

For twenty-five years, God’s people have been away from home. This was far from voluntary. 25 years ago, the Babylonian armies swept through Judah and destroyed Jerusalem. The last time they saw the holy city, it was a wasteland of rubble and flame. 25 years ago. It’s been a long 25 years because they’re strangers in a strange land, but it’s not just that: they’re in Babylon because they blew it. They turned away from the Lord to a bunch of false gods that had no life or way to defend them. They thought they were invincible; after all, they had the temple, and as long as God was in His temple, there was no way that the city would fall. When the walls fell, the temple was vacant; since Judah had wanted nothing to do with God, the Lord consented to their eviction notice and departed. Jerusalem fell.

Of course, among those captives are some faithful people of God. They trusted Him and worshiped Him throughout the fall of Jerusalem. They confessed their sins and trusted in His promised Savior, still to come. But their faith has not shielded them from trouble in this world. Despite their trust, they are still captives in Babylon. Is it hopeless? Is this the end? Will Israel be no more? Will their children grow up culturally Babylonian? Has God departed forever? It is to these suffering believers that the prophet Ezekiel speaks comforting words.

In a vision, the Lord takes Ezekiel back to the hill of Jerusalem; and in the vision, the city is no longer in ruins. There are buildings, a temple, gates and a wall. And as Ezekiel looks to the East, the Lord returns to His temple. Though many might forsake Him, He does not forsake His people. As His glory fills the temple once more, He declares to Ezekiel, "Son of man, this is the place of My throne and the place of the soles of My feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the children of Israel forever." God promises that He has not abandoned them; no, He will be present forever. The captivity in Babylon will end. Many will even get to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild it.

Long after that captivity ends, there's another wasteland in Jerusalem. Oh, the walls and the buildings are still standing, and the temple looks stunning once again. But it's still a wasteland—a wasteland of faith. Once again, nearly all the people there have turned away from the one true God. They would say otherwise, because they believe that they are pleasing God because of the things that they do. They are good in His sight because they do good things. It's a common false god, this idea that people earn God's favor by being good. But it always leads people to trust in themselves more than God; from that point, it is only a matter of time until they hold God in contempt. And here we see many are so turned from Him that they are killing His Son.

Not just God's Son; this is Mary's Son, too. Her privilege of being the mother of Jesus has brought her both joy and sorrow. The joys of seeing Jesus grow have been many. There have certainly been a few worries along the way as well. Of course, Mary was duly warned; back when she and Joseph took Jesus to the temple on His 40th day, Simeon promised Mary, "A sword will pierce through your own soul also" (Lk. 2:35). The sword is never more piercing than now,

for the mother of Jesus stands below His cross, accompanied by the disciple John. Three hours will never be longer than when a mother watches her Son die in agony.

One might raise the objection: Is this fair? Where is God when all of this is happening? Why must Mary's soul be pierced? As Mary stands at the foot of the cross, Jesus speaks a second time. The first time was to pray for His enemies. This time, He speaks for the good of His mother; even on the cross, the Son obeys the 4th commandment. "Woman," He says, "Behold your son." "Son," He says to John, "Behold your mother." And from that day, John takes Mary into his own home to care for her. And this is a beautiful provision, here. John isn't just Mary's surrogate son. The Lord makes him a minister to Mary, because Jesus wants to make sure that His mother hears true hope.

What's true for the captives of Babylon is also true for the mother of Jesus as she stands below the cross. Past all of the sorrow and suffering and woe, this objective truth remains: God is faithful, and He will not abandon His people. How faithful? To the question, "Where is God that day?," we need not look far. He is just above Mary, dying on the cross to take away her sins. Although she suffers dearly that Good Friday afternoon, it is true that the Lord is present with Mary in her suffering; in fact, He is suffering for her so that, though she mourns, she will be comforted.

This scene at the foot of the cross brings to life what we know to be true: Christians face suffering in this world. It may not seem fair, and it is a stumbling block to many. If we are sons of God and heirs of eternal life, why does such suffering come along?

Scripture tells us. Remember how the world treated Christ, your King; and do not be surprised that the world treats His Church and His children the same way. The devil, the world and the sinful flesh each paint a target upon you, intending to make you as miserable as they are allowed; they know that you are redeemed, and they wish to make you believe that God does not care, that He has abandoned you. Therefore, there is suffering for the Christian; we must live lives under the cross. But under the cross isn't such a bad place to be—because that's where you can hear the crucified Savior speak. "Woman, behold your son," He declares, and "Son, behold your mother."

As Jesus directed Mary and John's attention to one another, He directs your attention to those who are near you today. Jesus gives us to one another in times of suffering. While we're busy asking the big questions like, "Where is God?" He is giving people to us who are willing to bear our burdens, walk with us in grief, pray for us and with us, and provide for us in tangible ways. Let us not overlook the ministry of compassion Jesus creates at the foot of his cross. He would have us be family to one another.

Any time can be a long time, especially when you don't want to be where you are. This will often be the case when you find yourself in suffering. But take heart and behold the Son; the Lord's suffering for the sins of the world had an end, as will yours. Furthermore, look around and behold the mothers and sons and fathers and daughters around you, who love Jesus as you do. You need not search high and low for people to serve. They share in the gifts of Jesus' cross with you.