

CALVARY

A Love Story



Promises to Hold Onto



Desmond Ford and **Eliezer Gonzalez**

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and
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Biblical Quotations

Where Bible passages have been referenced, the following translations have been used: The Living Bible, New Living Translation, Good News Translation, NET Bible, The Message, New International Version, English Standard Version, International Standard Version, Word English Bible.

Where no Bible reference appears, the authors have paraphrased the original text.

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*But God showed his great love for us
by sending Christ to die for us
while we were still sinners
(Romans 5:8, The Living Bible).*

Introduction

Jesus: God with Us

The most influential person of history is Jesus Christ. He is the only person who ever lived who claimed to be God, and yet was considered sane by the best of his generation.

It can be said that the most natural explanation for Christ is that he was supernatural, for if he were good, then he must have been God, as he claimed to be, for a good man does not lie about himself.

Jesus said: [God] “has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; he has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind and to release the oppressed” (Luke 4:18).

That was his work. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by Satan. There were whole villages where

there was not a moan of sickness in any house, for Jesus had passed through them and healed all their sick. Love, mercy, and compassion were revealed in every act of his life.

But the chief message of Jesus' life is his death and resurrection. It tells us that a suffering God is at the heart of Christianity. Only Christians worship a God who was wounded for us.

A wonderfully appropriate event occurs at the beginning of the last week of Jesus' life. Mary Magdalene, breaks an alabaster jar of expensive perfume and anoints her Lord. Here is a symbol of the Gospel: Jesus' body that would be broken on the Cross—God's extravagant gift to the world. As the perfume of Mary's gift filled the house, so the perfume of God's love went out from the Cross to fill the whole world.

Chapter One

The Lamb of God

Yes, unbelievable as it was, Jesus was planning to die—to allow himself to be killed by his enemies. He had come to this earth to rescue the world from the curse of sin, to pay the price for sin so we would not need to suffer its penalty. That price was death.

The heart of the Bible is the Gospel, and the heart of the Gospel is the Cross. This is the story of how God has solved the problem of sin in the world. Jesus' death on the Cross is the event that tells us the whole story of how God loves us.

At the Cross we learn to understand God. Everything in the Bible either points towards the Cross or refers back to it. Without Jesus' death on the Cross, there wouldn't be any happy ending to

the Bible story, or to the world's history. Without the Cross, our lives would have no hope, and death would be a black pit of nothingness.

The Cross changes everything. Despair becomes joy, death becomes life, and ugliness becomes beauty.

Early in Jesus' ministry the Jewish teacher Nicodemus came to visit him. Jesus told him: "God loved the world

*For the Son
of Man came
to seek and
save those
who are lost
(Luke 19:10).*

so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Nicodemus didn't understand the full

meaning of Jesus' words until later, when he knew the whole story.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day wanted him dead because his message was the opposite of what they taught. It

wasn't about keeping their rules: it was about love. It taught a new way of finding salvation.

**FOR GOD
SO LOVED
THE WORLD
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THAT
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JOHN 3:16**

Chapter Two

Betrayed by a Friend

Jesus and his disciples had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. He knew the time for his death had come, and he also knew there was a plot to arrest him.

At the first Passover, God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. God had sent a series of plagues to encourage the Pharaoh to release his people. The final

|| *Jesus' message
was about love
and a new way
to find God.*

plague was the most terrible of all: the firstborn of every family was killed by the angel of death in

the middle of the night. Only the firstborn of those who had smeared the blood of the sacrificed lamb on their doorposts was saved. God told them this was a picture

of the salvation he would bring to every man, woman and child, but they did not understand.

In the time of Jesus, most Jews, as they celebrated the Passover, looked forward to the time when God would rescue their nation from the Romans. The real meaning of the Passover was very different.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, Jesus took his disciples to a private room to eat the special Passover supper together.

Firstly, Jesus gave his disciples an acted-out picture of God's plan of redemption. Jesus took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist and washed his disciples' feet. They were astonished, because servants normally washed the guests' feet. When Jesus performed this ritual, it became a picture of how he had left his glorious place beside God the Father to descend to this earth, to wash away our sins with his sacrifice.

While they ate, he announced that one

of his twelve disciples would betray him. The man's name was Judas, and he had been one of Jesus' special friends during his ministry. But Jesus could read his mind, and knew his guilty secret. He sent Judas on his way. "Do what you have to do," he told him.

Judas wasn't a 'bad' man. In fact, he was very devout. He had been appointed the treasurer of Jesus' band of disciples. But

*Jesus washed
the dust from
his disciples' feet.
He has washed
away our sins
with his sacrifice
on the Cross.*

he didn't agree with Jesus' style. He was bitter because Jesus hadn't moved to set up his kingdom on earth, with an important place for Judas.

Judas had offered to lead the priests and their soldiers to Jesus in exchange for thirty pieces of silver. That's a very large amount of money in today's terms. He took the priests and soldiers to the

garden of Gethsemane where he knew Jesus would be praying.

Judas represents all those who pretend to follow Christ but who actually deny him by their behaviour. We see this demonstrated when he kisses Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus warned that there would always be people who were not genuine followers of God. Jesus is always ready to forgive sins when people come to him in genuine repentance. But part of that genuine repentance is for a person to be 'obedient unto death' just as Jesus was.

Gardens of Sin and Salvation

The Bible story began with the story of creation, and man's first home in a garden. God made the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, in his image, as his children. They disobeyed God, bringing sin, death and misery into the world. The crucifixion story begins in another garden,

the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus begins the work of paying the price for Adam and Eve's sin.

In the Garden of Eden, man was lost. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus began his work of redemption.

Jesus left his disciples and went a little further by himself to pray. He knew what was to happen that night and it was here that Jesus shed his first blood for us. Jesus was in agony as he prayed to God about the ordeal he was facing. "His sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood" (Luke 22:44).

Judas arrived with a band of priests and soldiers. He greeted Jesus with a kiss. It was the sign to the soldiers that this was the man they had to arrest.



The other disciples, who had slept while Jesus wept and prayed, woke, horrified at what was happening. They wanted to fight the soldiers.

The Bible tells us that Peter cut off the right ear of the High Priest's servant. But Jesus stopped them, and healed the servant.

He turned to the priests' soldiers, asking them: "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? I was with you every day in the temple and you didn't lay a hand on me. But you've come to me under cover of darkness."

Judas has no role in the story of Jesus after this. We're told that, too late, he realised what he had done. After Jesus had been condemned to death, Judas was filled with remorse. He took the thirty pieces of silver back to the high priests. "I have sinned", he told them, "for I have betrayed an innocent man."

"What do we care?" they retorted. "That's your problem."

Judas threw the silver at their feet and the pieces scattered across the floor. Then he went away and hanged himself.

This is the other tree in the story of the crucifixion: the tree Judas used to hang himself. He died a lonely death by his own hand because he had rejected his Saviour. Judas' death reminds us that there is no salvation and no comfort apart from the Cross.

Trees of Sin, Death and Life

Even my close friend whom I trusted, he who shared meals with me, has turned against me (Psalm 41:9).

In the centre of the Garden of Eden was the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It was beautiful, and it had delicious fruit. The devil told Adam and Eve it would make them wise, but it did not. When they ate the fruit, their disobedience introduced sin, misery and death into the world.

Thousands of years later, the Cross on which Jesus was crucified, made of the

wood of a tree, shows us the true wisdom of God. The Cross is a terrible picture of the results of man's evil, but it is also beautiful because it reveals the goodness of God. Calvary has transformed the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil into a Tree of Life for all who believe.

In the first garden, the Garden of Eden, mankind disobeyed God and was lost. In the other garden, the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus obeyed God and saved the human race. In Eden, Adam and Eve sinned; in Gethsemane, Jesus suffered.

"My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done"
(Luke 22:39).

Hundreds of years earlier, the ancient Hebrew prophet Daniel had a special dream that helps to describe the meaning of Jesus' Cross. He dreamt of a tree that filled the whole earth and became the

source of food and rest for all creatures. This tree is a symbol of the Cross, the 'tree' that Jesus died on. The Cross gives us food for our spiritual life and its salvation gives us rest and shelter in God.

Chapter Three

An Innocent Man On Trial

Jesus was taken to the temple where he endured a long night of trial and abuse. This ordeal reminds us that we all face trials in our lives – no one can avoid them. But trials can help keep us close to God.

Jesus was flogged and spat on. He was insulted and mocked. Because people had called him the 'King of the Jews', the soldiers threw a robe over his bleeding shoulders, and put a stick in his hand as a fake sceptre.

The Crown of Thorns

The final insult was a 'crown' woven from a thorn bush, which was jammed on his head, piercing his skin and making the blood drip down his face.



Remember that Jesus wore a crown of thorns when he deserved a crown of gold and precious jewels. Because we are all sinners, we deserve the crown of thorns, but Jesus wore it in our place.

Caiaphas and the High Priests

At one stage during his trial, Jesus was brought before the high priest. Caiaphas was possibly the most powerful religious leader in the land. Twenty thousand priests served him and his word was law throughout the nation. His duty was to save the Jewish church from its enemies.

During his last recorded day of preaching and teaching, Jesus accused the religious leaders of blaspheming God, and of being thieves and murderers because they put religious rituals above the important things of God's law: love, righteousness, mercy and faith.

Here we see the contrast between the church leaders and Jesus. Jesus accused

them of being heartless leaders of a meaningless temple, the blind leaders of the blind, the fanatics who had lost all sense of the really important things of God. And Jesus said he had come to save the church—their church! No wonder they were angry and afraid! Jesus challenged everything they stood for.

The same can happen to any religion unless God's Spirit continues to be heard and obeyed. Jesus' interview with Caiaphas reminds us that no church can put itself between people and God. We must choose God's will every day, even if it conflicts with our traditions and desires. Otherwise we cannot be God's disciples. The Cross reminds us that staying true to God is not easy. Every day we must fall on our knees, asking God: "What do you want me to do?"

*Jesus taught
about the really
important
things of God.* ||

Barabbas

While Jesus was being tried, a condemned man was waiting in the cells below the temple for his execution. His name was Barabbas, a murderer.

The Roman governor and judge, Pontius Pilate, was uneasy. His wife told him to have nothing to do with Jesus, and called him “this just man.” But how could he solve this problem?

Then he had an idea. It was the custom to pardon a condemned prisoner at Passover. He decided to offer the people a choice. He could either release that dangerous murderer, Barabbas, or he could release Jesus: the people could choose.

But the chief priests whipped up the crowd to demand that Barabbas be released instead of Jesus.

Pilate was puzzled. “But if I release Barabbas, what shall I do with this man you call your king?”

The crowd shouted back, “Crucify him!”

The Bible tells us that Pilate was afraid of a riot and was anxious to please the people, so he released Barabbas, ordered Jesus flogged with a lead-tipped whip and handed him over to be crucified.

Pilate had been forced to make a decision between the two men. He said, "I find no fault in him", but that was not enough. He still rejected Jesus.

The mob was also forced to choose. And so are we. In every choice, we accept either Jesus or the devil.

And that decision decides everything else in our lives.

How did Barabbas feel?
He was condemned to

*Jesus has
taken your
place; you
are free.* |||

death and there was nothing he could do to save himself. Then, unexpectedly, he was told: "You are free. Someone else has taken your place."

Perhaps Barabbas followed the procession to the place of crucifixion to get a look at the man who had taken his

place. Perhaps he stayed to watch and became convinced that God had truly died in his place. Perhaps Barabbas became one of Jesus' disciples that day.

Barabbas represents every person who has ever lived. God's law has condemned us and we are helpless to redeem ourselves. But Jesus has taken our place and has suffered as we deserve to.

When Pilate's wife begged him not to have anything to do with Jesus, she was asking the impossible. We cannot ignore or avoid Jesus. We must choose. We must either cry, "Crucify him", or we crown him Lord of all.

Suppose Barabbas hadn't believed the messenger. Suppose he had refused the offer of his freedom, thinking it was just a cruel joke. Or suppose he said to the messenger, "When I become a better person, I will leave this prison."

Impossible? No, not impossible. Many people treat the Gospel's invitation like this

every day. But Barabbas wasn't so stupid. God grant that we may not be, either.

Take His Cross

Finally, Jesus was condemned to death. Then began the terrible walk out of the city, carrying the cross on which he was to die.

Jesus was exhausted, and stumbled under his heavy load. The soldiers pulled a man from the crowd and forced him to carry Jesus' cross through the streets of Jerusalem. His name was Simon, and he came from a place called Cyrene in North Africa. What a burden he carried!

We are told that this had a profound effect on the rest of his life. Simon is a symbol of the millions of people who have been touched, and whose lives have been completely changed by the Cross of Jesus.



Chapter Four

At the Foot of the Cross

The Place of the Skull

The place of Jesus' death was a small hill called Golgotha, which means 'the place of the skull', perhaps because of its shape. Executions were carried out there, and the bones and skulls of people who had been executed lay all over the ground. It was a horrible place.

Think for a moment about the symbols in the name of this place. A skull is an empty head. Perhaps it symbolises those who do not accept Jesus' sacrifice, those who consider Christianity to be foolishness. They cannot understand love as strong as God's love for humanity. But for a person who accepts the gospel, Golgotha, 'the place of the skull' represents the wisdom

of God where the Head of the church gave himself for everyone.

Golgotha was outside the gates of Jerusalem, a place of fear. When people were banished from the city, the gates were shut and they could not return. They may have had leprosy or some other awful disease, or perhaps they were banished as a punishment for wrongdoing.

Jesus was punished for our sins outside the gates of Jerusalem, so we can live forever inside the great city of salvation—heaven—which is often called the New Jerusalem.

Thousands of years earlier, God had instructed

*There they
crucified him,
and with him
two other men,
one on either
side, and Jesus
in between
(John 19:18).*

Abraham to take his son Isaac to a hill called Mount Moriah. There, God told him to build a stone altar and sacrifice his

son as he would normally sacrifice a lamb. Abraham obeyed this terrible command, but God intervened at the last moment and gave Abraham a substitute sacrifice, so Isaac was spared. It was a lesson in how God would one day provide a substitute sacrifice for our sins.

The Time of the Crucifixion

At the first Passover, every household had to kill a lamb, then smear some of the lamb's blood on the doorpost of their home as a sign of God's protection.

Jesus became the Lamb of God and died, not just to save one family or one nation, but everyone who has ever lived.

The lamb was killed before the Children of Israel escaped from Egypt. This has meaning too. Jesus had to die *before* we could be rescued from sin. The Bible tells us that Jesus died for us, not after we'd told him we were sorry for our sins, but "while we were still sinners".

How Did Jesus Die?

The time when Jesus lived on this earth was a very cruel time, and there was little respect for human feeling or welfare. But even by the standards of those brutal times, crucifixion was a horrible and cruel death. It reminds us of how bad our sin is, and how it could have destroyed the entire universe if it were not for a loving God who was prepared to pay the penalty so we could be saved.

*"Here is the
Lamb of God,
who takes
away the sin
of the world!"*

John 1:29

In the Bible's account of the Hebrews' desert journey from Egypt to Israel is a story that illustrates how Jesus would die. The Children of Israel encountered a plague of poisonous snakes, and many people died of snakebite every day. God told Moses to make a snake of bronze and to put it high up on a pole. People

who were bitten just needed to look at the bronze snake and they would be cured. The source of death became a symbol of healing.

This is exactly what happened at the crucifixion. Jesus died on the Cross, but his death has become our promise of eternal

*Who can
refuse a loving
Saviour, arms
outstretched
in welcome?*

life. It gives us the way back to God. This is why the Cross has become the symbol of Christianity. The suffering Jesus is raised

on the Cross, with his arms stretched out in love and welcome. Sinful people might resist an angry God, but who could refuse a loving Saviour, arms outstretched in invitation?

The Lord of the Universe Nailed to a Cross

At Golgotha, Jesus was nailed to the cross, then it was lifted and dropped into

the hole. Can you imagine the agony of nails being driven through your wrists and feet?

Because crucifixion is such a terribly slow, painful death, the condemned men were offered 'gall' (a powerful drug) to dull the pain. Jesus refused it because he knew he had to experience the full weight of his sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Crucifixion was not only extremely painful, it was also humiliating. The prisoners were stripped naked to be nailed to their crosses. Jesus' glory was stripped from him when he left God's side to come to this earth. At Calvary, he permitted himself to be stripped in order that he could clothe us in his own righteousness—we who crucified him with our sins.

Jesus' Cross: An Altar of Sacrifice.

We have already learned that God had instructed his people to offer animal sacrifices to help them understand his

plan to save them from sin. When Jesus died on the Cross, he took away the need to sacrifice animals. At the Cross, Jesus became both sacrifice and priest, and his Cross was the altar.

Jesus' Cross: The Mercy Seat.

The holiest place in the Hebrew sanctuary (tent of worship) contained the ark with God's Ten Commandments. Above the ark was the golden mercy seat. On the Day of Atonement (reconciliation), the blood from the sacrificed lamb was sprinkled on the mercy seat in a sign that the penalty for breaking God's Law is death.

On the Cross, Jesus paid the penalty for sin with his own blood. By doing this, he satisfied the demands of God's Law forever. The law is still the perfect standard by which God judges us. We can never measure up to it by ourselves, but now, the Cross gives us perfect standing before God.

Jesus sprinkled his blood over the Law of God, forever paying the price to bring us home to God. This is the good news of the Gospel, the proof of God's love for us.

Because of the blood sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross, God can forgive sin. God is just, so sin must be punished, but Jesus' sacrifice allows God to see us as sinless.

The Sign on the Cross

The Roman governor, Pilate, ordered that a sign be nailed to the cross above Jesus' head. It was written in three different languages so everyone could understand it: Greek, Latin and Aramaic. It said: "This is Jesus the King of the Jews."

Jerusalem was full of strangers and travellers, who had come to celebrate the Jewish feast of Passover. The sign was meant to mock Jesus, but instead, it was a statement that Jesus' sacrifice was for everyone, no matter where they came from, or what language they spoke.

The crucifixion was God's promise fulfilled. He banished the enemies of mankind forever: sin, death, and the curse of the broken law. The devil knows now that he is beaten.

The Cross Becomes a Throne

Jesus had already been mocked as a 'fake king'. They put a purple robe over his shoulders, gave him a stick instead of a king's sceptre, and pushed a crown of thorns on his head.

The sign was another attempt to mock Jesus' claim to be God's son. It had the opposite effect, and the Cross of Jesus has become a throne, for on it he made the sacrifice that confirmed him as King and Redeemer of the universe.

Jesus' Tunic

From the beginning of the Bible, clothing is used as a symbol of character. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden were clothed in

light. When they sinned by disobeying God, this light disappeared and they realised they were naked.

At the end of the Bible story, God promises that we will be clothed in “fine linen, bright and pure—for the fine linen is the righteousness of the saints”, a gift from Jesus himself. To give this gift, Jesus had to lose his own clothing and suffer naked on the cross.

*They divide
my clothes
among them
and throw dice
for my clothing
(Psalm 22:18).*



At the foot of the cross, the soldiers amused themselves by sharing around the clothes they had removed from the crucified men. Finally, they came to Jesus' tunic. It was a beautiful garment, woven as a single piece, so it had no seams.

These rough soldiers recognised immediately that it was too valuable to tear up and that it must go to one person.

The only fair way to decide, they told each other, was to gamble for it. As they watched the King of the universe suffer and die, they sat around throwing dice for Jesus' tunic.

All of life is a gamble, because we can never be certain that the decisions we make are the right ones. There is only one decision in life that is not a gamble: that is the decision to follow Christ.

Around the Cross

There is a song that begins with the words: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" The answer is "yes", we were all there. The people who gathered around the cross represented every person who has ever lived.

Jesus suffered terribly from the nails, the thorns, and the agony of hanging on the cross. But the true agony was the weight of our sins, because it cut him off from God.

During his crucifixion, Jesus had different effects on the various people gathered on that terrible hill. One of the soldiers recognised that Jesus was the Son of God, one of the criminals asked Jesus for salvation, others cursed him and were glad to see him die, some grieved and still others walked away, not caring.

The Roman officer overseeing the execution...said, "Surely this man was innocent" (Luke 23: 47).

There were plenty of people prepared to have a joke, not just passersby, but also the chief priests, the church officials and the soldiers. "He saved others, but he can't save himself," they sneered. They even promised that if he came down from the cross, they would believe in him.

They didn't understand that Jesus could have come down from the cross if he had chosen. He was not on the cross because he *couldn't* come down, but because he

wouldn't come down. The ties of love, not the nails driven through his hands, held Jesus on the cross. If he was to save the world from sin, he could not abandon his suffering to show his power.



The ties of love, not the nails in his hands, held Jesus on the cross.

Chapter Five

Jesus Speaks

Jesus spoke seven times as he hung on the cross. These words shine like diamonds through the story of Calvary. They form Jesus' greatest sermon, a summary of the entire Bible. They tell us how to live and how to die, what to believe and what to do. They show us Christ's perfection and truth.

'Forgive Them'

Jesus' first words were a prayer to God: *"Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they're doing."* Jesus is the Son of God who is giving up his life to save the human race. His relationship with God is the only thing that gives him the strength to go through this terrible ordeal.

Jesus often forgave people. But on the Cross he was weighed down with all the

sins of the world. He asked his Father to forgive his killers, because 'they don't know what they are doing'.

Even those who didn't know what they were doing needed forgiveness. Sin is sin, whether or not we recognise it. But this also teaches us that everything can be forgiven if a person is truly repentant.

The Other Crosses

Crucified on either side of Jesus was a criminal. They represent each one of us, condemned to death for the weight of sin we carry.

One criminal joined in the mockery. "Aren't you the Messiah?" he gasped through his pain. "Save yourself and us too."

The other man recognised that Jesus was different. The mystery of Jesus' manner moved his heart. He heard Jesus' prayer to God, asking that his crucifiers be forgiven, and he understood that he was in the

presence of the Son of God. He rebuked his companion: "Don't you have any fear of God? ... We deserve our sentence, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he turned to the dying Jesus with the greatest request any person can make: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:42).

At this point, the cross becomes a throne and a place of judgement. Jesus is King and Judge of the universe. The man is still a criminal, but he is now the 'penitent' criminal. Because he reached out to Jesus, he has been declared innocent in the eyes of God, and he is rewarded with a place in heaven.

Jesus didn't ask what the criminal had done. He just accepted his repentance and

offered him salvation. This is the gospel in a nutshell. Jesus' promise to the penitent criminal is also his promise to everyone who comes to him in repentance: "You will be with me in paradise."

Grief at the Foot of the Cross

Standing by the cross were a few close friends who had not abandoned Jesus. The Gospels tell us that Jesus' mother, Mary was there. Imagine how she must have suffered! This was her son, whom the angel had told her would be the Messiah, and whose kingdom would last forever! When Jesus saw his mother, he forgot his agony of body and mind for a moment. One of Jesus' closest disciples, John, was standing beside her, no doubt trying to comfort her.

Jesus said to her: "Dear woman, here is your son." Then he looked at John: "Here is your mother." The Bible says John took Mary into his home that very day.

This beautiful story shows the love Jesus had for his earthly mother, but there are other lessons as well. The Bible teaches that the family is a sacred unit blessed by God. Jesus was observing the commandment to honour his parents.

The family also mirrors God's relationship with his people. Jesus' mother Mary was not related to John, but because of Jesus, they became part of the same family: God's family on earth.

This is what it means to be God's followers. We have all been born into life on this earth, but to receive eternal life, we must all be born again by believing in Jesus. All those who have been reborn in Christ belong to God's family.



Chapter Six

Jesus Suffers

Darkness at Midday

At midday, when Jesus had been hanging on the Cross for three hours, a strange darkness descended over his suffering. Imagine how dark it was in his heart. Now, his own creation put a veil of shadow over the place of his crucifixion.

Perhaps some of the people there experienced the darkness, and felt the mysterious workings of God. Perhaps later they became believers and accepted the light of the gospel. Others may have ignored it, and lived in darkness forever.

This is a very powerful scene. God the Creator caused the sun to hide its light from the greatest crime ever committed in the universe. The sun was a symbol of

the God who loves righteousness but who cannot look at sin. This midday midnight was nature's sermon to everyone who could see and hear.

The darkness reminds us that there is no light apart from Jesus and his Gospel.

While we live in this world, there will always be a dark shadow of trouble and trial. The devil's shadow is never far away, but God's light is always there, for

*For Christ also
suffered once
for sins, the
righteous for the
unrighteous, to
bring you to God
(1 Peter 3:18).*

Jesus is the Light of the World, and he has earned our salvation on the Cross.

Jesus' Cry of Despair

Out of the darkness comes the most heartrending cry of all history: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

When Jesus took on himself the load of all the sins of the world, God could not

look at him. He had to turn his face away from his Son because he cannot look at sin. This was worse than the terrible pain, worse than the mocking and humiliation, worse even than the betrayal of his friends. Jesus had endured all this, suffering in silence, thinking of others. But when he felt his Father turn away from him, his heart broke.

Jesus saw what we will never need to see: the horror of a universe without God, a universe which is one hideous mass of confusion with no reason to guide it and

no love to sustain it.

*Therefore, as
you received
Christ Jesus
the Lord, so
walk in him
(Colossians 2:6).*

Jesus' cry of despair has a question for us. Shouldn't we hate the sin that brought such agony to him who loved us so much?

Will we happily go on sinning just because we know God will forgive us? That would be like cutting ourselves with a knife

because we have a Band-aid. If we truly understand how much Christ loves us, can we deliberately hurt him?

The Cross demonstrates how much our sin hurts God. It gives us the opportunity to turn back to God in gratitude.

Jesus' Cry of Pain

During the six hours that Jesus hung suffering on the cross, he mentioned his physical pain only once: "I'm thirsty." Jesus' struggle with the sin of the world exhausted him. His body was worn out. Jesus suffered most from his separation from God, but we should remember that his physical pain was extreme as well.

Earlier, the soldiers offered Jesus and the two criminals gall, the powerful drug that helped a little to dull the pain of crucifixion. Jesus had refused, because he knew he needed to experience the full weight of his sacrifice. Now, his body cried out for moisture. A soldier dipped a

sponge into a tub of vinegar and held it up to his mouth. He tasted, then refused it.

When we experience physical suffering, we should remember that Jesus also suffered. He sympathises with us and understands our pain better than we know.

There is also a spiritual lesson in the words "I'm thirsty." Jesus was thirsty for God's love and approval. He is still thirsty for the love and acceptance of the people he has redeemed.

Jesus' Shout of Victory

"It is finished!" Jesus cried. In the language he spoke, this was just one word. It was the word that God and all creation were waiting to hear. Jesus was triumphant and his great work of redemption was done. His sufferings were almost over, and he would soon close his eyes in death.

When Jesus was twelve years old, his parents took him to the temple, where he became so involved in discussion with

the teachers in the temple that he failed to join his parents for their return journey. When they chided him for this, he replied, "Don't you know that I must be about my Father's work?"

During his ministry, Jesus was always aware of the suffering he must endure and the blood he must shed for mankind. Now, with this word, he announced that his work was finished. This shout of victory is the signal for every believer to rejoice.

Jesus was triumphant and his great work of redemption was done. ||

Jesus' Final Word to God

After his shout of victory, Jesus spoke to his Father once more. He used the words of a favourite Hebrew child's goodnight prayer: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). The Bible story tells us that he cried with 'a loud voice'. This is unusual for a dying person, especially after the

ordeal Jesus had suffered. Then, the Bible tells us, he bowed his head and died.

This shows that it wasn't the suffering of crucifixion that killed him, but instead the weight of our sins. Jesus willingly gave his spirit to God in a wonderful example of complete faith and trust in God.

Every Christian can have the same

There is nothing to fear in either life or death when you trust in the God of love.

confidence about dying that Jesus did. There is nothing to fear in either life or death when you trust in the God of

love. God never says goodbye to anyone who rests in him.

Jesus' last words on the cross give us an example to follow. Whenever anything distresses or alarms us, we can confidently take it to God in prayer. We can be certain that he is always there and he will always support us. We can rest in him because Christ has defeated all our enemies. The

Bible says: "If God is on our side, who can really be our enemy?" (Romans 8:31).

The Earthquake

As Jesus bowed his head in death, we read that "the earth shook and the rocks were split" (Matt 27:50-51). The earth shook as its creator cut the cable linking him to life. The ground trembled in sorrow at the terrible suffering of Jesus, but it turned into a joyful event, because the Bible tells us: "many ... saints who had fallen asleep were raised ...".

*We can rest in
Jesus because
he has defeated
all our enemies.* ||

So Jesus' death brought the dead back to life, a symbol of what happens when a person who has been spiritually dead accepts salvation and life in Jesus. It is also a symbol of the great resurrection at Christ's second coming, when all those who have accepted his salvation will be raised to join him in the holy city.

Jesus, the Lamb of God

Jesus died at 3 o'clock on Friday afternoon. A little after that, the Jewish priests spoke to the Roman soldiers. It was getting on for sunset and the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath. They didn't want these dying men hanging on their crosses over the holy Sabbath. They asked the soldiers to break their legs. This was a way to hasten death, and the bodies could then be taken down.

Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!
(John 1:29).

When the soldiers came to break Jesus' legs, they saw that he was already dead. This was unusual, because a man normally took days to die on a cross. One of the soldiers put his spear into Jesus' side and immediately blood and water flowed out.

Hundreds of years before, the prophets had foretold that 'none of his bones would be broken' and 'people will look at the one

they have stabbed'. This is a fulfillment of this prophecy.

There is another reason why none of Jesus' bones were broken. Throughout history, the Passover lamb foretold Jesus' sacrifice. Only a perfect lamb could be killed for Passover. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice. And when we accept Jesus, we must do so perfectly, that is, without any reservations.

Why blood? This question is often asked. There are other ways to die. Blood symbolises life. So when the Bible speaks of Jesus pouring out his blood for our sins, it is emphasising that Jesus' death was a sacrifice.

Jesus bled in the garden of Gethsemane, again when he was flogged at his trial, when nails were driven through his hands and feet on the cross, and finally when the blood and water poured from his side.

God was showing us that all the animals killed in sacrifice pointed forward to Jesus,

and that all the blood sprinkled on the mercy seat pointed forward to Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross.

Notice that blood and water flowed from Jesus' side. Usually, blood becomes thick and will not flow from a dead body, but it flowed miraculously from Jesus' side. To John, and to Christians ever after, the streams of blood and water represent the two great blessings of salvation: Jesus' power to 'justify' (make right with God) and to 'sanctify' (help us to live according to God's will).

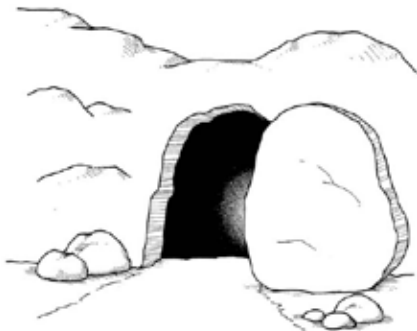
Burial

Two special friends of Jesus, Joseph from Arimathea and the teacher Nicodemus, went to the Roman governor Pilate and asked for Jesus' body to be given into their care for burial. Pilate gave his permission.

Near where Jesus was crucified was a garden, and in the garden was a new tomb. Nicodemus and Joseph wrapped Jesus'

body in linen cloth and spices according to the Jewish custom. Then they put Jesus in that tomb and rolled the big stone door across the entrance, because the Sabbath day was about to begin.

The Bible often gives us little details that have meaning for our spiritual lives. This is the case when John's gospel tells us about the garden with the tomb. A garden is a symbol of life and death. It contains life after death in the seeds that seem dead in winter, but which burst into life in the spring.



Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, turning life into death, and the garden into a wilderness. Jesus came to the earth that had been scarred by sin; he lived a perfect life and died to turn this sinful world back into a glorious garden.

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed (Isaiah 53:5).

Chapter Seven

Our Victorious Saviour

Resurrection

Imagine the grief of Jesus' followers during that Sabbath day as they mourned for their leader. Mary Magdalene went back to the tomb on Sunday morning while it was still dark. To her amazement, she found that the large stone blocking the entrance to the tomb had been rolled away.

When Peter and the others arrived, they discovered that Jesus' body was not there. All that remained were the strips of linen the men had used to bind his body.

Two shining figures at the entrance to the tomb asked them: "Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" What they meant was this: "Jesus is alive, so don't expect to find him in a tomb."

These were angels, messengers from God. They reminded Jesus' followers that Jesus had predicted his crucifixion, he had told them that he would die and be raised again on the third day.

Suddenly, grief was turned into joy as they understood. They rushed to tell the

*He isn't here!
He is risen from
the dead, just as
he said would
happen. Come,
see where his
body was lying!
(Matthew 28:6).*

other disciples the wonderful news.

Only Christianity gives us hope when we are facing death. Without Jesus' victory over death, our own death would be wrapped

in despair, and our lives would be hopeless.

If there is nothing at the end of our lives, then life has no meaning. But no one can find the bones of Christ. Even his worst enemies could not prove that his body was there in the tomb. Praise God, Jesus is alive!

Chapter Eight

The Path to God

The Cross of Jesus casts the longest shadow in the history of the world. It covers every person who has ever lived, and it guarantees that everyone—everyone who says yes to Jesus—will live forever.

*The Cross of
Jesus is the
path home
to God.* ||

If you ever doubt whether God loves you, just look at the Cross.

If you ever worry that God might have abandoned you, just look at the Cross.

If you think you can never be good enough for God, just look at the Cross.

The existence of Christianity testifies to the resurrection of Jesus. Nothing but a living Christ could have transformed Jesus' broken, grieving followers and filled

them with radiant power. Nothing else could have given them the courage to be prepared to die for their faith.

The resurrection story is told in each of the 'Gospel Books' of the Bible—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. When you read the resurrection story in each of the gospels, you will notice that they each have some different details, but they all have the ring of truth.

Hundreds of people who actually saw Jesus after his resurrection were still alive when the first letter to the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth was written.

When Jesus rose from the dead, he completed his work of redemption. The Bible tells us that Jesus "has abolished death" and turned it into nothing more than a sleep.

What a terrible world it would be if God abandoned us and left us in our graves! If we become rubbish in the end, what is to stop us from treating each other as

rubbish now? If God despises us, then what would stop us from despising our fellow men?

God has promised us that death isn't lonely, because Jesus has been there before us and he has won the battle over death, just as he has won the war with sin. This is the reason that Christianity shines the only light onto a dark world.

*He broke the
power of death
and lit up the
way to life and
immortality
through
the Gospel
(2 Tim. 1:10).*

Christ is risen! He is alive! We don't need to despair about anything—pain, tragedy, guilt or death. Jesus changes everything. He is completely powerful, and he loves us.

The Cross of Jesus changes your life. Look to it today and every day. Believe in Jesus and what he has done, and you will live forever, joyfully, with God.

*Jesus said:
"I am the way, the truth, and the life.
No one can come to the Father
except through me"
(John 14:6).*



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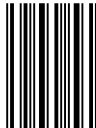


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