

Lessons From The Cross



Steve Flatt

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A Roman Crucifixion

Just what did the body of Jesus of Nazareth actually endure during those hours of torture?

The practice of crucifixion itself is torture and execution by fixation to a cross. I am indebted to many who have studied this subject in the past, and especially to a contemporary colleague, Dr. Pierre Barbet, a French surgeon who has done exhaustive historical and experimental research and has written extensively on the subject.

Apparently, the first known practice of crucifixion was by the Persians. Alexander and his generals brought it back to the Mediterranean world -- to Egypt and to Carthage. The Romans apparently learned the practice from the Carthaginians and (as with almost everything the Romans did) rapidly developed a very high degree of efficiency and skill at it. A number of Roman authors (Livy, Cicer, and Tacitus) comment on crucifixion, and several innovations, modifications, and variations are described in the ancient literature.

For instance, the upright portion of the cross (or stipes) could have the cross-arm (or patibulum) attached two or three feet below its top in what we commonly think of as the Latin cross. The most common form used in our Lord's day, however, was the Tau cross, shaped like our T. In this cross, the patibulum was placed in a notch at the top of the stipes. There is archeological evidence that it was on this type of cross that Jesus was crucified.

Without any historical or biblical proof, Medieval and Renaissance painters have given us our picture of Christ carrying the entire cross. But the upright post, or stipes, was generally fixed permanently in the ground at the site of execution and the condemned man was forced to carry the patibulum, weighing about 110 pounds, from the prison to the place of execution.

Many of the painters and most of the sculptors of crucifixion also show the nails through the palms. Historical Roman accounts and experimental work have established that the nails were driven between the small bones of the wrists (*radial and ulna*) and not through the palms. Nails driven through the palms will strip out between the fingers when made to support the weight of the human body. The misconception may have come about through a misunderstanding of Jesus' words to Thomas, "Observe my hands." Anatomists, both modern and ancient, have always considered the wrist as part of the hand.

A titulus, or small sign, stating the victim's crime was usually placed on a staff, carried at the front of the procession from the prison, and later nailed to the cross so that it extended above the head. This sign with its staff nailed to the top of the cross would have given it somewhat the characteristic form of the Latin cross.

But, of course, the physical passion of the Christ began in Gethsemane. Of the many aspects of this initial suffering, the one of greatest physiological interest is the bloody sweat. It is interesting that St. Luke, the physician, is the only one to mention this. He says, "And being in Agony, He prayed the longer. And His sweat became as drops of blood, trickling down upon the ground."

Every ruse (trick) imaginable has been used by modern scholars to explain away this description, apparently under the mistaken impression that this just doesn't happen. A great deal of effort could have been saved had the doubters consulted the medical literature. Though very rare, the phenomenon of Hematidrosis, or bloody sweat, is well documented. Under great emotional stress of the kind our Lord suffered, tiny capillaries in the sweat glands can break, thus mixing blood with sweat. This process might well have produced marked weakness and possible shock.

After the arrest in the middle of the night, Jesus was next brought before the Sanhedrin and Caiphus, the High Priest. It is here that the first physical trauma was inflicted. A soldier struck Jesus across the face for remaining silent when questioned by Caiphus. The palace guards then blind-folded Him and mockingly taunted Him to identify them as they each passed by, spat upon Him, and struck Him in the face.

In the early morning, battered and bruised, dehydrated, and exhausted from a sleepless night, Jesus is taken across the Praetorium of the Fortress Antonia, the seat of government of the Procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate. You are, of course, familiar with Pilate's action in attempting to pass responsibility to Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch of Judea. Jesus apparently suffered no physical mistreatment at the hands of Herod and was returned to Pilate. It was in response to the cries of the mob that Pilate ordered BarAbbas released and condemned Jesus to scourging and crucifixion.

There is much disagreement among authorities about the unusual scourging as a prelude to crucifixion. Most

Roman writers from this period do not associate the two. Many scholars believe that Pilate originally ordered Jesus scourged as his full punishment and that the death sentence by crucifixion came only in response to the taunt by the mob that the Procurator was not properly defending Caesar against this pretender who allegedly claimed to be the King of the Jews.

Preparations for the scourging were carried out when the Prisoner was stripped of His clothing and His hands tied to a post above His head. It is doubtful the Romans would have made any attempt to follow the Jewish law in this matter, but the Jews had an ancient law prohibiting more than forty lashes.

The Roman legionnaire steps forward with the flagrum (or flagellum) in his hand. This is a short whip consisting of several heavy, leather thongs with two small balls of lead attached near the ends of each. The heavy whip is brought down with full force again and again across Jesus' shoulders, back, and legs. At first the thongs cut through the skin only. Then, as the blows continue, they cut deeper into the subcutaneous tissues, producing first an oozing of blood from the capillaries and veins of the skin, and finally spurting arterial bleeding from vessels in the underlying muscles.

The small balls of lead first produce large, deep bruises which are broken open by subsequent blows.

Finally, the skin of the back is hanging in long ribbons and the entire area is an unrecognizable mass of torn, bleeding tissue. When it is determined by the centurion in charge that the prisoner is near death, the beating is finally stopped.

The half-fainting Jesus is then untied and allowed to slump to the stone pavement, wet with His own blood. The Roman soldiers see a great joke in this provincial Jew claiming to be king. They throw a robe across His shoulders and place a stick in His hand for a scepter. They still need a crown to make their travesty complete. Flexible branches covered with long thorns (commonly used in bundles for firewood) are plaited into the shape of a crown and this is pressed into His scalp. Again there is copious bleeding, the scalp being one of the most vascular areas of the body.

After mocking Him and striking Him across the face, the soldiers take the stick from His hand and strike Him across the head, driving the thorns deeper into His scalp. Finally, they tire of their sadistic sport and the robe is torn from His back. Already having adhered to the clots of blood and serum in the wounds, its removal causes excruciating pain just as in the careless removal of a surgical bandage, and almost as though He were again being whipped, the wounds once more begin to bleed.

In deference to Jewish custom, the Romans returned His garments. The heavy patibulum of the cross is tied across His shoulders, and the procession of the condemned Christ, two thieves, and the execution detail of Roman soldiers headed by a centurion begins its slow journey along the Via Dolorosa. In spite of His efforts to walk erect, the weight of the heavy wooden beam, together with the shock produced by copious blood loss, is too much. He stumbles and falls. The rough wood of the beam gouges into the lacerated skin and muscles of the shoulders. He tries to rise, but human muscles have been pushed beyond their endurance.

The centurion, anxious to get on with the crucifixion, selects a stalwart North African onlooker, Simon of Cyrene, to carry the cross. Jesus follows, still bleeding and sweating the cold, clammy sweat of shock until the 650-yard journey from the fortress Antonia to Golgotha is finally completed.

Jesus is offered wine mixed with myrrh, a mild analgesic mixture. He refuses to drink. Simon is ordered to place the patibulum on the ground and Jesus is quickly thrown backward with His shoulders against the wood. The legionnaire feels for the depression at the front of the wrist. He drives a heavy, square, wrought-iron nail through the wrist and deep into the wood. Quickly, he moves to the other side and repeats the action being careful not to pull the arms too tightly, but to allow some flexion and movement. The patibulum is then lifted in place at the top of the stipes and the titulus reading "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" is nailed in place.

The left foot is now pressed backward against the right foot, and with both feet extended, toes down, a nail is driven through the arch of each, leaving the knees moderately flexed. The Victim is now crucified. As He slowly sags down with more weight on the nails in the wrists excruciating pain shoots along the fingers and up the arms to explode in the brain -- the nails in the wrists are putting pressure on the median nerves. As He pushes Himself upward to avoid this stretching torment, He places His full weight on the nail through His feet. Again there is the searing agony of the nail tearing through the nerves between the metatarsal bones of the feet.

At this point, as the arms fatigue, great waves of cramps sweep over the muscles, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain. With these cramps comes the inability to push Himself upward.

Hanging by his arms, the pectoral muscles are paralyzed and the intercostal muscles are unable to act. Air can be drawn into the lungs, but cannot be exhaled. Jesus fights to raise Himself in order to get even one short breath. Finally, carbon dioxide builds up in the lungs and in the blood stream and the cramps partially subside. Spasmodically, he is able to push Himself upward to exhale and bring in the life-giving oxygen. It was undoubtedly during these periods that He uttered the seven short sentences recorded:

The first, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

The second, to the penitent thief, "Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise."

The third, looking down at the terrified, grief-stricken adolescent John -- the beloved Apostle -- he said, "Behold thy mother." Then, looking to His mother Mary, "Woman behold thy son."

The fourth cry is from the beginning of the 22nd Psalm, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Hours of limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint-rending cramps, intermittent partial asphyxiation, searing pain where tissue is torn from His lacerated back. He moves up and down against the rough timber enduring hours of limitless pain, cycles of twisting, joint-rending cramps, and intermittent partial asp. Then another agony begins a terrible crushing pain deep in the chest as the pericardium slowly fills with serum and begins to compress the heart.

One remembers again the 22nd Psalm, the 14th verse: "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels."

It is now almost over. The loss of tissue fluids has reached a critical level; the compressed heart is struggling to pump heavy, thick, sluggish blood into the tissue; the tortured lungs are making a frantic effort to gasp in small gulps of air. The markedly dehydrated tissues send their flood of stimuli to the brain.

Jesus gasps His fifth cry, "I thirst."

One remembers another verse from the prophetic 22nd Psalm: "My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws, and thou hast brought me into the dust of death."

A sponge soaked in posca, the cheap, sour wine which is the staple drink of the Roman legionaries, is lifted to His lips. He apparently doesn't take any of the liquid. The body of Jesus is now in extremes, and He can feel the chill of death creeping through His tissues. This realization brings out His sixth words "It is finished."

His mission of atonement is now complete. Finally He chooses to die. With one last surge of strength, he once again presses His torn feet against the nail, straightens His legs, takes a deeper breath, and utters His seventh and last cry, "Father! Into thy hands I commit my spirit."

The rest you know. In order that the Sabbath not be profaned, the Jews asked that the condemned men be dispatched and removed from the crosses. The common method of ending a crucifixion was by crurifracture, the breaking of the bones of the legs. This prevented the victim from pushing himself

upward; thus the tension could not be relieved from the muscles of the chest and rapid suffocation occurred. The legs of the two thieves were broken, but when the soldiers came to Jesus they saw that this was unnecessary.

Apparently, to make doubly sure of death, the legionnaire drove his lance through the fifth interspace between the ribs, upward through the pericardium, and into the heart. The 34th verse of the 19th chapter of the Gospel according to St. John reports: "And immediately there came out blood and water." That is, there was an escape of water fluid from the sac surrounding the heart, giving postmortem evidence that Our Lord died not the usual crucifixion death by suffocation, but of heart failure (a broken heart) due to shock and constriction of the heart by fluid in the pericardium.

Thus we have had our glimpse -- including the medical evidence -- of that epitome of evil which man has exhibited toward Man and toward God. It has been a terrible sight, and more than enough to leave us despondent and depressed. How grateful we can be that we have the great sequel in the infinite mercy of God toward man. Adapted from -- "A Physician Testifies About the Crucifixion, Dr. C. Truman Davis, konnections.com/Kcundick/crucifix.html"

David foretold it this way "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? ... But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him. ... I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing. ... All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations. All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him -- those who cannot keep themselves alive. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn -- for he has done it." (Psalm 22:1-8; 14-18; 27-31)

The Cross is the Center

It was a Friday morning about 9:00 that it began. It would be over by 3:00 that afternoon. What can you do in six hours? In our modern, high-tech world, you can send e-mail all over the world and you can get an automobile and travel 300 miles or more. You can hop on an airplane and go from one end of the country to the other. There's a lot you can do in six hours. But that day was over 2,000 years ago.

What did the people do in those six hours? Probably like any other day, a farmer got up and began to plow his field because it was spring and it was about time to plant. A housewife I'm sure got up and began to be busy with her daily house chores. A merchant opened up his shop, and he did a brisk day's business for six hours, getting ready for the Sabbath and for the Passover weekend. You can do a lot in six hours. But all that was done in Jerusalem during that six hour, and for that matter all that was done

all over the world in all the days combined, paled in comparison to what was being done on a hill called, "Calvary." A man was being crucified, a very special man nailed to a Roman cross. His was on one of three crosses erected that day, the middle one.

A visitor who happened to come to Jerusalem that day might have seen the crosses, shook his head and thought, "Oh, one of those sad but necessary executions in order to keep the peace and to keep justice." The Roman soldiers assigned to the task knew little of this mysterious young carpenter who refused to beg or whine or complain. They had no idea that this one that practically laid himself down on that cross could be anything other than just a Nazarene.

Oh, but some strange things began to happen. First, there was the darkness, a blackness darker than an eclipse. The sky had an eerie, hellish gloom. It's as if God, the Father, had turned his back on the earth, maybe even to shed a tear. Then there was the earthquake that Matthew tells us about. A mysterious rumble from the very womb of the earth caused the rocks to split. Prisoners of the grave were released from death's cold grip. Reports spread all the way around Jerusalem of the bodies that had been entombed actually walking down the streets; no doubt loved ones saw and talked with them.

The curtain, that massive veil in the temple that separated the holy place from "the Holy of Holies," would be torn apart. The place where only once a year as the High Priest would take in the blood from an unblemished lamb to sprinkle upon the mercy seat to make atonement, a sacrifice for all the people. That curtain was 40 feet high and it weighed several tons. But during those six hours, somebody, something, somehow tore that massive curtain from top to bottom as if two great hands ripped it apart. As if the great God of the universe was saying, the high priest has entered the Holy of Holies for the last time, the final Day of Atonement. He'll never have to go in there again.

Well, this was no ordinary Friday. Jerusalem was captured in the throes of the mystery that she couldn't understand. People were beginning to wonder as they saw some things and as they heard other things. Could it be? Could it be? No! It couldn't be. That Nazarene man might be something other than just a man, something more than just a carpenter who lived in Nazareth, maybe even something more than a prophet. You can almost hear the entire thought process of an entire community. In fact, they buzzed about it for days and days and days.

Do you remember Pentecost? Do you remember how 3,000 people were baptized on one day? Have you ever wondered how 3,000 people were baptized on one day? It wasn't just the power of one sermon. You see what had happened in Jerusalem that day was all that everybody talked about for seven weeks. What did all those mysterious things mean? Then Peter on that Pentecost Day, inspired by the Spirit, unsealed it. He said, "That was the Son of God on that cross." That's why it happened.

Have you ever stopped to consider how central it is to human history? All of time is measured by it. All of this book, the Bible, is its story. All the Old Testament history points to it, a type of things to come. Now type is a person, place, or thing in the Hebrew religion that foreshadows or anticipates a person, place or thing in the New Covenant. In other words, it was a symbol back there that foreshadows or anticipates something here.

Frankly, the Old Testament is filled with beautiful types. When you take the time to see and understand them, it helps you to piece together God's magnificent providence and you can see that the story is the same all the way through history, pointing to the very same conclusion.

The most beautiful types in the Old Testament are those that foreshadow the cross. Do you remember the first Passover? As the blackness of the plague of the death of the firstborn crept across Egypt, it surely foreshadowed the blackness at midday on that Friday just as a Lamb was slain in each of those Hebrew homes that night so the death angel would pass over, leaving that family unharmed. It set the stage for the time that the real Lamb, the Lamb of God, would be slain allowing death to pass over humanity again.

Or how about that Ark of the Covenant, the mysterious Ark of the Covenant introduced to us in Exodus 25 on

Mount Sinai? Do you remember the name of the covering of the Ark of the Covenant? It was called, "The Mercy Seat." On that "Mercy Seat" once a year, the high priest would come into the Holy of Holies with the blood from an unblemished lamb and sprinkle drops of blood on the Mercy Seat so that sin would be taken away. But it was at the cross where the real mercy seat was established and where the blood of the perfect sacrifice wasn't just sprinkled, but flowed that would take away all sin for all time.

Or how about when the Israelites had been grumbling and complaining and sinning again and God threw them in the midst of venomous snakes and they were being bitten and being killed. Then Moses, after praying fashioned a bronze serpent, put it on a pole and lifted it up. Their cure from certain death was free and available to all. But they had to take some action on their own. They had to look upon it to live. But in doing so they did not earn the cure for it was free to all. By looking upon the bronze serpent they did not work but they did take action in order to live. (Numbers 21) Jesus said in John 3, just like that bronze serpent, "If I be lifted up, I'll draw all men to myself." I could give you two dozen others, but the Old Testament is like a huge sign with an arrow saying, "This way to the cross. This way to the cross."

Then when Jesus came, he lived for it. He lived for the cross.

From his earliest days, the cross cast its shadow ahead of him. From the very day that he came into this world in Bethlehem where there was no room in the inn. It was saying right then, "There's no room for you in this world. You'll not find a place to stay here. You'll be rejected and even crucified."

The gospels record for us no less than a dozen different accounts of Jesus foretelling his own death. I think about Matthew 16 when he and the disciples were having a little R & R (rest and relaxation) at Caesarea, Philippi. Jesus asked, "Who do you think I am?" After they had given speculation, street talk of what others were saying, Peter looked at him and said, "You're the Christ, you're the Son of the Living God." Jesus said, "Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood hasn't revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." Jesus knowing now that the men, who would carry on what he was going to die for were beginning to understand. Verse 21 says that, immediately, from that time on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples, how he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the Elders, Chief Priests, and teachers of The Law; that he must be killed and on the third day, raised to life.

He said the same thing in Matthew 17, 20, 21. In Matthew 26 at that *Last Supper*, He told them again, "I'm about to be killed." In those few hours after that in the Garden of Gethsemane, He bowed on His face and asked if there were any other way, He knew that it was for this destiny that He was born. The cross was what Jesus came here for, and He always knew it.

The entire New Testament reflects it. Paul said, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." (1 Corinthians 1:22, 23) "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (1 Corinthians 2:2) "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Galatians 6:14) Do you see those three statements? Paul said, "All I know is Christ crucified." Then he said "All I preach is Christ crucified." (1 Corinthians 1:23) "All I boast about is the cross of Christ, Jesus crucified." (Galatians 6:14) "For me to live is Christ, and to die would be gain" because he was crucified. (Philippians 1:21)

Folks, you go through the Bible, the New Testament, every sermon preached by Paul or Peter you will see, every one of them focused on the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus. So whether the Old Testament, the New Testament or the whole Bible, the cross is central.

Years ago in the British Royal Navy in their great sailing vessels would weave a blue thread right through the center of the rope that would be used to hoist the main sail because they wanted that rope to be distinguishable. If they needed to hoist it in an emergency, to flee an enemy or to avoid a storm, they looked for the rope with the blue thread right through the middle of it. The cross should be like that. It's always visible and always accessible. It's the main thing, not just in this book, but in life itself. It should be at the very center of everything that we do; the center of our lifestyle, the center of our home life, the center of our work life and our school life. If we ever take Jesus and his cross out of the center, we lose everything.

Have you ever seen signs on posts that stated, "Power Cable Buried Here?" That's what the sayings of the cross are. You come to one of those sayings, you dig down and there is power there—a whole source of power in our lives if we will just take time to understand it. Jesus' final words were "It is finished." (John 19:30) What's finished? The divine plan for redeeming all of humankind is finished. Man's fear of death is finished. The power of guilt is finished. The uncertainty of tomorrow is finished.

The following lessons in this series will focus on seven incredible statements that the Son of God made while in human form. I don't know about you, but to me, nothing was more amazing in the whole spectrum of that divine drama that we call the cross than those seven sayings Jesus made. What would you say if you were on your way to be executed? If it were going to be a slow torturous punishment like Jesus received, what would you dare say while you were hanging on the cross?

Jesus carefully chose the words that he would utter on that cross. They were not random phrases just uttered by some pained martyr. They were intentional statements from God himself to let us have some clues about the unfathomable depth of meaning of that cross on which he hung.

1. **Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.** (Luke 23:34)

Those are the words of forgiveness. To that immediate audience, but extended far beyond them.

2. **Today you shall be with me in paradise.** (Luke 23:42, 43)

Jesus turned to the thief and said words of acceptance to a common criminal, the last person in the world you would think ought to be in paradise that day. A person, who unlike Jesus, was there for crimes he had done.

3. **Dear woman, here is your son,** and to the disciple (John), **Here is your mother.** (John 19:25)

Words of comfort, even amidst his agony, the beautiful words of comfort.

4. **My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?**

(Matthew 27:46)

What do those words mean? Words of separation, a horrible separation but a separation that had to occur if we are going to live forever.

5. **I thirst** (John 19:28)

The words of humanity showing us that Jesus was not some type of freak, he was just like you and me. He hurt, he thirsted, he hungered and he understood our pain.

6. **It is finished.** (John 19:30)

The words of victory. The greatest words ever uttered.

7. **Into thy hands I commit My spirit** (Luke 42:36) The great words of ultimate surrender.

The cross is at the heart of our faith. It is the central part of what we stand for. It is the only reason that we can gather as a community of faith.

I ran across a modern parable this week that I'm afraid reveals the status of too many individuals, and for that matter, too many churches. The parable talks about a church that erected a brand-new building. They made it awfully nice and behind the pulpit area they erected a sign that said, "We preach Christ crucified." Then down in the lower corner they put a small potted plant, one of these creeping vines that would kind of go up the wall for decoration. As time passed, the vine began to grow and as it grew the congregation began to mellow. After a while it covered that last word "crucified." The readable part of the sign displayed only, "We preach Christ" sure enough not so much the cross just the nice socially-oriented Jesus who showed compassion on all needs. But the vine kept growing and the congregation kept mellowing and after a while, only the words, "We preach," showed. Eventually they had just forgotten about Christ. The whole idea was a human gospel, a human religion responding to human needs, searching for any answer, but not a cross. Finally the vine continued to grow until all that was left was the word, "We." I pray to God that in our life, we still proclaim Christ crucified.

If you're wondering how much the cross is at the center of your very being, answer these three questions in your heart today.

1. **Does the cross bring you to your knees in thankfulness?** Do you fall prostrate before that and thank God for the very fact that the gates of heaven are open because of it?

2. **Does the cross free you from guilt?** Or are you carrying around a sack load of it; not laying that guilt at the cross to do the work that it was designed to do?

3. **Does the cross cause you to surrender daily to God?** — Are you dying on your own cross and letting Christ live in you?

If you can't answer those three questions today as well as you would like to, I hope and pray that by the time we finish this series, your life has changed. Amazing Grace Lesson #1250 Steve Flatt - February 18, 1996

Father, Forgive Them

The cross had been erected, the flesh had been torn, hanging by spikes in his hands, and Jesus labored for every breath. There wasn't a muscle in his body that wasn't burning. His eyes stung from the mixture of blood and sweat. All those who he had been teaching for three years were gone; only a handful of friends stood there at the foot of the cross. Oh, but the taunters and the revilers, they were there; they were shouting out "Come on down, King of the Jews. Ha! Some Savior! He saved others, why can't he save himself?" Through blurred eyes, Jesus looked down upon that murmuring rabble; and let his eyes drift heavenward and he uttered the short prayer; "Father, please forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

Tell me, from where does that kind of love come from? Can you explain to me the origin of that source of forgiveness? Contrast that to us. We lose our cool when somebody cuts us off in traffic or bumps into our grocery cart or when the kids aren't ready on time. Look at Jesus. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Who would have criticized Jesus if he had one little word of concern for himself? Maybe saying, "I'm innocent, what about my rights?" Or even a word of criticism, "Surely, you'll be sorry" would have been appropriate. No, when his pain was most severe and when he stood on the brink of being separated for the first time in all eternity from his Father, about whom was he thinking? He was thinking of the sins of the people who had put the sixinch spikes through his hands and who had spit on his face.

Tell me, what kind of love is that? Where does it come from? What kind of marriage would you have if you had that kind of love that was totally consumed by the needs and the desires of someone else ahead of your own? What kind of Christians would we be if we had that kind of love for one another? We get so upset by the trivial, but by contrast, Jesus, during the most painful, unfair and unjust death imaginable prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." That short, but poignant prayer is recorded for us in Luke 23:34. It is the first of seven statements recorded from the lips of Jesus while he hung on that cross.

These seven statements are more than just seven statements. They are like the tab or the index pages on a huge notebook, just a word or two, but behind it there is a volume of information waiting to be understood. These sayings on the cross are like the sign that states, "Power Cable Buried Here." If you

could dig down just a little bit, you would find this unimaginable source of power waiting for your life. These statements from the cross summarize who Jesus is. If you can understand them fully, you'll understand the capsulated summary of everything he said and everything he did.

The most basic statement the cross makes is **Forgiveness**, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." Yes, he was praying for those who put the spikes in his hand and who led the illegal trial, but he was praying just as much for those the Hebrew letter said would crucify him afresh.

I heard a story of two fellows who were on a boat out in the ocean and the boat went down, but they managed to work their way onto a life raft and they floated for a few hours before being picked up by the coast guard. One of the two fellows on that life raft was tremendously grateful. He was just showering the captain of the boat with praise, and he shook hands with every crew member. He said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." The other fellow was kind of quiet. He said, "Well, you know Tom, don't make such a big deal out of it." When they got to the shore, the news reporter was there and he interviewed that first fellow and he was crying with tears of gratitude. The other fellow didn't want to be interviewed. The newsman looked at the first fellow and said, "What's with your buddy?" And he said, "Well, to tell you the truth, he thinks he could have got out on his own."

It's interesting isn't it, when you think you can get out on your own and you're not really rescued? I think the very first mark of a genuine Christian, a true convert to Christ, is one who knows he was a "goner," one who talks and behaves in a manner that says, "I was on my way down, I was holding up the third finger, and I was about to drown in my sin. Jesus Christ saved me."

What's sad is, across this land and across the world there are hundreds of thousands of folks sitting in pews, smug and proud. They wouldn't say it out loud, but down deep they're thinking, "I'm doing pretty good on my own. I'm paddling that boat right well." They look around at all the other folks who aren't sitting in those pews thinking, "I'm a pretty good guy, never killed anybody, never could hit anybody, I don't curse, I don't smoke, I don't chew, I don't run with those who do." They're kind of just proud of how well they're paddling their boat on their own.

I can ask two questions to anybody and learn a whole lot about their theology, learn a whole lot about what they think about Jesus and about all spiritual things.

1. "Are you going to heaven?" They'll either say, "Yes, no, or somewhere in the middle—not sure, hope so, don't know," that type thing. You can find out a lot.
2. To those who answer yes, "how are you going to get there?" What I've found over 50 percent of the time when I've asked that question, the number one response is: "Well, I've been about as good as most people I know." You know what they're saying: "I'm paddling that boat hard." Contrast that to the Apostle Paul who said I am the chief of sinners. O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death."

Paul said that because he understood forgiveness. It's been said about Paul that he only understood two things: He knew that he was lost, and he knew that he was saved. When you read his epistles, his

understanding comes through every single line. That's what every genuine Christian knows, he or she knows they were lost, they were desperate and all of a sudden someone threw them a lifeline.

Consider this simple prayer that Jesus uttered, "Father, forgive them, for they know what they do." What does that forgiveness entail? How does it apply to you and me? What are its characteristics?

1. Forgiveness that Jesus offered and prayed for on the cross is given.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23) Did you hear the contrast there? "For the wages," that's the salary, "is death," that's the payment of sin "but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." The first thing we need to remember about the forgiveness that Jesus offered on the cross and still offers from heaven's throne room is that it's something that we don't earn. His grace, his forgiveness is a gift.

Let me illustrate that and show you why that's important. Think right now and exclude salvation, the cross or things we consider spiritual, vertically given, what's the most precious earthly gift that you have right now? What is that? Some of you might say it's a newborn child, that's the most precious gift. Some of you would say healthy family, that's the most precious gift. Excluding salvation, the love of my wife is the greatest gift I have. But if I were to say, "You know honey, you've loved me now for 17 years and I really appreciate that. I want to pay you for that love. I wish I had more cash on hand, but I have about \$1,700. I could give you about \$100 a year for all the love you've given me up unto this point. Let me give you \$1,700. We're going to work it into our budget right now. I'm going to pay you another \$25 a month from here on out for the love that you're giving me. Now what do you think she would do?

Well, first of all, she would think it's a joke. I mean she'd laugh, "What are you doing—come on?" Then if I pressed the issue and said, "No, no, this is what I really want to do. I want to pay you for that gift." She would look at me like I'm absolutely absurd. Folks, that is absurd because a gift is not something you can buy. It's not something you can earn. If you can, it's not a gift; it becomes a salary, a wage.

Read Romans 6:23 again, "For the wages..." the salary is attached to sin, it is death, "but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ." I'm amazed at how many millions of people reverse those two. They think that the lostness they have, the spiritual death they are going to die, is just a bad break or just the fickle, capriciousness of a funny God and that the salvation they're going to have, they're earning day by day because of how good they are. They've got it exactly reversed. The thing we're earning is hell through every sin we commit. The gift is forgiveness.

What do you do when you receive a gift? You say, "Thank you" and you act in gratitude. The bigger the gift, the longer and the more you act in gratitude. By attempting to pay for a gift:

- a. You insult the giver. God is insulted if we try to pay for the gift of forgiveness because we're reducing him to a hireling. We reduce him to a sales clerk. We prostitute him by trying to barter love, and God will not be reduced to that. He reacts strongly to that and he always has. In fact, that's what angered Jesus so much about the Pharisees. They thought they were paying for their salvation. They were earning it. Some people think that today.

There is a world of difference between attainment and atonement. Attainment is something you work to achieve. Atonement is something that is given to you. The word atonement means to pay

a debt that one is unable to pay for himself. Jesus offered the atonement. God, the Son, knows we cannot get out of our own mess. So, he offered himself as a sacrifice and on that cross he pleads: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Oh, but the human spirit, it just wants to be saved by attainment. Do you know why? Because we live in a sin-stained world that doesn't operate by atonement, it operates by attainment. We know the answers to these old slogans though, "There ain't no such thing as a free what? Lunch?" and "Look out for number one!" Sure, we all know those, that's the way the world operates, so we want to save ourselves by our own good works. The question I ask anybody who has that philosophy is how many good works does it take then to be saved? What's the quota? What's the standard? You insult the giver when you try to pay for the gift.

- b. You create a business relationship. If you say, "Here, you give me this, I'll give you that." That's an exchange, a swap, a trade, a business transaction. When you try to pay back God's gift, you reduce a Father/Child relationship to an employer/employee relationship, and that is so short of what God wants.

Let me illustrate that. Each month I make a mortgage payment to somebody in Chicago that I've never seen. He or she has never seen me. Now do we have a relationship? Yes. Does he care if I've got appendicitis? Or if my marriage starts to get in trouble? No! All they care about is getting their's. It's a relationship, but it's shallow. It's just on paper. If I come to a contractual agreement with God, "Now I'll do this, you provide me with heaven," then I'm making a business relationship with God. He wants to be my Father, not my employer. He wants to love me and bathe me and forgive me like a perfect dad. That's what he wants.

- c. When you try to pay for a gift, it reveals your own misunderstanding. You just don't have the concept. Forgiveness is given.

2. Forgiveness that Jesus pleaded for and offered is radical.

It is radical, extreme and extraordinary. The gift is a radical substitution. "For God made him who had no sin to be sin for our sakes, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21) That's my favorite verse in the Bible because that tells what the cross is all about. Who is the him in 2 Corinthians 5:21?

You know who it is. It's Jesus, right? Let's say it again putting Jesus in for him. "For God made Jesus who had no sin to be sin for our sakes, so that in Jesus we might become the righteousness of God."

As an illustration let's say you are standing in Judgment one day. God says "how many sins did you commit?" You reply with bowed head, "Oh not many. Lord." He says, "Well, think real hard." "Well, there was that one time I didn't help the lady across the street. Then there was another time, I didn't honor my father and mother like I

should. And I ..." He said "Let's just look at the books." The book of your life is opened, it is stained with sin. Everything you did or said is recorded there, your good deeds as well as your sins. You really do not want anyone looking at it. Suddenly Jesus walks up and stands beside you clean and white as snow.

Remember, God made him who had no sin to be sin so that in Him, we might become the righteousness of God. Do you want to know Christian how you're going to look before the Father on the Judgment day? Unless Jesus has cleansed you by His Blood and has substituted his life for yours, it will be ugly and not welcomed. If His Blood has cleansed you and you remain in Him, Jesus will stand there holding all your sins. It is a radical substitution.

3. The forgiveness is arranged.

It wasn't accidental or happenstance; it is part of an eternal plan. When I was growing up, I heard this illustration used a lot for the cross. Maybe you've heard it. The story is of a fellow who operated a mechanical bridge that allowed trains to go across the bridge, but would turn at certain times so ships could pass by on the river below. One time the bridge was turned, but all of a sudden word came and he could hear a train coming. And he was going to need to move that bridge back in line so that passenger could make it across and not be destroyed. But the problem was that day he had brought his little three-year-old son to work. The son had gotten away from him and he looked for Junior and he was down in the mechanism of the bridge, in the gears itself, the little boy was playing on the gears and now with just minutes, he didn't have time to go down and get the boy and still close the bridge. He had the choice of saving the train and hundreds of passengers or throwing the switch and crushing his son. Anguished by that decision, he threw the switch. Our God gave His Son on the cross so all who would come to him could be forgiven and saved.

Now that's a powerful illustration, but there's one main part of it that's not right at all. It's inaccurate. See if you can figure out where the inaccuracy is. "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." (Acts 2:22-23)

What's the fallacy of the illustration that I've heard all my life? Here it is. The cross, unlike the engineer sitting up in the plant, the cross was not a knee-jerk reaction by some ecclesiastical engineer who saw the world spinning out of control. The cross was part of the original blueprint. The plan was in the works the minute that Eve's teeth sank into the fruit. It was there before when Jesus came to this earth, was born or crucified. The shadow of the cross came nearer with every step he took.

Have you ever stopped to think that Jesus was the one who put life into the seed that became the tree from which his cross would be hewed? Jesus was the one who put the iron ore in the earth from which the spikes would be smelted? Jesus was the one who breathed life into the embryo that would be named Judas in his mother's womb, who would come out and betray him? (Colossians 1:15-16)

What was it like to plan your own execution? I don't know, I don't have any idea, but it was not an accident. I know that he knew from the beginning that the only way his bride could be dressed in white and live forever in heaven was if he himself would die for her sins. Folks, knowing that I better understand why he could look down from that cross having always known he was going to hang there and say: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." You see the love that offered that prayer came from the throne room of heaven where love has its very origin. The cross and the forgiveness were no accident. They were arranged.

4. **Forgiveness is continuous.**

I'll tell you something interesting about this one sentence prayer from Jesus: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." The imperfect tense of the verb is used, indicating a repeated action in the past tense. Well in other words, more literally, the translation is Jesus kept saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Can you see that? I can see him muttering it all the way through the six hours between each of the statements: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

How appropriate because though his sacrifice was once and for all, the forgiveness stemming from that cross is perpetual. Hebrews 9:26 says, "If we walk Christians in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7) I love that word "all", don't you? A little bitty word, but it means so much—cleanses us from all sin—all our sin before we came to Christ in baptism, all our sins after if we walk in the light.

Two verses later "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) Then two verses John says, "My little children, I write these things to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin ... we have Jesus Christ, the Righteous, as an advocate for our sins." (1 John 2:1) I want you to see as a Christian, if we are willing to walk in the love and the will of Jesus, not in rebellion to his will, if nurturing sin, trying to hide it in some closet away from God, but instead openly confessing our shortcomings and mistakes, then we are forgiven continuously. We are being washed daily so that we are clean and stay white. Then God lets me in.

5. **Forgiveness is exemplary, a pattern to be imitated.** Jesus empowers us to forgive others around us. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32) The key to living a forgiving life toward other people is the realization of your own forgiveness stemming from that cross. Forgiving people are forgiven people. There are no exceptions.

The following acrostic may help you remember God's gift of His Grace.

G-iven
R-adical
A-rranged
C-ontinuous
E-xemplary

We accept that gift when we come to that cross. Scripture tells us how. God doesn't make us climb mountains or run a marathon. What he says to us is simply, I want you to put your trust in Christ, come to that cross in faith, believe that Jesus, God in the flesh, died on that cross for you, confess this belief before men, die to your sins and be buried with Him in water baptism at which time I, God, will give you a new life free from sin having been washed clean by the blood of Christ. Amazing Grace Lesson #1251 Steve Flatt February 25, 1996

The Power to Pardon

"Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. The people stood watching and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One.' The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar and said, 'If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.' There was a written notice above him, which read: This is the *King of the Jews*. One of the criminals who hung there, hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!' But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.'" (Luke 23:32)

As you look around the scene of the crucifixion, with which of the characters do you most readily identify? As you look into their faces is there anything that reminds you of yourself? For some of you, that answer might be Peter. You make statements and promises of loyalty, only to have them fall short. You may be wrestling with guilt and frustration asking yourself the question: Can God ever forgive me for falling short again? Perhaps, you identify with Pilate. Think about Pilate, the key word there is, "Almost," isn't it? He "almost" released the Son of God. He "almost" did the right thing. Maybe your life is wrapped up in the word, "Almost." You "almost" became a Christian. You "almost" lived a faithful life. You "almost" lived a disciplined existence.

Maybe you identify with Mary. I think there are a lot of Marys, both male and female, faithful, loyal, true, sometimes sad or sometimes confused. Or, perhaps somebody identifies with John. You're there too, but you're timid, you're quiet, you're afraid. Outside of this place, there's really nobody who knows that you're Jesus' disciple.

As you look over the whole cast of characters around the crucifixion, with whom do you identify. Amid all those characters, I suggest to you that there is one with whom each of us who are in Christ can identify. He's the focus of our study. You're not going to like this, but all of us Christians identify with the crucified crook. Like him, you hang on the cross beside Jesus. Like him, you've looked in faith and made the most unimaginable request possible. And like him, you have received what Paul called the "incredible gift" of salvation.

What does the scene about the crucified thief tell us? What does it show us? Just two basic things, but they are the two most important lessons a human being could ever learn. **The immeasurable value of a person** and **the immeasurable depth of God's love**. It's a beautiful story, in many ways it's a mysterious story. For generations, the story of the crucified crook has been a controversy for some about how one accepts God's grace today, about how one becomes a Christian. Folks, it's not recorded for that purpose. This whole thing occurred before there were any Christians, before God ever established his church. The reason the story has made its way down through history is to show us as

graphically as any other page in Bible, those two powerful lessons: The immeasurable value of a person and the immeasurable depth of God's love.

Seven statements Jesus made on the cross summarized his whole life and mission like tabs or an index page in a large notebook. You turn and find a volume of material behind each little tab.

1. The immeasurable value of a person.

We see Jesus treating that crucified crook the way he's been treating people through his ministry all along. Those people are helpless and look to him in faith. For example, he displayed the same care and grace much earlier when he came down from giving the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew tells us in his gospel, chapter 8, that he was huddled around a group of people talking when all of a sudden that group scattered like roaches that had just seen a ray of light. Somebody yells out at the top of their lungs, "Leper." Sure enough there he was a huddled mass of humanity, a walking wound, a festering sore, maybe no arm, maybe no nose. I'll tell you for a fact, he had nothing, except for one final, desperate prayer. The leper looked up and said, "Master, if you would, you can make me clean."

See, that leper had exactly what the crucified thief had nothing except a desperate prayer. Do you remember what Jesus did to that leper? Jesus reached out and touched him. He put his hands on one of those open, bleeding sores. Now you've got to see Peter and John over in the bushes looking out saying, "Oh no, Master, Master, don't, don't touch him!" Why did he? Could Jesus not have healed the leper without touching him? Sure he could. Why did he do it? He was teaching us the immeasurable value of a person.

Folks, a human being has value because he or she is human. Now the world doesn't buy that. The world teaches us that we have value based upon how we look, what we can do or what we've got in our bank account. Now you take those things and mesh them together and you have the world's value system. God says, "No, you're valuable just because you are made in My very image, unique in all Creation."

Jesus taught the same thing to the adulterous woman in John 8. Do you remember her story? She had no grounds on which to stand. She had been caught in the act of adultery. She had no defense. We'd say she was guilty as sin. But when her eyes met the eyes of Jesus, she didn't see the hatred and the bitterness that she had seen in those other eyes. She looked at him with a plea in her eyes, and he spared her life.

On and on the stories go in the gospel, the Samaritan woman, Zacchaeus up in that tree and the blind Bartimaeus. So, it shouldn't surprise us when we see what happened to this man who died beside the Christ. It's interesting that we don't know much about this thief, do we? We don't know his name, his hometown, what he did for a living or what he knew about Jesus. Some have speculated that he was a patriot, one of those Jewish zealots who was trying to drive the Roman army out of the land. To tell you the truth, I doubt that. I doubt that because if that were true, surely Luke would have told us. And if not Luke, some other historian somewhere would have mentioned that.

No, I think we've got to face the fact that this man hanging beside Jesus was just a crook. He was just a thief. In fact, judging from the severity of his sentence, he was the worst of the worst. He was a habitual criminal and to die on a Roman cross for thievery, that really was pretty severe. There is no telling how

many other atrocities he may have committed. Somebody says, "Well, if he were that bad, what is it that Jesus is trying to teach us?" **2. The immeasurable depth of God's love**

Let's let our minds wander back to that cross on that hill they called "Golgotha," or the place of the skull. It was barren, it looked like a skull. It was a place where many skulls had fallen. Now imagine that you are in the crowd at the bottom of the hill looking up at those three silhouetted crosses. You go a little closer to see the face of the one that they call the criminal, the one who would eventually ask for forgiveness.

As we look up at him, his face is gray, ashen, and weary from no telling how much time he had been in jail and prison. His eyes are sunken and desperation has destroyed any sense of joy at all in his life. He has all but given up. "Let's get it over with," he's thinking, "Let's just get it over with." So he's hanging on that cross, and there are only a few grains of sand in his hourglass left.

But then he looks over at this man who is crucified next to him. The man in the middle, the man over whose head is nailed a placard that says: *The King of the Jews*. We don't know if this crook had ever seen Jesus before, maybe he had. Maybe he had seen a miracle, maybe he had seen Jesus love the unlovable, maybe he had seen our Lord treat the scum of the earth like the salt of the earth, maybe he had heard one of his teachings, or, maybe all he knew about Jesus was what he was looking at right now, a crucified carpenter whose lungs were gasping for air and whose skin was torn and bleeding. But as he gazed at the man beside him, there was something about this man that was riveting to this thief. Why was this fellow so serene? Why was he so amazingly quiet while everybody else is ridiculing? Why doesn't he scream out for pain like everybody else does who is on the cross? Then something amazing began to happen.

This crook, this thief began to forget about himself. The intensity of his pain is momentarily dulled, the sting of the nails is momentarily forgotten and he finds himself unable to take his eyes off this man. He senses an emotion that he hasn't felt in "who knows when." He finds himself concerned about the Messiah. He catches himself caring about this man. A calloused crook, it's been so long since he cared about anything. It feels strange, but the feeling is there.

There's an interruption. There's a foghorn-like voice that breaks his train of thought. It comes from the other crook, the fellow who's crucified on the other side. The voice is bitter and it's ugly. You see, somebody else has also been looking at Jesus. This criminal has not been looking at our Lord through the eyes of compassion and concern. He's been looking through the cracked lens of cynicism.

Isn't it an amazing thing how two people can be so close to Jesus, have virtually the same circumstances, and yet have two totally different perspectives? Have you ever been amazed by how one of them can come out absolutely committed to following the Lord and the other just totally reject him and yet their circumstances virtually the same? I've never fully understood that, but here's a classic example of it. One felt compelled to request the impossible by faith, and the other just wanted to join in with the jeers of the crowd. "If you're the Christ, save yourself, Oh, while you're at it, save us, too!" It was just another verbal spear. Then there's silence again.

I wonder if that critical thief didn't really expect the other fellow to join in. Misery does love company. But instead, the most remarkable thing happens. That other crook does just the opposite. I don't know

how many people heard what he said to Jesus. I'm talking about those on the ground, the soldiers, Mary and the others. But I will guarantee you anyone who heard it was in awe. "Don't you fear God?" the thief says? "Since you are under the same sentence, we are punished justly. We are getting what our deeds deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong. Then he says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Can't you see the soldier glancing up, Mary wiping away a tear and staring into the face of that thief? Why I can see the angels in heaven gasping. "When was the last time this fellow ever spoke up for anybody?"

But here he is, performing perhaps the most noble act recorded in Scripture when nobody else would come to God's defense, when almost everyone else turned their back, when even the angels were weeping and the demons from hell were dancing in the light because they thought they had killed the Son of God. It took a crook, it took a rejected low-life crook to stand on behalf of God and in so doing, in the very sunset of his existence, he salvaged everything about his life.

Peter, the one who would never forsake Him, was nowhere to be found. Pilate, the authoritative one, had washed his hands a long time ago. The crowd had turned fickle, the disciples had run, but a crook without even knowing it shares with us the three things that you must know and believe deep in your heart of hearts if you are ready to come to Christ. What do I need to know to become a Christian? What do I need to understand? Folks, you never quit understanding, it's hard. Where do you draw that line?

The book of Acts shows multiple examples of those who came to Christ and what bare necessities they understood. But, it is capsulated right here as clearly as any place I've ever seen.

1. **He came to the conclusion that he was filthy.** He looked over and said, "You know I deserve what I am getting." He didn't just say he was a sinner. He's saying, "I'm a mega-sinner. I deserve to hang on this cross.

I deserve to die," gasping for breath.

2. **He came to a conclusion that Jesus was absolutely pure.** He said, "But this man has done nothing wrong." The crook said, "I am guilty. God's innocent. I'm wrong, He's right. I'm lost, but He's the Savior." The crook said about he and his friend there, his buddy on the other side, "We're here because we deserve it, but he does not."

3. **Jesus has the power to incorporate us into a kingdom that transcends this life.** That thief knew that there were just a few grains left in his hour glass and knowing he was dying, he looked over and said, "Master, will you remember me when you come into your kingdom?"

By now Jesus had turned his head toward this thief and I can't help but wonder if even in his pain, Jesus had managed a slight smile as he seized this lost, lone sheep, broken, bruised and bleeding limping into the fold. That sheep looked up at the shepherd and said, "Can I come in? I don't deserve to, but can I come in? Master, would you remember me when you come into your kingdom?" The good shepherd looked at the sheep and said, "Come on in. Today, you're going to be with me in Paradise." **The immeasurable value of a human, the immeasurable depth of God's love.**

The words of the song *Beneath the Cross of Jesus* summarize this lesson "Upon that cross of Jesus, mine eye at times can see the very dying form of One Who suffered there for me; And from my smitten heart, with tears two wonders I confess: The wonders of his glorious love and my own worthlessness" except we are not worthless in the eyes of the saving God. Amazing Grace Lesson #1252 Steve Flatt March 3, 1996

Words of Comfort and Loyalty

Writers of the four gospel accounts, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, give us a record of the words that Jesus spoke when he was hanging on the cross—seven statements in all. The third one is perhaps the most touching scene and the most tender of all of the scenes that we have from Calvary. It's the scene when Jesus looks at his mother and said "Woman behold thy Son," and then to John the beloved disciple, "behold thy mother." This is a beautiful and touching scene of comfort and of loyalty.

"When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. 'Let's not tear it,' they said to one another. 'Let's decide by lot who will get it.' This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, 'They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.' So this is what the soldiers did. Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, the disciple took her into his home." (John 19:23-27)

There were four soldiers who crucified Jesus who divided his clothing into four different parts. But to help us understand the pattern of what's happening let's step back a little bit in history and look at some of the Jewish customs of dress as well as some of the Roman customs that surrounded crucifixion.

A Jewish man typically wore five pieces of clothing. He had first of all a headpiece, maybe a turban or some kind of cloth. You've seen pictures on your television before of the kind of headgear people in the Far East and Middle East wear to keep their hair out of their face and in place. It was a traditional headpiece that has been worn for centuries.

But the Jewish male would have on some type of shoe, usually a leather sandal. A third piece of garment would be a long robe, generally with a slit in the top, sometimes completely open or slit down the sides. It hung down close to the ankles and was a loose fitting garment.

The fourth piece of clothing was his girdle or his belt as we would call it. It was either another piece of cloth, or sometimes a piece of leather used to tie around his waist. This kept the long, flowing outer garment from just blowing away, and yet allowed it to be loose. Lastly a Jewish man wore an undergarment. In the case of Jesus, it was seamless made out of one piece of cloth woven from top to bottom.

Customarily, that undergarment was made by a mother and given to her son when he reached maturity, when he came into his own adulthood. More than likely, that's exactly what Mary had done for Jesus. Now remember because it will come into play in just a moment.

The Romans also had some customs regarding the crucifixion. There were five Roman soldiers always assigned to the crucifixion duty. Four were given the responsibility to actually drive the nails and pull the cross into position. But after the cross was in its standing and upright position, they formed kind of a four-cornered guard post. If there was any kind of threat, then they were the ones there to protect the victim as he was on the cross to die a painful death.

The soldier who was responsible for the other four was the Centurion. He was supervising the crucifixion. One of the benefits that came to the four soldiers was that they could divide up whatever clothing the victim might be wearing that day. That's what they were doing with Jesus' clothing as He hung there naked and humiliated. They were gambling for his clothes.

The problem was Jesus probably had five pieces of clothing but only four soldiers. The centurion apparently didn't get involved in this activity. Therefore, one took the headpiece, one took his sandals, one took his outer garment and one took his belt. But who would get the fifth garment, the undergarment? How do they decide? John tells us in order to decide which one of the four would get that undergarment by casting lots or gamble for it. We might say they were throwing dice to see which one of them was actually going to get the undergarment. No doubt they did not know but John tells us, they were actually fulfilling a prophecy of David recorded in Psalm 22:18.

So, with that kind of background in place, knowing the customs of how Jewish men dressed and knowing something of the customs of the Romans soldiers as they crucified their victims, let's come back now to the scene and see if it makes a little more sense.

There were others present at the crucifixion besides the soldiers who crucified him and the jeering mob who were yelling insults at him. At least one of His disciples who had deserted him returned. John was with Mary and at least three other women. There must have been a bit of a dangerous thing for those four women to be there around the cross with Jesus. After all, for a man to be considered such a criminal that the Roman government would deem him worthy of being crucified, makes him the kind of person that you probably don't want to be around for fear something might happen to you. After all, isn't that why all the other disciples fled? Even after Jesus had been resurrected and ascended into heaven, the apostles all gathered in the Upper Room in Jerusalem afraid to even go out for fear that probably the same thing might happen to them?

Yet here these women were there out of their love and devotion for Jesus Christ, really not caring very much about the potential danger. Who were those three other women? One of them was Mary, the wife of Clopas. Now we have no idea who she was other than she was the wife of Clopas. We don't have any other information about her, but she was one who loved Jesus.

Another woman was according to Matthew the mother of the sons of Zebedee, James and John; according to Mark Salome and according to John the sister of Jesus' mother. Thus, James and John were Jesus' first cousins. Do you remember something about Salome, something that she had done earlier in the ministry of Jesus? She was the one who came to Jesus and said to him, "Lord, when you establish

your kingdom, I want you to give thrones, one on your right-hand and one on your left-hand to my sons, James and John." Jesus' response was a loving rebuke as that kind of self-centered ambition was not the way the kingdom was to be. As a matter of fact, Salome had no idea the kind of problems that were going to come and the price that would be paid by his disciples at a later date.

The third woman is identified as Mary of Magdala, the woman out of whom Jesus had cast evil spirits. She was so grateful for what Jesus had done that she could never forget it. She didn't really care that there was danger at the cross. She loved her Lord and she could never lose her gratitude for what Jesus had done for her. So, she is right there at the foot of the cross.

But then there is one other woman named, actually she's named first even though we are discussing her last. It was his mother, Mary. Though Mary had been there all along, she is introduced to us in conjunction with the undergarment that we read just a moment ago. Look again at the text and you'll see after the undergarment is mentioned; it's at that point when his undergarment is being gambled for that Jesus then speaks to his mother. Apparently when the soldiers touched that undergarment, they touched something that was very near and dear to his heart as well as to his mother's heart because more than likely she had made that undergarment for Jesus. Little wonder then as they were gambling for that undergarment, he would turn and address his beloved mother.

Maybe Mary was not able to understand all that was going on at that time. I doubt she was. But she was able to love him; after all, that was her son—that was her firstborn son. Is there anything like a mother's love in all the world? I don't think there is. Can you imagine what Mary must have been experiencing as she stood there at the foot of the cross, seeing her son, her firstborn hanging, dying, bleeding, suffering, struggling for every breath? He was the one conceived by the Holy Spirit that the angel said would be called the Son of God. You'd think that no one would want to stand and watch that, but that was his mother and that was her boy. She had to be there, it's the most natural thing in the world for her to be there as painful as it was. Jesus might be a criminal in the eyes of the law, but Jesus was still her son.

Think of all the things that Mary had seen, all the things that she had heard, and all the things that she had experienced up to this point. When Jesus was only eight days old, do you remember she and Joseph took Baby Jesus to the temple? They were going to dedicate him, and it was time for his circumcision. They took him to the temple where Simeon, a wise old godly man to whom the Holy Spirit had made a promise stating "Simeon, you will not die until you see the Messiah." Upon seeing Jesus Simeon realized that the promise had been fulfilled. It was the Son of God. "Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'" (Luke 2:34-35)

Do you think Mary had any idea what Simeon was talking about when Jesus was eight days old, when he said to her, "And a sword will pierce your soul too?" I doubt it very seriously. But she lived to see her worst fears come true. She lived to see her son, who came to give his life for all, have a sword pierce his side. Mary lived to see the day when they drove nails in his hands. She lived to see the day when they shoved that crown of thorns down upon his brow. She lived to see the day when he breathed his last. It cost Mary greatly to submit to God's will, didn't it? Think of all the various incidences that must

have been running through her mind as she stood there at the foot of the cross and watched Jesus die. Now had come the time when the ultimate plan of God was coming to pass for her firstborn son. Jesus would be a martyr and he would die for the sins of the whole world.

Notice something else about Mary. It would be easy to miss it. It says Mary was standing there. She stood. She didn't faint, she didn't fall. Outwardly she was still that same calm woman who had met the salutation of the angel some three decades earlier. She said to that angel, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word," Mary still showed that same kind of strength. So at this day she entered into her son's great suffering and she drank the cup right down to the bitter dreges.

It must have been a shock to all those people who heard Jesus shout, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" What a painful shock that must have been; but it didn't crush anybody's heart anymore than it crushed Mary's. She stood there and listened to that. Never has sorrow presented itself in a form more touching than we see in the life of Mary. But even in all of his bitter anguish, who is he concerned about? He's concerned about his mother, isn't he? Seeing her standing with John by her side, he said to his mother, "Dear woman," as the King James has it, "Behold thy son, here is your son." Now surely that was Jesus' way of saying to her and to John, that John was now going to take responsibility for Mary. Jesus' earthly life was about over and someone needed to take care of her. Though she was strong, she was going to need support. John was the one Jesus trusted to provide that support.

Perhaps it seems a little bit strange, but there was nobody there from her immediate family to help. Why did Jesus have to give that responsibility to John? Apparently, Joseph, her husband, had died. We don't know that for sure, but we don't have any mention of the name of Joseph after Jesus was 12 years old. So Mary is probably a widow. Jesus couldn't call on any of his brothers to come and take care of his mother because although she believed in him, John tells us that none of his brothers yet believed that he was the Christ. Apparently, none of them were around, they were long gone. They may never have even been there at all. So, he looks to John, his beloved friend, and says, "John, take care of this woman, she's your mother."

The Bible tells us that all the disciples deserted Jesus. But John was at the cross, standing at the very foot of the cross. Who knows where the other 11 or the other 10 were? Judas had killed himself, the other 10 were in hiding somewhere, but John was right there loyal to Jesus. Jesus knew he could trust John. So as John stands beside Mary, the mother of Jesus, Jesus says to John, "John, I know I can trust you. You are loyal to me, and you will be as loyal to my mother as you've been to me. I want you to take care of her." What a compliment that was to John. It meant more than just providing a roof over her head; it meant taking responsibility for her. The last time Mary is mentioned in the New Testament is in the book of Acts when she is in the presence of other disciples who are waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit, but the Bible tells us that she's there with John. So, John is living up to the trust that Jesus put in him.

It's a powerful story; it's only part of the story, that's only one of the seven statements. There's so much richness in this scene of the death of Jesus Christ. But let's try to make three brief applications from this:

1. **Grace is extended to those who fail.** If there is one thing in John's life that he would like to have gone back and been able to undo and erase, it would have been the time when he too, like all the others, deserted Jesus, but he couldn't erase that.

Aren't you glad that when John made that mistake, the Lord didn't say "Okay John, you had your shot at it, but you messed up, just sit down. You're out." His grace was more than sufficient for John and he accepted John back and even gave him this blessed responsibility of caring for his mother. Folks, when you fail—not if you fail, but when you fail and we all will and we all do — turn back to Jesus like John did because our Lord is a Lord who is gracious and who will accept us back and restore us.

2. **Water is thicker than blood.** Now we've all heard that old expression: "Blood is thicker than water," In Jesus "Water is thicker than blood." The reference I'm trying to make is through the waters of baptism one comes in contact with the blood of Jesus Christ. When we confess our sins, express our belief in Jesus Christ and are buried in water baptism for the forgiveness of our sins, we are brought up, resurrected, out of that water a new life, creation. We become Christians. We become brothers and sisters of each other and of the Lord Jesus Christ. A new relationship is formed as we are born in water into a far more precious and far more powerful relationship than even than our own blood relationships. We who have been washed in the blood of Jesus Christ in the waters of baptism know that oftentimes, water is thicker than blood.

3. **Never get beyond the call to honor our parents.** Paul wrote "Children, obey your parents in the name of the Lord, for this is right—Honor your father and mother which is the first commandment with a promise—that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." (Ephesians 6:13) Jesus, even in his dying moments, paid honor and tribute to his dear sweet mother. No matter what the circumstances might be for us, or what they might be for our parents, we never get too old, never get too sophisticated and never get beyond the call to honor our father and mother. Jesus, even in his dying moments, displays that very truth. Amazing Grace Lesson #1253 Steve Flatt March 10, 1996

The Darkest Hour

All of my life I've heard that the death of Christ was the central point in all history. Scripture bears that out, doesn't it? Paul says, "Far be it for me to glory in anything except the cross of my Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14) and "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but for those who are being saved it is the very power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18) We sing a lot of beautiful songs about the cross.

And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross

Till my trophies at last I lay down;

I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown

Another song says, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." That old rugged cross was erected on a hill called "Calvary," a place so well known for its stench of death that it had another name. They called it Golgotha, the place of the skull.

After a sham of a trial, before the Jewish high priest, Jesus was railroaded before a cowardly Roman governor by the name of Pontius Pilate. In fear and trembling he abdicated his responsibility and handed the man over to be crucified while ceremonially washing his hands of the whole matter. Beaten and scourged, Jesus trudged up that hill wearing a mocking purple robe and a crown of thorns. It was at 9:00 a.m. on a Friday that they nailed him to that cross. For three hours he heard the taunts and the jeers from the crowd below. "King of the Jews, Ha! He saved others, he can't save himself. If you're the son of God then come down off that cross."

At noon, something strange began to happen. An eerie darkness that quickly turned into a pitch blackness spread over the sky. It's as if somebody had shut the door and turned out the lights and said, "You're losing the light of the world." The darkness thickened for three hours and a frightening silence pervaded the entire hill. "At the sixth hour" (that's noon) "darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour" (that's 3:00 p.m.) "And at 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?'" (Mark 15:33)

I find it interesting that the words "cried out" in the Greek could be translated, "roar." It was the same word used for a lion's roar. He roared it from the cross, "Eloi, Eloi..." A lot of them didn't understand what he was saying.

The next verse said, "Why he's calling for Elijah." No, he didn't say, Eli, Eli, he said, "Eloi, Eloi" (My God, My God) "*lama sabachthani*" (why have you forsaken me?)"

Of the seven statements Jesus made on the cross, this is the most crucial. Everything else He said you'd almost expect Him to say, wouldn't you? But if you knew the life of Jesus, you'd almost expect him to say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It doesn't shock you that he would look over to a crucified crook and say, "Today, because of your faith, you'll be with me in paradise." And it certainly doesn't surprise us he would look down at his mother and motion to John and say, "Behold your son, and son, behold your mother." All those things would naturally come from the lips of Jesus.

But this was different. Hanging there, looking down at his executors. Sure, it was magnanimous, sure it was compassionate. This was a cry, a desperate cry. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" At the foot of the cross they didn't understand it, and a lot of people still don't today. What was he saying?

1. A cry of sadness. Do you know what that darkness that spread across the land for three hours represented? In scripture, darkness is always symbolic of evil. "Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." (John 3:19) Satan's kingdom is

called a kingdom of darkness. (Colossians 1:13) By contrast in dozens of scriptures, light is reflected with the presence and glory of God. The absence of light on that day signifies the absence of God. As God, the father, turned his back, it's as if he was calling the whole attention of the world to something he could not stand to look at himself. You know we focus on the cry from Jesus, but I've often wondered what was going through the heart of the father as the darkness spread and the cry went up, and he heard the words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It was a terrible cry of sadness.

2. A cry of separation. Let's get right down to the heart of it. What did Jesus mean? "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That was recorded in Psalm 22:1. Some scholars have said, "Oh God was there, Jesus was just fulfilling prophecy by quoting scripture." No, it's much more than that. It's interesting that the verb used there is exactly the same verb that Paul used in 2 Timothy 4:10 when he was writing about a former comrade named Demas. "Demas has forsaken me having loved this world too much." The word means "abandon." It means to leave, to run away from. Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Why have you run away from me? Why have you left me here? For the first time in all eternity, the most unimaginable thing that you could possibly comprehend has occurred. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the eternal one Godhead, was divided. The Godhead is disjointed in that Jesus was separated from the Father. It never had happened before and never will happen again.

Why would God forsake Jesus anytime, much less right now at all times? What did Jesus do wrong? The answer is: Nothing. Nothing at all. You see it's not what he did that was wrong. It was what he was willing to do for our wrongs. One of the great verses to explain this cry in scripture "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." See where the first part of the verse says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree." (1 Peter 2:24) You see it's if all the sins of humanity have been gathered into one huge, stinking, filthy, sewage pile dumped upon Jesus Christ while he hung on that cross. In a way that we can't even pretend to understand, all the sins of the world were put upon the cross of Jesus. "God made him who had no sin to be sin." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

"The wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23) The word "death" in the Greek doesn't mean termination, it just means separation. That's why we use it in a number of different contexts. When one die physically they don't just terminate or cease to exist as their spirit is separated from their earthly tent. That's all death is, it's just a separation. The death that's talked about in Romans 6:23 as compensation for our sins, it's not a physical death and it's not a physical death, the separation of the soul from the body; it is a separation from God. That's frightening, that's eternal.

Remember the parable of the prodigal son? When that prodigal son was in the depth of his sin, where was he? He was separated from the father, wasn't he? He was away in a foreign land, dwelling in his sin. When the boy came back home, the father turned to the other son and said, "This your brother was dead, but he's alive again." What does he mean he was dead? He wasn't dead. Yes, he was. He was separated from the love of the father, and that father must have wondered at times if he would ever come home. The Son of God that we call Jesus was separated from his Father not by his own sin, for he had none, but because he bore all ours.

The best commentary and the best picture of the cross, and particularly this cry: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Leviticus 16. Since the Old Testament is a tutor to help us understand the new, Leviticus 16 should help us understand this cry from the cross. There were three sacrifices that were made by the Israelites involving two goats and a bull. First, the bull was offered for the sins of Aaron so that he could intercede for the people. Then a goat was offered sacrificed for the sins of the people. A second goat, the third animal, was brought before the people. "When Aaron was finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert." (Leviticus 16:20-22)

Now do you get the picture? A goat would be brought, and Aaron would take his hands and put them on the head of that goat. He would say, "All our sins we put on this goat's head." All the lust, all the adulteries, all the lies, all the thefts, all the gossip, all the hatred and all of any other sin was symbolically put on the goat. That goat would be led by a man until it was so far out in the desert that it could never find its way back to camp again. That man would take his shoe or sandal and kick that goat and say, "Get out of here, be gone, be vanished." Do you realize we get our English word, "scapegoat" from that very passage? Placing all the blame, all the sins on a third party? That's surely seems like a silly tradition.

Why do they do that?" For 1,500 years, the Israelites obeyed that command. They sent that scapegoat out into the desert signifying the vanishing of sin.

For six long hours Jesus hung on a cross, and it must have seemed like six millennia. Like the goat when left alone in the desert, he was left alone. He cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

3. A cry of substitution. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:24). "By his wounds you have been healed." "God made him who had no sin to be sin for our sakes so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21) See the substitution?

It's incredible. Somehow God took the ones who were sinless, holy, spotless and pure and made him as filthy as sewage and somehow when I come humbly, obediently and in faith to Christ God transfers to me the beauty, the purity, and the grace of Jesus Christ. That is the most powerful, most unbelievable and most incomprehensible thought that a human can bear, Jesus' righteousness being transferred to sinful man. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" Could be considered a cry of substitution.

If Jesus had not interceded, if everything had just got along in the natural course of things, that's the cry that you and I would be offering on our death and at the events of the Judgment. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But Jesus said those words so that I don't have to, so that you don't have to.

You probably have heard the story before or maybe even saw the man on the *Today Show* about eight years ago.

But it was probably to me the best illustrations of this idea of the cry of substitution. Early one morning I happened to see a man by the name of Francesca Geraszchnevik interviewed early in the morning on

the *Today Show*. They interviewed him because he was a survivor of Auschwitz, the terrible concentration camp that was right in the middle of the Holocaust. But Geraszchnevik had a particularly interesting story because he told about the time in 1941 when there was an escape in July at Auschwitz. And whenever that occurred, the commandant of that concentration camp always did the same thing. To discourage future escapes, he would gather all of the inmates and all of the prisoners out into the courtyard, and they would randomly draw 10 names. And those 10 would be put into an open pit and it would be covered up. And they would be left there until they would starve to death or dehydrate. And everybody would watch them dying every day. They began to call the ten names, and the tenth name called was the name Francesca Geraszchnevik. Geraszchnevik said, "I fell to my knees and I began to weep uncontrollably. I begged." I said, "I've got a wife, I've got children, please, please, don't do this to me." And all of a sudden out of nowhere stepped forward a man by the name of Maximilian Cole. Cole was not even Jewish. He was in that concentration camp as a sympathizer. Cole had come in February of '41, this was in July, and already he had earned the nickname, "The Angel of Auschwitz," because he shared his food, and he took care of the sick, and he tried to encourage the downtrodden. He spoke up and said, "Commandant, may I say a word?" It was remarkable that he wasn't shot on the spot. But for reasons we will never know, the commandant turned to Cole and said, "Yes, you can." He said, "May I take his place? I'm older - you won't get as much work out of me." Well, the Nazi mind picked up on that and allowed it. And Maximilian Cole was thrown into that pit with the other nine. Six weeks later on August the 14th, he was the only one left living. Rather than allowing him to die of starvation, they injected him with phenol and he died.

I don't know if Geraszchnevik is still living, but he was as of eight years ago. And when they interviewed him, his comment was, "I didn't get a chance to say a word to him, but I looked into his eyes as they led him away. And he knew how grateful I am. Every August 14th, Geraszchnevik goes back to Auschwitz as a memorial. And in his backyard is a metal plaque that he fashioned with his own hands, and everyday he expresses his gratitude to a man by the name of Maximilian Cole.

We have very little in common with Francesca Geraszchnevik. We don't speak the same language, we don't know the same people. We don't even claim the same homeland. But we've got a couple of things very much in common with him. Somebody died to save our lives and we both lived the rest of our lives in absolute gratitude. That's what everybody who's a Christian has in common with Geraszchnevik, Although Geraszchnevik's is physical and ours is spiritual.

They gave a lot of jeers at Jesus and a lot of taunts. There was one of them that was true. Yes, there was one that was true. They said, "He saved others, but he can't save himself." That was true. Oh, he could have saved himself, Matthew 26:53. Several hours he told Peter, "Don't you know I could call down 12 legions of angels?" He could have saved himself, but he could not have made that whole statement true. He saved others, but he couldn't save himself. If he was going to save others, he could not save himself. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" was the cry of substitution. Amazing Grace Lesson #1254 Steve Flatt March 17, 1996

The Words of Humanity

"Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty.' A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips." (John 19:28)

On the surface, that statement doesn't mean anything to us. It's exactly what you'd expect from a dying man who's parched and dehydrated after six hours on a cross. "I'm thirsty." Sure, that's what he's going to say. But I think he says much more. I would suggest to you that this was a claim of completion.

Perhaps you remember that there were two drinks that were mentioned at the cross. It's helpful to know which is which. In Matthew 27:34 as Jesus was being put on the cross, the Bible tells us that he was offered a drink that's called, "wine mixed with gall." The gall was a narcotic agent, a numbing agent. Even the cruel Romans had a touch of mercy in them. Before they would put a man up on the cross, they gave him something to just blur his mind and to allow him to withstand the pain. When Jesus was offered that, he refused. He said, "No."

"Why would he refuse it?" One reason is surely Jesus would choose no escapes or shortcuts. He was determined to endure the full brunt and the full wrath of the cross. Jesus wanted his full mental faculties while he hung there so that he could summarize his whole life and ministry in these seven statements made from the cross.

But six hours later another drink is offered. It's identified to us as wine mixed with vinegar. It was different. It was a cheap wine, hardly fermented, if fermented at all; it was wine mixed with vinegar. The scholars usually say, "One part wine, two parts vinegar." It had no gall, it had no numbing effect. If anything, it would stimulate his senses. And Jesus said, "I am thirsty," and they gave that to him.

So why did he drink the second drink?" Look at verse 28. "Later, knowing that all was now completed and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty.'" Folks, there is another evidence that is God hanging on the cross. You see I'm convinced that only God could know what Jesus knew at that moment. After six hours of excruciating, mind-blurring pain, and just moments before he was going to die, that man hanging on the cross reflected on the 700-plus prophecies about his life to see if they were all fulfilled. The following are prophecies just about Jesus' death.

The betrayal by a familiar friend. (Psalm 41:9)

The forsaking of the disciples. (Psalm 31:11)

The false accusations. (Psalm 35:11)

The silence before his judges (Isaiah 53:7)

Being found guiltless (Isaiah 53:9)

The numbering of him with the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:12)

Being crucified. (Psalm 22:16)

The mocking of the spectators. (Psalm 109:25)

The taunt of non-deliverance. (Psalm 22:7,8)

The gambling for his very garments. (Psalm 22:18)

The prayer for his enemies. (Isaiah 53:12)

Being forsaken of God. (Psalm 22:1)

The yielding of his spirit into the hands of the Father. (Psalm 31:5)

The bones not being broken. (Psalm 34:20)

The burial in a rich man's tomb. (Isaiah 53:9)

They gave me vinegar for my thirst (Psalm 69:21)

Did you know there were that many prophecies just about the death? Was this man just a man? As he was thinking through all of those, one came to his mind not yet fulfilled, one last prophecy. Psalm 69:20 prophesied that vinegar would be offered and it would be consumed, and Jesus, knowing that he would and that he must fulfill all prophecy, said something to cause that fulfillment. He said, "I am thirsty." They gave him the vinegar. It was a claim of completion. But even more important than that, it was a claim of incarnation.

There could have been two reasons Jesus made this statement from the cross. One, it was to complete prophecy; and second, because the man was thirsty. The first reason shows us that he was God while the second reason shows that he was man. Together, they validate again the greatest claim in all history, the claim of incarnation. Incarnation just means that this man, Jesus, was God come packaged in the flesh. There are claims to that all the way through the Bible. John began his gospel with "In the beginning was the Word" (that was a metaphor for Jesus). "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1) And then 14 verses later, he said, "And the Word became flesh and dwelled right here among us."

Colossians 2:9 says, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form," Or, 1 Timothy 3:16, Paul says to Timothy, "He appeared in a body and was vindicated by the Spirit," and the list goes on and on. I can't stress this enough. The claim of incarnation is the Continental Divide of faith, it flows one way or the other. You see the world loves Jesus. Ninety percent of America even claims to be Christian, everybody likes Jesus because he was loving and nice and warm and fuzzy and the world is anxious to talk about him being a good teacher, a great philosopher and a kind man. But unless you accept him as God come in the flesh, then the Bible makes no rhyme or reason. It is the crucial claim in all humanity. If you believe he is God come in the flesh, everything else fits. He walked on water? Sure, the one who made the water can walk on it, can't he? That he came out of the grave? The one who altered life, is it any surprise that death couldn't hold him? The fact that he could say, "Your sins are forgiven," hanging on the cross. If he's God on that cross, it's no surprise that his death would have a saving significance.

The critical decision of our lives is: Was this man really God? Or, was God really this man? That's it. And the claim, "I AM thirsty," says, "Yes." Yes, he was. He was God come in the flesh.

I want to suggest to you that there's a very practical day-to-day way that the incarnation of Jesus, God come in the flesh, means everything to us. The God who put the stars in the sky, who spoke the world into existence and who gave you life in your mother's womb, that God came, lived and died on a cross so that he could feel what you feel, sweat like you sweat, hurt like you hurt and cry like you cry. The sad reality is that most people acknowledge Jesus and I'm even talking about Christian folks now, but they have precious little understanding of how he really wants to impact their day-to-day living.

Most people see Jesus as a man who came to set up a religion, Christianity, an institution, the church, a code of conduct, the Bible and they think that's it. No! Jesus didn't come to this earth and hang on that cross to establish religion. He came to re-establish relationships.

You may have heard that before but still not understand. You believe Jesus came in the flesh, he's been here, done that, gone back to heaven and what he did was important, case closed. How do you have relationship with somebody who's not here? You can't see him, touch him, feel him or hear him. We're like the little six-year-old girl who had a bad dream. Her mother went in to her bedroom while she was crying and trying to give her courage and get her independence growing, she stroked her and said, "Now honey, go back to bed, Jesus is here with you." The little girl looked back and said, "Well good, you stay here with Jesus, I'm going in there with daddy."

Now we laugh at that, but that's the way most people I know really operate about Jesus. A lot of folks believe that Jesus is around somewhere, but we need something flesh and blood to snuggle up with. We need somebody we can get a hold of, somebody who can touch us, somebody who can really understand us. If there is ever a passage that answers the question: Does Jesus care? Can he touch us? Can we touch him? Can he really meet my needs today? It's the scripture we're studying now. Jesus said, "I am thirsty."

One of the most fascinating things in all the Bible is when Jesus was about to begin his ministry, he went into the desert without food for 40 days and the Bible has one of the greatest understatements in all scripture, it says "And he was hungry." Forty days without food and he was hungry. Then now in the last few minutes of his life as he's hanging on the cross, we find him thirsty.

It's intriguing to me that at the bookends of his ministry, we see Jesus struggling with the most basic human needs: hunger and thirst. Have you ever wondered why we're told that? Why over here in Matthew 4 in the desert when Jesus is going *one on one* with Satan when they're trying to figure out who's going to rule the world. We're talking about the spiritual battle of all eternity. Then we're told "and he was very hungry." Why over here in the blackest day that's ever been where Jesus was experiencing the same blackness as all of our sin was being heaped on him, and he's looking for the Father and can't find him, crying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We're also told: And he was thirsty.

Have you ever wondered why we're told those things? It's so that the words of Hebrews 4:15-16 would ring absolutely true in our ears: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace." Look at this, "to help us in our time of need."

The beautiful song says, "Does Jesus care when my heart is pained too deeply for mirth or song? As the burdens press and the cares distress and the way grows weary and long? Oh yes, he cares, I know he cares." But better than the song, Peter said "Cast all your anxiety on him for he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7)

Jesus is not here today in the flesh to put his arms around me, to hold on to my hand physically in the dark nights and the frightening times. I'm glad he's not here in the flesh now. Because he's done what he needed to do and our sin is taken away. If he were still here, it would be for the purpose of needing to abstain and absolve our sin. I'm also glad he's not here in the flesh because he's back in heaven's throne room interceding for us before the Father. I'm glad, because now he's no longer packaged in flesh confined by time, location and space.

He can know and deal with all of our pain, suffering and needs at the same time. We don't have to be like a leper or blind Bartimaeus or the blind man, we don't have to try and find out: Is Jesus in Nazareth? Is Jesus in Capernaum? Is Jesus in Jerusalem? I want to see him. He's right there, right there where we can touch him any time.

I'm glad he's not here physically because he left behind a "Comforter," the Holy Spirit of God, not just to be with us, but to live in us when we're raised a new creation from being baptized into Christ. The Holy Spirit living in us is making intercession in our prayers. Romans 8:26 says, he's offering groanings for us that we don't even know how to offer. He's talking to the Father about our needs that we don't even know how to ask for. Therefore, when any of us come to God in prayer, Jesus in heaven can identify with and meet any need we have. If that doesn't make any sense to you it's because you've either never met the "man" Jesus, or because you've never seen prayer as the opportunity to talk with him face to face. Don't just pray, live in prayer. That's a claim of care.

One author said that the cradle in Bethlehem proves that God came. The cross on Calvary proves that God cares.

They lifted the hyssop stalk with the vinegar and wine to his lips and "When he received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that he bowed and gave up his spirit." (John 19:30) Jesus had to have the needs of humanity met before he could make the claim of divinity. He couldn't call out the words, "It is finished," until his human thirst was met, and abated. What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. Amazing Grace Lesson # 1255, Steve Flatt March 24, 1996

The Words of Victory

William Henry Harrison, the ninth president of the United States, delivered the longest inaugural speech on record. It was over 9,000 words. Harrison must have been awfully proud of that speech because it was a cold, rainy, January morning. He refused to wear an overcoat or to abbreviate his address. After standing in those miserable conditions for two hours he contracted pneumonia and died less than one month later. Somebody quipped that, "No president has ever said more and done less."

Now contrast that with what Jesus did when he hung on that cross on a hill called "Calvary." His statements were few. We only have seven recorded. They were brief. Not one is more than ten words long in English. But as few and as brief as they were, all eternity was altered by what he said. I suppose one could say "No man has ever said less and done more."

The best of all His statements were the words of victory: "It is finished." "Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty.' A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." (John 19:28)

That phrase comes to us in the English in three different words: It—is—finished. But in the original language, the Greek, it was just one word: *Tetelestai*. *Tetelestai* was a powerful word. It was a very terminating phrase that indicated something had been totally consummated. It is absolutely finished. Some had thought that this was a cry of desperation. Jesus yelling, "Oh it's finished!" It wasn't. Others thought it might be a sigh of relief, "Ohhh, it's finished." It wasn't that either. I'm convinced that this was a word of triumph, not tragedy. This was a word of jubilation, not lamentation. This was a cry of victory, not a cry of despair. In fact, he could have shouted "*Tetelestai*!" IT IS FINISHED!

But, what was finished?

1. Jesus' earthly work was finished. It's a lot easier to start something than it is to finish it, isn't it? Whether you're talking about a project, a college degree, a marriage, a commitment, a life, whatever: it's just a lot easier to start than it is to finish. That's why we only give rewards to those who finish. You don't see t-shirts that say, "I Started the Boston Marathon," do you? Nobody gets a diploma the first day of school. You don't get the gold watch at the beginning of the second month on your new job. You're rewarded when you finish. Frankly, most of us have a difficult time finishing what we started, but not Jesus. He was a finisher.

This word, "*Tetelestai*," is used three other times in John's gospel and all three times it comes from the lips of Jesus. "'My food,' said Jesus 'is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.'" (John 4:34) "'I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, that which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me.'" (John 5:36) This man is saying early on I am set to finish what I started.

Just hours before he would go to the cross, he's in prayer with his Father and said, "'I have brought you glory on earth by completing'" (there's that word, *Tetelestai*) "'by completing the work that you gave me to do.'" (John 17:4) Hours later, he cries out while hanging from his hands, "'It is finished.'" (John 19:30) When Jesus came to this earth, he didn't come with a random "fly by the seat of your pants" approach. He had a specific plan. He knew exactly what needed to be done. He knew the prophecies that needed to be fulfilled, the men that needed to be trained, the miracles that needed to be performed and the message that needed to be communicated. He said, my job is to do the will of He who sent me and I'm going to finish that work.

The reason so many people feel so unfulfilled in life, so frustrated, so unhappy, is that they simply don't follow Jesus' example. They have no life plan. They chase every rainbow, every source of instant

gratification and drink out of every pleasure pool. But they stay perpetually thirsty. Jesus, by contrast, said I want to know what my Father wants me to do and I'm going to do it until I finish it. People, that's the same secret for fulfillment in your life. We are on this earth for the very same purpose that Jesus was here. We're here to bring glory to the Father. This might surprise you, but we're going to accomplish that exactly the same way. We're going to accomplish it by simply being obedient, by going to our own cross symbolically and by letting ourselves be crucified so that God can live and reign in us. We're going to be fulfilled by staying the course and by finishing the race.

That last thing is the hardest thing to do. Some of you are asking "How do you do that? How do you stay motivated? How do you have the courage to run the entire race of life right to the finish line and do it well?" Let's examine what the Bible shares with us about Jesus' secret.

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the 'author and,'" (look at the word) "finisher of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2) It tells us how to finish! Here's how we finish, we look at Jesus. Where was Jesus looking? "The joy set before him he endured the cross," he hated the shame, but he went through it. Why? Because he knew just on the other side, he was going to be seated at the right hand of the throne of God having provided the way for man to be reconciled to Them. We keep our focus on where we're going. In an age of immediate gratification where we want instant satisfaction, we must remember that our reward is in eternity.

Now don't misunderstand. I wouldn't trade the Christian life for anything because as we seek to fulfill our purpose and finish the race God bears fruit in our life. We've studied those: Love, joy, peace, patience, all nine fruits of the spirit from Galatians 5. Nobody can experience those in the same measure as a Christian can.

But there's another side to that coin. Being a follower of Christ will make demands on our life. It will require sacrifices if our walk with God is genuine and tells us how we cope with that sacrifice, with the demands and with the annoyances of life. "For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross despising the shame and now he's sitting at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2)

Some of you are on the verge of quitting. Some of you studying this lesson may be on the verge of quitting a ministry, you're beginning to feel frustrated and maybe it seems fruitless. Are you a Bible school teacher who's wondering, you should just quit because you think "I'm not getting through to any student?" Are you a personal worker who's the same way? Are some of you thinking about quitting your marriage? Are some of you thinking, I don't know if I'm going to keep this church-stuff up?"

Can I give you one little bit of the best counsel? Look where Jesus looked. Re-focus on eternity. "This world is not my home; I'm just a passing through. My treasure is laid up somewhere beyond the blue." If you don't believe that, you're going to have a hard time ever finishing life, Paul said "...at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." (Galatians 6:9) Don't quit. *Tetelestai*. Jesus finished his work.

The plan of redemption was completed. He knew the plan of redemption was finished. That word, "*Tetelestai*" is an interesting word. It was often used in the first century in a commercial sense. For example, if somebody had a loan that required installment payment, that man might walk in on the last

day and slap down that little bit of money and say, "*Tetelestai*," it's finished, it's paid off, it's done. And the lender would look at him and say, "Congratulations!" When Jesus cried out, "*Tetelestai*," all of those around the cross would have made that association. It's paid, it's finished. What's paid, what's paid in full? The answer is the payment for sin, the purchase of redemption.

Just how did Jesus purchase our redemption? How does that work?

The requirement of the law was that anyone who sinned would die. That was the curse of the law. Now remember the word "die" means separation. If you sin, you would be separated from God eternally. That was the way it would work. Somebody would have to come in and cancel that debt, wipe it out, pay for it. From the beginning of time, God decreed there had to be a blood sacrifice. I don't know why, we'll ask God when we get to heaven. We've got some clues. We're told that life is in the blood. Sin is death; life cancels out death, which was going to be the payment. It had to be a blood payment to take away our sins.

Now for centuries, God had allowed the blood of animals, rams, bulls, goats and heifers, as a symbolic payment for that sin. But "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to really take away sins." (Hebrews 10:4) No, if our sin was ever going to be taken away, the sacrifice that would adequately pay for it and cancel the debt would have to meet three criteria: 1) It would have to be human; 2) it would have to be sinless and 3) it would have had to live under the law, the old Law of Moses fulfilling every jot and tittle perfectly. "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights as sons." (Galatians 4:4) Therefore the sacrifice had to be a human and born under the law. Jesus met all three of these criteria. Consequently, He could and would make the payment for us.

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature," (look at this) "God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us." (Romans 8:1-4)

We've been set free from sin and death because God sent his own son in the likeness of sinful man to be our sin offering so that the righteous requirements of the law might be met in us. Notice it reads "met in us" not "met by us." We can't meet the requirements of the law. Nobody could except Jesus.

The greatest part of the whole thing to me is in verse three, that last line of the verse, "He condemned sin in sinful man." Do you know what that says? That when God looks at me, a sinner, but a sinner who's in Christ, a Christian, he doesn't look at me and say "I condemn you, you sinner." Instead, "He condemns sin in sinful man." He says I condemn your sin, I put your sin on the cross and I let you have the righteousness of Jesus." *Tetelestai*. As the song says, "Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain; he washed it white as snow."

The power of mortality was finished. The natural enemy of humanity is death, isn't it? Someone said, "Man wants to be happy, but man can't be happy because he does the very thing he doesn't want to do, he dies." That describes most of humanity.

How many times do we try to postpone death? How many times do we try to avoid that monster? How many times do we dance around it and pretend it's not there? We try to duck its grasp, but we all eventually end up in its stranglehold. I've got great news! Jesus has broken the stranglehold. Jesus never preached a funeral service. In fact, Jesus messed up every funeral he ever attended. They were mourning for Jairus' daughter, and he had just brought her from the grave. They were leading the widow's son out from Nain. He just made him rise up. They had been weeping for Lazarus for four days. Jesus said "Roll the stone back. Lazarus come forth." Jesus destroyed every funeral he ever attended.

In the three days that encompassed his death and resurrection, he stripped death of all its power. "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the first-fruits; then when he comes, those who belong to him." (1 Corinthians 15:20)

When they took the lifeless body of Jesus off the cross that Friday afternoon, they placed it in a borrowed tomb. Knowing his claims about coming back to life and fearing his followers, the soldiers rolled a stone across that tomb, sealed it and placed a guard around it. But, they could not contain the seed of life. On that Sunday morning Mary and the other women were there when He, life, had burst forth. He was the first-fruit. The first to be raised from the dead, never to die again. When he comes again all who've died in him, will come out of the grave given a new, imperishable and incorruptible body. "When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55)

Folks, when Jesus said, "*Tetelestai!* It is finished!" he turned death from a bottomless pit into an exit ramp, taking us off one road and putting us on a better one. The way we face death is the acid test, the ultimate measure of our faith. Do you have that kind of faith, that kind of trust, that God will raise you up from this dust? He can – you can count on it because he broke the stranglehold of death, and he came back never to die again. It's finished. It's now up to you! Lesson #1257 Steve Flatt, April 7, 1996

The Words of Surrender

There had been hundreds, perhaps thousands, of crucifixions in Jerusalem prior to the day that Jesus was crucified and probably thousands after Jesus was crucified. So, it wasn't just the fact that a man was being crucified. What made this one so unusual is the man who was on the cross that day.

There was a tension in the air. There were huge crowds that had flooded into the city of Jerusalem because it was Passover. Frankly, things could very easily get in a state of frenzy in Jerusalem during this time of year. There was an explosive sort of mob psychology that was at work that particular day. All morning long, the leaders had served as cheerleaders. They were among the people yelling, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" All the crowds were joining in. The Roman soldiers were very much on alert that day. They had seen crowds of Jews like this turn violent before, so they were on their watch very carefully.

But now finally, Jesus is nailed to the cross. Some of the uproar seems to have subsided just a little bit, but now really strange things were beginning to happen. No one could quite put their finger on it, but there was something strange about what was going on, almost as if something was sneaking up on you, and you didn't know what it is. You couldn't tell for sure. Although it was high noon straight up and down, 12:00 in the middle of the day, it became dark; not just the kind of darkness that we are accustomed to seeing when a bad storm comes through during the day because it is still somewhat light, but it's pitch dark. It was the kind of dark that you just can feel. It's like midnight when it's overcast and the moon is not out, you can't see the stars and you're away from the city lights. You literally have a difficult time even seeing the hand in front of your face. It was that kind of dark in the middle of the day.

It was the kind of heavy darkness you could almost feel, so thick you could almost cut it with a knife. It was the kind of dark that makes birds go and roost. It was the kind of dark that makes soldiers light torches so they can see. It was the kind of darkness that didn't go away quickly like an eclipse would. But it lasted seemingly forever, three hours of absolute total darkness. Things were more than unusual, a strange, eerie and even frightening feeling.

Yet the amazing thing about these three hours is how briefly each one of the writers of the gospel tells the story of what was happening during the last hours of Jesus' life. The *Narrated Bible* which F. LaGard Smith edited several years ago has a marvelous way of putting the various accounts of the gospel altogether so that they read as one narrative. "From the sixth hour until the ninth hour, darkness came over the land. About 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?' When some of those standing there heard this, they said, he's calling for Elijah. Later, knowing that all was now completed and so that the scriptures would be fulfilled, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty.' Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar and put it on a stick and offered it to Jesus to drink. And the rest said, 'Now, leave him alone and let's see if Elijah will come and save him.' When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit.' With that he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

"At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs. And after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified and explained, 'Surely, this was the Son of God.'

Some women were watching from a distance, among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses and Salome. In Galilee, these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there. When all the people who had gathered to witness the sight, saw what took place, they beat their breast and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance watching all these things.

During the last three hours of Jesus' life, from noon until 3:00 in the afternoon, Jesus said very little, but what he did say is extremely important. The very last thing that Jesus said was "Father, into thy hands I commit my **spirit**." The very first word he said there is the word, "Father." What a beautiful word that is. Throughout this long ordeal, and even just prior to it, we see Jesus in very frequent communication with his Father. Somewhere between the Upper Room and the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus says, "Father, the hour has come." But notice how he addressed God: "Father, the hour has come."

In his place of solitude, he prayed "Father, not my will but thine be done." After he had been nailed on the cross, he said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." While shouldering our sins he said "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Finally, just before his death, he said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Throughout all these circumstances, no matter what they were, Jesus never lost communication with his Father. He was praying to his Father, talking to his Father, in union with his Father and in communion with him. Except for that brief moment when God turned his back on Jesus, and Jesus cried out those words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus never broke that communion with his Father.

Unlike Jesus it doesn't take much of a distraction to get us off track for a day or a week or longer, to distract us and our attention away from Father, from the way God blesses us. We tend to forget to pray "God, thank you for taking care of me" or "God, thank you for doing this in my life." We're so easily distracted, but not Jesus. Regardless of the circumstances, Jesus was always in communion and communication with his Father.

Then Jesus said, "Father, into your hands..." For the last twelve hours, Jesus had been in the hands of others who had abused him. They had plucked his beard, stricken him in the face, brutally smashed him about the neck and the body and taken a crown made of long thorns and pressed that down onto his scalp and into his brow. They had abused him terribly. But now he is finally in the hands of his Father. He is no longer in the hands of those who brutalized him, but it's into your hands, Father, that I commit my spirit. He was embraced now by the loving arms of God where there would be safety and comfort and acceptance. I can't help but think there are times when perhaps we feel persecuted or brutalized or lonely or whatever our situation might be. But just to know that we can be in the hands of God, not in the hands of those who would mistreat us or even in our own hands is a comforting thought.

Jesus also said: "I commit." "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." In the original language "commit," meant to deposit or to lay aside. In other words, nobody took Jesus' life away from him. He had said that even before his crucifixion. He said, "I lay down my own life. Nobody takes my life from me." Voluntarily, Jesus laid down his own life for you and for me. Jesus had done everything the Father had asked him to do. "It is finished." Jesus had become the propitiation for our sins, the atoning sacrifice. Jesus had become the satisfaction that God demanded for the sins of the world deflecting God's wrath from us. It was finished Jesus offered himself as a substitute for us. (1 John 2:1-2)

It can really be outlined this way:

1. We've got a problem – we are sinners condemned to death

2. There's a solution – a sacrifice without blemish, sinless, was required
3. There's a result – Jesus offered his own sinless life shed his own blood and satisfied God's demands for reconciliation.

Jesus said "Into your hands, Father, I commit my spirit." Almost ten centuries earlier David said the same thing but added a request "Into your hands I commit my spirit; redeem me, O LORD, the God of truth." (Psalms 31:5) It is a statement of surrender. That's what Jesus had done throughout his whole earthly life. He trusted God and had surrendered his life in total submission to God Almighty. Jesus knew with great confidence that resurrection and glory awaited him.

It was over. He had accomplished everything God had asked him to do. The full payment for our sin debt had been paid. Jesus, our atoning sacrifice, had made it possible for us to be reconciled to God. Perhaps we can now better understand what John meant when he said "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

We must commit. We must endure. We must commit our lives to him. "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him." (Romans 6:3-8) We must also stay focused and faithful. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning it's a shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." (Hebrews 12:13) Amazing Grace #1256 Steve Flatt, March 31, 1996