

Were You There?

Scripture Allusions, Bible References, and Devotion for the African-American Spiritual, “Were You There?”

1. “When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves.

And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, ‘He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.’ The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine and saying, ‘If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!’

Now there was also an inscription above Him, ‘THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.’ ” (Luke 23:33-38)

Verse 1 (Sing or read together):

**Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
 Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
 O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
 Were you there when they crucified my Lord?**

2. "If a man has committed a sin worthy of death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.” (Deuteronomy 21:22-23)

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us-for it is written, ‘CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE’ - in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” (Galatians 3:13-14)

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Verse 2:

**Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
 Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
 O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
 Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?**

3. “Then the Jews, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away. So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him; but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.

And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe. For these things came to pass to fulfill the Scripture, ‘NOT A BONE OF HIM SHALL BE BROKEN.’^a And again another Scripture says, ‘THEY SHALL LOOK ON HIM WHOM THEY PIERCED.’^b” (John 19:31-37)

^a Exodus 12:46, Numbers 9:12, Psalm 34:20

^b Zechariah 12:10

Verse 3:

**Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
 Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
 O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
 Were you there when they pierced him in the side?**

4. “It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness fell over the whole land until the ninth hour, because the sun was obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two. And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT.’^c Having said this, He breathed His last.

Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he began praising God, saying, ‘Certainly this man was innocent.’ And all the crowds who came together for this spectacle, when they observed what had happened, began to return, beating their

breasts. And all His acquaintances and the women who accompanied Him from Galilee were standing at a distance, seeing these things.” (Luke 23:44-49)

° Psalm 31:5

Verse 4:

**Were you there when the sun refused to shine?
Were you there when the sun refused to shine?
O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when the sun refused to shine?**

5. “And a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man (he had not consented to their plan and action), a man from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who was waiting for the kingdom of God; this man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. And he took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid Him in a tomb cut into the rock, where no one had ever lain. It was the preparation day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.

Now the women who had come with Him out of Galilee followed, and saw the tomb and how His body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and perfumes. And on the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.” (Luke 23:50-56)

Verse 5:

**Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?**

Consider:

Imagine you were there as one of the eyewitnesses to the crucifixion, death, and entombment of Jesus. What emotions would you be feeling? Why?

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Pray:

In your own words, thank Jesus for enduring the pain and suffering He went through to pay the cost of our transgressions.

“But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5)

Comments/History:

“Were You There” focuses on the Biblical account of the crucifixion, death, and entombment of our Lord Jesus. The above five verses of “Were You There” are suitable during Holy Week and especially on Good Friday.

“Were You There” was likely composed by African-American slaves in the 19th century. (Ref. 3) It was first published in William Eleazar Barton's 1899 *Old Plantation Hymns*. (Ref. 3) In 1940, it was included in the Episcopal Church hymnal, making it the first spiritual to be included in any major American hymnal. (Ref. 4)

The five verses cited above (public domain) are taken from the 1989 United Methodist Hymnal. (Ref. 5) The African-American Heritage Hymnal (Ref. 6), the recently-published Glory to God Hymnal (Ref. 7) and the old Cokesbury Hymnal (Ref. 8) use the same five verses.

Some hymnals have deleted middle verses (e.g., Were you there when they pierced him in the side? Were you there when the sun refused to shine?) and added another last verse (Where you there when He rose up from the dead? – Ref. 9, and Were you there when he rose up from the dead? – Ref. 10). Those versions of “Were You There” are suitable for Easter.

The Open Hymnal Project provided the attached score for “Were You There” (Ref. 11).

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References:

1. Scripture quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*[®], Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
2. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/>
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Were_You_There
4. *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion*, LindaJo H. McKim, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993
5. *The United Methodist Hymnal*, The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989
6. *African American Heritage Hymnal*, GIA Publications, 2001
7. *Glory to God*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2013
8. *The Cokesbury Worship Hymnal*, Abingdon, 1938
9. *The Celebration Hymnal*, Word Music/Integrity Music, 1997
10. *The Worshipping Church*, Hope Publishing Company, 1990
11. <http://openhymnal.org/index.html>

Mr. Whitney V. Myers is a church music composer and arranger, as well as a devotion and Bible Study writer. Mr. Myers has published over 30 choral arrangements, hymns, and songs on the www.whitneytunes.com website. Mr. Myers is a graduate of Gettysburg College (B.A.), George Washington University (M.S.), and the University of Maryland (MBA, with honors).

Lyrics for the African-American Spiritual, “Were You There?”

Verse 1:

**Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?**

Verse 2:

**Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?**

Verse 3:

**Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
Were you there when they pierced him in the side?
O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they pierced him in the side?**

Verse 4:

**Were you there when the sun refused to shine?
Were you there when the sun refused to shine?
O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when the sun refused to shine?**

Verse 5:

**Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?**

Were You There?

GOOD FRIDAY

Words: African-American Spiritual, before 1899.

Music: 'Were You There' African-American Spiritual, before 1899. Setting: attr. Charles Winfred Douglas, 1940. copyright: public domain. This score is a part of the Open Hymnal Project, 2013 Revision.

♩ = 100

1. Were you there when they cru - ci - fied my Lord? Were you
2. Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree? Were you
3. Were you there when they pierced Him in the side? Were you
4. Were you there when the sun re - fused to shine? Were you
5. Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb? Were you

there when they cru - ci - fied my Lord?
there when they nailed Him to the tree?
there when they pierced Him in the side? Oh!
there when the sun re - fused to shine?
there when they laid Him in the tomb?

Some-times it caus - es me to trem - ble, trem - ble, trem - ble.

Were you there when they cru - - ci - - fied my Lord?
Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree?
Were you there when they pierced Him in the side?
Were you there when the sun re - - fused to shine?
Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?

6. Were you there when God raised Him from the tomb?
Were you there when God raised Him from the tomb?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when God raised Him from the tomb?