

Isaiah 53:1-10, Luke 22:39-45

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Date: 07 April 2019

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you to Ian and the band. Very recently I read what you might call a very old report.

I discovered, really by chance in a sense, or you might say it was providential, a report from 1874. You probably wonder, why was I looking in Aberdeen journey from 1874?

Well, you can ask me afterwards the reason. But I discovered this report, and it's dated March 11th, 1874. The Aberdeen Evangelistic Association had its annual meeting in the Baptist Church Crown Terrace.

Mr. Clarence Chambers read a report of the work done by the association during the year. Now, any of you who, a bit of an historical sense, you might recognize the name Clarence Chambers.

He was the father of Oswald Chambers, whose book, *My Utmost for His Highest*, is the biggest selling daily devotional book in the world, period. Which is quite something.

[1 : 0 9] But anyway, I'm going to skip down the report, because it comes to the point where it says, The committee had asked Messieurs Moody and Sankey to visit Aberdeen. And although they had not got a definite statement as to the time they would come, they had got a promise that they would come after they had concluded their engagements in Glasgow.

And I find that very, quite touching, actually. Because at the time, Moody and Sankey, and I presume many of you have heard of them, the very famous evangelists.

Moody was particularly the preacher, and Sankey, he was the sort of gospel singer, leading on his little penny organ. Well, they had six months in Glasgow, in the Glasgow Green. And one of the, many thousands converted, but one of the things that came out of it was the formation of the Bible Training Institute.

And my mother, actually, was there for two years in the 1950s. So there's a slight connection, family-wise. But, indeed, Moody and Sankey came to Aberdeen, and they were in the music hall, and they were also on a hill, which I've sat on, actually, a couple of times overlooking Pataudry.

Not because I went to get, to save me the expense of going into the ground. I just sat on top of the hill and looked across. Well, apparently, back in 1874, they set up a little platform for Moody to preach from, and there were 15,000 that heard them preach.

[2 : 3 5] And many of the were converted at that time. And I understand, looking at the list, this might be of interest to you here, that those that were part of the Aberdeen Evangelistic Association included the West Parish Church, the Belmont Congregational Church, which I think was the one on Skeen Street, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, and the Free High Church.

So maybe that was your ancestral church. I'm not quite sure. Maybe some historian can tell you. Maybe Dr. Ian MacDonald. Now, the reason, partly, I told you that is because I was interested, on their journey, well, actually, they came to Aberdeen, successful campaign, then they went up to Duff House, via Old Meldrum, then across to Cullen House, big campaign, actually, at Duff House, and over to Inverness.

But one of their journeys, on this particular occasion, they went from Glasgow Queen Street, they took the train, and indeed, they took a first-class train, I believe, because Moody had this idea that God wanted them to look after themselves, so they made sure they were comfortable on a first-class train.

But he must have bought a daily paper, whatever it was, Aberdeen Journal, or maybe the Glasgow Herald, I'm not sure. But anyway, he bought this paper, and in the carriage, Sankey picked it up, and he noticed a poem written out by, you might say, an unknown poetess, an author from Fife.

And so he cut the clipping out and stuck it in his notebook. And then, Julie, they were in Edinburgh that particular evening, and indeed, I understand, and this is another connection to the free church, Horatius Bonar was the chairman of the meeting on the mound, and there were many thousands gathered for this particular meeting, and Moody preached one of his classic sermons on the good shepherd looking for the lost sheep.

[4 : 40] And at the close of his address, he turned to his colleague, Sankey, sitting at his organ, and said, do you have an appropriate hymn to close the service with? And Sankey couldn't think immediately, but then he thought about this poem he had cut out of the newspaper.

So he placed it on his organ, and on the moment, you might say almost inspired, not quite verbal inspiration, but on the moment, he was inspired to think of a tune, not only that, to keep the melody through all the verses, and some people still sing the hymn.

You may have heard of it, it was the 99 that safely lay in the shelter of the fold, but one was out in the hills far away, far off from the gates of gold, and the hymn became very popular, and people were, you might say, indeed, I'm sure, converted through hearing and singing those very words.

But in that particular hymn, there's a very, what I would call a very poignant verse, which touches on my theme tonight, which is a bit walking the path that Jesus took to the cross as a very lonely path.

Indeed, going to the, you might say, to the depths and to the darkness of loneliness, drinking to the very, the dregs of the cup, a bitter cup.

[6 : 01] And in the hymn, the authoress, it was actually called Mrs. Corvane, and she wrote it, and she was unknown in her own day, and died, but she wrote it because she had a brother who was actually an alcoholic, and she prayed for this, her brother's salvation, right through the whole of her life, and that's why the hymn was actually written about the 99, and one was out in the hills far away, it was her lost brother.

But in the hymn, she wrote these very poignant words, but none of the ransomed ever knew how deep were the waters crossed, nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through ere he found his sheep that was lost.

Jesus walked a very lonely path. A number of years ago, I was with my parents, we were down in Christchurch in Hampshire, Dorset, kind of area, and we took a day over to the Isle of Wight.

It's the only time I've been to Isle of Wight, and we went to see Alfred Ward Tennyson's house at Farringford, and in one of the rooms in Tennyson's old study, my mum quoted Cross in the Bar, you may have heard that poem, and I said, Mum, where did you learn that from?

Oh, my mother taught me that, and I was quite dumbstruck, because she'd never ever referred to her own mother. She died when my mum was 14, and we used that poem, actually, at my mum's funeral a year past summer.

[7 : 31] But after going to Farringford House, we then went to Osborne House, not so far away, which is where Tennyson's queen lived, Queen Victoria, and I believe that the Osborne House was built prior to Balmoral, and so it was another one of her summer residencies, and you could see the playhouse, for example, where the children would play.

But at the time when Prince Albert died, the queen was in residence at Osborne House, and she felt terribly alone, so she called her poet, Loretta, Tennyson, to come, you might say, and give her a bit of solace, a bit of comfort, comfort.

So Tennyson came along and he wrote this in his diary, sorry, in a letter to Victoria, he said, you are so alone on that terrible height.

Now if you've been to Osborne House, it is on a height, and there she was, all alone, although she had her home comforts, and indeed I'm sure she had the children round about her, of which there was quite a sizable family.

But Tennyson made a very poignant remark, you're terribly alone in that terrible height, and indeed you might actually argue, going by facts of history, Victoria never recovered from the loss of her husband, she always wore black to her own death.

[9 : 01] You might say she never got over that loss. But Victoria had, could draw comfort from the words of Tennyson and from friends and from family, all sorts of sources.

Round about the same time, there was a very famous, again another free church man, Principal Robert Rainey of New College in Edinburgh, and this particular man who was a very, a statesman, ecclesiastic, and well known, and a man of reputation, he had so many disappointments in his life, and he once recorded, recorded this, when he was asked, how do you cope, or how do you go on in the face of disappointments, and Robert Rainey said, oh you see, I am so happy when I am at home, I am so happy when I am at home.

In other words, yes he knew life had its disappointments and its hardships and its trials, but he could draw a solace from home life.

Even Victoria could have done that too. Another person at the same time was actually Prime Minister William Gladstone, and of course he had a lot of challenges and hardships in his life, but what he would do, he would come up to Feta Cairn to Fask House, and as it were, get away from the madding crowd, and get comfort and solace there.

Now why did I give those examples, and you could mention many, many more, it's because there's a contrast between them, and perhaps even with us, where we can find comfort, where Jesus could find none.

[10 : 47] There was no comfort for Jesus in his way to the cross. His was a very lonely path. So I'll give you an instance, it's very interesting how our editors of the Bible, how they divide chapters and verses up, and this is one where perhaps they shouldn't have divided it exactly that way, but it does actually highlight something about comfort and consolation.

It says at the end of the Gospel of John, chapter 7, and they went, everyone to their own home. In other words, we're talking about the disciples, and they had somewhere that they could go.

And then at the very beginning of the following chapter, with a semicolon, between, it says, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Now why did he not go to his own home like everyone else?

Well, Jesus himself said this, he said, the foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.

He's nowhere for comfort and for solace. Charles Wesley, one of the great hymn writers of the church, put it like this in one of his hymns, How Do Thy Mercies Close Me Round.

[12 : 08] He wrote, Inured to poverty and pain, a suffering life my master led, the Son of God, the Son of Man, he had not where to lay his head.

He had not where to lay his head. He had no comfort. He had no solace. Where many of us can find comfort somewhere.

Jesus drank, what I would describe as a bitter cup. And one ingredient of that cup was loneliness and being all alone. And there's actually steps.

You can detect this in various parts of the Gospels. where each step Jesus took on his journey towards the cross, indeed even the beginning in the wilderness, you might see that Jesus' path got lonelier and lonelier.

We're told, for example, upon this many of his disciples went back and they walked no more with him. They walked out on him.

[13 : 16] They abandoned him because they saw he was taking a path that they did not want to go. He wasn't fulfilling their desires or wishes. The people left him alone.

Consider it this way. When Jesus went for his trial, his what's called mock trial, there before Pilate in the praetorium, crying with his thorns and robed in rags, Pilate turns to the people, what shall we do with this Jesus who is called Christ?

And they all cried out with one in unison, crucify him, crucify him. And yet just days before, the same crowd had said, Hosanna to the son of David.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. In other words, people were fickle. The crowds were fickle. They were moved. They were swayed by opinions and feelings.

They weren't steadfast. And I think that's why the prophet Isaiah says of the suffering servant, he was despised and rejected.

[14 : 21] People just walked out of him and they considered him of no repute. It says, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

So the people, the general crowd, they left him all alone. But moreover, the disciples left him all alone. In Mark chapter 14 verse 50, it says, they all forsook him and they fled.

And Jesus saw them flee. And how lonely he must have felt. In John 16, 32, it says, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered everyone to their own home and you will leave me alone.

Even his nearest and his dearest left him alone. And then, of course, most awful of all, you might say, is his father, God, the father, left Jesus all alone on the cross.

Where we have those words of agony, my God, my God, why have you forsaken or deserted me? And again, the prophet Isaiah draws attention to this, where he says, I have trod in the winepress alone and from the people no one was with me.

[15 : 36] The people weren't with him. His nearest and dearest went with him. And God, it seemed, had completely abandoned him. Hence, Hugh Martin, who was a well-known free churchman back in the 19th century, he draws attention to the Garden of Gethsemane in one of his sermons.

And I find it really interesting, again, just like the Gospels portray, the more Jesus goes to the cross, the more lonely it becomes. But he takes the, he focuses in the Garden of Gethsemane, does Hugh Martin, and he takes it by step by step.

And you see each step leading to more loneliness. So, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus, to begin with, is with the living disciples.

They left the city with all its care and life behind them, and they're entering the garden. And the second step is when they are in the Garden of Gethsemane, the greater number of his disciples, they leave, and he advances further into the Garden with just three.

So, it's gone from three, sorry, from 11 down to three. Excuse me, I need a drink of water. And then Hugh Martin brings out, or draws to our attention, the third step, that Jesus, and he makes the choice, must leave those three also and go forward alone to meet the danger to wrestle and agonize with God concerning it.

[17 : 17] As we read in Luke, and he went a little further, he was withdrawn from them about the stone's throw, and he fell on his face, and he prayed, saying, O my father, if it be possible, let this cup pass for me.

Nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will. And the impression from this very vivid picture of this lonely man, in anguish, prostrate, as I can imagine, on the ground, sweating great drops of not just, you might say, a water, but of blood coming out of his veins, says Hugh Martin, ought to draw from us the liveliest and most inexpressible astonishment.

And I like that term. Should draw from us the liveliest and most inexpressible astonishment. This is the son of God, the son of man, with nowhere to lay his head, and he's lying in utter anguish there in that garden.

Wesley, Charles Wesley, portrays it again in one of his great hymns, And Can It Be? He wrote, 'Tis mystery all, the immortal dies. Who can explore his strange design?

You know, this is the question I'm going to look at in a moment. Why would Jesus choose this path of loneliness? What a strange design. In vain, the firstborn seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine.

[18 : 50] Why would Jesus choose this path of loneliness? Because it was a choice he made. It didn't just happen to him. He was responsible in a sense, and indeed it had been marked out for him before the foundation of the world.

It was as if to say, to use the words of Jesus himself, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground, it abides alone, but if it dies, it brings forth much fruit.

So he's choosing a path to be alone in order to bring forth fruit. I think the prophet Isaiah provides a clue to the answer why he chose it.

Jesus chose this path of loneliness. As we read in verse 5 of Isaiah 53, but he was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities.

The chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed. Jesus chose a path, and it didn't just happen to him in a moment, I would suggest.

[19 : 54] It was a path that he set out from the first day of his, you might say, his adult ministry, when he was sent by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tried and tested, to be all alone, resting with the powers of evil.

And again, in the Garden of Gethsemane, resting with the powers of evil. And on the cross, in that utter place of abandonment, he's wrestling with the powers of evil, of sin, and of death.

Jesus chose this path willingly because he knew he had to suffer before he could enter his glory. He knew he had to bear the cross before he could wear the crown.

That he had to pass the stroke of death's flaming sword before he could enter paradise. There was a choice there. You may know the story, I'm sure many of you know the story of Aslan and the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.

And in the story, you've got a bit, quite a parallel to the path of loneliness, where Aslan, who's a symbol of Jesus, is walking a path.

[21 : 09] And initially he's with the two girls. You might remember the story, Lucy and Susan. And they're wondering, why are you looking so sad? Why are your faces so cast down, your tail hanging low?

And they're asking these questions, and they join in the sadness. And there comes a certain point in the story, climbing the steep hill towards the stone table. Aslan turns to the girls and said, you must stop here.

I have to, to use the word, I have to go on alone. So Aslan is making a choice, a willing choice. But later he says to the girls, when he comes alive again, he says this, when a willing victim who committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the table would crack and death itself would start to work backwards.

backwards. So there's a purpose, you might say, a divine and eternal purpose in Jesus' minds. A plan before the foundation of the world.

He's walking a path of extreme loneliness beyond anything we can ever receive in life. And we all can have elements of that, but he walks this path in order to accomplish something to our benefit, indeed our redemption.

[22 : 31] Again, Isaiah 53, he shall see of the travail, or you might say the pain of his soul, and he shall be satisfied. He'll be pleased. Why? Because by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many, for he shall bear their iniquities.

He goes this path in order to reach out to us. You might say also to identify with us, because often in life we can be lonely and things can go wrong, but we know that we have a Savior who's walked the path before us and understands and walks with us as we believe that as Christians.

But he's walking a path alone, not only to bring that comfort, but he's doing it for our salvation, for our justification that we might be right with God. And that great verse in Corinthians, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty we might become rich.

Hugh Martin, in his sermon, goes on to say this, were we more with Jesus on the way, more given to cultivate the fellowship of his sufferings, more studious to enter into the mind and love of our suffering Savior, more sensitive to realize the deep glories of our redemption, as springing endlessly from the unfathomable abysses of the anguish of the Son of God.

We would be far more awake to the things that are unseen and eternal, and we would live both more holy and blessed under the powers of the world to come.

[24 : 22] So there's Hugh Martin exhorting us as God's people to follow in this path, to understand why Jesus went the path of loneliness, and to enter into it, to, as it were, become a partaker of his sufferings, that we might know the glory to come.

He goes on to say this, let us awake then to a more lively our faith, and a more penitent and grateful love to him who died for us and rose again. For it is high time to wake out of our sleep, for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. For he who lay prostrate on the ground in Gethsemane will someday come to sit on his great white throne. And so let us awake and serve him with faith and love, and fight under his banner of free and forgiving and sanctifying love. The love that braved, and I quote, that braved walking the path alone. It was love. Jesus' choice was based on love, love for us. Walking that path alone in order that we might taste that the Lord is good. And remember that he is holy, that we might not be ashamed at his coming again. Excuse me.

I just want to finish my address by a brief story from personal experience of a knowledge, you might call it a personal knowledge of, you know, Jesus going the path alone. I went back in 1996, and it's just unfortunate David's not here this evening because your minister, I think it's his uncle Alistair Ross, was one of my tutors at the Faith Mission College in the early 90s. Indeed I went to, I preached many times in the Free High Church in Oban. I know James Beaton there and I was in Mull. He was inter-modern, there was no minister, so I took all these services that walked on, I remember, in Tobermory. But I remember that year in particular, not because, well, I mean, all the times in those places, great people I met, but I must admit, I, after the year, I was physically and spiritually exhausted. And then just to, as it were, to rub salt in the wound, my sister got sexually abused, and I was just, I was absolutely, emotionally just wrecked by the whole experience. And so the doctor actually signed me off for a period.

And all I did, a little bit of activity, helping the children's club in South Lanarkshire, I kind of just lay low, to be really frank about it. But one of the things that I look back on with great fondness, and yes, I got nice letters from James Beaton, I recall, and other Free Church people, which meant a lot to me. And what my dad did actually, and this was the crumb of comfort, he got one of those boards, and he would pin these cards and these letters up on the boards for me to sort of be, you might say, draw solace from, because that people thought well, and they, and they were thinking of me. And that meant a lot. But I still recall thinking that as much as I appreciate peace, people's words of comfort, and, and their care and sensitivity, and I must admit, I've had a pretty tough past year, and there's been very little of that.

And, but I look back at that period where there were people were very thoughtful, Andy, and, and would write to me. But the thing that really, I remember from that time is that that was great, and it was important. And it's really important that we, we show the care as Christian people to those who, you know, that might be going through a period of suffering or being alone. And we do draw near. But the one thing I found is that nobody, not even the nearest and dearest could get right into the heart, into the nub, right into your soul, you might say. And what I really found from that experience, and I remember it quite vividly, because that's what got me back in my feet again, so it was healing in that sense, is that I came into a better understanding, and particularly reading the book of Hebrews, where Jesus identified with us, and he walks the path with us of our suffering, our humiliation, whatever happens, it might go wrong. He's there, and he's walking beside it, beside us, and he's in it with us. And that meant so much to me, that God really cares that much. And he understands, that was important too, that I understood that Jesus actually walked a path of loneliness for me and for us. And he did it for, so that we could continue on our own path through life, because life, as we all know, is not a bed of roses. Jesus enters our path, he journeys with us, he sustains as he gets underneath us. And from that we can draw draw what I would call true solace, and true comfort, and true peace. So again, just to quote Hugh Martin, let us awake, he says, let us serve this master, this Jesus, with faith and love, for he understands.

[30 : 02] Let us fight under his battle, for the love that braved walking the path alone, and never tasting that the Lord is good. And we remember that he is holy, that we might not be ashamed at his coming.

Amen. And we do that in our lives, our daily lives, for his name and for his glory's sake. Amen.