

Excerpt from
RELIVING THE PASSION

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Preface

I love you, Lord Jesus

In the sincerest silence of my soul, I murmured over and over, "I love you, Lord Jesus."

Jesus was dying. I could do nothing to save him—not even to ease him. I could only watch and suffer the sorrow too. I was a child. Yet I saw every detail of his passion exactly as the Bible set it down. Everything. I learned everything. Not because I was precocious, but because I felt it all. And always there came the moment when I burst into tears.

Jesus looked at me. The love in his face was so horrible that I started to cry, and I murmured over and over, "I love you, too! I love you. Lord Jesus."

Did he hear me? At the moment I couldn't know, because he was dying.

Now I know.

He heard me.

In those days my father was the pastor of a modest church in North Dakota. I was his eldest son, an earnest child, wide-eyed by nature, and watchful. The name of the church was Immanuel, "God With Us": I believed that. The interior of the church building was bare brick painted white. In the evenings, when the windows were blackened by night, the white walls softened to an incandescent orange, and the whole building became a place of consolations, a familiar fortress wherein I was safe from the evil without. In the evenings, then, I relaxed my guard. I allowed my imagination considerable freedom.

And on Wednesday evenings, late in winter, for a full six weeks preceding Easter, my father preached of the passions of Jesus.

These were our Lenten services.

His sermons were dramatic. He would assume the character of a disciple, Peter denying the Christ, John leading the mother of Jesus away, Mary Magdalene watching from a distance. Perhaps this form of discourse trained me and translated me (in spirit) to the time of Christ itself, just as great which always persuades us to experience the thing it presents. Perhaps because my imagination was safe in a golden fortress it was quicker to dart inside a story and to live there. Whatever the causes, when my father took the Bible on Wednesday evenings and began to read of the sorrows of Jesus—from the Last Supper to his last cry on the cross—I was there.

That's why I cried.

The reading made real the story—so terribly real to a boy of eight that I was swept through the events of the Gospel not as though recalling them, but feeling them in fact.

Is it in hearing that faith begins? Yes. And is faith an intimate, real relationship with Jesus? Yes. And this is the strength of our sacred story, that when we hear it we experience it; and in the experience we meet the Christ; and him whom we meet in the extremes of his love, we must likewise love.

So my father was reading the Bible while the winds of winter shrieked outside; but I wasn't in the white-brick church. I was nowhere in North Dakota. I had slipped into The Story. . . .

Teeth. I saw teeth before me.

Teeth: in Gethsemane Judas was grinning with teeth as big as tombstones. Torchlight flashed in his eye, false laughter. He kissed the Lord Jesus. I shivered.

Then the High Priest was clashing his teeth together, hissing horribly, "Blasssssphemy!"

Ugly men spat on the Lord through crumbling teeth. But Jesus stood cool and silent: the Christ, as calm as the white candle—and its single flame—tall by the altar in Immanuel. I gazed at his patience, and I grieved.

Teeth: Pontius Pilate had piggy-little teeth. The multitude gnashed ratchet teeth of violence, crying, "Crucify him!" Pilate simpered and surrendered, dipping the tips of his fingers in water. I wanted to cry. Jesus didn't even open his mouth. I never saw his teeth. He was different from them all. He was different from me, because I would have cursed the people.

We walked to Golgotha, that hollow head in the hillside. I saw the sweating faces of soldiers as they set spikes to my master's hands—but I couldn't look at his face. I shut my eyes. My father was reading: *And when they crucified him—*

I heard a gasp as they lifted the Lord aloft.

Then, when I opened my eyes, I was astounded by a change. Suddenly I was seeing everything as Jesus saw it. I was (we were) looking down on the sea of faces, twisted faces, brown teeth, broken teeth, jeering at Jesus, crying him down from the cross. I heard him groan by my ear.

In my heart I said. *Let's get out of here! Please, let's go.* These people were purple with hatred. Women and men and soldiers and slaves, the teachers, the leaders, their faces enraged. The loathing rose in waves around us, and I pleaded, *Please, let's go away! Let's go!*

But Jesus was different, not like me. "Father, forgive them," he whispered. "They know not what they do." I felt the bones beside me, no motion but the crack of his hanging. I heard his purposeful breathing by my ear and, with a sort of horror, realized he wasn't going anywhere. He was choosing to stay right here.

Then the thief on our left began to bellow, "Let's get out of here. Let's go! If you're the Christ, get down from the cross and take me too. Let's go! Let's go!"

I felt ill. I felt so guilty. That sinner was speaking my words out loud! I decided to say no more.

But then the thief on our right hand said, "Lord, remember me," and Jesus twisted around to look at him—

No! Jesus was looking at *me*! Things had changed again, and it was as if I were the one who had said. *Remember me*. To me, then, the Lord said, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

And that is when I burst into tears.

I cried because I wasn't with him any more. I was on a different cross. We were each alone.

But I also cried because he did what he did for me! To take me to Paradise! He loved me. Jesus loved me. He looked at me, and the love was so horrible—

His arms torn up at the sockets, the weight of his body popping the armpits, the ribs pulled apart, stretching his flesh. I could count his bones! He whispered, "Today" and "Paradise," and I burst into tears, murmuring over and over, *I love you too. I love you. Lord Jesus.*

Then came a torment I did not imagine because I could not. This was something past comprehension. His chest began to heave. His body thrashed against the wood. He threw back his head and stared at the black skies, and he screamed, "My God! My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?"

Nobody answered. I couldn't stop crying.

My father was reading: *Darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour—*

Out of that darkness there suddenly came the roaring of his voice, an inarticulate scream, a wild and final cry. And then he died. I saw his head slump forward. I saw the chin fall to his chest. I heard the air go out. I saw his body sag. I was sad. I was so sad.

In the night of Good Friday, my father was reading: *He gave up the ghost. And the veil of the temple was rent in twain—*

By then it was not winter in North Dakota any more. Neither was it spring. It was bleak hell. My father was wearing a black robe only. The altar had been stripped of linen. All things were sad, all things severe and dark and dark and very true.

And the preacher said, "He died for you."

How was I supposed to feel at that? Guilty? Beloved?

Jesus, I was just a child then. I loved you with an incomprehensible pain. I did not want you to be dead. Jesus?

Dear Lord Jesus—do you know what a whooping joy I felt when my father read the rest of the story? Who ran to the tomb on Sunday morning? Me! That was me! I stuck my head in the empty spaces. And when the gardener spoke, I got me a good spot next to Mary Magdalene. And who was the gardener? Why, it was you!

To Mary you said, "Mary."

But to me you said, "Wally, I love you."

Ha ha! And I with shining eyes said, "I love you too. I love you. Lord Jesus. I do."

This is the light that has shone in our darkness—in the winters of North Dakota, in the melancholy winters of old, exhausted souls—and the darkness has not overcome it! This, then, is the way we may enter the story of Jesus, the history of our salvation, that the Gospel might in every way become our own.

To that end have I prepared the meditations of this book. It is my intent that they should lead a reader step by step to an Easter celebration, walking with Jesus both in thought (learning along the way) and in a genuine feeling (experiencing The Way—experiencing the love of the Lord in his passion).

Forty Steps to the Journey

It is surely possible and right to take this journey to the Resurrection at any time, whenever the personal need and readiness arise.

But these forty devotions fit best the forty days that lead to Easter, one for each day (except Sundays, when public worship preempts this private practice).

Forty days has come to be an excellent period in which to prepare for the Resurrection of the Lord. Jesus took forty days in the wilderness to fast, to fight the Devil, and to prepare for his ministry. Likewise, Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai, receiving the Law (which no one finally kept but Jesus himself). In the Old Testament a special meaning was attached to the forty-day period: devout encounter with the Lord. But then that meaning was both acknowledged and superseded in the New Testament by Christ's divine activity—and the Law was super-seded by Grace!

Therefore we, in matching our own forty days of faithful commitment to the Lord's, admit the reality of Grace in our lives and mimic our Jesus as well.

Read the first meditation on the Wednesday traditionally called "Ash Wednesday." It's identified on most calendars. The fortieth day before Easter (not counting Sundays), it has marked the start of the season of Lent ever since the sixth century A.D.

In fact, as you fulfill these meditations day by day, you will be participating in an ancient practice of our Christian Church: observing Lent, examining yourself for your own deep need of Jesus' grace, understanding the crucifixion as the moment of marvelous love and your salvation, and giving God thanks for a resurrection which promises your own in the end.

Each devotion shall focus on a passage from Holy Scripture. In order to maintain a narrative unity, allowing the devotions to flow easily one from the other, I've elected to follow the passion of our Lord, verse by verse, as written in Mark's account of the Gospel.

It would be to your advantage then if, before you begin these devotions, you read the fourteenth and fifteenth chapters of Mark all in one sitting.

God be with you.

Earnestly I pray blessings upon the hours we are about to spend together—that your hearts grow young again and that, like children in sorrow, like children in joy, you finally cry in the silence of souls, *I love you. Lord Jesus. I do!*

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