The Passion of The Christ
Sermon Series

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The Passion of The Christ – True or False?
By: Lee Strobel, John MacArthur, and Brian Mavis

Experience The Passion
By: David Mains, Chuck Moore, and Don Woznicki

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Introduction

Mel Gibson’s new film *The Passion of The Christ* will be in theaters on Ash Wednesday, February 25th, 2004. This is a feature length film portraying the betrayal, trial, beating, and crucifixion of Jesus. The movie, filmed in Aramaic and Latin, artfully intertwines flashbacks to earlier episodes in Jesus’ life, giving fuller meaning to His person, His sufferings, His relationships, and the message of His life to humanity.

SermonCentral.com believes that this movie will open the hearts and minds of people to the gospel message of Jesus. But like the Ethiopian Eunuch in the book of Acts, someone needs to explain to people what they have witnessed and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

We want to help you prepare for the release of *The Passion of The Christ*, so we put together a team of pastors and authors - who saw a private screening of the movie - to write sermons inspired by *The Passion*. **SermonCentral is giving these sermons away for free.**

Lee Strobel (author of *The Case for Easter*) and John MacArthur (author of *The Murder of Jesus*) contributed two sermons each to comprise a four-part series entitled *The Passion: True or False?* Brian Mavis (General Manager of SermonCentral.com) wrote four sermons for another option in this same series.

David Mains (President of Mainstay Ministries), Chuck Moore (President of Northern Baptist Seminary), and Rev. Don Woznicki (St. Norbert Catholic Church) wrote four sermons (homilies) each to give you three different options in the four-week sermon series called *Experiencing the Passion of Christ.*

**How to Use This Resource**

Each author has his own style. Strobel and MacArthur contributed material influenced by their books. Rev. Don Woznicki wrote homilies appropriate for Catholic leaders. Mains and Moore lean on their years of practical teaching experience in their sermons. Mavis
writes sermons that are tied closely to scenes in the movie and that are easily transferable to most pastors.

You also have your own style. Look at each sermon. You may choose to closely follow just one author or you may choose to mix and match. As with all sermons, first ask God what He wants to say through you to your congregation. Then, study the Bible yourself and apply the message to your life.

When to Use This Resource
The movie is being released on Ash Wednesday – February 25th, 2004. Easter is April 11th. I recommend that you begin a four-week series on March 21st, ending on Easter. Or if you already have special Easter event, begin on March 14th, ending the Sunday before Easter.

May God speak powerfully through you,
Brian Mavis
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Biographies of the Authors

**Dr. John MacArthur** – Dr. MacArthur is author of numerous best-selling books that have touched millions of lives. He is pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, and president of The Master’s College and Seminary. He is also president of Grace to You, the ministry that produces the internationally syndicated radio program *Grace to You* and a host of print, audio, and Internet resources. He also authored the notes in the Gold Medallion Award–winning *The MacArthur Study Bible*. John and his wife, Patricia, have four grown children and twelve grandchildren. For more information, contact Grace to You at 800-55-GRACE or www.gty.org.

**Dr. David Mains** – For 20 years David R. Mains was the speaker on the "Chapel of the Air" daily radio program. "You Need to Know," which he also hosted, won the 1995 National Religious Broadcasters Television Program of the Year award. He has authored, or coauthored with his wife Karen, over twenty books including Gold Medallion winners. Most pastors know him because of using a 50 Day Spiritual adventure, an Advent Celebration, or another Mainstay Church Resources series. For more information visit www.SundaySolutions.com.

**Brian Mavis** – Brian Mavis helped create and became the General Manager of SermonCentral.com in the Fall of 2000. SermonCentral.com is now the #1 Preaching Resource Website worldwide with over 170,000 users sessions per week, from over 118 different countries. (He has also read approximately 20,000 sermons.) Brian is a published writer whose most recent work includes “Experience the Passion of the Christ” and “The Passion of the Christ: True or False?,” two booklets written to accompany Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion of The Christ.* Brian has his Masters Degree in Philosophy and Theology, and has served as Missionary, Youth Pastor, Associate and Singles’ Pastor. He lives in San Marcos, California with his wife Julie, and their two daughters.
**Dr. Chuck Moore** – Since 2001 Dr. Chuck Moore has served as the President and Professor of Christian Ministry & Leadership at Northern Seminary in Lombard, IL. Prior to coming to Northern, Chuck served congregations in Illinois, Ohio and Michigan. Chuck has been married to Marilyn for 26 years. They have two college age twin boys and a recently married daughter. Chuck is pleased to serve at a seminary that is deeply evangelical and is committed to training pastors and church leaders for culturally relevant ministries. For additional information and generous scholarship opportunities, see [www.seminary.edu](http://www.seminary.edu) or call 1.800.YES.NBTS.

**Lee Strobel** – Lee Strobel, an award-winning journalist for thirteen years with the Chicago Tribune and other newspapers, was a spiritual skeptic until 1981. He is the author of several books including the Gold medallion Award-winning books *The Case for Christ*, and *The Case for Faith*. His newest book is *The Case for Easter*. He has been a teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Valley Community Church. He and his wife live in Orange County, California.

**Rev. Don Woznicki** – Rev. Woznicki, 43, is Associate Pastor at St. Norbert Catholic Church in Northbrook, Illinois. He earned his Master in Divinity and Baccalaureate in Sacred Theology (S.T.B.) from University of St. Mary of the Lake (Mundelein Seminary). He was ordained to the priesthood for the Archdiocese of Chicago, May 18, 2002. Before becoming a priest, Rev. Woznicki earned his Bachelors in Chemical Engineering from Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana (1984) and worked in the environmental field for a good portion of his engineering career. In order to get a better understanding of the entertainment industry, a year before entering the seminary in 1998, Rev. Woznicki traveled to Los Angeles to work in the film and television business. He continued to do so while in the seminary, becoming a chaplain for the Intra-denominational Christian group, Act One: Writing For Hollywood. Act One, based in Hollywood, is a Christian sponsored effort to place more talented Christian artists and business people in the entertainment industry.
Jesus is the Son of God – True or False?
(Truly this was the Son of God!)
By John MacArthur

Scripture records a number of supernatural phenomena that occurred while Jesus hung on the cross. Those events were God's own supernatural commentary on the cross. They gave proof that the execution taking place that day just outside Jerusalem's city walls was an event of cosmic importance.

The routes to the city that day were jammed with pilgrims coming and going as they prepared to celebrate Passover. Few if any of them realized what a monumental event was occurring at Calvary. God's true Paschal Lamb was dying on that very Passover to provide forgiveness for all the sins of all the redeemed of all time. That was the very focal point of redemptive history yet as far as Jerusalem was concerned on that day, relatively few were taking notice.

But then suddenly all nature seemed to stop and pay attention.

THE SUN DARKENED

The first of the miraculous signs that accompanied Jesus' death was the darkening of the sky. Matthew writes, "Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land" (Matthew 27:45). Matthew was counting hours by the Jewish system, so the sixth hour would have been noon. At the precise moment when the noon sky should have been brightest in the sky, darkness fell over all the land, and remained for three hours.

This was probably not a total blackness, but rather a severe darkening of the normal daylight intensity of the sun. "Over all the land" is an expression that might refer to the land of Israel, or it could refer to the whole world. I'm inclined to think that the sun itself was dimmed, so that the darkness would have been universal, and not limited to the local area surrounding Jerusalem.

As a matter of fact, according to some of the Church Fathers, the supernatural darkness that accompanied the crucifixion was noticed throughout the world at the time. Tertullian mentioned this event in his ApologeticumCa defense of Christianity written to pagan
skeptics: "At the moment of Christ's death, the light departed from the sun, and the land was darkened at noonday, which wonder is related in your own annals and is preserved in your archives to this day."

The darkness could not have been caused by a solar eclipse, because Passover always fell on a full moon, and a solar eclipse (caused when the moon gets between earth and sun, blocking the sun's light) would be out of the question during the full moon. But God is certainly able to dim the sun's light without recourse to any planetary phenomenon like an eclipse. During Moses' time, darkness had fallen on Egypt because a plague of locusts was so thick that the flying insects had blocked the sun (Exodus 10:14-15). In Joshua's time the opposite had occurred, and the sun seemed to stand still over Israel for a whole 24-hour period (Joshua 10:12-14). In Hezekiah's day, the shadows turned backward ten degrees, as the earth's rotation seemed to reverse for about 40 minutes (2 Kings 20:9-11).

The darkening of the sun is commonly mentioned in Scripture as an apocalyptic sign (Isaiah 50:3; Joel 2:31; Revelation 9:2). Amos wrote of the last days of the earth, "'And it shall come to pass in that day,' says the Lord GOD, 'That I will make the sun go down at noon, And I will darken the earth in broad daylight'" (Amos 8:9). Throughout Scripture, darkness is connected with judgment, and supernatural darkness of this type signifies cataclysmic doom (cf. Isaiah 5:30; Joel 2:2; Amos 5:20; Zephaniah 1:14-15). So the darkening of the sun at noon like this was certain to evoke widespread fear that catastrophic judgment was about to fall.

Scripture does not say why the darkness at Jesus' crucifixion; it only reports it as a fact. Various interpreters have tried to explain the darkness in several ways. Some have suggested God sent the darkness as a veil to cover the sufferings and nakedness of His Son, making it an act of mercy toward Christ. Others have suggested the dimming of the sun signified God's displeasure with those who put Christ to death. There may be truth in both of those ideas, but neither seems to get to the heart of what the darkness signified. Since this kind of supernatural darkness is always associated with divine judgment Scripture, it seems reasonable that this darkness was also meant to convey a message of judgment. Coming as it did during the time when Christ's suffering was most intense in the three hours before He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46)
may well have signified the Father's judgment against the guilt Christ bore in His person on our behalf.

In any case, the darkness is certainly an appropriate reminder that the cross was a place of judgment. In those awful hours of darkness, Christ was bearing the judgment meant for His people. He was standing their place as the wrath of God was being poured upon Him for their transgressions. That may be why the biblical narrative links the culmination of the darkness with Christ's outcry to the Father: "And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'" (v. 46).

Matthew records what the taunting crowd said in response to Jesus' outcry: "Some of those who stood there, when they heard that, said, 'This Man is calling for Elijah!'" (v. 47).

_Eli_ is Hebrew for God. (Mark uses the Aramaic cognate, _Eloi._) _Lama sabachthani_ is Aramaic, meaning, "Why have You forsaken Me?" Since Aramaic was the common language of the region, it seems unlikely that all the spectators at the cross were truly ignorant about the meaning of His words. It appears that their remark ("This Man is calling for Elijah!") was a deliberate misrepresentation of His words another cruel and sadistic sneer at Christ.

Their behavior further makes clear their mocking intent: "Immediately one of them ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine and put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink. The rest said, 'Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to save Him'" (vv. 47-49). The one who ran to fetch the vinegar obviously did so for melodramatic effect, to complete his mockery by pretending to be generous and compassionate to Jesus, but really only seeking another means to taunt. Vinegar would have been a disappointing refreshment to someone in such a state of dehydration though it would have helped some.

In fact, shortly after this, when Christ did utter the words, "I thirst" (John 19:28), the vinegar was all He was offered. By then it was close at hand (v. 29) because of this individual's devilish taunt. But at this point, others who were standing close by forbid the prankster from giving Christ even mock assistance, saying, "Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to save Him." Despite the ominous darkness, they were reveling in Christ's sufferings, and they did not want anyone to offer Him relief even if the assistance rendered were merely a fiendish insult.
Matthew indicates that such cruel taunting continued to the very end. It was at some point in the midst of that continued taunting that Christ said, "I thirst," and was then given a sponge full of vinegar. Shortly afterward, "Jesus cried out again with a loud voice" saying "Tetelestai!" Then commending His spirit to God, He "yielded up His spirit" (Matthew 27:50).

**The Veil Torn**

At the very moment of Christ’s death, a series of remarkable miracles occurred. Matthew writes, "Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (v. 51).

The veil was a heavy curtain that blocked the entrance to the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple, the place where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, symbolizing the sacred presence of God. Josephus described the veil as an ornately decorated curtain, made of blue woven fabric.

Only one person ever traversed the veil, and that was the High Priest. He ventured into the Holy of Holies just once a year, on the Day of Atonement, when he was permitted to enter only to bring the blood of a sacrifice. The veil was of vital symbolic importance, signifying "that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest" (Hebrews 9:8). In other words, it was a constant reminder that sin renders humanity unfit for the presence of God. The fact that the sin offering was offered annually and countless other sacrifices repeated daily was meant to show graphically that sin could not truly and permanently be atoned for or erased by mere animal sacrifices. "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4).

"But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:11-12). The tearing of the curtain at the moment of Jesus’ death dramatically symbolized that His sacrifice was a sufficient atonement for sins forever, and the way into the Holy of Holies was now open. In effect, the entire Levitical system of rituals, animal sacrifices even the priesthood itself were done away in the moment of His death. The redeemed now had free and direct access to the throne of grace without the need for priest or ritual (cf. Hebrews 4:16).
The tearing of the curtain from top to bottom signified that it was God Himself who removed the barrier. He was in effect saying, "My Son has removed this veil and eliminated the need for it, through a single, perfect, once-for-all sacrifice that cleanses the redeemed from their sins forever. The way into my Holy presence is now open to every believer and the access is free and unobstructed."

At the moment the tearing of the veil occurred, the Temple was packed with worshipers who were there for the killing of their Passover lambs. By God's design, it was in the very hour that those thousands of lambs were being slain that the true Passover Lamb died. He was the real Lamb whom all the others merely symbolized. In fact, He perfectly fulfilled all the symbolism of the worship in the Temple. From that day on, all the Temple ceremonies lost their significance, because what they were meant to foreshadow had now arrived. Within forty years, the Temple itself would be completely destroyed when Titus sacked Jerusalem. But the true end of the Old Testament sacrificial system occurred not with the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, but here at the moment of Jesus' death, when God sovereignly declared Christ's death a sufficient sacrifice for sins forever, by supernaturally splitting the Temple veil from top to bottom.

**THE EARTH SHAKEN**

Another miracle also occurred at the exact moment of Christ's death. "And the earth quaked, and the rocks were split" (Matthew 27:51). An earthquake powerful enough to split rocks would be a significant temblor. (The crowd in the temple probably assumed the earthquake was the cause of the tearing of the veil.) Such a powerful quake would be a frightening experience for everyone in the region of Judea. Although earthquakes were a fairly common phenomenon, an earthquake with enough force to split rocks would have instantly brought the entire city of Jerusalem to a halt for several minutes.

Earthquakes in Scripture are often used like darkness to signify a graphic display of divine judgment. In particular, earthquakes signify God's wrath. When Moses met with God at Sinai to receive the tablets of the law, "the whole mountain quaked greatly" (Exodus 19:18). David wrote, "Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations of the hills also quaked and were shaken, because He was angry" (Psalm 18:7). "The earth shook; the
heavens also dropped rain at the presence of God; Sinai itself was moved at the presence of God, the God of Israel” (Psalm 68:8). The prophet Nahum wrote,

The LORD is slow to anger and great in power,
And will not at all acquit the wicked.
The LORD has His way
In the whirlwind and in the storm,
And the clouds are the dust of His feet.
He rebukes the sea and makes it dry,
And dries up all the rivers.
Bashan and Carmel wither,
And the flower of Lebanon wilts.
The mountains quake before Him,
The hills melt,
And the earth heaves at His presence,
Yes, the world and all who dwell in it.

(Nahum 1:3-5).

The book of Revelation indicates that the final judgment of the earth will commence with a global earthquake more powerful than any ever experienced before (Hebrews 12:26-27; Revelation 6:14-15).

So it is clear that a supernatural earthquake like this one could only signify the wrath of God. At the cross, the wrath of God against sin was poured out on God's own Son. The accompanying earthquake, coming at the culminating moment of Christ's atoning work, was a kind of divine punctuation mark, perhaps signifying God's anger at the fact that sin had cost His Son so much.
THE DEAD RAISED

At that very same moment when Christ died, yet another miracle occurred: "The graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many" (Matthew 27:52-53).

Many of the tombs in and around Jerusalem to this day are hollow stone sepulchres, resting at ground level or just above. The earthquake was evidently powerful enough to split sepulchres like these. That was not the miracle; that might have occurred in any earthquake. The great miracle is that those who emerged from the broken sepulchres were raised from the dead.

Of all the gospel writers, only Matthew mentions this event. Some have cited this as a reason to discount Matthew's veracity, suggesting that if such an event occurred, it would have certainly been noteworthy enough to catch the attention of all Jerusalem. But there's no reason to think this miracle was designed to catch a lot of people's attention. It seems to have been a remarkably quiet miracle, despite its spectacular nature.

Although "many . . . saints who had fallen asleep" were raised, not all were. These were select representatives of the multitude of saints buried in and around Jerusalem. The number who were raised is not specified, but the term "many" in this case could refer to as few as a dozen or even fewer. (That would still be "many," given the fact that what Matthew is describing is people who were released from stone sarcophagi and came alive!) Still, despite the spectacular nature of the miracle itself, this seems to have been a fairly low-key event.

Notice, in fact, that those who rose from the dead did not appear in Jerusalem until after Jesus' resurrection. (The proper phrasing and punctuation of the verse is probably best reflected in the NIV translation: "They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.") Where these resurrected saints were in the days after they were loosed from the grave and before they appeared in Jerusalem is not specified. But the fact that they waited until after Christ's resurrection to appear to anyone reminds us that He is the firstfruits of those risen from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20).
These risen saints most likely came forth from the dead in glorified bodies already fit for heaven (rather than being restored to life in unglorified mortal bodies, as Lazarus had been). They "appeared to many" (v. 53). Again, how many is not specified, but evidently there were enough eyewitnesses to verify the miracle. When Matthew wrote his gospel, some of the eyewitnesses would have no doubt still been alive. Matthew doesn't say what became of the risen saints, but they undoubtedly ascended to glory not long after Jesus' resurrection.

Their appearance proved that Christ had conquered death, not merely for Himself, but for all the saints. One day "all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth" (John 5:28-29). This miraculous event prefigured that final great resurrection.

**THE CENTURION SAVED**

But perhaps the most dramatic miracle that occurred at the moment of Jesus' death was the conversion of the centurion charged with overseeing the crucifixion. As Christ's atoning work was brought to completion, its dramatic saving power was already at work in the lives of those who were physically closest to Him. Matthew 27:54 says, "So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, 'Truly this was the Son of God!'"

A Roman centurion was the commander of a hundred-man division (or a "century")—the basic building-block of a Roman legion. There were about 25 legions in the entire Roman army worldwide. Each legion comprised 6,000 men, divided into ten cohorts of 600 men each. Each cohort had 3 maniples, and each maniple was divided into 2 centuries. Each century was commanded by a centurion. The centurions were usually career officers, hardened men of war.

Because this particular officer was with those guarding Jesus, it appears he is the very one who had been given charge of overseeing and carrying out the crucifixion of Christ and probably the crucifixions of the two thieves as well. He and his men were close eyewitnesses to everything that had happened since Jesus was taken to the Praetorium. They had personally kept Him under guard from that point on. (It is even possible that the centurion and some of the men with him were also the same soldiers who arrested Jesus the night before. If so, they had been eyewitnesses from the very beginning of the entire ordeal.) They had seen how Jesus held His silence while His enemies hurled accusations at Him.
These same soldiers had strapped him to a post for the scourging, and watched while He suffered even that horrific beating with quiet grace and majesty. They themselves had mercilessly taunted Him, dressing Him in a faded soldier's tunic, pretending it was a royal robe. They had battered His head with a reed they gave Him as a mock scepter. These very same soldiers had also woven a crown of cruel thorns and mashed it into the skin of His scalp. They had spat on Him and taunted Him and mistreated Him in every conceivable fashion and they had seen Him endure all those tortures without cursing or threatening any of His tormentors.

In all likelihood, the soldiers heard with their own ears when Pilate repeatedly declared Jesus' innocence. They knew very well that He was guilty of no crime that made Him a threat to Rome's interests. They must have been utterly amazed from the very beginning about how different He was from the typical criminal who was crucified. At first, they probably were inclined to write Him off as a madman. But by now they could see that He was not insane. He fit no category they had ever seen in the hundreds of crucifixions they had probably superintended.

Until now, the uniqueness of Christ had made no apparent impact whatsoever on these soldiers. They were hardened men, and Jesus' passivity made no difference in the way they treated Him. His obvious innocence had not gained any sympathy from them. They had showed him no mercy. They were professional soldiers, trained to follow orders. And so they had dutifully nailed Jesus' hands and feet to the cross. They had set the cross upright and dropped it into the hole dug for it. They had cast lots for Jesus' garments. And then they had sat down to watch Him die.

But Christ's death was unlike any crucifixion they had ever witnessed. They heard Him pray for His killers. They saw the noble way He suffered. They heard when He cried out to His Father. They experienced three full hours of supernatural darkness. And when that darkness was followed by an earthquake at the very moment of Christ's death, the soldiers could no longer ignore the fact that Christ was indeed the Son of God.

Mark suggests that there was something about the way Jesus cried out that struck the centurion as supernatural—perhaps the powerful volume of His cry, coming from someone in so weakened a condition. Mark writes, "When the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, 'Truly this Man was the Son of
God!" (Mark 15:39). Matthew indicates that it was also the earthquake, coming at the exact moment of Jesus' final outcry, that finally convinced the centurion and his soldiers that Jesus was the Son of God: "When [they] saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly" (Matthew 27:54).

Notice that Matthew indicates all the soldiers had the same reaction. When the earthquake occurred they "feared greatly" using a Greek word combination that speaks of extreme alarm. It's exactly the same expression Matthew used to recount how the three disciples reacted on the Mount of Transfiguration when Christ's glory was unveiled (17:6). This kind of fear was a typical reaction of people who suddenly realized the truth about who Jesus is (cf. Mark 4:41; 5:33).

When the soldiers around the cross heard Jesus' exclamation, saw Him die, and then immediately felt the earthquake, it suddenly became all too clear to them that they had crucified the Son of God. They were stricken with terror. It wasn't merely the earthquake that they were afraid of. Rather they were terrified by the sudden realization that Jesus was innocent and not merely innocent, but He was also precisely who He claimed to be. They had killed the Son of God. The centurion remembered the indictment of the Sanhedrin ("He made Himself the Son of God" John 19:7), and having witnessed Jesus' death up close from beginning to end, he rendered his own verdict on the matter: "Truly this was the Son of God!"

The words were evidently a true expression of faith. Luke says, "He glorified God, saying, 'Certainly this was a righteous Man!'" (Luke 23:47, emphasis added). So the centurion and his soldiers with him were evidently the very first converts to Christ after His crucifixion, coming to faith at precisely the moment He expired.

**THE DRAMA ENDED**

John records that as the hour grew late, the Sanhedrin wanted the bodies off the crosses, so that they would not remain there overnight and defile the Sabbath. "Therefore, because it was the Preparation Day, that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away" (John 19:31).
The Sabbath was a "high" Sabbath because it was the day after Passover, and therefore that particular Sabbath belonged to the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Sanhedrin's pretentious reverence for the sacredness of the high Sabbath is ironic in light of how they were treating the Lord of the Sabbath Himself (cf. Mark 2:28). But it reveals again how they were wholly concerned merely for the appearance, and not the reality, of things. Old Testament law (Deuteronomy 21:23) strictly commanded that the body of anyone hanged on a tree be removed and buried out of sight, not left hanging all night. It is almost certain that most victims of Roman crucifixion were nonetheless left hanging on crosses for days. But this being Passover, it was an especially high Sabbath, so the Sanhedrin wanted the Jewish law observed. That is why they petitioned Pilate not to permit the bodies to remain on the crosses overnight. In order to keep their sanctimonious veneer intact, they now wanted Jesus to die, and die quickly.

As we noted in the previous chapter, the breaking of the legs would make it certain that death would occur almost immediately, because once the legs could no longer push up to support the body's weight, the diaphragm would be severely constricted, and air could not be expelled. The victim would die of asphyxiation within minutes. The cruel practice also guaranteed that the victim died with as much pain as possible.

Soldiers from Pilate therefore came to the crucifixion site with the express purpose of breaking the victims' legs. John writes,

Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe. For these things were done that the Scripture should be fulfilled, "Not one of His bones shall be broken" (vv. 32-36).

The legs of both criminals were broken. Within minutes, the forgiven thief was in Paradise with the Lord, who had preceded him to glory.

But the soldiers, finding Jesus already dead, decided not to break His bones. Instead, they pierced his side with a spear, to verify that He was indeed dead. The blood and water that flowed out showed that He was indeed dead. The watery fluid was probably excess serum
that had collected in the pericardium (the membrane that encloses the heart). The blood was an indicator that the spear pierced the heart or aorta as well as the pericardium. The fact that blood and water came out separately from the same wound seems to indicate that death had occurred some period of time before the wound was inflicted, so that Christ's blood had already begun the process of coagulation.

Mark 15:44 says that after Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathea came to ask Pilate for the body of Jesus, and "Pilate marveled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time." The relatively early hour at which Christ died surprised all those who were familiar with death by crucifixion. He died several hours before the typical crucifixion victim would have been expected to die. (Remember that crucifixion was designed to maximize the victim's pain while prolonging the process of dying.)

But Christ died at such an early hour in order to demonstrate what He had once told the Jewish leaders: "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father" (John 10:17-18). He was sovereign, even over the timing of His own death.

Even the soldiers' failure to break his legs was a further fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy: "He guards all his bones; not one of them is broken" (Psalm 34:20). And thus from the beginning to the end of the crucifixion, Christ had remained sovereignly in charge. The Father's will had been fulfilled to the letter, and dozens of Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled to the letter, in order to make the point.

Christ was dead, but death had not conquered Him. On the first day of the week, He would burst forth triumphantly from the grave and show Himself alive to hundreds of eyewitnesses (1 Corinthians 15:5-8). He thus not only atoned for sin, but He demonstrated His Mastery over death in the process.

The resurrection of Christ was a divine stamp of approval on the atonement He purchased through His dying. Paul wrote that Jesus was "declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4). The resurrection therefore gave immediate, dramatic, and tangible proof of the efficacy of
Christ's atoning death. The converse is true as well: it is the cross, and what Jesus accomplished there, that gives the resurrection its significance.

A thorough account of all the events and eyewitnesses surrounding Christ's resurrection would fill another entire volume, so it is not possible to examine the biblical narratives of the resurrection here. (Perhaps one day, if the Lord permits, I will have the opportunity to publish such a volume.) But it's worth noting that the resurrection is one of history's most carefully scrutinized and best-attested facts. The enemies of the gospel from the apostles' day until now have tried desperately to impeach the eyewitness testimony to Jesus' resurrection. They have not been able to do so, nor will they.

Still, it is vital to see that the early church's preaching focused as much on the death of Christ as on His resurrection. Paul wrote, "We preach Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23); "I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (2:2); and, "God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14).

Why did Paul place so much emphasis on the death of Christ, rather than always stressing the triumph of the resurrection above even his death? Because, again, without the atoning work Christ did on the cross, His resurrection would be merely a wonder to stand back and admire. But it would have no personal ramifications for us. However, "if we died with Christ," that is, if He died in our place and in our stead then "we believe that we shall also live with Him" (Romans 6:8). Because of the death he died, suffering the penalty of sin on our behalf, we become partakers with Him in His resurrection as well. That is virtually the whole point of Romans 6.

So don't ever pass over the meaning of the death of Christ on your way to celebrate the resurrection. It is the cross that gives meaning to the resurrection life. Only insofar as we are united with Him in the likeness of His death, can we be certain of being raised with Him in the likeness of His resurrection (cf. Romans 6:5).

That is why "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" remains the very heart and soul of the gospel message. And in the words of the apostle Paul, every believer's deepest yearning should be this: "That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10-11).
Jesus is the Only Way to God – True or False?

By Lee Strobel

Jesus often surprised people with teachings that cut across the grain of human nature. Lose your life to save it. The first will be last. The meek will inherit the earth. Rejoice in persecution. Pray for your enemies. It’s better to give than receive. Turn the other cheek.

But, by far, the most outrageous assertion Jesus ever made — His most politically incorrect claim of all — was when He declared in JOHN 14:6: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by Me.”

This claim rankles people like no other. It has been called arrogant and narrow-minded and bigoted and snobbish. Some of you are seekers, and something inside of you chafes at this claim. For you, it may be a stumbling block to faith.

But I believe that Jesus was telling the truth when He said it. And I believe He said it out of great compassion, not arrogance. And I believe that when we look closer at it, this statement makes ultimate sense. In fact, I believe this single sentence is one of the most critically important bits of information on the planet — and to you personally.

So why is this claim so controversial? One reason is that it strikes at the core of three great myths about religion. And so in examining this statement by Jesus, I thought it would be a good idea to address these three common misconceptions. Maybe these are myths you’ve heard — or maybe they’re myths you believe right now.

So let’s deal with the first myth, which is this: When you get right down to it, all religions are basically the same.

You’ve probably heard people say that although there are surface-level distinctions between the various world religions, if you strip them all down to their essentials, all religions fundamentally teach the same thing — so it doesn’t really matter which one you
follow. In other words, all spiritual paths lead up the same mountain because all religions basically teach the brotherhood and sisterhood of men and women and the universal fatherhood of God.

Now, there is some common ground between many of the world’s religions, particularly concerning certain basic values and morality. But there are significant differences, too. In fact, with this one outlandish assertion, Jesus boldly puts Christianity in a separate class by itself. If the path to God is through Jesus, then Christianity cannot be reconciled with any other religion. This uniqueness of Christianity is rooted in the uniqueness of Jesus Himself.

Someone once noted that other religious leaders say, “Follow me and I’ll show you how to find truth,” but Jesus says, “I am the truth.”

Other religious leaders say, “Follow me and I’ll show you the way to salvation,” but Jesus says, “I am the way to eternal life.”

Other religious leaders say, “Follow me and I’ll show you how to become enlightened,” but Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.”

Other religious leaders say, “Follow me and I’ll show you many doors that lead to God,” but Jesus says, “I am the door.”

Then, Jesus says, “So follow Me.”

Do you see the difference? For a long time people have tried to harmonize the various religions of the world, but there are drastic and irreconcilable differences between Christianity and other belief systems.

Every other religion I’ve ever seen is based on people doing something — through struggling and striving — to somehow earn the favor of God. They say people have to
use a Tibetan prayer wheel or go on pilgrimages or give alms to the poor or avoid eating
certain foods or pray in a specified way or go through a series of reincarnations or
wherever. They are the attempts of people to reach out to God.

But Jesus Christ is God reaching out to us. Jesus taught the opposite of what other
religious teach. He said nobody can do anything to merit heaven, so we might as well
give up trying.

He said we’re all guilty of wrongdoing — and that’s consistent with our experience, isn’t
it? Nobody here would claim to be perfect. And Jesus said that our wrongdoing separates
us from our holy and perfect God — and, again, that’s consistent with our experience.
Haven’t you ever felt distant or disconnected from God? Of course you have.

Because God is a righteous judge, our wrongdoing has to be paid for. So out of His love,
Jesus voluntarily offered Himself as our substitute to pay the penalty that we owed for
our sin. And when we receive His sacrifice on our behalf, we become reunited with God
for eternity.

As we say around here, other religions are spelled “D-O,” because they teach that people
have to do a bunch of religious rituals to try to please God. But Christianity is spelled “D-
O-N-E” because Christ has done it all on the cross — and we just need to receive Him.

This distinction is starkly demonstrated by comparing a parable taught by Jesus with a
similar story found in Buddhist literature. Both stories involve sons who became
rebellious and left home, but who then saw the error of their ways and decided to come
back and be reconciled with their families.

In the Buddhist story, the errant son is required to work off the penalty for his past
misdeeds by spending years in servitude. But you know how the Christian parable of the
Prodigal Son ends — with the repentant son being warmly welcomed home by his loving
father and being given undeserved grace and forgiveness.
And there are other fundamental differences between Christianity and other world religions as well. For instance, Christianity says there’s one eternal God who created the universe. Hinduism says everything is God — you’re God, I’m God, this podium is God. Islam denies Jesus was God or that He died for our sins. Buddha may not even have believed in God! Friends, these beliefs cannot all be true at the same time; they contradict each other too thoroughly.

So all religions are not the same. And while other religious leaders can offer wise sayings and helpful insights, only Jesus Christ — because He is the perfect Son of God — is qualified to offer Himself as payment for our wrongdoing. No other religious leader even pretended to be able to do that.

And that makes sense, doesn’t it? It’s illogical to think that God would go over to one side of the world and tell people, “Here’s the way to become reconciled with me,” and then go over to another place and say, “No, here’s a completely contradictory way to please me,” and so forth. I mean, God isn’t schizophrenic!

It would make sense that He would provide a path for us to follow in finding Him, and that He would tell us about that path in an extraordinary manner, which He did by sending Jesus Christ to enter human history.

So, friends, it does matter which path you follow in your spiritual journey. Jesus’ own words dispel the myth that all paths lead to God.

The second myth that Jesus dispels is related to the first. This myth says that even though Christianity might be different, it’s still just one philosophy among many, and that it’s only as valid as any other religion. In other words, even if there are differences between religions, they all have equal claims on the truth. You know — you have your truth and I have mine.
This myth has a certain amount of appeal because, on the surface, it seems to reflect our pluralistic attitudes in this country. And we do want to be tolerant of other views, don’t we? The Bible tells us we should be loving and accepting and respectful toward all people, regardless of their faith.

But here’s the thing: under our Constitution, all religious viewpoints are equally protected. People can believe whatever they want. But some people jump to the erroneous conclusion that because different philosophies are equally protected, they must be equally valid. And that’s just not the case.

The concept behind what the Supreme Court has called our “marketplace of ideas” is that truth and falsehood will grapple in unhindered debate so that, in the end, truth will prevail. So even though all religious are equally protected under our Constitution, that has nothing to do with whether they’re based on truth.

Let me give you an example in honor of the late Mike Royko. A few years ago Royko wrote a tongue-in-cheek column in which he said he was a member of the Church of Asylumism. He said this church believes that there was an advanced civilization in a distant galaxy millions of years ago, but a few hundred of these aliens ate some tainted veggie dip and a virus scrambled their brains.

When treatment failed, they were taken to an uninhabited planet that would serve as an asylum and where they could roam free and act goofy. That planet, he said, was earth, and we’re all descendants of these aliens.

Royko said to doubters: “You want proof? Read history books. Look at the newspaper and TV news. Then tell me this isn’t one big loony bin!”

Now, Royko was kidding about the Church of Asylumism, but in this country people have the right to believe whatever they want. The Church of Asylumism would be
protected under the Constitution as much as any other religious institution. *But that doesn’t mean that its teachings are true.*

And, of course, that means everybody is free to make the claim, as Jesus did, that they are the way, the truth, and the life, and that nobody can come to God except through them. I could say it or you could say it, but that wouldn’t make it true. **The question is, how do we know Jesus was telling the truth?**

Well, Jesus backs up His claim with unique credentials that make Him uniquely credible. For instance, Jesus authenticated His claim of being God by fulfilling dozens of centuries-old prophecies against every mathematical odd. These prophecies were like a thumbprint that only the Messiah would be able to fit — and, in all of history, it only fits Jesus. I will refer to just one of the many prophecies Jesus fulfilled. If you saw Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ” you saw Judas throw his betrayal fee of 30 shekels into the temple. That was the fulfillment of a prophecy made hundreds of years prior.

Unlike other religious leaders, Jesus performed great miracles that further authenticated His claim to being God. And in the most spectacular demonstration of His deity, Jesus fulfilled His own prediction by being resurrected from the dead in an historical event that was witnessed by more than 500 people and which sparked a spiritual revolution unparalleled in history.

*Friends, Christianity isn’t just a philosophy; it’s a reality.* Jesus didn’t just claim He was the one-and-only Son of God, but He validated His claim like nobody else in history.

So we’ve seen that the first myth — that all religions are basically the same — isn’t true because Christ’s teachings set Christianity apart from all other faiths. And the second myth — that Christianity is just one philosophy among many and only as valid as any other religion — isn’t true because the unique credentials of Christ give Him credibility like no other spiritual leader. **In other words, when He claims to be the way to God, His credentials back him up.**
The third myth is the one that says Christians are narrow-minded or snobbish when they say Jesus is the only way to heaven.

Now, I’d agree Christians would be acting in a narrow-minded way if there really were lots of paths to God and they were saying that theirs is the best way. But they’re not saying that.

They’re saying that the truth of the matter is that someone has got to pay the penalty for our obvious wrongdoing that keeps us away from God. And Jesus, by virtue of His sinlessness and divinity, is the only one qualified to be our substitute. That’s just the reality of the situation. And it’s not narrow-minded to act upon the evidence and pursue truth.

Let me draw you an analogy. I have some friends whose baby girl developed jaundice shortly after birth. Jaundice is a liver disorder that caused her skin and the whites of her eyes to turn yellow. The pediatrician told them that this is a potentially devastating disease but it’s easily treated. All they had to do was put the baby under a special light for a while and this would stimulate her liver properly and she’d be all right.

Now, the parents could have said, “That sounds too easy. How about instead if we scrubbed her with soap and dipped her in bleach? If we worked hard enough, I’m sure we could get her normal coloring back.”

But the doctor would have said, “No, there’s only one way to handle this.”

They could have replied, “Well, how about if we just sort of ignore this and pretend everything’s OK? You know — the jaundice is your truth, Doc, not our truth. And if we sincerely believe that, things will work out for the best.”
The doctor would have said, “You’d jeopardize your baby if you did that. Look, there’s only one way to cure her. You’re hesitant because it sounds too easy, but look at the credentials hanging on my wall. I’ve studied at medical school and I’ve used what I’ve learned to cure countless babies like yours. Trust me!”

Now, would anybody accuse those parents of being narrow-minded if they trusted that doctor and pursued the only course of treatment that was going to cure their little girl? That’s not narrow-minded; that’s acting rationally in accordance with the evidence.

Well, we all have a terminal illness called sin, and the reason we cling to Christ is because He’s the Great Physician who has the only cure. We can try to scrub away our sin with good deeds, but it won’t work. We can ignore it and hope it goes away, but it won’t. We can sincerely think there’s another way of dealing with it, but we’d be sincerely wrong. The truth is that only the Great Physician offers a treatment that will erase our stain of sin. When we turn to Him, we’re not being narrow-minded; we’re acting rationally in accordance with the evidence.

And it’s not snobbish to believe what Jesus taught about being the way to God. Because, frankly, Christianity is anything but snobbish.

Let’s pretend there are two country clubs. The first one only admits people who have earned membership. To get in, you’ve got to obtain superior wisdom or fulfill a list of demands and fulfill certain spiritual requirements. Despite their best efforts, lots of people just won’t make the grade and will be excluded. Friends, that’s what other religions are saying by teaching that people have to work their way to God.

But the second country club says, “Anybody who wants in can come in because Jesus has already paid for your membership. Rich or poor, black or white, regardless of your ethnic heritage or where you live, we would love to include you. Entry isn’t based on your qualifications but only on accepting Christ’s invitation. So we’ll leave the matter to you.”
You decide. But remember, we will never turn you away if you seek admittance.” That’s what Christianity is like.

Now, which country club is being snobbish? Christians aren’t putting on airs; we aren’t saying we’re better than anyone else. As one Christian said, “We’re just beggars telling other beggars where to find food.”

Friends, Christianity is unique. It can’t be reconciled with any other religion. And it backs up its truth claims with the credentials and credibility of Christ. That’s why when He said He is the way, the truth, and the life, history hasn’t laughed. Instead, history has been revolutionized.

But you might be asking, “What about those who live in an isolated place and who haven’t had a chance to hear about Jesus? What’s going to happen to them?” This is one of the most commonly asked questions about Christianity — and, frankly, we don’t have the complete answer. God hasn’t explicitly told us all we’d like to know about this.

But we do know a few things. First, we know from the Bible that everybody has a moral standard written on their hearts by God and that everybody is guilty of violating that standard. That’s why our conscience bothers us when we do something wrong.

Second, we know that everybody has enough information from observing the world to know that God exists, but people have suppressed that and rejected God anyway — for which we rightfully deserve eternal separation from Him.

But we also know from the Bible that those who sincerely seek God will find Him. In fact, the Bible says that the Holy Spirit is seeking us first, making it possible for us to seek God. And this suggests to me that people around the world who respond to the understanding that they have and who earnestly seek after the one true God will find an opportunity, in some way, to receive the eternal life that God has graciously provided through Jesus Christ.
I’ve seen this happen in seemingly impossible circumstances. I remember meeting a man who had been raised by gurus in an area of India where there were no Christians. As a teenager, he concluded there were too many contradictions in Hinduism for it to be true. So he called out to God for answers — and in a remarkable series of events, God brought people into his life who shared Christ’s message with Him. And today he’s a follower of Jesus.

There’s something else that’s reassuring, too, which is that God is scrupulously fair. **GENESIS 18:25** asks, “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” It’s comforting for me to know that each person will be judged uniquely and justly, according to what they knew and what they did. After being judged by a loving and righteous God, not one person will be able to walk away claiming that he or she had been treated unfairly.

We know that apart from the payment that Jesus made on the cross, nobody has a chance of getting off Death Row. But exactly how much detailed knowledge a person has to know about Jesus or precisely where the lines are drawn, only God knows. The Bible says in **FIRST CORINTHIANS 4:5** that only God can expose the motives of a person’s heart.

And, finally friends, nobody will be excluded from heaven solely because he or she has lacked some information. The reason people will be denied admittance is because they have told God their entire life that they can live just fine without Him. On Judgment Day, God will say, “Based on your own decision to live separately from Me, you will now spend eternity apart from Me.” God won’t violate our will — and that’s only fair.

But for you and me, the issue isn’t ignorance. It’s obedience. We’ve heard what Christ has to say — even today—, we have access to the evidence, and it’s clear we’re responsible for our decision on how we respond.
Some of you need to respond today by becoming serious seekers who are sincere and systematic in your search for truth so you can eventually make a knowledgeable decision to follow Christ.

But if you’re among the 84 percent of Americans who already believe Jesus is God, then maybe it’s time you finally acted on that belief. What does that involve? Let me paint a picture through a story.

When I was 14 years old, I was home alone and painting with oil paints in the finished basement of our house in Arlington Heights. Now, if you’ve ever painted with oils then you know they take forever to dry. I was impatient, so I did something stupid — I plugged in some heat lamps to try to dry the paintings faster.

Before long, a fire broke out among the rags soaked with turpentine and the table and entire corner of the basement were immediately engulfed in flames.

I ran to the phone and called the fire department. When I returned I saw that the fire was out of control, with orange and yellow flames climbing the paneled walls and lapping the ceiling, which was directly beneath the living room. I knew that if the fire burned through, the whole house would be destroyed — and then I’d really be in trouble!

So I grabbed a bucket of water from the laundry room and dashed over to throw it on the fire, but that didn’t help very much. The basement was rapidly filling with black, sooty smoke. I started choking on the fumes and was becoming disoriented. And I couldn’t see the stairs anymore -- the lights went out and the smoke was too thick.

That’s when a horrible realization hit — I couldn’t save myself. I wouldn’t be able to find the route out of the basement before I would be overcome.
Fortunately, not long after that, a police officer arrived and opened the door to the basement. He stepped onto the stairs and began shining around a big flashlight. “Police officer!” he called out. “Anyone down there?”

Now, intellectually, I could have analyzed the situation. Things were serious in the basement; if I stayed down there much longer, I’d die from the smoke and fire. But the police officer knew the one and only escape route. He was a trained professional and fully capable of leading me to safety. What’s more, he held a big flashlight to illuminate the way for me.

But it wasn’t enough just to analyze the situation. I had to take a step of action. I had to put my faith in that police officer — a faith based on facts — by letting him reach out and rescue me. So I followed the light, and he put his arm around me and led me to safety, away from the inferno.

Many years later I faced a spiritually equivalent situation. After nearly two years of investigating the claims of Jesus, I knew He had unique credentials and credibility. And based on what He had said, I realized for the first time that I couldn’t save myself. Unless I took up Jesus on His offer to pay the penalty for my wrongdoing, I was going to remain separated from God forever.

I was hopelessly lost, but Jesus was calling to me and reaching out to rescue me. He was fully capable of leading me to safety. He knew the way to eternal life; in fact, He was the way. And He didn’t need a flashlight because, as He said, “I am the light of the world . . . he who follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

But it wasn’t enough just to know that. I had to act on it. I had to take a step of faith — not an irrational step, but as this entire series has demonstrated, a rational step that was firm and secure because it was based on the track record of Jesus’ trustworthiness.
And so on November 8, 1981, I allowed Jesus to drape His arm around my shoulder and lead me out of the darkness, away from danger and into a place of safety, forever.

If you’re part of the 84 percent of Americans who are convinced Jesus is the Son of God, that’s a good first step. But if you’ve never acted on that belief, then the truth is that you’re still in danger. Let Jesus put His arm around you and rescue you and lead you to safety, once and for all. Before your head hits the pillow tonight, tell Him in a prayer that that’s the desire of your heart.

When you do, and as you grow in your relationship with Him, you’ll find out what I have —

• That Jesus is the way — He’s the path to a lifetime of adventure, fulfillment, challenge, and purpose.

• That He is the truth — and He will provide you with wisdom that works for everyday life and for the turbulent times as well.

• And He is the life. He — and He alone — can give you confidence for your future, for all of eternity.

Let’s pray.
Jesus Died for You – True or False?
(How Jesus' Death Reconciles Us to God)
by John MacArthur

The heart and soul of the gospel message is powerfully given in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21. There, the apostle Paul explains the true meaning of Christ's life and death in no uncertain terms:
All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Notice, carefully, that Christ's main role in coming to earth was to reconcile a world of fallen humans to God. The apostle Paul says Christians are blessed to share in that ministry, because God has committed to us the ministry and the message of reconciliation.

Consider a few fundamental truths that are either assumed, implied, or explicitly stated in that passage:
1. All of humanity is fallen and sinful and therefore needs to be reconciled with God.
2. God Himself accomplishes that reconciliation (because sinners could never do it for themselves), and He does it through Christ.
3. Christ was perfectly sinless (He "knew no sin").
4. But He made atonement for others' sins by an exchange of His righteousness for their sin. In other words, He was "made sin" (i.e., He took others' sin on Himself and bore the punishment for it) and He makes believers righteous through their union with Him.
5. Although God is the offended deity, He is the very One who seeks and initiates our reconciliation. He doesn't take pleasure in the destruction of sinners (cf. Ezek 18:32; 33:11). But He makes an appeal to the whole world through the Christian message, imploring sinners to be reconciled with Him.

All of that is the very essence of the gospel message.
To be a Christian, therefore, is to be reconciled with God. As Christians, we are also called to participate in the ministry of reconciliation, by beseeching other men and women on Christ's behalf to be reconciled to God. The term reconciliation is therefore practically the theme of true Christianity. It is a reconciliation for sinners who have offended and spurned a righteous Deity and yet are redeemed through no merit of their own.

In fact, true reconciliation is accomplished only through the work of Christ. The ministry of reconciliation that has been committed to Christians is therefore the greatest work in the world; and the message of reconciliation is the most important message.

That is why the message of reconciliation was always at the heart of Paul's preaching. In 1 Corinthians 1:17, he says, "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." His primary concern was always for the purity of the message. To adulterate or alter the simple, straightforward truth about reconciliation in the cross would be to empty the entire gospel of its power. So Paul was committed to the proclamation of the gospel message unstintingly, unhesitatingly, and unreservedly (Rom 1:15-16; 1 Cor 2:1-2).

God has likewise called every Christian to be an ambassador carrying that very same message of reconciliation to the world. The word rendered "ambassadors" in 2 Corinthians 5:20 is a noble, multi-faceted Greek term (presbeuomen), which is related to the word usually translated "elders" (presbuteroi). Thus the term "ambassador" carries the idea of someone who is mature and stately. (In ancient times, old and experienced men were usually the ones chosen to be ambassadors of emperors and kings, because of the dignity and wisdom they brought to the task.) But this doesn't mean only mature Christians are Christ's ambassadors. On the contrary, Paul is writing to the rank-and-file members of the Corinthian church (some of whom were notoriously immature spiritually). He teaching that all Christians are ambassadors, invested with all the honor and dignity one would normally owe an esteemed elder. After all, an ambassador is someone who represents a ruler and delivers a message on that ruler's behalf. The ambassador therefore receives honor not because of his own personal worthiness, but because of whom he represents. So it is the importance of the mission, the weight of the message, and the eminence and excellence of the One we represent that gives every Christian the status of a presbeuomen.
A good ambassador doesn't make up a message on his own authority. He is commissioned to carry someone else's message and to deliver it faithfully. He is not authorized to alter the message in any way. He cannot adjust it to fit his own personal preferences. He cannot embellish it with his own opinions. He speaks for a higher authority, and he is responsible to deliver the message in unadulterated form.

By the same token, to scorn or mistreat an ambassador is to insult the ruler for whom he speaks. To send him away is to break off relations with the government he represents. An ambassador is essentially his government's mouthpiece. He never offers his own promises or demands his own privileges, but rather he speaks on behalf of his government. His only authority is derived from his head of state, and to reject the ambassador is to reject the one who sent him.

By definition an ambassador serves in a foreign land. He spends his life as a stranger and an alien. He has to speak a different language. He has to interact with a different culture and tradition and adapt to a different lifestyle. Those are all relevant analogies that help us understand the calling and task of Christians as ambassadors.

As ambassadors for the kingdom of God, Christians live and serve in an alien world. Paul says the believer comes with authority from his King, representing the kingdom. He comes with a word of reconciliation from the court of heaven to plead with people to be reconciled to God.

Having been reconciled to Christ and redeemed out of the world of sinful humanity, we nonetheless remain here in this world as "sojourners and exiles" (cf. 2 Pt 2:11; Heb 11:13). We serve as ambassadors of God, commissioned by Him to proclaim a message of reconciliation to other fallen creatures. That is our central duty, and it should shape our entire perspective on the world.

If we examine 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 a little more closely, some magnificent truths emerge to clarify the ministry of reconciliation for us. Here is the gospel in outline form. If you wanted a brief summary of what Christianity is all about, you could hardly find a better text than these few verses in 2 Corinthians. We can glean from them four key truths about the reconciliation promised in the gospel.
1. WE ARE RECONCILED BY THE WILL OF GOD

First of all, reconciliation was conceived and initiated by God. "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself" (v. 18). "All this" refers to the truths Paul had just set forth in verses 14-17. The transformation described there, conversion, salvation, everything connected with the new nature and new life in Christ, is entirely from God. Sinners themselves cannot merely decide to be reconciled to God and therefore make that happen. They have no power to satisfy God's wrath toward sin, His holy justice, or His perfect standard of righteousness. They cannot even change themselves on their own (cf. Jer 13:23), much less change God's attitude toward them. Sinners are simply offenders who have broken the law of God and are therefore naturally at spiritual enmity with Him. Any change or reconciliation that is going to come about in that relationship must come from God. This is the very reason why the gospel is such good news: God loved sinners so much that He made a way to reconcile Himself with them, to make them His children and yet without violating His justice.

Paul essentially declares that God's own sovereign will is the objective basis of reconciliation, even as he told the Roman believers, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation" (Rom 5:10-11; cf. Col 1:19-22).

The word "reconcile" (katallasso) means "to change," or "to exchange." The exchange involves nothing the sinner accomplishes, but only what he embraces. Stated another way, reconciliation with God is not something sinners accomplish when they decide to stop rejecting God. Instead, it is something God accomplishes when He decides to embrace sinners who repent and believe. He had to be willing to remove the guilt of sin, which caused such profound alienation and separation between humanity and Himself. Wherever we find the language of reconciliation in the New Testament, God is always the initiator of the reconciling activity. He is the One who removes the guilt.

God made reconciliation possible entirely through His Son who through Christ reconciled us to himself." Why? Because Jesus Christ is the only mediator who could stand between God and man (Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tm 2:5-6). He alone could offer the one perfect sacrifice to satisfy the justice of God. "[God] will by no means clear the guilty" (Ex
34:7). Divine wrath against sin (Rom 6:23) had to be meted out. Unless that holy requirement was satisfied, no sinner could be reconciled. And therefore Christ died as a sacrifice for the sins of all who believe. *He paid the price of their sin.* His death was the most magnanimous expression of selfless love the universe will ever know. An infinitely holy God extended His love toward sinners to such a degree that He gave up His own Son in an ignominious death to bear the punishment sinners deserved. That occurred so that they might become His children and be made righteous instead of guilty. Only then could the reconciliation and transformation described in 2 Corinthians 5:14-17 take place.

The entire New Testament makes it clear that it was God who called, God who sent His Son, and God who saved. All the glory must go to Him as the source of reconciliation (cf. 1 Cor 8:6; 11:12b; Jas 1:17).

### 2. WE ARE RECONCILED BY A DEGREE OF JUSTIFICATION

Reconciliation involves a legal decree of forgiveness for sins. God does not merely admit sinners into the circle of His blessing while leaving them guilty and sin-stained. He absolves them of their guilt and imputes to them a perfect righteousness, so that they stand before God without guilt, robed in a righteousness that is not of their own making (Phil 3:9). Second Corinthians 5:19 makes reference to this truth when it says, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, *not counting their trespasses against them*" (emphasis added).

The only way sinners could ever be reconciled to God was if the sin that separated them from God were no longer an issue. Therefore, sin had to be dealt with and not counted against them. And God graciously and mercifully did that by the means of justification, which is a divine decree whereby believing sinners are declared righteous by virtue of their being covered with the righteousness of Christ and by having their sins atoned for. That is why God does not count their trespasses against them. Rather, He imputes to them the perfect righteousness of Jesus (Rom 3:21-26; 4:5-8; Col 2:13-14; cf. Mt 18:23-27; Eph 2:1-9).

It is important to understand justification as a legal decree, not a process. It happens instantaneously, the very instant the sinner savingly trusts in the atoning death of Jesus Christ. That person is immediately forgiven of all sin and counted as fully righteous before
God. Of course, experientially, we will not achieve complete righteousness and total perfection until we see Christ and are finally glorified (Rom 8:23; 1 Cor 13:12; 2 Cor 3:18; 1 Jn 3:2). But we who believe are fully justified here and now, not because of our own flawed and feeble works of "righteousness," but because of Christ's perfect, true righteousness, which is imputed or credited to our eternal account.

The phrase in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "reconciling the world to himself," interjects a complicated, difficult, and sometimes debated issue into the matter of divine reconciliation. If Paul had said "reconciling believers to Himself," or "reconciling sinners to Himself," the matter would undoubtedly have been easier to understand. But because the apostle wrote, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (emphasis added), the verse is a little more difficult to interpret accurately.

Universalists (people who erroneously believe that everyone eventually will be saved) use verse 19 to argue their case. If God through Christ has reconciled the world to Himself, they claim, then that must mean God has removed the barrier of sin between Himself and everyone in the world. Therefore all without exception are automatically going to be saved. But we know that is not true. This very passage is all about imploring unreconciled people to be reconciled. Elsewhere, Scripture clearly states that many people will be eternally condemned to hell to pay for their own sins (cf. Mt 7:13, 22-23; Rev 21:8).

So what did Paul mean when he said God was in Christ "reconciling the world to himself"? To answer that, we must understand that when the Bible speaks of Christ's dying for the whole world it speaks of mankind in general, regardless of class and ethnic distinctions, not of every specific individual without exception. "World" indicates the sphere or class of beings for whom God provided reconciliation. It speaks of the broad sweep of humanityCpeople from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Gentiles as well as Jews. Greeks as well as Hebrews. "The world."

It is in that sense that Christ died to reconcile "the world" to God, not counting their trespasses against them. He does not guarantee or even intend the salvation of all of people without exception, but He is calling out from among humanity a believing remnant drawn from every nation, every culture, and every ethnic group (cf. Acts 15:14). That is what Paul means when he speaks of "the world." He chose that word deliberately, not to signify that salvation is universal, but to emphasize that it is not limited to one people or nation.
Of course, Christ's sacrifice is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world, if that had been God's design. But we know many will not be saved. Therefore it twists the meaning of verse 19 to suggest, as some have, that no sinner anywhere has any need to fear retribution for sin. Clearly, it is not the world in general whose trespasses are not counted against them, because the trespasses of many will be counted against them in the final judgment. So "the world" that is reconciled is the world of those who are justified.

3. WE ARE RECONCILED THROUGH THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

Who are the justified ones? They are the ones who believe. Faith is the instrument of justification. Faith doesn't merit justification. It is not the ground of our justification or the reason for our justification. Faith itself does not constitute the righteousness by which we are justified (as some have erroneously thought). But faith is the instrument by which sinners lay hold of justification. Righteousness is imputed to them by faith (Rom 4:5-6, 22-24). Faith is therefore what the gospel demands from hearers.

Second Corinthians 5:20 speaks of the gospel call to faith. The apostle declares, "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." What must people do to be reconciled with God? Scripture answers that question repeatedly, always with the same answer: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31; cf. John 3:16; 5:24; Rom 5:1; 10:9-10). So when we plead with people to be reconciled with God, we are calling them to faith in Christ.

The plea to "be reconciled to God" is in no way contradictory to the truths we have already noted: that reconciliation is completely from God and by means of a sovereign, declarative act of justification. But at the same time, reconciliation does not occur apart from the sinner's trusting wholeheartedly in Christ's atoning work.

Faith itself is not the sinner's work; it is a gift of God (Eph 2:8-9; Jn 6:44, 65; Phil 1:29). He sovereignly draws those whom He chooses (the elect) to faith in Christ (Jn 6:37; Rom 8:29-30; 2 Thess 2:13-14). And yet all are commanded to repent and believe (Acts 17:30). Sinners who reject the gospel are held responsible for their unbelief (Jn 3:18; 16:8-9). The Bible teaches that God is sovereign in salvation. But just as plainly, it teaches that
sinners are responsible for their own unbelief because unbelief is willful disobedience (Heb 2:3; 12:25; 1 Jn 5:10).

Charles Spurgeon said this about the twin truths of divine sovereignty and human responsibility:
If . . . I find taught in one part of the Bible that everything is fore-ordained, that is true; and if I find, in another Scripture, that man is responsible for all his actions, that is true; and it is only my folly that leads me to imagine that these two truths can ever contradict each other. I do not believe they can ever be welded into one upon any earthly anvil, but they certainly shall be one in eternity. They are two lines that are so nearly parallel, that the human mind which pursues them farthest will never discover that they converge, but they do converge, and they will meet somewhere in eternity, close to the throne of God, whence all truth doth spring.

This much is plain: no one is excluded from the plea to be reconciled. Jesus said, "whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (Jn 6:37). The apostle John wrote, "But to all who did receive him [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (Jn 1:12-13; cf. Rom 3:26; 10:9-10). Scripture closes with this invitation: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price" (Rev. 22:17).

So every believer has the privilege and the duty to proclaim the gospel to sinners and urge them, beg them, and implore them on Christ's behalf to be reconciled to God through faith.

Faith has objective content. One must believe God raised Jesus from the dead and that He now is Lord. But the ultimate object of true faith is not merely a doctrinal statement; it is a Person. Christ. The call to faith is a call to embrace Him as He is set forth in the gospel. Faith therefore also has a subjective side that often gets overlooked. James 4:8-10 describes this attitude: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." The sinner must come before God, recognize his fallen condition (that his inner being is spiritually filthy and
double-minded, miserable, wretched, and blind), plead for God's mercy, and lay hold of Christ by faith as the only Savior who can redeem people from their sins.

God is making His appeal through us, His ambassadors, and imploring sinners (literally, "begging them") urging them to seek reconciliation with God through faith in Christ.

4. WE ARE RECONCILED BECAUSE OF THE WORK OF SUBSTITUTION

The real heart of 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 is the glorious truth of how our reconciliation was bought and paid for. This passage shows as clearly as any passage in Scripture that Christ atoned for sins by becoming a substitute for sinners. Verse 21 sets forth this powerful biblical truth in unmistakable terms: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." That one sentence resolves for us the main difficulty of the divine plan to redeem sinners. How can depraved sinners be reconciled to a holy God? Here we learn that the entire basis of the sinner's reconciliation to God is the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.

The apostle Peter elsewhere writes, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pt 2:24). Peter is quoting from Isaiah 53, another key passage about substitutionary atonement. Isaiah writes, "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows . . . he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. . . . The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (vv. 4-6).

Second Corinthians 5:21 contains four features that identify and summarize the significance of the work of substitution: the beneficiaries, the benefactor, the Substitute, and the benefits.

First of all, the beneficiaries of substitution are believers. The text says "For our sake"c the "our" referring to Paul's believing audience (along with "we" in v. 20 and "us" in v. 19). He was speaking of those who are transformed and are in Christ (v. 17), those who have been reconciled (v. 18). It was for them in particular that Christ died as a substitute.

The final word of verse 20 identifies substitution's benefactor. It is none other than God. Remember, God is the One who designed and brought to fruition our reconciliation.
He was the One who demanded a Substitute; He was the one who chose our Substitute; He was the one who ordained and executed the entire plan. Mankind had nothing to do with initiating the concept of substitution.

It was for their sake, however, that God planned it (cf. Rom 3:10-20). Only God the Father could ask His Son to become incarnate, enter into the world, humble Himself, take on the form of a man, and be obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (see Phil 2:5-8). Only God could decide how His own infinite holiness, intense hatred of sin, and inflexible justice could be perfectly satisfied without destroying the sinner in that satisfaction. In other words, God determined what would propitiate His wrath. And although the price was inconceivably awful, He was willing to make the sacrifice.

God acted as the Benefactor in providing substitution for sinners simply because of His own great love (Jn 3:16). "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). While believers were still His enemies, God reconciled them to Himself through the death of His Son (v. 10). Ephesians 2:4-5 says, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (cf. 1:3-7; Col 1:12-14).

This truth is what makes biblical Christianity different from all the religions of the world. Most of them operate on the premise that God is an angry, hateful, or indifferent deity who could not care less about the prosperity of beings who grub around underneath Him in this world. All of them teach that if God's righteousness is to be satisfied, it is the sinner himself who must provide the satisfaction. Therefore the goal of virtually all religion is somehow to appease God. Either they must placate an otherwise hostile and angry god through self-atonement, or they imagine that they can please a benevolent God merely by being benevolent themselves. If people in those systems are going to be reconciled to their god or gods, they must do something usually by performing religious ceremonies, observing rituals, fulfilling duties, or offering prayers by which they can appease this deity and thereby earn his favor.

But the good news of biblical Christianity is that God Himself has already supplied on our behalf all that is necessary to appease Him. We aren't left to work out a plan of reconciliation for ourselves or obtain our own righteousness. We can lean trustingly on the good news that God is the benefactor. He has effected the substitutionary atonement to pay
the full price of sin, and He now offers forgiveness and reconciliation to all who believe and trust Christ alone. That is the gospel.

It took death to pay the price of sin because, as it says in Ezekiel 18:4, "The soul who sins shall die" (cf. Rom 6:23). God made that abundantly clear throughout the whole Old Testament economy. The Jews spent most of their lives either coming from or going to a sacrifice. They continually killed and offered animals as sacrifices to deal with sin, to show people how wicked they were, and to illustrate the fact that sin requires death. The blood of those animals could never take away sin (Heb 10:11). But the nonstop offering of those animals nonetheless demonstrated that the wages of sin is death. Believing Jews longed for the ultimate Lamb of God who once and for all would take away the sin of the world. Essentially, God's own Son, Jesus Christ, in obedience to the Father's plan, fulfilled that longing (cf. Heb 7:26-27; 9:11-12). And Christ did so under no coercion, but willingly: "I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father" (Jn 10:17-18).

The third feature of the work of substitution contained in 2 Corinthians 5:21 is the identity of the Substitute: "He made him to be sin who knew no sin." That is not describing any ordinary human being, because no mere man meets that sinless qualification (cf. Rom 3:23). Still, the substitute had to be a human being, because God required that a human must die for humans. The substitute could not be a sinful human being (or else he would have to die for his own sin and thus be unable to provide atonement for someone else's sin). So the substitute had to be a sinless man.

The only way God could provide a sinless man as a substitute for sin was to provide a Man who was God, because God alone is sinless. He made that provision by sending into the world in the form of a man His own Son, the sinless and perfect Christ as holy as (and of the same substance as) the Father and the Holy Spirit. Paul told the Galatians, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law" (Gal 4:4-5). Jesus Christ then is "him . . . who knew no sin." The testimony of the New Testament affirms that. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been
tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15; cf. 7:26; Lk 23:4; Jn 8:46; 1 Pt 1:18-19; 2:22; 3:18; 1 Jn 3:5).

What does the phrase "he made him to be sin" mean? In view of the utter sinlessness of Christ, it clearly does not mean that Christ became a sinner and committed sins or broke God's law. Our Lord had no capacity to sin. He remained the sinless, eternal God while becoming fully man. And certainly it is unthinkable that God would turn Him into a sinner.

We return to Isaiah 53 to understand how Christ was "made sin":

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (vv. 4-6)

Christ was "made sin" by being made a substitute for sinners. He bore their guilt. He was punished for it. Simply put, God treated Christ as if He were a sinner, by making Him pay the penalty for sin though He was innocent. More than that, God treated Him as if He were guilty of all the sins of all who would ever believe. Sin, not His but ours, was credited or imputed to Him as if He had committed it, and He then paid the price on the cross.

That imputation is the only means by which Christ was "made sin." The Father then poured out the full fury of His wrath against all that sin and, because sin was laid on Him, Jesus experienced the full force of divine wrath against sin. He suffered as much of the wrath of God as someone would experience in an eternity of torment in hell. In other words, He paid an infinite price. Is it any wonder that He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mt 27:46)? He was treated as a sinner and thus for a time on the cross felt complete alienation from the Father. Although Christ was in practice and reality perfectly holy, God considered Him forensically guilty.

Anyone trying to achieve reconciliation with God by his own efforts, apart from trust in the Substitute, is cursed. Galatians 3:10 says, "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse." Anyone who tries to earn his way to heaven by doing good works, performing religious duties, or adhering to some moral or ceremonial law, is doomed to failure. "Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them" (Dt 27:26). He is accursed because the first time he violates one part of the law he is deemed
guilty of all (cf. Jas 2:10). That is why the law can damn sinners, but it cannot save them (cf. Gal 2:21).

There is a penalty associated with the curse of the law, and someone had to pay it on behalf of those whom God would redeem. Thus Paul declared, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal 3:13). That perfectly illustrates the principle of imputation. Christ became sin by imputation, just as all who embrace His atoning work become righteous by imputation. Our sin was imputed to Him so He could pay for it, just as His righteousness was imputed to us so we could be justified and reconciled to the Father.

In other words, on the cross God treated Christ as if He sinned all the sins of everyone who would ever believe, so that He could treat them as if they had lived Christ's perfect life. That is precisely what Paul means in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

That is the benefit or purpose of substitution: "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Basically, that is the wonderful result sinners realize from justification. They receive a righteousness not derived from keeping the law but one that is laid hold of by faith in Christ. It is a true righteousness that comes from God. As Paul testified to the Philippians, it is "not . . . a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil 3:9).

So the righteousness God requires from the sinner is the very righteousness He provides for those who believe. When God looks at believers He sees individuals covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. And conversely, all their sins are eternally forgiven because Jesus has already paid the penalty for them.

What about the sins believers commit after their conversion? Christ died for those sins too, because, from the divine perspective, the atonement was conceived and designed while all sins were still in the future. Christ is the lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8, KJV). God's eternal plan was for Christ to die for believers' sins, even while all those sins were yet future (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28).

The efficacious benefit of God's plan of redemption is the righteousness Paul refers to in the book of Romans: "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all
who believe" (3:22). Faith is the key to experiencing this benefit, and that faith involves acknowledging certain things. We must confess that we are sinners, desperately alienated from God. We must believe that in ourselves we have no hope of reconciliation with God, and unless we repent, we will be forever separated from God and suffer eternal torment. We must believe that God sent His Son into the world in the form of a man to die as a substitute for sinners and receive the full fury of God's wrath in their place. We must believe that God's justice was satisfied by Jesus' sacrifice, as demonstrated by the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead. And finally we must believe that God exalted Jesus to His right hand, seated Him on a throne, and gave Him a name "that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:9-10).

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Jesus is Alive – True or False?

By Lee Strobel

Who would you guess is the most successful defense attorney in the world? F. Lee Bailey? Well, he's fallen on hard times. Johnnie Cochran? Let's check an authoritative source on this: the Guinness Book of World Records. This is what it says on Page 547:

"Most successful lawyer: Sir Lionel Luckhoo . . . (who) succeeded in getting his 245th successive murder charge acquittal by January 1, 1985."

That's an absolutely astonishing feat that nobody in the world has come close to replicating - 245 murder trials in a row, either won before a jury or on appeal. No wonder he's renowned as the real-life Perry Mason.

What skills do you think he needed to rise to that unprecedented level of courtroom success? Certainly he must be smart and savvy. He must have tremendous analytical skills so he can dissect what may appear on the surface to be an air-tight case. And he must be a world-class expert on what constitutes reliable and persuasive evidence.

All of that describes Luckhoo, who was knighted twice by Queen Elizabeth and who also served as a distinguished diplomat and a justice on his country's highest court.

As we approach Easter, wouldn't it be interesting to get an opinion from an expert like Luckhoo on the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Well, we're in luck, so to speak. During his own spiritual journey, Luckhoo turned his expertise to the question of whether the resurrection of Jesus Christ fits the test of legal evidence. And here's the conclusion he ultimately reached:

"I say unequivocally that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof which leaves absolutely no room for doubt."
Amazing, isn't it? Our everyday experience tells us that pigs don't talk, regardless of the movie *Babe*; that Santa Claus doesn't slide down chimneys; and that dead people don't spring back to life. And yet here's the most successful attorney in the world applying the test of legal evidence to the case of Jesus Christ and concluding with absolute confidence that His resurrection is reality. And then Luckhoo did the most logical thing he could do: he gave his life to Christ.

Well, today you and I are going to examine some of the facts ourselves. Last week we looked at the evidence that points convincingly toward Jesus being the unique Son of God. We saw how the record of His life is reliable; how His claims to being God are credible; how Jesus alone fit the fingerprint of the Messiah by fulfilling ancient prophecies against all odds; and how Christ has impacted millions of individuals.

And now here we are on Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, which culminates with Easter -- and we're going to talk about the evidence that confirms what Easter is all about.

I hope I have more success in explaining Easter than my brother-in-law did a few years ago when he was trying to explain it to his 5-year-old son Sean. They were sitting in church on Easter, and just before the service began, my brother-in-law pointed to the cross and said, "See the cross? The people put Jesus on the cross. *The people killed Jesus.*"

Sean looked around very nervously, then asked cautiously: "*These* people?"

Well, we're going to get at the heart of Easter today; in fact, to the very heart of Christianity itself. The Apostle Paul wrote in *First Corinthians 15:17*: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins."
So the resurrection is the linchpin of Christianity and the ultimate authentication of Jesus' claim that He is God. I especially hope that those of you who are spiritual skeptics or seekers will do that Sir Lionel Luckhoo did -- keep an open mind and let the evidence lead you wherever it points.

I'm going to begin by summarizing how Jesus died, and I'm going to get a little graphic for a very important reason. Some people take the position that Jesus never really died on the cross; in fact, that's what many Muslims are taught.

It's called the "swoon theory" -- that Jesus fainted on the cross or took a drug that made Him only appear to die, and then the cool air of the tomb revived Him and He emerged alive. So, they contend, there was no resurrection because He hadn't died. But as I describe to you what happened to Jesus, you'll quickly see the fallacy of that position. If you've seen Mel Gibson's movie “The Passion of Christ,” with the horrible brutally worked upon Jesus, you already know the impossible nature of the "swoon theory."

After Jesus' trial in which He was found guilty of blasphemy for claiming to be God, John 19:1 says: "Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged." A medical expert named Dr. C. Truman Davis studied what this involved and concluded this was a brutal beating that left Jesus on the very edge of death.

Jesus was tied to a post and beaten at least 39 times -- and probably more -- with a whip that had jagged bones and balls of lead woven into it. Again and again, the whip was brought down with full force on His bare shoulders, back and legs.

At first, the heavy thongs cut through His skin only. But as the blows continued, they cut deeper into the underlying tissues, first producing an oozing of blood from the capillaries and veins, and finally the spurring of arterial bleeding from vessels in the underlying muscles. The balls of lead first produced large, deep bruises which were then broken open by subsequent blows.
By the end, the skin of His back was left hanging in long ribbons and the entire area was an unrecognizable mass of torn, bleeding tissue. One witness to a Roman flogging wrote this: "The sufferer's veins were laid bare, and the very muscles and tendons and bowels of the victim were open to exposure."

Undoubtedly, Jesus was in serious to critical condition even before the crucifixion began. It's no wonder He was unable to carry His own cross.

Then five-to-seven-inch spikes were driven through His wrists, crushing the median nerve, which we call the funny bone. Experts say this would be like squeezing your funny bone with a pair of pliers. So painful was death by crucifixion that a new word was coined to describe it -- the word "excruciating," which is Latin for "out of the cross."

After His wrists and feet were nailed securely, He was hoisted into the air to hang. Death from crucifixion is basically a slow death by suffocation. Because of the stress on the muscles, Jesus could breathe in, but He couldn't breathe out unless He pushed up with His feet to relieve some of the pressure on His chest. Of course, that was tremendously painful because of His bloodied back scraping against the coarse cross and because of the spikes through His feet. After a while of pushing up again and again, exhaustion sets in.

If the Romans wanted to hasten death, they used a mallet to shatter the victim's shin bones so he couldn't push up anymore, and the victim's lungs would fill with carbon dioxide and he'd slowly asphyxiate.

And that's what the executioners did to the criminals crucified on either side of Jesus. But when they came to Jesus, they saw He was already dead. To confirm that, the soldier plunged a spear between His ribs, puncturing the sac around the heart and the heart itself, and causing a clear fluid and blood to spew out, which eyewitnesses recorded. Then four Roman experts confirmed He was dead.
Friends, nobody came down from a cross alive -- and that included Jesus. An authoritative article in the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Society* concluded: "Clearly, the weight of historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead (even) before the wound to His side was inflicted. . . . Accordingly, interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge."

In fact, think about this: even if He wanted to go against everything He taught by intentionally deceiving people, even if He had somehow survived the cross, even if He were somehow able to escape from the cocoon of linen wrappings soaked with 75 pounds of spices, even if He could somehow roll away the huge boulder from the mouth of His tomb -- a boulder so big that one ancient account said 20 men couldn't budge it -- even if He could somehow get past the elite Roman guards, think of the condition He would have been in when He appeared to His disciples.

He wouldn't have inspired them with confidence and gotten them all excited about receiving that kind of resurrection body someday. He would not have appeared as the glorified, perfected Jesus like you saw in “The Passion of Christ.” He wouldn't have prompted them to triumphantly declare His glorious return and launch a worldwide movement. They would have been horrified and sickened by His bloody and broken condition. They would have pitied Him and gotten Him a doctor.

So the evidence clearly refutes the "swoon theory," which, by the way, people often bring up but no reputable scholar believes.

Now let's look at the affirmative evidence for the resurrection. I'm going to summarize it with the three E's, as you see behind me on these placards. The first "E" stands for "EARLY."
We discussed this last week when we talked about the reliability of the ancient documents that make up the New Testament of the Bible, but it's important to reiterate that the account of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection date back very early.

For instance, a creed recited in the early church and preserved for us by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 clearly affirms that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; He was buried; he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,” and then it cites specific people who Jesus appeared to. This creed has been dated back to as early as two or three years after the crucifixion, and the beliefs that underlie it go back right to the cross itself.

This completely rebuts the idea that legends about the resurrection developed in the decades after Jesus' death. Studies have concluded there was nowhere near enough time for that to have occurred.

In fact, when the apostle Paul mentions that Jesus appeared to 500 people at one time, He specifically states that many of them were still alive. In effect, he was saying, "Hey, these people are still around -- ask them yourselves if you don't believe me, and they'll tell you it's true." That's how confident he was. There were witnesses still around for people to question because the proclamation that Jesus was the risen Son of God began virtually immediately after His death.

The second "E" stands for the word "EMPTY" -- the empty tomb of Jesus.

During His trial, Jesus' chief accuser was the Jewish high priest Caiaphas, who served in that position from 18 to 37 A.D. It was Caiaphas who accused Jesus of blasphemy for claiming to be God and handed Him over to Pilate to be killed.

Just six years ago, archaeologists were digging in Jerusalem, and they managed to uncover the burial grounds of Caiaphas and his family. But though His accuser's grave has been found, nobody to this day has ever uncovered the body of Jesus Himself.
Jesus' body was laid to rest in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Jewish council, and the tomb was sealed and placed under heavy guard, and yet it was discovered empty on Easter morning by -- and this is very significant -- several women.

You see, the fact that the ancient documents say women discovered the tomb empty lends even more credibility to these accounts. The reason is that women had low status in Jewish society at the time and didn’t even legally qualify as witnesses. So if the disciples were making up this story, surely they would have claimed that men discovered the empty tomb because their testimony would have been more credible in that culture. This is just one more indication that the writers were committed to accurately recording what actually happened.

But here's the most powerful fact concerning Jesus' tomb: nobody ever claimed it was anything but empty! Even His opponents admitted it was vacant on Easter! They tried to bribe the guards to say that the disciples stole the body while they were asleep, which is ridiculous because they didn’t have the motive or opportunity -- and, besides, how would the guards have known it was the disciples if they were sleeping?

But the point is, when the disciples declared the tomb was empty, Jesus opponents didn't respond by saying, "No, it's not." Or, "You've got the wrong tomb -- His body is over there." Instead, they admitted it was true -- the tomb was vacant!

Now, the question is, how did it get empty? When I was first trying to figure this out as a skeptic, I went through a list of possible suspects but couldn't come up with a reasonable explanation.

For instance, the Romans wouldn't have taken the body. They wanted Jesus dead. The Jewish leaders wouldn't have taken the body. They wanted Him to stay dead.
Either the Jews or the Romans would have loved to have paraded Jesus' lifeless body down Main Street of Jerusalem because this would have instantly killed the growing Christian movement that they were expending so much energy trying to destroy. But they couldn't because they didn't have the body.

And the disciples had nothing to gain and everything to lose by stealing the body. Why would they want to live a life of deprivation and suffering and then be tortured to death for a lie? If this had been a charade, certainly one of them would have broken ranks under torture and told the truth.

Then I thought, "Well, maybe the women went to the wrong tomb -- after all, this happened in the pre-dawn darkness. Maybe they lost their way." But that didn't withstand scrutiny either.

Not only did Mary Magdalene and the other women find the tomb empty, but Peter and John came and checked it out. What are the odds they all would have made the same mistake? And don't you think they would have made absolutely sure it was the right tomb before they risked their lives proclaiming Jesus' body was gone? Besides, their friend Joseph of Arimathea knew where his own tomb was located. And if somehow they all came down with amnesia, don't you think the Jewish and Roman authorities would have gladly pointed out the real tomb to show Jesus was still in it?

Friends, the unanimous testimony of history is that the tomb was empty on Easter Sunday. There was no motive for the disciples or the Romans or the Jewish authorities to have stolen the body. The only explanation that fits the facts is that Jesus really did return from the dead.

Especially when we go to the third "E," which stands for "EYEWITNESSES." Not only was Jesus' tomb empty, but over a period of 40 days Jesus appeared alive a dozen different times to more than 515 individuals. To men and women, to believers and
doubters, to tough-minded people and tender-hearted people, sometimes to groups, sometimes to individuals, sometimes indoors, sometimes outdoors in broad daylight.

He talked with people, He ate with them, He even invited one skeptic to put his finger in the nail holes in His hands and to put his hand in the spear wound in His side in order to verify that it was Him. And that disciple, Thomas, became so convinced that he ended up proclaiming to his violent death in South India that Jesus had, indeed, been resurrected.

Five hundred and fifteen people -- that's a lot of witnesses. I had to stop to put that into context!

Think about it this way: if we were holding a trial to determine the facts concerning the resurrection, and if we were to call to the witness stand every eyewitness who personally encountered the resurrected Jesus and we cross-examined each of them for only 15 minutes, and if we went around the clock without a break, how long do you think we'd be sitting here?

This first-hand, eyewitness testimony would continue through tonight, through all day Sunday and Sunday night, through all day Monday and Monday night, through all day Tuesday and Tuesday night, through all day Wednesday and Wednesday night, through all day Thursday -- and we'd be listening to the last eyewitness account at about 3 o'clock next Friday morning!

After listening for more than 128 straight hours, who could possibly walk away unconvinced? I've covered scores of criminal trials as a legal affairs journalist, but I've never seen a case with anywhere near as much eyewitness testimony as that!

Well, when I was a skeptic, I tried and tried to poke holes in their testimony. First, I thought, maybe these appearances were hallucinations.
But psychologists said that's not possible because hallucinations are like dreams -- they're individual events that can't be shared between people. It would be like me asking you, "Did you enjoy the dream I had last night?" In fact, one expert said that 500 people sharing the same hallucination would be a bigger miracle than the resurrection itself!

But I wasn't ready to give up yet. What if these weren't hallucinations, but instead an example of what psychologists call "group think" -- a kind of wishful thinking where people in a group subtly encourage one another through the power of suggestion to see an image?

A few years ago I was able to ask that question of Dr. Gary Collins, the president of a national association of psychologists, a university professor of psychology for 20 years, and the author of more than 40 books on the subject. But Dr. Collins said, no, that wouldn't be possible, because the circumstances were all wrong for anything like this to have occurred.

For instance, the disciples weren't anticipating a resurrection. This was totally contrary to their Jewish beliefs. And so they weren't primed for this sort of thing to happen. Besides, Jesus ate with them, He talked back to them, and He appeared numerous times before all kinds of people in various settings -- all of which runs contrary to this "group think" theory.

Besides, what about the empty tomb? If they just imagined Jesus, then where was His body? Certainly the Romans would have produced it if they could have.

Friends, the appearances of Jesus weren't a hallucination, they weren't wish fulfillment; they weren't mythology or mistake. They are real events of history that revolutionized the lives of whose who encountered Him.
I mean, look at what happened to the disciples. Before Easter, they were dejected and despondent because they thought their leader was gone forever. Peter denied Christ three times. They fled and hid.

But history clearly shows that after Easter, they're boldly proclaiming Jesus is alive. Suddenly, these once-cowardly men are transformed into people filled with courage, willing to fearlessly proclaim to their death that Jesus had conquered the grave.

Now, at first I wasn’t very persuaded by the fact that they were willing to die for their beliefs. After all, lots of people have died for the faith through history. Look at that Muslim terrorist who blew himself up and killed a lot of other people in Tel Aviv recently. Why was he willing to die that way? Because he sincerely believed he would immediately go to be with his god in paradise.

But then someone pointed out to me that what the disciples did was very different from that. Listen to this: people will die for their religious beliefs if they’re convinced their beliefs are true -- like that terrorist. But people will not die for their religious beliefs if they know their beliefs are false.

And the disciples were in the unique position in history to know first-hand -- to know for sure -- whether Jesus had really risen from the dead. They encountered Him. They talked and ate with Him. And they declared it was true -- He was resurrected. It wasn't a hallucination or a trick. And because it was true, they were willing to die for it.

Do you see? If they had been lying, do you think they would have willing let themselves be tortured to death for a lie? Nobody knowingly and willingly dies for a lie.

Friends, Luckhoo was right: the evidence is absolutely overwhelming. The three E’s add up to a powerful and persuasive equation -- EARLY ACCOUNTS + an EMPTY TOMB + EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY = certainty that Jesus was, indeed, resurrected. And
that’s the ultimate authentication that He is who He claimed to be -- the one-and-only Son of God.

But this is more than just an historical curiosity. The resurrection has profound implications for you and me. And to explain that, I'm going to end with a story made up by Alfred Hitchcock and recounted in a recent book by David Jeremiah. It's not a true story, but it is a story with a lesson.

It's the story of a woman who murdered her husband years ago and was sentenced to life in prison. She vowed that somehow, some way, she'd escape.

As her prison bus approached the penitentiary, she saw an old man, another prisoner, covering up a grave in a small cemetery outside the prison walls. Right then and there, she hatched a plot.

Once inside, she befriended this prisoner. He was going blind and needed cataract surgery. "I'll give you the money for your surgery if you'll help me escape," she said. And he agreed.

Here was the plan: the next time she heard the bell toll, which indicated an inmate had died, she would sneak down to the workroom where he made the casket and slide inside with the body and pull the covering closed. He would wheel the casket out to the cemetery, lower it into the grave and cover it with dirt. But that night, when nobody was watching, he'd return and dig up the casket and set her free.

Late one night, the bell tolled. The woman sneaked down to the workroom. It was dark, but she found the casket, lifted the lid, slipped inside next to the body, pulled the cover over her -- and waited.
Sure enough, a few hours later she felt the casket being rolled toward the grave site. She smiled as the casket was lowered into the hole. She heard the clumps of dirt hitting the casket and covering her up. She had done it! She could barely contain her excitement.

Silence followed as she waited in the dark. Time began to drag. Hours passed, then more hours. Finally, she began to worry. She broke out in a cold sweat. Where was that old man? What was keeping him? Can you imagine the emotions that would have coursed through her?

In a moment of panic, she reached into her pocket and took out some matches. As she lit one, she glanced at the corpse beside her -- and saw that it was the old man himself.

*Her only hope lay buried right next to her!*

The lesson for you and me is obvious. This woman had placed her hope in another human being who she sincerely thought would be able to save her -- *but he went to his grave and ended up taking her with him.*

Friends, listen to me: every single religious leader in history is in his grave right now: Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed, all of them -- except one, and that's Jesus Christ. His tomb is empty because He had the power of God to overcome the grave.

So let me ask the question: *Who are you going to put your hope in to help you overcome the grave?* You just heard the evidence; it points compellingly toward Jesus Christ as telling the truth when He said in John 11:25: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies."

One thing we haven’t talked about today is the “why” of Jesus’ death. You see, your wrongdoing has separated you from a perfect God, and out of His love for you Jesus chose to suffer the pain of the cross as your substitute, to pay the penalty that you deserved for your sin so that you could be reconciled with God.
And when you confess your wrongdoing and personally apply Christ’s work on the cross to your life -- you receive Christ as your forgiver and leader and you receive eternal life as a gift of grace -- then you can have confidence that you, too, will overcome the grave and spend eternity with Him in heaven.

Go ahead, do what Luckhoo did. Do what I did: look at the evidence yourself. You decide. But keep the image of that hopeless woman in mind while you ask yourself this question: “Who is the only one who the evidence has demonstrated can offer you hope for your eternity?”

Let’s stand for closing prayer.
Jesus Is the Son of God – True or False?

Matthew 26:57-68

By Brian M. Mavis

[Note to the pastor: I end this sermon with a prayer of forgiveness. It is just a suggested ending. You may, of course, end the sermon the way that best fits your beliefs and church.]

Mel Gibson’s new movie “The Passion of The Christ” is about the last hours before Jesus was crucified. This movie is profoundly impacting different people. Christian and non-Christian, Democrat and Republican, the religious and the non-religious are amazed by it. Let me share with you what some people are saying about this movie:

- “I thought Passion was a superior recounting of the ‘greatest story ever told,’ the last days of Jesus. … I cannot but believe that people of all religions will find this truly an impressive and respectful piece of art and realism, emerging from the New Testament.” Jack Valenti, CEO of the Motion Picture Association. (In a letter to Mel Gibson, July 2003).

- “It is deeply moving, powerful, and disturbing. A film that must be seen.” James Dobson, Chairman of Focus on the Family. (From an email to Icon).

- “It is by a very large margin of advantage the most effective cinematic adaptation of a biblical story I have ever seen. And it’s the kind of movie that’s going to touch people.” Michael Medved, Film Critic and Radio Show Host (and Jewish). (Fox News, The O’Reilly Factor, Aug 4, 2003).

- “As one who has seen virtually every modern biblical epic – I can say “The Passion” is the most beautiful, profound, accurate, disturbing, realistic and bloody depiction of this well known story that has ever been filmed.” Cal Thomas, Syndicated Columnist. (Tribune Media, Aug 5, 2003).

- “Mel Gibson not only closely follows the narrative of the Gospels, giving the viewer a new appreciation for those Biblical passages, but his artistic choices also make the film faithful to the meaning of the Gospels, as understood by the Church.” Rabbi Daniel Lapin (WorldNetDaily.com, Sept. 25, 2003).
“In my opinion, one of the greatest achievements of this film is to have shown so effectively both the horror of sin and selfishness, and the redeeming power of love. Seeing this film provokes love and compassion. It makes the viewer want to love more, to forgive…. This film is a triumph of art and faith. It will be a tool for explaining the person and message of Christ.” Cardinal Castrillon Hoyos, Worldwide Prefect of the Clergy. (La Stampa, Sept 18, 2003).

People agree that the movie is amazing, but is it accurate? Is fact or fiction? Is Hollywood or history? Is it true or false?

If you find yourself asking intellectual or even skeptical questions about Jesus, you are in good company. It is ok to have doubts. God isn’t afraid of your questions. He welcomes your search for truth. You don’t have to have a lobotomy to believe in Jesus. Many scientists, lawyers, professors, engineers, philosophers, and intellectuals believe in him.

We are beginning a four-week series about Jesus inspired by some of the claims brought forth in the movie “The Passion of the Christ.” Today we will be looking at who Jesus is, and specifically exploring the question, “Is Jesus really the Son of God?”

Controversy has always followed Christ. If you have seen the movie, you can remember that Jesus was put on trial – an illegal one. You can read this scene in Matthew 26:57-63:

57 Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. 58 But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome.

59 The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. 60 But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward.

61 Finally two came forward and declared, “This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’ ”
Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?"

But Jesus remained silent.

At Jesus’ trial they were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. Finally a false claim was made that they thought they could build on. Back then people were making false claims about Jesus. Two thousand years later people still are making false claims about him. Here is one common one.

1. False – Jesus Was Just a Good Moral Teacher

The first false claim is Jesus was just a good moral teacher. Have you ever heard it said that Jesus never claimed to be God – but that He was just a good moral teacher? It is a common belief. For example Gandhi believed this. He writes in his book called The Message of Jesus Christ:

It was more than I could believe that Jesus was the only incarnate son of God, and that only he who believed in him would have everlasting life. If God could have sons, all of us were his sons. If Jesus was like God, or God Himself, then all men were like God and could be God Himself…. I could accept Jesus as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher, but not as the most perfect man ever born. His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept (p. 12).

But as the Oxford and Cambridge scholar, C.S. Lewis said:

I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic -- on the
level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about Him being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, pp. 55-56).

2. False – Jesus is a Myth

Another false claim made about Jesus is that he is just a myth. Two things can be meant by this. First, people can mean by it that Jesus never actually existed in history. But even non-Christian historians and secular publications don’t even accept that theory now. Listen to what Time Magazine said about Jesus in an article titled *The Man of the Millennium*:

The memory of any stretch of years eventually resolves to a list of names, and one of the useful ways of recalling the past two millenniums is by listing the people who acquired great power. Muhammad, Catherine the Great, Marx, Gandhi, Hitler, Roosevelt, Stalin and Mao come quickly to mind. There’s no question that each of those figures changed the lives of millions and evoked responses from worship through hatred. It would require much exotic calculation, however; to deny that the single most powerful figure—not merely in these two millenniums but in all human history—has been Jesus of Nazareth. Not only is the prevalent system of denoting the years based on an erroneous 6th century calculation of the date of his birth, but a serious argument can be made that no one else’s life has proved remotely as powerful and enduring as that of Jesus. (*Man of the Millennium. Time Magazine*, Dec. 6, 1999).
Even a skeptic like H.G. Wells admitted, “I am an historian, I am not a believer, but I must confess as a historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of history. Jesus Christ is easily the most dominant figure in all history.”

Another thing people mean when they say Jesus is a myth is that Jesus did exist, but his followers made him out to be more than he was – Jesus was good, but His followers created a myth he was God. They say Jesus was saying good things, but his disciples said he was God. They say Jesus did good things, but his disciples said they did miracles. They say Jesus died, but his disciples said he resurrected. He wasn’t a liar, lord, or lunatic – he was legend.

But listen to what Albert Einstein said in an interview with the Saturday Evening Post:

As a child I received instruction both in the Bible and in the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene. Jesus is too colossal for the pen of phrasemongers, however artful…. No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life. (Albert Einstein, Saturday Evening Post, 26 October 1929).

3. True – Jesus is the Son of God

The truth is that Jesus did exist. He claimed to be the Son of God. And he gave proof of it in many ways. Let’s go back to the Bible passage and read what happens in this courtroom scene. Let’s pick up from where we left off in Matthew 26:63-64:

The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."

64 "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."
Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?"

"He is worthy of death," they answered.

Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, "Prophesy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"

Jesus had remained silent during the earlier, false accusations against him. Now Caiaphas – who acted as prosecutor, judge, and jury – makes Jesus answer. He tells Jesus that he has to answer the question – under oath – if he is the Son of God. Jesus isn’t allowed to plead the fifth. He has to answer. And he says he is.

If you saw the movie, you may remember at this moment pandemonium erupts in the courtroom. The high priests cries out and tears his clothes. They yell at Jesus. They spit on him. They slap him. They hit him with their fists. This is just how the Bible describes it too.

You may wonder, what just happened? What did I miss? What did Jesus say that just infuriated people? As far as the religious leaders were concerned, Jesus just confessed to the ultimate crime. He claimed he was God. This was blasphemy. He would have been better off to say he was a mass murderer.

Jesus knew this. He wasn’t surprised by their reaction. Their reaction would have been justified IF Jesus weren’t God. But he was. For Jesus to say he was the Son of God wasn’t blasphemy it was fact.

It is true that Jesus claimed divinity. This was the reason they put Him on trial and put Him to death. But, just because Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, it doesn’t necessarily make it true. If someone you knew claimed to be the Son of God, would you think it was true? No, you would probably think that person had a serious mental problem.
Richard Bandler tells one story about visiting a mental institution and dealing with a man who insisted he was Jesus Christ - not metaphorically, not in spirit, but in the flesh. One day Bandler walked in to meet this man. "Are you Jesus?" he said. "Yes, my son," the man replied. Bandler said, "I’ll be back in a minute." This left the man a little bit confused. Within three or four minutes, Bandler came back, holding a measuring tape. Asking the man to hold out his arms, Bandler measured the length of his arms and his height from head to toe. After that, Bandler left. The man claiming to be Christ became a little concerned. A little while later, Bandler came back with a hammer, some large spiked nails, and a long set of boards. He began to pound them into the form of a cross. The man asked, "What are you doing?" As Richard put the last nails in the cross, he asked, "Are you Jesus?" Again the man said, "Yes my son." Bandler said, "Then you know why I’m here." Somehow, the man suddenly recalled who he really was. His old pattern didn’t seem like such a good idea. "I’m not Jesus. I’m not Jesus!" the man started yelling. Case closed. Source: Robbins, Anthony. Unlimited Power, pp. 184-185. New York: Ballantine Books, copyright 1986.

But when Jesus claims to be the Son of God, hardly anyone laughs. Why is Jesus believable? Let’s put him on trial ourselves, and look at their articles of evidence.

His Life – Jesus lived a perfect life. He was sinless. Look again at this trial. Notice verse 59. It says that "The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. This verse points out that even his enemies knew that they couldn’t charge him with doing anything morally wrong. They couldn’t charge him with one legitimate sin. The Bible says, He “was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). He “committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth” (1 Peter 2:22).

His Miracles – Jesus referred to his miracles as signs. These signs pointed to Jesus’ divinity. Of the hundreds of miracles he did, one was especially important – He rose from the dead, never to die again.
Again, let’s take a look at this trial against Jesus. Verse 61 says, “Finally two came forward and declared, ‘This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’”

These false witnesses had twisted Jesus’ words. What Jesus actually said was, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19). He didn’t say he would destroy it – he said they would. Furthermore, Jesus wasn’t referring to the temple in Jerusalem, but the temple he had spoken of was his body. Jesus was all the time pointing out the miracle people should be looking for – namely, that he would rise from the dead three days after being killed.

In verse 64 Jesus goes on to say in his trial “In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” He is really rubbing it in now. He is saying I’m God – I’m coming back to life – and I’m coming back for you.

**His Prophesies** – Hundreds of years before Jesus came to Earth, many predictions were given about the identity of The Messiah. Jesus matched every prediction. It was like one-of-a-kind divine DNA.

The movie “The Passion of the Christ” opens up with a verse from Isaiah 53. It is just one example of prophecy that was fulfilled in Jesus. Let’s read Isaiah 53:3-12, and you can see how obvious it is that Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy that was written 700 years before Jesus was born:

3 He was despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.  
Like one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.  
4 Surely he took up our infirmities  
and carried our sorrows,  
yet we considered him stricken by God,  
smitten by him, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearsers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
And who can speak of his descendants?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

11 After the suffering of his soul,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.

For he bore the sin of many,

and made intercession for the transgressors.

In his book *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, Josh McDowell says that the Old Testament contains over 300 references to the Messiah that were fulfilled in Jesus. He asks what chance did Jesus or any other man have of fulfilling these prophecies. He refers to the work of the mathematician, Peter Stoner, who calculated the mathematical odds of fulfilling just 8 of the 300 prophecies: "We find that the chance that any man might have lived down to the present time and fulfilled all eight prophecies is one in ten (to the seventeenth power). That would be one in 100,000,000,000,000,000.”

In order to help us comprehend this staggering probability, Stoner illustrates it by supposing that we take ten (seventeenth power) silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas. They will cover all of the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up one silver dollar and say that This is the right one.

What chance would he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man.

(Evidence That Demands A Verdict, Josh McDowell).

**Now What?** How does this affect your life? It’s really quite simple. If Jesus is God’s Son, the consequences are enormous. For example:

- God must exist and He can be known through Jesus.
- He’d rather die than live without you.
- Jesus is alive here and now.
- He has revealed The Way to peace and purpose in life.
Jesus once asked His disciples the crucial question:

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven” (Matthew 16:15-17).

You must answer the question – who do you think Jesus is?

How To:

If you are ready to confess that Jesus is more than just a man, more than just a great moral teacher, more than a myth – but that he is actually God, then you need to act. As James 2:19 says, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.” Intellectual belief in the existence of God is a start but not nearly enough. What is required is submitting to the lordship and leadership of Jesus. If you are ready to do this you can begin by praying this prayer that is printed in your bulletin.

“God I believe that Jesus is the Son of God. I believe that He has authority over my life. I believe He died for the forgiveness of my sins. I believe He rose from the dead to give me life forever. Forgive me of the wrong things I have done. Create in me a clean heart. Teach me to obey you and follow you the rest of my life. Amen.”

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.
Mel Gibson’s movie – *The Passion of The Christ* – has stirred up a lot of controversy. Months before it was even released an Anti-Defamation League representative, Rabbi Eugene Korn, the head of the group's office on interfaith affairs, said “this film may undermine Christian-Jewish dialogue and could turn back the clock on decades of positive progress in interfaith relations.”

Others who have seen the film have praised its beauty and accuracy. Ted Haggard, president of the National Evangelical Association, has called it "the most authentic portrayal I've ever seen." Rick Warren, the author of *Purpose Driven Life* said it was “Brilliant, biblical – a masterpiece.” Jack W. Hayford said, “The Passion is a forthright, compassionate, evenhanded presentation of the historic facts of the trial, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.”

Jesus has always caused controversy and required people to take sides. Last week we looked at Jesus’ claim that He was God. Of the world’s major religions, Jesus is the only leader who claimed to be God in the flesh. Moses didn’t. Mohammed didn’t. Buddha didn’t. But Jesus made another claim many people find even more controversial. We are going to look at this claim today: Jesus claimed that He was the only way to God.

In John 14:6 Jesus told his disciples: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Of course there are people who think that Jesus is wrong, that he’s not the only way to God. What is true and what is false? Let’s begin by looking at a couple of common false beliefs.
False – To Claim Just One Way to God is Intolerant

One of the most common beliefs today is that to claim just one way to God is intolerant. The claim is that if you say someone is wrong in his or her beliefs, then you are intolerant and bigoted. Of course the people who say this are guilty of being intolerant too.

This is a hot topic. Last year Franklin Graham (the son of Billy Graham) got into some hot water with the media because he declared that Islam was not the way to God, but that Jesus was the only way. In an interview with National Public Radio he said:

This whole notion of tolerance. They say, "Well, you Christians are narrow-minded. You say Jesus is the only way. You're not tolerant of other religions." Well, if other religions are not tolerant of us, I'm not putting down their faith system; it's just not what I believe. And I don't accept their way as truth. They don't accept my way. That's fine. But don't ask me to believe that their way to God is a valid way. I don't believe that. (RELIGION & ETHICS NEWSWEEKLY Transcript: Show #549 August 9, 2002).

So is it intolerant and arrogant to believe Jesus is the only way to God? It’s only intolerant if Jesus is wrong. If Jesus is right, then it’s not intolerant, it’s truth.

False – There are Many Ways to God

The idea that there are many ways to God is another popular – but false – belief. It is often expressed in the way Ramakrishna Paramahamsa said it: "One can ascend to the top of a house by means of a ladder or a bamboo or a staircase or a rope; so too, diverse are the ways of approaching God, and each religion in the world shows one of the ways.”

M. Cherif Bassiouni has been a law professor at DePaul University College of Law for over 30 years. He is one of the world’s leading authorities on international criminal law and human rights. In 1999, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in establishing the International Criminal Court. At a January 4, 2000 interfaith dialogue near Chicago, Bassiouni he said this: “All religions lead to God using different paths… judgment is not by the choice we make, but by how we pursue the path of the choice we
Different religions and cultures are equal in the eyes of God and should be seen as equal in the eyes of man.”

The most common way to be “spiritual” now is to take the parts of a religion you like and to leave the parts you don’t like. It’s like a faith buffet – you get to pick and choose.

It isn’t just Hindu gurus or Nobel Laureates who believe this. Sarah Michelle Gellar, star of the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* said, “I consider myself a spiritual person. I believe in an idea of God, although it’s my own personal ideal. I find most religions interesting, and I’ve been to every kind of denomination: Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist. I’ve taken bits from everything and customized it.” (Scotland’s Daily Record).

You might be asking, don’t all the major religions basically say the same thing? The truth is they do ask similar questions: Who is God? Why is the world such a mess? How do we solve this problem? The fallacy is they come up with the same answers.

As religious scholar, Ravi Zacharias, has said, “Anyone who claims that all religions are the same betrays not only an ignorance of all religions but also a caricatured view of even the best-known ones. Every religion at its core is exclusive.” (Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message, p. 7).

Is it intolerant to claim Jesus is the only way to God? No, it’s truth. Are there many ways to God? No, each religion claims to be THE way to God, yet only one of those can be right. So, how does one come to God? What is true?

**True – Jesus is the Only Way to God**

There is just one road to God. This is depicted in the opening scene of *The Passion of The Christ*. The movie begins in the evening with Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Let’s read it in Matthew 26:36-46:

> Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled.
soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

40 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. 41 "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

42 He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

43 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. 44 So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. 45 Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

I’d like to point out one verse in particular here. Look again at chapter 26 verse 42: “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” (Matthew 26:42). This verse is often pointed out to teach how Jesus submitted to God’s will in all things – even to the point of death. No doubt this is true. But another truth can’t be overlooked. Jesus is praying that God reveal another way for people to be reconciled to Him. God’s answer was there is no other way. Jesus must die to provide a way. Islam won’t do it. Hinduism won’t do it. Judaism won’t do it. Mixing and matching religions won’t do it Being good won’t do it. Our problem is our sin that separates us from God, and Jesus’ death is our only cure. In fact if there were another way to God, Jesus’ death is unnecessary.

For those of you who saw the movie you may have noticed that the movie includes something that isn’t in the scripture we read. In the movie Satan is in the garden whispering to Jesus that He can’t take on the sins of the world. A snake then comes from Satan’s feet and crawls onto Jesus who is lying down in fervent prayer. Finally Jesus stands and then crushes the snake’s head with the heel of his foot. Though this scene is not recorded in the gospels, it is superb theology. You see, at the beginning of humanity
God gave a prophecy to Satan. You can read it in *Genesis 3:15*. Satan has deceived and tempted Adam and Eve to sin against God. Then God confronts Satan and says, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” This was the first prophecy of the coming Messiah, and as the movie excellently depicts, Jesus fulfilled it.

Look again at the opening words of Matthew 26:36 “*Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane.*” Maybe you have never heard of a place called Gethsemane. Maybe you have, but do you know what Gethsemane means? Gethsemane means, “Oil press.” It was a place where olives were *crushed* for their oil. It became the place where Jesus was also *crushed*. In the beginning of the movie one verse flashes on the screen – *Isaiah 53:5* “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was *crushed* for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” And as we saw in the movie and in Genesis 3 it was the place that Jesus *crushed* Satan’s head. Although Jesus still had to face the cross, it is here that He made His decision to follow God no matter the cost. There is no other way to God. Jesus is the only way.

Is it intolerant to claim Jesus is the only way to God? No, it’s truth. Are there many ways to God? No, each religion claims to be THE way to God, yet only one of those can be right. And what is the right way? It is Jesus. If Jesus was not our only hope, our only way to God, then he would have walked away from that Garden. He would have wiped the sweat and blood from his brow and said, “I don’t have to do this—I don’t have to die.”

**Now What?**

Because Jesus is the Only Way to God, you need to walk the path that He laid out. Jesus was crushed for your iniquities.
How to:

Jesus began by asking God a question – “Is there another way?” He heard from God that there was no other way. You need to answer that same question. Do you believe that Jesus is the only way to God?

Jesus then submitted to God’s will. Even if you believe that Jesus is the only way, that is not enough. You must submit to God’s will in following Jesus. Can you say to God, “not my will but yours be done”?

Lastly join Jesus in crushing Satan and his evil work. Listen to these words from Romans 16:19—20 – “19 Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil. 20 The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.”

Let me close with these inspirational words:

“Jesus.
It’s a little name.
A small word.
Say this little name in public, however, in a way other than an obscenity, and stand back and watch the fireworks.
This little name is like a tiny detonator that triggers a nuclear warhead.
You can say "God," and you won’t get a squeak.
You can say "Our Father/Mother in Heaven," and few will flinch.
You can say "Great Spirit," and people will nod in approval.
You can say "Allah" and you will be deemed tolerant.
But say "Jesus" and just wait for the sonic boom.
Articles will appear in the paper. Reprimands will be posted from the home office. Suits will be threatened by the civil liberties block.
So don’t say Jesus.
Jesus is divisive, and now is a time for unity.
Jesus is an extremist, and that must mean right wing.
Jesus is exclusive, so His name amounts to hate speech.
Keep His name to yourself. Cloister it in your church. Lock it in your prayer closet. Close it between the covers of your Bible. But for God’s sake, don’t voice it in the public square!
It’s immodest. It’s immoral. It’s unloving.
Only one problem.
Jesus is God.
Only one problem.
Jesus alone brings salvation.
Only one problem.
All other gods are nothing.
So speak His name aloud.
Shout it from the mountain.
Whisper it in the dark.
Write it in the sky.
That’s not hate, it’s hope.”
(From The Southeast Christian Church, Louisville, KY, Newsletter)
Jesus Died for You – True or False?

Matthew 27:11-56

By Brian M. Mavis

[A note to the pastor or worship team: The conclusion/application of this sermon requires some preparation, but it is well worth it. Make photocopies of a man’s hand – make enough copies for everyone in your church. Cut the hands out (so the paper is in the shape of a hand). At the end of the sermon, you will challenge people to write on the back of the hand sins for which they want to be forgiven. They will then hammer a nail into the hand onto a cross.]

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Obviously, most people by now have heard about Mel Gibson’s new movie The Passion of the Christ. In fact many of you have seen it. It is a beautiful and brutal portrayal of the day Jesus was betrayed, tried, and crucified.

It is a very graphic movie. It is rated “R”. In this case the “R” shouldn’t stand for “Restricted” but for “Realistic”. If it had been rated “PG” it would have meant “Pastoral Guidance.” It is a very disturbing movie. After seeing it, you won’t read the gospels in the same way. After seeing it, you won’t take your sin lightly. I remember thinking to myself while watching it, “why did Jesus have to endure so much? Why did he have to be beaten so badly?” Then the answer quickly came to me. It’s because that’s what it took to pay for my sins.

But not everyone thinks this. Some people believe that the life of Christ is more Hollywood than history. Or they believe that his death was a mistake or a hoax. What is the truth about Jesus’ death? Today we will explore the second question in our series inspired by this movie – Did Jesus Die for You?

Let’s begin by taking the time to read about some of Jesus’ trial, torture, and His crucifixion. Open your Bibles to Matthew 27. I will be reading verses 11-56.
Before Pilate

11Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the
king of the Jews?"

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied.

12When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. 13Then
Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" 14But
Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge--to the great amazement of the
governor.

15Now it was the governor's custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the
crowd. 16At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. 17So when the
crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you:
Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" 18For he knew it was out of envy that they had
handed Jesus over to him.

19While Pilate was sitting on the judge’s seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have
anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream
because of him."

20But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to
have Jesus executed.

21"Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor.

"Barabbas," they answered.

22"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" Pilate asked.

They all answered, "Crucify him!"

23"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!"

24When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting,
he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man’s
blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"

25All the people answered, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!"

26Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to
be crucified.
The Soldiers Mock Jesus

27Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. 28They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. 30They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. 31After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

The Crucifixion

32As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. 33They came to a place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). 34There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. 35When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. 36And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. 37Above his head they placed the written charge against him: THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS. 38Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads 40and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!"

41In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. 42"He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. 43He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.' “ 44In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

The Death of Jesus

45From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. 46About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"--which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
47When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."
48Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. 49The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."
50And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.
51At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. 52The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. 53They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.
54When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"
55Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. 56Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

If you have seen the movie, many painful images spring to your mind as I read this. It is a heart-breaking scene, but it is the foundation of the Christian faith. Jesus’ cross is the crux of Christianity. But because the consequences of Jesus’ death are so profound, some false beliefs have arisen in order to explain it away so the consequences don’t have to be face. Before we explore the truth of Jesus death, let’s take a look some of the false claims that you may have heard.

**False – Jesus’ Wasn’t Supposed to Die.**

One false belief is that Jesus wasn’t meant to die – as a result, his death had no meaning. For example, the Unification Church – also known as “the Moonies” – claims that Jesus’ mission was not dying; rather, his mission was to get married and establish a righteous family.

In his “Divine Principle”, the Reverend Moon teaches that Jesus’ death on the cross was not an essential part of God’s plan for redeeming sinful man. Rev.
Moon says, we “must realize that Jesus did not come to die on the cross” (p. 178). Jesus, according to Moon, was a failure, and Christ’s death was without effect. He says, “the cross has been unable to establish the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth by removing our original sin.” (Rev. Moon, Divine Principle, p. 178). Moon also believes that the death of Christ was a victory for Satan, saying “Satan thus attained what he had intended through the 4,000-year course of history, by crucifying Jesus, with the exercise of his maximum power” (Rev. Moon, Divine Principle, p. 435).

The Bible plainly states that Jesus Christ came to this earth for the specific purpose of dying for the sins of the world. Jesus said, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). Jesus died so that we may have life.

**False – Jesus Didn’t Die on the Cross**

Another false claim regarding the death of Jesus is known as the “Swoon Theory.” The swoon theory is the theory that Jesus was crucified and came very close to death – but he didn’t die; he just swooned. The theory goes on to say that after three days the coolness of the tomb revived Him, and He managed to roll away the immense stone and appear to the disciples making them think He’d risen from the dead.

The swoon theory has been thoroughly refuted by many people and very few continue to bring it up as a possibility. If you saw the movie, you wondered how Jesus even survived long enough to be crucified. Let’s consider what he endured.

Jesus was severally beaten with rods and scourged with a whip with several leather strips embedded with pieces of metal to the ends of the leather strips. Each lash was administered and pulled across the back so as to rip the back open. Often the back muscles were so badly shredded that the skeletal structure was exposed. People very often died from this punishment alone.
The torture of Jesus’ crucifixion was extreme. His arms are pulled apart and nails driven through the wrist into a cross beam which is raised in place. This dislocates the shoulders. The nails in the wrists sever the median nerve resulting in a burning pain as well as paralysis in the hand. To breathe Jesus had to press up on the nails in His feet, scraping His raw back on the wood. The body gradually drains of blood causing the heart to beat faster and faster. Dehydration is occurring. The breathing becomes more labored and intense as well as frequent adding to the agony. The blood loss results in extreme thirst as the body craves water to restore the lost blood. Jesus said, "I thirst" (John 19:28). The heart beats so hard trying to compensate for the loss of oxygen (due to the lack of blood) in the body, that it eventually ruptures. At this point the chest cavity fills with fluid.

After Jesus died, a soldier threw a spear into Jesus' side and out came blood and water, signifying that the heart had stopped beating and the blood was settling in the chest cavity. Jesus was dead.

For Jesus' burial, his body was wrapped in linen (Matt. 27:59). This wrapping was done tightly around the whole body from head to toe like a mummy. We see from the resurrection of Lazarus, that Lazarus had to be unbound (John 12:44) since help was needed to get out of the linens. The tomb was cold and Jesus laid in it for three days without medical attention.

A "large stone" had been placed over the entrance to the tomb (Matt. 27:60). Unless Jesus had some help, which isn't mentioned, He would have had to move the large stone. The stone had to be large enough to cover an entrance big enough for people to walk into. Even if they ducked to get in, the stone was large enough that it would take more than one person to move it in place.

Jesus appeared to several people after coming out of the tomb. Are we to believe that Jesus managed to walk a long distance on pierced feet and appear to the disciples as a victorious conqueror of death? It makes no sense.
One of the best replies to the swoon theory came from a lady who wrote into a question and answer forum:

Dear Sirs,
Our preacher said on Easter, that Jesus just swooned on the cross and that the disciples nursed Him back to health. What do you think?
Sincerely,
Bewildered.

Dear Bewildered,
Beat your preacher with a cat-of-nine-tails with 39 heavy strokes, nail him to a cross; hang him in the sun for 6 hours; run a spear thru his side...put him in an airless tomb for 36 hours and see what happens.
Sincerely,
Charles.

**False – Jesus Wasn’t Crucified**
One more false theory is that it wasn’t actually Jesus who was crucified. This is known as the “Substitution theory.” Some orthodox Muslims have proposed, "...God made someone else look like Jesus and that this person was crucified instead" (McDowell, *Islam*, p. 107).

The Koran (Quran) Sura 4.157 contains the following statement:

They denied the truth and uttered a monstrous falsehood against Mary. They declared, “We have put to death the Messiah Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of Allah.” They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did. Those who disagreed about him were in doubt concerning his death, for what they knew about it was sheer conjecture; they were not sure they had slain him. Allah lifted him up to his presence. (See:
Not only does this flatly contradict the Bible, but also it leaves open some big questions that need to be explained. For example, thousands of people knew Jesus, wouldn’t someone have noticed that the wrong man was being crucified? Jesus’ mother stood at the foot of the cross (John 19:25). Obviously she would have recognized her own son! If the wrong man was crucified, wouldn’t he have been yelling, “I’m not Jesus!”? But that didn’t happen. Lastly, if Jesus wasn’t crucified, then what happened to him after 30 AD? There is no explanation for any of these problems.

The truth about the death of Jesus is in the tag line of the movie – “Dying was his reason for living.”

**True – Jesus Died for You**

In the movie it was interesting to see the different reactions people had to Jesus and his crucifixion. Most of the Pharisees and the Roman soldiers were despicable. Barabbas was disrespectful. Most of the disciples were fearful. John and some of the women came close to the cross and stayed faithful. Simon, who helped carry the cross, changed from not wanting any part of it to identifying with Jesus. One criminal on the cross mocked Jesus and another repented.

But the person’s reaction that I found most fascinating was Pilate’s. Look at verse 24 again: *When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"*

I think Pilate’s reaction is the most common one among people today. Most people don’t hate Jesus. Most are not intentionally disrespectful. Most aren’t afraid, and many don’t repent or come close to the cross. Most people do what Pilate did – they admire Jesus, but they wash their hands clean of Jesus’ blood.
There is an intriguing phrase in the Apostles’ Creed that says Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” Other than Jesus, his is the only human named in the Apostles’ Creed. It is almost as if he is being blamed for all the sufferings of Christ.

Why pick on Pilate? It was Herod the Great who sought to slay Jesus at his birth. It was the Pharisees who sought to trap Jesus. It was Judas who betrayed Jesus. It was Herod’s son, Antipas, who had Jesus flogged and crowned with thorns. It was the High Priest who arraigned him before Pilate charged with offences against Caesar. Yet it was Pilate's decision which had to count, and Pilate put his own safety, career and reputation first.

Contrast Pilate’s response with Mel Gibson’s. As most of you know, Mel Gibson was not an actor, but the Producer of The Passion of The Christ. Gibson has taken a lot of criticism for making this movie. Some said it would end his career in movies. But Gibson said he didn’t care about that. He said, “I’m not a preacher, and I’m not a pastor. But I really feel my career was leading me to make this. The Holy Ghost was working through me on this film, and I was just directing traffic. I hope the film has the power to evangelize.”

In the movie there is an obscure detail in the crucifixion scene that probably goes unnoticed by most people, but it is a detail that says so much.

When Jesus is being placed on the cross, the camera comes close to watch as a large spike is positioned in the middle of Jesus’ hand. Then, a mallet comes into focus, and a rugged hand swings it to drive the spike. Those are all things you expect to see.

But there is something you don’t see. You never see the face of the one who drives that nail. You never get a glimpse into the eyes, or heart of the one who so assuredly pounds away until the spike has passed through Jesus’ flesh and passes through the wood of the cross.
You might be interested to know that the person who plays that role in the movie is Mel Gibson. He wanted to identify himself as being guilty of putting Jesus on the cross. But why does he never show the face of the one who put Jesus on the cross?

It’s because we are all guilty of putting Jesus to death. It wasn’t just the Romans. It wasn’t just the Jews. It wasn’t just Pilate. It was our sin that nailed Jesus to the cross.

**Now What?** You have a choice before you. Jesus requires a response. You can do what Pilate did. Show that you admire Jesus, but ultimately wash your hands clean of him. Or you can do what Gibson did; admit that your sins nailed Jesus to the cross. But also repent and rejoice that Jesus forgave you of your sins. As Colossians 2:13-14 says: “You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's cross” (New Living Translation).

**How To:**

Dying was Jesus’ reason for living. He died for you so that you might be forgiven.

If you want to confess that your sins helped nail Jesus to the cross, and want to be forgiven of those sins, I have a challenge for you. Each of you was given a photocopy of hand. Imagine that is Jesus’ hand. At the front of the church, there is a cross with nails and hammers next to it. As I lead in a time of prayer and music plays in the background, I’d like for you to write on the BACK of the hand what you want to be forgiven of. When you are done writing, come to the cross and nail the front of the hand to the cross. You can return to your seat when you are done.

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.
It was the night of October 31, 1936. Halloween night. The men and women sat at the round table with joined hands. They awaited the message - the message they had hoped for every Halloween night for the past 10 years. But the message did not come.

Finally, one woman rose from the table and announced to the others - and to a listening radio audience - "Houdini did not come through," she said. "My last hope is gone. I do not believe that Houdini can come back to me, or to anyone...The Houdini Shrine has burned for ten years. I now, reverently... turn out the light. It is finished. Good night, Harry!"

The woman was Bess Houdini, wife of the famed magician and escape artist. And this was the last séance she would participate in to try to contact her dead husband. Houdini was known as “The Man No Jail Could Hold.” But he couldn’t escape from death.
(paranormal.about.com/library/weekly/aa103000a.htm)

Today we are finishing our series inspired by Mel Gibson’s film The Passion of The Christ. Do you remember how the movie ends? Jesus dies. The screen fades to black. You think the credits are going to roll, but an image flashes back on the screen. It is Jesus – resurrected, flawless, and glorious. He has escaped death. He is back and alive.

Is this something we should really believe? Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Is this history or just a Hollywood ending? What is true and what is false?

There are, of course, people who don’t believe. They don’t think Jesus escaped the bonds of death so they have to develop other theories. Let’s begin by looking at three theories that are suggested to explain away the resurrection:
False – Jesus’ Body Was Stolen
The first false theory is that Jesus’ body was stolen. This theory was actually a fraud concocted up by the Jewish religious leaders and spread by the Roman guards only hours after the resurrection. Let’s read how this happened in Matthew 28, starting at verse 1.

1 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.
2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. 4 The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.
5 The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. 6 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”
8 So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”
11 While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. 12 When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, 13 telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ 14 If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” 15 So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

The guards spread the story that the disciples had stolen the body in the night and took it to an unknown location. This is still a popular claim, particularly in Jewish circles. It
explains the story of an empty tomb and the inability of anyone to disprove the claim that Jesus rose from the dead.

There are some problems with this theory though. First of all is the fact that Jesus had taught His disciples to be honest and men of integrity. Stealing Jesus’ body and then perpetuating a hoax would have gone against everything they believed.

Second, some might argue that they were trying to make Christ’s prophecies about His resurrection come true. But that is a problem. Let’s put it this way: even though the disciples were honest, they weren’t necessarily what you would call honor roll students. It is clear that at the time of Jesus death, they didn’t even understood that He was going to die, let alone that He was to be raised (John 13:36). At the grave the disciples are confused. They didn’t understand what was going on. They didn’t anticipate a resurrection (John 20:9).

The third problem to this theory is the changed lives of the disciples. At Jesus’ trial, death, and burial, they scattered and hid in fear of being caught (Mark 14:50). The disciples were cowards. But when they saw Jesus alive, they became bold and outspoken. Jesus’ resurrection was the theme of the earliest preaching by the apostles (Acts 2:30-31; 3:15; and 4:10, 33). They placed belief in the resurrection at the center of their faith (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 15:1-5, 12-19). If they had stolen Jesus’ body, then they were killed – most of them brutally – for what they knew to be a lie. People will sometimes die for what they think is true, but they won’t die for what they know is a lie. It’s unbelievable that none of them ever denied belief in the resurrection of Christ, in spite of suffering and persecution (cf. 2 Cor. 11:22-33; Heb. 11:32-40).

Finally, the greatest problem with this theory is if the body was stolen, then how did Jesus keep showing up alive?
False – The Women Went to the Wrong Tomb
Another false belief is that the women mistakenly went to the wrong tomb. The tomb they visited was empty, and they jumped to the conclusion that Jesus rose from the dead. They spread this rumor to the disciples, which led to the widespread belief in the resurrection of Jesus.

There are serious problems with this creative resurrection theory also. If the women went to the wrong tomb, then the disciples who went to check to the women’s claims, also had to go to the wrong tomb. But even if they did repeat the mistake of the women, all the Jewish authorities would have had to do to stop the rumors was to just point out that they went to the wrong tomb. They would have said, “No, you have the wrong tomb. See Jesus is in this tomb. Here is His body.” That obviously would have disproved the women’s and disciples’ claim that Jesus had risen from the dead.

And again, the greatest problem is, if the body was stolen, then how did Jesus keep showing up alive?

False – Jesus’ Resurrection was a Hallucination
Some people try to answer that question with this third false theory – they claim that what appeared to be Jesus’ resurrection was actually a hallucination. They say, people thought that Jesus kept showing up alive, but they were actually hallucinating it because they wanted to see Him alive, and they believed He would come back.

One problem with that theory is the fact that the disciples didn’t believe Jesus would come back. They were devastated. They thought He was dead and gone.

Even after some of the disciples saw Jesus alive, not all of them believed. They told Thomas Jesus was alive, and he didn’t believe it. Let’s read this event in John 20 starting at verse 24:
Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Thomas didn’t believe Jesus was coming back from the dead. He was a skeptic that wanted proof. And Jesus gave it to him. Thomas didn’t just see Jesus alive again, he actually put his fingers in Jesus’ nailed pierced hands and spear pierced side.

Again, - if it were just a hallucination, then where was the actual body? Why didn’t the Jewish or Roman authorities produce it? All they had to do was take Jesus’ corpse and wheel it through Jerusalem. That would have stopped all resurrection talk.

True – Jesus is Alive

Not only are the theories for alternative explanations of the resurrection flimsy and biased attempts to avoid the facts, the evidences supporting the resurrection are extremely strong. It is true that Jesus is alive, never to die again. Let’s look at three arguments that show that Jesus’ resurrection is the most amazing fact of history.

Jesus Predicted It

First, Jesus predicted He would rise from the dead.

Have you ever read the predictions of Nostradamus? I don’t know about you, but the ones I have read are so vague and confusing that they can be interpreted to mean just about
anything. Or what about horoscopes? They are so generalized and indiscriminate that they can apply to anybody at anytime. But Jesus’ predictions were totally different. Jesus’ predictions weren’t ambiguous or generalized. They were very clear and specific. Listen to some of these predictions:

- **Matthew 16:21** – *From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.*
- **Matthew 17:22-23** – *When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief*
- **Matthew 20:18-19** – *We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!"
- **Matthew 26:32** – *But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

And immediately after His death, even His enemies quote Jesus’ prediction about His resurrection. Listen to this:

- **Matthew 27:62-64** – *The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.*

Over and over again, Jesus not only predicted that He would be mocked, flogged, and crucified, but that He would actually rise from the dead three days later. And He did!
Eye-witnesses Saw It
Not only did Jesus predict that He would rise from the dead, eyewitneses saw it. Listen to what Paul – a former unbeliever – said about this:

3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).

Jesus was seen alive over a 40-day period after His crucifixion, by men, women, skeptics, believers, individuals, and simultaneously by a group of over 500 people.

Dr. Edwin M. Yamauchi, associate professor of history at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, emphasizes: "What gives a special authority to the list (of witnesses) as historical evidence is the reference to most of the five hundred brethren being still alive. St. Paul says in effect, 'If you do not believe me, you can ask them.' Such a statement in an admittedly genuine letter written within thirty years of the event is almost as strong evidence as one could hope to get for something that happened nearly two thousand years ago." (Josh McDowell)

History Supports It
Lastly, history supports the resurrection of Jesus. That the church ever came into existence and that you are here today at this church is a result of the resurrection of Jesus.

What do you think the main message of the disciples was after Jesus rose from the dead? – “Turn the other cheek.” “Give to the poor.” “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” No. It was none of those things. The main message of the disciples was “Jesus is alive!” Listen to what Peter said:
"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

David said about him:

"I saw the Lord always before me.
Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will live in hope,
because you will not abandon me to the grave,
nor will you let your Holy One see decay.
You have made known to me the paths of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence."

Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. (Acts 2:22-32).

Within a generation of Jesus’ life, documents were written about His death and resurrection. If treated without prejudice the historical records are as plentiful and as reliable as any ancient event we know of. As F.F. Bruce, of Manchester University, said, “If the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt.”

There are also historical documents outside the Bible that speak of the resurrection. For example, the Toledoth Jeshu, a compilation of 5th century Jewish writings, acknowledges that the tomb was indeed empty and proceeds to try to explain it away. It confirms that
Jesus was crucified and buried, and it tries to explain how His tomb was empty. Even this document – written by nonbelievers – believed that Jesus wasn’t in His tomb after three days. They just don’t want to believe how it happened.

*The resurrection of Jesus couldn’t have been preached and believed for a single hour in Jerusalem if it weren’t true. There would have been too many ways to discredit the claims and disprove the evidence.*

**So What?**

But the question has to be asked. So what? Why does it matter that Jesus rose from the dead, never to die again?

The consequences are enormous. Jesus’ resurrection sets Him apart from all other religious leaders and anyone else who ever lived. All other religious leaders were powerless to death, proving their humanity. Jesus had power over death, proving His divinity. The resurrection is the foundation of the Christian faith. All of what Jesus said and did falls if the resurrection is false. All of what Jesus said and did stands if the resurrection is fact.

If the resurrection is true, you can put your trust in Jesus Christ. You can be forgiven of your sins. You can be given the power to live right. You can have everlasting life – being reunited with loved ones after death, and even getting to see, know and love Jesus forever.

**Now What?**

At the beginning of this message I told you about Houdini’s failed attempt to slip the shackles of death and communicate with his wife Bess. Shortly before his death, Houdini made a pact with Bess that if he could, he would return and make contact with her from the other side. They devised a coded message that only he and Bess knew; this would prove that it really was Houdini breaking through from the afterlife. But after 10 séances in 10 years, Bess had not received her beloved husband’s personal message.
The message was based on word combinations that corresponded to a secret spelling code. The Houdinis’ secret phrase spelled out one word – “Believe.”

Jesus did more than just communicate from the grave – He rose from the grave. He gave many evidences and proofs that He was alive. Do you remember what he said to “Doubting” Thomas?

27Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

28Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

29Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

You can’t see Jesus, but you have heard the evidence. You can’t see Jesus, but you can believe. Jesus is spelling out a one-word code for you. Can you hear it? He is saying “Believe.”

You don’t have to have all your questions answered and all your doubts cleared to make a thoughtful decision and claim that you believe in Jesus. Where do you stand right now? Are you ready to respond to Jesus? If so, everyone – including intellectuals – come to God the same way. Do you believe? If you believe, pray this prayer with me:

Pray. “God, thank You for what you have done for me. I believe You sent Jesus to die for my sins instead of me. I believe Jesus rose again to give me everlasting life. Please forgive me for the wrong things I have done. Please give me a clean heart. I invite you into my life. Teach me to do everything You want me to do and to follow You all the days of my life. I pray this believing what Jesus did for me. Amen.”

Obey. Jesus said, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). Jesus taught
to be baptized. His commands are summarized in loving God with all you are, loving the needy like you love yourself, and loving others as Jesus loved you. The best way to begin doing this is to be part of a good church that is learning to follow Jesus together.

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I am known as a person who loves a good bargain. I clip coupons. I search the papers often for discount offers and weekly sales. I love to scan the Internet, looking for the best buy on an airplane ticket, hotel room or car rental. That is why my wife Marilyn was so surprised when, a few years back, I did something that was out of character for me. In mid February, I was traveling to Southern California on business. I was scheduled to spend several days attending meetings. As I was scanning the Internet planning my trip, I discovered a website for one of the most stunning bed and breakfast inns on the west coast. Perched on a hillside overlooking the Pacific Ocean, this quiet out-of-the way inn reflected an environment of romance that would undoubtedly please my wife. So, with no coupons in hand and no bargains offered, I did the unthinkable; I purchased an additional airline ticket and reserved three nights at the inn. As I was getting ready to leave for my trip, I stood at the door and told Marilyn goodbye. Then, I reached into my pocket, removed the tickets and shared the good news. “I’ll see you in a few days. You’re flying into the John Wayne airport next week where I’ll pick you up and take you to a bed and breakfast inn that you’re going to love.” She was stunned! I had abandoned all of the predictable behavior she had come to expect.

Her response? Looking up the stairs she hollered, “Chuck, you need to come down here right away. There’s some man standing by our door impersonating you!”

When is something outrageous in life? When it defies all human reasoning; when it exceeds the typical boundaries of normal expectation; when it doesn’t seem to make any sense. When an individual does something that’s completely unpredictable or that rubs against the norm, we think that their behavior is outrageous.

Isaiah 53 is a powerful image of the suffering servant, the crucified Christ. The prophet’s words point us to a Messiah who was accused and accosted; who was burdened and
beaten; who was taunted and tormented. Yet, what is equally amazing is the response that the Christ expressed. Isaiah puts it this way:

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth;
He was led like a lamb to the slaughter and a sheep before he shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away,
And who can speak of his descendants?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
For the transgressions of my people he was stricken.
He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death though he had done no violence
Nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Have you ever been in a situation where you were unfairly accused? Has anyone ever said anything about you that was untrue? Have you ever found yourself in a situation in which another person took advantage of you or has used you for their own personal gain? What is the natural and ordinary human response? We clench our fists. Our mind is suddenly filled with all kinds of sordid images in which we imagine ourselves performing unmentionable creative acts of retaliation. We look for ways to get even, committing ourselves to doing whatever is necessary to bring the offender down. We want to play the role of the enforcer.

Yet, that is precisely what makes the passion of Jesus so incredible. Isaiah reminds us that during his final twelve hours on earth in which he was publicly embarrassed and personally humiliated, he restrained himself from responding in any sort of retaliatory way.

In his book, “The Jesus I Never Knew”, author Philip Yancey imagines some of the exchanges that may have taken place between Jesus and his accusers. Yancey writes:
Jewish leaders as well as Romans intended the mockery to parody the crime for which the victim had been condemned. *Messiah, huh? Great, let’s hear a prophecy.* Wham! *Who hit you, huh? Thunk! C’mon, tell us, spit it out, Mr. Prophet.* For a Messiah, you don’t know much, do you? You say you’re a king? Hey, Captain, get a load out of this. We have us a regular kind here, don’t we. Well, then, let’s all kneel down before hizzoner. What’s this? A king without a crown? Oh, that will never do. Here, Mr. King, we’ll fix you a crown, we will. Crunch! *How’s that? A little crooked? I’ll fix that. Hey, hold still! My, look how modest we are.* Well, how about a robe then…something to cover that bloody mess on your back. What happened, did your majesty have a little tumble?

The movie, “The Passion” in a profoundly powerful and excellent way, takes those words of Yancey’s and makes them come alive. When one sees this moving drama, the scenes that we witness are no longer merely pieces of human history; the story of the Christ becomes real. We feel it deep within our emotions. We experience intensity. We feel the shame as well as the pain. And yet, as we watch, we are amazed, aren’t we that, never once did Jesus use his God-given powers to lash out or get even….not once! He had used his power to heal the sick, restore sight to the blind and raise the dead. It would have been nothing for him to have spoken a word and to have brought the forces of heaven to bear upon this grave injustice. If he could speak a word and birth creation into being, how much would it really have taken to have said a word and brought evil down? Yet Jesus did nothing to reveal any inclination towards retaliation. Far from responding in an Arnold Schwarzenegger sort of a way in which he pulls out his weapons and unleashes his fury, this Christ absorbed the anger and accepted the abuse. He freely and willingly suffered the abuse that was showered upon him.

It raises the question, “Why?” What was it that caused the Christ to take it? What was it that enabled Jesus to resist any temptation to respond in any sort of “get-even” way? Was Jesus some sort of mild-mannered meek weakling who didn’t have the courage to stand up for himself? Or, is there something else going on?
For centuries, theologians have filled volumes attempting to explain the passion of Jesus Christ. With intellectually sounding statements that are saturated with multi-syllabic words, Biblical scholars have for centuries attempted to explain the passion of Jesus in a way that provides some level of human understanding. Yet, no matter how we endeavor to explain the passion of Christ, the events of Isaiah 53 and the final twelve hours of Christ’s life come down to one simple word: love! The simple witness of John still stands as the most powerful explanation behind the passion of Jesus. He did what he did and allowed to be done what was done because of love. As translated by Eugene Peterson in “The Message”:

“This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one needs be destroyed by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.”

How else can you describe that type of love if not outrageous? It defies human explanation. It is irrational and perhaps even ludicrous. Yet, that’s the beauty! It rubs against the standards of normalcy. It moves beyond the boundaries of what might be typically expected. Christ experienced the hurtful and hateful events of the passion because of a love that is deeply pure and profoundly personal. As John Stott has put it: “In the crucifixion of Jesus, divine love triumphed over divine wrath by divine, self-sacrifice.”

I must admit to you that even though I have been intellectually familiar with this truth for years, it really wasn’t until my wife and I welcomed our first child into the world, that I really came to a deeply profound appreciation for the outrageous love that God showed to me when he gave up His son. When my children were younger, the thought occasionally dashed through my mind, “what would I do if someone would endanger my child?” “How would I act if a culprit would kidnap, abuse or hurt my child in any way?” I would like to tell you that my Christian spirit would kick into overdrive and I would respond with grace and forgiveness. Yet quite frankly, I’m not sure. Even if I were to get to that point eventually, I sense that my humanity would surface quickly and that I would be
filled with a level of anger and rage that would become so intense that I fear what I might
do if I ever encountered the person who caused my child harm. That is what makes the
passion so incredibly amazing. John reminds us that God willfully gave up His son out
of love for the world that He had created.

Yet, if we are to fully experience the passion of Christ, then the love that was expressed
for us must become more than a touching scene that moves our sentiments and tugs at our
emotions. It must become deeply personal.

There are any number of experiences in life that can be touching, but if the experience is
to be redeeming, it must engage our lives at a level that goes deep. I can witness a
beautiful sunset or the birth of a baby, but for those experiences to become a redemptive
part of my life that changes me or transforms me, I must move from the posture of
knowing or witnessing and to the level of experiencing.

So, how does one experience the personal and pure love of God? How does one move
beyond the position of witnessing the passion and experiencing it fully?

First, it begins by realizing that you are loveable to God. That’s right…you are loveable
to God! You are the all-consuming passion of your Creator! You matter to Him! Why
was God willing to come to this planet? Why was he willing, in the form of Jesus, to
allow himself to be hung out there in such a publicly vulnerable way? He considers you
worth loving!

In recent months, my father has been forced to spend some time in a nursing home. I
have been to many such facilities during my years of ministry. Sometimes, residents are
not given proper attention, respect and honor. Yet, I was impressed with the level of care
my father was receiving. Unlike some homes, this home was operated by a staff that
treated each person with value and respect. I witnessed their compassion in all sorts of
ways; the way the residents were fed, the way the words that were used to talk to the
residents and the intonations in their voices revealed grace and compassion. The staff
didn’t allow the resident’s medical condition to become an excuse for failing to express compassion and care. No matter if a resident had Alzheimer’s Disease or had been diagnosed with dementia, I had the sense that every resident was valued.

Listen. No matter who you are, where you have come from or what you have done, God considers you worth loving. You are not a product of a happen-chance encounter between two other human beings. You are not a number who is lost in the massiveness of this world. You are significant to God. You count! And nothing in all of God’s entire creation will ever cause God to quit loving you….nothing!

Again, recall the scenes in the film “The Passion.” Which of the individuals portrayed in the film would you be tempted to consider, “not worth loving”? Go ahead and pick one. Which character is worth writing off? Judas, who betrayed Jesus? The soldiers, who abused Jesus? The crowds, who taunted Jesus? Or, Barabbas who “walked”? From my vantage point, I could see plenty who were not worth loving! Yet, Jesus considered every one of them worth loving. That’s how God responds to everyone. He looks at you with a face that is strong yet compassionate and says, “You are worth loving to me!”

How can you experience this love? Second, it is critical that you realize what God really wants from you. He wants a relationship. God’s desire for you is not that you believe in religion. He wants a personal connective relationship with you in which He calls you His friend.

There is a difference between enjoying a relationship and believing in a religion. What do individuals often mean when they talk about “believing in a religion.” They reduce their faith to a series of intellectual propositions. Yet, while being capable of enumerating a sometimes lengthy list of propositional truths that can be intellectually supported and rationally defended, it does not necessarily indicate that a living relationship exists.
God’s passion for you is that you move beyond a head-trip with Him and encounter Him in your heart. He wants you to go from the level of the merely intellectual to the deeply personal. He will never be content with anything less.

How can you embrace God’s love? Remember, that you are loveable to God. Realize that he wants a relationship with you. Then three, Receive his love for you. Say yes to his reach. Don’t resist it or run from it. Give yourself permission to fall into the same arms of grace that were stretched on the cross, where you will experience his perfect pure and personal love forever.

Have you ever been involved in a relationship in which you sensed that you had to earn the person’s love? You know the type of relationship to which I am referring, don’t you? Do all the right things. Behave in a particular way. Dot all the I’s and cross all the T’s, and in the end, the person will love you. You have to work at getting the person to love you and even if the person eventually says they love you, in the back of your mind, you wonder, “Do they?” But not God! That is what makes God’s love so outrageous and so pure. There are no conditions attached. He stands at the doorway of your life and he knocks with tenderness, inviting you to embrace his love, just as you are. It is not a matter of living a perfect life. It is not a matter of acting in a religious sort of way. He offers you the free gift of love. It is yours for the taking.

Rubel Shelley shares a story about a man named Tedd Kidd who was five years older than his friend Janet. Tedd, having completed college before her, accepted a position in a city hundreds of miles away from her school. Yet, every Valentine’s Day, he persisted with the same question, “will you marry me?” Every Valentine’s Day, the answer was the same: “not yet”. Finally, when they were both living in Texas, Ted bought Janet a ring. He took her to a romantic restaurant where he would, for one last time, offer her his proposal. Following a wonderful meal, Ted decided that the time had come to ask the question one last time. Yet before the question was asked, Janet surprised Tedd by handing him a box, the size of a book. He opened the package and slowly peeled away the tissue paper. The gift? It was a one word cross-stitch design that read, “YES!”


Yes! That is the only word that God needs to hear from you. In his persistent and patient way, he craves to hear that word from your mouth. “Yes, I receive your gift of love today.”

At the time of Jesus’ coming to the earth, humanity longed to hear a word. Like a family that sits in a waiting room to hear a word from the doctor or like a parent who sits by the phone waiting to hear from their child, humanity desperately wanted to hear God say something. That desire continues today. The Good News is that God has spoken. What God says today is what he said when Christ died on the cross. What is He saying? “You are worth loving,” “I want a relationship” “Fall into my arms of love today.”

The one called the Word has spoken the word. Are you listening?

1 Citation: PreachingToday.com., Provided by Rubel Shelly, Nashville, Tennessee from story shared at Janet’s funeral.
Recently, I learned how to play the game of scrabble a different way. It’s called “speed scrabble.” To begin the game, each player selects eight pieces. The players then attempt to form words by connecting the blocks without the use of a game board. When any one player has used all of their blocks, they say, “go.” At that point, every player is free to select another block and to make use of the letter. Yet here’s what so interesting about “speed scrabble.” At any point in the game, you can undo your board and start over. In fact, if a player becomes totally frustrated with their inability to form words, they can exchange every letter on their make-shift board for new letters. So, no matter how far a player has gone into the game, there’s always an opportunity to start over and begin with a fresh new slate.

Have you ever thought, “wouldn’t it be great if life would work in the same way?” Are there disturbing choices you made in your past that still haunt you? Is your mind filled with images of past decisions that just don’t seem to go away? Is your life filled with one regret after another? If so, what will you do? What’s an appropriate response that will restore your vitality and give you hope for the future?

I never cease to be amazed at how some individuals choose to respond to this image-eating monster called guilt. For example, some individuals respond by playing the age-old blame game. Assuming the posture of a victim, they deny responsibility for their actions and choose instead to focus the attention elsewhere. For example, do you recall the scene in the movie, “The Passion” where Pilate was forced to make a decision about Jesus? What did he do? Realizing that it was the tradition of his day to release one prisoner during the celebration of the feast, Pilate gave the crowd a choice. He asks the people, “Who shall I release? Jesus or Barabbas?” Suddenly the crowd does the unexpected. They selected Barabbas, one who had been thrown into prison for causing an insurrection and who was guilty of murder. The crowds wanted Jesus to be crucified.
Is Pilate off the hook? Does he have any responsibility in the least? Not in his mind!
Just as Adam claimed in the Old Testament when he ate of the forbidden fruit of the
garden and he told God, “It’s not my fault. The woman gave it to me”, so Pilate could
say, “Don’t look at me. Blame the crowds. It was their choice. I am not guilty. My
hands are clean.”

Or two, others try to handle their guilt by some act of self-infliction. They assume that
the best mechanism to coping with guilt is by internalizing the pain and taking it upon
themselves.

Do you remember the character in the movie, Judas? He had betrayed Jesus by turning
him into the authorities. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the darkness of the
night, they knew who the identity of the Christ because Judas betrayed him with a kiss.

Yet a few scenes later, what do we see? Judas has hung himself. Judas is dead.
The pain of his guilt is evidently so overwhelming that he can no longer find the capacity
to go ahead with his life. Thus, he chooses the dramatic and drastic option of ending
every breath that is left in his body. He attempted to deal with his guilt by returning the
money that had been given to him as a reward for his betrayal of Jesus. Yet, the leaders
wouldn’t take it. They laughed at him. It was too late to turn back. Thus, with the
laughing still resonating in his ears, he calls life quits.

You may not go to that degree in handling your guilt. Yet, there are other ways in which
we can internalize our guilt and allow it to bombard us. We can beat ourselves up,
choosing to live in the dark isolated environment of our soul. We can get locked in to the
past, not having the capacity to move into the future that God has designed. We can
become emotionally immobile, spiritually immature or relationally inept.

Is there a better way? Is there a healthier way? Is there a manner to deal with our guilt
that liberates us from our past and offers us a future that is filled with hope and renewal?
Consider these words from Isaiah 53:

“…He took our infirmities and carried our sorrows. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him, the iniquity of us all.”

Did you catch the word “our”? God is not inflicting his Son with any sort of deserved punishment. The Christ who hung on the cross did not have it coming. Rather, it is our suffering that he bore. It was for “our transgressions” and “our iniquities” that he endured this anguish-filled pain. The repetition of that first person personal pronoun “our” drives home the truth that the Servant has suffered in “our” place.

And yet, that pronoun “our” sounds so safe, doesn’t it. If interpreted in a collective sense, then frankly, I don’t feel very guilty. I can easily explain it away, rationalize it, or even downplay it by protesting, “well, I’m not really that bad after all.” The term “our” gives me the freedom to hide my face in the crowd. It’s a little like what happens when a mob mentality sets in on a crowd. When everyone responds in an unlawful or rebellious way, an attitude permeates through the crowd that gives them the luxury of hiding behind others who performed worse acts or perpetuated more gruesome scenes. I can convince myself that I’m not as responsible if I adopt the belief, “we’re all in this together.”

Yet, in another passage of Scripture, in Proverbs 20:9, King Solomon confronts the reality of our lives in a much more personal way. There’s no hiding behind a collective pronoun here. Listen to these words: “Who can say, “I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin.”

The point is clear. Every one of us must say “I have sinned. In my relationships, actions and thoughts, I am guilty.” Suddenly to use Isaiah’s image, the “our iniquities” becomes “my” iniquities. The “our sorrows” becomes “my” sorrows. It’s hard to say at times. I
may wish I could avoid it. But it’s true. Each member of the human race must say, “I am guilty before a holy and perfect God.”

Yet, did you hear the good news from Isaiah? HE took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.” “But HE was pierced for our transgressions.”

The film, “The Passion” powerfully depicted the horrendous suffering of the Christ. Jesus was horribly disfigured. His body was tormented and twisted. The image that we viewed is a far cry from the image that appeared in a children’s Bible that I was given in the first grade where the crucifixion shows a Christ who has a small marking on his side and a few stripes on his back. Jesus faced incredible and indescribable violence. And why? Because in the act of his passion, he took all of humanity’s guilt and wiped the slate clean.

When I was a young boy, I received for Christmas a gift that could occupy my attention for hours; an Etch-A-Sketch®. You may even still have one of these drawing type toys lying around your house. What I enjoyed so much about it is that anytime I made a mistake, I could shake the Etch-A-Sketch® and the image would disappear and I could start over again.

That is precisely what Jesus accomplished during his passion when he went to the cross. In one sweeping act, he shook all of history and offered to humanity, the opportunity to experience a fresh beginning. The hands that hung on the cross were hands that joined the Father with sinners.

Yet, how does that process take place? What role do we play? What, if anything, do we need to do?

One, we must begin by squarely facing ourselves and admitting that our separation from God exists. We cannot afford the luxury of living in denial, ignoring our guilt or hoping
that our guilt will somehow magically disappear. We must come to grips with who we really are as human beings.

Have you ever chosen to ignore something that needs attention with the unrealistic hope that it would disappear? Several years back, I had a problem with the windows in my car. They kept fogging over with no explanation. It was obvious that something was wrong. However, instead of addressing the issue I chose to ignore it, excusing my lackadaisical approach by claiming “I’m too busy. I’ll attend to it later.” Early at 2 AM one morning, I received a call to rush to a hospital located 30 miles from my house. As I was driving down the expressway, I heard an explosion, suddenly, the entire interior of my car filled with a fog like substance that looked like smoke. Later I discovered that my heater core had ruptured. When I had the car hauled to the garage, I was informed that had I brought the vehicle in earlier, the cost would have been less and the inconvenience would have been minimal. Yet, there I stood early in the morning, hoping that someone would come along and rescue me from my predicament.

What happens when we ignore the reality of our humanity? We never get around to giving attention to the issues that keep us from God and often times the issues we have failed to address end up causing some level of explosion. Complete forgiveness begins not by playing games, wearing a mask or hoping that the sin-issue will somehow go away. Living a life that is filled with masquerades and covered by pretenses won’t do. Complete forgiveness is initiated through an honest confrontation with ourselves.

What else is needed? We must receive the gift that is offered. In the middle of verse 5, Isaiah points out the ultimate payoff of the passion of the Christ:

“…the punishment that brought us peace was upon him.”

What powerful words! Jesus took the punishment that was actually deserved for us, through to its ultimate conclusion. He allowed himself to be crushed, shattered and destroyed so that in the end, we could receive the ultimate gift of everlasting peace with
God. Or to put it another way, Christ went through Hell on the cross so that we could be freed from living in our hells of today and from the ultimate hell tomorrow. On the cross, he has offered us the gift of complete forgiveness. It’s a free gift that offers us second chances and new beginnings.

A few years back, my wife and I took a cruise with some friends. One afternoon we received an invitation from the captain of the ship to join him at his table for dinner that evening. Prior to going to dinner, we were also invited to a “get acquainted” reception. The reception was a wonderful opportunity to meet the captain of the ship and several other guests. As dinnertime approaches, the captain informed us that we would exit the area where we had been gathered, descend a long wide staircase and join him at the captain’s table. As we started to walk down the staircase, all eyes in the lower level dining room turned to look our direction. The band began playing. It was an entrance we did not anticipate. Walking in front of me was a lady who was wearing a floor length wrap that hung off her shoulders. For a moment, I took my eyes off her in order to take in the surrounding scene. Suddenly, she fell to the ground. It was then that I discovered that I had stepped on her wrap, causing her to fall. Needless to say, I felt overwhelmed with a sense of embarrassment. I wanted to leave the dining room and return to my room. Yet, you can imagine my relief when the lady stood up laughing and the captain approached us and said, “Don’t worry about it. Those things happen. Come to my table and enjoy the meal.”

When we face up to our guilt, we may at times be tempted to run away from God. We may wish that we could hide our faces. Yet, just as the thief on the cross next to Christ discovered, there are times in which we cannot run away. We must sit before the Christ, not moving or running or ignoring or denying. We must face the situation straight-on. And the response we will receive from him? Just as he offered forgiveness and grace to the thief who hung beside him, he says to us, “My daughter. My son. You are forgiven, completely. I have carried your sins. You do not need to carry them anymore.”
There is a story about a man riding down the road on a donkey, carrying a large sack of flour on his shoulders. As he was riding down the road, he was stopped by a person walking on the side of the road. “What you are doing?” he asked. “Why don’t you take that flour off your shoulders and put it on the donkey’s back?” The man responded, “How can I expect the donkey to carry all of that extra weight? It’s not fair.”

We smile. Yet, we see ourselves in the story. Does it really make any sense to carry our guilt on our back when the Christ who has offered to carry us through life also offers to carry our sin away? How far away? David put it this way: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” (Ps. 103: 12).

When the Christ was nailed to the cross, our sin and guilt was nailed with him. From God’s side, everything has been done. From our sin, some things must still be done. So, it leaves the question….will we?
Mitch Albom, author of “Tuesdays With Morrie,” has also authored the book, “The Five People You Meet In Heaven.” It’s an interesting book of the people in Mitch’s life who have made an indelible impression. One person featured is his Uncle Eddie who impacted him as a child. Albom writes:

“They say that uncles stand to the side; that fathers and grandfathers have a more direct line to the child. But uncles, perhaps because of that distance, can be glorified in ways that others cannot, and as a boy I glorified Eddie. He was the champion of my family tree, and stronger than anyone I knew. But as I grew older, I saw my uncle differently. For all of his strength, for all of his grizzled, whiskered toughness, he was sad and incomplete. A person like many people, dreams had fizzled young, and life had become a dull routine of low expectations.”

A few weeks back I sat with my uncle who was dying of cancer. It was a long and lingering painful experience. Throughout the night, fully conscious of the fact that he was dying, he kept crying out, “Lord take me. Lord, I’m ready to go home. I want to see you. Please take me.”

I look back on the death of my uncle and I read Albom’s words and I wonder, “Which is worse?” Is it worse to die of a debilitating disease or to reach the end of your life and be filled with the disease of sadness and incompleteness; to realize that your dreams died young and you reached the end of your life with little more than unmet expectations?

Quite frequently, individuals look back and their lives and are consumed by regret and disappointment. Their stories are filled with one “if only” story after another. For example:
• If only I hadn’t married so young.
• If only I had taken another job.
• If only we waited to have children.
• If only we hadn’t invested in dot coms.
• If only I had kicked my habit.
• If only I had pursued another career
• If only……If only….If only.

**Idyllic Dreams**
The reality is that no life never begins with “if only” statements. Life begins with anticipation, vision, dreams.

Do you remember what it was like for you when you were a child? How would you have answered the question at the age of four, “What are you going to do with your life when you get older?” We were going to be firefighters, police officers, astronauts, professional athletes and more. I don’t recall ever hearing a child say, “When I grow up I want to be an incomplete, unfulfilled, discontented nobody who has never managed to reach my truest potential.” No way! Boldly and openly, we announced our dreams to anyone who might listen.

**Isolated Detours**
Yet, the fact remains that no person has ever gone through life without encountering some detours. According to Genesis one, the ultimate detour that impacted humanity was the detour called sin. Sin, at its roots is disobedience against God that is caused by a distrust of God. Like the original players in the story of creation, we convince ourselves that God really has no idea what he what he is doing. We tell ourselves that our wisdom is much more insightful; that our intelligence probes so much more deeply. As a result, we make the conscious choice to go through life in other ways that ruin our God-given destinies and often wreck our worlds. Because of the problem of sin, our idyllic dreams are shattered our futuristic vision are destroyed.
Why, even those detours of life that aren’t of our own making have been caused by some type of sin. If not by the choices that we’ve made, then tragically, dreams are often crushed by the sinful choices of others.

Take for example a story that rocked the American public in October, 2003. A boy was found eating food out of garbage can in Collingswood, New Jersey. He was 19 years old, yet weighed only 45 pounds. When authorities investigated the incident, they discovered four boys, ages 9 to 19, weighing 136 pounds altogether. Think of it. A 19 year old weighing 45 pounds. A 9 year old weighing 23 pounds. A ten year old weighing 29 pounds and a 14 year old weighing just 40 pounds. The investigation is still continuing. Some have suggested that the children are victims of parents who had become so preoccupied with their own lives that they willfully ignored their children. Others have contested that the parents are innocent of all charges and that the children had been abused before their adoption. They maintain that the children are victims of fetal alcohol syndrome, sexual and physical abuse and eating disorders. Who is responsible is yet to be determined. Yet either way, we can’t ignore the reality that the idyllic dreams in the children’s minds have been broken by sin.

**Individual Decision**

So, where does that lead us? Are we assigned to a life of regret with no hope and healing that can lead us to wholeness? Or, is there a remedy? Is there any hope that wholeness can somehow be restored?

Yes! Consider the words of David in Psalm 34: “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” (Ps. 34:18).

Did you hear the Good News? God wants you to be healed! As David confessed in his words, God is close enough to care and willing to share in the healing process. Yet, what must you do?
One, face reality. Healing begins not when you attempt to fix the problem yourself; not when you attempt to fake it until you make it. Instead healing is initiated when you admit that brokenness has occurred and that you need God’s help. In a prayer of repentance that occurred after his sin of adultery, David cried these words: “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it. You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps. 51: 16,17).

When I was in the fourth grade, our classroom was located on the second floor of the elementary school building. There were two ways that a pupil could get to the first floor of the building. A student could either walk down the long set of stairs or they could take the quick route of sliding down the banister that ran alongside the staircase. One route was preferred by the teacher, the other was preferred by the students. I think you can figure out which party preferred which option. One afternoon, the teacher asked me to run an errand. All alone, I couldn’t resist the temptation. Not seeing the principal or any teachers in sight, I decided to take the quick route. Why waste my time? Yet as I was sliding down the banister, I leaned over too far, plunging to the floor below. I had literally fallen one and a half stories! As I made my way back to the classroom, I experienced a sharp pain in my arm. I knew that something was wrong. Yet fearing the repercussion of what would happen if my teacher discovered the truth, I hid the truth and attempted to ignore the pain. For three long hours, I endured. Yet later that day, a friend told the school nurse that I was having problems. It was then that I was taken to the emergency room where the x-rays revealed a serious fracture.

Sometimes in life we attempt to carry our pain all alone. We do everything in our power to avoid facing reality. Fearing what others might say or think or do, we try to downplay our pain, carrying it about in the isolation of our soul. That is why facing reality is so important. Healing can’t begin until we are willing to say, “I’m hurting.”
A few months back when I witnessed Mel Gibson’s movie, “The Passion” for the first time, I found myself drawn to the reality of facing my need for help. If you have seen the movie, you know how heart-wrenching it is to watch the violent and bloody scenes surrounding the persecution and crucifixion of the Christ. Yet, as I watched the scenes unfold, by gazing on the Savior, I found myself also forced to confront myself. Like the thief on the cross who couldn’t ignore the reality of his own brokenness, I found myself gazing upon my own life, forced to confront my own realities. It’s hard to explain but I couldn’t ignore it or deny it. I had to candidly confess my own personal ongoing need for a Savior.

That’s where real healing begins. That is where genuine wholeness gets started. The process of healing is birthed when one faces reality and admits, “I cannot do this alone. I am hurting and haunted by who I am and where I am living.”

How does healing unfold? Two, receive God’s gift of community. God doesn’t intend for your healing to occur in private isolation. He doesn’t ask you to play the role of the proverbial lone ranger where you battle by yourself. God has created this marvelous gift called the church that is hopefully filled with a community of caring Christians who agree to come alongside of you with grace, understanding and love.

Have you ever considered that the gift of community is a direct outgrowth of the passion of Christ? Think of this way: if Jesus had never gone to the cross and resurrected from the grave, if Jesus had not gone eyeball to eyeball with the forces of evil, then the existence of the church would not have been possible. The church is a direct outgrowth of the very events that transpired during Christ’s week of passion. In fact, it is in direct response to the love exhibited in the passion of Christ that the church is driven to reach out and express God’s gift of healing. You don’t have to walk the journey of healing alone. God gifts you with community.

Several years back when I was starting out in the ministry, I visited a man in the psychiatric ward of an area hospital. The man was suffering from depression. He had
attempted to take his own life. At one point I attempted to help him understand that God was with him; that God cared for him and wasn’t about to give up on him. What I shared was true, yet it was his response that still sticks with me. Looking at me with tears in his eyes he said, “Pastor, I know that what you are saying is true. But there are times in which I need human flesh.”

That statement has always stayed with me. God knows that there are times in which you need human flesh. You need someone to say, “I love you. I understand. I care.” Receive God’s gift of community with friends who will stand with you and support you.

How does healing take place? Face reality. Accept community. Three, move ahead patiently.

Does the potential and promise of God’s healing mean that we will no longer have to “do business” with some of the dark sides of life that still haunt us? Does God’s gift of healing mean that we will instantaneously become well adjusted human beings who no longer have to deal with issues again? If we are healed from our sin, our guilt, our anxiety, our fears, our jealousy, our greed, or whatever else it might be that hinders us; does that mean that we will suddenly somehow have life all “put together”?

No. There is always business that demands attention. There is always some area of our life that needs help. Remember, healing is not so much an instantaneous gift, as much as it is a process. The apostle Paul wrote that “He who began the good work in you will complete it in the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). Sometimes, God’s work of grace that restores wholeness to our lives takes time. To use the words of an old prayer, “Lord, I ain’t what I ought to be and I ain’t what I’m gonna be, but thanks to you, I ain’t what I used to be.”

When it comes to God’s healing in your life, be as patient with yourself and your God as He is patient with you!
Face reality. Receive community. Move ahead patiently. Finally, accept continually. His act of grace. Consider the words of Isaiah: “...by his stripes we are healed.” (Is. 53 5).

At first glance, one might think that those words are a little bit strange. “By his stripes we are healed.” One might think that we would hear the prophet say, “By his word, you are healed.” After all, we read in the Gospel accounts where Jesus said something and miraculously and instantaneously, someone was healed. “Rise take up your bed and walk.” Or we may have expected to hear words like, “by his touch you are healed.” Again, we read of these situations in the Gospel accounts, like the story in Mark 8 where Jesus spit on the blind’s man’s eyes at Bethsaida. Then Jesus touched him and the man could see. Yet Isaiah’s words are neither of these. Instead he says, “By his stripes, we are healed.”

As you witnessed the movie, “The Passion” what went through your mind as the Christ was being beaten? What thought went through your mind as the lashes continued and continued and never seemed to stop coming? Did you find yourself thinking, even for a moment, “This is wonderful. I am being healed!” I doubt it. Yet the witness of the prophet is clear. It was by the excruciating, painful death of Jesus that healing in our lives has been accomplished and wholeness restored. God desires a whole relationship with His people in order to make us whole. Yet, that relationship would be prevented until justice had been satisfied. In the servant of Jesus, God discovered a way to satisfy His justice and to offer healing to the hurting. In his crucifixion on the cross, Jesus is not suffering with His people, he is suffering for them, and doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And in that one dramatic and sweeping act of death, wholeness has been offered to all who receive it.

“The Green Mile” is a movie that is set in a 1935 scene. The character Tom Edgecomb, played by Tom Hanks, is the lead guard of death row in a prison in Louisiana. The area of the prison is called “the green mile” because of the long lime-colored floor that the inmates walk when going to the electric chair. In that movie, we are also introduced to
John Coffey, played by Michael Clarke Duncan. He is a slightly developmentally disabled seven foot man who has been falsely accused of murder. At one point, Tom discovers that John possesses a mysterious gift. He can absorb another person’s disease and cure them. Later in the movie, the prison warden’s wife is diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. Paul arranges for the guards to transport John to the woman’s home. As the guards escort John into the house, the warden’s wife is screaming. When John nears her beside, she asks John his name. John responds, “John Coffey, ma’am. Just like the drink but not spelled the same.” Next, while leaning over, he responds by saying, “I see it.” As the warden witnesses the action, John places his mouth next to hers. The inside of her mouth begins to glow. It appears as if a stream of bugs is moving from her mouth to his mouth. The room becomes bright. The crystal shatters. The house shakes. Suddenly, the woman becomes quiet. The disease has left her body. Then suddenly, John falls over and begins to cough loudly. He has taken her sickness upon himself. The warden’s wife is made whole because John has absorbed the pain.

From Isaiah’s vantage point, that is precisely what Jesus did during his passion at Calvary. He took your pain upon himself and offers you the gifts of wholeness and healing.

Face reality…don’t run. Accept community…don’t try to do it alone. Move ahead patiently…don’t expect instant cures. Accept continually His act of grace…and don’t stop receiving it, ever.

There is a song entitled, “Bring Christ Your Broken Life.” Listen to the words:

    Bring Christ your broken life, so marred by sin,
    He will create anew, make whole again;
    Your empty wasted years, He will restore,
    And your iniquities he will remember no more.
    
    Bring Christ Your Broken Life.
The gift of wholeness and healing is offered to anyone whose life is filled with regret, disappointment and pain. The gift is waiting. What, if anything, is holding you back?
Everlasting Life
(The Exaltation that Follows Humiliation)
Isaiah 52:13-53:3 and Hebrews 4:15-16
Dr. Chuck Moore

When I was in the seventh grade, I went out for the junior high basketball team. In my heart, I knew that I didn’t stand much of a chance at making the team. I was too slow, too short and too weak! Yet, wanting to give the tryouts my best shot, I worked hard during the week long after school tryouts, hoping that what was missing in talent would be made up in desire. On the final night of the tryouts, the coach called us together. Throughout the tryouts he had developed a complicated scoring system that would guide his decision. He rated such areas as shooting, rebounding, dribbling and passing. Then, he added up the scores. The individuals with the top 15 scores would make the team. The rest of us would be relegated to the position of “fans”. When it came time for him to announce the team, he did something, which in retrospect, probably qualified as “cruel and unusual punishment.” Instead of merely announcing who made the team, he announced the names of the individuals who didn’t make the team. In addition, he announced the names in order, beginning with the weakest score first. I will never forget those words: “The following individuals are being cut. As you hear your name called, go to your locker and clean out your things. Moore!”

Ouch! That hurt, big time! I kept hoping that this was a dream, even if it were a nightmare. I kept hoping that I would somehow wake up. I tried to fight back the tears. I wanted to find a place to hide. It was hard enough not to making the team, but to know that I had received a score that qualified me as being the absolutely worst player on the floor that week; the feelings of humiliation cut deep.

It’s impossible to go through life without being the victim of humiliation at some point or another. We have all found ourselves in situations where individuals who are lacking in the skills of sensitivity and compassion have publicly embarrassed us. We want to disappear into a cave, never to be seen again in public.
Sometimes as Christians, we find ourselves experiencing humiliation of a different sort; the humiliation that accompanies our commitment to Christ. We want to do the right thing. We want to be obedient to God. We want to stand on the side of Biblical truth, not permitting the culture to determine the outcome of life’s choices. Yet, where does it get us? At times we find ourselves being misquoted and misunderstood. We’re looked upon as being the unenlightened and the uneducated. Instead of being publicly affirmed and accepted, we’re sometimes accused of being close-minded and overly rigid.

For example, I have a friend who is a salesman. In his position, he does a lot of traveling to conventions and trade shows. During a recent visit to a large metropolitan city, he was invited to go out one evening with some of his friends to a strip club. Candidly, he told me, “I wrestled with my decision. I wanted to relate to the guys with whom I was spending the week. Yet, as a follower of Christ and a man of integrity, I knew the right thing to do.” He told his friends that he wasn’t going to join them. Immediately the seemingly light-hearted teasing began. “What are you going to do, go back to your room and call your wife?” “Come on, who’s going to know. It’s not like we’re going to turn in our expenses to the company accountant.” “Come on. It’ll make you a better man.” While on the exterior, he attempted to ignore their comments and downplay their sarcasm, their comments cut deep.

Do you sometimes feel alone when you go through similar experiences? Do you sometimes tell yourself, “no one understands. They don’t get it.” Do you feel that you have been relegated to your own private emotional prisons of isolated confinement? If so, think again. Recall the magnitude of the humiliation that Jesus endured during the week of His passion when he decided to be obedient to his call. The humiliation was incredible.

One, there was the humiliation that accompanied the public rejection. Listen to Isaiah’s opening words in Isaiah 53:1: “Who has believed our report?”
Have you ever been in a situation in which you attempted to convince someone that something was true and no one would believe you…no one? I have often wondered what it must be like for individuals who claim to have had an experiential encounter with aliens. They tell captivating stories of lunar type landings in their backyards in which they are kidnapped and held captive against their will. Yet, apart from a few writers who are employed by sensationalized newspapers, which appear on supermarket shelves, I have often wondered, “What is like for these people to know that no one really believes them? What must it be like to try to persuade a public in which few considering you worth hearing?” Can you imagine how frustrating it must be to try to convince someone that something really happened only to receive the response, “Yeah, right! If you say so!”

Jesus came into the world and told the truth. His story was not a tale that was conjured up in his own imagination. He had not taken some sort of course in creative writing and written a tale called, “I am the Messiah!” He was God in human flesh. He was God’s answer to humanity’s struggles and sin. Yet the very people for whom he had come chose to turn a deaf ear.

Two, there was the humiliation that accompanied the public resistance. It is one thing not to believe what Jesus had to say. It is another thing to say, “We’re not even open to listening.” The crowds that Jesus came to embrace had a preconceived notion in their mind regarding the coming of the Messiah and anyone who didn’t fit their preconceived model was going to be resisted outright.

What kind of a Messiah did the people want? They desperately were searching for a political Messiah. They wanted someone who would overthrow the powers of Rome. Yet when Jesus announced that His Kingdom was not of this world, the people pulled back, unwilling to give Him a second thought.

Three, there was the humiliation that accompanied the public ridicule. There were the crowds who called out, “we want Barabbas.” There were the soldiers who ripped off his
clothes and tossed dice for his garments. There was the criminal on the cross who was more interested in getting Jesus to prove his power than in seeing the truth. There were the crowds who mocked, “He saved others. Why can’t he save himself.”? Up until Jesus took his last breath, the people who looked on were continually ridiculing him. Jesus had become like the geekish looking boy in the fourth grade that, just because he didn’t fit in with the crowd, was being openly picked on by the classroom bully on the playground. And what were the crowds doing? Like the students on the playground, they stand around mocking and laughing as they take in the scenes.

Finally, there was humiliation that accompanied the private wrestling. Throughout Mel Gibson’s movie, “The Passion” one is introduced to a thought that, while not being taught directly in the Scriptures, is probably quite accurate. The film depicts the presence of the evil one lingering in the background, tempting, taunting and teasing Jesus at every turn. Speaking for myself, I have often read through the passion narratives with the realization that Jesus, without question, had to face the temptation of listening to the evil one. Particularly in the episodes in the Garden, one can almost hear the evil one mocking Jesus by whispering, “Go ahead Jesus and quit. You don’t need this. Walk away. Stand up for yourself. All of the pain you’re enduring isn’t really worth it.

On the outside, those events may not appear humiliating, yet can you imagine what it must have been like for the Christ? He was God in human flesh. He was the Creator of the world. He had the capacity to snuff out the existence of the evil one in the blink of an eye. Yet, Jesus endured it. Time after time, every time the evil one appears (and we see him many times in Gibson’s film), yet, Jesus allows himself to be tested. He willfully laid aside all of His privileges as God and allowed himself to be taunted by the very one who wanted to become like God.

What incredible humiliation Jesus endured! Public resistance! Public rejection! Public ridicule! Personal wrestling! And why? Because Jesus had determined that He would be true to His calling and He would honor His God. Jesus had made the personal
decision that he would not disobey the will of the one who had sent Him. Yet with that commitment and courage, there came unparalleled humiliation and embarrassment.

Listen. Anytime you make a decision to be a disciple of integrity who lives out an authentic and consistent faith, you will find yourself thrust into experiences where the potential for humiliation is real! Anytime that you determine to stand with your convictions, there are always going to be those individuals, who don’t understand your choices; who can’t relate to your values; who would rather pick the popular path than the path of obedience. Yet, how can you cope? Where’s the good news that designed to give you courage to continue?

First, remember that God recognizes your suffering. Far from living at a distance in a detached sort of way, God looks upon your suffering and sees everything you are enduring. He does not close His eyes. He does not ignore you. He does not play the role of a passive God who is uncaring or uninvolved. God’s Word to you is, “I am watching. I see what you are enduring for my sake. I am taking notice.”

Think of it. God witnessed every dramatic moment of the passion of Christ. He was not like the man who while watching a football game, stepped into the kitchen to get something to eat, only to return to be shocked by the score. God didn’t send his son Jesus into the world, close his eyes, only to awaken 33 years later and think, “Wow, what happened? I missed something!” No, God witnessed everything. From the moment in which Jesus came into this world to the point in which he was arrested to the moment in which he took his last breath, nothing escaped the eyes of God. Nothing!

One might ask then, “So, why didn’t he do something?” Or you might even be asking, given your situation, “Then, why doesn’t God do something immediately when I’m being humiliated because of my faith?” Why?

Perhaps an illustration will help. In high school, my son played on the high school soccer team. During one of the matches with a team that was state ranked, the coach assigned
my son the responsibility of guarding one of the opposition’s top players. Throughout the match, my son consistently followed through on his assignment. My son was determined that the opposing player would not score the entire game, no matter what the cost might have been. He stuck closer to this player than his own shadow! Eventually, the opposing player became frustrated by my son’s unrelenting harassment. As the match moved to the final minutes of play, the opposing player’s frustration mounted. At one point, the ball was elevated into the air toward my son. As my son jumped to head the ball, the opposing player rushed toward my son, aiming his elbow at my son’s head. Upon impact, my son fell to the ground. He wasn’t moving. When he was eventually rolled over, blood streamed down his face. Sitting in the stands, I faced an immediate decision. Do I run to his aid? Do I leap from my seat and head toward the field? Do I stand up and scream at the referee demanding that the opposing player be removed from the game? Instinctively, I wanted to react! Yet, instead, I did nothing. I stayed in the stands and observed. Praying for my son in the quietness of my heart, I resisted the temptation to add my voice to the action. A few minutes later while driving my son to the hospital where he would receive ten stitches, I shared my temptation to run to the field. He responded with an interesting statement: “Thanks Dad for not resisting the temptation to run onto the field to help me.” That was a teachable moment for me as a father. It reminded me that the temptation to rescue my child can sometimes accomplish the opposite. While I may have seen my actions as being heroic and loving, he would have perceived my actions to have been an attempt to insulate him from pain and embarrass him as a teenager. I am glad I remain seated!

Have you ever considered that when God recognizes our humiliation and yet resists the temptation to instantaneously react, God is actually doing something that is good? He trusts us as adults in our faith. He is allowing us to grow through the experience and to continue our climb towards maturity. Yes, he could leap in on the action. He could interrupt the stream of events that result in our feelings of embarrassment. Yet, oftentimes, the first thing God does is the most important thing God can do, he recognizes the experiences we are facing while giving us freedom and space to grow
through it. He has not left us alone. He has not abandoned us. The first step God takes is He recognizes the pain we are enduring.

How can we find courage when humiliated for our faith? Two, remember that God relates to our suffering. I love the words of the writer in Hebrews 4:15: “For we do not have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He’s been through the weakness and testing, experienced it all...all but the sin!”

When you read the words of Isaiah 53 and envision the pain that Jesus endured, is there really any experience of human humiliation to which God cannot relate? God has walked in our shoes! God has fully embraced the rejection, retaliation and resistance that we sometimes endure when we stand on the side of the Christ. There is never a basis for protesting to God, “but you don’t understand. You don’t get it.” God does get it. God does understand. Not only did he visit our planet in the coming of Christ, but also he absorbed the full brunt of humanity’s sin.

Several years back, my family nearly lost my mother to death. Recovering from a significant surgery, she had developed a staff infection that nearly took her life. Realizing that her condition was critical, I flew to Pittsburgh to visit her in the hospital. The scene that I encountered when walking into her room caught me by surprise. While I had been to many such settings in the past, I was not prepared for the scene that was filled with a barrage of medical equipment. Later that week I returned home. In visiting with a colleague, I shared the strange feelings I experienced when I thought about the possibility of my mother’s death. At one point in the conversation I said, “Do you have any idea what it must feel like when one thinks of burying their parent”? To which my colleague said, “yes, I buried my mother last year.”

Suddenly I realized that the person listening to me was not simply another pastor who would respond to me based upon courses he had taken in seminary or seminars he had attended in the area of pastoral care. He knew precisely what I was feeling and facing.
He knew firsthand the magnitude of the overwhelming human emotions. He could understand the doubts, questions and fears.

That is precisely how God responds to us when we go through suffering that accompanies our faith. Perhaps that is why the writer in Hebrews 4 goes on to write: “Let us go to his throne of grace with boldness so that we can find grace to help us in our times of need” (Hebrews 4:16). I love that word boldly. It means that we don’t have to go to God with any reluctance or hesitation. We never have to hold anything back. Just as Christ exposed his human emotions in the Garden scene, the invitation is clear: Tell God what you are facing and feeling. Be open with God. Take off the masks. Don’t play games. He relates.

How do we keep going with courage when facing humiliation that comes with our faith? Remember that God recognizes your suffering. God relates to your suffering. Three, remember that God reacts to your suffering. Perhaps God does not react according to your time schedule. Maybe God doesn’t move in the time that you would like him to move. After all, God is not necessarily bound by the palm pilot calendar that you carry around in your pocket. Yet, in God’s own timing, God will respond…always!

How did God respond to the humiliation of Christ? Consider the words of Isaiah 52:15

“...he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
Just as thee were many who were appalled at him, his appearance was so disfigured
Beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness---
So will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him.”

It is the same image of exaltation that continues in Isaiah 53:12:

“Therefore, I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong.”
It brings to mind the words of the Apostle Paul in Philippians 2:9. Following a lengthy description of the humility of the living Christ as exhibited in his willful obedience to become a servant to humanity, Paul writes these words:

“Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven, and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9-11).

The point is that is driven home is that the humiliation that accompanies our faith, as hurtful and painful as it may be, is always temporary. Humiliation for the Christian never goes on forever.

You may be familiar with the character from Greek legend named Achilles. Achilles was the strongest of the Greek warriors in the siege of Troy. Tradition tells us that as an infant he was dipped by his mother into the river Styx and thus he became invincible, except at the spot where she held him by his heel. Thus, we get the phrase, “Achilles heel.” Achilles, according to tradition, also knew that if he went to Troy, he could be killed. Yet, he went anyhow, and as predicted, he died when an arrow was shot into his heel.

Jesus went into Jerusalem, fully aware of the impending results. And in the end, he endured the passion that eventually took him to the cross. Like Achilles, he exposed himself and he died. Yet, that is where the parallel ends. Jesus, unlike Achilles arose. Jesus, unlike Achilles still lives. Jesus, unlike Achilles experienced his eventual exaltation. And just think….we share in that hope today! The eventual exaltation that Jesus experienced is the promise for every Christ follower today. The humiliation is short-lived. No matter how long it may seem to last, the humiliation never has the final word…never!
In recent months, we have heard and read some emotional heart wrenching stores of United States soldiers who have died in Iraq. They have lost their lives while supporting and standing for the cause of freedom. Yet, there are others who are also dying in that war torn country. Yet, they are not the soldiers who are carrying rifles. Rather, they are carrying their faith. And while not appearing on the front pages of United States newspapers, the risks that they are taking are every bit as dangerous. Take for example the story of Zewer Mohammed Ismael, a taxi driver in Northern Iraq. Ismael had converted from Islam to Christianity. Taking seriously the call of Christ to make disciples of all nations, he had developed the habit of distributing Bibles to his passengers, believing that he was called to express his faith to people who didn’t know Jesus. Yet, where did his bold witness take him? It cost him his life when a Muslim extremist filled his body with 28 bullets (Christianity Today, December, 2003, p. 32)

Like Christ, Zewer Mohammed Ismael faced the ultimate humiliation. His commitment of faith and obedience to God cost him his life. Yet, I wonder what it must have been like when he took his last breath and entered into the presence of God. Can you imagine the sensational excitement that he must have felt? Can you imagine the sense of relief and reward? At that moment, he was exalted! At that moment, he exchanged the humiliation that accompanied his public execution for an eternity with His God. In God’s time, God did to Ismael what He did for his own son and what He will do for you and me…if not on this side of life, then in the next! Exaltation eventually comes from humiliation. Sometimes, like Joseph who was released from prison and elevated to a position of influence, the exaltation takes place in this life. Yet, sometimes it doesn’t. Yet, the point remains that in God’s time, the exaltation will eventually occur…always!

Do you remember that opening story? The story continues. Upon walking into the locker room after being cut from the team, I encountered another student who made the team. He didn’t hold back on this opportunity to further humiliate me. In an effort to elevate his own sense of pride, he boldly informed me that I didn’t have what it takes to play basketball. Yet, here’s where the story gets interesting. Eight years later, while a junior in college, something somewhat humorous occurred. The young student who had
verbally taunted me in the locker room in seventh grade had transferred to my college. One evening, we met on the basketball court during an intramural game. I have no doubt that he didn’t recall our earlier “discussion.” During that game on the hardwood, I was motivated to play with more energy and intensity than normal. We won that game by a sizeable margin. I will admit that I was tempted to remind him of our earlier encounter; yet knowing what public humiliation feels like, I took the right road, shook his hand and congratulated him for a great game. (Yet, I will admit, that on the inside, I was beaming. Childhood memories sometimes die hard.) Out of the ashes of humiliation often comes hope…but always in God’s time.

Do you remember that hymn, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”? At the end of the second verse, there is this line: “Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.” Where do you find the courage to remain a person of integrity and a disciple of obedience? Stop and remember…God recognizes your pain. God relates to your pain. God will react to your pain, in His time. Yes, when facing the humiliation that sometimes comes with our faith, there is strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. There really is!
Experience Pure Love

Isaiah 53:3-12

David Mains

“What sort of a day was it? A day like all days, filled with the events that alter and illuminate our time. Everything is as it was, except . . . you are there.” Those words always opened and closed a television show that was popular back in the 1950s. It was patterned after an earlier radio series of the same name, You Are There.

Men who reported the news on CBS through the week, like Walter Cronkite, Mike Wallace, and Charles Collingwood, on Sunday evening would use the same approach to go back in time and cover events like the Fall of Troy, the Salem Witchcraft Trials, or maybe the Death of Socrates (which, incidentally, featured on the program a young toga-wearing Paul Newman). Important historical figures like Galileo, Freud, or Beethoven would be interviewed or talked about as if they were contemporaries. If you’re of retirement age I’m sure you have memories of those unique programs.

In a sense that’s what producer Mel Gibson has done in his new film The Passion of Christ. He allows you to be there and watch the final hours of the life of our Lord. The movie begins in the Garden of Gethsemane and traces what happens as Jesus is arrested, tried, flogged, and crucified. It ends with his lifeless body being taken down from the cross.

I encourage adults to see The Passion of Christ. You might say it’s both beautiful and troubling. Beautiful because you realize just how much God loves you, and troubling because what his son suffered on your behalf is far greater than what you had come to believe.

Be aware that the film is rated “R” for its violence, and it’s done in Aramaic with a smattering of Latin. Subtitles, however, make it easy to follow what happens. I suggest
that you see it first for your own sake, and then pray about what friend or relative to invite to go with you.

The introduction to the movie contains some familiar words from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah in chapter 53. Please turn there now in your Bibles. Isaiah is called the messianic prophet because he wrote so much about the Messiah who was to come. Messiah is a Hebrew word that means “the anointed of God.” In the New Testament the same word rendered in the Greek is the title Christ. Christ also means “the anointed of God.” Messiah and Christ are actually synonyms.

The New Testament quotes more from Isaiah than all the other prophets combined, with an amazing 308 references in the various New Testament books. For example, John quotes Isaiah in chapter 12 of his gospel and then adds this commentary, “Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him” (verse 41).

As a matter of fact, when one reads verses like we will look at next, it’s almost as though Isaiah was an eye witness to the flogging and the crucifixion . . . that he was there. But understand that time-wise, Isaiah’s long ministry was roughly 700 years prior to that of Jesus. Seven centuries separate them. That’s like someone writing in the early 1300s about the events related to the terrorist attacks here on 9/11/01!

So, let’s look at some of these amazing verses. Isaiah 53 starting with verse 3 and reading through verse 12:

He was despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.  
Like one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he took up our infirmities  
and carried our sorrows,  
yet we considered him stricken by God,  
smitten by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
And who can speak of his descendants?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was stricken.
He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.
After the suffering of his soul,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.
Reliving the final hours of the life of Christ--experiencing the passion--doing this by watching this film that’s now in nearby theatres--you’re quickly made aware of the cosmic scope of what’s going on. You can’t miss a Satan figure who’s a part and not a part of the action. He or she, you’re not sure which--this presence is both attractive and unattractive, and makes you aware that more than just the natural world is involved in what’s happening. What sort of a day was it? It was undoubtedly the most significant day in all of history.

Then the film is also intensely personal. Before very long you know intuitively, no one has to tell you, that you the viewer are partially responsible for what’s going on. Most probably it’s the Holy Spirit who reveals this truth to you.

There’s been a great deal of controversy about this movie. The Jewish community has expressed fear that those who see it will accuse them of being “Jesus killers.” I understand their concern because historically this charge has been made against the Jews. My prediction, however, is that such a thought will hardly enter your mind. Instead, you will quickly see yourself as one of those responsible for what takes place. It’s like you personally will identify with Isaiah’s words:

But he was pierced for my transgressions,
he was crushed for my iniquities;
the punishment that brought ME peace was upon him,
and by his wounds I am healed.

Watching this movie you never get the impression that Jesus is taken by surprise or that things have gotten out of hand. Just the opposite is true. In the Garden, as the film starts, he knows exactly what’s about to happen. It’s because he fully understands what’s ahead that he prays, “If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet, I want your will, not mine” (Matt. 26:39, NLT). And like Isaiah wrote, “It was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer” (v. 10).
Let me see if I can put some puzzle pieces in place for you. The Bible presents Jesus as involved in the whole process of creation. John writes, “He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he didn’t make” (John 1:3, NLT). And the world Jesus fashioned was a masterpiece. It’s only as you appreciate the wonder and beauty and abundance of creation that you can comprehend the tragedy of what theologians call “the Fall.” This world with all its goodness was made to be enjoyed by human beings. They in turn were to love their creator and honor one another.

Our ancestors chose instead to disobey God and to make self their No. 1 concern. And the truth is, all of us have done the same. “All of us have strayed like sheep.” Remember those words from our Isaiah passage? “We have left God’s paths to follow our own” (v. 6, NLT). And the difference this has made in our personal world has been catastrophic. All manner of evils have resulted from our disobedience of God’s two primary commands.

Jesus came to earth partly to model for us what obeying the great commandments looks like. His love for God is obvious, as is his concern for the well being of others. What a beautiful place this earth would be even now if everyone loved His way. The difference is hard to imagine. Think of all the problems that would be quickly solved if true love both vertical and horizontal--toward God and toward others--were practiced. There would be more than enough food for all people. Eliminate sin and just think how much money could be saved by everyone.

Unfortunately, the world the Son of God came to rejected him for the most part. Isaiah again, “He was despised and rejected--a man of sorrows, acquainted with the bitterest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way when he went by. He was despised, and we did not care” (v. 3, NLT). Even so, Jesus preached about an alternative kingship to embrace, a unique kingdom to which one could belong, made up
of those who loved God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and likewise loved their neighbors. These people would stand out like a city on a hill shining brightly for all to see.

Unfortunately, mere self-effort wouldn’t be enough for them to pull this off. There would have to be some kind of supernatural transformation. Past sins against God and others needed to be forgiven and a new power experienced if his followers were to demonstrate real change.

So, as the good shepherd, Jesus now came to “lay down his life for his sheep.” Remember those words from John’s gospel (10:15, NLT)? Listen, “No one can take my life from me. I lay down my life voluntarily” (10:18, NLT).

For human beings to be the initial evidence that God was in the process of restoring all things to himself, it would be necessary for “the anointed of God” to fulfill the Scriptures and to die and rise again. As early as he felt his disciples were ready to hear this truth, Jesus began to talk to them about this happening. At the time what he said made as little sense to them as it does presently to some of you. But that didn’t mean Jesus could delay or abandon the divine plan.

Sin had separated the human race from a holy God. In Scripture death is a symbol of that. You see, in the Bible life and union with God are one and the same. The reversal is also true. Separation from God is life’s opposite, or death. Yes, sin had brought on death—the great enemy all of us dread. But physical death is only part of the problem. The bigger issue with sin is that it also cuts us off from a holy God. So with physical death comes spiritual death or an eternity separated from the Lord.

The good news is that “the anointed of God” who knew no sin had come to earth. He would show us what God’s expectations were and at the end of his life be separated from God, or die, in our place. He would die physically in a most terrifying manner. At the same time he would die spiritually, in that he would take upon himself the very sins
of the world. This sinless one who always experienced the closest of fellowship with his father, would now cry out in anguish, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus will allow all this to happen to himself, as he explained, because he loves us far more than we will ever know.

Jesus, totally aware of what he must do to draw us back to God that final day of his life, receives the full fury of the dark powers of both this world and the reign of evil in spiritual realms. He pays for all the wickedness from the foundation of the world as though it were his own debt, and by doing so covers the price for everyone’s sins. Your sins are covered. Mine are as well. Praise the Lord. At Calvary it’s all laid to the account of the Lamb of God.

Isaiah once more--“He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before his shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth” (v. 7). What you and I deserved by way of punishment Jesus accepted in an act of mercy beyond anything we will ever be able to get our minds around. “Amazing love,” exclaims the hymn writer, “how can it be, that thou my God woulds’t die for me?” (Charles Wesley).

We know that what happened didn’t end with Christ’s broken body being removed from the cross. Sin always resulted in death or endless separation from God. For anyone sentenced to hell there was no escape. But the devil had no real claim on Jesus. And in three days our Lord rose triumphant from the grave. The powerful draw of the Father was too great for anyone, including Satan, to stand in the way of a heavenly reunion. Soon the lifeless body of our Lord took on life in every way, including being made one again with his father. This great triumph was only implied in Gibson’s film. Even so, by focusing on Calvary we are captured above all else by the incredible love that prompted Jesus to do for us what he did.

Have you ever felt like nobody loves you? Others get all kinds of breaks and helps and relationships and love but not you! Seems like everyone talks about love, but
deep inside you feel left out of those conversations. Even when people do say they love you, you wonder what their angle is, what it is they’re after.

Well again, I encourage you to see this movie. As difficult as it is to watch, especially because of feelings of guilt we all have for our sins, for our failure to love God and love others as was intended, my conviction is that you will still feel loved--deeply loved by God. And you should be, just as I should be, or anyone should be for that matter. Because that’s Calvary’s bottom line--God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.

So how does one respond to such mixed feelings? Here’s what I would suggest:

The first opportunity you have to be alone, find a quiet place and in your thoughts return to Calvary. Close your eyes in prayer and picture yourself walking over to the cross where Jesus is. Bow there at its base. Go down on one knee as you would before a great king. Literally kneel if you can. Otherwise do it in your mind. But take yourself back to that most dreadful and yet most wonderful place. Speak your prayer as though you are there at the crucifixion and you’re bowing before the promised Messiah--the Christ--the anointed of God--his only Son.

Then humbly voice words something like this:

I’m so ashamed of my involvement in what’s happening to you, Jesus. Forgive me for not living the way you taught, for not loving God as I should, and for so often treating others badly. I want to change and I want to be forgiven. Please enter me by your Spirit and empower me to be the person you intended. Thank you for dying in my place, for rising from the dead, for hearing my humble prayer and granting my request. Amen

A prayer such as this, that’s in your bulletin, is what gives Jesus permission to do for you what he’s done for millions down through the centuries. He pours king’s love into
you, leaving you convinced he has heard what you asked and acted accordingly. A supernatural transformation begins, and what happened at Calvary becomes incredibly personal to you.

Another hymn writer expressed it as follows:

Alas! and did my Savior bleed
And did my sovereign die?
Would he devote that sacred head
For sinners such as I?

Was it for sins that I have done
He suffered on the tree?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown!
And love beyond degree!

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

Thus might I hide my blushing face
While his dear cross appears,
Dissolve my heart in thankfulness,
And melt mine eyes with tears.

But drops of grief can ne’er repay
The debt of love I owe;
Here, Lord, I give myself away--
’Tis all that I can do.
(Isaac Watts)
What sort of a day is being referred to in words like this and numerous other hymns I could quote? A day like all days maybe, filled with the events that alter and illuminate our times. Everything is as it was except . . . you are there. That’s the difference.

See, in the history of the world there’s no other time and place people have returned to again and again and again and been transformed like this one. Can God’s pure love be personalized? The answer is yes. TO EXPERIENCE THE PASSION go to Calvary and bow before Christ’s cross in humble prayer.

Is today the date heaven will report that you came back to Jesus? Is this the day you will change your allegiance from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light? Is this your morning to experience Christ bearing your sin like Isaiah wrote about so many centuries back? Is this the hour you find the healing Christ’s wounds can bring? Is this the time when the one who made you for himself floods you with King’s love?

As we sing the very hymn I read to you just moments ago, I invite you to come to him . . .

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Experience Complete Forgiveness
David Mains

Deadly--when you hear that adjective, certain phrases come to mind, like
  a deadly weapon,
  a deadly concoction,
  a deadly snake,
  a deadly heart attack,
  a deadly explosive,
  a deadly enemy.
Whatever connection you make with the word “deadly,” for the most part it’s not going
to be a pleasant one.

This morning my intent is to talk about a deadly serious matter. Unfortunately,
most Americans no longer view what I’ll preach about with a sense of fear and trembling.
Just the opposite is true. For example, David Letterman said recently, “Here I am, 56, and
by all rights it shouldn’t be happening. But there’s nothing we can do about it now. And
I’m terribly excited about this. I’m scared silly about this. I’m going to be . . . a father!”

The late night host was informing his massive television audience that his
girlfriend, Regina Lasko, was about six months pregnant. “I realize we kind of got the
cart before the horse here,” he laughed. “But, I’m just seeing how much I can get by with,
and it’d be nice to have the kid take over the family business!” At that point bandleader
Paul Schaffer joked, “Tonight, David Letterman Jr. and his guests!”

“Oh my God,” Letterman responded, “Does that sound peculiar!”

As long as his name was mentioned, what do you think God’s thoughts are on this
pregnancy? I mean, the studio audience applauded and laughed and buzzed when
Letterman said, “I’m just seeing how much I can get by with.” The lead to the newspaper
story the next day was, “Dave’s next late-night job: diapers.” Again, what happened was given a light-hearted spin.

Is someone thinking, “Come on, reverend, why make a big deal of a baby being born outside of marriage? With all the evil and darkness in the world, it’s hardly worth bringing up such a small matter!” Well, my first reason is just to demonstrate the attitude of most Americans regarding sin, which has become quite casual. Then second, I want to make the point that our thoughts and God’s differ significantly on this matter. The attitude of a holy God, the God of Scripture, has always been that sin is a serious matter—in fact, deadly serious.

To get a feel for just how serious, I recommend you see Mel Gibson’s new movie, *The Passion*. It’s not a film young children should watch, so don’t even consider taking them. But you go. I believe it’s important that you see it.

This movie begins with a famous quotation from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, in chapter 53 if you want to turn there now in your Bibles. “He was pierced for our transgressions” . . . or our wrongdoing . . . our sins . . . “and by his wounds we are healed” (verse 5).

So, in this movie, as you watch Jesus whipped, one awful blow after another, as you see him brutalized, bleeding profusely, and in terrible pain, then shamefully presented to the screaming mob that still clamors for his death, as you feel the sharp pain when the crown of thorns is pressed into his head, and then close your eyes or bodily recoil as the nails are driven into his hands and feet--bring to mind Isaiah’s words from this chapter: “We have left God’s paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord has laid on him the guilt and sin of us all” (verse 6, NLT). When you want to turn your head or close your eyes, instead keep watching and remind yourself that to God sin is a serious matter—deadly serious.
“The wages of sin is death,” reads the Bible (Romans 6:23). Restated, sin’s payoff is a deadly serious one. Consider Calvary like actor-turned-director Mel Gibson does in this film, and you’ll find it to be a place of sobs and wailing and brokenness.

Modern man doesn’t like the concept of sin. To be politically correct, best avoid the term. It sounds outdated, intolerant, judgmental, and offensive. So who’s a no-name preacher to say that a popular entertainer like David Letterman and his live-in girlfriend Regina Lasko have sinned? “They probably love each other,” people respond. “The church should applaud them for not having the fetus aborted!”

Say what you want to a preacher. If that man or woman plays the role he or she is divinely called to fill, to the minister the only opinion that will hold any weight is God’s. And the truth is, down through the centuries the church, following God’s Word, has consistently seen sin as deadly. Certainly you’ve heard terms like the seven . . . deadly . . . sins. Why deadly? Because it’s taught that sins such as

- anger
- greed
- lust
- sloth
- gluttony
- envy
- pride

can damn your soul. And there are more sins than just seven. Which happens to be your favorite?

Before I read from chapter 53 let me just note that Isaiah had a long ministry. Verse one of chapter one tells us that this is a vision concerning Judah (the nation) and Jerusalem (the capitol city) that Isaiah saw during the reigns of four kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.
A tradition from the Talmud is that as an old man, Isaiah had resisted the idolatry of King Manasseh, who followed Hezekiah. Isaiah was then taken prisoner, strapped between two planks, and sawn in two. This would be an awful way to die, and many scholars believe it’s the background to the verse in Hebrews 11 about various heroes of the faith that reads, “They were stoned; they were sawed in two” (verse 37), and so on.

Do you remember in the New Testament in Acts chapter 8, the eunuch, the treasurer of all Ethiopia with great authority under the queen? What I’ll read now is the passage this eunuch was trying to get his mind around as he headed home to Africa in his carriage. Isaiah had written these words 700 years earlier. See if you can figure out who it was the prophet was referring to as I read five verses from Isaiah 53. I’ll start with 3 and read through verse 7:

He was despised and rejected by men, 
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.  
Like one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he took up our infirmities  
and carried our sorrows,  
yet we considered him stricken by God,  
smitten by him, and afflicted.  
But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.  
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

To us it’s obvious Isaiah was writing about the coming Jewish Messiah we believe was Jesus. We know this because our world has heard a great deal about him. In the first century, however, news about Jesus hadn’t yet circled the globe. So when Philip was asked by this Ethiopian “Was Isaiah writing about himself or someone else?” the Bible reports that, beginning with this scripture and many others, Philip told this high official the Good News about Jesus Christ. “Look, there’s some water,” said the eunuch, “Why can’t I be baptized?”

Modern man would probably be more argumentative. He also tends to be somewhat defensive about his sin. He may not be all that forgiving about the sins of others, but he sure can overlook his own favorite flaws.

- I mean, what’s all that wrong about cheating
  on tests?
  on resumes?
  on taxes?
  on expense statements?
  on your mate?

- Back off! (says modern man). I’m one who enjoys doing what I choose.
  gambling when I want to.
  drugs when I want them.
  sex when I want it.
  the best of the best when I feel I deserve it.

- I’m just seeing how much I can get by with. What’s your problem if I’m critical of
those I don’t like?
those I resent for some reason?
those I choose not to forgive?
those I feel superior to?
those I can’t tolerate?

- So what if I did ruin
  somebody’s reputation?
somebody’s marriage?
somebody’s family?
somebody’s future?
somebody’s church?

One definition of sin in Scripture is to miss the mark. That mark, as established by God, is to love him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. What that looks like in real life was modeled by Jesus. He lived his life loving God and loving others. When we fail to live this way we introduce pain and sadness into our surroundings. Some cause more hurt than others, but this Isaiah passage makes it clear that all of us, like sheep, have gone astray.

Imagine what a beautiful world this would be if everyone lived for God and for others as Jesus did. Think how much suffering would be eliminated. Consider just your world. If you lived as Jesus did, honoring what he taught and how he lived, would that not make things more beautiful in the places where you have influence?

It’s each of us turning to his or her own way that has filled this globe with so many arrows that fail to hit the mark. Said a different way, as sinners we all share partial responsibility for this earth being a place that’s less than paradise. And if you’re God, this is a deadly serious charge. This planet could be truly wonderful except for the way most people live. Sin has all but destroyed God’s world that could have been. Missing the mark is not a laughing matter. It’s not something God jokes about!
If Isaiah’s words or mine are making you feel guilty, know that both the prophet and your preacher identify with you. I have fallen far short of the person God intended me to be. I cringe when I think of the self-centered way I have lived much of my life. And in chapter 6 when the prophet had his great vision of being in the Lord’s presence, Isaiah’s response was, “My destruction is sealed, for I am a sinful man and a member of a sinful race” (verse 5, NLT).

Whatever your thoughts about sin, if you study the Bible you will pretty much come to the conclusion it teaches that sin and God don’t go together. There is no deceit, no evil, no darkness at all in him. God is truth; God is good; God is light. By his very nature God is perfect--but unfortunately we aren’t.

The surprise teaching of the Bible, however, is that this holy God, in an incomprehensible act of love and mercy, sent his only son to our earth in the person of Jesus to show us the way to live, and also to suffer the penalty we deserve for our sins. Jesus takes on himself the punishment we had coming, which is far more serious than we like to think. Again, as you watch the film The Passion, I believe you will know intuitively, no one will have to tell you, that Jesus is taking your punishment and my punishment. Why? Because to a holy God, sin is a serious matter--deadly serious.

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Our response should obviously be one of immense gratitude. Who can imagine such a huge favor being done, especially when none of us is deserving of it? Logic also says that understanding the sacrifice required of God should bring us forever into agreement with him regarding sin. After grasping the lengths to which our Lord went to forgive us and make possible a renewed relationship with himself, we can no longer view sin in a casual way. It’s not something to snigger or giggle about. Sin is a serious matter--deadly serious. It always has been and it always will be.
If you want to think of sin as

innocent fun
modern
freeing
exciting
my business and nobody else’s,
then
you’re not where God is
you’re not where Jesus is
and you’re not where the Holy Spirit is.

If you are a Christian, how do you come to agreement with a holy God on this deadly serious issue? If I were you, I would start by naming the sin God would say he most wants you to be free of. Earlier I mentioned seven deadly sins that church has traditionally seen as core to most of the flaws that mark human beings:

- anger--the clenched first always ready to strike
- greed--craving more than your fair share of money, things, whatever
- lust--the perversion of true love, taking rather than giving
- sloth--laziness, an entitlement attitude, an “entertain me” mindset
- gluttony--being ruled by your stomach
- envy--green with jealousy over what others have
- pride--always thinking your way is the best

Usually one of the list will quickly surface or remind you of a closely related sin.

Next, mentally take that given flaw with you to the theatre this week when you go to see Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion*. Then as you watch what happens to Christ, tell yourself, “My anger, or my greed, my lust, my sloth, my gluttony, my envy, my pride, is partly responsible for what he’s having to suffer. God is laying my iniquity on his son.
And yes, I’ve asked him before to forgive me, and yes, in so many ways I’ve become a better person for following Jesus. But the time has come for me to begin to know victory in this area of my life as well.” And even as you watch this movie, determine to change. You can pray this short prayer right there in the theatre:

    Lord Jesus,
    Guide me to the right person, the right minister, the right small group, the right book, the right resource, whatever, to see this sin addressed and defeated in my life. I pray that process will begin before another week has passed. Guide me Lord, and I will be obedient.
    Amen

    I’ve included this short prayer in today’s bulletin, because I have great confidence that God will start to answer it if you sincerely pray the words. If you have already seen the film, you can obviously begin to make the prayer your own this very morning.

    For you who see yourself as still deciding whether you want to be called a Christian, probably the first question you need to answer is whether you want to live as Jesus modeled and taught—loving God and loving others. Having fallen short of this standard, having missed the mark, having sinned repeatedly, it would make no sense to pray, “Jesus, forgive me please, but be aware that I want to keep living pretty much as I always have—not paying all that much attention to you, and choosing whom I want to love and those I want to ignore.”

    Rather, you need to admit that you have lived poorly; you’re numbered among the sheep who have gone astray. You’re a sinner who needs to be forgiven; you’re lost and wandering around confused. But you want to be found by the shepherd.

    I recommend that you see this movie, too, to have an understanding of how much you are loved. And here’s a short prayer you can pray . . . in the theatre, or here in church if you want:
Lord Jesus,
I have fallen far short of how you taught we should live. I’m truly ashamed and sorry about this. In my mind I come now to Calvary and bow before your cross in humble prayer. Thank you for taking on yourself the punishment for sin I deserved. My request is that you will forgive me and make me clean. Please enter me by your Holy Spirit and begin to teach me your ways. Thank you for granting me such a huge favor.
Amen

That prayer is also in the bulletin. If you have made use of it I would strongly encourage you to let someone in the clergy know you have done so. That person will be able to help you regarding growing as a new Christian.

My conviction is that experiencing the movie *The Passion* can be a painful but powerful way to be brought back into agreement with God about sin being a deadly serious matter. All of us who call ourselves Christians--or those who want to take on Christ’s name--need to be yanked back in line on this matter. We need to open ourselves to an examination by the Holy Spirit that reveals to us what is not pleasing to the Lord. When the Spirit of Jesus convicts us and lets us know “This has to change,” we need to say an immediate “Yes, Sir!”

If that means getting rid of items in our lives that are unacceptable, we need to comply. This very day it means you find time to meet alone with God and set up a plan for how you’re going to start down a path that’s different than the one you have been on. If it takes you two months or two years to replace a sinful pattern with a holy one, so be it. Start the process this very day!

It’s not permissible to make light of the sin, to make a funny remark like David Letterman and hope people will laugh along with you. This culture is ripe for judgment. How much longer it has before it’s judged and found wanting I can’t say, but I promise
you this: no nation can sin with impunity--or sin as though there will never be a day of accounting. Babylon couldn’t, Egypt couldn’t, even Israel wasn’t able to get by with that. America with all its swaggering won’t be able to either. And you don’t want to be sucked into thinking that sin talk is silly or stupid or not scary anymore.

Does reliving the final hours of Christ’s life through a movie have any real value? Oh yes. Mel Gibson’s movie is timely indeed. Do see it. And as you do, agree with God that sin is a deadly serious matter. May you also know complete forgiveness though Christ our Lord and Savior as you experience The Passion.

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Experience Ultimate Wholeness

David Mains

If I were to ask the teens here to imagine what it would be like to be in their early 30s, my guess is that would probably seem to them like eons away. I mean by the early 30s many have started their families or gotten a toehold on a career. How old!

When you’re on the other side looking back, however, say in your 50s or 60s, someone in their early 30s seems delightfully young. If we older folk only knew back then what one knows now--right?

One of the reasons I’m convinced Jesus is who he claimed to be--the unique son of God--is that as someone in his early 30s he was incredibly wise and balanced. You or I might have manifested a few good qualities in our early 30s, but we were far from perfect. The truth is, at 30, 31, 32 most people are really not all that mature. With Jesus, on the other hand, there is already the wonderful development of his character and his personhood.

As you watch a film like the one I have been referring to recently--The Passion of Christ--even though Jesus is not only wrongly accused, but hit repeatedly and later flogged by the Romans and put to death for no fault of his own, you still come away with the impression that not only was he a beautiful person, he was truly a remarkable young man in every way. You can hardly help but like him, in fact, admire him.

This morning it is my intent to explore how we can know wholeness in a way similar to what Jesus did. I’m thinking of the verse, in Isaiah 53, where the prophet writes, “by his wounds we are healed” or made whole (v. 5). It’s part of the passage Mel Gibson quotes at the start of his movie. That healing begins when one bows before Christ at the cross and asks to be forgiven of sin and made new by the miracle indwelling of the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Jesus. Those terms are used interchangeably in the Bible.
Since I talked about that experience the last two Sundays, let me take a different approach this morning.

The *Passion of Christ* film begins with Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. And incidentally, if you haven’t yet seen this movie, do go this week. It’s not a fun film to watch, but you need to see it. My belief is that it will draw you closer to the Lord.

Throughout his life Jesus constantly sought to do his father’s will. “I always do those things that are pleasing to him,” he says in John chapter eight, verse 29 (NLT). And even as he agonizes in prayer there in the garden, knowing only too well what is expected of him as his life comes to an end, Jesus prays, “Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will, not mine” (Luke 22:42, NLT).

I believe this submission to his father’s wishes is the secret to his early maturity. Jesus always seeks to do what he perceives are his father’s desires, and so should we.

“But I have real difficulty knowing what God wants of me” I can almost hear someone say.

Let me see if I can explain a little about how that problem is overcome. One of the great changes that takes place when you become a Christian is that the Spirit of Jesus or the Holy Spirit enters you. Jesus can’t bodily crawl inside of you, but again, he does literally indwell you by his Spirit. Evidence of this at conversion includes the new sense of cleanness or holiness you feel, or the release from the burden of sin you have been carrying around. That guilt is suddenly gone and great joy overwhelms you. All of this is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Another of the many actions of the Holy Spirit is to begin to program the new believer’s conscience. Before it was conditioned by the norms of the given society in which you happened to be raised. But now a new teacher begins to make his presence
felt. His desire is to help you learn to love God more and also your fellow human beings—said differently, to please God in all you do even as his son did.

How does this work? Say you’re a high school student who comes to know Christ on a Sunday in church. The next day you’re in school and you see someone you don’t like all that much. You start to make a negative comment when suddenly, “Bzzzt!” It’s like an alarm goes off in your head. It’s not a loud voice that says, “You’re doing something bad!” It’s more like an internal alarm system that sounds, “Bzzzt,” meaning, “Warning, be careful. I want you to learn to respect others!”

For new Christians this alarm or “Bzzzt” seems like it sounds in your conscience a great deal. After a while you start to think, “Don’t I ever do anything right?” Well, the truth is, there’s a big difference between the way you’ve been living and the new ways of heaven you’re being taught.

Those who don’t understand what’s happening or don’t respect the new teacher, have a tendency when “Bzzzt” happens to shut off these promptings like they would an unwelcome alarm clock that awakens them in the morning. Listen--this is not a good idea! If you do that repeatedly, over time you can silence the Spirit or shut him out of this role as the programmer of your conscience.

Now obviously there are numerous ways the Spirit of Jesus teaches new Christians. For example, the Scriptures are extremely important. Studying them is a tried and tested way to discover God’s desires. It’s also more objective than what I’ve been describing. Learning to trust the Spirit’s influence on your conscience is more subjective.

Actually the two work together quite well. For example, I may not know that worry is not how God wants us to live. Then I read in Philippians, “Do not be anxious about anything,” or don’t worry about anything (4:6), “but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Having been sensitized to this
truth from Scripture the Spirit now starts to remind me of it through my conscience. “Bzzzt” happens the very next time I start to worry.

Admittedly what I’m doing is looking at just one of many ways the Spirit teaches new believers the ways of God. For example, the Holy Spirit also begins to immediately reprogram your emotions. Before you often laughed or cried for all the wrong reasons. Now you will laugh at what God finds humorous and weep over what saddens him. And that’s just one of numerous other illustrations I could give.

The process I’m describing is almost like Jesus himself were still present with us saying occasionally, “I’d stay away from that if I were you,” or, “This is something good I believe you would be wise to consider doing.” And if we were to obey everything he said we would soon become quite a disciple of his, or student of this fine teacher, which is what the word disciple means.

In similar fashion, if you always respond to this one taking Christ’s place in today’s world--the Holy Spirit--as he brings matters to your conscience, you’ll grow rapidly just like the people you read about in the Bible who experienced our Lord’s bodily presence.

“But how do I know it’s the Holy Spirit and not the devil?” you ask. “Can’t he put thoughts in my mind too?”

Sure, but frankly, seldom is it that hard to tell the difference. Maybe it would help just to think about what this new counselor is called. He’s the Holy Spirit. So when you’re challenged regarding a matter of holiness you don’t have to wonder if it’s the devil. Respond to the “Bzzzt” because that’s a message from God.

He’s also appropriately named the Spirit of Truth. If you’re at all like me, you’ll find him hammering away at this, until not only are outright falsehoods taboo, but also any slanting, or shading, or exaggerating of the facts. Many spiritual children of God
know they need to respond more to the Spirit regarding their naughty tongues and certainly there’s little question regarding the source of these promptings.

Scripture speaks about the love of the Spirit. So the strong nudge or impulse to do a good thing on another’s behalf should be seen as having initiated with God.

Regularly the Bible refers to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus or of Christ. So again, any inner encouragement to act in a Christ-like fashion really needs not be questioned. Numbers of other related terms could be brought up, but I think you get the idea.

My assumption is that most of the time you know when it’s God trying to get your attention. I wouldn’t worry about those occasions when you’re honestly confused. If you always obey when you are sure, you shouldn’t have to worry about the times when you aren’t!

Unfortunately, I fear most believers treat too lightly the ministry related to the conscience that the Spirit attempts to conduct. In one of his books Dr. David McKenna tells about the troubled soul who went for professional help. “What’s your problem?” the counselor queried. “Well, you see, I don’t have the will power to resist temptation, and my conscience is uneasy” was the reply. “Then you would like to strengthen your will power? Is that right?” The patient paused, dropped his head, and then answered sheepishly, “Well, not exactly. If it’s all right with you, I’d prefer to have my conscience weakened!”

Without being as direct, I’d like to ask: is it possible, my friend, that you have been following an unstated policy or trying to get accustomed to a troubled conscience? It wouldn’t be all that uncommon. On the other hand, were you aware that you also might be missing one of the greatest delights God’s children can experience? I’m talking about the joy of knowing day-by-day and moment by moment the immense thrill of living with
a clear conscience--always staying in fellowship with your heavenly father just like Jesus did!

“But hey, he was the divine Son of God,” someone protests.

Yes, but followers of his have given testimony to living this way too. For example, Paul states in Acts 24:16, “So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.” To Timothy he writes, “I serve God with a clear conscience” (2 Timothy 1:3). And that he didn’t necessarily view this as highly unusual is reflected in his list of qualifications for church leaders found in 1 Timothy which includes “keep[ing] hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience” (3:9).

Apparently Peter had similar thoughts as to a clear conscience being attainable because he went so far as to instruct ALL believers to “keep your conscience clear.” That’s 1 Peter 3:16 (NLT).

Can you imagine what it would be like to be someone who actually learned to consistently enflesh that admonition?--to live without the discomfort of guilt feelings when you go to pray because of a lie you told, or impure thoughts you have been harboring, or the knowledge that you cheated on a test!--to witness to someone about your faith in Christ and not have to wonder if someday that person will hear about your rocky marriage or how you mistreat your employees, or the habit you have or not paying your bills?--to attend church services and know ahead of time that if God speaks to you through the message you not only want to but will respond instantly as opposed to time and again steeling yourself against God’s voice. Some people actually start to shake they feel so convicted, but they have learned to tense their bodies to stop the shaking, and then they naively ask why God seems close to others but not to them.

Simply put, there is great joy in keeping a clear conscience. As you learn to see to it that your conscience is attune to the will of your heavenly Father you will also begin to
know wholeness even as Jesus so beautifully demonstrated. And the truth is, you may not be as far away from this becoming a reality as you might think.

Granted, it would be hard if you felt the way to go about this task would be to dredge up all the spiritual sludge that’s gathered in your life over the past years, and then try to get rid of it all at once. But I wouldn’t begin there if I were you. In fact, you wouldn’t be able to remember everything if you tried.

I would start instead with a determination that this day I would do everything within my power to respond positively to the promptings I sensed coming from the Holy Spirit.

When watching something on TV and “Bzzzt” prompts me to turn it off or change the channel, that’s exactly what I would do. If I felt an inner impulse to spend some quality time in God’s Word instead of a half-hour in the Sunday paper or a book, I would heed that prompting at least for this given day.

If one of my children wants my attention but I’m busy with one of all kinds of weekend chores I need to get done, and “Bzzzt” happens--I’d make whatever adjustments were necessary to put aside the list for the few moments of time required of me to be a good father.

If I notice someone in need and my conscience hears the “Bzzzt” sound, I’d do my best to be Christ-like for that moment and show the tenderness the Savior himself might demonstrate in such a situation.

I would stubbornly refuse any sly bending of the truth the enemy might put in my mind even as my Lord instantly did when the devil displayed his wares before him.

Then, at the end of this day I would evaluate whether or not the practice of a clear conscience brought me joy. If not, I’ll forget about what I heard in this sermon. I tried it,
but it didn’t work. The truth is it turned out to be a lousy day, the kind I never, ever want to repeat.

However, if in looking back you say to yourself, “This wasn’t all that bad a day. In fact, it was a really good day,” then I’d extend the practice of keeping a clear conscience into Monday as well.

Before sleeping tonight, I would also ask to be forgiven for any times I chose to ignore the Holy Spirit, and I’d tell the Lord that tomorrow I will work at being even more obedient than I was today. Restated, you want to always do the things that are pleasing to your father in heaven, even as Jesus did.

Well, my prediction is that today’s trial run will leave you anticipative, setting a new personal record of two days in a row of practicing a clear conscience, then three, and so on. And before you know it, a new pattern has been established and you’re growing spiritually by leaps and bounds. That’s how Peter and Paul got to where they were--one day at a time!

“Do you really think that what you’re saying is possible for me?” someone asks. “I fear my conscience is so seared I may even have passed the point of no return.”

That’s not what God is saying to you. If you had a seared conscience you wouldn’t have been listening to me this long. You certainly wouldn’t be here in church if that were the case. No, I believe you’re someone the Lord is telling to go about enjoying clear conscience day number one--and two--and three--and quite soon you’ll see restored the joy of your salvation. Sound good?

Whatever your age, I challenge you to learn this simple lesson from observing the final hours of the life of our Lord. Again, he always sought to please his father in heaven. It’s as simple as that. And the more you are like Jesus in this regard the more you will know the wholeness he demonstrated throughout his life.
Whatever your age--high school student or person of retirement age, early 50s or late 80s, you call it--the truth is that you CAN know God’s desires on a daily basis. Submit to the promptings of your experienced teacher, the Spirit of Jesus. Don’t resist him--or ignore him--or question him. Instead, when he makes his will known, obey instantly.

Let this be a decisive new day in your ongoing relationship with the Lord. To personally experience the Passion, those final hours of Jesus’ life, ask to in time become the person your king intended, starting this very day. Whatever your testing, it will be nothing compared to what the Son of God was asked to do!

In the time of quiet before I pray, tell the Lord that for the rest of this day it’s your choice to be taught by his Spirit. And if this turns out to be a good day, you want to continue the practice tomorrow and the next day until pleasing God is as natural to you as breathing out and breathing in.

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Experience Everlasting Life
David Mains

In Southern Judah, during the reign and spiritual revival under King Hezekiah, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians. This same bunch of ruthless and arrogant invaders also attacked Jerusalem, the capitol city of the Southern tribes. You may recall reading in the Bible how the distressed king, Hezekiah, sent for the prophet Isaiah to see if he had “a word from the Lord.”

Isaiah’s response was that he did. “‘Assyria will not enter the city, or shoot an arrow here. . . . I will defend this city and save it,’ says the Lord” (2 Kings 19:32, 34). And the next paragraph reads, “That night the angel of the Lord went out and put to death 185,000 men in the Assyrian ranks. So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew” (vv. 35–36).

So on one hand in the north there’s humiliation and defeat, while in the south on the other hand there’s exaltation and victory. All through Isaiah there’s a balancing act going on like I’ve just illustrated between humiliation and exaltation. Balancing these two is also a part of my agenda for this morning.

With all of its good qualities, the new Mel Gibson movie The Passion of Christ only reveals a day in the life of Jesus--the worst of days. That’s also true of the scripture quoted from Isaiah 53 at the start of the film, “He was pierced for our transgressions . . . “by his wounds we are healed” (v. 5). You see, Isaiah wrote in that chapter about the exaltation of our Lord as well as his humiliation.

“I will give him the honors of one who is mighty and great, because he exposed himself to death,” reads Isaiah 53:12 (NLT). Reading that verse gives exposure to the opposite extreme. One value of Mel Gibson’s remarkable movie is that it reveals the darkness of the downside. Enduring the cross was not an easy assignment. The upside of
the Messiah’s surprising victory over death and his exaltation are only hinted at in the film.

In the New Testament the apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians—chapter 2:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (vv. 5–11)

Did you catch that?

My contention is that learning to live the Christ-life means embracing both his humiliation and his exaltation. Once again, the Passion movie is quite helpful because it doesn’t sugarcoat what that humbling or humiliation involved. Taking up the cross is certainly not to be understood as an invitation to comfort and ease. Down through the centuries, following Christ has seldom meant adoring fans, best-selling books or records,
triumphant tours with all kinds of money, 5-star accommodations, and great press coverage.

I’m not saying any of these are wrong in and of themselves. Jesus had all kinds of attention and who knows how many following his every move. But when these trappings come to be *equated* with what it means to follow him, that’s when we’re in trouble!

I suspect that in many ways learning to live the Christ-life involves becoming comfortable with this tension. Later in this same letter to the Philippians Paul refers to learning “how to get along happily whether I have much or little. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in EVERY situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength I need.” That’s chapter 4:11–13, NLT. Again, “I can do everything with the help of Christ who gives me the strength I need.”

In reflection, it’s amazing how often this truth marks the lives of the saints. They aren’t confused when facing extremely difficult tests. It’s almost as though these are expected if one is truly following Jesus.

Paul’s words in Galatians 2 are most revealing. “I have been crucified with Christ. I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (v. 20a, NLT). Apparently there came a time when Paul told Jesus, “From now on I want you to have complete access to everything I am. I give you the right to live your life in me. If you want to say something here’s my mouth for you to use. If you desire to go somewhere in my body, my legs are available to take you there. If you need my mind or my abilities, they are yours to direct in any way you wish. I am no longer the one in charge. The old Paul has died. The new Paul is just a front for Jesus to use as he chooses.” Scripture again, “So I live my life in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” (v. 20b, NLT)
The reluctance on the part of most people to make such an offer comes from a fear that Christ will do with our body exactly what he did with his own body. He will lean heavily to the side of humiliation and will wait until the next world to balance things out on the exaltation side. Therefore, we often choose not to trust him with who we are.

Am I describing not only where I am but where you are too? There’s a fear that the Christ-life definitely won’t be as pleasurable as the David-life or the Tammy-life or the Jason-life or the Caitlyn-life we have come to rather enjoy!

Devotional writers often call what I’m referring to “the exchanged life.” We exchange the right to live as we choose for Christ living in us the life he desires. Back in 1960 Dr. V. Raymond Edman, who was then the president of Wheaton College, wrote a book called *They Found the Secret.* ** It described the lives of twenty such individuals, both men and women, who made an offer to Christ similar to that of Paul’s in Galatians 2:19–20. Let me refer to just three of them.

J. Hudson Taylor was a deeply respected early missionary to China. He wrote:

The sweetest part, if one may speak of one part being sweeter than another, is the rest which full identification with Christ brings. I am no longer anxious about anything, as I realize this; for He, I know, is able to carry out His will, and His will is mine. It makes no matter where He places me, or how. That is rather for Him to consider than for me; for in the easiest positions He must give me His grace, and in the most difficult His grace is sufficient. (p. 20)

Boston’s A. J. Gordon was a contemporary of D. L. Moody and author of the book *How Christ Came to Church* (his autobiography). His words:

The change which ensued may be described thus: Instead of praying constantly for the descent of a divine influence there was now a surrender, however imperfect, to a divine and ever-present Being: instead of a constant effort to make
use of the Holy Spirit for doing my work there arose a clear and abiding conviction that the true secret of service lay in so yielding to the Holy Spirit that he might use me to do his work. . . . It costs much to obtain this power. It costs self-surrender and humiliation and the yielding up of our most precious things to God. It costs the perseverance of long waiting and the faith of strong trust. But when we are really in that power, we shall find this difference: that, whereas before it was hard for us to do the easiest things, now it is easy for us to do the hardest. (pp. 63–64)

Dr. Walter L. Wilson, “the beloved physician,” was also a pastor and president of the Kansas City Bible College. He wrote about an encounter with God that was much like Paul’s. This was following a message he heard from D. James M. Gray on Romans 12:1 about giving our bodies to God.

There, in the quiet of that late home, I said to the Holy Spirit, “My Lord, I have mistreated You all my Christian life. I have treated You like a servant. When I wanted You I called for You; When I was about the engage in some work I beckoned You to come and help me perform my task. I have kept you in the place of a servant. I have sought to use You only as a willing servant to help me in my self-appointed and chosen work. I shall do so no more. Just now I give You the body of mine; from my head to my feet, I give it to You. I give You my hands, my limbs, my eyes and lips, my brain; all that I am within and without, I hand over to You for You to live in it the life that You please. You may send this body to Africa, or lay it on a bed with cancer. You may blind the eyes, or send me with Your message to Tibet. You may take this body to the Eskimos, or send it to a hospital with pneumonia. It is your body from this moment on. Help Yourself to it. Thank You, my Lord, I believe You have accepted it, for in Romans twelve and one You said “acceptable unto God.” Thank You again, my Lord, for taking me. We now belong to each other. (p. 127)
“And what were the results of that surrender of body and appropriation of the fullness of the Holy Spirit? (Edman asks this question in the book referred to earlier: *They Found the Secret*. He continues . . .)

The very next morning two young ladies came to the office to sell advertising, as they had done previously. Up to that time the doctor had never spoken to them about the Lord Jesus because his lips had been his own and he had used them for business purposes. Now that his lips had been given away, the Holy Spirit was to use them; and He did so at once. Out of brief conversation and testimony to his visitors, Dr. Wilson led both of them to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. They were the first fruits of a great harvest of souls that D. Wilson has won for the Saviour.

Hundreds of thousands have been thrilled and challenged by the doctor’s experiences in soul winning, such as he has recounted in *The Romance of a Doctor’s Visits*. For example, in the account of “The Little Man in a Big City” he tells of his being alone in the great city of New York. Before he went out for a business appointment he had prayer in his hotel room, and requested: “My Lord, this is a large city of seven million people, and I am just a weak, unknown servant of Thine with no knowledge of the city and no acquaintance with the hungry hearts that may be there. Thou alone dost know whom Thou has been dealing with. Here is my body--my feet and my lips. Wilt Thou take them today to some troubled heart and speak through me Thy Words of light and life? Thank You, Lord, I believe You will do it.”

As he walked eastward on Thirty-second Street he passed a stationery shop and noticed a small leather-covered notebook in the window. This brought to mind his need of a book in which to keep his prayer list. Upon entering the shop he inquired of the little German owner thereof about the notebook. The size and the price were satisfactory; and the shopkeeper began to wrap it up. Just then Dr. Wilson said, “Do you know what I expect to do with this little book?”
The storekeeper did not know, and was astonished to learn that it was to be used as a prayer book. Thereupon he began to unwrap the package saying, “I am sorry, my friend, but this is a blank book; it is not a prayer book.”

That was just the opening Dr. Wilson needed. He explained that he made his own prayer book, using the left-hand pages for petitions and the right-hand ones for the answers. Then he added his testimony of knowing the Lord Jesus as His Saviour, and invited the shopkeeper to do the same.

The reply was not surprising. “Mister, I have tried to find Gott for many years. I have gone around Manhattan and Brooklyn and the Bronx, night after night, attending many services, but failed always to find Gott. Can you tell me how to get to Him?”

After explanation of the Scripture that the Lord Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, Dr. Wilson led his new friend to the Saviour. The quest of the years had come to an end, for now the shopkeeper knew the Lord Jesus for himself.

And for the soul-winner only twenty minutes had elapsed from the prayer in the hotel room to the winning of another soul to Christ, because the life and lips of the servant belonged to the Holy Spirit. (pp. 127–128)

This is a commitment that no doubt sounds scary to most of you. I confess that it does to me as well. But I believe some of us are ready to at least move in the direction that’s being suggested.

You might feel this tug as you watch the movie The Passion of Christ. I did. Given the privilege through this film of standing at the foot of the cross, your mind could be reminded of Paul’s words in Galatians and “Yes,” you will say, “I want to know this crucifixion with Christ he writes about. I’m tired of all the spiritual failures and the
pigmy faith that for the most part still marks who I am. On my own I don’t believe I’m all that good at trying to live for you, Jesus. Please teach me to understand what the apostle had in mind when he wrote, ‘I myself no longer live, but now Christ lives in me’ and ‘So I live my life in this earthly body by TRUSTING in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.’ I want to learn that trust.”

Can Jesus be trusted? What if he does decide he wants to send this body of yours to the Eskimos or to a hospital with pneumonia? What if he leads you down Humiliation Street instead of Exaltation Avenue? And to be quite honest it wouldn’t be the first time that’s happened. Again, learning to live the Christ-life means embracing both humiliation and exaltation.

Well, the obvious truth is that Jesus is the most trustworthy person any of us will ever know. He’s also the wisest . . . and the most respected . . . and he’s not going to shortchange anyone.

May I suggest a short experiment? Rather than thinking in terms of “the rest of my life,” while the cross is fresh in your mind because of the movie, why not consider what Paul writes about being crucified with Christ for one day at a time? Resaid, making that exchange for this day, and then tomorrow. Exchanging the right to live as I choose for Christ being allowed to live in me the life he desires.

A prayer might sound something like this:

Jesus--I offer myself to you today to live through me the way you choose. If you want to say something to someone, my mouth is yours to use. If you desire my feet to go somewhere on your behalf, I’m ready to do just that. My abilities are yours as well to use as you please. Keep me sensitive to the guidance of your spirit, even as you were always quick to do your father’s will. I am open to identifying with both your humiliation and your exaltation. I just consider it a privilege to be your willing servant. Amen.
As you have probably noticed, I included this prayer in your bulletin.

Writing about his own experience of being crucified with Christ, Dr. Edman penned these words:

Could any place be safer than the center of His will? Did not He assure me by His very Presence that His thoughts towards us are good, and not evil?

Death to my own plans and desires was almost deliriously delightful. Everything was laid at His nail-scarred feet, life or death, health or illness, appreciation by others or misunderstanding, success or failure as measured by human standards. Only He Himself mattered. (p. 150)

I’m in pursuit of that same peace. What about you?

I suppose Mel Gibson could have produced a movie about the resurrection. Maybe someday he will. And messages from Scripture could be preached using Paul’s words such as: “I can really know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead.” But the crucifixion is probably the better starting point.

The cross continues to remind us that the Christ-life involves humiliation as well as exaltation . . . what we would often prefer to skip as well as what we certainly don’t want to miss.

I guess if I had to choose which of the two I would rather have mark the few years I know of life on this planet and which I’d want for all eternity, I’d say let’s take the humiliation now and the exaltation later. And my presumption is that so would you!
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Experience the Passion: Pure Love

Isaiah 53:7-9

Rev. Don Woznicki

[If possible, show a film still of full moon (opening of film) on a screen, or make reference to it]

This is how Mel Gibson’s film, The Passion of Jesus Christ, a Love story, opens - so mysterious, so haunting, yet so powerful and beautiful.

Have any of you really experienced love to the depths where it actually haunts you with the power of its mystery? - A haunting truth, beauty, and goodness that draws you in, prompts you to seek out its mysterious beauty and power, but at the same time reveals your vulnerability, weaknesses, and dependency on it? It is a love that sees you for who you are but still wants nothing more than to be with you? Many have experienced this haunting love to some degree through the experience of human love. But to what depth, if any, have you experienced the awesomeness of Divine Love? It is a passion that God has for us - A passion that pursues us relentlessly with its pure love, so powerful in mercy, Divine Mercy, where to love is to sacrifice oneself, to sacrifice is to suffer, and to love is to suffer. This love haunts even those who try to run from it, and there is no escape! Have you allowed yourself to be captured by this love?

Feodor Dostoevsky wrote in his classic nineteenth century novel, The Idiot, “Beauty will save the world.” - that beauty is none other than the climatic loving action of Jesus Christ crucified! [point to Crucifix]. Today my prayer is that many of you would become more aware of that beauty, God’s Pure Love in our lives.

Over these next four weeks, I hope to help awaken your spiritual senses to a personal experience of the passion of Christ using as props, the cross, and personal revelations of three individuals who have personally experienced the passion of Christ in their lives; 1) Hollywood Film Director and Producer, Mel Gibson as manifested in his film, The Passion of Jesus Christ, 2) Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824), a mystic
nun, stigmatist and visionary who wrote *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.* ¹ It is an account of her private revelations of Jesus’ Passion, while faithful to scripture (Mel Gibson used some of her accounts for certain details in the film), and 3) St. Maria Faustina Kowalska (1905-1938), a visionary nun who also received private revelations of Jesus’ passion and his message of mercy that she would compile in her diary.²

Today, we live during one of the most historic, exciting, and defining moments in Christian/human history - and I am not necessarily talking about The Great Tribulation, The Rapture, or the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. I am talking about what is happening in Hollywood! In the recent past, Hollywood has increasingly been using its talents to pervert, ridicule, and defame the sacred of traditional religion, especially Christianity for “entertainment.” Hollywood culture has many times spread a culture of death through the moral poison of self-gratification, violence, and disrespect for human life. But God is using the good and beauty of this industry to spread his message of mercy and love.

Yes, Mr. Dostoevsky, Beauty will save the world, and never before has a film, like Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of Jesus Christ,* brought that beauty and goodness to mainstream film distribution. It is a film that should prove to strike down and wound countless film-viewers (including Hollywood) with the Pure Love of God. Mel Gibson wants to do nothing more than share to the best of his God given ability, his experience of the pure love of God’s Divine Mercy available to all humanity – as St. Paul writes, “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” [Rom. 10:12-13].³

If you have not seen this film yet, do not miss the theater experience. Many of us have been or will be left somewhat numb after viewing the film, not knowing exactly what this pure love of God is, how to react to it, what to do with it, and how and why it keeps pursuing us? What are we to make of this Holy Haunting for it will haunt you with its
holiness? - not only will its truth and beauty strike you down at the theater, but for sometime afterward. There will be no escape until you surrender to its embrace.

Given the great atrocities in our modern world, the wars, holocausts, abortive and greedy society, and growing numbers of people either taking God for granted or turning from him, Mel Gibson’s film is proving to accentuate these times as a time of God’s Divine Mercy. I hope to help lead you there. So let us begin.

Let us turn our attention to the crucifix [point to crucifix]. Let us look at it closely as we begin to enter our own experience of the passion of Christ. How does it affect your spiritual scenes? What do you see in it? What is it saying to you? Do you sense any penetrating fragrances? Can you touch it with your heart? Can you taste anything? Are you being refreshed by the blood and water that flows from it? Now, let us begin to fix our senses on the One who was “pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins” [Is. 53:5]. It is time to confront the holy haunting of the cross of Jesus Christ and be wounded by His pure love, healed, and then left shuttering with joy!

Again, we focus our attention on the film’s opening scene of a full moon [point to film clip slide]. Its light casts a haunting, bluish hue in the foggy darkness over the Garden of Gethsemane. The sound you hear as the camera pans down into the garden is a mysterious voice. It is the voice of Jesus praying the in ancient language he spoke, Aramaic. The calm of the night is a prelude to an immense suffering like no individual has ever experienced – it is the calm before the storm of suffering, a suffering that will envelope all humanity. Think of the worst suffering possible. This suffering was that and much more then we could ever imagine.

The Prophet Isaiah writes that Jesus would be treated harshly and endure it humbly [cf. Is. 53:7-9] - He would be arrested, brutally scourged, sentenced and lead off to die like a criminal and abandoned through it all by his closest friends and followers. Jesus was to put on the face of death and its desolating experience of darkness and despair and eventually be discarded in a tomb.
Like the suffering that looms in the night for Jesus, if we have not entered into the trials of immense physical and/or emotional suffering – you will. This suffering is inevitable for human beings – it waits for us. It looms in the stillness of our lives, waiting to arrest us. Whether it be the consequences of original sin, such as the death or separation of a loved one, or our own impending death, or the consequences of the personal sins of others or our own. Are we prepared like Jesus to face these calamities with a beautiful peace?

The prophet Isaiah writes, in that through it all, “He never said a word, freely embracing what was to be his lot like a lamb about to be slaughtered, a sheep about to be sheared. [cf. Is. 53:7]. For Jesus, the temptation would be to avoid this lot and think of another way. But there could be no other way. It would have to be God who “so loved the world that he gave his only Son” [Jn. 3:16]. It would have to be God that could stand in our place, face Satan, and roundly defeat the sting of sin and death, even transforming it into life giving power – that is beautiful!

The cross is the symbol of that victory. Can you sense the power of its pure love, a total self-giving love? It is a love that suffers for you, even while we take him for granted, rejecting, ridiculing, spitting on, and turning away from him.

Let us look more closely at what this love is [show film still of Jesus’ agony in garden].

The love of Christ has looked into the sinful hearts of humanity, hearts decaying and hallowed out from the most heinous human offenses due to the deadly sins of pride, envy, greed, sloth, anger, lust, and gluttony. Deadly sins try to fill the human heart but instead burn out a growing abyss of emptiness and despair. God’s pure love knows the truth behind these hollowed out hearts, and yet remains to face it even as it spits out its vileness into His face. Even in the midst of this abuse, Jesus says to us, “you are precious to me!” The visionary St. Maria Faustina Kowalska writes of this pure love in her diary as a “merciful love that is greater than all sin, greater than all evil, greater than death itself... a love poured out on all sinners...(and) no matter what we have done, God wants
us to repent and turn to His Mercy in Trust.” We must realize that the real pain and suffering that Jesus experienced on the cross was the sins of those who fail to Trust that God awaits them with his mercy of love, compassion, and forgiveness, and not disdain, hate, judgment and punishment. St. Faustina writes, “The greater the sinner, the greater the right he has to my Mercy… for a soul’s greatest wretchedness does not enkindle me with wrath, but rather, My Heart is moved towards it with greater mercy.” It is pure love that desires to suffer so the misery that deadly sin causes can be taken away and filled with His Divine Mercy.

Today, I ask you to seriously look into your hearts. Where are you contributing to the suffering of Jesus in His Passion? As you look upon him in the garden, what poison has been brought into your heart through the fruit of sin, preventing God’s mercy from entering (name it)? Is there anything you have buried in the dark cellar of your heart to be dealt with later, or in the hope of never having to face it? - but it will not go away. Its stench will eventually surface to disturb your peace. Now is the time to enter the power of Jesus’ Passion so he can help you unlock and uncover all that is not God.

But you cannot do this alone. Jesus wants to go with you. But first, you must ask yourself these questions. Do you really want to experience the pure love that God has to offer? Are you willing to ever more surrender yourself over to God’s ways? Before you make this decision, know this - as you look deep into the merciful heart of Jesus, realize there is a fountain of Mercy that awaits you. It is the Sacred Heart that was pierced on the cross for our offenses, and wants nothing more than to go with you and help you face the overwhelming pain and burden of sin that must be faced.

As you begin to experience the passion of Jesus Christ in greater depths, it requires only one thing from us – to “not be afraid” [Lk. 5:10] and willingly say, “Jesus, I Trust in You!” – that is in God’s infinite power of love and forgiveness for you that flows from what St. Maria Faustina Kowalska writes, ‘his Ocean of Mercy.’ Without this trust, it will be impossible for the sinner, let alone Mankind, to ever have true peace reign in hearts.

2 References to her writings are taken from *Tell My Priests*, compiled by Fr. George Kosicki, O.S.B., (Stockbridge, Mass.: Marians of the Immaculate Conception, 2002).

Experience the Passion: Complete Forgiveness

Isaiah 53: 4-6, 11

Rev. Don Woznicki

[If possible show film still/slide from Garden of Gethsemane scene]

The Prophet Isaiah writes, “All of us were sheep that were lost, each going his own way.”

Last week I pointed out how God’s pure love relentlessly pursues us no matter who we are and what we have done. It is a love that will haunt us with its mysterious beauty and power from which we will freely surrender to it or run from it. If we surrender to God’s love, it will only draw us deeper into his mysterious power of peace and joy. But if you reject and run from his pure love, it will not cease to haunt you, for you will constantly live in the fear and anxiety of having to face it – A pure love that will eventually be eternally impressed on the soul. For a soul, this is the epitome of agony, knowing the beauty, goodness, and splendor of God’s pure love, how it only can satisfy the soul, but being unable to accept and receive this merciful love – this is the ultimate Hell, the ultimate condemnation, for a soul resigned itself to an eternal existence of despair mired in the guilt and shame of its sins.

Today, let us enter deeper into our experience of Christ’s passion, so that we may become more aware of God’s pure love as known and experienced through His infinite Divine Mercy freely – a mercy offered as complete forgiveness. But this forgiveness does not come without any demands. The sinner is called to love and to love is to suffer. The sinner is called to face his sins, name them, take responsibility for them, feel true sorrow for the harms it causes, and desire to hate and eradicate it from one’s life. Most of all, God’s complete forgiveness requires the sinner to trust that Jesus wants to freely bear their sins on his back, nail them through his hands on the cross and offer them up as a fragrant sacrifice to God the Father – for the smell of total self-giving love is beautiful.
I have previously mentioned that God’s haunting love, when confronted and embraced, will strike you down, wound and heal, and empower you to love as God loves. But to be “love struck,” the sinner must be open and capable of receiving its thunderbolt. God’s love will not force itself on us, for than it would not be love. We all have a choice to accept or reject it. Are you willing and able to accept it?

Most would say of course! But people deny it all the time, knowing what is God’s way, yet choosing to do evil? The sinner, who does not do what they want, but does what they hate. [cf. Rom. 8: 15].¹ There are many people who stay away from Church because of the guilt they carry for the sins they think God will never forgive (e.g., numerous abortions, life of cheat and deceit in order to have power and fame, the mental and physical abuse inflicted on people in the worst way, life of hedonism). Have you heard someone even say that they are not holy and never will so its better if they are left alone?

Let us remember what Paul wrote, “I take delight in the law of God, in my inner self, but I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this body?” [Rom. 8:22-24] – Jesus Christ Crucified! But unrepentant sin in our lives weakens our will and ability to accept this free gift of mercy. And to add to our weakened will is Satan’s accusations and exploitations of our guilt and shame from sin. In the shadows of our souls, there Satan lurks to whisper to us that we are not good enough, our sins have condemned us, God does not want us, and there is no use even trying to ask for God’s forgiveness – under these assaults, what human being could remain capable of receiving God’s complete forgiveness? This is dangerous, for the only unforgivable sin is unrepentant sin – impossible for God to forgive if the sinner refuses to ask for it?

Let us enter more deeply into experiencing The Passion of Jesus Christ so that we might be found willing to eradicate sin in our lives and be holy – may we become enlightened to trust in God’s mercy through which he gives us the grace to be able to receive that
same mercy – Let us be rescued from the deadly deceptions of Satan who tries to keep us from trusting in God’s complete forgiveness.

[If possible, show a film still/clip of Jesus in Garden with Satan in the background] - Mel Gibson has drawn from the private revelations of the two mystics, Mary of Agreda (1602 –1665) and Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774 – 1824) for certain details in his film, *The Passion of Jesus Christ*. Come, let me take you deeper into the agony of the garden experience through a passage from Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich’s written account of the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ, “The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” [Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1983]. This passage was not necessarily written into the script of the film, but it does illustrate to you in more detail that there is nothing, not even the deceptive powers of Satan or the most heinous sins that can separate us from the love of Christ.

[Enter, the Garden of Gethsemane]

“No words can describe the sorrow which then oppressed his soul… Jesus went a few steps to the left, down a hill, and concealed himself beneath a rock, in a grotto about six feet deep… The earth sank gradually the further you entered this grotto, and the plants which were hanging from the rock screened its interior like a curtain from persons outside. His sorrow and anguish of soul continued to increase, and he was trembling all over when he entered the grotto to pray… the awful visions pursued him…and became more and more clear and distinct. Alas! This small cavern appeared to contain the awful picture of all sins, which had been or were committed from the fall of Adam to the end of the world, and the punishment, which they deserved… He fell on his face, overwhelmed with unspeakable sorrow, and all the sins of the world displayed themselves before him, under countless forms and in all their deformity. He took them all upon himself, and in prayer offered his own adorable Person to the justice of His Heavenly Father, in payment for so awful a debt. But Satan, who was enthroned amid all these horrors, and even filled with diabolical joy at the sight of them, let loose his fury against Jesus, and displayed before the eyes of his soul increasingly awful visions, at the same time addressing his adorable humanity in words such as these: ‘Do you take even this sin (place your most
heinous here) upon thyself? Are you willing to bear its penalty? Are you prepared to satisfy for all these sins?’… Satan brought forth innumerable temptations as he had formerly done in the desert, even daring to adduce various accusations against him (does Satan not do this to us?)… he (Satan) reproached Jesus with having been the cause of the massacre of the Innocents, as well as of the sufferings of his parents in Egypt, with not having saved John Baptist from death, refused to cure various sick persons… in the hopes of causing Jesus to waver, suggested to him every thought by which he would have tempted at the hour of death an ordinary mortal who might have performed all these actions. Among the sins of the world which Jesus took to himself, I saw also my own (Bl. Anne Catherine Emmerich)… At first Jesus looked calm, as he kneeled down and prayed, but after a time his soul became terrified at the sight of the innumerable crimes of men, and of their ingratitude towards God, and his anguish was so great that he trembled and shuddered as he exclaimed; ‘Father, if it is possible, let this chalice pass from me!…Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.’…his soul had to sustain a second interior combat, which lasted three-quarters of an hour. They (angels) showed him the satisfaction, which he would offer to Divine Justice… No tongue can describe what anguish and what horror overwhelmed the soul of Jesus at the sight of so terrible an expiation… I saw this at the time when the angels, filled with compassion, were desiring to console Jesus…In the first portion of the agony, Satan displayed before the eyes of Our Lord the enormity of that debt of sin which he was going to pay… ‘and what good will result from this sacrifice?’ then a most awful picture of the future displayed before his eyes and overwhelmed his tender heart with anguish…Jesus beheld all the future sufferings of his Apostles, disciples, and friends…the tepidity, malice, and corruption of an infinite number of Christians…scandals of all ages, down to the present day and even to the end of the world – every species of error, deception, mad fanaticism, obstinacy, and malice…Finally, I saw all who were separated from the Church plunged into the depths of infidelity, superstition, heresy, and false worldly philosophy; and they gave vent to their fierce rage by joining together in large bodies to attack the Church (of Christ)…it was as though Jesus himself had been torn into a thousand pieces!” [pp. 99-117].
Satan leads one to believe that one’s sins are so heinous, so reprehensible that God will never accept his repentance (the taste of Hell, here and now on earth). But even in the sight of these horrible visions, even as our Lord was being nailed to the cross, he cries out… “Forgive them Father, for they know not what they are doing.” - [Lk. 23:34].

Another tactic of Satan, as he tried on Our Savior, is to lead the soul to believe that the power of evil will prevail. If the sinner becomes convinced of this, he is lead to mistrust in the power of the cross, leaving the sinner to go his own way, lost and hopeless. The soul has turned away from the only One who can help and now relies on its own power and way for salvation. This is where the mistrust of God’s mercy leaves the poor soul wondering through the valley of darkness, vulnerable to the devouring attacks of Satan. Once a soul is unable to accept God’s mercy, it is only a matter of time before Satan’s assaults and exploits on the sinner’s guilt and shame leave him hopeless. And if the soul thinks it has a chance in solely facing and defeating Satan, then his own pride will leave him condemned as well.

The prophet Isaiah writes that, “He was spurned and avoided by men...one of those from whom men hide their faces...we held him in no esteem.” [Is. 53:4]. Even with full knowledge of the most heinous sins in all humanity, Jesus freely desired to bear our punishment, to endure the sufferings meant for us, and still offer himself as our Suffering Servant.

So why would we fear to humble ourselves with our sins before a loving God rather than fear facing the power of Satan who desires to kill us?

The 20th century visionary, St. Maria Faustina Kowalska, writes in her private revelation diary that “even if the sins of a soul are as dark as night, when the sinner turns to My Mercy, he gives Me the greatest praise.” for the sinner has surrendered to His Divine Mercy of pure love and complete forgiveness, he has willingly said yes to the gift of mercy offered through suffering!
Today, I invite you again, to experience the Passion by looking into your hearts. Now is the time to offer to Jesus what enslaves you. Step down into the grotto of the garden and place your current fears and sins on his trembling body, and resolve not to add to that burden in the future – and even if you should, his love still burns for you. He just needs your humble submission and trust in placing your fears and sins into the flame of his loving heart. Trust in his complete forgiveness and do not be afraid of what this Mercy will call you to do – for its power will heal and transform your hallowed out hearts into fountains of love, peace, and joy.

1 All biblical citations are taken from *The Catholic Study Bible, New American Bible* (New York: Oxford Press, Inc., 1990)
2 References to her writings are taken from *Tell My Priests*, compiled by Fr. George Kosicki, O.S.B., (Stockbridge, Mass.: Marians of the Immaculate Conception, 2002).
Experience the Passion: Ultimate Wholeness

Isaiah 53:5, 11

Rev. Don Woznicki,

In the last two weeks of entering into the experience of the Passion of Jesus Christ, I have guided us to the cross [point to crucifix] so that we might begin to experience God’s pure love, to not be afraid, and to willingly surrender to it rather than run from it. Today, let us immerse ourselves deeper into experiencing the Passion of Christ so that it may begin to heal us from any debilitating consequences of sin.

God calls us TO BE HOLY. God, Our Creator, wants ultimate blessedness and joy for us. He created us to share and manifest his glory. Sin is what de-humanizes us, causes us to be less whole, less human, and less joyful. But to strive TO BE HOLY, is to strive to be a whole person. A holy life is what ultimately gives us joy – ultimate wholeness.

I have asked groups of children and adults if they want to be holy. Usually, hardly anybody raises his or her hand. Some people shy away from holiness almost as if it is evil, thinking holiness will rob their freedom and individuality. Sometimes evil is even looked at as a friend. Some people will admit that a little evil is good, just as long as one is doing more good than evil. Before I was a priest and in the “game” of dating, many men and women found that “a little bad” was something that was sexy, mysterious, and alluring about those they wanted to date. Some people think that there is no such thing as evil – there are only wrong choices and actions due to stupid and ignorant choices. In any case, these are considered amoral situations that provide an opportunity for people to learn and grow. Tell that to someone who has lost a loved to a heinous murder or has just been raped. We must not let Satan fool us into thinking that evil either is a friend or does not exist. Evil does exist, and no part of it is a friend (e.g., 9/11, holocaust).

What does sin look like? Have you seen it? Can you pick it up and touch it, or even try to destroy it? (e.g., beer can, cigarette, gun – in themselves are they sin?)
Many people have a tendency to think of sin as something positive, that is something tangible, something you can point to and say that is sin. But sin is actually the absence of good. In the Book of Genesis, “God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good.” [Gen. 1:31]. So what exactly is evil? There is physical evil, blindness for example, where the eye is absent of the goodness of sight. There is moral evil, abortion or lying for example, where the decision to do the right thing is absent of the good to protect innocent life or the truth, respectively. There is what is called original sin, where the sin of Adam has left all of humanity deprived of the original graces that perfected the human person’s original created nature (infused knowledge, absence of the inclination to sin, bodily immortality). There is what is called personal sin where a person’s thought, word, or deed is knowingly thought, said, or done and is absent of the goodness of God’s will. If sin is absent of good, sin cannot be good for us. Its damage is that of destroying, not creating, and what does grow is an abyss of emptiness in the presence of evil. The consequences of sin keep us from a firm trust in God’s Mercy and hinder our ability to love like God loves – TO BE HOLY so that we can extend God’s Mercy to others - to share in this mission is also to share in his passion and death for the sake of extending Divine Mercy to others who need to experience it. It is for the sake of love. Let me know take you to the path to ultimate wholeness.

[If possible, show film stills/slides of the scourging/carrying of the cross/crucifixion] - The prophet Isaiah writes, “Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured...he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins. Upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, By his stripes we were healed...through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear.” - [Is. 53:4, 5, 11].

I ask again, do you want to be holy? Are you willing to surrender to God’s love and his ways so that he can make you holy for sake of loving like God loves? Let us not just look and adore the cross, or even just walk closer to it. Now its time to step inside The Passion with your spiritual senses and feel his stripes so it can heal you. To love like God is to suffer with him, also bearing the sins of others so that they too can open themselves to the salvific and healing power of cross. To love is to suffer because to love
is to sacrifice and as Archbishop Fulton Sheen once said, “one cannot give one’s heart away and keep it too.”\(^2\) Many times this hurts, but it hurts so good because one helps to heal and is being healed in the process – to share in this love of Christ is what makes us whole…more fully alive, more fully human!

You may say that it is evil to suffer at all for Jesus did that once and for all to take away all suffering. But God calls us to share in the suffering he offered some 2000 years ago, “I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.” [Col. 1:24]. This passage does not mean Jesus’ sacrifice was not complete rather that it extends through time. We are the instruments to extend it through time to others.

When we try to avoid and alleviate suffering, we are either trying to avoid suffering that is brought on through evil (i.e., cancer, abuse, war, addiction) or through love. God does not calls us to contribute to the latter, but as we look upon the cross of Christ, he does invite us into a suffering brought on through love. Ask anyone who has been through a suffering brought on through love or willed by God. There is great value experienced in this suffering, for if it is a suffering born out of pure love – through this suffering, the soul becomes like the Savior and what greater value can you think of? This is the cost, if you had to name any, of the Divine Mercy if we accept it, for any gift accepted effects us and invokes a response from us. We are able to receive God’s mercy through the grace of the Holy Spirit, but the response is to the call to give that gift of mercy to the world through “Works of Mercy” – to love like God – to suffer like God, for to love is to suffer.

We will only be able to do this loving through the grace of God. A suffering heart must remain open to God’s graces so that they might flow through to others. The water source for the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea come from the River Jordan. The Dead Sea only has an inlet and not outlet. Its waters become stagnant and smelly, dead. The Sea of Galilee has an outlet that keeps its waters fresh. An open heart must have an outlet of loving works – namely, a working faith, for a faith without works is dead [Jas. 2:26] – and a dead faith debilitates our ability to accept the gift of God’s mercy.
Will our works of mercy save us? - Absolutely not. Only the work of Jesus Christ crucified has and will save us. Works of Mercy are our continued response in accepting the gift of Divine Mercy. It is through these works that more of the light and strength of God’s grace is given to the soul to accept God’s will and carry on his work on earth – a soul is strengthened to continually say ‘yes’ to God’s will and to be a part of his mission. It is a working faith that manifests the glory of God in the world – ultimate wholeness.

[If possible, show a film still/slide of Jesus on cross when he is saying, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” – Lk. 23:34] - “Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.” [Mat. 5:7]. If we are to be merciful through works of mercy, we must love like God loves and realize the urgency and necessity of this is our lives.

Again, I take you to the cross as seen in the film, The Passion of Jesus Christ. Let us learn from the Savior himself about how to love. In particular, let us enter into the passion of Christ, with Jesus on the cross and the two criminals on each side of him. See and hear in their conversation, the urgent message that faces all mankind – it is a message that says that before the Day of Justice (Day of Judgment) God is sending the Day of Mercy. But the Day of Justice draws near! The visionary, Bl. Anne Catherine Emmerich, who wrote of her private revelations of the Passion of Christ, wrote this about the conversation.

“(After Jesus said), ‘Father forgive them…,’ one of the criminals cried out, ‘If you are the Christ, save yourself and us.’… (the other criminal said to the other), “how can you insult him when he prays for you…neither do you fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation. And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done no evil…remember you are at the point of death, and repent.” (Then the humble criminal) turned to Jesus and confessed his sins and said, ‘Lord, if you condemn me it will be your justice…And Jesus replied, “You will experience my mercy.”…and as death approached, (this criminal) raised his head and trustingly and with humility and hope said to Jesus, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”…and Jesus replied,
“Amen, I say to you, this day you will be with me in Paradise.” [cf. Lk. 23:39-43].

The visionary, St. Maria Faustina Kowalska, writes in her diary that God’s mercy is infinite, but can only be tapped into with a repentant, humble, and contrite heart. God does not want to punish mankind to eternal condemnation rather He desires to lead all to His Merciful Heart. His truth and justice punish only when unrepentant sinners force Him to do so. Like the hard-hearted criminal, he who refuses to face the truth about himself, repent, and pass through the door of mercy must pass through the door of justice – here, you will be judged on your merits alone without the most glorious and triumphant merit of Jesus Christ crucified attached. As with both criminals, God prolongs the time of mercy for the sake of sinners, but the time of justice is near. Do not take this time for granted for everyone’s time is short in that everyone’s life is short and death is certain for all – we just know not the hour like. [cf. Matt. 24:42]. Now it the time for all to repent, trust in God’s mercy, and spread this same mercy to those who need to experience mercy, especially the least desirable and your enemies (name them here).

Our Lord commands us to give this mercy away that we receive:

“a scholar of the law who stood up to test him (Jesus) and said, ‘Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Jesus said to him, ‘What is written in the law?…He said in reply, ‘You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.’ He replied to him, ‘You have answered correctly; do this and you will live.’ But because he wished to justify himself, he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ (Jesus replied), It is the one (Samaritan) who treated the robbers with mercy that was neighbor to them. Jesus commands us, ‘Go and do likewise.”’ [cf. Lk. 10: 25-37].

“he himself (God) is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” [cf. Lk. 6: 35-36].
What does a work of mercy look like? – Like pure love and complete forgiveness. The Catholic Tradition offers what is called seven corporal and seven spiritual works of mercy, not as an end all list of good works, but as a biblical guide to help direct our thoughts, words, and actions.

**Corporal Works of Mercy** (offers the sacrifice of ones material blessings in time, talent, and treasure).

1. **Feed the Hungry and Give Drink to the Thirsty:** Acts of charity that start at the home and extend to the community, especially the least desirable.
2. **Clothe the Naked.**
3. **Comfort the Imprisoned:** not only those in prisons but the sick and elderly who maybe trapped at home. Spend time with them and give them material aid as well as emotional support.
4. **Shelter the Homeless**
5. **Visit the Sick:** a short visit to a hospital or nursing home is time-consuming, but for the person being visited, that time given is very precious.
6. **Bury the Dead:** Give support to the grieving, aid them materially or spiritually as they deal with their sorrowful loss.

**Spiritual Works of Mercy** (Acts of mercy that do not require material means but can provide an even more beneficial spiritual support).

1. **Admonish sinners:** taking time to give needed and loving correction through standing up for moral principles at work, school, or home, and disciplining those (especially children), whose wills are not steadfast in the truth.
2. **Counsel the doubtful:** Give Christian counsel as an approach to solving problems, especially when one doubts their faith or is confused over certain moral demands of gospel living.
3. **Instruct the Uninformed:** Giving instruction to another helps to foster their faith to seek understanding in a gospel based faith and morality.
4. **Comfort the Sorrowful**: Giving a empathetic ear or just being present with a sorrowing person.

5. **Bear Wrongs Patiently**: Have patience with others as well as your own personal pain and suffering resulting from original, social, and personal sin.

6. **Forgive Offenses**: Forgive all injuries whether voluntary and involuntary.

7. **Pray for the Living and the Dead**: It is impossible to physically aid the many people who need our help. All people, dead or alive, benefit from our prayer.

This week, as we attempt to enter ever more deeply into the experience of the Passion of Jesus Christ, realize that now is the time to firmly embrace the cross of Christ in your life – embracing a suffering for the sake of loving God and neighbor. Now is the time to commit your life to God so you can commit your life to holiness. It is truly a blessed life with purpose and meaning – where we become whole/holy, a life of ultimate wholeness.

“Let His Passion become imprinted on your body in an invisible manner – through suffering!… “Someday we will know the value of suffering, but then we will no longer be able to suffer – the present moment is ours!” [St. Faustina’s Diary, Paragraph 963-5].

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1 All biblical citations are taken from the *Catholic Study Bible, New American Bible* (New York: Oxford Press, Inc., 1990).
Experience the Passion: Everlasting Life

Isaiah 52:13-15, 53:12

Rev. Don Woznicki

St. John of the Cross says: “I saw the river over which every soul must pass to reach the kingdom of heaven, and the name of the river was suffering…and I saw the boat which carries souls across that river, and the name of the boat was love.”

-Let us again look upon Mel Gibson’s film, The Passion of Jesus Christ, at a time after Jesus proclaimed from the cross, “It is finished.” [Jan. 19:30]. [If possible, show film still/slide of Jesus in Mary’s arms – “The Pieta”] – Michelangelo sculpted this; Mel Gibson has recently put it on film.

Last week I directed us to the cross and to “not be afraid” [Lk. 5:10] but to embrace the suffering we experience through it. But the way of Christ is to bring the joy of everlasting life to us, not only in heaven, but also here and now on earth! When we enter the experience of the Passion of Jesus Christ it is hard to see and understand how this translates into a personal and tangible experience of Everlasting Life.

The prophet Isaiah writes, “Many people were shocked when they saw him; he was so disfigured that he hardly looked human.” [Is. 52:13]. Many people believed Jesus might have been the political Messiah of the Israelites, saving them from their political oppressors on earth – the triumph of the cross is partly this and so much more!

The prophet Isaiah also writes, “Many nations will marvel at him and kings will be speechless with amazement…they will see and understand something they had never known.” [Is. 53:12]. What exactly is it that they will see and understand? What do we see and understand as we look upon Our Lord expired in his sorrowful Mother’s bloodied arms? It appears as an image of utter defeat and tragedy.
For most of us, it is difficult to see with our eyes beyond this image. Does not our present experiences keep us weighted down with our own walks down the way of the cross? Each of us carry our crosses of sorrow and tragedy, waiting to be nailed to this cross and die, only to leave our loved ones with a picture of our “pieta.” – where is our certainty of victory?

Let us begin to open the eyes of our heart and through the lens of hope experience victory now. Mel Gibson’s film has tried to direct our sight and understanding beyond the “Pieta” to an image that all nations will come to eventually see and understand - when all will know of God’s Great Divine Mercy. [If possible, show film still/slide of the light brightly shining on the place where Jesus had been laid to rest] - It is our hope that keeps our faith looking forward to the triumphant Resurrection of Christ and His eternal Kingdom. A hope that is not wishful thinking, but a certain hope in that the risen Jesus is present to us on our “way of the cross” and not asleep, and most definitely, not dead.

But there are many of us who really are suffering and not for something they did (e.g., a mother loses two of their three adolescent children in an automobile accident because of the negligence of another driver; brain cancer effects a 12 year old boy, etc.) – Why God? In all this, how do we know the risen Christ has truly walked out of the tomb and is present, let alone tangible to us?

We can tangibly know of the risen Christ’s presence in our lives through the experiences of a life lived in loving God and neighbor – seeking God out through an active faith. It is through the struggle of seeking him that we know he is there. As we come to the end of this four-week journey of experiencing the Passion of Jesus Christ, may I guide your focus to the here and now as an opportunity to see and understand beyond the image of the Pieta. It is an opportunity to experience the powerful presence of Jesus who walked out of the tomb. Here are three biblical images to carry in your minds eye as you venture forward in life to experience of the Passion of Christ. I hope these three images may help you to tangibly experience what St. Faustina Kowalska writes of Jesus’ “Ocean of Mercy,” as fresh and flowing today in our midst.
The first biblical scene: Easter night, when the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room. The doors were locked because the disciples were in fear of the Jews who might arrest them. The disciples also felt sorrow over abandoning Jesus during his passion.

“Jesus came (through the locked doors) and stood in their midst and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ …As the Father has sent me, so I send you…Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” [Jn. 20:19-23].

♦ Jesus pursues us, especially when we are locked in fear from the attacks of the world or due to our own moral failures as he did with the disciples. Jesus wants to extend his infinite mercy into our lives, coming even through the locked doors of the hearts of the most hardened sinners. If you are immersed in the most heinous sin, feeling that God does not desire to see your face, know that even in these moments he wants to enter your heart and heal it through his gift of mercy.

♦ How do you know he is present through this image? Trust in him! Repent and receive his mercy, then feel the peace that brings. Who do you think is that peace?

♦ The upper room image also provides a tangible experience of God’s mercy in the world today because it was through this event that God gave his authority to extend his mercy of love and complete forgiveness to the world. In the Catholic Tradition, that forgiveness is tangibly offered and experienced through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The priest is ordained to sit in the place of the community and act as the minister of Christ’s love and mercy to those who sincerely repent and seek to amend their lives. Again, repentant sinners can tangibly know of God’s presence through the peace it brings to his heart.

-The second scene: Calvary, and in particular, the moment when Jesus was pierced with a lance and blood and water flowed from his side. [If possible, show a film still/slide of
blood and water spraying the centurion knelt beside the cross]. Does the blood and water of Mercy touch you today?

"One soldier thrust a lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out." [Jn. 19:34].

♦ Water - All human beings are subject to the penalty of sin of death as a result of the fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve. St. Paul writes in Romans 8:19, “For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want.” All are inclined to sin and live according to the spirit of the flesh - it is impossible for our good works to save us from this destiny – it is impossible for works of the flesh to lift our bodies up to an eternal life in the Spirit of Christ.

→ Our only hope is to rely on the power of Christ that saves us and heals us through the free gift of grace and mercy offered to those who take responsibility for their sins and desire to amend their lives, and live by the spirit of Christ rather than the spirit of the flesh. This power of Mercy is initially offered through the tangible grace of the cleansing waters of baptism. There is nothing so bad that we can do to condemn ourselves except the unforgivable sin – namely, to reject God’s free gift of Mercy offered to cleanse and heal us.

♦ Blood - At the Last supper Jesus “took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which will be given up for you; do this in memory of me.’ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you.” [Lk. 22:19-20]… “Do this in remembrance of me.” [1 Cor. 11:24]… When Christians all over the world ‘do this in remembrance of me,’ they are expressing in a tangible way with each other their unity of faith. In the Catholic Tradition, it is believed that God’s Mercy is an infinite fount of grace that comes through partaking in an act of communion. This is an act of actually receiving the real Body and Blood of Christ as was offered on Calvary – it is an act that feels grace in that one can taste and know of the goodness of the Lord, God’s life poured into the soul.
The third scene: Jesus as High Priest, dressed in the white linen of the priest, coming out of the Holy of Holies of Heaven - the mercy seat of the Father. [Sir. 50:18-21 and Lev. 16:1-4]. This is an image of Jesus extending his mercy to us from the Holy of Holies of Heaven as our “compassionate” High Priest, eagerly awaiting for us to confidently approach his throne of mercy, “Christ, offered once to take away the sins of many, (and) will appear a second time, not to take away sin but to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him.” [Heb. 9:28] – We feel his presence through trusting, having confidence, and security in our salvation.

For now, we have come to the end of this experience into the Passion of Christ. May your experience continue to grow ever more deeper and tangible in God’s Divine Mercy of pure love, complete forgiveness, ultimate wholeness, and everlasting life.

-Shema O Israel! - hear all you people of faith! (strong, weak, wavering, angry, wounded and blinded by sin…) - hear all you people of faith (even those of another god) - hear all you people of no faith (who even claim no god), “The Lord is Our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength…Bind them (Law of Love) at your wrist…let them be a pendant on your forehead.” [Deut. 6:4-8].

Hear ALL you people, there is no escape of the Holy Haunting of the One, True, God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). His pure love pursues us through the murk and mire that covers our souls, blows off its hard and crusty covering with complete forgiveness, gives the soul ultimate wholeness. This love pierces and penetrates the soul’s depths, then shocks and rattles it, embraces and caresses it, nourishes and refreshes it, and warms and illuminates it, causing the soul to shutter, flutter, and tingle – For now the soul has been struck, wounded, and now radiates joyfully with the everlasting life of God.

You will either barricade your heart from God’s mercy and then run from it for the rest of your life, leaving your heart empty, stone cold, and lifeless - or you will surrender to your call. Let God’s merciful love take possession of you, touching and
filling your soul to the furthest depths, and satisfying and lifting you to the highest plateaus imaginable.

All in all, you must trust in what God can do for you. Satan, the prince of darkness, is real and active in this world, trying to deceive anyone who will listen to the lies that love is pleasure and not some worthless sacrifice and senseless suffering. But do not be afraid! [Lk. 5:12]. Now is the time to enter ever more deeply into the experience of the Passion of Christ whose power has triumphed over Satan. Come closer to the suffering Jesus on the cross and see, hear, smell, touch, and taste the wisdom, the truth, the love, the joy, the promise of everlasting life, that THE DIVINE MERCY freely offers. This power of God’s love and joy is yours if only you trust and accept what it has to offer. Then, may it be bound on your wrist, worn as a pendant on your forehead, and be forever imprinted on your soul!

**Psalm 20**

May the Lord answer in time of trial;
May the name of Jacob’s God protect you.

May he send you help from his shrine
And give you support from Zion.
May he remember all your offerings
And receive your sacrifice with favor.

May he give you your heart’s desire
And fulfill every one of your plans.
May we ring out our joy at your victory
And rejoice in the name of our God.
May the Lord grant all your prayers.

I am sure now that the Lord
Will give victory to his anointed,
Will reply from his holy heaven
With the mighty victory of his hand.

Some trust in chariots or horses,
But we in the name of the Lord.
They will collapse and fall,
But we shall hold and stand firm.

Give victory to the king, O Lord,
Give answer on the day we call.