willingly to his own demise. Even we as believers called to faith go begrudgingly still, as Thomas Watson writes: "Christ went more willingly to the cross than we do to the throne of grace." We are not forced or coerced into following Christ, but the Spirit who has been given us does indeed guide us on our way (John 16:13). In seeing the weakness of Christ, we can be assured that he suffered in all ways according to the flesh, and that in every

struggle we face he is there (Ps 19:2). As we carry on following Jesus, having taken up our own crosses (Mark 8:34), we can rest assured in the knowledge that Jesus comes to us, not as Simon came to him, but willingly and with love. He carries our burden and helps us along the way (Matt 11:30).

#### **Station VIII: Jesus Meets the Daughters of Jerusalem (Luke 23:27–31)**

OT References: Prov 11:31; Isa 2:19; Jer 25:39; Ezek 20:47, 21:3–4; Hos 10:8

Jesus keeps our minds on the things of God rather than on the things of men. In so doing he sets us aside to be in the world but not of it (Rom 12:2). As Peter and the Women of Jerusalem had their minds solely set on earthly things, so too do we often worry about those things that are beyond our control. Christ has instructed us not to worry, for the Lord is at the helm watching over all of creation (Matt 6:25–34).

#### **Station X: Jesus is Stripped of His Garments (Matthew 27:33–36)**

OT References: Gen 37:23, 39:12; 1 Sam 19:18–24; Ps 69:21, 22:17–18; Isa 20:2–4

As the First Adam was created perfect in nakedness but found shame through the Fall, the reverse is seen in the Second Adam. As Jesus is stripped of his garments we see the beginning of humanity's restoration to former glory. The New Adam is stripped in order that his garments might be distributed unto us (Gen 3:21). These garments are not earthly, but spiritual, and they reflect the righteousness of Christ in us (Rev 19:8). In his nakedness, Jesus' position in society is revealed, but it is not what one would expect. As his earthly garments are removed, all of creation sees him for who he truly is: the savior. The Evangelist John records that Jesus' tunic was woven in one piece, as the robes of the Old Testament priests were woven (John 19:23). Thus, his identity as the true High Priest is revealed in the stripping of his robe.

#### **Station XI: Jesus is Nailed to the Cross (Mark 15:25–32)**

OT References: Job 25:6; Ps 22:6,7, 69:7, 109:25; Isa 53:3, 9, 12; Lam 3:14; Amos 8:9

The people do not see the significance of Jesus' identity and they nail him to the cross, deriding him all the while. Yet, what they intend for evil, God intends for good (Gen 50:20). They speak the words of Satan in the wilderness, questioning Jesus' identity, and inciting him to abandon the necessary means of salvation (Matt 4:6). He cannot save himself, according to God's plan, but he *can* save his people. Their confession that he is the King of the Jews was intended for mockery, but speaks to the truth that this king, even in weakness and humility, is ruler of all.

#### **Station X: Jesus Dies on the Cross (John 19:28–37)**

OT References: Exod 12:16, 46; Lev 23:6–7; Num 9:12; Deut 21:22–23; Josh 8:29, 10:26; Ps 22:15–17, 34:20, 69:21; Dan 9:26; Zech 11:10–11, 12:10, 13:6

Hanging upon the cross near the hour of his death, Jesus drinks sour wine in order to fulfill the Scriptures concerning him. Though the Lord wished good wine to spring from his creation, it is only the worthless, sour wine of man's self-centeredness and sin which comes forth (Ps 51:5). He drinks this cup willingly, remembering the promise he made of old never again to destroy his creatures (Gen 6:6, 9:15). His final words from the cross (τετέλεσται, *tetelestai*, "it has been accomplished/completed") indicate that the Lord's plan for salvation from the very beginning came to its completion in the death of his Son (Heb 9:26). This he does purely out of love, with no merit on the part of creation. The death of Jesus is the ultimate end of love, and Jesus was willing to go to the end for his creation (John 13:1). He pushed the bounds of love to their very limit, and indeed even beyond that limit, in the giving up of self (1 Cor 13:7). In his death, he gives up the Holy Spirit which had been upon him since his baptism by John. This Spirit he gives up to the world, to dwell among us and continue the work of Christ even as he sits enthroned in

glory at the right hand of the Father. Because his legs were not broken, Jesus is confirmed as the true Passover lamb, the one whose bones were not broken but who was slaughtered for the sake of his people (Gen 22:14). As his side was pierced, blood and water flow forth as symbols of the Sacraments in which Jesus continues to come to us. In water we are joined to his side, and in his body and blood we are nourished in spirit and in faith. Through this piercing the Church is born while Jesus slumbers in death just as Eve was born from the side of Adam in his slumber.

**Station XIII: Jesus' Body is Removed from the Cross (Mark 15:42–45)**

OT References: Num 19:20–22

Throughout the passion narrative one is led to believe that Jesus is completely abandoned in his ordeal. However, at the time he is removed from the cross, the Evangelists show that the demand for his death was not as uniform as what the Pharisees and Scribes portrayed. As he died, there were groups of followers with him until the end, including members of the Sanhedrin and the Jewish elite. Pilate, amazed by the request of these disciples, consults with *the* centurion, whom we may be let to believe is the very same centurion who witnessed Christ's death and confessed, "Surely this was the Son of God" (Matt 27:4).

**Station XIV: Jesus is Laid in the Tomb (Matthew 27:57–66; John 19:38–42)**

OT References: Ps 45:8; Prov 7:17; Song 4:14; Isa 53:9; Dan 6:17

Pilate releases Jesus' body, which is placed in a brand-new tomb. He who brings the newness of life sleeps in a new place of death. This is indeed an ironic display of his victory over death, and the transformation of death into a new thing for those who are joined to him (Ps 118:17). In life he is treated shamefully. In death, he is treated as the king he truly is (Isa 11:10). Myrrh is used to perfume his body, recalling the gift given him by the magi. This looks towards his ministry as one which existed for the sole purpose of his death, and a kingly reign which existed purely for the king's death. This king is unlike earthly kings, for he has come to die and to give himself up for his people.

