



Writings of W. Burney Overton

Burney's Papers

1990 Series, No. 2

Another Story of the Cross

July 15, 1990

W. Burney Overton

Jesus, by dying on the cross, was doing God's will. He shed his blood so that people could be cleansed of their sins. This, with appropriate elaborations, is the story of the cross with which I grew up, and with which I am most familiar. It continues to be the one most often told wherever anyone is telling what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. It may well be the most accurate interpretation of the cross event.

Jesus has done the will of God all his life, and the trauma of the cross was the final testing of his willingness to do what God had decreed he was to do.

Jesus was – is – the Son of God. He was, from the beginning, the sacrificial lamb who's death on the cross was to pay the price for the sins of all mankind. Therefore, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of his week of passion and suffering, the Temple episode and all that happened that week, the last supper, the prayer in the Garden, the betrayal, trial, abuse, and, finally, the crucifixion itself, were all in the plan of God to bring about the sacrifice that paid the full cost of my sinning – and that of all those who accept Jesus as personal savior. Because of what he did, the slate was wiped clean. My sinning is not held against me. Nor is theirs.

The empty cross hangs over time and eternity as the symbol and the evidence of what God has done for humankind – because God loves us that completely.

The measure of Jesus; anguish and suffering was seen in the prayer in the Garden, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done." (Mt. 26:39) Three times he prayed with such intensity that he, as it were, sweat great drops of blood. And it was God's will that the cup not pass from him.

In conformity to God's will, Jesus stoically endured the ignominy of a false trial, the jeers and name calling of the mob, the abuse of the soldiers, and, finally, that humiliating march to the site of his crucifixion, with the very cross on which he would hang heavy upon his shoulders. There, he submitted to the nails being driven through his hands and feet, and to the piteous display of his wounded body on that wretched cross. He hung there until, in abject despair, he screamed his sense of utter rejection even by God, and died.

According to this interpretation of the story, it was God's will that Jesus should suffer and die in this terrible fashion – the very terribleness of his death being a measure of the immeasurable love and sacrifice of God – to bring salvation to all who believe. Over and over I heard the words, "The blood of the Lamb.", "Washed in the blood.", "Without the shedding of blood there is no sacrifice for sin."

All this, and more, is in the story of the cross as I learned it many years ago, and have re-learned it many times over in all the years of my life.

It may well be the true story of the cross. I would not propose to deny, nor to refute, that possibility. Maybe it is exactly what God intended. Maybe God had decided

beforehand that there was no other way to bring salvation to the world. Maybe Jesus really had no choice but to follow the course that God had laid out for him.

Certainly, it seems to be well established that the events in the story are as they have been told, all the way to the misery of the cross itself, and Jesus; death there. However, I wonder if, in those events, God's will might have been manifested in a somewhat different way than I learned when I was growing up, and have heard all my life.

What other interpretation might there be? To explore an answer to that question, I want to tell another story of the cross, and to tell it as if I were observing those events, and reflecting on what I saw.

It was Passover week, and I had come to Jerusalem, both to celebrate the Passover, and to be there to see what was going to happen when Jesus came into the city.

Without doubt, something was going to happen. The religious leaders were too upset with Jesus not to encounter him when he showed up. In fact, there were widespread rumors that they would try to silence him in some way. Some even said the leaders were prepared to have him killed if need be.

It hardly seemed possible that the religious leaders would go so far as to cause Jesus to be killed. True, he lived and taught differently than they, but he didn't seem dangerous enough for them to try to bring about his death. Besides, the people didn't have to listen to him if they didn't want to.

In the past few months, I had spent a lot of time with Jesus and his company of followers. I never actually became a member of the group, but I did travel in their company. What Jesus did and said stirred me deeply, but not enough for me to make the sacrifices it looked like I would have to make if I really identified myself as a follower. I chose to stay on the fringes, watching and listening, and reflecting a lot on what I saw and heard.

Jesus was a remarkable person, wise and gentle and compassionate – and so clear about what he thought, and believed, and taught. I watched the multitude flock to him, seemingly hanging on his every word, and bringing people with every kind of infirmity to him to be healed. I noted, however, that, increasingly, there was a look of sadness in Jesus' face. I wondered why.

Wherever Jesus went, I went. It was natural, therefore, that I should head toward our capital city when Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem". (Lk. 9:51)

I was in the crowd that shouted his praises as he entered Jerusalem that fateful day. I was in the Temple when he drove the money changers out. I was near by and listening when he encountered the religious leaders and succeeded in evading every trap they set for him. They were furious.

Later, I overheard the religious leaders plot Jesus' death. It was true. They really were going to silence him even if death were the only way. Because they feared the reactions of the people, they decided against arresting him while he was teaching in the courtyard of the Temple. Instead, they arranged to send the Temple guards by night to the Garden of Gethsemane to take him captive.

I missed out on Jesus' celebration of the Passover with his disciples, and it was many days before I learned what had happened in the upper room that night. In a special way, Jesus shared the bread and the cup with them. "This is my body," he said, "This is my blood of the new Covenant. Eat and drink." I didn't really understand what he meant – not when I first heard what had happened.

I was already in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus and his disciples got there after the Supper. I hid in the shadows, afraid to let anyone know I was there. Even so, I could see and hear everything that took place. I noticed that Judas was not with them, but, at that time, I didn't know why.

Jesus was clearly very troubled. He seemed both to want to be alone, and to want his disciples with him – especially Peter, James and John. He asked them to watch with him while he prayed, but they were unable to do so. Each time he went a short distance from them to pray, they soon went to sleep. I was angry with Peter and the others that they could not stay awake and watch with Jesus, but I wasn't any help either. Although I heard his anguish, I felt utterly helpless to do anything for him. I knew the Temple guards were coming, of course, and I was too afraid to come out of hiding.

Apparently Jesus knew, too, that the Temple guards were coming for him. He seemed to be aware of the plot against him. If they arrested him, he would surely be put to death on a cross. He must have known it was not too late to save himself. He could slip away from the garden before the guards got there. If they captured him, he could deny the accusations against him. Or, if he had to, he could repent of his words and actions. To take any of these actions would possibly mean he would not have to die.

While I watched Jesus, I thought about what must be going through his head. "I don't want to die. Isn't there another way? Surely life is more precious than any teaching or action. How can defying and speaking against the religious leaders bring about changes that would justify dying? What harm would denying do if, as a result, my life were saved?"

I could imagine that Jesus was thinking about all that had been happening the past few months. Many people had been healed. Multitudes had followed him to listen to his words, although they seemed not to have really understood what he taught. He had spent many hours instructing the disciples, but even they seemed not to understand. They were still with him, but were very uneasy and fearful.

Considering the result of his effort thus far, who would be hurt if Jesus renounced all he had stood for? By so doing, he could save his own life.

No wonder Jesus was in such anguish. It was an excruciating dilemma. If he took any steps to save himself, he would be confessing to the disciples, and to all who had listened to his teaching, “What I have been teaching you is wrong. It is more important to do what is necessary to save your life than to risk your life for a teaching or a principle – or anything.”

As I watched Jesus, I sensed that he had made his decision, although, at the time, I couldn’t tell what it was.

It didn’t take long to find out.

With torches held high, the Temple guards stormed into the Garden. If it were not such a grim situation, I could have laughed at the disciples. They milled about in confusion, watched the guards with wary eyes, and seemed ready to flee at any further sign of danger. In sharp contrast, Jesus quietly and calmly walked directly up to the captain of the guards and said, “I am the one you are seeking.” By that action, Jesus declared for all time, “Saving your life at any cost is not what is most important. Loosing your life for the gospel of the Kingdom is. In the final count, this is life.”

“I am the one you are seeking.” As the guards roughly laid their hands on Jesus and led him away, every one of the disciples fled into the night.

The guards took Jesus to the Temple and into the presence of the High Priest. I followed along, but was careful not to attract any attention. I was as afraid as the disciples, but believed I was safe if I stayed in the shadows. Besides, no one knew that I had any connection with Jesus.

That night, and the next day, were a blur to me, although certain events were etched into my memory.

There was the scene in the courtyard of the Temple. Caiaphas, the High Priest was there, together with the scribes and the elders of the people, obviously quite upset. Jesus stood before them, a calm and slender figure in a seamless robe, with his hands tied behind his back. The guards crowded around him as if to make sure he didn’t try to escape them. All that might and power displayed, and there was Jesus, one lone, unarmed figure in their midst. There was something both grim and ludicrous about that scene.

There was Pilate. “I find no fault in him,” he said, and finally, he washed his hands in public to try to rid himself of responsibility for what he knew was going to happen to Jesus.

There were the Roman soldiers, hardened and feelingless men, who mocked Jesus, spat upon him, and crushed a crown of thorns hard upon his head.

There was the final encounter with the priests and elders of the people. They were determined to find an excuse that would force the Romans to put Jesus to death. And they did when Jesus did not deny that he was the Christ. In a frenzy, they cried out, “He is a blasphemer. You heard him. We need no other witnesses.” Any they condemned him to die on a cross.

In this manner his enemies used all their power to stop the threat Jesus was to them. They succeeded – or so it seemed. Jesus was arrested, tried, convicted, and crucified. He was no longer a threat – not by any standards they knew.

Only they were wrong. They did not succeed. They could kill his body, but they could not kill Jesus – and they did not. The cross – symbol of the use of all the power arrayed against God to defeat God and God’s purpose for God’s creation – did not accomplish that objective.

“So,” I asked myself, “Why did Jesus die on the cross?”

Because people who were threatened by Jesus and opposed him had the power to put him there, and, seemingly, to get away with doing so. They were willing for a man to die rather than to risk the loss of their own power and position.

Because Jesus, though facing death because of his life and teaching, remained faithful to the intentions of his life. “The kingdom of heaven is at hand,” he proclaimed over and over. The life that he lived was, and is, the life of the Kingdom.

Because Jesus believed that faithfulness was more important and more valuable than even is own life.

Because Jesus knew that, if his disciples saw and heard him put saving and preserving his own life as the priority above all priorities, they – and all of us – would be doomed to a life of fear and anxiety as we followed that example and focused on trying to save and preserve our own lives at any cost.

Because our salvation – our very life – is bound up in Jesus’ faithfulness. He paid the price for my sin all right. He chose faithfulness to the will of God over trying to save and preserve his life, and my sin – my choosing to try to save and preserve my life at any cost – helped to put him on the cross.

In a very real sense, Jesus, by dying on the cross, does take away my sin. If I will accept it, I am cleansed by the cross. I am freed from my enslavement to the tyranny of death. I am released to enter into the fullness of life for which God has created me.

I have told another story of the cross – a story that confronts me with a primal and primary choice. Do I make my first task in life to try to save and preserve my life no matter what the cost? Or, do I make my first task in life to live my life in faithful response to the unconditional love of God no matter what the cost?

Jesus made the decision. Will I make the same decision? Am I willing to commit my life to being a witness to the gospel of the Kingdom of God as Jesus did?

The choice is mine – mine alone.