

THE PASSION EXPOUNDED

By Pastor Glenn Pease

INTRODUCTION

The following messages are a commentary on the film of Mel Gibson, *The Passion*. They give a deeper insight into the scenes of the movie.

CONTENTS

- 1. THE SAVIOR IN GETHSEMANE Based on Matt. 26:30-56**
- 2. LISTEN TO YOUR WIFE Based on Matt. 27:11-26**
- 3. A TERRIFYING VICTORY Based on Matt. 27:39-51**
- 4. TO HELL AND BACK Based on Matt. 27:45-54**
- 5. THREE HOURS IN HELL Based on Matt. 27:45-56**
- 6. SIMON OF CYRENE Based on Mark 15:15-26**
- 7. GUILTY BUT PARDONED Based on Luke 23:34**
- 8. LOVE'S RESPONSE TO HATE Based on Luke 23:34**
- 9. FORGIVENESS OF SIN Based on Luke 23:34**
- 10. THE WORD OF FAITH Based on Luke 23:39-46**
- 11. THE PERFECT PROMISE Based on Luke 23:43**
- 12. PILATE'S PERPLEXING PROBLEM Based on John 18:28-40**
- 13. THE CRUELTY OF THE CROSS Based on John 19:1-16**
- 14. I THIRST Based on John 19:28-29**
- 15. IT IS FINISHED Based on John 19:28-37**

1. THE SAVIOR IN GETHSEMANE Based on Matt. 26:30-56

A salesman said to me, "We all know you do not get something good for nothing." It turned out to be very true in regard to what he was selling. I began to think about this in relationship to the Gospel and concluded that it is both true and false. Salvation by grace through faith is the greatest gift man can receive, and he does nothing to deserve it. He is getting something for nothing, but if you think a little deeper you see that someone had to pay for that free gift. In fact, it was the most costly gift ever purchased, for it cost Jesus unimaginable agony and His very life blood. In our text we see the beginning of the payment for our redemption. There was a two-fold aspect of Christ's payment for our sin. There was one in Gethsemane, and the other on Golgotha. The first was mainly mental suffering, and the second was mainly physical suffering. Before we enter the garden we want to look first at-

I. THE SAVIOR'S SONG. v. 30.

We often think of Jesus as a man of sorrows, and that He was, but we more often fail to see Him as a man of song as well. No religion has been such a religion of song as Christianity. It began as such from the beginning. Even before His greatest sorrow we see Jesus and His disciples singing. All were doing so except Judas who had lost the song of his life when he left Jesus. He never sang another note.

What a delight it would be to hear this Apostolic choir singing. Do you wonder what it was they sang? Scholars tell us it is likely that we have the words to their song. It was the Passover season and the Jewish custom was to sing Psa. 113 to 118. It is likely then that Psa. 118 was part of their hymn. A heart filled with song is better prepared to face sorrow. As we see how rapidly Jesus went from singing to suffering, we see again how Jesus experienced life just as we do. He knows from experience how life can have sudden and sharp contrast. You can be happy in one moment and discouraged in the next. You can be singing one minute and sobbing the next. Jesus had just spoken of His joy, and in a matter of minutes He will be on His face with strong crying and tears.

Even in the darkest hours the Christian can sing, for God gives songs in the night. The Apostle Paul and Silas were in a dark damp dungeon and they sang. The martyrs at the stake often sang as they were perishing in the flames. The singing of the saints even in times of great suffering and sorrow has led many an unbeliever to want to become a follower of the Christ who sang just before His greatest suffering. If Jesus could sing just before this, and knowing the cross was soon to follow, then we ought not to be without a song. Next we see-

II. THE SAVIOR'S SORROW. v. 37-39

The hour which Jesus had so often spoken of was now approaching. He had always escaped before because His hour had not yet come. Now it had come and He was exceedingly sorrowful. The mental stress was so great that Dr. Luke says He sweat drops

of blood to indicate the intensity of it. There are several records of others who had this experience. The question comes as to why Jesus was under such stress. What was this cup that He had to drink that was so horrible to Him?

In verse 39 we see how earnest was His desire, for He fell on His face before God. There are times when a man does not ask what is the proper position to pray, but he just falls flat before God and pours out his heart. I remember the first time I felt this need to cast myself down. I was in high school and a situation came about in which I thought my father had drowned. It was near the raging falls and his car was near by but he was nowhere around. In fear that he had fallen in I ran to the car, fell on the seat, and cried out to God that my fears would prove to be false. Fortunately, they were.

If we have had this experience, it helps to understand Jesus, but His need was infinitely greater than what any man has ever experienced. If your heart ever feels like breaking with a burden too heavy to bear, remember that Jesus understands from personal experience. When no one else can understand you know He does. We sing the song No One Understands Like Jesus, and it is true, for no one has experienced sorrows on such an infinite scale.

Was it only the death on the cross that He faced? No, for even though this was cruelty at its worst, and even though all deserted Him, and He was hated and spat upon, whipped and crowned with thorns, this was not what caused this great sorrow of Jesus. His anguish in the garden was basically mental, and it arose out of the fact that He who knew no sin was going to become sin for us. Can you begin to grasp what this meant to the pure, holy and righteous soul of Jesus? To be sin is to be separated from God, and to be separated from God is to be in hell. Jesus was going to endure hell for us that we might escape it. It is difficult enough to be forsaken by friends, but to be forsaken of God is the ultimate abandonment.

Other men have suffered as much as Jesus did physically. He did not come just to bear our pain but to bear our sin, for on Him was laid the iniquity of us all. Strong men have cracked under the burden of their own sin, but Jesus bore the sin of the whole world. All the seething mass of wickedness from Adam to the day of judgment was placed upon Him, for His pure soul this was infinitely greater burden than any physical pain He suffered. What Jesus suffered in Gethsemane is beyond our comprehension, and we can only say that Jesus bore hell for us.

Adding to His sorrows was the lack of support and sympathy on the part of His disciples. Jesus, like all of us, found great comfort in the presence of those who care. Jesus asked only one thing of His disciples, and that was that they pray with Him and watch so that no one would intrude on Him as He prayed. He wanted to be ready and composed when they came for Him. Here was man's chance to really be of help to the suffering humanity of Christ, but they failed. How alone Jesus must have felt when He came and saw them sleeping.

Jesus had been surrounded by crowds most of His ministry, but few of them understood Him, and so He had His chosen group and inner circle, and still He was not

understood. He had to often get alone and commune with His Father. Companionship does not necessarily mean communion, and Jesus experienced what most of us do at sometime, which is a sense of loneliness even with others around. The true picture of loneliness is not a man on the desert alone, but a man in a crowded railroad station with people bumping him on every side, but with no one there to meet him. Loneliness is not just lack of people, but lack of concern and understanding in the midst of people. W. E. Sangster told of how he was ordained in New York, and all the others had families and friends around them and he had no one. He never felt so alone in his life. Jesus understands for He became more and more alone as He neared the cross. Little did His disciples know that the rest of history was going to be changed by what was happening. They were as unaware of the revolutionary nature of that hour as Rip Van Winkle was of the Revolution he slept through.

Just because we are blind to God's working does not mean He is not working. God is working out His plan of redemption even if we are asleep to what He is doing. When Jesus came the third time He just told them to sleep on, for it was too late now to give Him support. The battle is over and they did not support Him, but He does not scold for He recognizes that the flesh is weak. They miss their chance to cooperate with God in His great plan. They charged Jesus with not caring when the storm threatened to sink their boat, but He did care and He awoke and saved them. Now it was their chance to show they cared, but they slept through His stormy trial. So often we think God does not care about our needs, but the fact is, we are the ones who do not care, and we miss opportunities, like the disciples, to cooperate with God.

In verse 46 Jesus just told them to get up and they would go. They had missed their opportunity, but Jesus did not reject them and let their present failure stop them from being a part of His future plan. Jesus was sad that they let Him down, but He was not going to let them down. In the midst of His sorrows He was still fully supportive of them. Next we see-

III. THE SAVIOR'S SUBMISSION. v. 39, 42, 44

Here in a garden of beauty, like the first Adam, Jesus met the temptation to exercise His own will contrary to that of the Father's will. Great was the temptation to escape the cross. He knew they were coming for Him, and He could have escaped as He did on other occasions, but note His attitude: "If it is possible." Jesus desired desperately that He not have to become sin, but if it was the only way it was possible to save man, then He would submit. Three times He prays the same way, just as Paul asked the Lord three times to remove his thorn in the flesh. Both Jesus and Paul were denied their deepest desires, but they did not rebel. They submitted to God's will. Submission means to continue in the way of God's will even when God says no.

It was not possible that men could be saved by any other means than the cross. If it were possible, God would certainly have granted His Son's earnest request. Any plan of salvation that denies the necessity of the cross is a false plan. Jesus submitted to God's will and said, "If I must go through the dark to get to the light, then I will go." He did not try to bend God's will to fit His, but submitted Himself to God's will. Jesus

submitted to God's plan in the garden, and this gained Him the victory which enabled Him to lay down His life and go to the cross voluntarily in peace. Jesus had His mental battle all won before He entered His work so that all would be voluntary and calmly accepted. The real battles of life are spiritual, they are between serving our own will or surrendering to God's will. Jesus had conquered His will and surrendered to the will of the Father in the garden, and so He could freely lay down His life. Finally we see-

IV. THE SAVIOR'S SURRENDER. v. 47-56

Why would they come with swords and staves? Jesus was someone to be reckoned with, for only a few days before He drove men out of the temple single handed, and escaped before they were able to arrest Him. John records that those coming to arrest Him now were so amazed at His courage and calmness that they fell backwards when He said, "I am He whom you seek." They were not sure He would practice what He preached in turning the other cheek and loving His enemies.

How Judas could betray Him with a kiss is beyond us. It was a common greeting, of course, and it was easier to see him doing this in the dark than if he just pointed to Jesus. What Judas did was terrible and yet Jesus called him friend in verse 50. Spurgeon says that we might have excused Peter if he had struck Judas instead of the servant Malchus, but Jesus not only taught us to love those who hate us, He practiced it. His last miracle before the cross was for an enemy, as He healed the ear of Malchus. He gave practical proof of the sincerity of His last word on the cross, which was "Father forgive them."

Peter, as usual, tries to help out in a wrong way by striking Malchus. He showed his desire to keep his boast of dying for Jesus, for by doing this he did risk his life. Jesus tells him to put his weapon away and He heals Malchus. Tradition tells us that he became a believer. If it was just a matter of power Jesus would not need His disciples to fight for Him, for He had 12 legions of angels that would have rescued Him. That represents about 72 thousand angels, and we know that it only took one to slay an army of 185 thousand in the Old Testament. There was no lack of power at the command of Jesus, but power could not save man, only love could do that, and Jesus laid down His life in love.

How anxious the angels must have been to see their Lord being treated by a mob as if He were a common criminal. But Jesus did not call upon this power, for He must give himself up or give us up. The disciples saw it later, and now we see it too. Let us thank God that Jesus did not let the failure of His disciples lead Him to call it quits, or to call upon the angels to deliver Him. Thank God for that victory He gained in Gethsemane that led Him to go to the cross for our salvation.

The paradox here is that this place of terrible agony and pain became also a place of comfort for our Lord as he headed for the cross. Gerald Kennedy says that in France at one of the great healing shrines where thousands of people go each year they have a number of hotels and motels to accommodate them. One hotel is called Gethsemane. But the additional words on the sign made it seem anything but an appropriate name, for underneath were the words, "With all modern comforts." My first thought was of the

great contrast between Gethsemane and comfort. They did not fit together, but then as you examine the record you realize this is not the case at all.

Jesus went to Gethsemane, not just on that Thursday night before the cross, but often to be alone in the midst of its beauty to commune with His Father. And even this last time, though it will be filled with an agony that is beyond our grasp, it ended with Jesus being fully comforted and committed to the will of God, which meant the cross. Gethsemane was both a place of trial and triumph. It was a place of comfort after all, and because of the great victory Jesus won there, it is a place of modern comfort as we who benefitted by that victory look back. It was a battleground, but also a victory garden, for here Jesus conquered the last temptation to avoid the cross.

LISTEN TO YOUR WIFE Based on Matt. 27:11-26

Is there a man alive whose wife has never said, "You should have listened to me?" The pages of history are red with the blood of men who should have listened to their wives. Calpurnia pleaded with Caesar on that fatal Ides of March not to leave the house. She had a restless night, and three times she cried out in her dream for help. It was a sign to her, and she urged her stubborn husband to heed her warning. But Caesar was not about to join that pathetic minority who give credence to the silly feelings of their wives. He would rather die than admit a woman's intuition had any validity, and so he went out for the last time and died.

In our text we are looking at another Roman leader who was equally heedless of his wife's warning. Claudia Procula was her name, and she was the wife of Pilate. She was the only person who came to the defense of Jesus while he was on trial. Jesus would not defend Himself, but Claudia had a dream about Jesus, and she sent word to her husband not to have anything to do with this innocent man.

In typical macho fashion Pilate ignored the message and made the biggest blunder of his life. He sent Jesus to the cross. Because he did not listen to his wife he has been despised all through history on a level next to Judas. Jesus would have died anyway, for it was His plan to do so, and the Jewish leaders would have defied Pilate. Nevertheless, by listening to his wife he could have become a noble hero. There could have been St. Pilate churches all through history, and Pilate could have become a popular Christian name. But Pilate blew it because he would not listen to his wife.

Her lone voice said to Pilate, He is innocent, and it is wrong to condemn an innocent man. Don't do it. But the loud voice of the mob mobilized by the enemies of Jesus cried out for His blood. Who do you listen to-a mere wife or mean crowd? The majority of men in Pilate's sandals would probably make the same choice. What does a woman know about the ways of the world and political maneuvering? Am I supposed to make major judgments based on her dreams? Nonsense! I have to deal with political realities, and

this clamoring crowd is no dream. These people are out for blood, and if I don't give it to them it may be mine they will be after. I know the man is innocent, and nothing He has done is worthy of death. Yet what is to be gained by sparing one innocent man and making a mass of people mad at you. Better one innocent man dies unjustly than risk many being hurt or killed in a riot.

Pilate did resist the injustice before him. He tried to get Jesus released, but they choose Barabbas instead. He did wash his hands of the whole ordeal and say I am innocent of this man's blood. But in the final analysis he refused to listen to his wife, and handed Jesus over to be crucified. He is now infamous for being the man who sent the Savior of the world to the cross.

From the beginning of the second century Christians have recited the Apostle Creed which begins, "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ His Son who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate." Caesar only died because he did not listen to his wife. Pilate lives forever in infamy because he did not listen to his wife. It is high risk to ignore your wife. If this verse tells us nothing else, it tells us that a wife may have insight that a husband lacks, and, therefore, it is wise to listen to her.

This dream Claudia had spoke to her, and she made it clear to Pilate, but he did not listen. It speaks to us also and we are wise if we give heed. This dream did not come to Pilate himself, but came through his wife. God could have just as easily had Pilate dream the dream, but He did not do so. He gave the dream to Claudia, and she, because she was a loving and concerned wife, sent the message of it to her husband. God makes it clear that we do not get all truth and guidance directly. Often we get it through others who love us and want God's best for us. It is a terrible pride that keeps men from listening to their wives or others who care about them. If God wants to tell us something a man thinks, he can talk to me directly, and not go through my wife, mother, grandmother, or any other person in my life.

Claudia obviously loved her stubborn husband or she would not have sent him the warning. But Pilate was not open to advice and guidance from such a source. Woe to the man who will not listen to the dreams of others as possible guidance for him.

**He would not go to school
Where the teacher was his wife.
Thus, he became a fool,
And missed his greatest chance in life.**

Pilate did not pay any attention to the dream, and the fact is, most people pay it no attention, but we want to focus on it, for it was the only positive note in the journey of Christ to the cross. Harold Bell Wright in, *The 13 Truly Great Things Of Life* says, "Of the 13 truly great things of life, dreams are first." He goes on to say that what many of us become begins with our dreams. This is certainly true for Pilate's wife. She would have been a famous lady of her day, but her lasting fame for all time was due to this dream she had that put her into God's revelation.

It is a mystery why God allowed the record of her dream to be recorded by Matthew. It almost seems totally irrelevant, for Pilate does not seem to have been impressed, and as far as we know it had no effect on the outcome of the trial of Jesus. We would not expect it to prevent the cross, for that was the goal of Jesus. He would not inspire a dream to prevent His own goal. The seeming irrelevance of the dream is what lead Martin Luther to the conviction that the dream must have been inspired by Satan as a last ditch effort to stop Jesus from going to the cross. The evidence will not support such a conviction.

Pilate already knew that the Jewish leaders had handed Jesus over out of envy. He was working for the release of Jesus, but gave in to the persistent demands of the Jewish leaders and their rabble-rousers. The dream of his wife only confirmed what he already knew, but it did not altar the outcome because of the bitter hatred of the leaders of Israel. The point is, whether God or Satan inspired the dream, it does not seem to have had any measurable impact on the situation for good or evil.

So why is it here? For one answer we can look at Matthew's interest in dreams. He is the dream collector of the New Testament. The word for dream here is ONAR, and it is used just six times in the New Testament, and all six come from the pen of Matthew. If not for Matthew's interest in dreams we would have none of the four references to the dreams of Joseph by which he was guided to receive the baby Jesus as virgin born, and by which he was led to flee to Egypt, and later to bring Jesus back to Israel. The wise men were also warned in a dream to flee from Herod. Five of the six dreams deal with the birth and childhood of Jesus. Only the dream of Pilate's wife deals with the other end of his life-his trial and death.

What are we to make of these facts?

- 1. It is the only dream in the Bible of a woman.**
- 2. It is the only dream concerning the end of Christ's life.**
- 3. It was a disturbing dream that was more like a nightmare.**

It is only speculation, but here is what Edwin Markham, the poet, felt Claudia's dream was all about. It appeared first in 1902 on the cover of an American magazine called Success. It is to long to share it all, but here is the essence of it.

**Oh, let the Galilean go, strike off his cruel bond:
Behold the fathomless silence and those eyes that look
beyond.
There's more than mortal in that face, -than earthly in this
hour:
The fate that now is in the bud will soon be in the flower.
O Pilate, I have suffered many things in dream today.
Because of this strange teacher of the strait and mystic way.
I saw Him hanging on a cross, where the stones of Golgoth
are:
Then laid, at last, in a guarded tomb, under the evening star.**

I saw him rise again one dawn and down a garden go,
Shining like great Apollo white, our god in the silver bow:
And then the wind of vision tore the veil of time apart,
And love of him ran greatening from camel-path to mart;
His story was a wonder on the eager lips of men,
The scourged Galilean walked the roads of earth again.
I saw Jerusalem go down before the wrath of spears,
And turn into a field of stones under the trampling years.
World-battles roared around this man, the world's myster-
ious king;
But over the storm of the ages I could hear the seven stars
sing.
Rome crumpled and I heard a voice across the ruin laugh;
A power had risen on the world, shaking the thrones as chaff.
And down the ages ran your name, a byword and a jeer:
"He suffered under Pilate!" sounded ever in my ear.
The deeds of some are clean forgot, but yours did breathe
... .. and live;
Some are forgiven in the end, but none could you forgive.

It is, as I said, only speculation, but even the great Spurgeon agrees that it is likely Claudia saw in her dream the crucifixion. She states clearly that she suffered, and what could her suffering had been but the vision of this innocent man being crucified unjustly. Claudia would have been the first person to witness the crucifixion. It was in a dream, but it was very real. Spurgeon goes on to speculate that she may have also seen in her dream that this just man would one day be sitting on a great white throne judging the world. This man her husband was about to judge would be the judge of all men, and her husband was about to condemn the only man worthy to judge all men. Why else would she be so disturbed, and why would she rush her message to Pilate? It could not wait until he came home for he was making the most important decision of his life.

The second fact is that the dream is a valid channel by which God has communicated to both men and women. The dream is still a possible channel for God's guidance in our lives. It would be folly to suggest that all dreams have some significance, but it is equal folly to dismiss them as being irrelevant. The great scholar Dr. Benjamin B. Warfield of Princeton Seminary wrote in, *Hasting's Dictionary Of Christ And The Gospels*, an article on dreams. In it he makes this statement, "We surely can find no difficulty in recognizing the possibly and propriety of occasional Divine employment of dreams for the highest ends."

What he is saying is revelation by dreams is real but rare. We are not to look to dreams as a primary source of guidance. God gave us His word for that. But He may on occasion give us guidance through our dreams. Pilate's wife could have dismissed her dream as a meaningless nightmare, but she took it seriously and sent a message to her husband because of it. Was she a foolish woman to do so? Not at all. According to Christian tradition she became a believer because of her dream. So we learn it is not only wise to listen to our wives: It is wise to listen to our dreams, and recognize they may

be conveying to us a message from God.

A. J. Gordon, the famous Baptist preacher and author of the late 19th century, had a dream that changed his whole ministry. He saw a stranger come into his church while he was preaching, and after the service the stranger just disappeared, but he knew it was Jesus. He realized that if Jesus was in his service he had to preach in such a way that his Lord would be pleased. He wrote, "It was a vision of the deepest reality. Apparently we are most awake to God when we are asleep to the world."

John Newton, author of *Amazing Grace* and many other great hymns, was a captain of a ship when he had a strange dream about a ring that was to keep him secure. But he was ridiculed for trusting in that ring, so he took it off and threw it into the sea. Then a stranger came and offered to dive to the depths and recover the ring. When he came up with it he did not give it back. He said, "I will keep it for you and be forever by your side." He knew it was Jesus, and when he awoke he left his life as a sea captain and became a pastor. He was one of the most famous pastor's in history, and it was a dream that changed his whole life.

History is full of such life changing dreams, and Pilate could have been a hero had he listened to the dream of his wife. Modern Jews have seriously considered having a retrial of Jesus and reversing Pilate's decision. There was so much that was illegal that the most mediocre lawyer could have secured the release of Jesus. The dream could have done it too. The dream was the only defense Jesus had, but it was enough if Pilate would have listened. He is innocent, he is faultless, stainless, and guiltless. God's plea for His Son was, "Not guilty!"

Claudia believed her dream and knew Jesus was being framed. Because she believed, she, the granddaughter of the Emperor Augustus, went on to become famous for the serving of Christ, while Pilate went on to become infamous for the suffering of Christ. The difference being, one believed and the other disbelieved the dream. Because Claudia gave heed to her dream she wrote part of the New Testament. It is only a sentence, but that one sentence is a powerful testimony. She is the only female who wrote part of the New Testament. No man spoke up for Jesus. Only one woman did, and she said He is just and righteous, and not worthy of the vile treatment He is getting. Without this one sentence coming from a woman's dream, there would have been not a single word of testimony in Christ's defense.

I really don't know what difference it makes, but God went out of His way to get this one testimony in His Sons defense. However irrelevant it may seem to us, it was important to God, and Pilate's wife was apparently the only mind God could use to accomplish this task. The mind of one woman was open to receive this revelation. That is why we need to listen to our wives. Sometimes they are the only ones listening to God. Let me share more illustrations of this reality. David was about to act in anger and kill the fool Nabal for his refusal to help feed his men in an emergency situation. Abigail pleaded with him not to do this great evil. David listened to the voice of this woman who later became his wife. He calmed down, and got control of his emotions, and he realized she had saved him from folly. He said, "Blessed be thy advice and blessed be thou, which

hast kept me this day from coming to shed blood.."

Abraham Lincoln listened to his wife Mary Todd when she refused to go to Oregon. This kept him in Illinois where the summons reached him to go to Washington where he became the President of the United States. Had she not intervened, G. Hall Todd says, "Lincoln might have known only the virtual oblivion of a Pacific coast outpost." President Theodore Roosevelt once remarked that there had never been a time when he failed after listening to the intuitive suggestions of his wife. We don't want to give a false impression that wives are not fallen sinners, for they are. Job refused to listen to his wife when she urged him to curse God and die, and this was clearly God's will that he not listen to her. Wives are not the infallible voice of God. It is just that they can be a channel of God's wisdom when other channels are not open. Therefore, it is just practical wisdom to listen to your wife. She may not always be right or wise, but it is always wise to at least listen.

3. A TERRIFYING VICTORY Based on Matt. 27:39-51

I remember learning a poem when I was a boy, which you will no doubt recognize. The first lines were, "Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are." I have been told that this poem is out of date, for the scientifically educated modern child can say, "Twinkle, twinkle little star, I know precisely what you are." Then they can go on and describe how much oxygen, hydrogen and other elements compose the star. Because of the rapid advance in knowledge, that which was mysterious and awe-inspiring to one generation may be understood common knowledge to the next generation.

Good Friday, however, brings us to a subject where men of all ages stand in awe, for it brings us to the cross. Ever since that awesome event on Golgotha's hill men have looked at the cross and thought, "Wonder of wonders that Jesus so loved me." Certainly any believer has experienced something of the feeling of the poet who wrote,

I wonder as I wander out under the sky
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die,
For poor on'ry people like you and like I.
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.

Martin Luther one day determined to understand the cry of Christ from the cross. He sat down to meditate, and for a long time without food or drink and little movement he concentrated on the cross. Finally, he broke his silence with a cry of amazement: "God forsaken of God, who can understand that?" No one since has ever claimed to fully understand, and we shall not begin to grasp it all, but if we cannot exhaust it, we can at least examine it, and I trust go away with a deeper understanding of the meaning of the cross.

THE TEMPORARY TRAGEDY AROUND THE CROSS. v. 39-44

I use the word temporary because even the hate and evil of those who crucified Jesus was forgiven, and they too were free to accept the pardon, which He purchased on that cross. We first see those who passed by. The cross was on a hill near a main road going into Jerusalem, and so many going to and from could see the cross. Many were passing by on the way to the city, possibly even to worship in the temple. They would see Him who said, "Destroy this temple and in 3 days I will raise it up." Seeing Him they cried out, "Where is your boasting now? Come on and let us see some of that power of yours. Come down and show us." There was not a sign of sympathy as they went on their way totally unconcerned about His suffering. It would have made no difference if they had seen Him in a ditch having been beaten by robbers. They did not care, for how could His suffering affect them. There was not a Good Samaritan among them.

People have not changed, for they are still self-centered, and only things that interest them and profit them are of any concern. They do not see the sufferings of others. We have to ask ourselves if we were on that road to Jerusalem, would we have been concerned? Are we so wrapped up in our own problems that we do not see the burdens others are bearing? John Wesley had to learn the hard way. He rebuked a man in anger for his small contribution to a worthy cause. He knew the man had a good income and it angered him that he gave so little. The man looked him in the eye and said, "I know a man who buys in the market once a week and boils parsnips in water and lives on that all week." "Who is that?" asked Wesley. "I am that man." Wesley responded, "I don't understand." The man explained, "I made many debts before I became a child of God, and now my goal is to repay them." Wesley thought only of his perspective, and he did not see from that man's perspective. So it was for those who passed by the cross.

This tragic self-centeredness is seen even more clearly in their cry for Him to come down and then they would believe. This is the height of self-centered pride. Man is dictating the terms by which he will believe. Man is demanding that God conform to his will or he will not believe. People still do this, and they say if God will do such and such, then they will believe. Leslie Weatherhead tried this and when it failed he woke up to realize he was reducing God to a magic rabbit's foot. He realized that God is not a cosmic slave who runs our errands. We can thank God He did not answer that foolish prayer and come down from the cross, for had He done so we would have had to take His place. Tragic is their blind self-centered request, but more tragic would it have been to have had that request granted.

They cried, "Save yourself," or in other words, "Be like us and put self first and second, and everyone else last." What they said amounted to, "Stop saving us and we will believe." Thank God that Jesus knew if He would save others, He could not save Himself. By dying on the cross Jesus made the tragedy around the cross only temporary.

THE TERRIBLE TRIUMPH ON THE CROSS. v. 45-46

The cross was a victory, but it was not an easy battle. We cannot begin to grasp the

meaning of these verses, but they are so significant that we must try. Jesus had hung on the cross from 9 until noon, and then came three hours of darkness and silence. The clamoring of people stopped. There was no more shouting and reviling. Men suddenly feel that things have been taken out of their hands, and something is going on that is deeper than they can know.

What was the darkness? Some say it was an eclipse, or poetically the sympathy of nature, or God's expression of sorrow. None of these are likely as an explanation. G. Campbell Morgan feels these 3 hours are the most significant of the whole of account of the crucifixion. In that period all the forces of Satan, the prince of darkness, were gathered together to quench the Light of Life, and Jesus had to face him alone. He was forsaken by family, friends, followers, and now when He most desperately needed Him, He was forsaken even by His Father. This was that which caused Jesus to sweat drops of blood in Gethsemane. This was the cup He so dreaded to drink. He became sin for us, and was forsaken by God to be left in the hands of Satan. No one ever knew such darkness. Daniel went into the lion's den, but God was there. Shadrack, Meshack, and Abed-nego went into the fiery furnace, but God was there. Jesus went into the den of Satan and the fires of hell, but no one was there, and He was all alone.

The Apostle's Creed says that Jesus descended into hell during the 3 days in the grave, but it seems that if Jesus ever went to hell it was in these 3 hours of darkness, for what is hell but separation from God. Here is the only time where Jesus was forsaken by the Father. If Satan could have held Him, the light of the world would have gone out forever. It is easy to see the terror side of these words, but where is the triumphant side? This is seen in the fact that Jesus has conquered the darkness and the light continues to shine. The words are past tense, and they are spoken, not in the hour of terror, but after that hour. Both the Greek here and the Septuagint of Psa. 22:1 are past tense. Matthew says it was about the 9th hour, and so it was at the end of darkness that Jesus said, "My God, my God why did you forsake me?"

There were no words during the 3 hours of darkness, but now at the end the Father returns and Jesus cries out to Him, "Why did you leave me?" It is as if I left my son in a dark room and for several hours of terror he sits in fear. Finally, I open the door and he cries out, "Daddy, daddy why did you leave me here?" He does not cry out until I return. We see Jesus coming through this ordeal, and He is reconciled with the Father. God and man were reconciled on the cross, and Jesus had to be reconciled with His Father to make this possible for all men. Jesus had successfully atoned for the sin of the world. The price of man's redemption has been paid, and now it is possible for all to come to the Father, for Jesus is now the way.

We could never have known the price He paid had He not uttered these words. So great is the price that some cannot believe it, and they say Jesus is only quoting Psa. 22 in delirium. No one can understand such a sacrifice, for no one has ever gone to hell and back. No one ever could but Jesus, for He was the only perfect sacrifice that could take our sin and still return from that realm of separation from God. One thing we can understand is why God, after seeing His Son pay such a price, is a consuming fire to all who trample under foot the blood of the cross. You cannot take the cross too seriously.

**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.**

4. TO HELL AND BACK Based on Matt. 27:45-54

One of the greatest paradoxes of history is the story of the young English sailor by the name of Noble. His job was to deliver a large cannon from Portsmouth, England to Boston in the Colonies in the mid 1700's. After two days on the ship HMS INTREPID, they encountered heavy weather. Ensign Noble hurriedly secured the cannon thinking these ropes should hold it, for it doesn't look like that much of a storm. But he was wrong. It was so intense that the cannon broke loose and began to rumble across the deck, and they could hear the sound of wood splintering below. Ensign Noble came on deck just as the loose weapon was rolling toward two sailors who were busy trying to untangle some sails. He threw himself in front of the cannon and stopped it before it hit its shipmates, but both his legs were broken by the weight of the cannon. This is where the saying "Under the gun" came from.

The next day, the entire crew assembled for a special ceremony as the captain of the ship bestowed on ensign Noble his country's highest award for heroism. He was in great pain as the cheers went up, and the captain pinned on the medal. But then the captain called for silence, for he had a more solemn duty to perform. Since the young ensign was the cause for the problem in the first place for not securing the cannon properly, the captain pronounced him guilty of dereliction of duty and sentenced him to die before a firing squad; the sentence to be carried out immediately. He had just become a hero for saving lives, and then was shot for being guilty of endangering lives. What a paradox! He was a hero and a condemned criminal at the same time.

This same perplexing paradox confronts us as we look at the cross. Is Jesus dying as our hero saving us from the consequences of sin? Yes he is, and that is why we glory in the cross. On the other hand, is he dying because he deserved to die, and was actually guilty? Look at the circumstantial evidence against Jesus.

- 1. He was betrayed by one of his closest companions. It is suspicious when one of your own inner circle betrays you. It hints at something being known that is not available to the public.**
- 2. The rest of his disciples fled and did not fight to release their master. There seems to be great doubt about his claims when he is so treated by his core group.**
- 3. The highest court in the land convicted him of blasphemy. These were the most godly and learned leaders of Israel. If they can't be trusted, who can?**

4. The mob of common people chose a known murderer to be released instead of Jesus. They wanted Barabbas set free and clamored for the crucifixion of Jesus.

Now this circumstantial evidence does not convince us because we know they were all blind, and Satan was pulling their strings. They were mere puppets for the forces of evil in their sinister plot to kill the only truly innocent man who ever lived. But then we come to the fourth word of Jesus on the cross, and we are shocked for it seems that God, the ultimate judge, has reviewed all of this evidence and agrees with the sentence. The supreme court of the universe let's the lower court's judgment stand.

When Jesus cries out, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me!" He admits he has been forsaken by the one Person we expected to be his supporter to the end. But God cast his vote with the rest and says, guilty. How could his sinless Son be so godlessly guilty that he was worthy of the cross? How can our Savior hero be abandoned as a guilty criminal? The answer is, Jesus became our substitute. He took our place and became as guilty as the sinners he died for. Paul put it clearly in II Cor. 5:21, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

What a paradox! The sinless one becomes the very embodiment of sin, and thus, is worthy of all the judgment that sin deserves. Jesus was, in fact, guilty of the sin of the whole world. He was God-forsaken because he was the object of all God's wrath on sin. He was worthy of all that sin deserved, and this means hell and total separation from God. The greatest punishment of history was inflicted on Jesus because he was guilty. He was as guilty as the sin he bore, and he bore the sins of the world. You may never have owed anybody a dime in your life, but if you take on my debts and the debts of others, you are responsible to pay them. Jesus never sinned, but when he took on your sin and mine, he was responsible to pay the penalty. Innocent? Yes! But still as guilty as sin. In the cross we have the perfect paradox, for we have two complete opposites, but both are true at the same time. He was innocent and guilty.

All of this background explains the most mysterious words ever uttered by Jesus, which is the fourth word from the cross about being forsaken by God. God forsaken by God! The Son abandoned by the Father! It can only make sense in the light of Jesus being made sin and becoming guilty for all the sin of the world. Spurgeon said, "At that moment the finite soul of the man Christ Jesus came into awful contact with the infinite justice of God." It was like two incompatible chemicals coming together that cause an explosion, and when the holiness of God confronted the soul bearing all the sin of the world, he was repulsed and abandoned that soul even though it was the soul of his own Son.

Had Jesus not suffered this abandonment he would not have paid for our sin, for that was the just penalty. He had to drink the full cup of judgment, and drink it dry to the last drop or man would still have hell to pay. Jesus could not atone for sin half way. He had to go all the way or there was no point in going any of the way. If you are going to build a bridge only half way across a river, you just as well not bother, for half a bridge is not an improvement over no bridge at all. Half an atonement for sin would be equally

worthless. Had Jesus never been forsaken by God to endure hell for us, he never could have said the words, "It is finished." What good would it be had he said, "It is half done?"

So this horrible word out of the heart of a terrorized Savior is, in fact, good news. It is a paradox that such an awful experience can be the foundation for good news, but it is. Because Jesus was forsaken we can count on his promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." He took all the forsakenness necessary, and now can assure all who come to him that they will never need to taste of hell and be God forsaken. There is no need, for that penalty has been fully paid. Because of Jesus, man owes nothing to the kingdom of darkness. Hell is paid off, and man is debt free in Christ.

The fact that there was three hours of darkness before Jesus spoke this word reveals he had been in the darkness of hell, and the fact that his next word was, "I thirst" is symbolic of this as well. The one request of the rich man in hell was for a drink of water, or even one drop. Darkness and thirst are the two experiences of Jesus as he spoke these words. He was God-forsaken in darkness, and He was thirsty. Jesus was in hell for you and me.

Why did they nail him to Calvary's tree?
Why? Tell me, why was he there?
Jesus the Helper, the Healer, the Friend,
Why? Tell me, why was he there?

All my iniquities on him were laid,
He nailed them all to the tree;
Jesus the debt of my sin fully paid,
He paid the ransom for me.

And what was the price? It was hell. Is there hell on earth? There was for Jesus, for in those three agonizing hours of darkness Jesus experienced literal hell, which is separation from God that leaves one absolutely alone. This word is Jesus' *Et tu Brute!* as the Father joins all the others in forsaking him, leaving him to pay the penalty for the world's sin alone.

Hundreds of thousands of sermons have been preached on these words of despair, but no one pretends to be able to explain their depths fully, for we would have to go through hell ourselves to grasp them, and Jesus did this so we would never have to know or experience this depth of separation from God. Spurgeon says it for all the great preachers of history, "Well may I tell you that this unutterable darkness, this hiding of the Divine face, expresses more of the woes of Jesus than words can ever tell."

These three hours were the longest three hours of all history, for in them Jesus endured the eternal judgment on all sin. If time goes fast when you are having fun, how slow it must go to get through three hours of God forsakenness. But keep in mind that before the cross experience was over, and before Jesus died, he was back in the light of fellowship with God. He died saying, "Father into thy hands I commend my spirit." He

was only forsaken for three hours, but it had to seem an eternity to Jesus who had never been out of fellowship with his Father for all eternity. There had never been a time like this in the infinite past, nor will there ever be in the infinite future. Here, and here only, for three hours we see the most momentous event in all the history of the universe. God was enduring hell to make it possible for man to escape hell.

This was the cup Jesus so dreaded drinking, but he yielded, for there was no other way to save man. Jesus went to hell and back to save us. The magnitude of God's love is here revealed to be so far beyond our comprehension that all we can do is stand in awe. The full answer to why God forsook Jesus is incomprehensible, but the essence of it is this: He forsook his Son that He might forgive fallen mankind, and have many sons and daughters in his eternal kingdom.

I do not know, I cannot tell
What pains he had to bear.
I only know, it was for me
He hung and suffered there.

The way to heaven was through hell, not for us, but for Jesus who had to endure our hell that we might enter heaven.

Martin Luther wrote, "So then gaze at the heavenly picture of Christ who descended into hell for your sake and was forsaken by God as one eternally damned.....In that picture your hell is defeated..." You can be assured that after paying such a price Jesus will fight to redeem as many as possible. That is why his final words were to go into all the world and preach the Gospel. Jesus is not willing that any should perish and suffer their own hell, when he has already suffered it for them.

Evangelism is not a top priority with those who have not paid anything for men to be saved. Jesus paid three hours of hell, and for the infinite and innocent Son of God that was a price beyond calculation. No wonder it is a top priority with him. Only as we begin to grasp something of the cost that Jesus paid can we begin to see why it is so important that we care to win those for whom he died. "There is now no condemnation to them which are in Christ," says Paul. But what about those not in Christ? They shall face the judgment of God. His lightning of judgment will not strike twice in the same place, and so all who are in Christ are safe forever. In him there will never be another drop of the cup to drink. He drank it all. But outside of Christ people face judgment.

Imagine bombs falling on the city and you know where there is a safe bomb shelter where all who are there are safe. Would you not share that good news with those in danger as they hear the sirens screaming? So we need to sense the urgency of telling people of what Jesus provided for them: a shelter in the time of storm-a storm that can sweep them into the abyss of judgment. Sure it is hard and inconvenient, and there is a price to pay, but what is all this in the light of what Christ paid? To complain after what we have received in Christ by his sacrifice is like winning the lottery, and then complaining that you had to go out and feed the meter to collect it.

We should be embarrassed to ever complain that it is hard to obey Christ. In light of this fourth word from the cross, the only response can be, so what if it is hard! If he suffered hell for us, we can suffer hard for him. In this word we see the power of love as nowhere else. God so loved the world, and here is the measure of that word so. How much is so? He so loved that he gave his only begotten Son. But even that great text of John 3:16 does not tell us how fully he gave, and how completely the Son gave. Only in this fourth word do we get to see how measureless was his love. God could have blown up the whole universe in a mega-explosion that would make a super movie seem like a lady finger firecracker, and it would not have saved a single soul. Power was not the answer to the sin problem. Only love could do the job, and Jesus did it. He so loved that he bore the hell of what all sinners were worthy of, and this made it possible for all sinners to be set free from condemnation.

Even though this was the greatest act of love ever, and the greatest show on earth, there will be no Jesus II, or a series of sequels, for what he did he did once and for all, and there is nothing more to do to accomplish what is necessary for all men to be saved. That is why he could say before he died, "It is finished." Hell has no claim on those in Christ, for all penalty has been paid in full. This is the only one of the seven last words that is recorded twice in the Gospels. Both Matthew and Mark record it. None of the other six are recorded twice. This is the central word of the seven. There are three before and three after. Even these trivial details support the view that this is the most profound sentence ever uttered. Herbert Lockyer, author of dozens of books on the Bible, says of these words, "The most appalling utterance that has ever fallen upon human ears." Yet when we see the depth of love that led to this being uttered, we can add they are also the most appealing that has ever fallen upon human ears. Because he uttered them no one else ever has too.

Paul makes it clear in Gal. 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a cross." What a perplexing complex paradox. The only sinless one ever to live, and yet he was made sin for us. The only perfect one ever to live, and yet he is cursed for us. This fourth word is the cry of the cursed, and the despair of the damned. To compare the death of Jesus with any other, as if he was just another martyr, is to reduce the sun by comparing it with a candle, or to reduce the sequoia by comparing it with a twig. To put Jesus in the same category with any other death is to totally miss the significance of the cross.

This word reveals the ultimate identification with man. In the incarnation Jesus took on the nature and the body and the mind of man. But now he takes upon himself even the depravity of man, and he becomes sin and, therefore, liable for all the penalty that sin deserves. He was in this state fit to be forsaken by God, for he represented all that God hated.

The scourge, the thorns, the deep disgrace,
These thou couldst bear nor once repine,
But when Jehovah veiled his face,
Unutterable pangs were thine.

Jesus was now feeling the full cost of the incarnation and his identification with man. When he was born in the night the sky was filled with holy light, but when he died in mid-day the heavens turn to horrible night. Being born was indeed a radical step down for the Son of God, but it was a mere step in comparison to the plunge he now takes into the very pit of hell. The principle God follows is, the lower we go in humility the higher we rise in God's eyes. This explains why Jesus was exalted to the highest place and given the name above all names, for he plunged to the lowest depth conceivable.

What a contrast between the biography of the Savior and Satan. Satan was among the highest and in pride sought to go higher to take the place of God, and he was plunged to the pit of hell in judgment. Jesus was the highest but was willing to go to the lowest level of hell to fulfill God's plan, and the result is he ends up the highest in the universe. The paradox is that Jesus has the record at both ends. We know his is the highest name, and he is equal with God, and there is none higher. But seldom do we think about it that Jesus was also the lowest. There will never be anyone lower in hell than Jesus was, for no matter how awful they were, they bear judgment for their own awfulness only. Jesus bore the awfulness of the world, and, therefore, takes the record of being the worst to ever enter hell, for he entered it with the sin of the world on him. The lowest place in hell will be ever held by our redeemer, and because of that price he will hold forever the highest place in heaven.

Jesus knows what it is to be on the bottom of the pile, and the lowest man on the totem pole. He also knows what it is to be number one, and king of the mountain. He holds all records and they will never be broken. What is startling is that Jesus knows by experience what it is to be lost, and not just lost in the woods, but to be cursed and damned, and God forsaken, and literally lost as a rejected soul. These three hours of darkness were not just the dark ages for Jesus, they were the doomed ages. He experienced lostness first hand, and he did it that we might never have to experience it. We can experience saved-ness and never lostness because he took our lostness for us. Robert M'Cheyne wrote,

When I stand before the throne
Dressed in beauty not my own.
When I see Thee as Thou art;
Love Thee with un-sinning heart,
Then, Lord, shall I fully know;
Not till then, how much I owe.

How much do we owe to someone who saved us by going to hell and back?

5. THREE HOURS IN HELL Based on Matt. 27:45-56

People die all the time just to advance our knowledge. Have you ever wondered how

doctors knew the precise steps in the development of the fetus before there was any means of seeing inside the mother? It came from a team of Harvard doctors who asked a group of women who were scheduled for hysterectomies to stop practicing birth control before their surgery. This was long before all of the present controversy concerning when life begins, and the abortion issue. They did not see it as abortion, but simply as a removing of the female organs. But in doing so they were able to study 30 embryos and see the actual development of the fetus. Thirty babies had to die to give man this knowledge.

Doctor Lawrence Altman in his book *Who Goes First* tells numerous stories of doctors who have died in trying to get information on various diseases. I will share just one. In Lima, Peru there stands what may be the only statue in the world of a medical student. It memorializes Daniel Carrion who in 1885 decided to solve the mystery of a strange disease that was killing many of his people. He took some of the blood of an infected person and tried to inject it into his own arm. He failed at first, and so a fellow medical student helped him. He got the disease as expected, but his case was far more severe than expected. Thirty-nine days later he died. Some called it a horrible act and a disgrace to his profession. The young man who helped him was charged with murder. It was quite a scandal, but three professors came forward and sighted the many doctors in history who risked their lives in self-experimenting. The charge was dropped and Carrion became a hero. The medical students sing a ballad to his memory, and enough was learned about the disease to bring it under control. Others live because he died.

This is not an isolated incident. Every new medicine, every new test, and every new therapy has to be performed on a human being before it can be approved. If a doctor had not first put a tube into his own heart, which could have killed him, we would not have many of the heart surgeries we have today. Somebody has to go first, and that somebody often has to die to enable others to follow and not die, but be saved by the procedure. We are looking at Jesus as our Great Physician who was also the Pioneer of our faith. He went first into the hell of God forsakeness that you and I, and all who trust in Him, might never have to endure it.

Those few hours of history in which Jesus laid down His life for the world of sinners were the most unusual hours in all of history. Nothing was normal. It was the Creator Himself putting Himself through the greatest self-experimentation of all time. As the author of life He would experience death, and in so doing all of reality is being altered, for He was turning the world of both nature and super nature upside down. The hours of His death were hours of complex confusion. Let's look at these strange phenomena.

I. THE CONFUSION OF NATURE.

Verse 45 says that from the 6th hour until the 9th hour darkness came over all the land. Mark and Luke record this same thing. Dr. Luke gives us one other word, and he says that the sun stopped shining. We are not talking about a cloudy day or an eclipse. We are talking about an event in creation that has never happened but this one time in all of history. The sun took a break, and for the only time in its existence it ceased to shine for 3 hours. This is one of the greatest miracles of all time, and Herbert Lockyer in his

All The Miracles Of The Bible includes this one, which most of us would miss as a miracle.

Jesus was born in the darkness of night, but it was a natural night. He died in the darkness, which was a supernatural night because it came just when the day was brightest. It was from noon to 3 in the afternoon. That is the least likely time to have darkness, and so the whole thing is being timed by God to give the world a message. God never turned the sun off before, and He has never done it again. From God's perspective this was an event without parallel. It was a once in a history, and a once in a universe, time and space event. When you add the most unusual earthquake of all time to this darkness, it is no wonder the Centurion and the others were terrified and exclaimed, "Surely this was the Son of God!"

They were observing what was very frightening in nature. Nobody had ever seen anything like this before, and they knew they were in the presence of the supernatural. It makes sense why God the Father would turn off the sun for 3 hours while His Son died. What greater statement could God make concerning the significance of this event. Isaac Watts wrote,

**Well might the sun in darkness hide,
And shut His glories in,
When Christ the mighty Maker, died,
For man the creature's sin.**

It was God's way of wearing black for His Son's death, and thereby symbolizing the sadness of heaven at the price that had to be paid for man's salvation. It was a dark and heavy load He had to bear to see His Son endure separation from Him that man might be reconciled. There is no symbol great enough to convey how dark and heavy it was other than the sun. It is the source of light and life for all the world. For 3 hours it ceased to function as a symbol of the 3 days in which the light of life would cease to function, because Jesus entered the realm of death.

This confusion of nature created confusion in the minds of men as well. When Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me," the people misunderstood the words of Jesus, and they thought He was calling for Elijah. The Aramaic word eloi, eloi sounds like Elijah, and so they are confused and hear a message Jesus did not give. In their confusion they say let's see if Elijah comes to rescue Him. There is total chaos around the cross as both nature and man are confused, and they are not functioning with the capacity they normally have. Disharmony reigns, and in all this confusion as the earth shakes that everything is backwards. People are coming out of the tombs instead of staying dead like dead people always do. The whole world is wired wrong, and nothing seems to be working right. The veil in the temple is ripped from top to bottom, and everything is out of whack from what is normal.

You get the unmistakable feeling that God is trying to say something that has never been said before. One of the things He is saying is that the cross and the death of His Son is the most awesome event of human history. It is in a class by itself. It is not one of the

many martyr stories of great men dying for a cross. It is not a Socrates laying down his life for a principle, or a soldier laying down his life for his country. These are noble and praiseworthy sacrifices, but they do not qualify to be in the same category as Calvary. Here is an event that covers heaven and earth, all of creation, and all of mankind. The sun shuts off for no man but the God-Man, and even then only in the hours of His dying for all men. More miracles happen at the cross than anywhere else in the Bible. The veil is rent, the earthquake shakes dead people into life, people are converted, the trinity is separated only this once in all eternity, and the sun goes off for 3 hours.

Some see the darkness as the Father's mourning and sympathy for His Son. Jesus was stripped naked when he was nailed to the cross, and God in mercy lessened his shame by the cover of darkness. We know that from 9 in the morning until noon the leaders of the people mocked Jesus unmercifully, but when the darkness the mocking ceased, and then there was three hours of silence. The darkness veiled Jesus and halted the cruel mocking.

The darkness marked a turning point in the atmosphere around the cross. Nature's expression of sympathy led even cruel men to follow and begin to feel sympathy for Jesus. The compassion of people was born in the darkness and silence of those hours. One man ran to fill a sponge and give Jesus a drink. Others watch to see if Elijah will come and rescue him. Many felt with the Centurion that this was no ordinary man, and the Centurion said he was the Son of God. Dr. Luke tells us that the crowds of people who were so cruel began to doubt their dogmatic stand, and they began to smite their breasts as if to say, "What fools we have been." The darkness revealed to them that Jesus was no mere criminal, but someone uniquely different from anyone else.

In His dying hours nature shocked man into seeing the cross for what it really was. It was the greatest act of folly and sin the world has ever seen. Man in his sinful blindness and rebellion was actually killing the light of the world, which was God's greatest gift ever given to man. The darkness made men see what they never saw in the light, and there were people converted in those dark hours. The Centurion was the most prominent. Matthew Mark and Luke all end this strange period of darkness with a focus on the gentle women who stood afar off. There were many women Mark says who followed and ministered to Jesus. They beheld this awesome scene at the cross. The male disciples were all hiding but the females were there watching through the dark to see what would happen. It was a violent death in the midst of violent acts of nature, but in the presence of it all were the women disciples who added a touch of gentleness to a terribly confusing scene. Even the presence of the women is part of the confusion, for everything around the cross is not normal. This is where the men should be strong, and the women off crying in despair, but it is the opposite.

There is nothing about the cross that is normal. Not only did God withdraw His power from the sun in the sky so that it ceased to shine, but He withdrew His presence from His Son on the cross, and for the first time in His eternal existence He felt forsaken by His Father. This is what Jesus most dreaded about the price He had to pay to save man. He dreaded the darkness of being deprived of His Father's light. Not only was the external world thrust into darkness, but His internal world was darkened and Jesus cried out with the feeling of one forsaken. There was a power shortage in the solar system, and

it was symbolic of what man cannot see, and that was the power shortage in the very triune nature of God as the Father and the Son were cut off from communication. Jesus had to experience hell, which is the darkness of being cut off from God's light and presence. Those three hours of darkness were literally hell for Jesus.

Jesus died what is called the second death, which is the death, not just of the body, but of the body and soul in hell. Many have died for our bodies, and we have Memorial Day to remember them and honor them. Many have died that we might have freedom and the right to health and a host of other blessings, but nobody ever died that we might escape hell and spiritual death of separation from God. Nobody ever did this, but Jesus, for he alone could do so as the perfect Lamb of God worthy of being the sacrifice for all sin. We need never die this death for Jesus died it for us. No wonder the cross is the central symbol of our faith. What happened there is a once for all unrepeatable event. That is why the whole creation was involved. It was a time of un-paralleled confusion.

Even God the Son was asking why on the cross, and this gives us a hint as to the cost of saving man from sin. If the sun in the sky could feel what it is like to be turned off and not shine it would feel what it is like to be forsaken by God. The sun could not feel it, but Jesus the Son of God could, and He felt the inner darkness of being cut off from the power source of the universe. It had to be the most painful experience ever endured in this universe. It was not the nails, the crown of thorns, nor the whip lashes on His back, for these physical pains have been endured by millions, but it was the eclipse of His very being, and the abandonment of His relationship to the Father, which was the greatest pain every endured. That is the price Jesus paid for our salvation. He was abandoned by God and man, and He was in hell for 3 hours.

Three hours did not seem long, but try laying your hand on a red hot stove for 3 hours and you will get an idea of just how seemingly eternal 3 hours can be. We just cannot imagine what 3 hours of separation from the Father means. It is in the realm of the infinite where we cannot even think or imagine. We do not know what Jesus experienced in the 3 days and 3 nights in the tomb, but these 3 hours of God forsakenness were the 3 most painful hours ever experienced in this universe. And Jesus did it for you and me. Spurgeon saw in this the greatest crisis in history, and the greatest comfort for sinners. He wrote, "As to my sin, I hear its harsh accusings no more when I hear Jesus say, Why hast thou forsaken me? I know I deserve the deepest hell and the hand of God's vengeance, but I am not afraid. He will never forsake me, for He forsook His Son on my behalf."

To grasp even a fraction of what the cross means is to be filled with gratitude to the Father and to the Son, who together paid such a price for our salvation. And out of the gratitude of heart comes the cross carrying life. The life that is willing to sacrifice to advance the kingdom of God. Paul said that he dies daily. He died to self and gave up a self-centered life every day for Christ. Someone asked a missionary to Africa if he liked his work and he said, "No! We do not like dirt and crowding into vile huts through goat refuse. We do not like association with ignorant, brutish people. But is a man to do nothing for Christ which he does not like?"

We reveal just how much we grasp the message of the cross, the 3 hours of darkness, and the cry of forsakenness by how much we are willing to do what we do not like for the sake of our Savior. I am sure Jesus did not like His 3 hours in hell. It was the worst experience of His existence, but He did it for us so that we might never need to experience hell. May God help us to be always filled with thankfulness because Jesus took our place in those 3 hours in hell.

6. SIMON OF CYRENE Based on Mark 15:15-26

This text focuses on a man who was forced to become famous. Millions of people through the ages have labored and fought to get their names in the record of history, but Simon of Cyrene was pushed into the pages of history. Except for one incident in his life he would never have been known, but because of that one experience, he is known the world over wherever the Gospel of Jesus is known. There is very little said about Simon in the Bible. In fact, just about everything we know about him is found in Mark 15:21, and in one verse in each of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke which are parallels of this one.

One might suspect that there is hardly enough information to preach on for ten minutes, but this is not the case, for the Bible has a unique way of saying a great deal in just a few words. A high school student was assigned to write a five hundred word theme, and he chose to write on the universe, its origin, nature, and destiny. Even the Bible does not attempt to condense to that degree, but it does not waste words. The story of creation is told in two chapters. The great 23rd Psalm is just a little over a hundred words. The famous Sermon on the Mount is in three chapters, and the last words of Christ on the cross, though few in quantity, have been of such quality as to give birth to literally tons of literature. The Bible is the key example of the truth that one does not need to be wordy to be wise, nor voluminous to be valuable. I trust we see this as we consider what we can know about Simon from this one verse. First of all-

I. WE KNOW WHERE HE WAS FROM AND WHAT HE WAS DOING.

He was from Cyrene, one of the two largest towns of Libya in North Africa, of over 100,000 people. It was a city in which a great many Jews lived, and many of them would travel all the way to Jerusalem for Passover and Pentecost. In the list of places in Acts 2 of which the people were from, you will find Cyrene listed. Simon was either a Jew or a proselyte, that is a pagan who was converted to Judaism, and who was a very pious believer, for he was willing to travel over a thousand miles to Jerusalem to worship in the temple.

But what he was doing when he was suddenly in a moment made to chance the whole direction of his life, was simply passing by. He knew nothing of all that had gone on in

the city that night. Jesus had been going through the agonies of Gethsemane, and the trial, and had endured the cruel mockings and beatings of the mob and soldiers. Simon had no doubt been sleeping. He had a long day planned, and was up early in the morning, as were all Orthodox Jews, saying their prayers. He was dressed, cleaned, and almost into the city before 9 in the morning. If he had been three minutes earlier or later, or had gone a different way, we never would have heard of him, but in the providence of God Simon was to have an experience that morning that changed his whole life. This brings us to the second thing we know about Simon.

II. WE KNOW HE WAS COMPELLED TO BEAR THE CROSS OF CHRIST.

As Simon came near the city gate he saw a crowd coming out of the city. They were shouting and mocking at three men who were bearing crosses. One of them was having a difficult time, and it was obvious he was holding up the procession. The soldiers who were anxious to get this business over ordered Simon to bear his cross. The Roman soldiers had a right to compel a civilian to help them. When Jesus said, "If anyone compel you to go a mile, go with him two miles," He was referring to this practice.

Why the soldiers picked Simon is not known. We know that Jesus had been up all night, and had taken a beating that was known to have killed other men. Therefore, it is quit likely that the traditional viewpoint is true-that Jesus stumbled and fell beneath the load. Many felt that Simon must have shown sympathy for this one who had been so cruelly treated, and possibly even stepped forward to help Him up. The soldier in charge, seeing a chance to speed things up, says, "Alright helpful, you carry the cross," and forced him to do so. Simon was likely the only one in the crowd not mocking Jesus, and so he was a likely one to choose.

I find it easy to believe another idea held by many, that Jesus looked on Simon with a look of love that drew out his compassion. Jesus had a power in His eyes to move men. Just hours before He moved another Simon, called Peter, to tears of repentance by a mere glance. It is likely then that Simon was moved by a force within before he was compel from without. The poet put it-

Thou must have looked on Simon,
Turn Lord, and look on me,
Till I shall see and follow,
And bear Thy cross for Thee.

Because of an act of sympathy and compassion he found himself going in the opposite direction and bearing a cursed cross. What a way to start the Passover season. He was on his way to church, and he winds up in a possession to a crucifixion. Just to touch the cross would defile him, so his day was ruined. What a miserable way to meet the Master. He was on his way to worship God, and was interrupted by having to help Christ get to the cross to redeem the world. Not a bad days work! He, of course, did not realize what was taking place. He came a thousand miles to do something significant, and all he did was help save the world.

Simon did not rebel at this sudden turn of events. It had to be a disappointment, but it was one of the greatest acts of love in history. Like Cornelius, Lydia, and others who were honestly seeking to know the will of God, he had, no doubt, prayed that very morning, "Lord teach me thy will and draw me closer to you this day." He had come along way seeking a deeper knowledge of God, but he believed compassion and not cruelty was the will of God, so he submitted to the shame of bearing the cross.

He was compelled to bear it, but he chose to submit. The fact that nothing more is said indicates that Simon gave no trouble, but bore the cross without a struggle. If only we could, like Simon, choose to bear what we are compelled to bear. If only we could see the blessing and burdens that we bear for Jesus. Circumstances compel us to bear burdens, but we can choose to submit or rebel. This principle holds true for all of life. For example: Young people are compelled to go to school. This is a burden that many would not choose if it was left to them. But since we are compelled to go, we have two choices. We can rebel and fight the system and quit as soon as possible, or we can take it as a challenge, and choose to submit to the burden, and in so doing the burden will become a blessing. We cannot determine what life brings to us, but we can determine what we bring to life, and if we choose to do what we are compelled to do, we can change burdens into blessings. The third thing we know about Simon is-

III. WE KNOW THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS BEARING THE CROSS.

It is also certain, that though the cross kept Simon from church that morning, it brought him to Christ. We believe he found it to be true that the way of the cross leads home, and that his frustration led to faith; his embarrassment led to enlistment; his compassion led to commitment, and his sympathy led to salvation. There are several reasons for believing this to be the case. In the first place, it fits into a pattern which is amazing if true. If Simon was a convert just before the cross, and the Roman Centurion was a convert just after the death of Christ on the cross, then together with the thief on the cross, we have three converts at the cross representing the descendants of each of the three sons of Noah, Sham, Ham, and Japeth. This would be a concrete illustration of the universality of the cross, and that Jesus did indeed die for all men.

There is more to go on, however, for our verse says that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus. Why would Mark, who wrote his Gospel for the Romans, say that he was the father of these two men unless it was because the Romans knew these two men? There would be no point in giving these names unless they were well known among the Roman Christians. Nor would these names be known if Simon just disappeared in the crowd after reaching Golgotha. The others Gospels do not mention the names of these two sons. This means that the sons of Simon were well known Christians in Rome, and this is confirmed by Paul in his letter to the Romans where he says in 16:13, "Greet Rufus, eminent in the Lord, also his mother and mine." Where did this outstanding Christian family come from? Paul had not been to Rome when he wrote his letter, so he must have met them before they moved to Rome.

If we put all these facts together and see that, not the Ethiopian Eunuch, but Simon of Cyrene was the first convert from Africa, and he went back to his home and won his

family to Christ. From there they likely moved to Antioch, for in Acts 13:1 we read of prophets and teachers there, two of which were Simon and Lucius of Cyrene. It was here in Antioch where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. Who knows how much he who bore the cross of Christ had to do with that. He was the first convert at the cross, and became a leader where believers were first called Christians. It would be here that Paul would get to know the family, and later be able to speak of them when they moved to Rome.

There is much we do not know, but these things that we do know teach us to see that though Simon was compelled to bear the cross for a while by the soldiers, he chose to bear it the rest of his life for the Savior. That brings us to the final thing we can know about Simon.

IV. WE KNOW HIS EXPERIENCE WAS RECORDED FOR A PURPOSE.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and its profitable. The story of Simon, the minor in length, teaches us a lesson of major importance. It teaches us what cross-bearing really is. Men have been more concerned about making up legends about the cross than they have been in learning what it means to bear it. Legend takes us way back to the garden of Eden. Adam was dying, and so his eldest son Seth ran to the gate of the garden, and begged the angel for fruit from the tree of life. The angel told him that Adam would be dead when he returned, but that he should bury him with seeds from the fruit of the tree of life in his mouth. A great tree grew from these seeds which Noah cut down for the king post in his ark, which saved him and his family. Centuries later Hiram, king of Tyre, brought it down from the mountains to build the temple of Solomon. It was not used, however, but laid in a trench by the wall. Nehemiah used it when he rebuilt the temple, but when Herod rebuilt it again this tree was again laying beside the wall.

In the haste of the day of the trial of Jesus no one made a cross, and so this post by the temple wall was used. The early Christians cared nothing about the actual cross on which Christ died, but only the meaning of it, and so for several centuries there is a break in the legend. But when the church became corrupted because of paganism, it again revived the legend. The cross was found it was claimed, and was being sold in small pieces as charms. This is where we get the idea of knocking on wood. It has been estimated that enough pieces of the cross have been sold to build a fleet of ships. Today the cross has become to many nothing more than a piece of jewelry. We bear golden crosses around our neck or on our lapel as decorations. There is nothing wrong with the cross as a symbol like this, but there is something wrong with our thinking about it. The experience of Simon teaches us to think of the cross as an identification with Christ, and not merely a decoration.

When Simon bore the cross of Christ he became identified with Christ, and bore the same reproach that he did. Jesus said, "Take up your cross daily and follow me." That means to be identified openly with Jesus, and if people would mock Christ they will mock you. That is why it is not as easy to talk about Jesus as it is about the weather or politics. It is embarrassing and difficult to be identified with Christ in some circles. I am sure Simon was ashamed as he picked up the cross and heard the laughter and mocking of the

crowd.

Bearing the cross is not the same kind of suffering one goes through because of some injury or weakness in the body. That is a thorn and not a cross. The cross is only taken up when we are so identified with Christ that people will feel and act toward us as they do toward Him. If a person loves Jesus, he will also love you. If a person despises Jesus he will also despise you. This means that Christ expects us everyday to be so identified with Him that it costs us to be a Christian. It is easy to be a Christian if we do not bear the cross.

Ray Jordon tells of being in a group in Jerusalem that wanted to follow the path that Jesus took on His way to the cross. It was hot that day and he noticed that the leader had an umbrella over his head to protect him from the discomfort of the blazing sun. It struck him as to the amazing contrast between this and the real incident. They wanted to follow the path of Christ, but did not want any discomfort in doing so. It is understandable, for there would be no profit in being miserable as they followed the path. But when this philosophy passes over into the spiritual realm, it is tragic. We want to follow Jesus, but we do not want it to cost anything. It should be that we experience some discomfort because of our identification with Christ.

Leslie Weatherhead had an Indian Christian tell of what it cost to follow Christ, and it put him to shame when he considered how little he had identified himself with the cross of Christ in such a way that it cost. This Indian friend heard the call of Christ in a Methodist church in Madras. He came from a Brahmin family and his father was the head of the community. When his father heard of his decision for Christ he blazed with anger. He tied him to a pillar in the courtyard of his home. He stripped the turban from his head, a mark of indignity in the East, lashed his back with whips till blood ran, and let him stand in the hot sun for hours.

They even poured the contents of the sewage bin over his head. They put two large scars on his face with red hot irons. His own mother died of shock before him, and finally his sister cut him loose, and he escaped to the hills. He eventually became a chaplain in the army. Many have suffered the same thing for crimes, but when it is suffered because one is identified with Christ, that is cross-bearing. The story of Simon is recorded for the purpose of challenging each of us to take up the cross and be identified with Jesus whatever the cost.

7. GUILTY BUT PARDONED Based on Luke 23:34

If God did not pardon the guilty there would be no Gospel, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Even so, we feel there is a danger in being too merciful. Abraham Lincoln was accused of this during the Civil War when he seemed willing to

pardon just about anyone. He would defend those who broke army regulations, and he would find alibis for those condemned to die. One young soldier, for example, had gone to sleep at his post and was court marshaled and sentenced to be shot. He was pardoned by Lincoln, who gave this defense: "I could not think of going into eternity with the blood of that poor man on my skirts. It is not wondered at that a boy raised on a farm, probably in the habit of going to bed at dark, should, when required to watch, fall asleep, and I cannot consent to shoot him for such an act."

There was no question about his guilt, but though guilty he was pardoned. At another time 24 deserters were to be shot and warrants for their execution was sent to Lincoln to be signed. He refused to do. The general went to Washington to see Lincoln. At the interview he said, "Mercy to the few is cruelty to the many. These men must be made an example or the army itself would be in danger." In spite of the forceful argument Lincoln replied, "There are too many weeping widows in the United States. For God's sake don't ask me to add to the number, for I won't do it." With complete knowledge of their guilt he pardoned them, and it was not because Lincoln was ignorant of the law, for he was a lawyer. He was also not ignorant of the importance of justice, but out of mercy he pardoned the guilty.

This is a parallel of what we see at the cross, though the mercy there was infinitely more amazing. We see a king, who was also a lawyer, defending those whom he knows to be guilty. But here it is himself who is also the victim of their sin and crime. Certainly no murder mystery ever ended with a more surprising scene than this. Here the guilty are standing before the judge, who is also the murder victim, and who is acting as their defending attorney pleading for their pardon before he dies. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." He has acknowledged their guilt, for if they were not guilty there would be no need for forgiveness. His case then will not consist in proving them not guilty, but instead that even though guilty there is a basis on which they should be pardoned. There are two questions we want to ask about this defense Christ makes for the guilty sinners who crucified Him.

I. WHO IS HE DEFENDING?

It would be a confusing trial indeed in which one did not know who the defendant was. There is some disagreement as to who is included in Christ's plea for mercy, but this is only because a few authors cannot bring themselves to believe that even the cunning Jewish leaders were included. All agree that the Roman soldiers are included, and that they are the least guilty of all. They are victims of a power machine beyond their control. It is not theirs to reason why, but only to do or die. They have orders to crucify this man, and whether they like the task or not they do it. They could have refused and died, but what reason would they have for refusing to execute a man that has been legally condemned by the state? How could they know that the only sinless hands that ever were are now being nailed to a cross. It was certainly true of them that they knew not what they were doing.

But did Jesus go further than this? Did He intercede also for the Scribes and Pharisees? Did He include Caiaphas and Annas, and the cruel crowd that mocked Him?

The vast majority of commentators say yes, but a few say no. Are we to follow the majority and make this plea all inclusive just because it is a majority opinion? The magnitude of this plea for mercy cannot be determined by counting votes, but by searching the Scripture, and as we do we discover that the majority view is not an opinion only but a conviction based on clear revelation.

In Acts 3 we read of Peter preaching to the Jews where he gives credit to Christ for the healing of the lame man. He says of Jesus, "...whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilot, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Author of life..." And then in verse 17 he says, "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers." Peter knew that even the most guilty acted in ignorance, and so they were forgiven and were able to respond to the Gospel which he preached. Paul adds to the conviction in I Cor. 2:8, "None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

With these two witnesses we rest our case that Christ's plea for mercy included all who guilty and responsible for His crucifixion. This means that Christ died for all sin, and that included the sin of causing Him to die. No one who was guilty was left without a pardon. The case was closed, for all were forgiven. The plaintiff dropped all the charges. They were all guilty, but they were all pardoned. This fact should have made it impossible for the history of Christian anti-Semitism to have ever happened. It makes the modern debate over the guilt of the Jews for the death of Christ a mockery. There is any dogmatic truth we can learn from the history of the church it is this: When ever professing Christians do not determine all of their attitudes and actions based on the Word of God and the example of Christ, they promote evil rather than the kingdom of God.

Jesus forgave those who were guilty for His death. Peter and Paul repeat this fact, and yet men go on debating whether or not the Jews should be forgiven. This word of Christ ought to enable everyone to see the folly of it all. Even if the very Jews who killed Jesus were alive today, they would be forgiven. How much more contemporary Jews who had nothing to do with it? God forbid that any who name the name of Christ should refuse to forgive the innocent when Christ forgave the guilty. To the question then, who is Christ defending? We answer: Everyone who needs defense, or all who are guilty. Next we ask-

II. WHY IS HE DEFENDING THEM?

When we see that He meant even the most guilty in this plea for forgiveness we are compelled to ask why would He seek a pardon for those who deserve to be condemned? The primary answer lies in the very nature of Christ. The story is told of how in the Scotch Rebellion a man by the name of Ayloff was captured and taken before King James II. The king said to him, "You had better be frank with me Mr. Ayloff. You know that it is in my power to pardon you." The prisoner broke his sullen silence and answered, "It may be in your power but it is not in your nature." And so it was not, and Ayloff was executed.

This was not the case with the King on the cross. It was not only in His power but it was also in His nature to pardon. He never would have come into the world in the first place was it not His nature to seek and to save the lost, and to pardon the guilty. Mercy is one of the greatest attributes of God. As grace means what God does for us that we do not deserve, so mercy means what God does not do to us that we do deserve. We could conclude then that Jesus pleaded for the pardon of the guilty just because His nature of love and mercy made it a natural reaction.

This statement of Christ, however, that they knew not what they were doing shows that there is more to it than that. There is some cause in the guilty themselves that makes Him plead for pardon. Jesus finds a reason for their folly that does not make them not guilty, but does make them candidates for pardon, and that factor is ignorance. It is practically a proverb that ignorance is no excuse, but it is a product of man's wisdom and not Gods. The Scripture says ignorance is an excuse. We have already read Peter's statement that the Jews killed Jesus in ignorance, and to this we can add Paul's testimony in I Tim. 1:13 where he says, "I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him, but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief." He was guilty, but because he sinned in ignorance he was pardoned. Had ignorance been no excuse Paul would have been a flaming Apostle in the fires of hell, and not one flaming against the forces of hell.

The Old Testament makes a difference between the sin of ignorance and the sin of a high hand. One who sins willfully with full knowledge that it is out of God's will sins with a high hand. There is no atonement for those who sin in this way, but there is for those who break God's law in ignorance. We see then that the crucifixion of Christ was a sin of ignorance. They did not know what they were doing. As wicked as they were they would not knowingly kill the Son of God. They were really convinced that they were killing a blasphemer. Ignorance allows men to do the worst evils with the conviction that they are doing right. God accepts such ignorance as a basis for pardon. The fact that the greatest crime ever committed was the result of ignorance ought to open our eyes to see that ignorance is one of man's greatest curses. "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free," said Jesus. Those who love ignorance are bound to do that which is stupid, harmful and evil. Even so, if their evil is a product of ignorance, it makes a difference in God's attitude.

It made a difference in Lincoln's attitude as well. We saw how he could freely pardon those who became traitors out of weakness and ignorance, but when he was approached to pardon one who was engaged in the slave trade he made this reply; "You know my weakness is to be, if possible, too easily moved by appeals for mercy, and if this man were guilty of the foulest murder that the arm of man could perpetrate, I might forgive him on such an appeal, but the man who would go to Africa and rob her of her children, and sell them into an interminable bondage with no other motive than that which is furnished by dollars and cents, is so much worse than the most depraved murderer, that he can never receive pardon at my hands. No, he may rot in jail before he shall have liberty by any act of mine."

We see the 2 sides of Lincoln with his mercy and justice. We see mercy to the

ignorant guilty and justice to the willful guilty. The fact that he had these two attitudes would indicate that he was a man directed by God, for this is God's attitude as well. The mercy and wrath of God are to be understood in the light of this principle. As G. Campbell Morgan says, "All sins of ignorance are forgiven. It is only the sin against light, which has no forgiveness." He probably should have qualified that by adding that sins against light have no forgiveness without repentance. We sin willfully often in the face of clear revelation, and we need to know that if confess He is faithful and just to forgive. The point is, however, that sins of ignorance can be forgiven by God even before repentance, but willful sin only after repentance. Jesus prayed for the guilty sinners around His cross, and they were anything but repentant. But we cannot doubt that God heard the dying prayer of His Son. They were guilty and unrepentant, but they were still pardoned.

Because they were ignorant it makes sense that they did not repent, for one does not repent apart from conviction that one is doing wrong. By necessity then forgiveness must often come before repentance. Jesus often forgave sins and then told the person to go and sin no more, and to turn from evil to God, which is repentance. Paul also says in Rom. 2:4, "Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" Men often need to experience forgiveness first before they can repent. We often fail to represent God at this point by trying to bring conviction by means of condemnation rather than assurance of God's forgiveness.

We cannot begin to understand people as Jesus did, nor can we know their inner motives and the degree of ignorance in them, but it is our responsibility to be both just and merciful. For the unbeliever there is the responsibility of either receiving the mercy of Christ and being pardoned, or of receiving His justice and being condemned. The Jews suffered the wrath of God in 70 A.D. not because they crucified Christ, for they were pardoned for that, but judgment came because they refused to believe in Christ even after the clear revelation of His deity in His resurrection. Ignorance can be forgiven, but sin against light must be condemned.

Seneca the Roman says that those who were crucified usually cursed their executioners and spat upon all who were near. Cicero says that the tongues of those crucified were cut out on occasion to stop their terrible blasphemies. How Satan and all the forces of evil would have delighted had Jesus uttered a curse from the cross, but Jesus, like a fragrant tree, bathed in perfume the very acts, which gashed Him. His first thought was not for himself but for those who were guilty. It is hard to be like Jesus in this way because it is contrary to self-defense. To forgive demands self-denial, for to forgive means to take upon yourself undeserved suffering and demand no payment from those who inflict it. They are guilty of injustice, and you are innocent, but yet it is you that must suffer and the guilty who get off scot-free if you forgive them.

Our very sense of justice fights against forgiveness, for it is not fair, but that is just the point. Grace deals with unmerited favor. If forgiveness was fair it would merely be a legal obligation and moral duty, but it is not fair, and so it is a free choice that rises above the law. Forgiveness is totally of grace, and only those who are gripped by grace can grasp the importance of it, and the ability to express it. I cannot express what I have not

experienced. I cannot give away what I do not have, and so we must first be forgiven in order to forgive. We must believe in God's free grace of forgiveness before we can be free to forgive those who sin against us.

The example of Jesus shows us that the innocent party is free at any time to forgive. There is no need to wait for repentance and confession. The people Jesus forgave did none of these. They never said they were sorry, and they were not even looking for His forgiveness. Grace is expressed because of the nature of the forgiver, and not because of the nature of those being forgiven. We have many sins of which we are not conscious. We have many which are called the sins of omission. There is no way we can confess these sins of which we are not aware, and so we need to depend upon the grace of Christ to forgive them, and we can have the assurance that He will because He was willing to pray, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

8. LOVE'S RESPONSE TO HATE Based on Luke 23:34

One of the most diabolical criminals of his day, and the first big time American gangster, was also a very impressive pulpit orator. John Murrell as a youth was caught for horse stealing, and after a public whipping he was sent to prison. He declared eternal vengeance upon society for this, and while he was in prison he studied theology. When he was released he assumed the garb of an evangelist and began to preach. His eloquence gained him quick popularity, and soon he had an unique racket going with a highly organized gang. One of his schemes was to greet people in front of the church and compliment them on their beautiful horse. This was a signal to his helpers as to which ones he wanted stolen during the service. Before his career ended he added counterfeiting and murder to his list of crimes, and all the while he was preaching the Word of God.

He was an obvious example of the great contrast that can exist between what a man professes and what he practices. Profession is the easy part. The real test comes in practice. We need not limit this failure of practicing what is preached to sham clergyman, however. Leon C. Prince has recorded the experience of others. He writes, "A New England navigator who had charted the dangerous reefs of the Massachusetts coast who wrecked his own vessel on a sunken rock which he himself had described and of which he warned others. A surgeon on one of the Arctic expeditions of the last century who earnestly and repeatedly cautioned his fellow voyages against the peril of yielding to the almost overwhelming impulse to sleep, but the surgeon himself fell asleep and perished."

History is filled with such glaring inconsistencies, and we need look at further than our own lives to add to the evidence that man is far more able to learn the truth than to live it. It is so much easier to proclaim than to practice. Shakespeare has Portia say, "I

can easier teach twenty what were good to be done, than be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching.”

In the light of this fact of human nature it is with great assurance and satisfaction that we turn our eyes upon Jesus in whom we find perfect consistency. No one ever made such startling statements as Jesus. No one ever set such high standards of character and conduct. If we could not look at his life as an example of what He taught, we would have to dismiss His teaching as dreamy idealism and sentimental nonsense totally irrelevant to the real world in which we live.

How could we honestly bother to consider Christ twice once we heard Him say, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you,” if we say that he could not practice what He preached? No can make such radical statements and hold anyone’s respect whose life does not back them up. Thank God for the cross and the record we have of it, for not only is our salvation dependant upon it, but the reality of all Jesus taught is dependant upon what we see and hear at the cross.

We want to focus our attention on the first word of Christ that He spoke on the cross, for here we see the idealism of Christ made real, and His life conform to His lips. If all we had was the record of His life, and not His death, men might dare to doubt the sincerity of His teaching. They might point out that it is easy to say love your enemies when you are walking from village to village with crowds of eager listeners. It is nothing to set on a mount with friends and disciples all around, and talk about praying for those who hate you. But the record of the cross leaves critics facing a scene that removes all doubt.

The first word on the cross demonstrates in a manner unsurpassed love’s response to hate. It proves dogmatically that Jesus meant every word He preached, and those who claim Him as Lord need to take everyone of them seriously. Only the blind and deaf could stand at the cross and hear this word of Christ and not respond with the Roman Centurion who said, “Truly, this was the Son of God.”

This word of Christ is composed of two parts. First is His intercession for His enemies, and second is His interpretation of His conduct. We have then His response and the reason for that response in this word. We want to focus our attention on the first part only, which is His response of-

INTERCESSION. “Father forgive them.”

Jesus began His ministry as an interceding high priest even while on the cross. J. C. Ryle put it this way, “As soon as the blood of the Great Sacrifice began to flow, the Great High Priest began to intercede.” It is generally agreed that Jesus spoke this word of intercession as the nails were being driven into His hands, or immediately after. To respond to hate and cruelty with love and forgiveness is paradoxical enough in itself, but the paradox of this prayer is unique and unrepeatable. Here was the Lamb of God being sacrificed for the sins of the world, and at the same time He is the High Priest offering

the sacrifice, for He is voluntarily laying down His life for us.

This prayer gives us a God's-eye view of the cross. A man's eye view would give you the impression that the man on the cross is the guilty criminal and those mocking were the judges and jury. But this is not the real picture at all. This word of Christ pictures God as the judge, and those mockers as the guilty criminals on trial. This one on the cross is the advocate, that is their lawyer, who is pleading their defense. What a paradox! Jesus Christ the Lamb nailed to a cross interceding as a lawyer for the guilty sinners who nailed Him there. Imagine having a lawyer pleading for you in the very act of crime when He is the victim of the crime. This is love's response to hate.

It is of great importance that we recognize that Jesus began His painful experience on the cross in perfect fellowship with the father, and that He also ended the cross experience in that same relationship. His last word was, "Father, into thy hands I commend my Spirit." The cross is a picture of the superiority of love over hate from beginning to end. In the 3 hours of darkness on the cross, where Jesus became sin for us, which was the cup He so much dreaded to drink because He knew it meant separation from the Father, He again came forth victorious, and we cannot underestimate the importance of this first word in preparation for that victory.

Jesus had to face and experience the hate of man at its worst before He bore the sin of the world. This was the great test of His love. Could it take cruel injustice, mockery, pain, and finally the most horrible and humiliating form of execution known, and still respond in love? Could even divine love refrain from wrath in the face of such overwhelming hate? This word is our answer, "Father forgive them." Here is commentary on the "So" in John 3:16 where we read, "God so loved the world."

Jesus never held a grudge, for He never permitted one to gain entrance into His heart. This word of forgiveness, in which he demonstrated the final superiority of love over hate, was a necessary victory before He bore the sins of the world. The total victory of the cross depended upon His response to hate at this point. If Jesus had responded with anger and an unforgiving spirit, He would not have the perfect, spotless, and flawless Lamb required for the sacrifice for sin. Jesus had to bare our sin as one who was perfect and innocent. Here was Satan's last chance to halt the plan of redemption by getting Jesus to sin.

Satan and all the demons of hell would have broken forth in delight beyond measure if Jesus would have cursed and spit back, and cried out to God to destroy them. If Jesus would have met their cruelty and hate with a cry for revenge, the cross would have spelled defeat rather than victory. But like a Lamb going to the slaughter He opened not His mouth. We see then that this word of intercession is not just an incidental remark. The redemption of the whole world hung upon this response to hate. Jesus could not bare the sins of the whole world for all time if He could not bare the sins of His contemporaries .

What a contrast we see between this response and the response of Samson in his last prayer. Samson had also suffered at the hands of his enemies, and he had to endure the

mockery and laughter of hate. In Judges 16:28 we get his reaction: "O Lord, God, remember me I pray Thee, and strengthen me, I pray Thee, only this once, O God, that I may be avenged upon the Philistines for one of my two eyes." From this response to hate let us turn to Acts 7 where we see Stephen the first Christian martyr being unjustly stoned to death by an angry mob. In 7:60 we read of his response to hate: "Lord do not hold this sin against them."

Here were two men of God with opposite responses to their enemies and hate. One cried out for revenge and the other for forgiveness. What made the difference? The answer to this is the answer to the question, what is the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament? The answer is the cross of Christ, or more accurately, the Christ of the cross. The cross is the central theme of Christianity because it is the basis for the salvation of all people, and is the basis for the transformation of all people. The cross and the Christ of the cross is our standard by which we measure all attitudes and actions. Whatever is not consistent with the cross is not consistent with God's highest revelation. To be satisfied with any response to hate that is less than, or inconsistent, with this response of Christ is to be pre or sub-Christian. We cannot follow two examples. It is either Samson or the Savior.

If Christ is our Savior and Lord, He must be our example. He is the ultimate and final revelation of what God expects each of us to be. In the light of this first word from the cross we see that God expects believers to take seriously what Jesus taught about love's response to hate.

How hardly man this lesson learns;
To smile, and bless the hand that spurns,
To see the blow, to feel the pain,
And render only love again!

Dreamy idealism and sentimental nonsense? No! It is the very essence of the Gospel. It the good news that God so loved the world that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. This is love's response to hate, and this is what we see in this first word of intercession.

Jesus in thy dying woes,
Even while thy life-blood flows,
Craving pardon for thy foes.

Here was love that hate could not defeat. Gaius Glenn Atkins said, "When love is lost, all is lost-and the last banner which love maintains over its beleaguered strong hold is the power and the willingness to forgive." Let us never forget that the shedding of Christ's blood would not have atoned for sin if Christ did not have this heart of love and spirit of forgiveness. His spirit is the foundation for the effectiveness of His sacrifice. To have fulfilled the letter of the law without the spirit could not have atoned for sin. He could not truly forgive all sin if He was not willing to forgive the sin of crucifying Him. Charles Wesley wrote-

Five bleeding wounds He bears,
Received on Calvary;
They pour effectual prayers,
They strongly plead for me.
Forgive Him, O forgive, they cry,
Nor let that ransomed sinner die!

Let us remember that we only know of this message of His wounds because of the message of His words, "Father forgive them." Where sin abounded grace did much more over flow. At the cross where we see the greatest example of hate we also see the greatest example of love. Love's response to hate at the cross not only defeated hate, but used it for good. If it was not for the open hatred and violent injustice around the cross we would lose this most magnificent lesson of love.

O love of God! O sin of man!
In this dread act your strength is tried,
And victory remains with love:
Jesus, our Lord, is crucified.

Booker T. Washington once said, "I will not let any man reduce my soul to hatred." Jesus would not let the most unjust act of hatred in human history reduce His soul to hatred, or even to anger. Jesus was victor on the cross from beginning to end. There is no way to fight love and win. May God open our eyes to see this, and begin to apply this supreme and superior weapon in our lives. If you are one who has never trusted Christ to be your Savior, may God open your eyes to recognize that He stands willing to forgive you and to receive you into the family of God, for His response to all who come to Him is always the response of love.

9. FORGIVENESS OF SIN Based on Luke 23:34

Charlie Brown is quite certain that Lucy's offer to hold the football for him to kick will end just like the other attempts. She will pull the ball away just as she kicks, and he will end up flat on his back. She assures him that she is a changed person and that he can trust her. He accepts Lucy at her word and comes running to kick the ball. But sure enough, as he kicks she does it again and pulls the ball away. He flies through the air and smashes to the ground, and Lucy bends over Charlie to say, "I admire you, Charlie Brown. You have such faith in human nature."

Poor Charlie is made to look like a fool, but the fact is, followers of Christ are expected to be fools like this for Christ's sake. Jesus made it perfectly plain that the practice of forgiveness was to be perpetual. In Matt. 18:21 Peter comes to Jesus and asks, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as 7

times?" In verse 22 Jesus answers, "I do not say to you 7 times, but 70 times 7." We can only look at such radical teaching and say in the words of Lucy, "Lord, you have such faith in human nature."

Jesus not only taught radical forgiveness, but He practiced it. We see this in these first words He spoke from the cross. In these first of His final words He expresses a forgiveness far greater than the 70 times 7 that He expects us to express. Forgiving those who so cruelly crucified Him not only revealed His faith in human nature, but it opened up to the whole world an insight into His nature as the Son of God.

We do not understand God, or the Gospel, until we grasp the significance of forgiveness of sin. God's plan cannot be fulfilled without it, and we cannot be saved without it, nor can we live the Christian life without it. Forgiveness is not a subject out on the edge of Christian truth. It is at the very center. Maybe those at the cross did not hear Jesus in His prayer of forgiveness, but they heard the Gospel of forgiveness later. In Acts 5:30-31 Peter says to the leaders of Israel, "The God of our fathers raise Jesus whom you killed by hanging Him on a tree. God exalted Him at His right hand as leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."

The Gospel of forgiveness was the message of the early church. God commissioned the Apostle Paul to preach the message of forgiveness of sin to the Gentiles also. Paul speaking before King Agrippa tells of the message he received from Christ when He was saved. The Lord was sending him to the Gentiles, and Acts 26:18 has Jesus saying, "To open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." Note how forgiveness of sin is a key factor in the Gospel. It was a major message that Jesus wanted spread into all the world.

When Paul preached in Antioch where many, both Jews and Gentiles responded to the Gospel, he concluded that fruitful sermon with this great news in Acts 13:38-39, "Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by Him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses." Forgiveness of sin was the key message in Paul's preaching and writing. He writes in Eph. 1:7, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our sins, according to the riches of His grace." In Col. 1:14 he ends his statement of things to be thankful for with, "In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

We could go on and on showing how the whole of Christian theology has been influenced by the truth of forgiveness of sin. Those words of Jesus from the cross, "Father forgive them," laid a foundation on which the church has been building ever since. We want to examine what forgiveness means to us. First of all,

I. FORGIVENESS MEANS FREEDOM.

We just read of how Paul said that forgiveness in Christ frees us from everything from which the law of Moses could not set us free. If the Son makes you free, you are

free indeed, and the Son makes us free through forgiveness. Where there is no forgiveness of sin, there is only bondage. Much, if not most, of the world not only lacks political freedom, but they also lack spiritual freedom, which is the freedom that only comes to those who know their sins are forgiven. Many feel there is no escape from the past. What has been has been, and nothing can change it. Your Karma has been determined, and what shall be shall be.

The moving finger writes, and having writ
Moves on: nor all thy piety nor wit,
Can lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.

You are bound by the sin of the past, and there is no escape in the hard-nosed philosophy of much of the world. Pardon is not a possibility for them, and they cannot fathom forgiveness. The gods of the pagans have got their own problems, and could care less about man. Tennyson describes them as they lie reclined in heaven.

"Where they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands,
Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deep and fiery sands,
Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands.
But they smile."

In contrast to their indifferent grin, we have the God of Calvary who has an answer for sin, and who says, "Father forgive them." There is freedom in Christ, and no man needs to live in bondage because of his past. No man needs to carry the burden of his sin and folly. He can leave his heavy burden at the cross, and go free. The prayer of Jesus was for those who crucified Him, but He made it a part of the Gospel to be proclaimed to all the world. He died for the sins of all mankind, and so anyone can receive His forgiveness and be set free.

For you and for me
He prayed on the tree;
The prayer is accepted, the sinner is free.
The sinner am I,
Who on Jesus rely,
And come for the pardon God will not deny.

John Bunyan was in prison when he wrote Pilgrim's Progress, but he was one of the freest men whoever lived, because of his full grasp of the truth about the forgiveness of sin. He tells of how Christian journeyed with a heavy burden on his back. The burden weighed him down, but he could not get rid of it. Then in his dream he saw Christian at last ascend to a hill where he stood before a cross, and then the burden fell from his shoulders and tumbled down the hill never to be seen again. Christian could hardly believe it, and when he realized he had received forgiveness he leaped for joy and began to sing-

Thus far I did come laden with my sin;

**Nor could ought ease the grief that I was in,
Till I came hither: what a place is this!
Must here be the beginning of my bliss?
Must hear the burden fall from off my back?
Must hear the strings that bound it to me crack?
Blessed cross! Blessed sepulchre! Blessed rather be
The Man that there was put to shame for me!**

He made forgiveness of sin personal, and went away free. Forgiveness means freedom. The tragedy is that many of God's own people do not experience the perfect liberty that comes with forgiveness. C. S. Lewis wrote, "I had been a Christian for many years before I really believed in the forgiveness of sin, or more strictly, before my theoretical belief became a reality to me. I fancy this may not be so uncommon." Lewis fancied right, for the world is full of neurotic Christians imprisoned by the inability to accept forgiveness. Guilt poisons and pollutes the stream of their life, and in spite of the fact that Christ has opened the door to victory, they stay in the dungeon of defeat. These Christians need to grasp this truth:

II. FORGIVENESS MEANS FORGETTING.

There is no freedom without forgetting. If you are going to dwell on your past sins and failures, you will never be free from them. Forgetting comes before freedom. When God forgives He forgets. In Isa. 43:25 we read, "I, even I, am He that blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and will not remember your sins." God blots out sin, and He makes it white as snow. He removes it as far as the East is from the West. Communion is a call to remember Christ and what He did for us on the cross. We are to remember Him, and not our sin. He paid for our sin. He atoned for it to make forgiveness possible. If we do not remember to forget we limit the freedom He died to give us.

So many saints get confused, and instead of remembering Christ and His victory over sin, they remember their sin and feel regret. They think that God must desire them to feel bad about their evil past. But all the regret and tears of a lifetime will not blot out one sin. The Christian who understands forgiveness will feel relief and not regret. A.W. Tozer in his book *That Incredible Christian* says that some Christians feel that a lack of regret reveals a low view of sin, but he says just the opposite is true. Lack of regret reveals a high and biblical view of forgiveness. The biblical view leads us to forget and not regret. Tozer gives this illustration from the teaching of Christ.

"The return Prodigal honors his father more by rejoicing than by repining. Had the young man in the story had less faith in his father he might have mourned in a corner instead of rejoicing in the festivities. His confidence in the loving kindness of his father gave him the courage to forget his checkered past."

Do not misunderstand. The Prodigal had to repent of his sin and regret his folly before he returned to the father, but once he was received and forgiven he forgot his past, and he entered into the joy of restored sonship. A Christian who never learns this

lesson that forgiveness means forgetting will never experience the full joy of Christian freedom.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher points out how we tend to keep things we don't need. For example, men have buttons sewed on the outside seam of their coat sleeves right in back of the wrist. Their usefulness disappeared long ago. A century ago gentlemen wore white ruffles at the wrist, and to keep them from getting soiled they were buttoned back. Long after the ruffles went out the buttons stayed, even though they had no purpose. Regret and sorrow for sin has its place, but once it brings us to the cross it becomes obsolete. If we truly receive the forgiveness of Christ, we are set free from guilt, and we can forget the past. If we go on regretting and sorrowing for our sin, we hold on to what no longer has any purpose, and we hinder our joy in Christ.

One of the greatest gifts Jesus gave to every person who has received His forgiveness is the healing power to forgive others. Broken lives, broken health, broken homes, and broken hearts can all be healed through forgiveness. May God help us to experience the full joy of forgiveness in our own lives, and then let the spirit of forgiveness flow through us to bring healing and freedom to others.

10. THE WORD OF FAITH Based on Luke 23:39-46

Not all heroes die a noble death. Jacques de Lalaing, the flower of knighthood, who was considered the pattern of chivalry for all of Europe, and who was called the last hero of romance, died an early death in 1453. It was not of a lover's broken heart, or in a tournament with his flag flying. He walked into a cannon ball fired by a shopkeeper in the little town of Ghent. That was not a very noble way for a hero to die, and the fact is many of the heroes of history die very ignoble deaths.

There is nothing very glamorous about being fed to lions, or about being burned at the stake, or even dying in a wreck, or by a disease. When you come right down to it, there are not very many ways to die that are noble and glorious. It ought not to bother us as to how we die, however, for this passage we are looking at reveals to us that the very first saint to enter paradise died in the most horrible and ignoble way. He died on the cross a victim of capital punishment in the worst possible way. Nevertheless, he is one of the heroes of Christian history. It was not because of the way he died, but because of the faith he expressed before he died. Because of his faith Good Friday was good for him long before it was dreamed to be good for anybody else. He was not only first in paradise, but he was the first man to experience the goodness of Good Friday. He died on that day, but it was also the day he began to live forever. It was already Easter for him.

When I was just a small boy in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, the lights went dim one night and we all knew why. The only man ever to be electrocuted in the State Penitentiary, just up the hill from where I lived, had just come to his inglorious end. Years later I learned that George Sitts had put his faith in Christ months before he was strapped in that electric chair. He studied his Bible and wrote his testimony that was published for millions to read. He left this world by a horrible and disgraceful method, but like the thief on the cross he died in faith.

Faith or the lack of faith is the difference between heaven and hell. There is no way to over-emphasize the necessity and value of faith. Charles Wesley wrote, "Faith, mighty faith the promise sees, and rests on that alone; Laughs at impossibilities, and says it shall be done." Only faith has the audacity to believe in the impossible and be hopeful in a hopeless situation. What could be more hopeless than to be dying on a cross as a thief, who is being rejected by society? Such is the setting we see on Calvary, and yet, faith brings a dazzling glory into that dismal gloom. This dying thief, after rebuking his criminal companion for his lack of faith, and after revealing his awareness of his own sin and guilt, turned to the center cross and said, "Lord remember me when you come into your kingdom."

If ever a man had reason to be pessimistic about the future it was this dying thief, whom tradition has called Dumas. He had no future whatever according to the eye of flesh, but Dumas saw the future through the eye of faith, and he had hope. He did not say to Jesus that he wanted to be remembered if he came into his kingdom. He said he wanted to be remembered when he came into his kingdom. He had complete confidence that Jesus would be a victorious and conquering King who one day would rule over a kingdom. That conviction was based on faith, for the evidence for it was conspicuous by its absence. Jesus was dying just like he was. It looked as if his future was to be short and filled with nothing but pain. He did not have the evidence of the resurrection like we do. He did not have a long history of the power of Christ to change lives. All he had to build his faith on was the presence of the suffering Savior.

Tholuck rightly asks, "Did ever the new birth take place in so strange a cradle?" Calvary was a most unlikely context for a conversion. There was no beautiful church, no glorious music, no flowers or choir. The environment was all wrong, for it was a setting of horror and hate. The one positive factor that gave birth to faith, however, was the eloquent love of Christ in the midst of that hate. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." It was this attitude of Christ's love for His enemies that convinced Dumas that Jesus was more than a man. He was convinced that Jesus had a future even though He was dying. He believed that Jesus would conquer death and come again and establish His kingdom. Dumas wanted in on that kingdom and so in faith he said to his new-found King, "Remember me."

Faith enabled him to be optimistic about the future even in his situation. Someone said, "Faith is the daring of the soul to go further than it can see." Those who live according to what they can see only do not live in faith. The present facts are often negative, but faith recognizes that the play of life must be judged by the ending, and not the difficult scenes along the way. Faith believes that God is an author and director who

will bring his production to a happy ending. Francis Quarles wrote,

My soul, sit thou a patient looker-on,
Judge not the play before the play is done.
Her plot hath many changes, everyday;
Speaks a new scene, the last act crowns the play.

Had Dumas lacked faith he, like all those around him, would have looked at Calvary as the final scene. It was a dismal conclusion, and his companion shouted out to Jesus, "Save your self and us." In other words, non-faith says its now or never. If you don't save us now there is no salvation. Faith, however, says that even this tragic scene in which we die is not the end if there is a king who can conquer death and establish a kingdom after death. Dumas could read the sign above the cross of Jesus, which said, "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews." He could observe the reaction of Jesus to the hatred of those around him, and also His love for His mother. This convinced him that Jesus was the Messiah. He became one of the world's great non-conformists at this point, and he went against the crowds, the community leadership, and his own companion in crime to put his trust in this dying King.

Dumas saw none of the miracles of Jesus, but only His misery. No lepers were cured; no blind were made to see. There was no mass feeding, no storm stilled, and no walking on water. All the evidence to the eye was negative, and yet he had faith in Christ. If ever a man had faith in the unseen, it was him. John Calvin wrote, "How clear was the vision of the eyes which could see in death life, in ruin majesty, in shame glory, in defeat victory, in slavery royalty. I question if ever since the world began there has been so bright an example of faith." What an example of salvation by faith alone. He was not baptized and never partook of communion. He never joined a church and never gave a dime, and he never did a good deed, but that day he entered paradise with nothing but faith in the one who could save him.

As profound as his faith was, it is also a great example of the simplicity of faith. This thief did not know the answer to dozens of questions about the future. He did not know how Jesus could conquer death, rise again and establish a kingdom. He had no answer to the complexities of end time theology. All he knew was that he trusted Jesus to remember him. If Jesus let him down he was sunk. Christian faith is simply trust in a person and not a conviction that your creed is foolproof and covers the mystery of theology accurately. Faith is trust in Christ and a confidence that the future is bright because He will remember you and receive you into His kingdom. Faith is always optimistic about the future because it is a trust in the power of Christ to bring any life to a happy ending. Someone wrote,

If I stoop into a dark, tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast, its splendor, soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom; I shall emerge one day.

Jesus confirmed the faith of Dumas on the spot. He promised him that that very day

he would be with Him in paradise. If ever there was a man who needed a purgatory before paradise it was him, but Jesus says that He would immediately be with Him. From hell on earth to paradise in the same day-no one can afford such a trip, for the cost is infinite, but Jesus offers it freely to all who will, like this dying thief, turn to Him in faith.

11. THE PERFECT PROMISE Based on Luke 23:43

Jonathan Swift made the well known statement, "Promises and pie crust are made to be broken." This attitude has prevailed through much of history, and the result has been that many have been rich in promises, but poor in performance. Many centuries ago Ovid suggested that men ought to supplement their promises with deeds, and so indicated that men could freely promise, and then just as freely forget. In more modern times Spurgeon complained of those who promised mountains and perform mole hills.

The promise has been used from the beginning as a weapon of deception. It was Satan's promise to Eve that she would be like God by eating the forbidden fruit. It was also by promises of great power that Satan sought to tempt Jesus to avoid the cross. The kings and lesser rulers in the days of Michelangelo were notorious for their use of promises to trick enemies into their power so as to execute or imprison them. Promises have been used by men to try and deceive even their gods.

The Persians have a fable about a peasant who saw an egg floating in the river, and when he tried to get it out he fell in. He began to get carried away by the current. He cried out, "Allah save me. I'll never eat another egg." Just then he was able to grab a low hanging branch of a tree and pull himself to shore. As he stood shaking himself off he remarked, "I suppose Allah you understood me to mean raw eggs of course." He quickly modified his promise when he was safe so as to nullify it, showing that he only promised in the first place to manipulate his god to his advantage. Peasants have not been the worst offenders, however, but rather kings and rulers who have had so much more with which to promise.

Many of the kings of England gained a reputation for breaking their promises. John Wilmot wrote this epitaph for Charles II.

Here lies our sovereign lord and king,
Whose promise none relies on.
He never said a foolish thing,
Nor ever did a wise one.

In Shakespeare's Henry VIII we read, "His promises were, as he then was, mighty, but his performance, as he now is, nothing."

It is in contrast to this dark background of deception and inconsistency that we turn our eyes upon Jesus, who is the light of the world, and the King of Kings, and whose promises all can rely on to be backed up by performance. Jesus promised that those who come to Him will in no wise be cast out, and that whosoever will call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. We see these promises being fulfilled to the thief who was dying on the cross next to Him. Jesus made the perfect promise to this dying man. It is a perfect promise for two reasons that we want to consider. First of all it is a perfect promise because-

I. IT IS PERSONAL PROMISE.

Jesus said to him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." This was a personal promise to this man that on this very day that he would die he would enter into the perfect life. The first word that Jesus spoke from the cross was a prayer of forgiveness for all who were responsible for His crucifixion. It was addressed to the Father, and not to those who were forgiven. Most of them did not even hear it, for they were so busy shouting and mocking. It was an unconscious benefit which Jesus bestowed on them. But this second word had to be very personal and direct, for it would be without meaning and effect if not consciously grasped by the one it concerned. The value of this word to the thief on the cross lies in its personal nature.

This holds a lesson for all of us who seek to communicate to others the Gospel of Christ. When we talk to an individual about the promises of God we ought not to speak in generalities that leave a person guessing, but get specific and personal. For example, imagine how less perfect this promise of Christ would have been if He had made His royal response to the rebels request something like this: "I will remember many when I enter my kingdom, and they shall join me this day in paradise." That would have given hope, but not assurance. It would have made him feel his salvation was possible, but it would have given him a sense that it was actual.

Jesus made His promise perfect by purposely making it distinctly personal so as to leave no doubt in the mind of the thief. Whatever may or may not be the experience of anyone and everyone else, you can count on it that this day you will be with me in paradise. What a joy it must have been to Christ to be able to win a soul for eternity in His dying hours. Here we see Jesus doing personal work even on Calvary's cross, and in so doing He transforms Golgotha, the hill of death into a hill of life. As Tholuck has said, "Did ever the new birth take place in so strange a cradle."

What a paradoxical picture is produced by this personal promise of a dying Savior to a dying sinner. The cross was a cruel way of bringing a man to the end of life, but it brought this thief also to an endless life. His cross began as his doom, but it ended as his deliverance, for now, though yet facing certain death, he does so with the promise of certain life. He was born again on the very day that he died. Nothing but a personal promise could satisfy in such a situation, and that is why Jesus emphasized it, and made it so personal. He was only hours away from a Christ-less eternity, but Jesus assured him that he was only hours away from a Christ filled eternity. Only and earnest personal promise could persuade a man so close to the gates of hell to believe that he was on his

way to heaven.

What a strange day it was on that Friday we called good. Two out of the three being crucified died victorious with joy in their hearts. What promise could be more perfect than one that could redeem a crucified criminal? Let us take Christ as our example in winning the lost, and make sure we give the Gospel the personal touch by making it clear that every individual can lay claim to the promises of Christ. He not only died for all men, he died for you and me personally. His blood was shed not only for the sins of the whole world, but for your sins and mine.

The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there may I, though vile as he
Wash all my sins away.

My sins can only be forgiven by one who is my Savior. A Savior of the world does me no good if He is not my Savior, and that is why we stress that every person recognize that they must as an individual turn to Christ and request His salvation. Christ died for the other thief as well, but he was lost none the less, because he did not look to Christ, and believe, and ask. This penitent thief did these things, and ,therefore, received a perfect promise. It gave him peace and assurance because it was a personal promise. The second reason for this being a perfect promise is-

II. IT IS A PRECISE PROMISE.

It is possible to make a promise personal, but leave it so imprecise that it is far from perfect. If Jesus would have said something like, now don't you worry, or all will turn out best in the end for you, it would have been personal but shallow. What really gives this promise power is its preciseness. Jesus promised that it would be that very day that he would be in paradise. It was not some day I will remember you, or soon I will remember you, but today, this very day of your tragic exit from this world will be the day of your triumphant entrance into a new world.

The preciseness of this promise not only made it perfect for the thief in that it would give him such specific hope for that very day, but it also protects the rest of us from popular perversions. It protects us from sacramentalism that says baptism, communion, extreme unction, or some other sacrament is essential for the salvation of a soul. This most public and widely known conversion of all is all the evidence necessary to reject such ideas. It is Christ and Christ alone that saves, and we ought not to put our trust in anything or anyone else for assurance of our salvation. Baptism is an act of obedience, and not a means to salvation. Jesus alone is the Savior, and not Jesus plus something else.

It protects us from the teaching that man is not fit to enter God's presence immediately after death. This means that the concept of purgatory does not fit this picture. If anyone needed a slight delay for cleansing it would be this dying thief, but Jesus promised him prompt entrance into paradise that very day. Wild imaginations

have built up quite a list of crimes that this man had committed. We do not need to speculate, however, for we have the man's own confession in verse 41. He admits that he and his companion are justly suffering crucifixion. This means that he was worthy of capital punishment, and it could very well mean he was guilty of murder.

He was, by any standard, an evil man guilty of serious crimes, and yet he was promised immediate entrance into paradise. It could well be that before his body was covered with earth his spirit was filled with mirth in paradise with Christ. This rules out such concepts as purgatory and soul sleep. Some teach that the soul sleeps until the resurrection, but this promise of Christ makes it clear that Paul spoke what is God's Word on the subject when he said, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." The preciseness here helps us avoid man made opinions as to what happens at death.

This promise also reveals the perfect confidence of Christ while on the cross. He knew that before this day was over he would be back with the Father having accomplished His mission. Thirty three years was certainly not a long time to be removed from paradise for the eternal Christ, but even to deity there is no place like home, and Jesus was happy that day had arrived for Him to return home, even though the worst experience of His existence had to be endured that day. He had to become sin for us, and to be separated from the Father. The joy that was to be His before the day ended enabled Him to face even the worst in confidence, and it was the promise to the thief that enabled the thief to face his death with confidence. Because of Christ's victory that day all believers can have the assurance of following the same pattern that Jesus did. We will go immediately into His presence at the time of death.

This personal precise promise given to the thief is offered to all who will turn to Christ in faith. I do think we must recognize the experience of this man to be unique, however, and not a recommended pattern. We are not to wait until we are on our death bed to turn to Christ. We have this one example so that all may have hope even in their dying moments, but there is only one example less men presume and make it a pattern to live in sin until they come to die. Far better it is to take Christ's promise as soon as possible, and have the joy of living for Christ before you die and enter paradise.

The dying thief had a perfect and precise promise that was all he could ask for, but we who could live beyond the day of our salvation have exceeding great and precious promises in plurality. We have the privilege of growing in grace, and being used of God to carry the good news of salvation to others. The thief received the perfect promise, and all who would benefit by the unsearchable riches in Christ must also first receive this promise. They must make this promise personal, and receive Jesus as their personal Savior, for only then are they ready to die with assurance. The dying thief was delivered from the very jaws of death and hell by turning to Jesus, and this same deliverance is freely offered to all who will respond to His promise: "He that comes to me I will in no wise cast out."

12. PILATE'S PERPLEXING PROBLEM Based on John 18:28-40

Pilate was appointed procurator of Judea in A.D. 26, which was only about 3 years before the crucifixion of Christ, but already he had so much trouble with the Jews that he despised them. When he first came to Jerusalem he discovered that it was about the only city in the whole Roman Empire that did not have an image of the Emperor. He did not realize how the Jews hated idols, and how they would rather die than bow down to one. In his ignorance he sent a guard to set up images on a tower overlooking the temple. He had enough sense to do it at night, but when it was discovered in the morning, the angry Jews began to stream out of Jerusalem toward the palace of Pilate. By the time they got there they had gathered seven thousand people and completely surrounded the palace.

The people sent Pilate their request to remove the images, but he refused, and so they camped there for 6 days. Every time Pilate looked out he saw seven thousand Jews praying that God would change His mind. Finally, he told them to go to the marketplace and he would speak to them. Then he ordered his soldiers to surround the marketplace. He then gave them a warning that they either go home quietly or the whole lot of them would be killed. They said it was better to die than have images in Jerusalem. This called Pilate's bluff, and he knew if he began his career there by killing thousand of unarmed Jews he would soon be back in Rome. He had to give in and order the idols removed. He despised the Jews for winning this battle and forcing him to be humiliated.

On another occasion he tried to rob the temple treasury and started a riot. Many Jews were killed by his soldiers. On a third occasion he tried to bring in shields with pagan gods on them, but again the Jews won out by writing to Caesar. He rebuked Pilate, and so with this as a background we can better understand the attitude and action of Pilate when Jesus is brought before him. First we see-

I. PILATE'S CONCERN. v. 28-32

Pilate was suspicious from the start. In the first place he could not stand there smug self-righteousness. They would not come into his judgment hall less they be defiled, but they could plan a cruel murder and think nothing of it. The letter of the law was everything to them, but the spirit of it was nothing. Pilate knew they were up to no good, but he went out to them and asked what they charged Jesus with. The Jews had no love for him either, and so they said, "If He wasn't guilty we would not have brought Him to you." They were saying this is none of your business. We only come to you to get your order to crucify Him.

In verse 31 Pilate shows he is not to be outwitted. He says, "That is just fine. If you don't need to tell me anything, then you take care of it yourself and judge Him by your own law." That was a victory for Pilate, for he knew he had them there. They had to admit it and confess that they could not put a man to death without his permission. Pilate would have been glad to see them try, for then he would have Rome behind him while he

satisfied his thirst for revenge against them. They knew this, of course, and so they obeyed the law of Rome that forbid them to practice capital punishment without permission.

Pilate was concerned also because he knew they were charging Jesus with treason. Luke tells us that they said he claims to be a king, and if you do not try Him, you are no friend of Caesar. Pilate had to consider this charge, for if news ever got back to Rome, he would be in serious trouble. He knew, however, that this was not the real reason they wanted Jesus crucified. He knew they were envious. They hated Rome and would be glad to see someone overthrow it. When Jesus was only a boy Judas the Galilean started a rebellion, and all of Galilee was in a uproar. Many of the Pharisees joined him. It was soon crushed by the Romans, but it showed that the Pharisees hated the Romans, and so Pilate was very suspicious of their charge. Pilate was cruel, but he did have a typical Roman concern for justice, and so he determined to examine the prisoner.

II. PILATE'S CONVICTION. v. 33-38

When Jesus was brought into Pilate the first question he asked Him was, "Art thou the king of the Jews?" Jesus had to be very cautious here, and so He answers by asking another question. Pilate responds with a third question, and so we can easily see why a conversation would be confusing if it contains nothing but questions. Finally, Jesus breaks the chain of questions. Jesus knew He asked the question only because the Jews charged Him with being a king, but he also knows that Pilate's eternal destiny is being worked out right there, and so He tried to become personal and get into the inner man. He asked Pilate, "Are you asking because of your own interest, or just because others have told this to you?" This made Pilate nervous, but Pilate tried to laugh it off as he would say something like, "What a question! What do I care about this whole business? I am no Jew, and it makes no difference to me. Your own people delivered you up to me. I just want to know what you have done to disturb them so that they say you are a king?"

Jesus answered him plainly then and said, "Yes, I have a kingdom, but it is not of this world." The kingdom of Christ does not originate in this world, and it is not built like the kingdoms of the world with swords and armies. Had that been the case Jesus would not have stopped Peter from using his sword, and all of his followers would have been armed. This was confusing to Pilate, but he began to be convicted. Could it be there is another world and a greater kingdom than that of Rome? Tradition says that Pilate's wife was a secret believer, and Pilate may have heard of Christian teachings through her. He certainly had heard of the miracles of Jesus, and of some of His amazing teachings. Now as he talks with Jesus personally it all makes so much sense, and he wonders if it could be true.

Pilate said, "You are a king then?" Jesus said, "Yes, I was born a king and came into this world to be a witness of the truth. My kingdom is a kingdom of truth, and I am the king. All who are of the truth hear my voice." This was another personal appeal to Pilate. Jesus knew He was under conviction and was saying something like this: "You are really the one on trial here Pilate. I am the king of the realm of truth, and you are in a spot right now that you have to decide what is the truth. If you intend to make the right

decision, you will listen to me and follow me." That was a personal invitation to accept Him as King. Pilate was faced with a decision even greater than the one he began with, for now he was personally involved.

There's a great deal of difference of opinion as to how Pilate asked this question in verse 38. A few think he was only jesting, and that he thought the whole business was a silly waste of time. I am inclined to agree with those, however, who see that Pilate was more serious at this point. He may have been skeptical and said it with the attitude of, "Well, how can you know what is right in a mess like this? I lose either way. If I don't give in to the Jews, they will write Caesar that I am protecting a rival of his. If I give you to them I will be killing an innocent man. How can a man know what to do?" With that said, he went out to the Jews and tried to persuade them to let Jesus go. Pilate did not want to make a decision, but he wanted to get rid of the whole problem. He felt the price was too great to follow the truth as he knew it. Some even feel he wanted to get rid of the crowd and talk with Jesus alone, but I feel he was trying to escape making it a decision for Christ by getting Him out of the way. He had the conviction that Jesus was innocent, but he did not want to choose Him as his King.

III. PILATE'S COMPROMISE. v. 39-40

It is obvious that Pilate was desperate, for he was naive enough to think he could come out and make a suggestion and they would go for it. He was never further from the truth. He comes out and says there is no fault in this man and so you will want him released as is your custom each year at the Passover when I release to you a prisoner. To his shock they cried out, "Release Barabbas." The crowd wanted Jesus crucified and the real rebel released. Pilate knew Barabbas was a scoundrel and that Jesus was innocent, and so he kept trying to do what he knew was right, but he did not try the one thing necessary, for he did not listen to the truth. He stood for the truth, but not at any cost. He compromised and gave up his personal conviction to do what the crowd wanted.

Pilate believed right but acted wrong. He believed Christ in fact, but he denied Him in act. He was willing to accept Christ as a good man and try to set Him free, but he was not willing to submit to Him as King. To do that would be to take up his cross and follow Jesus, but it was easier just to send Jesus to the cross. He just could not bring himself to the place where he would risk his earthly throne for a heavenly throne. He was no different than millions of other people. He had a good position and he was not sure it was worth losing it to be in the kingdom of Christ. When the showdown came between Caesar and Christ he compromised his stand for justice and chose Caesar and crucified Christ.

He wanted truth and justice, but not at such a price. Judas sold Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, and Pilate sold Him for his job. He had one of the most important posts in the Roman Empire. He was somebody in this world, and he couldn't afford to gamble with stakes like that, and so, like the rich young ruler who could not pay so big a price, he walked away from Jesus. How hard it is for a man with so much of the world to risk to yield it all to follow Jesus. History is filled with men of position who are almost persuaded, but they never take the step of commitment. John the Baptist almost had

Herod, but not quite. Jesus almost had Pilate, and Paul almost had Felix and Agrippa. All through history great preachers have had much influence on kings and leaders, but for the most part they only came close, for most of them never came all the way.

It is with real pleasure that I read the story of Thomas Cranmer who lived in the 1500's. He was an outstanding leader in England who compromised his faith out of fear, and because of pressure he signed documents repudiating his convictions. In his final confession, however, he became one of the most noble leaders in history. Because his life was at stake he denied the Gospel and bowed down to the forces of compromise. When he saw other Christians going to the stake, however, he was so ashamed of his cowardice that he wrote a denial of his denial. He confessed Christ as his King. When he was taken to the stake to be burned he held up the hand that wrote his denial of the Gospel, and he said, "It shall first be punished." He thrust it into the fire. He came close to being like Pilate, but he repented in time and sacrificed all to follow Jesus.

We can only wish that Pilate might have repented and confessed faith in Christ, but history records that he went on being cruel to the Jews. About 6 years after the crucifixion he killed a number of them unmercifully and was called to Rome. He was exiled where he, like Judas, according to tradition took his own life. A famous legend from which Mt. Pilatus in Switzerland takes its name says that over the waters of the Lake of Sucerne at the foot of the Swiss Mountains there can often be seen on moonlight nights the ghost of Pilate moaning as he washes his hands, but they are never clean from the blood of the innocent Christ he allowed to be crucified. Christ would have cost him his career, which he soon lost anyway, but compromise cost him eternity. We learn from Pilate that nothing is more dangerous than to compromise with the truth, and especially with Jesus who is the King of truth.

13. THE CRUELTY OF THE CROSS Based on John 19:1-16

Pierre VanPaasen once had an interview with Marshal Lyauty, but the former procounsel of the French Republic in Morocco. VanPassen asked him what he would have done had he been in Pilate's place. Lyauty, after describing what a trouble maker Jesus had been, endorsed Pilate's action. "You mean your excellency is of the opinion that Pilate was justified in putting Jesus to death?" he asked. "Positively," was his reply. In fact, he said he would not have waited until Jesus had infected the crowds in the capital, but would have had him put before a firing squad in his home province up North in Galilee.

This may sound like a cruel attitude, and it is, but it would have been far less cruel than what Jesus actually did have to endure. Marshal Lyauty's plan would have been

swift and merciful, but the way Pilate bungled things Jesus had to go through intense torture that was totally unnecessary. A close look at what Jesus went through is so horrible, revolting, and pathetic, that many feel that this aspect of the cross should be skipped over. After all, if we are opposed to violence on TV, why promote it from the pulpit?

Nothing could be more violent than the scenes of Christ's suffering. The cruelty of what He endured if shown in its stark reality would horrify people, and give them nightmares. People are not interested in being disturbed, and so the cruelty of the cross is played down. People want things more pleasant when they come to worship. The beauty of the cross is fine, but the cruelty of the cross is taboo. It forces people to face up to the undesirable fact of their own sin and depravity. It gets rather distasteful for the sophisticated person when he confronted by the truth that it was his sin that helped produce the cruelty of the cross. Every person is partly responsible for the cruelest crime that ever took place on this planet. We are all accomplices.

People like to cover up the pit of their evil nature and be entertained with trivial pleasantries, and not be made to look at the awful cost God had to pay to save them. There is truth in this little limerick:

There was a clergyman out in Dumont
Who kept tropical fish in his font.
Although it surprises
The babes he baptizes,
It seems to be just what they want.

If we get just what we want, we will certainly not be looking at the cruelty of the cross. If we get what we want, we will take all the benefits of Calvary, and leave the burdens to Christ. C. T. Studd put this attitude in poetry.

Mine be the pomp and glory
And Thine be Calvary!
Give me the ease of living-
The scourge, the thorns for Thee!

Ah, how we prate of threading
The path the Master trod-
Laurel and gold our portion;
Thorns were the crown of God!

Mine the respectful gester;
Thine be the bloody thong!
Mine be the titled leisure-
And Thine the jeering throng!

Here, and we call Him "Master"!
Our hands are pale and fine,

**Too good for blood and wounding-
His blood ran down like wine!**

**Mine be the chant and candle;
Thine be the pain and loss;
I am too good for trial!-
Thine, judgment and a cross!**

Subconsciously all of feel this way to some degree. We hate to face up to the fact that our sin is partly responsible for what Jesus endured. We hate to look at the price we made Him pay. We feel guilty because we not only have not resisted unto blood, but we have hardly entered the battle at all. We enjoy being at ease in Zion, and this may be disturbed if we look too closely at the suffering Jesus endured. Taking up the cross and following Him will no longer be an invitation to a pleasant afternoon hike in the beauties of God's creation. It will be a command to face the fury of the forces of hell, and if need be, die for righteousness. It is easy to understand why people get squeamish when you approach the horrors of Christ's sufferings, but God certainly expected us to face this scene squarely. The Gospels devote more space to the suffering and crucifixion of Christ than to any other event of His life.

The picture is gruesome, and the language is brutal, but there is no way to be faithful to the Scripture and bypass the cruelty of the cross. When we say the cross we are including all that Jesus went through in his trial that led to the cross. Jesus was half dead before he ever reached Calvary. In Luke 23:27-28 we read that he was followed by women who wailed and lamented. Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children." He went on to tell of the judgment that would fall on the Jews because of their rejection of him.

It is of interest to note that nowhere in the Gospels is a women ever an enemy of Christ. Nowhere does a woman ever add to the cruelty Jesus suffered. Women are always in a positive relation to Jesus. Even Pilate's wife warned him about condemning Jesus. Masculine brutality is responsible for the suffering of Jesus, while the feminine heart is always sympathetic to him. Nevertheless, Jesus was not pleased or helped by their tears, and he told them so. He told them to direct their tears to their own judgment, and not his.

We need to keep this in mind lest as we examine the cruelty of the cross we think we are accomplishing anything if we become emotional and shed tears over the suffering of Christ. Studdart Kennedy said in his own stinging way, "The last thing in the world that Christ was or wanted to be was pathetic. The last thing He wanted to do was set souls sailing on a sea of tears to no where in particular. Emotions are like shadows passing over corn fields; they come and go, and come again, and leave no trace behind. Christ wants more than our tears. He wants our very selves, and the very fibre of our beings yielded up to Him."

If we feel anything as we look at the cruelty of the cross it ought to be the feeling of repentance for our sin, and a feeling that we are unworthy servants unfit to untie His

shoelace let alone be a joint-heir with Him of the unsearchable riches of God. We cannot look at every detail of the sufferings of Christ, but we want to look at some major causes of His pain under two categories. We want to look first at-

I. THE CRUELTY OF HIS PRIVATE TORTURE.

In verse 1 Pilate had Jesus scourged in private. This was a whipping with what the Romans called the "horrible flagellum," or the horrible whip. It was made of long leather thongs studded with pellets of lead and sharp pieces of bone. It literally tore a man's back to strips. Roman law prescribed no maximum number of strokes as Jewish law did, and the result was that many died from this torture alone.

Josephus tells of how he had some of his opponents scourged until their insides was visible. How bad Jesus looked we do not know for sure, but we know it was no mere matter of red welts. Pilate's motive for having Jesus whipped was to appeal to the pity of the crowd. He brought Jesus out and said, "Behold the man." He was saying that they should behold this poor bleeding, bruised, and wretched man. "Can you look at such a pathetic sight and still persist in demanding His crucifixion?" If Jesus had not been severely beaten, this appeal would have no weight. Luke 23:16, 22 clearly reveal Pilate's plan. He said, twice with determination, "I will chastise Him and let Him go." But the Jewish leaders, like blood thirsty hyenas ruined his plan, and refused to moved by pity. They cried out, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

This meant that the beating of Jesus was for nothing. His back was torn to shreds as a part of Pilate's plot to outwit the Jews, and it failed. Jesus would have been better off if Pilate would have yielded to the Jews without a fight. His persistent efforts to resist their will only led to more suffering for Christ. So terrible was the sight of a man who had been scourged that for the first five centuries Christian artists refused to paint this scene in the life of Christ.

In verse 2 we read that the soldiers put a crown of thorns on His head. This was not primarily for torture, but for mockery, but the pain of it would be intense. It was mere sport for the soldiers. They mocked Him as King of the Jews. They would not have dared to do so in front of the angry crowd of waiting Jews, but in privacy they released their anti-Semitic hatred upon Jesus. The private torture of Jesus was mostly all the doing of Gentiles. The Jews were not interested in beatings and thorns. They just wanted Jesus to be dead. The Gentiles were not anxious to see Him die, but they enjoyed the sport of sadistic torture. So we see that the Gentiles were responsible for His torture, and the Jews were responsible for His death.

The crown of thorns was the work of Gentiles. Even if they were gentle, which is highly unlikely, the thorns would pierce His skin. One thorn in the finger could be painful, and so you can imagine the pain of dozens of them pressed into your head. The only thing beautiful that could come out of such a scene as this is the beauty of the legend concerning the robin. The robin seeing the agony of Christ sought to ease His pain by plucking a thorn from His head. In so doing, she died her breast red in the blood of Christ. An unknown poet records the legend in poetry.

Bearing His cross while Christ passed forlorn,
His God-like forehead by the mock crown torn,
A little bird took from that crown one thorn
To soothe the dear Redeemer's throbbing head;
The bird did what she could; His blood it's said,
Down-dropping, dyed her tender bosom red,
Since then no wanton boy disturbs her nest,
Weasel, nor wild cat, will her young molest,
All sacred deem that bird of ruddy breast.

Such legends as this develop, no doubt, to try and offset the cruelty of the biblical scene. They can be of value, for example, if every time you see a robin you think of the crown of thorns and what Jesus suffered, and then give thanks. There is a painting in Milan which represents a little cherub trying to feel one of the thorns with his finger. There is a look of wonder in his face, for he has been told it means agony, but he cannot feel it. He belongs to a different world, and sin and suffering are incomprehensible to him. Even for us who experience pain it is difficult to imagine what Jesus suffered. For all eternity He had been adored by all the hosts of heaven, and now He stands bleeding and bruised, and being mocked by brutal man. This was the coronation of the King of sorrows. The crown of thorns symbolized His bearing the curse of sin, for thorns were the result of man's fall, and all through the Old Testament they symbolized the curse of sin. Verse 3 says they also struck Jesus with their hands as they mocked them, and the other Gospels indicate other strikes against Him also. But now we move into the second category which is-

II. THE CRUELTY OF HIS PUBLIC TORTURE.

We are familiar with the nail pierced hands, and the spear wound in the side, but these physical pains may not have been as cruel as the psychological pains Jesus had to bear. The mockery would be more bitter to one who loved as Jesus did, and who knew the value of every eternal soul. That is why he told the women to weep for themselves and their children. The really sad thing as Jesus saw it was the folly and cruelty of men. They cried out "Let his blood be upon us and our children." They demanded his crucifixion with passionate hatred and mockery, and certainly this was a bitterness for Jesus beyond our comprehension.

How bitter that cup
No heart can conceive,
Which Jesus drank up
That sinners might live.

If we put all the mockery together we see Jesus was constantly abused. The Scripture says that the chief priests mocked him, with the scribes and elders. The soldiers mocked him, and those who passed by reviled him, and even the thieves crucified with him railed on him, and cast the same abuse in his teeth. The cruelty of the tongue was at its worst at the cross. We say that sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me, but the fact is, it is easier to bear the pain of sticks and stones than it is the deep cuts

of the mocking tongue. All the pain of the human tongue was poured into the cup Jesus had to drink.

Then in verse 23 we read of another cruelty that we seldom think of, but which was the depth of disgrace and humiliation. The soldiers took his garments and divided them. All of the Roman writers on the method of crucifixion agree that the victims were stripped naked.

All rights denied,
Naked, Christ died.

The Gentiles at his cradle brought him gifts, but now at his cross they take away the last of his possessions. Jesus was stripped of the last shred of dignity he had left, and he was exposed that he might bear the full shame of our sin.

His scared limbs they stretch, they tear
With nails they fasten to the wood;
His sacred limbs exposed and bare,
Or only covered with His blood.

The shame of nakedness was one of the first results of sin when Adam and Eve disobeyed God. All men must face the judgment of God naked with all their shame exposed, and, therefore, when Jesus died for all men He took upon himself their nakedness and shame also. He did so that we might be clothed in the garments of his righteousness, and be able to stand before God clothed and unashamed. Clothing was the first gift of God to sinful man. Clothing represents grace, and all grace was removed from Christ in the cruelty of the cross. K. Schilder in his famous book *Christ Crucified* writes, "He was made a public spectacle in His nakedness on the accursed cross. He could not forget that He had fewer rights than Adam. Adam's was still the right to conceal himself, and Christ's awareness of His own shame in part prompted the plaint: My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

There are other cruelties He suffered also, such as the contempt shown in those spitting on Him, but we do not have the time to look at everything. What we have seen is sufficient to demonstrate that the cross Jesus bore for us was the most cruel and painful experience ever endured. Others have been tortured as much, and more, but none ever suffered as much for no one else ever suffered so innocently, and with such love and sensitivity, and for the sins of all mankind.

Richard Jefferies tells of a boy who stood before a painting of the crucifixion. His feelings were hurt as he looked at the cruel nails and the unfeeling spear. He looked at the picture for a long time and then turned and said, "If God had been there, He would not have let them do it." But the paradox of it all is that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. God was not only there and letting it happen, but He was suffering with the Son for our benefit. Isa. 53:4-5 says, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows....But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are

healed."

God took all that physical pain, mental misery, and soul suffering, and turned it into a blessing for every person who accepts Jesus as Savior. This great paradox of Jesus using the world's worst act of cruelty for the world's greatest blessing assures us that no matter how much we suffer in life that which is unjust, senseless, and meaningless, God will turn it into ultimate blessing. If God turned the cruelty of the cross into a universal blessing, we need never doubt that verse of Paul in Rom. 8:28 that says, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Even the cruelty of the cross was made to lead to the ultimate beauty of redemption of the lost out of every tribe, tongue and nation who will praise Jesus for ever as King of Kings. God always has the last word, and no evil of men can prevent His final victory. Therefore, do not add to the cruelty of the cross by refusing the salvation Jesus purchased there for us. Receive Him as your Savior and enjoy His victor forever.

14. I THIRST Based on John 19:28-29

Shortly before midnight on March 29, 1848 a farmer in upstate New York was taking his late evening stroll. As he walked along and uneasy feeling possessed him. Something was wrong, but he was not sure what it was. His anxiety turned to terror when he suddenly realized that the familiar roar of near by Niagara Falls was absent. He thought he was going deaf, but that was not the case, for he could hear the breaking of twigs under his feet. He rushed to the falls and was horrified. The mighty Niagara had stopped. He thought the world must be coming to an end. He ran home and told his family, but they couldn't believe it. The next morning however the did believe it, for all the newspapers carried headlines about it. People began to panic, and thousands gathered at the falls. Prayer vitals began out of fear that this was a sign of the end. Thirty hours later, however, the terrific torrent of water began again to plunge over the great falls. It was discovered the huge chunks of ice from Lake Erie had become welded together in a solid block like ice cubes in a bowl, and they had blocked the mouth of the Niagara temporarily.

Had this happened to the Podunk River in Nowhereville, people would not have gotten excited about it, but when the mighty Niagara stops, people pay attention and stand in awe as they search for meaning. So it is with the 5th word of Jesus from the cross. If anyone else in the world would say these words, no body would get excited or pay any attention. Everyone has said it at sometime that they are thirsty. It is the most commonplace of statements. One of the first things a child learns to ask for is a drink. The two thieves on the cross were likely thirsty as well, but so what? Everyone who has ever lived has been thirsty and stated that they thirst. We don't make anything of it, or look for any meaning in it. It is just a simple fact of life. But when the Son of God says it, it becomes news, and men stand in awe and ask questions about its meaning.

Every word that Jesus spoke has meaning, and this 5th word, like all the others, was recorded for our edification. Had Jesus died by the Jewish method of capital punishment, which was stoning, we would not have these 7 words. Stephen was only able to repeat the first of Christ's words from the cross, which was, "Father forgive them." It was because he was stoned, but Jesus died by the Roman method of crucifixion that we might have all 7 of His final words. The meaning of this 5th word can be brought out by asking two questions-why and when? Let's consider first the-

WHY?

This reveals a suffering Savior. Why should He who created the great Niagara and all the oceans, lakes, rivers and streams of the world be dependent upon anyone for a drink. Some poet wrote,

His are the thousand sparkling rills,
While from a thousand fountains burst
And fill with music all the hills,
And yet he cries-I thirst.

Why? It is because He entered fully into the experience of suffering humanity. He did not have to suffer thirst, for He was the very water of life. He did not have to suffer hunger, for He was the very bread of life. He did not have to suffer death, for He was the very author of life. Jesus did not have to suffer anything, for He was sovereign, but He became a suffering servant and entered the fullness of our manhood that He might lift us to the fullness of His Godhood. He who was rich became poor that we might be made rich. Jesus said, "I thirst," because He did thirst, and He did because He gave up His perfect position of self-sufficiency to become one of us, which means dependent, needy and suffering.

The last time Jesus had a drink was with His disciples in the upper room on Thursday evening when He instituted the Lord's Supper. From there He went to Gethsemane, where in deep distress He sweat great drops of blood. He was then taken by force and put through a cruel and unjust trial all through the night, and finally He was beaten and made to carry His cross to Golgotha. He was exhausted and dehydrated, and His body would be burning with a need for liquid even before He was nailed to the cross. Eliza Cook wrote, "Hunger is bitter, but the worst of hunger pangs, the most accursed of wants fell scorpions, is thirst."

The Greeks have a story about Tantalus, a wealthy king who committed a terrible sin. He was punished by being placed in water up to his chin, and the water would recede whenever he tried to drink it. This is where we get the word tantalizing, which means something desirable kept just out of reach. What a horrible punishment, for it would be enough to drive the strongest person mad. We know that many have gone mad in a state of desperate thirst. Many have made the cry, "I thirst," but why Jesus? It was because He took upon Himself the limitations of human flesh, and He suffered the full depth of human suffering. "In every pang that rends the heart the Man of Sorrows had a part." The second question is-

WHEN.

This reveals a satisfied Savior. The timing here is vital to our understanding of the full significance of this word. Note that it comes after the 3 hours of silence and darkness during which Jesus endured the pains of hell for us. It is only after the battle with the forces of darkness and the flames of hell was finished, and the purpose of the cross was accomplished, that Jesus said I thirst. In other words, we have here the request of an exhausted victor when the battle is over. The Water of Life has been drained dry and the very fires of hell, but He has conquered and quenched the flames, and now He is asking for the comfort for a refreshing drink.

This gives us a picture of Jesus as a commander concentrating on only one thing and that is victory until the battle for men's souls is complete. He refused a drink that was offered earlier, for there was no time to think of self in the midst of this life and death conflict. The father who dashes into the flames of a burning home to rescue his child has all his conscious powers focused on one object, and not until that goal is achieved does he stop to think of his own needs and thirst. No soldier in hand-to-hand combat stops for a drink, however thirsty he may be. No man in a race with competitors on his heels stops to quench his thirst. He will go to the finish line first. So it is here on the cross where Jesus was in hand-to-hand combat with all the powers of evil. He does not think of His own needs and thirst until He has won the victory necessary for our salvation.

The thirst of Jesus was the thirst of an exhausted, but satisfied, Savior. He was satisfied that He had accomplished all that was necessary for us, and so then He made this request for Himself. After He suffered all the pangs of hell for us He simply makes this humble request for a drink. Jesus was not just taking a tour through the world like a wealthy visitor visits the slums. Jesus entered the world of human suffering to live, suffer and die. He did so as the God-Man. Only God could conquer Satan and quench the flames of hell, but only man would ask for a drink after the battle.

Gregory of Nazianzus, back in the 4th century, wrote this of Christ: "He thirsted, but He cried, if any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. He promised that those who believe in Him should gush forth as a well. He was weary, but is Himself the rest of the weary and heavy laden. He weeps, but He puts an end to weeping. He inquires where Lazarus was laid, for He was man, but He raises Lazarus, for He was God. He is sold at a contemptible rate, even 30 pieces of silver, but He ransoms the world, and at a great price, even His own blood."

Jesus was not ashamed to express a need. He had a need and was willing to ask for it to be met by the help of man. Jesus needs us to meet the needs of others as well, for when we meet another's need we meet the need of Christ. Even a cup of cold water given in His name will not go un-rewarded. He meets our needs through others and enables us to say with the poet,

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
Behold, I freely give
The living water, thirsty one,

Stoop down, and drink, and live.

**I came to Jesus, and I drank
Of that life giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
And now I live in Him.**

15. IT IS FINISHED Based on John 19:28-37

It could very well be that the greatest word ever spoken on this earth was the word Tetelestai. Herbert Lockyer, the great English Bible scholar, says of this word, "The greatest, most momentous word in the history of human language and the most wonderful proclamation every to fall upon human ears since the beginning of the world." This Greek word is translated by 3 English words. It is the 6th word Jesus spoke on the cross just before He died. He said, "Tetelestai-it is finished." This is the ultimate utterance of Jesus, for He was not just saying my life is over, but He is announcing the total completion of God's plan to atone for the sins of fallen man.

Never did one word convey so much meaning. One word can be life changing, and as when a woman says to the man proposing, "Yes." That one word changes all of the future for that couple. But here is one word that changes all of eternity for the multitude of the redeemed. It is finished-the battle is done, the victory is won. The enemy is vanquished. Salvation is achieved. Sinners are set free. Heaven is opened. The holiness of God is satisfied. The power of death and hell are defeated. Eternal life is secured. The once for all sacrifice was completed and it was a total success. It never needs to be repeated. Jesus finished all that needs to be done for the salvation of any person in all of time.

A cabinet-maker was saying to his friend who was witnessing to him, "I don't get it about the atonement on the cross." The friend lifted a plane and said, "What if I plane the top of this polished table?" "Stop!" cried the cabinet-maker. Don't you see that it is finished? You will ruin it if you use that plane." He responded, "That is what I have been trying to tell you about Christ's work of redemption. It is a finished work. If you try to add to it, you only spoil it. You have to accept salvation as a finished gift. You cannot add to it or improve it. All you can do is accept it as a finished product."

Jesus died a complete success, for He did all He was born to do. This word is a word of satisfaction. He is saying, "I did it! I have achieved all that my Father sent me to achieve. It was a hard goal to achieve with obstacles everywhere, and many a temptation to forsake it. But I set my face to get to the cross, and now I can die with this word on my lips-Tetelestai-it is finished-mission accomplished."

Jesus was only 33 years old and He was dying, but He achieved all that His life was meant to achieve. Quality and not quantity is what counts in the life of Jesus. Life did not begin at 40 for Him. He never made it to middle age. He died a fairly young man, but He died supremely successful. He did not have a home, a family, or anything to speak of in the way of an estate. The soldiers gambled for His garments, and that was it. But He was a success because He finished what He came to do in dying for the sin of the world.

There were many negatives surrounding the cross, but Jesus overcame every one of them with a positive. Yes there was agony, but there was also accomplishment. Yes there was pain, but also purpose. Yes there was cruelty, but also conquest. Yes there was suffering, but also satisfaction. Yes there was shame, but also success. Yes there was the tragic, but also the triumphant. Jesus looked past all of the negatives and saw the ultimate positives, and that is why He could say with a victorious voice, "It is finished."

'Tis finished! So the Savior cried,
And meekly bowed His head and died;
'Tis finished-yes, the race is run,
The battle fought, the vict'ry won.

'Tis finished! All that heav'n decreed
And all the ancient prophets said
Is now fulfilled, as was designed,
In Thee, the Savior of mankind.

'Tis finished! Man is reconciled
To God and pow'rs of darkness spoiled:
Peace, love and happiness again
Return and dwell with sinful men.

'Tis finished! Let the joyful sound
Be heard through all the nations round;
'Tis finished! Let the echo fly
Thro' heav'n and hell, thro' earth and sky. Samuel Stennett

F. W. Boreham points out that the word does not just mean that it is finished, but that it is perfected. It is the word the farmer would say when one of his flock gave birth to a lamb so perfect and without defect that it was a delight to his eyes. He would say, "Tetelestai-it is perfect." It is the word the artist would utter as he stood back admiring his work. Seeing no room for improvement he would say, "Tetelestai-it is finished. Nothing can be added, for it is perfect.

Jesus not only did the job He came to do, He did it perfectly. It was a work of art how He wove even the evil and folly of man into a beautiful pattern that revealed the love of God. My brother was artistic, and I can remember how we used to try and make a mess of lines on a chalkboard just to see if he could make something of the

meaningless tangle of lines, and he always could. He could find some animal or other aspect of nature and work with the mess we made to create something of order and beauty. That is what Jesus did with the awful scenes around the cross. He came into this world to turn the ugliness of sin into the beauty of salvation, and He did it on the cross. The first words of Jesus were, "I must be about my Father's business." And now his last words on the cross were announcement that He had finished His Father's business.

Over 150 thousand people die everyday in the world, but only one death makes all of these deaths a possible step into the presence of God. The idea of being finished carries the content of the reality that now that it is finished it is ready for application. When you say a loaf of bread is finished you mean that it is no longer in the process of being made, but is now ready to be consumed and enjoyed. When Jesus said it is finished He was saying, not that everything is over, but that now the atonement can be applied, and people can be set free from the bondage of sin. The Gospel is now ready for application. The price has been paid, and every i is dotted and every t is crossed. The plan of salvation is signed, sealed, and delivered. It is a done deal, and it is ready to be proclaimed to all the world.

The Jews expected their Messiah to come as a conquering hero and set them free from their bondage. What they did not see was that the real enemy was not Rome but sin and Satan. These were the foes Jesus had to defeat, and He did that on the cross. He was the conquering hero after all, and Calvary was the greatest battlefield of all time. Jesus took on the enemy of man there, and He whipped him. He had to endure the hell of separation from His Father, which was the worst thing Jesus had to suffer, but He did it, and did not cease to fight until He had drunk the entire cup of God's wrath on sin. Not one drop did He leave unconsumed. Only after He paid the full penalty did Jesus say this word of victory, "It is finished."

The greatest battle ever won was finished, and it was won for the cause of righteousness. Good and evil met at the cross, and when the dust settled from this enormous clash, God had won, and this was the end of Satan's controlling the destiny of man. The cross became the center of human history, for here man was set free to choose another alternative. He no longer has to be a lost sinner in bondage to the forces of evil. He is now free to be a saint enslaved by the love of Jesus. Nothing is ever done until it is done right, and Jesus did it right on the cross. It is done, and never needs repeating, for the plan of God is perfected.

Creation was finished on Friday just before the Sabbath day of rest. Now Jesus finishes the plan for the new creation on a Friday just before He enters the Sabbath rest in the tomb. He earned the right to raise His body on Easter because of His finished work on the cross on Friday. Because we know this we do not need to wait until Easter to rejoice in what Jesus did for us. Good Friday is also a day of rejoicing because we know Jesus settled the sin issue once and for all. An unknown poet wrote-

The terms of peace were settled then,
And never could be changed again.

**Heaven's irreversible amen
Had sealed that sentence, "It is done!"**

**The trembling earth its witness lent,
The veil, from top to bottom rent.
The dim and awe-struck firmament
All heard, astonished, "It is done!"**

Archaeologists have dug up many tax receipts from the ancient world, and a word often found on them is this word Tetelestai. It means that this is paid in full. That is what we celebrate in communion. The price is paid by the finished work of Christ. It is the basis for the songs of the saints through time and into eternity. Another unknown poet wrote-

**Ten thousand times ten thousand
In sparkling raiment bright,
The armies of the ransomed saints
Throng up the steps of light.
Tis finished, all is finished;
Their fight with death and sin.
Fling open wide the golden gates,
And let the victors in.**

As we celebrate the victory of Good Friday let us give thanks to our Lord who did not let satanic temptation and the folly of man stop Him before He finished His work. Let us rejoice in His announcement and praise Him for this word of eternal encouragement-Tetelestai-It is finished.

16. THE REALITY OF THE RESURRECTION Based on John 20:1-18

When Jesus Christ entered the stage of human history He entered it to stay, and even when evil men and satanic forces nailed Him to a cross, and sealed Him in a tomb, it was not the end; not even the beginning of the end, but only the end of the beginning, for He made that cross a symbol of love and redemption, and that tomb a symbol of life and resurrection. On that first Easter morning the greatest act that ever took place on this earthly stage was performed. How great was it, and how important was it? So important that the Bible says, if it did not happen your faith is vain, and there is no hope, and you are yet in your sins. It was so important that from the start the Apostles fearlessly claimed it, and forcefully proclaimed it. Atheists and skeptics have done all they could to try and disprove it, for if they could all of Christianity would collapse, but so overwhelming is the reality of the resurrection that Christians welcome investigation.

Many who set out to disprove it have become committed believers. There are just three things we want to consider in this message. First we want to-

I. EXAMINE THE RECORD OF THE RESURRECTION. vv. 5-8

Why did John believe? What evidence did he have here that told him of the reality of the resurrection? We need to try and think like he must have thought. Could robbers have stolen the body? This would be a logical question. But John would conclude that no robber would neatly fold the grave clothes as they were. And friend would not have stolen the body, for they would not have unrapped the body there. The evidence indicated that Jesus must have did this himself.

Who but the Son of God would rise from the dead and then neatly fold up His grave clothes? He did not just let them fall in disorder, but He folded them neatly, and thus revealed that it was the Lord of all order that was at work here. Nobody else would have bothered with such a trivial matter, but nothing was too small for it to matter to Jesus, and John knew that.

Mary is seen weeping at the tomb because the body of Jesus was gone, but little did she realize that she would really have something to weep about if the body had still been there. She would then have a god like the gods of the world who always end up in a tomb somewhere. She was suffering the grief of Good Friday yet as she stood before the empty tomb which represented the glory of Easter morning, and of the Risen Redeemer. She was bewailing her loss when she could be beholding her Lord. She was like the masses who still live in the darkness of a world with no hope when the light of eternal hope is right at their fingertips in the Living Lord.

Mary, however, did not stay in the dark, for Jesus revealed Himself. He spoke her name and Mary entered the dawn of a new morning, and Easter glory was born in her heart. Her Savior was alive, and had conquered death, just as he said. Anyone who will listen and turn to the Living Christ today can still hear Him say "Come unto me and rest." Anyone can enter into the Easter message and receive Jesus as Savior and have the hope of eternal life with Him. Next we want to-

II. EXPLAIN THE RESULTS OF THE RESURRECTION.

Mary became the first witness of the resurrection, and she became the apostle to the Apostles. But they were too sad to believe her good news. They were the saddest group of men the world has ever seen. The walls of life had collapsed on them, and lay in ruins at their feet. The one they put all their hope in was crucified and buried. It was over and they were in despair.

That evening Jesus himself came to them and this group of discouraged, disappointed, and defeated disciples became dynamic and determined to devote their lives to delivering this good news to the lost world. They turned the world upside down and changed the course of history. Nothing but the reality of the resurrection could explain this sudden change from fear to faith; from pain to praise; from sorrow to service, and from self-

centered cowardice to Christ-centered courage. Men do not face torture, burning at the stake, being torn in two, fed to lions, and all manner of persecution and suffering for the sake of a fairy tale, or for anything they were not so sure of they would be willing to die for its reality.

Some skeptics know that they must have seen Jesus alive to have such a motivation, but they come up with things like the swoon theory. It says that Jesus revived in the coolness of the tomb, and so they did see him alive again. This is foolishness, for he would be so weak that he would need long nursing back to health, and likely never make it but die in the attempt. They would know how unlike God he was then, and how he did not conquer death in any meaningful way different than others who have survived. A man half dead, and staggering from a tomb, and then needing a great deal of care would not inspire the conviction that death had been conquered. This theory cannot explain the zeal of the disciples to proclaim the reality of the resurrection. Jesus had to show He was mighty in His victory over death to convince His disciples, and motivate them to sacrifice their lives to share it with the world. Third we want to-

III. EXPERIENCE THE REALITY OF THE RESURRECTION.

There is little profit if we examine the record and explain the results, but do not experience the reality of the resurrection. This is the heart of the Gospel, for we can know Jesus and the power of His resurrection. Men can live without feet, fingers, and many other parts of the body, but not without heart. You can know the facts of Easter, and not know the faith of Easter, and this leaves you with a corpse religion, for the heart is gone. If you meet your greatest foe, which is death, and all you have is the facts of Easter, but not faith in the Lord of Easter, you are fighting with an unloaded gun. You are on a bridge that only goes part way across the river that separates time from eternity, and a bridge that stops short of the other shore is not any better than no bridge at all.

The reality of the resurrection must be more than a fact you believe in. It must be a force that motivates you like it did the disciples. It must be a reality that determines your whole perspective on life, and your actions and goals. This can only be by asking the Resurrected Savior to come into your life as Lord, and to reign in you. Those who will receive Jesus as their Living Lord will experience the reality of the resurrection, and enter into the joy of Easter, which means we have eternal life in Him.

