

Easy Reading Edition
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Chapter 1

Why Search for the Cross?

If you had a brand-new Rolls-Royce, you would want to keep it clean and shiny. You might not say anything, but you would feel proud of it. By polishing it all the time, you show how much you love it.

Some people like to show off nice clothes, a big house, or land. Others talk a lot about their job, music, art, science, or hobbies. These things are very important to them.

The apostle Paul cared deeply about one thing. This book is about that one thing. Paul said, "I will not be proud of anything except the cross of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14).

The word "glory" is hard to explain. It means being very proud and loving something a lot. It includes wanting it, enjoying it, and caring about it more than anything else. When Paul said, "I glory in the cross," he meant that the cross of Jesus was the most important thing to him. He also said, "I decided to know only Jesus Christ and that He died on the cross" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

WAS THIS MAN TOO EXTREME?

What did Paul see in the cross of Jesus that made him care so much about it? He cared the way Michael Jordan cared about basketball or Picasso cared about painting. Is there something very important in the Bible that we are missing?

Scientists say the ocean has a lot of hidden energy—enough to give people power for many years. In the same way, the cross has a lot of hidden spiritual power. Paul knew about this power and was excited about it. But many of us make our faith feel hard and painful. We do not understand how powerful the good news really is or how it can change people, like it changed Paul.

Paul became a believer because he saw Jesus, who had died on the cross. Before that, Paul was full of hate toward others. But in a short time, he understood that Jesus dying on the cross showed He was the Savior God had promised. From that moment on, the cross became the most important thing in Paul's life. It was the center of his message and never lost its meaning for him.

Today, many people do not understand the cross. Long ago, people paid close attention to it. Some thought it was foolish, others thought it was wrong, and many were offended by it. But today, many people think the cross is just boring or confusing. The cross cannot upset people if they do not understand it.

That is why many people today do not really care. Instead of arguing about the cross like people did in Paul's time, many people today simply do not know what it means. Still, we see crosses everywhere—on churches, on necklaces, and in colorful church windows. So why do so many people not understand what the cross really means?

HOW SATAN HURT HIS OWN PLAN

This darkness happened because of the tricky plans of the enemy of everything good. Satan knew that the cross meant he would be fully defeated. It showed how evil he really was. When Jesus died, it was like the whole universe was watching, the way people watch a big fight in a stadium.

At the cross, Satan showed his deep hatred for Jesus. Because of this, no one watching felt sorry for Satan anymore. When Jesus died on the cross, Satan lost his place as the "ruler of this world" (see John 12:31-33).

Once Satan's true self was clearly seen, even the angels in heaven had no sympathy for him. Anyone who truly knew God would never feel sorry for Satan again. Satan knew he had lost in the eyes of the angels who had stayed faithful to God. So, the only thing left for him to do was try to get the people of this new planet on his side and fight against Jesus.

A HIDDEN PLAN

So, Satan made a mean plan to erase the meaning of the cross from people's minds. He made a fake kind of Christianity. In this fake way, people go around the cross instead of learning what it really means. Satan wanted people to worship the *shape* of the cross but not understand the *truth* of the cross.

Starting long ago, the cross became a sign of Christianity. But the real message of the good news was slowly lost in many hearts. For over 1,600 years, history has shown how hard Satan has worked against the true message of Jesus. He knows his time is short. He gave people a shadow instead of the real thing. Many people wear crosses, put them on churches, or show them in windows. The cross becomes a decoration or a lucky charm. Some people even worship crosses made of wood or metal, but they do not understand what the cross really means.

Satan is so sure of his plan that he lets people talk about the cross, pray about it, sing about it, wear it, and put it on buildings. He even lets people worship it—as long as they do not understand what really happened when Jesus died. What could be more clever than turning the sign of his own defeat into something that looks like a victory?

In this kind of Christianity, it is like the sun has been taken out of the sky. People may not say they reject the cross, but they do not understand it. This causes a great loss. It is the same kind of loss that happened when leaders long ago rejected Jesus. The mind accepts the symbol, but the heart never truly understands what the cross means.

THE GREATEST LOSS BECAME THE GREATEST WIN

But we do not have to be fooled by an empty word or a symbol with no meaning. Satan made a fake to keep people from looking for the truth. But the fact that there is a fake means there must be something real! The fog that Satan has tried to put around the cross will be taken away. Then we can see the wonderful truth that Paul saw. What Satan thought would be his big win turned into his complete loss.

The Bible tells us that we can win over Satan: "They won because of the blood of the Lamb" (Revelation 12:11). Where was that blood given? At the cross. John the Baptist said, "Look! This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). God also says, "Look to Me and be saved" (Isaiah 45:22).

LEARNING TO LOOK

News magazines know that people like to look at new things. Millions of people spend free time just watching others—on the street, on TV, or in picture magazines. When there is an accident on the road or something strange happens, we feel a strong need to stop and look.

Everyone has a built-in desire to see something new and exciting. We want to see something we have never seen before. Deep inside, there is a feeling that we are still looking for something very important to see.

*When I look at Jesus on the cross,
I see how much He suffered for me.
My heart feels sad, and I cry as I learn two things:
His great love for me, and how much I still need Him.
I choose the cross to be my safe place.
I do not need anything else but Jesus with me.
I do not care about winning or losing in the world.
My wrong choices are my shame, but the cross is my greatest honor.*

Elizabeth Clephane

What we really want to see is the cross of Jesus. Nothing else can fully make us happy.

When we truly see it, like Paul did, we will not be proud of anything else. The cross will become the most important thing to us. When we "look at the Lamb of God," we see something so powerful that it makes false gods seem empty and useless. Money, things we own, jobs, being famous, and selfish pleasures stop feeling so important when someone understands what Jesus did on the cross. That is when real life begins.

Let us look.

Chapter 2

The Cross as Nature's Secret

Nature has never tried to hide its secret. But for thousands of years, sinful people lived on this earth without seeing the simple lesson written all around them—the meaning of the cross.

Farmers planted seeds in the ground to grow food every day. But they did not notice the lesson each seed teaches: a plant can only grow when the seed first gives up its life in the ground, so something new can grow.

Later, a perfect and sinless Young Man, Jesus, walked on this earth. Day after day, He knelt on the ground and prayed to His Father. He asked for strength and wisdom to help answer the big questions people had: How can death be overcome? How can people be saved from being lost forever? How can people who do wrong learn to do what is right?

HIS AMAZING DISCOVERY

Jesus made the world. He made nature with His own hands. Later, when He lived on earth as a Man, He studied nature to learn from it. He used its lessons to help people understand the only true way to live—the way of the cross.

One day, some visitors from Greece wanted to see Jesus. Jesus said, "The time has come for me to be honored. A grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die. If it does not die, it stays alone. But if it dies, it grows and makes many new grains. Anyone who loves only their life on earth will lose it. But anyone who gives up their life for God will live forever. When I am lifted up from the earth, I will bring all people to Me." Jesus said this to show how He would die.

A seed that stays safe on a shelf never grows. Because it protects itself, it stays alone. Even though the seed is good, it can only defeat death by being buried in the dark ground. Only by dying can it grow and make many new plants.

A TINY SEED TEACHES US A VERY POWERFUL LESSON

When Jesus was a young boy, He noticed how nature worked. Every flower, every tall tree, showed Him that small things sometimes must die to make something wonderful grow. A tiny grape seed, for example, must be buried in the soil before it can grow into a vine full of grapes. Jesus understood that His own life, like that little seed, would be given so that many people could be saved and share in God's glory.

Even as a boy, Jesus decided He would be like a seed. He would give up what was safe and precious to Him and "fall into the ground" to die. From watching nature, He learned this important lesson: only by giving up life can it truly bear fruit. This idea would guide Him to the cross, the place where He would defeat death.

It didn't matter if young Jesus fully understood that His death would be a Roman crucifixion. What mattered was that dying like a seed, giving up everything, was the most powerful way to

show His love for the world. Dying on the cross was much worse than ordinary death—it meant facing the deepest shame and suffering, as the apostle Paul explains.

Today, many people do not fully understand the cross. What used to be the most shameful and painful death is now seen as a symbol of honor.

This change is not just because of history. People are drawn to the cross because it shows something far greater: Jesus' love and the power of giving up life to save others. Understanding this is the main purpose of this book.

THE CROSS TOUCHES SOMETHING VERY DEEP INSIDE US

Whether or not we say we are religious, everyone can feel that the cross is important. Deep inside, something in us responds to it. The cross touches parts of human nature that nothing else can. History shows that one day, everyone in the world will understand its meaning.

Everyone feels a special connection to Jesus on the cross. He is so close to us that it's almost like He is part of us. No one else can feel so close or care so much for us as He does while He suffers there. Because Jesus died for everyone, "they all share in His death." People who are looking for truth know this, and even people who try to ignore it cannot avoid facing it.

Whether we believe in Him or not, everyone will eventually feel the power of the cross. Jesus said, "If I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to me." We can try to resist His love, but before anyone is truly lost, they will have to struggle against it. Rejecting Jesus is like choosing death, because His love is life itself.

IF WE CHOOSE NOT TO FIGHT AGAINST IT, THE CROSS GENTLY PULLS US TOWARD JESUS

Even a million devils, trying to fight against it, cannot stop the pull of the cross—like a tiny thread trying to hold back a huge battleship. When Jesus spoke to the Greeks, He was showing that His cross has power over everyone's heart.

This doesn't mean that everyone will be saved, but everyone will feel the pull of the cross in some way. Some people will follow it, and others will stubbornly resist it.

THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT JESUS' CROSS THAT STRONGLY PULLS ON OUR HEARTS

What makes the cross so powerful? Something about it touches anyone who stops to think about it. If Jesus were only a crazy person, or just a very good man who was killed, people would quickly forget Him—like a hero or leader who dies. But Jesus said He was God, and that is why His death is remembered forever.

But how can we know He really is God? Is it just because people told us to believe it, or because we want something good after we die?

Seeing the cross itself shows us more than all the arguments in the world. The love Jesus showed there is amazing. It is a selfless love, giving everything for others. Human love cannot

reach this level. Our hearts know that such perfect love must come from God. The hate and cruelty that killed Jesus also show how far humans can turn against God.

Jesus' love proves He is divine. No writer, poet, or thinker could ever invent a love like that.

This love makes the cross touch our hearts because the One who died is our truest friend, our closest family, the Elder Brother who has always loved us—even when we hated ourselves. He is the companion who stayed with us in our darkest times and believed in us when we doubted ourselves.

Every person has felt, at least a little, the hope of someone trusting them completely. It is even sweeter than hearing, "I love you." The greatest hope is hearing, "I believe in you. I trust you all the way. I am counting on your future."

NO ORDINARY HUMAN VOICE COULD GIVE US THIS KIND OF HOPE

Because our mistakes and sins are so many, only a never-ending forgiveness and trust could really help us. Everyone has heard this voice of hope in some way. It shows us that Jesus, the Son of God, came to live as a human. We can try to ignore it, but if we listen, it will lead us to follow Him.

The voice in our hearts and the lessons we see in nature both show that the cross comes from heaven.

This little book does not try to explain everything about Jesus or life. By the end, our journey will only be starting. There is still so much to learn about the cross. This shows us that life will continue forever, giving us endless time to explore the meaning of Jesus' great sacrifice. Our search for understanding will grow and continue, becoming part of the joy and knowledge of those who are saved for all eternity.

Chapter 3

Jesus' First Lesson on the Meaning of the Cross

Why did Jesus wait so long to teach this lesson? It may surprise us that Jesus waited until near the end of His three years of teaching before clearly telling His disciples that He would be crucified.

The cross is the most important message of the gospel. It is at the center of God's truth. So, we may wonder why Jesus waited so long to teach them about it.

Before this, Jesus only spoke about His death in unclear ways. He talked about the temple being destroyed and raised again in three days. He spoke about being lifted up like the bronze snake, giving His life for the world, the sign of Jonah, and the bridegroom being taken away. But the disciples did not understand what He meant.

What the disciples needed was a clear and full explanation of what was going to happen. Jesus did not explain it plainly until His visit to Caesarea Philippi, only a few months before it actually happened.

It may also surprise us that Jesus waited until this same time to ask the disciples who they thought He really was. They needed time to grow from their early excitement into a strong faith that could last through hard times.

THEIR FAITH THAT JESUS WAS TRULY GOD WAS TESTED

Jesus did not often call Himself the "Son of God." Instead, He liked to call Himself the "Son of Man." He did not act the way many Jews expected the Messiah to act. He did not accept praise from people who wanted Him to be a popular hero. Instead, He was happy to live a simple life without riches or fame. He did not try to please the religious leaders. In fact, He often did things that made them angry.

After Jesus taught about the Bread of Life, many people who had followed Him stopped following Him. He even sent away a crowd that wanted to make Him king. Soon, many people disliked Him and rejected Him. Because of this, the disciples could have found many reasons to stop believing in Him as the Savior, at least in a human and worldly way.

HOW THE DISCIPLES FINALLY KNEW WHO JESUS WAS

At the same time, the disciples had seen many things that made them sure, with the help of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus really was the Messiah, the Son of God. It was not just His miracles that convinced them—because people could make excuses for those. Miracles alone do not make faith strong.

What really made the disciples believe was the amazing love they saw in everything Jesus said and did. His words showed great wisdom and a deep understanding that came from God. These

were the “works” Jesus asked Philip to believe in. The Jewish leaders refused to see these works, and that refusal was called the sin of unbelief—not against Jesus, but against the Holy Spirit.

But the disciples did believe! By the time they reached Caesarea Philippi, only a few months before the crucifixion, they were ready to say what they truly believed.

Jesus asked them, “Who do people say that I, the Son of Man, am?” (Matthew 16:13). The answers they gave were flattering to many, but not exactly true. People said He was Elijah, Jeremiah, or another prophet. Then Jesus asked them to say clearly what they truly believed: “But who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15).

Peter was the first to speak the bold faith in their hearts. He said that Jesus was more than all the prophets and the long-awaited Messiah. He boldly said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16).

Jesus praised Peter’s faith but quickly warned him not to take the credit for it: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by any human, but by My Father in heaven” (Matthew 16:17). Peter could not think he was smarter than everyone else.

Even the brightest human mind cannot recognize God on its own. Only the Holy Spirit can show us who Jesus really is. “No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). When Jesus walked on earth two thousand years ago, most people did not recognize Him. Even today, people cannot understand God’s truth without His help.

NOW JESUS BEGINS TO TELL THE WHOLE TRUTH

After the disciples said they believed in Him, Jesus was ready to begin building His church. He said, “I will build my church on this truth, and even the power of death will not defeat it.” Jesus worked like a wise builder, carefully and quickly building a strong faith that evil could not destroy.

Now that the disciples truly believed that Jesus was God’s Son, He was ready to teach them about His death. He no longer spoke in unclear ways. Instead, He told them plainly that He would be rejected and killed. Jesus said that He would go to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of the leaders, be killed, and then rise again on the third day.

BAD NEWS!

The disciples listened with great surprise, not fear. The idea that God had a Son was already very hard for them to understand. Now hearing that God’s Son would die seemed impossible. They thought, “This can’t be true!” A Messiah who would be killed instead of honored, crowned, and ruling the world did not make sense to them. It felt wrong and upsetting. The more sure they were that Jesus was the Son of God, the more confused they became when He said He must die. And to be killed by their own people!

Simon Peter, who had been the first to say that Jesus was the Son of God, was also the first to say no to the cross. He meant well and thought he was helping Jesus. Peter took Jesus aside and spoke strongly to Him, trying to stop Him from thinking this way. He believed that nothing bad

like this should ever happen to Jesus, especially at the hands of their own people. Peter said, "This must never happen to You, Lord!" Crosses were for criminals, not for good people—and certainly not for the Son of God.

So, the cross was confusing and upsetting to the first disciples. It seemed foolish and wrong to them. In the same way, our human nature still struggles with the cross today.

WE SHOULD NOT BE SURPRISED THAT THE DISCIPLES WERE CONFUSED

If people could not understand on their own that Jesus was the Son of God, then Peter could not understand the idea of the cross by himself either. This idea was far beyond anything people could think up. They could only understand it if God's Spirit showed it to them.

It was good that Jesus first helped the disciples say that He was the Son of God before telling them this surprising news. If He had not done that, they might have stopped believing and left Him, like many others already had. People can make up religions and false saviors, but no one could imagine a Savior who would suffer, die, and give Himself in great love for the world.

ARE WE BETTER OR WISER THAN PETER?

On our own, people today still have a hard time understanding the truth about the cross, just like Jesus' first followers did. In some ways, we are in even more danger. We know the story of the crucifixion, and almost everyone agrees that it really happened. But knowing these facts in our heads can sometimes keep us from truly understanding the cross in our hearts.

If we think that being born in Christian times makes us better or wiser than Peter, we are mistaken. We might think we understand more because we live in a time with more knowledge. But thinking this way causes us to miss the true message of the gospel.

We cannot understand what happened at Caesarea Philippi unless we realize that we are just like Peter. If we forget this, we may make the same serious mistake he made by turning away from the cross. Peter did this without understanding. We could be in danger of turning away even though we do understand. This is the final sin of those who are lost.

THE REASON WHY PETER REACTED AS HE DID IS CLEAR

The idea of the cross was very new and not like anything people usually thought about. Only God could come up with it. The Bible says the cross shows God's wisdom and power (1 Corinthians 1:24). It was God's wise plan to fight evil. But Peter's reaction to what Jesus said was the same reaction many people have had in every time and place. Peter was saying what many of us still feel today—that the idea of being put on a cross sounds scary and foolish.

Jesus showed this when He corrected Peter for speaking in a rude and careless way. Jesus said, "You are in My way, because you are not thinking about what God wants, but about what people want" (Matthew 16:23). Peter was just a regular man, like any of us. He could only understand human ideas. He was not worse than anyone else—he was simply being human. Because of this, he could not understand God's plan or the meaning of the cross. The same human thinking that confused Peter can confuse us too.

But we have not yet talked about the real reason Peter did not want Jesus to die on the cross. Jesus was not being mean or angry with Peter. He did not lose His temper. Jesus spoke very strongly because He loved Peter.

His sharp words showed where Peter's wrong thinking came from. Peter was thinking in a worldly way, not God's way. Jesus pointed out the real problem that makes people reject the cross. He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are in My way." (Verse 23)

POOR PETER!

Without meaning to, Peter let Satan use him when he tried to stop Jesus from going through with His sacrifice. This temptation was very real for Jesus. Jesus knew that Peter's ideas came from the enemy's first rebellion in heaven. Avoiding the cross sounded tempting to Jesus, and He had to fight it with all His strength. By speaking for Satan, Peter had hurt Jesus deeply.

We should not think that Peter was Satan. But the way Peter spoke about the cross showed more than just a human mistake or lack of understanding. His words showed the same kind of thinking that Satan had.

We can imagine that the disciples became very quiet and serious as they started to understand how strong and serious Jesus' correction was.

Chapter 4

How Lucifer Chose to Hate the Cross

If people like us cannot understand the meaning of the cross, could Satan understand it? He is not stupid—he knows exactly what he is doing.

To be the enemy of the cross, he must have understood it clearly. If he didn't know the truth about salvation, then his opposition would be blind and innocent. But he does know, and that is why he fully rebels. This is what makes him the devil and Satan.

Why Satan rebelled will always remain the mysterious "mystery of sin." The way he rebelled included the strongest and smartest rejection of the cross.

Peter, even though he was innocent, was getting dangerously close to the same kind of thinking as Lucifer when he tried to turn Jesus away from the cross.

When Satan tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, he promised them that if they sinned, they would become greater than they were created to be. "You will be like God," he said (Genesis 3:5). This same desire—to be like God—was what caused Satan's first sin in heaven.

"How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High." Isaiah 14:12-14.

No one can truly be like God without trying to take God's place, because there is only one "Most High."

LUCIFER LOVED HIMSELF TOO MUCH

This is now how all of us naturally think, unless we are saved. But loving ourselves too much leads to being against God (Romans 8:7). Being against God can lead to hurting or even killing others. Jesus said about the devil, "He was a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44). That is true because "whoever hates their brother is a murderer" (1 John 3:15). Satan hated God and was jealous of Him. Right at the start of Lucifer's rebellion in heaven, the idea of a cross—the way of giving up self—began to appear, even in the shadows of eternity.

Lucifer probably began to see where his rebellion would take him. He realized that the terrible sin in his heart would lead to killing the eternal Son of God. This shows how dangerous selfish love can be! Isaiah mentions Lucifer's obsession with his "I" five times. Sin always starts with being self-centered.

Satan's main problem is that he hates agape—God's kind of love—which is very different from human love. Our kind of love likes only nice people, agape loves even mean or bad people, even enemies. Our love depends on how good someone is; agape makes someone valuable. Human love wants to go up higher, like Lucifer wanted to put his throne above God's stars. Agape, on the

other hand, is willing to step down, just like Jesus did in Philippians 2:5-8. Human love wants to get; agape is ready to give. Human love looks for a reward; agape dares to give up its reward.

Most of all, what Satan hated was seeing God's amazing love (agape) fully shown in Jesus: a love that is willing to give up even eternal life, to die the second death. This is the greatest kind of love, and it is the exact opposite of everything Satan stands for. He does not want anyone—people or angels—to see it.

Lucifer must have thought very carefully about the choice he was making. Could he turn back while he still had the chance? If he did, there was only one way to fix the sin in his angelic heart—this proud "I" that wanted to be "like the Most High" and take God's throne would have to die. Lucifer's self would have to be crucified.

HOW A BRIGHT ANGEL BECAME THE DEVIL, OR SATAN

Lucifer's only way out of his problem with God would have been a spiritual cross—giving up his pride, his ego, his selfish "I" willingly, so that truth, right, and holiness could live. He almost understood that this was the only way he could be saved.

But then, angrily and firmly, he said no. He refused to give up himself. He chose not to deny himself or make sacrifices. Instead, he decided to follow his own way, putting self first, self-seeking, self-love, and self-importance.

That's when he became the devil, Satan, "the serpent of old... who deceives the whole world" (Revelation 12:9). A bright angel who hates the cross becomes God's and our enemy.

Satan knows that the only way any sinful being in the universe can be saved is by the cross. So, he works hard to hide that truth from humans. Anything that is against the cross is from Satan; and anything that comes from Satan is against the cross.

WHY WAS JESUS SO FIRM WITH PETER?

Jesus' sharp rebuke to Peter makes more sense when we see it this way. He was not angry or losing His temper. Peter was thinking like a human, but he was also unknowingly thinking like Satan! He was speaking the enemy's words when he told Jesus to avoid going to Jerusalem to be crucified and to put His own safety first. Self-interest and self-protection are the main thoughts of Satan, and at that moment, they had taken hold of Peter too. Aren't these thoughts sometimes in our hearts as well?

The "things of men" actually have a hidden spiritual problem, and Peter shows it to us. Without realizing it, he was helping Satan by trying to stop Jesus from going to the cross. This temptation to turn Jesus away from the cross was Satan's greatest weapon, used again and again during Jesus' life on earth.

Satan understood the rule of the cross, but he could not understand the amazing love of God shown in Jesus, who willingly chose the greatest sacrifice. Even the last cruel words spoken to

Jesus on the cross, "Save Yourself, and come down from the cross!" (Mark 15:30), were inspired by Satan.

Now, at Caesarea Philippi, Peter's heart is ruled by self-interest. He is, in effect, saying, "Save Yourself, Lord." Jesus calls him by name and says, "Get behind Me, Satan." At that moment, Peter is opposing the cross.

ARE WE LIKE PETER?

We should not feel proud or think we are better than this man. He was a Christian, and he loved Jesus very much. He was not only a church member, but also a minister. He could proudly tell how he had cast out demons in Jesus' name! Jesus had even praised him. Yet, without knowing it, he was helping Satan by trying to stop what Jesus needed to do!

We are Christians who love Jesus very much. We may work for Him and feel proud of what we have done, happy that it seems we have power over evil spirits in Jesus' name, and that Satan seems to fall at our command. But is it possible that we could be wrong, just like Peter was when Jesus said, "Get behind Me, Satan"?

If it was possible for Peter, who was dear, lovable, and full of faith, to be following the enemy without knowing it, it could happen to us too. Whether this is true for us depends on our heart and how we feel about the cross.

The Bible warns: "Let the one who thinks they stand take care not to fall." Like the disciples, we need to stay close to Jesus to learn His next lesson about what the cross really means.

Chapter 5

Jesus' Second Lesson on the Meaning of the Cross

Peter would be shocked later when he had time to think about what he had done. He had dared to talk back to his Teacher. He had even grabbed Him, like he would grab another fisherman he thought was not thinking clearly.

A quiet and amazed group listened as Jesus clearly explained the rules of God's kingdom for the first time. He showed them what it really means to follow Him:

"Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.'" Matthew 16:24, 25.

It was as if He was saying: You are surprised that I, the Son of God, must go to the cross and die. But it does not stop there. If you want to follow Me, each of you must also be ready to give up your life and carry your own cross with Me. We are in this together, and this rule of the cross is for all of us.

THAT "WHOEVER" MEANS EVERYONE

God is not left out, and people are not left out either. Long, long ago, before sin began, the Father and the Son made a serious promise. If people ever sinned, the Father would give His Son, and the Son would give Himself, so the whole universe could be saved from the harm of selfishness.

Later, God would share His throne with everyone who chooses to share Jesus' cross. God was willing to risk everything to show His great love, a love deeper and higher than anyone had ever known before. God also has His cross.

No matter who you are, if you follow Jesus, you have a cross to carry. You do not have to be a priest, monk, pastor, missionary, or church leader to be included in the "whoever." Anyone who tries to save their own life will lose it, but like a seed that falls into the ground and dies, it will grow and produce lots of fruit. Jesus says this is the main rule on which His kingdom is built.

It is not surprising that when sin fought against God's rule, it attacked this rule of giving up self at the cross. In the battle that followed, God's love had only one way to win—the way of the cross. Love chose this way because it shows love best. There was no other path the Son of God could take except to give Himself on the cross.

Whenever real love meets the problem of sin, a cross appears, where selfishness is put to death. The Father had no other choice but to give His only Son, because He loved the world so much. Long ago, before people could understand it, Jesus agreed to become the Lamb of God. Because His heart was full of perfect love, He chose this way. That is why the Bible says He was "slain from the beginning of the world" (Revelation 13:8).

The same thing happens today wherever God's love enters a heart. When love meets sin, it makes the same choice. The way to win is the same, whether it is God solving the problem, or you and me.

HOW JESUS LEARNED ABOUT THE CROSS AS A BOY

The meaning of the cross can be seen clearly in the life of Jesus when He came to earth. Jesus was fully human, and He was tempted just like we are. But His heart had no sin in it, so it stayed pure. Because of this, His heart was full of perfect love. This made Him different from all other people who have ever been born. He never sinned and never gave in to selfishness, even though the temptation to think of Himself was just as strong for Him as it is for us.

But we should not think that Jesus remembered His life in heaven while He was growing up on earth. As a baby in His mother's arms in Bethlehem, He knew no more than other babies do. He could not understand the praise from the shepherds or the wise men. As a child in Nazareth, He did not tell Mary and Joseph stories about heaven or tell other children about leading angels.

No, Jesus learned just like we do. The Bible says He grew and became wiser as He got older. The amazing thing about Jesus is that He was God living as a human. He had to grow in mind and body just like we do, but He never sinned. He was not born remembering His life in heaven. He chose to give up all those special advantages.

WHY THE AGE OF TWELVE IS IMPORTANT

By the time a child reaches this age, he or she can think very deeply. The choices made then begin to shape the rest of life.

Jesus was twelve years old when He went to the Passover, the special national festival of His people. For the first time, He saw the famous temple and watched priests dressed in white place a bleeding animal on the altar. Jesus watched carefully and with respect. He wondered what it all meant. Why was an innocent lamb being offered?

No one could explain it to Him—not even the priests. They said the words and followed the rituals, but they did not really understand their meaning. For many years, God's servants had offered animals to pay for sin. When Jesus asked, "Why?" no one could answer Him. No one could explain why blood had to be given. Jesus wondered if the blood of bulls and goats could really take away sin.

A PRAYER SAID IN HEAVEN IS SAID AGAIN ON EARTH

Even as a child, Jesus had to walk His own path. He didn't join in with the silly talking or playful games of the other children. Not even His mother and father could fully help Him. Quiet and alone, He thought deeply about the animals' blood He had seen, which had made a big impression on Him.

Paul tells us that Jesus realized the blood of goats, calves, or lambs could never really take away people's sin. Not just in heaven before He came, but also as a young boy praying on His knees, He understood this and made the same promise in His heart that He had made in heaven:

"For this reason, when Christ was about to come into the world, He said to God: You do not want sacrifices and offerings, but you have prepared a body for Me. You are not pleased with animals burned whole on the altar or with sacrifices to take away sins. Then I said: "Here I am, to do Your will, O God." Hebrews 10:5-7, TEV.

It was as if Jesus prayed: Father, You don't need all these animals' blood! You don't want them because they can't take away even one person's sin. But You have made me just as I am—I have a body I can give! I have blood I can shed. Here I am, Father—let me be the Lamb of God! I will die for the sins of the world. My blood will pay for sin! I will be the "suffering servant" Isaiah spoke about, the one who takes the sins of everyone. Let me be hurt for people's wrongs, so that by my suffering they can be healed. Here I am, ready to do Your will, God!

Paul also says that Jesus ended the Old Testament animal sacrifices and offered Himself instead, the true and perfect sacrifice.

"So, God does away with all the old sacrifices and puts the sacrifice of Christ in their place. Because Jesus Christ did what God wanted Him to do, we are all purified from sin by the offering that He made of His own body once and for all." Hebrews 10:9, 10, TEV.

A BOY'S LOVE GROWS VERY DEEP

Jesus did not remember His life in heaven, so He had to understand the meaning of the Passover service on His own. He could not recall the promise He had made with God the Father before the world began, when He agreed to be the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world.

With His pure and sinless mind, He slowly began to understand what He saw. He realized that the lambs and other sacrifices "cannot make the person who offers them truly clean in their conscience" (Hebrews 9:9). He understood that the law and its sacrifices were only a shadow of the good things to come and could never make people perfect, no matter how often they were offered (Hebrews 10:1).

Jesus thought to Himself: This is all just a picture. Someone innocent, sinless, and holy must die as the Lamb of God if people's lost hearts are ever going to be saved! All the sacrifices and rituals must come to an end through a real, divine sacrifice.

The wise men and priests of Israel had never understood this, even after thousands of years of doing these ceremonies. But now, for the first time, the twelve-year-old Jesus understood what everyone else had missed. His heart was filled with a strong and unstoppable decision. He saw that people, trying to save themselves, would be left in hopeless despair if no one helped them. So, He decided to give Himself. The boy Jesus "saw that there was no one to help, so His own arm

brought salvation; His own righteousness kept Him strong" (Isaiah 59:15-16). "Christ ... through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without sin to God" (Hebrews 9:14).

Look at the amazing love of Jesus! He lives as a human boy, young and tender, knowing nothing of His past except what He learns from God's Word. Yet He makes the same choice He had made as the Commander of heaven's angels. He chooses to go to the cross.

THE ONLY WAY WE CAN REALLY SAVE OUR LIFE

When God's love (agape) fills our hearts through the Holy Spirit, we can choose the way of the cross just like Jesus did—first in heaven and again as a twelve-year-old boy in the temple. Every time someone's heart chooses this way, whether it's the Son of God or a believer, it leads to new life, just like Jesus rose from the dead. There is good news: "If you hate your life in this world, you will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25).

There are two crosses: the cross of Christ, and our own cross, where we "die with Christ," like the repentant thief did.

There was a third cross at Calvary, too, but the thief who refused to turn to God did not receive salvation. He suffered and died without surrendering, cursing God until the end, and he was lost.

Should we rebel against the way of the cross and follow him into eternal darkness?

Carrying our cross is easier when we see Jesus' cross first. He says, "My yoke is easy." By looking at His cross, we can understand our own and find the strength to carry it gladly.

When I look at the special cross

Where Jesus gave His life,

I see that everything I own

Is small compared to His love.

If I owned the whole world,

It still would not be enough.

His love is so great and wonderful

That I want to give Him my whole life and heart.

Isaac Watts

Chapter 6

Who is the "Old Man" Crucified with Christ?

A kind Christian woman became blind. While she lay in bed, trying to understand why this happened, her pastor came to comfort her.

"Dear one," he said, "God has given you a cross to bear."

How would you feel if someone told you that a sad event in your life—something you didn't ask for—was your cross? You might feel upset or even angry at God.

No one would ever choose the pain and troubles that people often call their cross. Jesus' cross is different—it must be taken willingly, just as Jesus took His cross willingly. No one would choose to become blind, unable to walk, paralyzed, or very poor. It's good to bear these hardships patiently, but that alone is not the same as carrying the cross Jesus taught about.

Paul, more than any other apostle, understood the power of the cross on human hearts. He was very educated in Jewish teachings and also knew Greek philosophy. The idea of the cross surprised people. To the Jews, it seemed like a "stumbling block"; to the Greeks, it seemed like "foolishness."

PEOPLE STILL DON'T LIKE JESUS' CROSS TODAY

It is not surprising that the Greeks thought the cross was "foolish." They did not understand the kind of wisdom the Jews should have shared with them. The Greeks had a word for "self"—ego—but they had no idea what to do with selfishness. When Paul said that people must "crucify" their selfishness, they thought he was talking nonsense.

The Jews, on the other hand, did not like the idea of a cross either. They did not understand human nature very well. If they had, they would have seen that Jesus' death was the perfect answer to what every person truly needs. But they did not understand their own teachings well enough to see it.

Paul, who knew Greek philosophy, noticed that people of the world often understand human nature better than religious people do. Even though the Greeks were looking for wisdom in the wrong places, Paul saw that the cross contained the wisdom they were really searching for. Human nature had hidden it from them, but the cross revealed it clearly.

HOW PAUL'S IDEA OF THE CROSS HELPS US UNDERSTAND LIFE'S BIGGEST PROBLEM

The New Testament does not give a complete, step-by-step explanation of everything Paul taught about the cross. What we have are letters he wrote from time to time. Paul did not mean these letters to explain all his ideas that shook the ancient world.

Even so, we can see in these letters some of Paul's powerful ideas that changed history. They show how much he believed the cross was the only way to help people stop being selfish. The clearest explanations are in his letters to the churches in Rome and Galatia.

"Surely you know that when we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus, we were baptized into union with His death. By our baptism, then, we were buried with Him and shared His death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glorious power of the Father, so also, we might live a new life.... Our old being has been put to death with Christ on His cross, in order that the power of the sinful self might be destroyed, so that we should no longer be the slaves of sin. For when a person dies, he is set free from the power of sin." Romans 6:3-7, TEV.

"I have been put to death with Christ on His cross, so that it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." Galatians 2:19, 20, TEV.

The King James Version calls "our old being" the "old man." But who is this "old man"?

Is he Satan? No—Satan would never let himself be crucified with Jesus, and God cannot force him.

Is the "old man" our sinful nature? Paul had another name for our sinful nature—he called it "sinful flesh" (Romans 8:3). This does not mean our physical body is bad! "Sinful flesh" really means our sinful thoughts or self-centered nature (Romans 8:7).

Paul's idea of the "old man" is bigger than just our sinful nature. It's not only the bad things we do. It can also include the parts of ourselves we think are good but are really still selfish. We must be careful—just because we think we have "crucified" our sinful nature today doesn't mean the "old man" isn't still hiding in our hearts, waiting to show itself tomorrow.

FINDING THE REAL CAUSE OF OUR HUMAN PROBLEMS

Many people think our "sinful nature" only shows up in the bad things we do. They think getting rid of the "old man" means just stopping those actions. But Jesus taught that sin starts in our thoughts, not just in what we do. For example, wanting something we should not want is already sinful, even before we act. Feeling hate in our heart, even before hurting someone, is already like murder.

Our sinful nature comes from the self, from our "ego." It shows up as a love for selfish things. David understood this when he said, "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5).

This means sin is not only what we do, but also who we are inside. Sin really means going against God's law. But sin is deeper than just doing wrong things. The first sin began with pride in Lucifer's heart. The last sin that people must overcome is the same kind—selfishness that goes against God.

When we try to understand the "old man," another question comes up: what is the "body of sin" that is destroyed when the "old man" is crucified? Is it the same as our physical body?

We know that sometimes our body wants things that lead us to sin. But that does not mean the body itself is sinful. Do we have to fight against our body all the time to destroy the "body of sin"?

The “body of sin” is not the physical body. It is like the root or source of sin, just as the “body” of a book is the words inside, not the cover. The “old man” is so important that when he is crucified, the “body of sin,” or the root of sin, is destroyed.

WHO IS THE “OLD SELF” THAT DIES WITH JESUS?

Paul answers this question as simply as solving a math problem. For example, if $x + 2 = 4$, we solve it like this: $4 - 2 = 2$, so $x = 2$.

In the Bible, Paul says in Romans that the “old man” is crucified with Christ. In Galatians, he says that what is crucified with Christ is “I.” So the “old man” is really just “I” or self. In Today’s English Version, it is called “the sinful self.”

To Paul, this was as clear as sunlight: selfish love is the source of all sin. Selfishness cannot be fixed by punishment, beating, ignoring it, or just saying “no.” It must be crucified.

When the “self” is crucified, the problem of sin is solved. It is like pulling out the root of a tree—once the root is gone, the tree dies. Paul says, “He who has died has been freed from sin” (Romans 6:7). Understanding this principle of the cross could help solve the same kinds of problems in people’s hearts today as it did in Paul’s time.

HOW CAN WE PUT SELF TO DEATH?

This idea might seem foolish or impossible—except that we have an example to show us it can work: the cross of Christ. We cannot get rid of selfishness by ourselves; it must be crucified with Christ.

In fact, crucifying self with Christ can be as natural for a believing heart as saying “thank you” to someone who does something kind for us. Following the way of the cross is not hard when we look at Jesus on His cross. Seeing Him there and understanding what it means helps our selfishness die with Him. Jesus said, “I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to myself” (John 12:32).

Satan’s favorite trick is to make the cross confusing, hiding it so we cannot understand it. Then he can make us believe we cannot follow it: “The cross is foolish! You can’t give up yourself in today’s world! Love yourself, get ahead, step on others!” He tries to fill our minds with these lies every day.

If we cannot see the cross clearly, Satan is right—without it, we can do nothing but live for ourselves.

But when we see Jesus on the cross clearly, it becomes the “power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18) for everyone who understands how important it is.

SEEING THE TRUTH CLEARLY

God’s way of dealing with sin is not hard, confusing, or complicated. His plan is very simple. In fact, sin itself is simple—it is just loving yourself too much.

Long ago, Lucifer (Satan) knelt before God as the “anointed cherub who covers” (Ezekiel 28:14), but he did not understand or love God’s selfless character. He cared only about his own beauty and cleverness. This not believing in God is called “unbelief” in the Bible. That selfish pride in his heart was the root of all sin, and from it came all the pride and selfishness we see in the world.

The “old man” is simply the selfish “I” or self. It dies with Christ when we understand the love shown on the cross. Jesus came as a human—your human, my human—and He faced life just like we do. From the life He was given, His honesty, purity, selflessness, love, and complete surrender led Him to the cross. He took our ordinary lives and added His love (agape). The result was His cross.

When we have the kind of love Jesus showed, being crucified with Him means we die to selfishness too. If you had that love, you could not avoid the cross any more than Jesus could. When you understand that He has come in your life, in your exact situation right now, you can see how love leads straight to the cross.

It is like when someone does something kind for you and you say, “thank you.” Your heart naturally responds. When you see the love of Jesus, all your selfishness is shown clearly. It’s like a special light shines on your heart and shows the real you—the part that is full of self-love and not love for others. You see yourself as God and the angels see you.

At first, it may feel overwhelming, like you want to hide. But as the light of Jesus’ love fills your heart, every little root of pride and self-centeredness fades away. The guilt you feel would crush you if Jesus were not already carrying it on His cross. You are never alone—your “old man” dies with Him. Your selfishness, pride, and self-satisfaction are gone—they are crucified.

FINISHING THE JOB OF OVERCOMING SIN

You don’t need to do hard or painful things to get rid of sin—no special trips, no punishing yourself, no starving yourself, no wearing rough clothes, no forcing yourself to stop one bad habit after another. All those things don’t really work. The Bible says, “He that has died has been freed from sin.” Jesus’ sacrifice does it, and nothing else in the world can.

Other ways people try to fix selfishness only stop it for a little while. The problem keeps coming back somewhere else. As long as the root of selfishness (the “body of sin”) is still there, you can cut off some branches, but selfishness will still grow, bringing worry, envy, pride, and other sins.

But now Jesus has lifted you up with Him. You can feel the power of His love. Think about it carefully—it is stronger than anything in nature. It is the way God designed the world to work. See it for yourself. Understand it for yourself. You don’t have to just believe what someone else says!

*Was it because of what I did
That Jesus hung on the tree?
It is amazing love and kindness,*

So much grace given to me.

*The sun could hide and turn dark
On that sad and painful day,
When Jesus, who made everything,
Died to take our sins away.*

*I feel ashamed and bow my head
When I see the cross so clear.
My heart feels full of thanks and love,
And my eyes fill up with tears.*

*My tears can never pay Him back
For all He 's done for me.
So, Lord, I give my whole self to You—
That 's the best gift I can give.*

Isaac Watts

Chapter 7

The Subtle Rebirth of the "OLD MAN"

If Jesus did not die for nothing, then the people who follow Him will shine in this dark world like stars in a stormy night. They will be set free from being selfish.

But when we look around us—and inside our own hearts—we see something surprising. When we stop doing wrong things in obvious ways, those wrong attitudes can come back in quieter, sneakier ways. Selfishness returns, dressed up to look better, but it is still wrong. Sometimes people who call themselves "good Christians" forget that they still make mistakes. This has made others confused or disappointed about Christianity. It must make Jesus very sad to see this.

Jesus gives us the answer in what He teaches about the cross. He said, "If anyone wants to follow Me, he must say no to himself, carry his cross every day, and follow Me." (Luke 9:23) Jesus tells us to carry our cross every day because our "old self" does not stay gone forever. Even when we think it is gone, it can come back in a new way.

Today, we may truly see our selfishness and honestly try to give it up. That is real and good. But each time we win, it is only one small battle—not the whole war. The old self comes back again and again, looking smarter and harder to see. That is why Jesus says we must carry our cross every day.

CAN WE EVER STOP CARRYING THE CROSS?

If we say we do not need to carry the cross anymore, we would be saying we are better than Jesus. But even Jesus had to choose God's will every day. He said, "I do not do what I want. I do what God the Father wants." Jesus would not ask us to carry our cross every day unless He also

did the same. A student is not greater than the teacher, and a servant is not greater than the master.

We carry the cross every day in this life. And even in heaven, the meaning of the cross—loving others instead of ourselves—will still guide how God’s people live. The Bible shows us that even after sin is gone forever, Jesus is still called the Lamb, the One who was sacrificed. In the new city God makes, everything centers on Jesus and His love. God’s love, shown on the cross, will always be the reason His kingdom is full of life, joy, and light.

Only when Jesus’ unselfish love fills every heart, will sin never come back again. If selfishness ever returned, sin would return too, and the great fight would start all over again. But God promises that this will never happen. Trouble will not come back a second time. When we choose to carry our cross each day now, we are learning how to live God’s way forever. Eternal life does not start later—it starts now.

THE OLD SELF CAN COME BACK IN NEW WAYS

Jesus tells us to carry our cross every day because our “old self” can come back every day too. It is our job to learn how the old self shows up in new ways.

Sometimes the old self looks very polite and educated. It may seem kind, smart, and well behaved.

The old self may enjoy good books, art, and music and be popular with others. But this proud self is not really better than a mean or rude self—it is just harder to notice and harder to give up to God.

The old self may like doing good things for family or the community.

The old self may enjoy being a leader, joining clubs, or working hard to help others. Many leaders do good things, and many are good people. But it is easy to start loving praise from others. Then pride sneaks in, and the old self wins again.

The hardest kind of old self to see is the religious self. This happens when a person feels proud about praying, teaching, or helping others know God. Even good actions can make pride grow if we are not careful.

Because of this, people who teach or preach about God must be extra careful. Even doing church work can pull someone away from Jesus if they forget to choose humility every day.

When good work is done to make ourselves feel important, it becomes wrong because it comes from the old self.

That is why Jesus warned that some people will say they did many great things for Him, but He will say He never really knew them. Their actions were wrong because they were done for themselves instead of for God.

WHEN SELF IS IN CHARGE, IT LEADS TO SIN

The Bible says the message of the cross shows God's power. So, if someone teaches without the meaning of the cross—giving up selfishness—it is not from God. That kind of teaching lets the old self take control.

When people work for God but do it for themselves, they may truly believe they are doing it in Jesus' name. Jesus warned that many people would say, "We did good things for You," but He would say He did not really know them.

These people are sad to think about. They truly believed they were serving Jesus. They were quick to thank God for the good things they thought they had done. But they were trusting what they could see instead of trusting Jesus. They focused on their own work, not on Christ. The old self trusts what it sees, not faith.

They praised God for their success, but they did not notice a proud thought hiding inside: that God was lucky to have them helping Him. This trick can be so sneaky that even very faithful people can be fooled.

Jesus knew this danger. That is why He gently warned His followers. One time, seventy of His helpers came back very excited. They said, "Lord, even evil spirits obey us when we use Your name!" Jesus remembered how pride once grew in Satan's heart long ago.

So, Jesus told them not to be proud of their power. He said they should be happy instead that their names were written in heaven. If church leaders today listened more carefully to Jesus' words, many good helpers could be saved from the trap of pride.

PAUL WARNED ABOUT A SERIOUS DANGER

Paul understood that something very sad could happen. He said that even if a person who works for God finds out in the end that his work did not last, that person could still be saved—but only after losing the work he was proud of.

Paul taught that we must first be humble before God. Only then can we build a life that lasts. A life built on Jesus is like using gold, silver, and precious stones. It will stay strong when tested. But work not built on Jesus is like wood, grass, or straw—it burns up easily.

A writer once said that nothing helps a person more than seeing his bad work burn away, except doing work that lasts through the fire.

The old self easily wants praise and honor, even when doing church work. In a church setting, people may say they do not care about fame, but the desire to be important can still hide in the heart.

If the old self is not given up every day, it may change into wanting to be a respected leader in the church. As churches become bigger and more impressive, this danger can grow.

This kind of pride is very tricky. It looks like serving Jesus, but it is really serving self.

THE OLD SELF CAN TRICK US IN VERY SNEAKY WAYS

Another way the old self can fool us is by trusting exciting feelings or amazing experiences. These can feel powerful, joyful, or even miraculous, and we may think God is working through us in a special way.

It is easy to think that miracles mean God is pleased with us. We might ask, “How could something bad be part of a miracle?” But not every miracle is proof that God is at work in the right way.

The Bible teaches that even Satan can do things that look good and bright. He can pretend to be an angel of light. This means we must be careful. We should not be too sure of ourselves. Anyone who thinks they cannot be fooled should be extra careful.

Jesus warned us that false teachers will do amazing signs and wonders. These things can trick people—even very faithful people.

When our prayers are answered, we may start to feel special or better than others. Pride can grow quietly in our hearts. It can be like bragging about knowing important people, while others feel left out or less important.

Pride can also come when we think God answers our prayers because we are better than others. This is like the Pharisees long ago, who thought they were God’s favorites. It can be hard to notice how much the old self is enjoying the attention and praise.

THE CROSS HELPS SHOW WHAT IS TRULY RIGHT

Think again about the sad group of people who talk to Jesus at the judgment. They say, “Didn’t we teach in Your name? Didn’t we do miracles in Your name?” They truly believed God answered their prayers. They prayed and saw amazing results that surprised everyone. But Jesus sadly tells them, “I never knew you.”

Someone must have answered their prayers, because real miracles happened. But if Jesus says it was not Him, then who was it?

The Bible tells us that Satan can pretend to be good. He can look like an angel of light and even act like a false Christ. He can do signs that look powerful and amazing, even calling fire down from the sky. But these miracles hide who he really is. The Bible says he uses these signs to trick people. This shows us that miracles alone do not prove that someone truly belongs to Jesus.

One of the hardest tricks to notice is when the old self feels proud because of exciting or powerful experiences. Big signs and wonders can feel special, but they are often used by false teachers today.

If selfish pride can sneak into preaching and church work, then it is also possible for false powers to seem to bless that work. Feelings and emotions can fool us. They are not always right.

The Jesus we trust must be the Jesus of the Bible—the Jesus of the cross and of truth—not just the Jesus of our feelings. We must be careful not to mix the two.

*The hardest test is the biggest trick:
To do something good for the wrong reason.*

T. S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral

In the end, every person will choose who they truly serve—either Jesus or Satan. There will be no middle choice. Satan knows that most people would never choose him on purpose. So, he tries to trick them. He makes serving ourselves look like serving Jesus. When people put themselves first, Satan counts that as following his way. This is what makes the false Christ so tricky.

Satan is carefully getting ready for the last big struggle. He hopes to pull many people to his side—even good people—by using self-love that looks like love for Jesus. Many people will not notice that they are serving for the wrong reasons. Some serve because they want rewards. Others serve because they are afraid of punishment. They follow whoever promises prizes or shows power, without really caring about who that person truly is.

The old self is quick to follow whoever seems strongest or most important at the moment.

CHRIST WILL NOT ACCEPT FORCED SERVICE

Everyone will have a test to show what is really in their heart. That test is how we choose to follow the way of the cross. This test happens every day.

Being sick or hurt can be painful, but doctors sometimes have to do things that hurt so we can get better. No one refuses help that brings health and new life.

Following Jesus and taking up the cross is like that. It can feel hard or unpleasant because sin tricks us and makes it seem bad. But when we come out of the confusion and sadness caused by selfishness, we are set on a solid rock—Jesus—and joy comes after the pain, just like day comes after night.

Are you tired of fear, worry, jealousy, or feeling insecure?

Set your feet on the solid rock where Jesus and the cross stand. Then you can be filled with joy and say, "He has put a new song in my heart—praise to God!"

*The Lord is my light, so why be afraid?
By day and by night, He is close to my side.
He saves me from sadness and from sin,
And the Holy Spirit brings this truth in.*

James Nicholson

Chapter 8

Jesus' Third Lesson on the Meaning of the Cross

Jesus felt a strong pull because many people liked Him and followed Him. He had a choice. Should He enjoy being famous and powerful?

Or should He stop the excitement and tell the hard truth about why He came—to suffer and die on the cross?

Jesus was not teaching secrets to only a few people. When huge crowds followed Him, He told everyone the same hard truth. The Bible says He turned to the crowd and spoke very plainly:

"And He turned and said to them: If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:25-27)

It was like Jesus was saying, "I am happy you are following me, but are you sure you really want to? I need to be honest with you. I am the Messiah, but not the kind people expect. I am going to God's kingdom, but the way there is through the cross. If you follow me, you must follow that same path."

Jesus wanted to make sure people did not follow Him just because He was popular. He wanted them to know the truth and choose Him for the right reasons.

IT TAKES BRAVE AND HONEST PREACHING, WHICH WE DO NOT HEAR VERY OFTEN TODAY, TO LET PEOPLE FREELY CHOOSE FOR THEMSELVES.

Jesus was not afraid of large crowds. He always told the truth, even when that truth led Him to die. Since He was willing to carry the cross Himself, He was not afraid to talk about it and ask people to choose. Only someone who carries the cross can ask others to do the same. Jesus did not need tricks or special ways to persuade people. The way of the cross kept Him humble and honest.

Choosing to follow the good news means choosing the cross. That choice must come from deep inside a person's heart. Because of this, people should never be pushed or pressured into believing. The simple truth does not need fancy words or tricks. Honest hearts will recognize it.

In fact, fancy words and extra tricks can push away people who truly want the truth. They may not hear the voice of the true Shepherd because the message becomes confusing and too focused on pleasing people. Using mind tricks or selfish rewards to make someone decide shows that a person does not really understand the power of the cross.

The cross is called the "power of God to save" because love is what truly pulls people in. Love is stronger than anything else. God says, "I have loved you forever, so I have drawn you to myself with kindness." (Jeremiah 31:3)

George Matheson, who wrote the hymn “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go,” shared a wise thought about this:

“I understand the word drawn to mean the opposite of pushed. God is saying, ‘Because I love you, I will not force you. I want to win you with love.’ Laws can control the stars, but God does not love the stars the way He loves people. People are meant to be led by love, not by force. That is why the Bible says we are drawn to God. Love can only win by love, not by pushing or forcing.

Because of this, God does not make us come to Him. He wants us to be drawn by what is good and right. So, He hides anything that would force us to choose out of fear. He hides how amazing heaven is. He does not show us the pearl gates or golden streets. He does not let us hear the music of heaven. He even hides clear signs in the sky and does not tell us the exact time of eternity. God comes quietly and gently, so our hearts are won by love, not by fear.”—Thoughts for Life’s Journey, pages 70, 71.

JESUS WOULD RATHER GENTLY PULL PEOPLE TO HIM BY THE CROSS THAN PUSH THEM WITH POWER AND GLORY.

The people who come to Jesus through the cross are the ones God the Father is drawing. God does not want people who only say the right words. He wants true followers who will follow Jesus wherever He leads. The power that draws people comes from the truth, because Jesus *is* the Truth. When the truth is made clear, nothing can stop it.

Another way to say this is that people who truly want the truth and the truth itself belong together. When they meet, they stick together very strongly—like super glue.

On the other hand, using strong emotional tricks to force people to “decide” can bring the wrong kind of followers. These people may not truly follow Jesus or live like His disciples. If someone chooses only because it benefits them, that choice is not based on faith. The Bible says that anything not done in faith is wrong. When things become confusing, people who truly belong to Jesus may turn away, because they do not follow voices they do not recognize. This may be one reason why sometimes only a few people respond to invitations to follow Jesus.

Causing problems that make it harder for young or new believers to follow Jesus is wrong. But Jesus said that His sheep hear His voice. They follow Him because they know His voice. Jesus knows His people, and they know Him, just as He knows the Father. Because of this, those who truly belong to Jesus do not need to be pressured. When the truth is clearly shared in Jesus’ voice, nothing on earth or anywhere else can stop them from following Him.

The beauty of the message is in the truth itself, because love and truth always belong together. If someone thinks they are teaching the right beliefs but does not speak with love, then they are not truly speaking the truth.

CAN LOVING YOURSELF ALSO INCLUDE LOVING YOUR FAMILY?

When Jesus spoke to large crowds, His words may sound hard at first. But He was not teaching people to be mean or unkind to their family. He did not want anyone to hate their loved ones. In the Bible, the word "hate" means to love something less when compared to something else.

We can see what Jesus meant by how He treated His own mother and family. Jesus loved His mother very much. Even while He was dying on the cross, He made sure she was cared for. He was a perfect example of loving and honoring a parent. But Jesus did not let family ties, no matter how close, stop Him from caring for all people who were hurting or in need.

One time, while Jesus was helping many people, His family came to see Him. Because the crowd was so big, they could not get close. Someone told Jesus, "Your mother and brothers are outside and want to see you." Jesus answered, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear God's word and obey it." (Luke 8:19-21)

Jesus was not being unkind to His family. Instead, He was teaching that love for family should not keep us from loving and helping everyone. This is an important lesson for us, because we often think our care should be only for close family and friends.

Loving family too much can sometimes become a problem. When God asks us to do something or go somewhere, and we say no because we do not want to leave family, our selfish nature is still in control. Loving people who will listen to God and obey Him is more important, just as Jesus obeyed God's call to save us. But when God asks someone to leave parents, brothers, sisters, or home to serve Him far away, the selfish side often complains. Many people do not realize that saying no to what God asks is also saying no to the cross.

JESUS SPENT HIS WHOLE LIFE HELPING OTHERS, EVEN WHEN HE WAS A CHILD

Jesus went through all kinds of pain and hard times that people can face. Many people chose not to accept Him, but some listened to God's Spirit and were drawn to Him. Others loved themselves more and chose a different path, so they did not follow Him. In the end, everyone showed which side they chose.

In this way, people judge themselves by the choices they make.

One day there will be a final judgment. Everyone who is lost will understand why they are outside of God's kingdom. It will be as if the cross is shown clearly for everyone to see. People will understand what Jesus did and what their own choice was. When they see this, they will realize for themselves why they are lost.

If we say no to doing something hard for Jesus because we love comfort, family, or ourselves more, it is no different than saying no to Bible truth for the same reasons. In both cases, it is really the cross that is being refused, not just a teaching or a job to do.

LEARNING TO BE A GOOD AND STRONG PERSON SOMETIMES COMES WITH A COST

When Jesus explained the cross to the crowds, He used three simple examples.

1. The first example shows that people need to think carefully about what it will cost to follow Jesus and become a good Christian. The "price" to pay is carrying your own cross.

"If one of you is planning to build a tower, he sits down first and figures out what it will cost, to see if he has enough money to finish the job. If he doesn't, he will not be able to finish the tower after laying the foundation; and all who see what happened will make fun of him: 'This man began to build but can't finish the job! they will say.'" Luke 14:28-30, TEV.

Jesus' teaching was very exciting and attracted many people. But He knew that sometimes people get so excited that they start following Him without really thinking about the cost. If they give up later, it would be embarrassing. The strong excitement and devotion will be helpful later, but first, a person must understand and accept the cost: the cross.

Jesus was saying that giving up selfish desires and carrying the cross is the "price" to build strong and lasting Christian character. If someone starts following Jesus without counting the cost, they might fail and feel ashamed, and the world might laugh at them.

Many times, people start following Jesus with great enthusiasm, but when they face problems like bad habits or hard choices, they stop. The early excitement promised something wonderful, but without counting the cost and accepting the cross, the "tower" of good character is left unfinished.

Sometimes, small wrong habits and selfish ways can stop a person from growing as a follower of Jesus. Little by little, the effort to build good character is lost, and the heart is left like an unfinished building, full of mistakes. Pride, anger, impatience, selfishness, judging others, grumpiness, and envy—these are the ruins of a character that is left unfinished. People will notice and say, "This person started following Jesus but couldn't finish!" Jesus is not honored when His followers quit.

The person who quits may also miss out on both God's blessings and their own potential. It feels empty and sad to put effort into something that is left half-finished. Many people do not have the courage to start over and finish building their character, so they live with the "rubble" of what is left, hoping it will somehow get fixed later. But this hope will not work unless they count the cost now and commit to follow Jesus fully.

When someone finishes building Christ-like character in their heart, everyone will see it and be amazed. Nothing is more powerful for helping others or sharing God's message than a heart that has been fully dedicated to Jesus.

CHECKING HOW STRONG THE ENEMY IS, LIKE WHEN PREPARING FOR A BATTLE

2. The second example Jesus gave was about a battle that is not fair:

"If a king goes out with ten thousand men to fight another king who comes against him with twenty thousand men, he will sit down first and decide if he is strong enough to face that other king. If he isn't, he will have to send messengers to meet the other king to ask for terms of peace

while he is still a long way off. In the same way, concluded Jesus, none of you can be my disciple unless he gives up everything he has." Luke 14:31-33, TEV.

Very serious words!

People know it is useless for a king to fight an enemy who has twice as many soldiers. Any wise king would try to save as much as he could and give up the rest. The stronger enemy would make the rules and take over. The weaker king would live with his scared people, trying to act like he was still in charge, even though he was not.

Jesus was using this story to teach an important lesson about the cross.

He was saying: Don't underestimate the power of the enemy inside you—your "old self" or selfish nature. If your desire to give up selfish ways is weaker than your old self's desire to keep living for itself, you will fail and have to make a weak compromise. It is better to have the courage to give up everything. Only then can you truly defeat the enemy. Follow Jesus fully, and you will be free and victorious.

BUT HOW MANY PEOPLE TRY TO MAKE PEACE WITH THE ENEMY INSIDE THEM!

The heart can be divided, like a land with a border. On one side is the "old self," and on the other side is the half-hearted follower of Jesus. People may try to look faithful by going to church, giving money, or doing some good things, but their heart is not fully committed.

The old self and the half-hearted Christian live side by side, but there are always small conflicts, like a tense border. The soul cannot be at peace. If a person is not willing to give everything to Jesus, they must live with the enemy inside them.

Jesus' story shows what it means to be lukewarm, like the people in Laodicea. Being lukewarm is a weak state—not fully alive in faith, but not completely dead either. It is a sad middle place, neither hot nor cold.

WE CANNOT STAY HALF-HEARTED IN OUR LOVE FOR GOD FOREVER

One day, everyone has to face the truth. We reach a point where we must choose a path. There are two roads: one leads back to sin and turning away from God, and the other leads through the cross to the bright, happy land of heaven and eternal victory. Which road will we take?

Being too patient or trying to stay "balanced" can be a problem in times of hard decisions. Too much patience can turn into fear, and trying to be "balanced" can make God disappointed. Jesus' love was never lukewarm—He gave everything, even going to the cross. He said, "My love for your house, O God, burns like a fire in me" (John 2:17).

Peter Marshall prayed, "While there is still time, save us from patience that is really fear. Give us the courage to be either fully on fire for God or completely honest about our hearts, so we will stand for something good and not fall for anything wrong."

THERE IS A HIDDEN PART THAT IS REALLY VALUABLE

3. The third example Jesus gave about the cross is very simple:

"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, there is no way to make it salty again. It is no good for the soil or for the manure pile; it is thrown away." Luke 14:34, 35, TEV.

Being a Christian is good. But if a Christian has lost the power of the cross, it is not helping anyone. In some parts of the world, Christianity is not treated as something important. It is not rejected or opposed for its true strength, and it is not valued as the world's best guide. Instead, it is often ignored, treated as unimportant, or "thrown away."

The good people who follow Jesus are like the salt of the earth. But salt only works if it still has its "saltiness." The world will be spoiled by sin and wrong choices unless God's people keep their saltiness—by living and teaching the way of the cross.

Jesus seriously warned the people of His time to be careful. They might look like they were helping the world, but there could be something missing in their hearts. On the outside, mountains of salt might look beautiful, shiny, and real. People might be excited about how much salt there was and think it could help the world. But adding more salt does not make it saltier. Just having more people in the church does not make it stronger or better. Tons of salt that has lost its taste are worth less than a small cup of really salty salt.

In Jesus' time, there were no refrigerators. Salt was used to keep meat and fish from spoiling. If the salt had lost its taste, the food went bad.

Today, we can see how the world is spoiling. There are terrible violence, cruelty, crime, broken families, selfishness, and bad choices. People's hearts and minds can decay like food left without salt.

God never meant for the world to spoil because His followers had lost their "saltiness." He never wanted His people to make the work of helping others so hard that people could not understand or accept His message. Even in the final battle between Jesus and evil, the world could still be saved if His followers stayed true and salty for Him.

Because of His love and mercy, God wants His last message to the world to be thought about carefully and freely by people who can choose to accept or reject it. God has scattered His people all over the world among many nations, languages, and cultures. By living the way of the cross and sharing its message, His people are like salt that keeps the world from spoiling. Without them, society would fall into great trouble and decay.

But we can be encouraged. The world will listen to the message of the cross when it is shared clearly and truly. Even when people ignore preaching, that can be a good sign. The world is not ignoring real, salty Christianity—it is ignoring fake, weak Christianity. True salty Christians are never "trampled down." People will either strongly accept it or strongly reject it.

This was true in Jesus' time and the time of His apostles, and it will be true until the end of history.

Jesus ended His sermon to the crowds by saying:

“Listen carefully, if you have ears!”

Chapter 9

How I Discovered the Cross

When I was young, I heard the story of Jesus’ cross and all the suffering he went through. I also heard about people long ago who were killed because of their faith. As a kid, I had a hard time understanding the difference between the pain Jesus went through and the pain of those people.

Sometimes it seemed like the martyrs’ suffering might have been even worse than Jesus’ flogging and crucifixion, and it lasted longer too.

As I got older, I started to understand more about Jesus’ suffering—not just the physical pain, but also the shame and loneliness. His friends and followers all ran away and left him alone. Most martyrs at least had someone there with them in their last moments. But I still had trouble seeing how Jesus’ suffering was worse than that of some people who went through terrible pain and were also rejected by others.

I also thought that it’s easier to bear pain if you know a reward is coming. I had learned that when someone dies, if they were good, they go to heaven; if they were bad, they go somewhere terrible. Jesus was perfectly good, so I thought he must have gone straight to heaven right after he died. The promise he gave to the thief on the cross— “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43)—made me think he must have been looking forward to that.

Jesus died on Friday afternoon and came back to life early Sunday. I assumed he spent the time in heaven or Paradise. If he knew something good was waiting, that could have helped him get through the suffering. I wondered, then, what was so special about the cross.

Also, his physical pain didn’t last very long. From the flogging to his death was only about twelve to fifteen hours. That’s long enough—I wouldn’t want to go through it for even part of that time. But many people have suffered longer and without knowing any reward was coming soon.

NO MATTER HOW HARD I TRIED, I FOUND IT HARD TO SEE ANYTHING AMAZING ABOUT JESUS’ CROSS

Maybe what makes it so special is that the person who suffered was God’s Son, going through all the pain that people sometimes have to face. I felt a kind of wonder, like I would if a king came to stay in our house, worked in our garden with us, and ate at our small table. I could look at it and be amazed, but I didn’t really understand it.

It made me sad that I couldn’t feel the deep, thankful feelings about the cross that other people seemed to have. I had heard that I should “glory” in the cross of Jesus, feel strong

emotions, or have my heart moved in a big way. I even saw people cry because of it. But I didn't feel that, and it made me worry.

It felt like I couldn't understand what Paul meant when he said, "God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14).

I TRIED REALLY HARD TO FEEL AMAZED LIKE I THOUGHT I SHOULD

But I couldn't help thinking that if the one who suffered was really the Son of God, knowing that should have made it easier for him to go through things that seem so painful and scary to us. He knew everything. He knew he had come from God and would return to God. Surely, he could handle physical pain for a short time, the kind of pain we would find very hard to bear for a long time. So, what was so amazing?

I remembered a story about Henry Ford, the man who made the famous Model T cars and the fancy Lincoln cars. One day, while traveling with friends on small country roads, he decided to drive one of his little Model T cars. It broke down—something that happened to many of his customers too—and he had to stop at a small garage to get it fixed. Even though it was a little trouble, the story said he really enjoyed the experience. I thought part of the reason was that he knew he didn't have to worry about it. At any time, he could have called for one of his fancy Lincoln cars to come and take him home safely.

I thought, wasn't Christ kind of like that? He told Peter that if he wanted, God could send more than twelve legions of angels to help him (Matthew 26:53). If someone has a strong suit of armor, they can be braver than someone who doesn't.

AND "SAVED BY FAITH" CONFUSED ME

I had heard people say that we are saved by faith. But I didn't understand it. I wondered if something was wrong with me. Maybe God had given up on me because I didn't feel thankful enough for what his Son had done. I also wondered if I should just pretend to feel something I didn't really feel. Would that work? But it was very hard for me to say I felt something when I didn't. I really wanted to be saved, but I also wanted to be honest.

Some writers and speakers say that people cannot really understand the cross or how Jesus felt until we get to heaven. They say we will understand it someday, but not now. Instead of making me feel better, this made me feel more upset. From the Bible, I thought the apostles, including Paul, were deeply moved by the cross while they were still alive on earth. Something very powerful changed them. They were willing to give up everything and even suffer for Christ. They didn't complain about it. They were strong and faithful even when life was very hard (2 Corinthians 12:10).

I didn't feel anything like that. I didn't want to suffer for Christ, and I certainly didn't feel happy about it. The apostles had something I didn't have. And it seemed like I couldn't get it until I went to heaven. But the problem was that I thought I couldn't get to heaven unless I already had that feeling. It felt like I was stuck and couldn't find a way out.

Someone might want to interrupt and say: "That's okay! You didn't need to feel anything special about Jesus' cross. Just accept Him as your Savior, like signing up for an insurance policy. You don't feel any excitement or gratitude when you sign, but you're still covered. That's all it takes to be saved."

I had thought about that. I knew many people see it that way. But to me, that calm attitude was very different from the apostles' strong love for Jesus. Paul actually proudly accepted the hard sacrifices he had to make, just like Jesus did:

"Three times I was whipped by the Romans; and once I was stoned [with rocks, not drugs!]. I have been in three shipwrecks, and once I spent twenty-four hours in the water. In my many travels I have been in danger from floods and from robbers, in danger from fellow Jews and from Gentiles; there have been dangers in the cities, dangers in the wilds, dangers on the high seas, and dangers from false friends. There has been work and toil; often I have gone without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty; I have often been without enough food, shelter, or clothing. If I must boast, I will boast about things that show how weak I am." 2 Corinthians 11:25-30, TEV.

The "insurance policy" kind of faith was very weak. It barely gave people the energy to go sit in a comfortable church once a week. But Jesus said:

"None of you can be my disciple unless you give up everything you have." "Whoever does not carry their own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:33, 27)

That made a strong impression on me. Either a person finds the power to serve Jesus like the apostles did, or they are not a real Christian.

The doubts I had were probably a good sign—the Holy Spirit hadn't left me. I was a sinner, no better than anyone else, but not worse either. I could still learn to truly appreciate Jesus' cross. What I didn't understand yet was what the cross really involved and what it meant to Him.

My parents and pastors had unknowingly taught me wrong ideas that hid the love of Christ from me. These wrong ideas were like heavy fog hiding the view of tall, snowy mountains. The apostles in the New Testament saw something amazing that I had never seen, and it made them love Jesus with all their hearts. I felt stuck spiritually because I couldn't see what they saw.

WHAT KEEPS US FROM SEEING THE CROSS CLEARLY

This mistake was the common idea that the soul cannot really die. People believed that death is not really the end, but just a step into another kind of life. Just like a small lack of vitamins can cause many health problems, this wrong idea—borrowed from old pagan religions and passed down in some Christian teachings—caused a lot of confusion in my understanding.

In the Garden of Eden, God clearly told Adam and Eve that if they sinned, "on the day" they sinned, "you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). God meant exactly what He said. But the devil lied to them, saying, "You will not surely die" (Genesis 3:5).

The devil was repeating the same false ideas found in pagan religions and in some teachings of Christianity: that people never really die and that the soul lives forever on its own.

This idea became the main belief in many pagan religions, and later it spread into some Christian churches. At first, it may seem harmless. But think about what it does to our understanding of Jesus' cross: it makes it much harder to see why His death was so important.

This idea goes against what the Bible says: "Christ died for the ungodly" and "Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6, 8).

In other words, if we believe Satan's version, Jesus didn't really die for us. He only went through physical pain, knowing He couldn't really die. If He had nothing to lose, then He had nothing truly valuable to give except for the pain He endured.

Some say that after Jesus cried out, "It is finished," He went to heaven. Others say He went to "hell" to preach to spirits in prison. Either way, He didn't really die in the way death usually is. He only moved into a different kind of life.

So where is the sacrifice? It's gone! And that false idea is exactly what Satan wanted me to feel about Jesus' cross—like it didn't really matter.

Compared to the suffering of martyrs, soldiers who die for their country, or heroes who die for their friends, Jesus' death might not seem very special. Some people think His sacrifice didn't have the same kind of bravery, because He kept His own safety while others gave up theirs. They say He didn't really give up anything, not even Himself. And when John 3:16 says, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son," some say it really means God just "lent" Him.

This wrong idea that the soul cannot really die is meant to make people doubt Jesus' death on the cross. It can make people feel like the story of Calvary isn't real, stopping them from truly loving Jesus and keeping their devotion weak.

THE TRUE MEANING OF JESUS' SACRIFICE

Jesus' suffering was much greater than just pain in his body, or even what any of the martyrs went through. His burden was real—he truly carried it. The Bible says, "The Lord has put the sins of everyone on him." (Isaiah 53:6)

What is "iniquity"? The Bible says, "Your sins have separated you from God, and your wrongdoings have hidden his face from you." (Isaiah 59:2) Iniquity means doing wrong in a way that makes your heart feel alone, guilty, and scared.

Jesus really took on this iniquity for all of us. He felt the guilt, loneliness, fear, and despair that we sometimes feel. That is what separated him from God for a little while.

Before I understood this, I thought Jesus couldn't have really felt so alone. The Bible says he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This wasn't acting or pretending—he was really hurting, deep in his heart.

Jesus didn't just carry this pain on the outside, like a heavy load. He carried it deep inside his mind and heart. Peter says, "He himself carried our sins in his own body on the cross." (1 Peter 2:24) Paul adds, "God made the one who never sinned to take on our sin for us." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

JESUS WAS NOT A SINNER; HE NEVER DID ANYTHING WRONG

But Jesus became "a curse for us, because the Bible says, 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" (Galatians 3:13) The "sin" and the "curse" are connected here. Paul shows that when Jesus carried the cross, he really took on our sins—it was a very real and frightening thing. The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23) Since Jesus was "made to be sin" and "made a curse for us," he also had to suffer the consequences of sin.

Jesus is very close to us, because "the one who makes people holy and those who are being made holy are all of one family. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters." (Hebrews 2:11) But how did Jesus take on our death?

WHAT IS DEATH—THE "WAGES OF SIN"—THAT JESUS HAD TO SUFFER?

The Bible talks about two kinds of death:

Sleep - This is the kind of death we usually think about, like when someone dies and their body stops working. (See John 11:11, 13)

The second death - This is the real, eternal death. It means being separated from God forever, losing all light, joy, and life. (See Revelation 2:11; 20:6; 21:8)

Jesus experienced this "second death." The Bible says, "He, by God's grace, tasted death for everyone." (Hebrews 2:9) It couldn't have been the regular kind of death, because everyone experiences that on their own. Jesus took the second, eternal death so that we wouldn't have to.

Jesus died the death that God told Adam and Eve would come if they sinned—the death that sin causes for everyone who is lost. He felt it as deeply as any human could, because "in everything he had to be made like his brothers and sisters... He himself suffered and was tempted." (Hebrews 2:17-18) So the death Jesus died on the cross was the full, bitter suffering and despair that sin brings.

Jesus had to go through a time when he felt God's face was hidden from him. The second death has no hope, no light, and no promise of coming back to life. There isn't even a little bit of light at the end of the tunnel.

If Jesus "died for our sins" (1 Corinthians 15:3; Romans 5:8), then during his final suffering he had to face this complete darkness, without thinking about being raised from the dead. If he had hoped for resurrection while suffering, he wouldn't have fully "tasted death for everyone" or given himself completely for our sins.

It's no wonder that Jesus' human nature struggled with this frightening experience! In Gethsemane, he threw himself on the ground and said, "My soul is very sad, even to the point of death." He went a little farther, fell on his face, and prayed, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. But not my will, only your will." (Matthew 26:38-39)

The suffering he drank from that cup was something no other human has ever fully faced. Since the beginning of time, Jesus is the only person who truly died this way. He felt the full terror of hopelessness in the second death. It wasn't the nails or the beatings that killed him; the pain of his soul was so intense that it caused him to sweat blood in Gethsemane and finally broke his heart. As the Bible says, "Reproach has broken my heart, and I am full of sadness." (Psalm 69:20)

All through his life, and even during some of the hardest hours on the cross, Jesus had a strong confidence that he would rise again. He lived as if he could see his Father's happy face. In that light, nothing could scare him. Even when the thief on the cross asked, "Remember me," Jesus stayed full of hope and said, "I promise you will be with me in Paradise today." (Luke 23:43). (There is no comma in the original)

But Jesus had not yet finished suffering. There was still more pain to come.

THE DANGER OF FAILING HIS MISSION

The evil tempter tried to make Jesus suffer even more. He used the very people Jesus came to save to hurt him.

While Jesus was on the cross, the people he came to save said mean things about him. They said, "If you are the King of Israel, come down from the cross, and we will believe you. If God really loves you, let him save you now, because you said you are God's Son." Some even said to him directly, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!"

Jesus could not ignore these words. They were very hard to hear while he was already suffering so much. His hands were nailed to the cross, so he could not stop listening. All he could do was pray, but it felt like no one was listening. "You do not hear," he said, feeling very alone.

For hours, Jesus struggled with the terrible burden he was carrying. Around three o'clock in the afternoon, "darkness covered the whole land," and Jesus cried out loudly, feeling completely alone and separated from God. This feeling of being abandoned caused him the deepest sadness.

The darkness hid his suffering from the people watching. He could not use his hands to cover his tear-stained face, so only his voice could show his pain. People can be very cruel, but God kindly covered Jesus in darkness while he suffered so much.

Not even angels were allowed to see how much Jesus hurt, and Jesus could not feel God's comforting love in that moment. Still, God was with him, suffering with him in a way we can't fully understand, because "God was in Christ, bringing the world back to himself." But Jesus had to face this pain feeling completely alone, carrying it all by himself.

SOMETHING INSIDE JESUS KEPT HIM GOING, AND HE WANTS TO SHARE THAT WITH US

Even when all hope seemed gone, his love stayed strong. There is a special psalm that talks about the terrible things Jesus went through. It helps us look into Jesus' heart as he hangs on the cross during those long, dark hours.

Jesus hears people making fun of him and wonders why God seems so quiet. Psalm 22 tells how he remembers that his ancestors got answers when they prayed. He wonders, "Why can't I?" He remembers: "They trusted you, and you helped them. But I feel so small and alone. People make fun of me, and everyone looks down on me. I cry, but it feels like you don't hear me."

That is a really awful feeling! Feeling like no one cares, not even God, is one of the saddest feelings anyone can have. Nobody else has ever felt the same way Jesus does—carrying the sadness of the whole world's mistakes on his shoulders. Jesus is the true Light of the world, and normally he helps people see hope even in their darkest times. The Holy Spirit reminds us, "Someone cares about you!" even when we've done wrong.

But Jesus cannot feel that hope. He is completely alone. "I have walked this path alone," he says. He drinks the bitter cup of suffering all the way to the bottom.

Still, Jesus has to find a way to reach God even in the darkness. He has to overcome the feeling of being abandoned. He has to make things right between humans and God. If it seems like God has left him, Jesus will not leave God! Even when it looks impossible, as the Son of God, he will build a way to fix the broken connection between people and God.

This psalm tells what happened to Jesus. It shows that Jesus remembers when he was a baby in Bethlehem. Even though it feels like God isn't listening now, Jesus remembers God cared for him when he was born and trusted God as a baby. He knew God watched over him from the very beginning.

Even when Jesus feels very sad and in pain, he remembers all the way God helped him in his life. If God helped the people before him, and if God took care of him as a baby, he will not stop caring for him now.

Jesus knows how kind and loving God is. He believes God will help him. By faith, Jesus trusts God even in the darkest and hardest times.

At the hardest moment, Jesus feels like he's in danger from wild animals: "Save me from the lion's mouth and the horns of the wild oxen!" But even then, his faith is strong. Like Jacob wrestling with the Angel in the Bible, Jesus holds onto God with faith. He believes God hears him.

Even if it feels like God has left him, Jesus will not give up on God. He says, "I will not let you go unless you bless me!" Jesus' faith never fails, even though the hardest trials and the "second death."

"HERE IS LOVE"

Once I started to see past my mistakes, I began to understand the cross better. I started to see how big and amazing Christ's love is—how wide, long, high, and deep it goes—even though we can never fully understand it (Ephesians 3:18-19). What used to be fuzzy in my mind now became clearer. It felt like I was just starting to learn the basics, like being in kindergarten.

Now I could see the love that inspired the apostles. Their selfless devotion didn't seem so impossible anymore. The love they felt started to seem like the natural way any honest heart should respond to what Jesus did. Yes, I could say, "I glory in the cross of Christ."

But I still didn't fully understand everything, and that made it hard to have the same closeness with Jesus that the apostles had. Now we need to look for the truth that faith can show us, so it can help us cross that gap.

Chapter 10

How the Cross Cast Out Our Human Fear

Animals that God made don't have trouble being themselves. We are amazed by the strength of a lion, the speed of a gazelle, or the flight of an eagle, but we don't really praise them for it, because they are just doing what they were made to do.

The eagle never worries about wanting to be something it's not. It is happy being an eagle. People are a little like that, too. It's easy for us to do things we are good at, and hard to do things we aren't good at.

Some people wonder if it was easy for Jesus to carry his cross. Wasn't he God's Son? Wouldn't it have been natural for him to do his Father's will?

If it had been easy for him, then his sacrifice wouldn't mean as much to us. We don't find it easy to do what is right, and we definitely don't find it easy to carry a cross like Jesus told us to. It would be like an eagle telling a land animal, "Follow me!"

–the land animal would struggle, but flying is easy for the eagle.

Yes, Jesus is God's Son, and he loved doing what God wanted. But for us, it is often very hard, and it seems almost unfair when he says to us:

Jesus said, "Take my yoke and follow me. My yoke is easy, and my load is light." (Matthew 11:29, 30)

Sometimes we think we are very different from Jesus. We may feel as different from Him as a horse is from an eagle. What is easy for an eagle feels impossible for another animal.

This idea confused me for many years. Then I found an important truth in the Gospels. It felt like opening a new window and seeing deeper into Jesus' heart.

DID JESUS HAVE STRUGGLES INSIDE HIS HEART?

If Jesus found it easy to carry His cross and do what His Father wanted, then it might seem like He had only one will—the same will as His Father. It would be like an eagle. An eagle only wants to be what it was made to be. It does not wish to be something else. An eagle does not feel confused about flying.

A prophecy in the Bible once made me think Jesus had only one will. In a psalm that speaks about Jesus, He says, "Here I am. I have come to do what is written about me. I am happy to do what You want, my God, and Your law is in my heart."

This idea is very important in the Bible. The book of Hebrews says that because of Jesus' will, we are made holy through His sacrifice. So, the "will of Jesus" is very important in Bible teaching.

After thinking about this, it almost seemed to me like Jesus was a kind of machine—someone who easily enjoyed doing what most people, including me, found very hard to do. It felt like Jesus

was the “eagle,” flying high and loving it, while I stayed on the ground saying, “He says, ‘Follow Me,’ but I can’t.”

BUT I HAD NOT READ FAR ENOUGH

The Bible says that when Jesus came, God the Father sent Him to be like us. He came in a human body, the same kind of body we have. In that body, He showed that sin was wrong.

This means the “eagle” became like me—someone who lives on the ground. It is like the eagle gave up his wings. If Jesus had a body like mine, then He must have had struggles like mine too. Doing God’s will would not have been easy for Him either.

Jesus did not fight sin in a perfect body. He fought sin in a human body. It would be silly for an eagle to blame a cow for not flying. The cow could say, “You don’t know what it’s like to be me.”

I learned that Jesus said clearly that He had struggles inside His heart, just like I do. He was very different from me because He never chose selfishness, but He still felt the struggle. As a human being, Jesus had two choices, or two wills. It was very hard for Him to give up His own will and follow His Father’s will.

The Bible says Jesus loved to do His Father’s will, but it cost Him a lot. Jesus said, “My heart is very sad, almost to death.” He also prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, take this suffering away from me. But not what I want—what You want.”

This shows how great the struggle was.

Jesus had His own will, and it did not want to suffer on the cross. In the same way, I have my own will that does not want hard things either. Jesus said clearly, “Not what I want.”

What Jesus did is easy to understand. He said no to what He wanted. He chose to give up His own will. He could not follow His Father’s will unless He first let go of His own will, because the two wants were opposite. Together, they made a cross.

That is an amazing thought.

THAT WAS A BIG STRUGGLE!

I began to feel sorry for ever thinking that Jesus had no struggle.

Then I thought more about it. Struggles can feel different to different people. Some people like hard things because they seem easy to them. Maybe giving up His own will was easy for Jesus. It was hard for me, but maybe I was wrong to think Jesus felt the same way I did.

But then I remembered what Luke wrote about Jesus. He said that Jesus was in deep pain and prayed even harder. He was so upset that His sweat fell to the ground like heavy drops.

When I remembered this, I felt even more sorry for thinking that the struggle was easy for Him.

WE SEE HIS STRUGGLE NOT ONLY IN THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE

Jesus' struggle did not happen only once. It lasted all through His life. Jesus said, "I can do nothing by myself. I do not try to do what I want, but what the Father wants." He also said, "I came from heaven not to do what I want, but to do what God wants."

This means Jesus came to fight our battle for us. He lived with the same kind of human body and nature that we have. He felt the same struggle we feel. But where we often choose our own selfish way, Jesus chose to give up His will and follow God's will.

Because of this, Jesus' words "Follow Me" make sense. He showed that selfishness could be defeated in a human life. It never won against Him, not even for a moment. The struggle was very hard—harder than ours—but He stayed faithful. Because of this, He changed what human life could be like.

I was wrong to think Jesus was like a machine. He was a free person. He had to choose which way to go. Love cannot exist without freedom. A toy doll might say, "I love you," but that does not really mean anything.

But then another question came to my mind. Was Jesus like a spiritual genius? His love was amazing, and His choice to give Himself was wonderful. But I wondered, "Is it just as impossible for me to live like Jesus as it would be for me to be as smart as a great scientist?"

I was never very good at math in school. If God told me I had to invent something very hard, like a famous scientist did, just to get to heaven, I would feel hopeless—even if I wanted to do it.

I can admire what a great scientist did, and I can admire what Jesus did too. But I wondered if that was as far as I could go.

BUT I DISCOVERED ONE IMPORTANT DIFFERENCE

Einstein was very smart in math, but that was different from how Jesus was wonderful in love. Einstein never promised to teach me how to be as smart as him. He never said, "Follow me, and you'll make amazing inventions."

But Jesus did promise that I could have His love in my heart! He would teach me how to love like Him. Then I could do something even more amazing than any invention—I could be like Him, helping other people with His love.

Jesus didn't say I could be exactly like Him, but people could see His love in me. That is why the followers of Jesus in Antioch were called "Christians." It meant they were close to Jesus, showing His love to others.

THEN I FOUND THE BIBLE VERSE THAT HELPED ME UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING

Philippians 2:5-8 talks about the steps Jesus took to give up His high place in heaven. There are seven steps:

[1] Even though He was equal with God, He did not hold on to that.

[2] He "emptied Himself."

[3] He became like a servant (a slave).

[4] He chose to be lower than the angels by becoming a human.

[5] He was not born as a king or a rich child. He was born like a normal person, living a hard life and working with His hands.

[6] In the end, He was “obedient even to death.”

That last step made me stop and think. I realized that no one who takes their own life is truly “obedient unto death.” They are just trying to escape pain, not face what Jesus faced.

Jesus was obedient even to being put on the cross. He accepted the punishment for all people’s sins. He felt the full weight of that suffering—more than any human could ever feel—because He was both God and man.

Then I understood something that helped me. Right before talking about Jesus’ sacrifice, the Bible says: “Let this same mind be in you” (Philippians 2:5). We can never do exactly what Jesus did, but we can try to have the same heart and attitude.

If I let the Holy Spirit put Jesus’ mind in me, His will could become my will, just like His Father’s will became His will. Then I could love and serve people around me the way Jesus did. And I would even enjoy it—no more complaining about what I had to do.

[7] But that last step of Jesus’ death was still very hard. It meant giving up His eternal safety and trusting God completely, even while dying on the cross.

It is encouraging to know that this kind of self-giving love is possible for people, even though we make mistakes, because of Jesus. Jesus can live in our hearts when we trust Him, and we can learn to serve Him out of love, not just for ourselves.

But has anyone ever really done this?

THERE WERE TWO PEOPLE WHO KNEW A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THAT KIND OF LOVE

One example is Moses. The people of Israel had done something very wrong—they made and worshiped a golden calf. God told Moses to step aside and let Him punish them. God said, “Leave them! I will destroy them and erase their name. But I will make you into a people greater than they are” (Deuteronomy 9:14).

This was a huge honor! If Moses agreed, he would be safe and remembered forever as a great leader.

Naturally, this was a big temptation for him. He could have said, “Why should I help them? They sinned and deserved to die.”

But Moses did something completely different from what most people would do.

Moses even offered to take the punishment himself so that the people of Israel could be forgiven. He said, “If you will not forgive their sin, then erase my name from your book instead”

(Exodus 32:32). Moses loved the people more than he wanted to be safe in heaven or to have honor forever. Can you imagine doing that?

Another person who knew that same kind of self-giving love was Paul. He said, "I wish I could be separated from Christ if it would help my own people, my relatives, the Israelites" (Romans 9:3-4).

As long as we follow Jesus mostly to protect ourselves or to feel safe, we will miss having the "mind of Christ." We won't be able to carry our cross fully. Jesus was never selfish. Moses and Paul weren't either. And neither are the people who truly follow Jesus everywhere He goes.

THE "OLD SELF" MAKES ONE LAST FIGHT TO KEEP CONTROL

The last thing the "old self" tries to hold onto is wanting rewards and being afraid of losing something. This is the opposite of carrying the cross.

The very first sin of humans came from wanting to be equal with God, to live forever, and to have everything. Adam and Eve didn't feel fear until they wanted those things. That same fear is behind the last sin people make. The cross is the only way to change that fear into love.

But love is not real if it is based on fear. If we only care about our own safety, that is not true love, which is called agape. John says, "There is no fear in love. Perfect love pushes out fear, because fear brings suffering. Anyone who fears has not been made perfect in love" (1 John 4:18).

John talks about our basic problem: worry and anxiety. Everyone is born with it. This worry can cause a lot of suffering, and sometimes it even leads to sickness. Some health experts know that problems like headaches, stomach troubles, or asthma can come from deep anxiety.

But when Jesus, called "the Sun of Righteousness," comes into our hearts, there is healing. The healing comes when fear and worry are driven out (Malachi 4:2).

BUT HOW CAN FEAR BE DRIVEN OUT OR GONE?

When the "old self" is put to death with Christ, the selfish part of us that causes fear is defeated. Anxiety is like hidden fear—it's under the surface, not easy to see, like a quiet dread we can't name. The "old self" is never fully clear or complete, so this hidden fear stays inside.

How does love get rid of fear? Love is stronger than fear. When we truly see and feel Jesus' love, it pushes out the fear and worry that the old self feeds on.

WHEN WE SEE JESUS' LOVE SHOWN ON THE CROSS, IT CAN DRIVE OUT OUR FEAR

We have seen that the last step to be close to Jesus is giving up our own will, just like Jesus gave up His will in our human nature. The Bible says, "By God's will we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all."

Because of Jesus, we can boldly come close to God. The Bible says, "We have boldness to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way He made for us, through

the veil, that is, His body" (Hebrews 10:10, 19-20). When Jesus gave up His will to God, He showed His love. When we give our will to Him, His love can work in us too. The way to boldness is through Jesus.

Anxiety is basically what the Bible calls the "fear of death." But the Bible also calls the normal sleep of death just "sleep," and people don't fear that. What we really fear is the "second death"—being completely alone, cut off from God and all joy forever.

This hidden fear affects everything we do, even our dreams. The only way to deal with it is to understand the full meaning of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. That is how we can face this deep anxiety.

YOU ARE ABLE TO RESPOND TO JESUS' LOVE

If someone gave you a really special gift, your first natural response would be to say a big, heartfelt thank you. And if the gift was very important, you would probably want to show your thanks by doing something nice for that person. Feeling glad and thankful is part of being human. It is almost like a natural habit. Many times a day we say thank you for little kindnesses and look for ways to return kindness too.

This simple, honest thankfulness is all God has ever asked from anyone. Jesus gave Himself for us on the cross. If we don't understand or feel how big that gift and sacrifice was, we won't respond with love. Instead, we may only focus on keeping ourselves safe, and fear will still stay in our hearts. This weak, halfhearted response happens when Satan hides the truth of what Jesus gave us.

But when we really see what Jesus did at Calvary, it begins to change us. The Bible says, "Through death, Christ destroyed him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and set free those who were afraid of death and had been enslaved all their lives" (Hebrews 2:14-15). Truly, this is amazing.

*No one who has been saved ever knew
How deep the waters were that Jesus crossed,
Or how dark the night was that He went through
Before He found the lost sheep.*

BUT WE DO KNOW A LITTLE BIT ABOUT IT!

Our journey has begun. As Satan tries harder and harder to trap us with selfish desires—whether for pleasure or for things—we will see something amazing happen. When sin is strong, the grace of Jesus becomes even stronger. When we remember the cross, Satan is defeated again and again.

"We are *ruled* by the love of Christ, now that we recognize that one Man died for everyone, which means that they all share in His death. He died for all, so that those who live should no

longer live for themselves, but only for Him who died and was raised to life for their sake." 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15, TEV.

When we really see this, it is almost impossible to live just for ourselves. That is real power! This is what Paul meant when he said, "The message of the cross is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Power for what? Power to change the most stubborn thing—our self-centered minds. The old ways of thinking are replaced, and love becomes the ruler of our hearts.

I hope no one misunderstands me when I say this—it really can become easy to follow Jesus! Jesus promised this when He said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). The cross gives us what we need to make it possible.

Now we can understand what Paul meant when he said, "I will only boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." And now that we have seen a little of what he saw, our hearts can say with him: "Yes, Paul, we are with you! We kneel at the feet of Jesus who was crucified, and we confess Him as Lord of our lives, King of our love, and the eternal ruler of our hearts."

*Everywhere I go, I will tell the story
Of the cross;
Nothing else will make my heart proud,
Only the cross.
This will be what I always share,
Now and forever everywhere,
That Jesus died for me
On the cross.*

Anon.

Chapter 11

Mary Magdalene and the Cross

What can the truth of the cross do for someone whose life has been a complete mess? Here is a woman whose life was so troubled that the Bible says "seven devils" controlled her (Mark 16:9).

"And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head.

"But there were some who were indignant among themselves [These "some" are identified not as the pagan Romans or Greeks who might have been present, nor as the unbelieving Jews, but as none other than Jesus' own disciples! And the instigator of their murmuring turns out to be none other than Judas Iscariot, the betrayer. So blinded were the Eleven! They could do nothing other than to say "amen" to his disloyal spirit. See Matthew 26:8 and John 12:4, 5] and said, 'Why was this fragrant oil wasted? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.' And they criticized her sharply.

"But Jesus said, 'Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always.

"She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.'" Mark 14:3-9.

When Mary broke the jar of expensive perfume to anoint Jesus, she was showing, without even realizing it, the same spirit of love and sacrifice that Jesus showed in His life and death. Mary's act helps us understand the meaning of the cross and what true love and giving look like.

This act at Bethany is one of the most beautiful and heart-touching things ever done by someone who had sinned. How could anyone who doesn't believe that Jesus is the Son of God explain that He is the only person in history whose feet were washed with tears? Mary's act showed Jesus—and the watching world—that humans can truly appreciate the sacrifice He made. Mary had no goodness on her own, but Jesus' goodness was shared with her.

Imagine how much her loving act cheered Jesus' heart in His hardest and darkest moments! No angel could have brought Him more comfort than her tears and sacrifice. In her love, Jesus saw a promise of the joy He would have later—making many people righteous through faith and love (Galatians 5:6).

When humans show this kind of love after repenting, it changes lives. This is exactly what Jesus wanted His sacrifice to accomplish!

I OWE A DEBT TO JESUS AND A DEBT TO THIS WOMAN!

The world may owe something to Mary, even though no one noticed, because she encouraged Jesus when He needed it most. Surely the twelve disciples, who were often cold and uncaring, did not give Him comfort like Mary did!

But Mary didn't really know why she felt moved to give this special gift. Guided only by love, she spent everything she had to buy the expensive perfume. What actually happened was that she was preparing Jesus' body for His burial ahead of time.

Mary couldn't explain or defend what she did because the disciples were criticizing her. Jesus had to step in and defend her. By doing this, He turned her act into a lesson about the meaning of the cross—something the church today still wants to understand.

In fact, to really understand the good news of Jesus, we need to appreciate what Mary did. Jesus said that her act would always be remembered: "Wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman did will also be spoken of as a memorial to her." That is even better than a fancy statue or inscription for a famous ruler!

This is a very good reason to pay attention to Mary and what she did.

WHY DID JESUS SAY SUCH NICE THINGS ABOUT HER?

Mary did something that seemed strange at first, but she did it to show how important Jesus' message is. Her action teaches us about love, sacrifice, and doing something wonderful for God.

What Mary did helps people see clearly how amazing Jesus' love is.

The other disciples, who complained, show how people sometimes react when they see love that is very kind and powerful.

If we were there, we might have agreed with the disciples and thought Mary was wasting her money.

Mary used a lot of expensive perfume—enough money to pay a worker for a whole year! That could have bought food for thousands of people.

If we didn't know what would happen later, we might have thought Mary was being careless. Many people in the church might have said it was wrong to spend so much money. We might have felt the same way as Judas and the other disciples, asking, "Why didn't she sell the perfume and give the money to poor people?"

But Mary wasn't wasting her money—she was showing love and honoring Jesus in the best way she could.

BUT JESUS SPEAKS UP TO PROTECT MARY

At first, we might agree with Judas. We might think it would have made more sense for Mary to use just a little of the expensive perfume on Jesus' head and then sell the rest to help poor people. We might even feel glad that most people in the church today aren't as "extreme" as Mary.

But Jesus did something surprising—He didn't just gently praise Mary or tell her to be more careful.

When Mary tried to hide, feeling embarrassed and worried that others would think she was foolish, Jesus spoke loudly for her: "Leave her alone! Why are you bothering her? She has done a good thing for Me."

Jesus wasn't worried about money or what the disciples thought. He saw something much deeper in Mary's love:

- In the broken perfume bottle, He saw His body that would be broken for us.
- In the expensive perfume poured out on the floor, He saw His blood that would be shed for many people, even though most would not accept Him.
- In Mary's act of love, He saw her heart reflecting His love for us.
- In her sacrifice to buy the perfume, He saw the way He would give everything to save us.
- In what looked like waste, He saw a gift powerful enough to save the world, even if only a few accepted it.

So, Jesus had to defend Mary's love because, by doing so, He was also showing the true meaning of His own sacrifice on the cross.

SADLY, WE CAN SEE OURSELVES ACTING LIKE THE UNFRIENDLY SIMON AND THE TWELVE DISCIPLES

Judas didn't care at all about Mary's pure and holy love—he only made fun of it. The other disciples, slow to understand and ungrateful, followed his selfish complaining. Can we really think we are better than they were? Probably not.

Mary's love and action came from the prompting of the Holy Spirit, a quiet inspiration that doesn't give reasons—it only works in a humble and sorry heart.

The disciples had learned about Jesus' coming death, but they didn't really understand it. Mary, a simple woman with a repentant heart, showed the meaning of the cross in a way even more powerful than Peter's famous sermon later. Her act still inspires people today.

This shows that knowing the history of Jesus' death is not as important as truly understanding it in your heart. If people can't fully understand who Jesus is, they also can't fully understand the meaning of His cross.

MARY'S ACT HELPS US UNDERSTAND HOW JESUS GAVE HIMSELF FOR US

Think about why Mary did what she did. She didn't do it to get a reward or to be praised. She even hoped nobody would notice. The only thing that gave her away was the sweet smell that filled the room. She acted out of love—love that showed a little of Jesus' own love for people.

Why did Jesus go to the cross? Even smart teachers and scholars can't fully explain it. The truth is simple: He did it because of love. Love was the only reason.

How happy Jesus must have been to see Mary's love showing His own heart! You might wonder—wasn't she a sinner? Yes, she was, a very serious one, but Jesus saw His own love reflected in hers. Just like a photo made from a negative, her love showed the same pattern as His love. When Jesus said, "Reproach has broken my heart," He saw that His own love had helped break her heart too, making her sorry for her sins.

Be amazed, heaven and earth! God's plan to save people is working! Maybe the other disciples didn't understand yet, but for Mary, it was a success. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross brought out her own act of love: a heart that was sorry, humble, and fully devoted. God sees that kind of heart—and unlike the disciples, He does not look down on it.

THINK AGAIN ABOUT HOW MUCH MARY GAVE WITH HER SPECIAL ACT

Mary's love is even brighter when we think about Jesus giving Himself for us. Jesus said about her, "**She has done what she could,**" meaning she did everything she could. And Jesus also **did everything He could** for us!

We don't know if Mary was ever rewarded for all the hard work she did to buy the expensive perfume. But Jesus, who gave up everything and died on the cross, deserves the greatest reward for His sacrifice.

Even if we don't have expensive perfume to give Him, we can show our love in other ways—like with tears, prayers, or acts of kindness for Him. Jesus, help us get rid of anything in our hearts that stops us from loving You like Mary did.

MARY'S GIFT LOOKS EVEN GREATER WHEN WE COMPARE IT TO JESUS' SACRIFICE

The disciples were thinking: Why use so much perfume? Why waste something so valuable? Look, it's spilling on the floor! Three hundred coins gone! Just a little on His head would be enough, Mary!

We probably would have thought the same way!

Even today, people who don't have God's guidance often can't understand how amazing Jesus' sacrifice on the cross really was.

Why give His life to save so many people when only a few will listen?

Why show so much love when most of it seems to be wasted?

Jesus' sacrifice could save everyone, but why pay such a high price if only a few will accept it?

Why should Jesus feel sadness and cry for people who don't know Him or care about His gift?

Why not give love only to those who will respond, instead of giving so much that seems wasted? (Even today, some people think like this—they believe Jesus only died for certain people and not for everyone.)

This is how the disciples thought about Mary's amazing gift—and this is how many people think today about Jesus, whose love her act showed a little bit of.

The answer is that true love is never stingy or careful—it is generous and gives freely. Mary's perfume was very expensive, and she paid full price for the best she could find. She didn't try to save anything for herself.

You can imagine her in the shop, asking for some perfume. The shopkeeper sees only a poor girl and offers a cheap one. "Do you have nothing better?" she asks, wanting the very best to give to Jesus.

"Yes, I have a better one, but it will cost you 200 coins."

"Do you have anything even better than that?" she asks.

"Yes, I have the very best and most expensive, but it costs 300 coins. You can't afford it, Mary. It's only for a king!"

"Give it to me," she says. Because she loves Jesus so much, she can't do anything less.

Could God, who is love, do anything less than His very best? No—He gave everything to save us. He didn't worry about what it would cost Him.

Jesus gave up Heaven, the angels, His special place with the Father, and eternal life to help us. He gave Himself completely, like an ocean of water flowing out freely. And what did He get back? Just a few small acts of love from people.

Those little acts of love are very precious to Him. As the Bible says, "**Hope in the Lord, for He is full of mercy and gives great rescue.**"

SIMON THE LEPER DIDN'T LIKE WHAT MARY DID, AND THAT BOTHERS US

The host, Simon, watched quietly as Mary showed her love for Jesus. He didn't seem as worried about her spending so much money like the Twelve were. But Simon was thinking his own secret thoughts.

He hadn't really accepted Jesus as his Savior yet, even though he hoped Jesus might be the Messiah. After Jesus healed someone, Simon invited Him and His followers to dinner to say thanks. But he didn't show Jesus any real respect—he didn't greet Him with a welcome kiss, put oil on His head, or even give Him water for His feet, which was normal in those days.

When Simon saw Mary washing Jesus' feet with her hair, he thought to himself, "If Jesus were really a prophet, He would know what kind of woman this is—she's a sinner." Simon's proud heart couldn't understand what was happening.

Jesus told Simon a story to help him understand:

"There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell me, therefore, which of them will love him more? Simon answered and said: I suppose the one whom he forgave more. And he said to him: You have rightly judged." Luke 7:41-43.

Simon had been the one who first led Mary into doing wrong, so he owed much more than she did. Jesus wanted Simon to see that Mary's big love came from being forgiven a lot, and he should have loved Jesus just as much if he understood how much he had been forgiven.

Simon had many bad habits and wrong ways of thinking—more than seven! But he also had another problem: he thought he was better than others, which made it hard for him to see his own mistakes.

Even so, Jesus' love and kindness helped Simon. Jesus showed him that he was a sinner who needed forgiveness, just like Mary. Because of Jesus, Simon was saved from even worse trouble. If he had understood this, he could have praised Jesus with the same joy that Mary did.

WHY DO SOME PEOPLE SHOW BIG LOVE AND SOME SHOW SMALL LOVE?

Jesus' story wasn't meant to say that some people are more guilty than others. Both Simon and Mary had sinned and needed God's forgiveness. Mary loved Jesus a lot because she knew she had been forgiven a lot. Simon didn't feel the same way because he thought he hadn't done much wrong.

Would anyone in God's kingdom feel proud and think they were better than others? "I've never done anything really bad. I came from a good family and behaved well. My friends were good too. I just needed a little help from Jesus!"

That kind of thinking doesn't really fit for someone who is already trying to follow Jesus.

Mary had a kind and humble heart. Even Paul, a great teacher, called himself "the worst sinner," and we should remember that too. God's forgiveness can teach us to be humble. Sometimes, people who think they are good will end up behind those who were once sinners, like Mary, but turned to God. Jesus said, "Many who seem first will be last, and the last will be first."

Chapter 12

The Cross and Perfect Christ Likeness

Jesus never praised anyone more than he praised Mary. He said, "She has done what she could," which means she did everything she could do. It's like he was saying, "Great job! You did amazing!"

This praise shows that Mary is a great example of a Christian:

- Her loving heart, full of sorry and care, perfectly showed Jesus' love and sacrifice on the cross.
- Her love was like a clear picture of Jesus' love. Just like a photo shows a picture from a negative, her love showed what Jesus' love was like. Jesus was happy to have someone he could show as an example of how people should love like he does.
- Mary understood the meaning of the cross, and that is why she came to take care of Jesus' body before he died.
- Her "good work" was that she understood Jesus and what he was doing. This is the same kind of understanding Paul says is important when we take part in the Lord's Supper.

This means that Mary understood the meaning of the cross, and that's why Jesus showed her as the best example of a true Christian. He said, "Wherever this good news is told, people will also tell what this woman did to honor her."

When someone begins to understand the cross, they begin to understand themselves. Mary could not have "done what she could" if she didn't understand the truth about herself. She learned not to think she was better than she really was.

Mary was willing to see her own mistakes so she could find Jesus. She didn't fight the truth that she had been controlled by "seven demons." She learned how bad sin really is when Jesus spoke to the demons that had hurt her heart and mind.

Even though she had done very wrong things, she became a great example of a Christian because she saw herself honestly as the "worst sinner." She understood how amazing it was to be saved, because she had felt what it was like to be lost.

DO WE HAVE FEWER PROBLEMS OR BAD HABITS THAN MARY DID?

If we think this way, we might look down on Mary and say her saying sorry was not the right kind for a good Christian. Some well-behaved Christians think that strong sadness over sin is only for very bad people, like criminals or people with terrible pasts. They think they only need to feel a little sorry because they believe they have not done very bad things. They believe they need much less repentance than Mary did.

At first, it might seem like Jesus agrees with this idea. When he talked to Simon, he told a story about two people who owed money. One owed a small amount, and the other owed a lot more. It can sound like some people only need to say sorry a little, while others need to say sorry much more.

But we should not miss the main point of Jesus' story. He was not teaching that the two people should feel thankful in different amounts. Both people could not pay their debt at all. Both owed far more than they could ever repay. So, both should feel very sorry for their sins in the same deep way.

When the Bible says, "All have sinned," it means everyone has sinned the same way. The biggest sin is loving ourselves too much, not caring enough about others, and not trusting God. Only when we understand the meaning of the cross can we see how serious sin really is.

All of us are like people who owe a very large debt. The problem is that, like Simon, we don't realize it. We think we only needed a little forgiveness. That is why our love for God can be small and our faith can feel weak or half-hearted.

One of the hardest problems God has ever faced is people who feel lukewarm—not fully loving Him and not fully turning away. This is talked about in the Bible in the message to the church of Laodicea. This kind of weak faith is very dangerous. God would rather people be fully for Him than only halfway.

But God's love is strong enough to win. His love will help His chosen people overcome even this big problem.

SOMEONE MIGHT WONDER WHY WE CAN FEEL SO HOPEFUL

The story of Mary and Simon gives us hope. Mary's life looked very sad because she had once been controlled by seven demons. But Simon's problem was even harder. He was a bigger sinner than Mary, even though it did not seem that way.

Some serious Bible readers have believed for a long time that Simon may have been the one who first caused Mary's life to fall apart. Jesus' story helps support this idea. Simon thought of himself as owing a very large debt, but he did not really see how much he needed forgiveness. Because of this, he felt proud, pleased with himself, and better than others. Jesus could have easily left Simon alone in his darkness, like people often do.

But Jesus did not do that. He worked hard to save Mary, and he worked even harder to save Simon. Simon was trapped by pride and a cold heart, which almost ruined him forever. Helping Simon change was an even greater miracle than freeing Mary from seven demons.

Simon finally began to see himself clearly. He saw the harm he had done to Mary. Jesus could have shamed him or judged him, but instead, Jesus showed him the truth with kindness. That kindness changed Simon's heart. We believe that Jesus' love was not wasted on him.

O Jesus, the miracle worker from Bethany, please come and work in our hearts today too!

MARY'S LOVE IS THE BEST EXAMPLE OF HOW A CHRISTIAN SHOULD LOVE

Now that we see Mary's deep saying-sorry as normal and the best example for all Christians, let's think about the love that made her repent. This kind of love is also the kind of love a model Christian has. Jesus wanted to bring this love into human hearts when he died on the cross. The cross not only followed God's rules but also changed people's hearts in amazing ways.

Many people do not fully understand how wonderful the cross is. Often, people think of Jesus' death as just a way to punish sin, to pay a penalty, or to stop God's anger. They imagine the cross like a tool that keeps God's "anger bolts" from hurting us.

Some people think of God like a strict judge who wants revenge, and they imagine that Jesus suffered on the cross just to satisfy God's anger. They see the cross as a kind of legal deal, with long, confusing words to explain it.

It's no wonder that when people think about it this way, their hearts don't really change. They may feel safe, like having insurance, but they don't feel true thankfulness, sorrow for sin, or love.

This kind of idea cannot make people love God like Mary did. At best, it only leads to a small, half-hearted devotion.

- Mary is not just one special person; she represents the whole church.
- Her human nature is the same as ours—she is like every person.
- Because she understood the cross, we can also learn to feel the same deep thankfulness and love she had.
- The good news of Jesus is still just as powerful as ever. Once it is freed from mistakes and confusion, it can do in millions of hearts the same amazing work it did in Mary's heart.
- This promise is shown in the prophecy in Revelation 18:1-4. It talks about an angel coming from heaven to shine light over the earth, and a heavenly voice reaching into everyone's heart saying, "Come out of [Babylon], My people."

The story of Bethany shows a problem people have had in every age. When the disciples did not like Mary's loving actions, they were acting like the world, which often looks down on people who show strong love for Jesus. If Jesus had not stepped in, they might have pushed Mary away from their group.

Even today, people who follow Jesus can make the same mistake. When someone shows a very strong love for Jesus, deep sorrow for sin, or special understanding, others may say, just like Judas did, "That's too much!" This happens again and again. Then other people agree, just like the other disciples followed Judas instead of thinking for themselves.

The Bible verses that say, "Do not be too good or too bad," have often been misunderstood. Because of this, some people think that being in the middle is better than clearly choosing good

or clearly choosing evil. Very bad behavior is strongly criticized, but strong love and devotion to God are also feared and sometimes judged as wrong.

At Bethany, the twelve disciples showed this same way of thinking. They said Mary's love was too much and called it foolish, even though Jesus accepted it and showed it was the right example for His followers. Today, near the end of time, it would be very sad if we made the same mistake—calling deep love for Jesus "fanatic" when it comes from understanding how much He loved us and died for us on the cross.

MARY'S SACRIFICE SHOWS US THE BEST EXAMPLE OF HOW A CHRISTIAN SHOULD LIVE

The "good work" Mary did for Jesus was more than just something helpful. The word "good" in the Bible also means something beautiful and kind in a very special way.

What made Mary's act so special? She did not do it to get a reward. She used all her money to buy the perfume and did not expect Jesus to praise her or thank her. She was not thinking about herself at all. Her love was pure and honest. Because she acted only out of love, her gift showed the greatest kind of love—greater than hoping for something back or even trusting that she would be noticed.

In this way, Mary shows us what a true Christian looks like. Our love for Jesus cannot shine brightly if we only serve Him because we are afraid of being punished or because we want a reward. If we obey God just to get something for ourselves or to avoid trouble, we are really thinking about ourselves, not about Him.

The Bible teaches that if people could become truly good just by following rules to earn rewards or avoid punishment, then Jesus did not need to die on the cross. But Paul says that is not true. God's grace is everything. Faith is not a plan to escape trouble or a way to get prizes later. Real faith is loving Jesus simply because of who He is and what He has done for us.

The cross is not just a clever way to trade something small, like happiness now, for something better later. Salvation is not like a business deal where we earn a profit by believing. It is true that salvation is very good—more than we can measure—but we cannot see all its value by thinking only with our minds. Faith can only see part of it, and only love helps us understand even when things seem dark.

Everyone is tested to see if their faith is just for themselves. At the hardest times, love takes the lead, and faith and hope follow. That is why the Bible says, "The greatest of these is love."

Let God's grace do its perfect work in us. Let's get ready for the final test!

MARY'S KIND OF LOVE WILL HELP FINISH SHARING THE GOOD NEWS WITH THE WHOLE WORLD

The biggest problem the church faces is sharing the good news with the whole world. Everyone needs a fair chance to hear it so they can choose to believe it or choose not to. This

work must be finished before Jesus can come back. Jesus said, "This good news will be shared in the whole world, and then the end will come."

Good people have worked on this problem for many years. Even though churches try very hard, the job keeps getting bigger. More people are being born every day, faster than all the churches together can reach them with the good news.

Because of this, honest and caring people have tried to find faster ways to finish this work that God has given us. Groups have made many plans and programs. They have used all kinds of tools, like TV, radio, satellites, and the Internet.

Can Mary's sacrifice show us the best way to do this work? Mary has several important lessons she can teach us today:

1. We are amazed by how creative and different her way of serving was. What Mary did was very unusual. No one would have thought to help spread the good news by bringing a jar of very expensive perfume and pouring it on Jesus' feet. She then felt shy and confused and tried to wash his feet with her tears. Since she had no towel, she used her long hair to dry them. She did not plan ahead, and she did not even think about needing a towel.

Some people thought she did a poor job. They believed she messed everything up. But no cold or uncaring group could ever plan a "good work" like the one Mary did. Her love helped her think of what to do in the moment.

This shows how powerful love can be. Only a heart that is truly sorry and full of love can find new and caring ways to serve Jesus. The good news Jesus talked about cannot be shared with the whole world without this kind of loving creativity. Doing things only by strict rules does not work, and acting wildly for selfish reasons does not work either. But love that comes from a sorry and humble heart does work. When that kind of love begins, the work will be finished.

2. Mary's love was so special that it showed what was going to happen later. The disciples had been told many times that Jesus was going to die and be buried, but they did not really understand it. Mary was the only one who seemed to understand what was about to happen. Her love helped her see the meaning of the future in a way the others could not.

Because she loved Jesus so much, she felt moved to prepare His body ahead of time for burial. Her loving heart helped her understand something very important before anyone else did.

This makes us wonder: does Mary stand only for one special person in the church, or does she show what God wants all His people to grow into—people whose love helps them understand His plans more clearly?

Hidden in the Old Testament is a special prayer that has not fully come true yet. Moses was very tired from leading the people of Israel, so God chose seventy men to help him. God shared His Spirit with them, and when the Spirit came upon them, they spoke messages from God.

Then something unexpected happened. Two men who were not with the group also received God's Spirit, and they began to speak messages from God right in the camp. Someone quickly ran to tell Moses and Joshua. Joshua was upset and told Moses to stop them.

But Moses understood something important. He said that he wished all of God's people could receive God's Spirit and speak for Him. Later, the prophet Joel said that in the last days, God's Spirit would be given to everyone. Then the special gifts from God would be fully brought back to the church.

Just as day always follows night, the church today will show the same kind of understanding when it has Mary's kind of love. When perfect love removes fear, it will also remove fighting and division. Sharing one Spirit, everyone will experience true unity and peace together.

People will know what is true because it really is true, not just because an important leader says so. Each person will learn to understand and choose truth for themselves. In this way, Moses' prayer will be answered.

3. When people become half-hearted and don't really care, their ability to love becomes weak and almost stops working. Love is like a secret room in our hearts, and we can only enter it through true sorrow for our sins. To feel this sorrow, we must follow the way of the cross, where we let go of selfishness with Jesus.

When people are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold in their faith—they are turning away, even without realizing it, from the lessons of the cross.

Love is what helps us understand God's plans, but if love is weak, the gifts of the Spirit stay asleep until love is awake.

God wants His people to experience the full freedom of being His children. Then, just like Mary once knew what to do for Jesus ahead of time, every follower will know the right thing to do at the right time, guided by love.

4. Judas judging Mary's gift by how much money it was worth makes us feel uneasy inside. "Why did we waste this sweet-smelling oil? We could have sold it for more than three hundred coins," Judas kept thinking about numbers. Sometimes, we think too much about numbers, too.

But Mary's love can't be measured by a computer. Trying to figure it out that way shows we don't really understand it. Love can't be counted on a chart. Mary showed her love with her tears, not with papers full of numbers.

In the busy and hard times at the end, the easiest way for the church to fail is to try to keep going "as usual," only caring about small yearly numbers. Our sharing of God's love must be like Mary's way—full of true, humble love. God, please help us!

Finally, Mary's story shows the answer to a question many people have in their hearts.

5. What Does It Mean to Be Right with God by Believing? “Righteousness” isn’t a hard idea. Even though we can’t see Jesus with our eyes, the Holy Spirit helps us understand what righteousness is in our hearts. The Bible says, “When he [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will show the world what is right...” (John 16:8-10). Being like Jesus is what righteousness really means.

But how do we become like Jesus? The Bible says the way is by faith.

So, what is faith?

People give many different answers, and it can be confusing. Some say one thing, some say another. It would be nice if God had explained it in very simple words! But when people hear the good news everywhere, Mary’s loving act shows what faith really means—doing something with love and trust in God.

Sometimes, Jesus praised the faith of people he healed. But when he praised Mary, it showed the highest example of what faith really is.

He said to Simon, “Her many sins are forgiven, because she loved so much” (Luke 7:47). Mary loved a lot because she knew God had forgiven her a lot.

Still, Mary probably wished she had more faith, like many people do. She knew her love, but she wanted the kind of faith that could do amazing things, like moving mountains! Yes, Mary knew she was small in God’s kingdom, but she loved with all her heart.

Imagine how surprised Mary must have been when Jesus said her own loving heart showed real faith. He told her, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace” (verse 50).

We don’t believe with our heads alone, but with our hearts. “It is by believing in our hearts that we are made right with God” (Romans 10:10).

Faith can include many things—trust, courage, confidence, and holding on to God’s promises—but the most important part is loving Jesus and seeing how much he loves us, especially at Calvary.

Faith is how people respond to God’s love. That’s the big lesson this story teaches! What really matters is “faith that shows itself through love” (Galatians 5:6).

Look to Jesus on the cross. If you don’t choose to ignore him or hurt him again, your heart will want to believe in him. That kind of faith is as certain as heaven itself. God promises it will happen!

Do you feel that faith trying to grow in your heart?

Yes, for “God has given each person a little faith” (Romans 12:3). This is like a tiny seed planted in every heart, including yours. If you let it grow and don’t try to destroy it, it will change you into the person you want to be.

Talking about his cross, Jesus says, “I ... will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). He keeps reaching out to you, even if you resist or hesitate.

If you trust him, you will see what faith can do. It shows that all of God's promises are true, and that your hopes are starting to come true, even if you can't see them yet. Faith is "the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see" (Hebrews 11:1).

Trust Jesus, and you will know for sure that God is real. The cross shows you who he really is.

Oh, I wish I had a heart to praise God!

A heart free from sin,

A heart that always remembers

The blood Jesus gave for me.

A heart that is made new in every thought,

Full of God's love,

Perfect, good, and pure,

Like Yours, Lord, I want to be.

Charles Wesley

Chapter 13

What did Christ Accomplish on His Cross?

ONE LAST IMPORTANT QUESTION IS LEFT

I couldn't doubt that Jesus' death on the cross really happened.

- Jesus gave His life completely, a huge, perfect gift (Isaiah 53:12).
- He poured out everything He had, even His life, like turning a glass upside down until the last drop is gone (Philippians 2:5-8).
- He took on God's curse for us, which is total punishment (Galatians 3:13).
- This is how He "tasted death for everyone" (Hebrews 2:9).
- He gave Himself for our sins and held back nothing (Galatians 1:4).
- We should say this quietly and with respect: He went through hell for us to save us (Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:25-27).
- His love for us was amazing and full of care (1 John 4:9-14)!

But for years, I kept asking myself: What did Jesus really accomplish? Was His sacrifice a true success, or did Satan manage to mess it up or ruin some of it?

People much wiser than me have thought about these questions for hundreds of years. But I found an answer in Romans 5:15-18 that seemed to show that Jesus' sacrifice was completely successful:

"God's act of grace is out of all proportion to Adam's wrongdoing. For if the wrongdoing of that one man brought death upon so many [Greek: the many meaning all], its effect is vastly exceeded by the grace of God and the gift that came to so many by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ. And again, the gift of God is not to be compared in its effect with that one man's sin; for the judicial action, following on the one offense, resulted in a verdict of condemnation, but the act of grace, following on so many misdeeds, resulted in a verdict of acquittal. ... It follows, then, that as the result of one misdeed condemnation for all people, so the result of one righteous act is acquittal and life for all." Romans 5:15-18, REB.

How could there be better Good News than that? But some people don't agree. They think there is some hidden rule or "fine print" somewhere. I couldn't believe God would go against this, but over the years, some have tried to explain away what Paul really meant. There are several ways they've tried to do that:

1. STRICT CALVINISM

To make this idea simple: some people say that Jesus didn't die for everyone. They say He only loved and died for a special group called "the elect."

This means God already chose some people to be saved, and they will go to heaven no matter what.

Some people, called strict Calvinists, think this makes sense because they believe God's will cannot be stopped. If God decides something, no one can change it. They even read the Lord's Prayer as meaning, "Your will must happen on earth, just like it does in heaven."

THAT'S ONE SIDE OF THE CALVINISM IDEA

Some people believe in "double predestination," which says God has already decided that some people will be saved and the rest will be lost, no matter what they do. (I grew up in a church that taught this.) That might sound like good news if you're one of the "lucky" ones—but what about everyone else?

But when I read the Bible for myself, I found some really good news:

- The very last page of the Bible shows that this idea is wrong. It made me so happy! It says: "The Spirit and the Bride say: Come! Let anyone who hears say: Come! Let anyone who is thirsty come. Whoever wants it may take the water of life for free" (Revelation 22:17). It would be awful if I wasn't invited—but the word "whoever" **includes me!** I am invited!

- Jesus promised: "Anyone who comes to me, I will never turn away" (John 6:37). He also said, "Come to me, all of you who are tired and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest... My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28, 30). The more I thought about this, the more I believed the gospel really is Good News. God has made salvation possible for everyone who is willing to come to Him.

- Isaiah 45:22 says, "Look to me, and be saved, all you people everywhere!" I would have to ignore that to miss this invitation.

- Then I saw that Isaiah 53:1-6 uses sixteen "we," "us," and "our." These must mean **everyone**, because it's talking about all of us who have sinned: "Surely, He has carried our sadness and pain... He was hurt for our wrongs; the punishment for our peace was on Him, and by His wounds we are healed. All of us, like sheep, have gone our own way, and the Lord has put the wrongs of us all on Him."

- John 1:29 says, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" We don't come from Mars, so that means He takes away my sin, too.

- John 4:42 says Jesus 'real title is "the Savior of the world," not just some lucky people. That means I'm included too. Of course, we all have a choice to accept Him or not, and many people refuse.

- And John 3:16 says, "God loved the world so much that whoever believes in Him will not die but have life forever." Could it be that some people can't believe? Romans 12:3 answers that: "God has given each person a little faith."

- So who will be lost in the end? John 3:17-19 says, “Anyone who does not believe is judged... people loved darkness instead of the light.” John 5:30 adds that only those who refuse to come to Jesus will be lost.

- What Jesus said about the Lord’s Supper really stood out to me: “My blood... is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28). Who are the “many”? Since everyone has sinned (Romans 3:23), it must mean that Jesus gave His blood for everyone. He also said, “Everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have life forever... The bread I give is my body, which I give for the life of the world. If you don’t eat my body and drink my blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:40, 51, 53). What He gives is for everyone.

Then I read that Paul said some people “eat” without believing and “don’t understand the Lord’s body” (1 Corinthians 11:29). This shows that Paul believed Jesus had done something for every person.

- I also found 1 Timothy 4:10, which says that Jesus “is the Savior of all people, especially those who believe.” That means every person can think of Jesus as their Savior. It was starting to become clear that Jesus did something on the cross for everyone, and no one is left out. It reminded me of a song I have heard:

And once again, the scene was different, and a new earth appeared.
I saw the Holy City next to a calm, endless sea.
God’s light shone on its streets, and the gates were wide open.
Anyone who wanted to could go in, and no one was turned away.

- Could “the everlasting good news” be this amazing? It seems so, because 2 Timothy 1:10 says: “Our Savior Jesus Christ... has defeated death and shown us life and never-ending life through the good news.” How can that be if cemeteries are full? It must mean the second death. Yes, when Jesus died, He defeated it by suffering it Himself. The lake of fire wasn’t meant for people, but for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41). People only end up there if they refuse the rescue Jesus already gave them. As it says, “Those who hate me love death” (Proverbs 8:36).

- Then I read Ephesians chapter 1, and it gave me a lot of hope and encouragement:

“The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ chose us in Him before the world was made. He planned for us to be His children through Jesus, and because of Jesus’ blood, our sins are forgiven. God gave us this gift of grace and wisdom freely” (Verses 3-8).

Who is the “us”? When God hugged His Son Jesus at the Jordan River, He was also including all people and adopted us as His children in Jesus.

Looking back at Romans 5:15-18, there is another way some people have tried to explain this Good News. It doesn’t ignore the gift, but it ends up at the wrong conclusion:

2. UNIVERSALISM

Arminianism reacted against Calvinism and said that God will eventually take every person to heaven, and no one will be lost, even the people who are very bad and refuse to obey.

But the Bible does not teach this. God wants everyone to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3-4), but Paul also tells the sad truth that many people will refuse His gift (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; 2:8-10). So even though we might wish everyone could be saved, the Bible shows that this won't happen. Revelation talks about people "as many as the sand of the sea" who will be lost, not because God rejects them, but because they would not accept the gift, He gave them in Jesus (Revelation 20:8-15).

Still, there was another way to understand the Good News texts, but it also had problems:

3. ARMINIANISM, AN IMPORTANT IDEA IN THE PROTESTANT CHURCH

This belief says that when Paul talks about "all people" in Romans 5, he only means the people who believe and obey. It started as a reaction to Calvinism, because some people felt hopeless thinking they were "chosen to be lost," while others thought they could sin as much as they wanted because they were "chosen to be saved." Arminianism tried to fix this and get the truth back on track.

Arminianism says God wants everyone to be saved and that Jesus died for everyone. But it also says that Jesus' gift only works if people first believe and obey. That makes it more like an "if" gift.

Could there be a problem with this idea? If Jesus didn't really do anything for anyone unless they first do the right thing, then for the people who are lost, it's as if He didn't die at all. They end up "paying" for their own sins, and they couldn't honestly sing, "Jesus Paid It All" for them.

This idea means that when people who are lost die their second death, they won't owe anything to God. By dying, they would have "paid their own way" and wouldn't need a Savior.

But does God want them to think that?

I had to ask myself: didn't Jesus really "pay it all" for everyone?

Some people who believe this teaching say that without Jesus' death, life on earth wouldn't even exist. That's true—our life is a gift because of Him. But even animals get the same life we have. So, if Jesus' gift only works for humans when we do something first, then what He did isn't fully for us—it's only conditional, like an "if" offer.

Yes, eternal life is offered to everyone, but is it only an offer, or did Jesus actually make it real for all of us?

I FELT UPSET

Doesn't what Jesus did on the cross deserve more thanks and honor? Isn't it true that all the good things people enjoy in life come because of what He did? Jesus even said, "I came so people could have life, and have it fully" (John 10:10).

Some people who will be lost have lived in luxury, wearing fancy clothes and jewelry (Revelation 18:7,16). But Jesus has carried the sadness, pain, and suffering for every person, so that everyone can enjoy life. For everyone, He took the punishment that should have been ours (Isaiah 53:4-6). Even people who don't believe in Him still enjoy the good things He bought with His sacrifice.

Could it be that Jesus hasn't actually done anything for people who don't believe? Is His gift only something we get if we do something first? That's not how a real gift works. If a friend offers you a gift but doesn't actually give it, then you have nothing to be thankful for. It's like credit card companies sending offers—they don't give anything for free. Jesus, on the other hand, really gave His gift to everyone.

I STARTED THINKING ABOUT THIS ALL THE WAY TO THE END

Arminianism teaches that we have to do something to make Jesus' gift work for us. If we don't, it's like He just offered to help, but didn't really do anything for us. We would feel like we earned it ourselves instead of being truly thankful for God's gift. I started to wonder if this is why some people in the church don't have strong, full hearts for Jesus.

Arminianism is good because it tried to answer a big question about God's plan. But the more I thought about it, the more I saw that it doesn't tell the whole story. God didn't just offer His Son—He gave Him. Jesus didn't just offer to die—He really died for us once and for all. He doesn't need to keep dying again in every church service. In the end, everyone in heaven will say: "Thank you, Jesus, for everything you did for us. We owe it all to you."

If Arminianism were completely right, people would have to say: "Thanks, Jesus, for your good offer, but we had to do something first to make it work. We did our part, that's why we're here." That really turns salvation into something we earn, instead of something God gives freely.

Could this confused idea about what Jesus did on the cross be the reason why many people in the church don't feel excited or passionate about God? This idea might affect people without them even knowing it.

And what about the people who are lost and stand before God on judgment day? Are they lost because they didn't understand a simple offer, or because they chose to say no to a real gift God already gave them?

Finally, I found a fourth way of understanding this that seemed to be the true message of the gospel.

JESUS DID SOMETHING FOR EVERY SINGLE PERSON!

The Bible shows that some people will finally understand that Jesus gave them the gift of being made right with God and saved, but they didn't accept it. He did as much for them as He did for the people who believed. Their unbelief caused them to lose their chance to be saved. This wasn't just forgetting about it—they actually chose not to say sorry and be friends with God. They

didn't just ignore God's gift; they made fun of it and wanted to keep doing their own way (Hebrews 2:3; Matthew 22:5).

The main question is simple: Did Jesus pay for every person's sins?

The Bible clearly says yes.

This isn't just a school lesson or something to argue about. Knowing the answer helps us understand how to reach people from all kinds of religions, like Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews. God calls all people "My people" (Revelation 18:4). This answer also shows the difference between a church that is cold and one that is full of love for Jesus, who died for us.

PAUL WAS NEVER HALF-HEARTED!

The love of Jesus was so strong that it moved Paul to act. When Paul said, "One died for all," he meant that everyone should understand that they cannot just live for themselves anymore. People who follow Jesus are now supposed to "live for the one who died for them and came back to life" (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

Paul loved Jesus so much that even when he was in a Roman prison, he stayed strong in his faith until the very end, when he was killed for Jesus. He once said, "I will only be proud of the cross," which means he didn't want to brag about himself, his faith, or his good choices—only about what Jesus did.

"The grace of God and the gift [with it] came to the many by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ [in Greek the many means all people] The judicial action, following on ... so many misdeeds, resulted in a verdict of acquittal.... The result of one righteous act is acquittal and life for all."

Paul also explained that God's gift of grace came to many people through Jesus. Because of Jesus, God forgives people and treats them as if they are good and right with Him. This doesn't mean that everyone becomes perfect, but God accepts everyone because of Jesus. Now, Paul tells us: "We ask you to be friends with God" (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).

HOW JESUS' DEATH ON THE CROSS AFFECTS ME

Some people said that when Paul wrote "all people," he really only meant the people who do something good first. But when I read it carefully, Paul was very clear. The "all" who are forgiven are the same "all" who have done wrong. Everyone can be made right with God **only by His gift of grace**, because of what Jesus did for us.

From this, seven important ideas seem very clear:

- Everyone has done wrong, and that includes me.
- But everyone can be made right with God.
- They don't have to pay or earn it—God gives it freely.

- It's a gift of God's love to everyone, even people who don't deserve it.
- It's only by God's gift, not by anything we do.
- This gift is for everyone.
- It's because of Jesus, who is the Savior of the whole world.

Some people worried that if others really believed this, they might keep doing wrong things. I thought about that. What they didn't understand is that real faith changes your heart. When you believe that Jesus forgives you because of what He did on the cross, it makes you want to do what is right. Love (agape) helps you follow God's rules, because love is what God's law is really about (Romans 13:10). When you understand that God treats you as good because of Jesus, He can also help you become good in your heart. This is called being made right with God by faith.

SOMEONE HELPED ME FIGURE THIS OUT, AND I'M VERY GRATEFUL TO THEM

I have to be honest—I wasn't smart enough to figure this out on my own. I felt confused because I didn't understand the difference between two big ideas called Calvinism and Arminianism. Then a friend shared something with me from an author long ago that helped me understand Paul's words:

"Because of what one person did (Jesus), God's free gift comes to everyone so they can have life" (Romans 5:18). There are no exceptions. Just like everyone has done wrong, everyone can be made right. Jesus died for every person. He gave Himself for all. The gift is free, which shows it really is for everyone.

The Bible clearly says that the gift of being right with God and having life in Jesus is for every person on earth. The only reason someone wouldn't be saved is if they refuse the gift. Many people sadly say no to this gift that is given so freely.

"God gives a little bit of faith to every person, and everyone gets the same amount. The gift of Jesus is the same for everyone. Jesus is given to everyone without holding anything back. Because everyone has the same faith and grace, everyone has the same chance to receive God's gift and live with Him forever."

"You might ask, 'What stops everyone from being saved?' The answer is: nothing—except that not everyone keeps their faith. If everyone held on to what God gives them, everyone would be saved."

This is very special truth. The same writer also said more.

The Bible says God wants everyone to be saved and to know the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). It also says God does everything according to His plan (Ephesians 1:11). Someone might ask, "Are you saying everyone will be saved?"

The answer is no. We are only teaching what the Bible says. God's grace has come and brings salvation to everyone (Titus 2:11).

God has made salvation for every person and has given it to them. But most people do not want it. They push it away and throw it aside.

When the judgment comes, it will show that God gave full salvation to everyone. It will also show that those who are lost chose to throw away the gift God gave them.

Someone might say, "Then we are fine no matter what we do. Since we are saved, God's law does not matter." But that is not true.

It is true that Jesus paid the price for everyone. But not everyone accepts what He did. Some people say about Jesus, "We don't want Him to be our King," and they push away God's gift.

Jesus paid for everyone with His own life. Because of that, everyone can be free from sin and death—if they choose to accept His gift.

As we learn more about the cross, our hearts should feel very thankful. We understand why people in heaven sing loud songs of praise in Revelation 19:1-6. They sing four powerful "Hallelujah" songs. These songs are even greater than the famous music written by Handel.

The Bible says the sound is like a huge crowd. It is as loud as rushing water and strong thunder. They shout, "Hallelujah! The Lord God who has all power is King!"

When we start to understand what Jesus did for us on the cross, we feel so happy and thankful. We can't wait to join in and sing this great song too.

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!" Revelation 5:12.

Start praising Him now, and you will be happy forever.