

The Perfect Sacrifice:
Communion with Jesus
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Foreword

This book was written primarily late at night when the house was quiet. It was not meant to be read at one sitting. Instead, it is a devotional book best read one chapter at a time. Much of this was written to be used as meditation thoughts prior to taking the Lord's Supper. The chapters focus on many heroes of the faith found in the Bible and how they relate to the amazing love of Jesus. His tender love shines through the characters of the Bible and can light up our world as well.

In the writing of this book, a debt of gratitude is owed to many. My parents, Bob and Beve Stanger, first introduced me to Jesus as a boy, attending church and shared His love in countless practical ways over the years. I was fortunate to marry Nora Swango who had been touched by Jesus's love prior to our meeting. She was instrumental in typing and putting together the various aspects of the text. Her feedback was very valuable. My friends Bill Glenn and Karen Mason gave me tips in writing more effectively. Joshua McComas also provided constructive editing advice which assisted in communicating the message more clearly. Their time and assistance have been greatly appreciated. It is my hope that all who read this will be drawn to the One who made love most fully known—Jesus.

The Choice and the Path that Followed

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?”

The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. (Genesis 3:6–9,21)

The Holy Bible begins by saying, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). His creation was said to be *very good* (Genesis 1:31), and God met all of the needs of His creation. However, Adam and Eve had fallen. They had eaten fruit from the tree of which God commanded they not eat. They soon realized they were naked and needed to cover themselves. More importantly, they found that their relationship with God had changed. Their times of joyful communion with their Creator in the garden were over. They felt a distance and separation from their God that they had never felt before. They longed for the beautiful closeness to God which had been such a joyful aspect of their daily lives prior to their failure.

Although God knew the answer, He asked, “Where are you?” God still loved and pursued them. First God presented an animal sacrifice and used the skin to provide garments for Adam and Eve. However, the animal sacrifice was not great enough to mend the broken relationship. The sense of guilt and shame which entered their world could not be covered. A blood sacrifice was needed.

As mankind multiplied, their sins multiplied as well. Nevertheless, God pursued them. God looked ahead to bridge the gulf that sin had carved between Him and His creation.

Our sin is still an issue creating guilt, shame, and needing resolution. We also need to be reconciled in our relationship with God. Yet the way home to God is as impossible for us to achieve on our own as it was for Adam and Eve.

A spotless or sinless sacrifice was needed to pay the price for our sins. There was only one sufficient sacrifice for all, and that was God’s own Son. He can bring us back into the garden with God. He suffered the penalty for our sins. His name is Jesus:

Our way home
Jesus!

Life Outside the Garden

And the Lord God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:22–24)

Here we find early in the Garden of Eden the mention of cherubim. Cherubim are celestial creatures which have wings. Cherubim were sent by God to keep Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden in order to guard the way to the Tree of Life.

Adam and Eve experienced a sense of isolation from God when they were banished from the Garden of Eden. They felt desperate in wanting to regain their closeness to God. Imagine going from walking with the Creator of the universe with all your needs taken care of to the cold, harsh reality of life away from God. They suddenly had to work to meet some basic needs in life. However, Adam and Eve’s best efforts to return to their previous relationship with God were insufficient. Nothing they did made any difference in the goal to return to their original condition.

Since the time of Adam and Eve, different religions have developed. Yet various human efforts to make things right with God have all fallen short. We continue to feel empty when we rely on our own solutions. We are unable to get close to God or to be at peace with Him on our own. Today we cannot even find our way back to the Garden of Eden, let alone the Tree of Life.

However, the love of God is all about bringing His children home. One day, God sent a man to show us the way back to Him. This man pointed out that He came, so that we may “have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). He said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6). The One who said those words was

Jesus:
The Way
Jesus!

Noah's Saving Ark

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. So God said to Noah, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark . . ." (Genesis 6:11–14)

Sin, wickedness, and darkness had swept across the world. Mankind had become so corrupt that the Lord was *grieved* that He had even made man (Genesis 6:6). For this reason, God sent a flood of water to cleanse the world. However, Noah was considered righteous and was said to have walked with God. Noah kept following God's instructions even though it did not seem to make sense. There had never before been a flood that covered the whole earth. Yet Noah was instructed to make an ark. Noah followed God despite the ridicule he endured from his friends. God saved Noah and his family through the water because he was faithful in following Him.

We will also face ridicule in following God. Noah took shelter in the ark. God asks us to take shelter in Jesus. Jesus can save us from threats to our souls. He can save us from the darkness that surrounds us. He can save us from the darkness that is within us:

Jesus,
Saving
Jesus!

Abraham's Lamb

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So Abram left, as the Lord had told him . . . (Genesis 12:1-4)

Abram, who was later named Abraham, means *father of a multitude of nations* (The New Bible Commentary: Revised, p. 96). Abraham was called by God to leave his father's household in order to go to a land that God would show him. He was faithful to the calling and ended up living in the land of Canaan. God pointed out that Abraham would be made into a great nation and that everyone on earth would be blessed through him. Nevertheless, his wife, Sarah, had no children. Abraham waited for decades, but Sarah still did not become pregnant. Finally when Sarah was ninety years old, she gave birth to a son they named Isaac. The one they had waited for had finally arrived.

Years later, Abraham was astonished when he was told by God to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering. We are told that:

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." Genesis 22:6-8

Abraham came before God in need of a sacrifice for the burnt offering. He expected the sacrifice would be his son. Although this was a journey which Abraham did not want to take, he obeyed God and prepared to sacrifice Isaac. While he trusted in God, it was God who provided for the sacrifice.

Today we also come before God in need of a sacrifice. A sacrifice is needed for our sins. Although we may look all around, we cannot find a sacrifice that is sufficient. God also asks us to trust in Him, and we find that He provided for our sacrifice as well. The sacrifice was His Son:

Jesus,
The Lamb of God
Jesus!

Jacob's Stairway to Heaven

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Genesis 28:10–15)

Jacob had many struggles in his life. Even before he was born, he is said to have *jostled* (Genesis 25:22) with his twin brother Esau. He pushed and collided with Esau inside of his mother, Rebekah. Then when Jacob was a young man, he tricked his elderly father into thinking he was Esau, so he could obtain his father's blessing. Esau was furious at Jacob and planned to kill him once their father had died.

However, Jacob fled to Haran to live with his uncle Laban. Jacob must have felt terribly alone and may have even been away from his family for the first time. On the way there, he stopped to sleep and had a dream about a stairway going from earth up to heaven. "The angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12). Above the stairway stood the Lord, and He spoke to Jacob. The Lord promised to give Jacob the land he was lying on and said He would be with Jacob wherever he went. What a beautiful reassurance Jacob received that the Lord would be with him, and Jacob would not be alone.

Jacob went on to work for Laban for twenty years, but their relationship was full of conflicts. Years later, God blessed Jacob and changed his name from Jacob to Israel, which means "he struggles with God" (Halley, p.122). Of all the relationships with which Jacob struggled, his relationship with God should have been perceived as the most important one of his life.

We also have many struggles in our lives. Ultimately, we must struggle with God concerning our eternal destiny. Early in the Bible, God said, "My spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal . . ." (Genesis 6:3).

Many years after Jacob lived a man named Nathanael declared that Jesus was the Son of God. Jesus responded by telling Nathanael that he would see "heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending" on Jesus (John 1:51). Jesus came to open the way to heaven.

We too may struggle with how to respond to Jesus. Will we accept God's Son? Will we resist Him? Jesus shows us the way to become members of the family of God. Jesus can help us resolve the struggle to get back home with God.

Jesus,
Our stairway to heaven
Jesus!

Joseph's Mercy

As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one . . ." (Romans 3:10)

Jacob had twelve sons, and one of his sons was named Joseph. We are told that Jacob "loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he had been born to him in his old age . . ." (Genesis 37:3). This aroused jealousy within the other sons. To make matters worse, Jacob made Joseph a beautiful robe: an elaborate gift that his brothers did not share. In addition, Joseph had dreams of his brothers bowing down to him, and he shared these dreams with his brothers.

Out of this jealousy, one day, his brothers attacked Joseph and sold him to merchants heading to Egypt (Genesis 37:28). They then took Joseph's robe and dipped it in goat's blood. They took the blood-stained robe to Jacob who thought that Joseph must have been *torn to pieces* by a *ferocious animal* (Genesis 37:33).

Not only had Joseph been rejected by his brothers, but when he was in Egypt, he was sent to prison on a false accusation. Nevertheless, Joseph was not abandoned. We find that "while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him . . ." (Genesis 39:20–21). In time, Joseph interpreted the dream of Pharaoh about a warning to Pharaoh of a severe famine coming. Pharaoh then elevated Joseph over everyone except himself, putting Joseph "in charge of the whole land of Egypt" (Genesis 41:43).

The great famine arrived as God had warned Pharaoh, but preparations for the famine had been made. The famine was so severe that people came from far and wide to buy food in Egypt and live. Joseph directed the distribution of the food. One day, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy food. They no longer recognized Joseph but bowed down to what they thought was a great Egyptian ruler. Joseph could have taken revenge on his brothers, but instead he showed them kindness. They needed his mercy as they wanted to buy grain. Joseph still had a special love for his family and wept as he forgave his brothers. Not only did Joseph provide grain for his brothers, but he offered them a new life in Egypt where there was a place they could pasture their flocks "in the best part of the land" (Genesis 47:11).

During the time of Jesus's life, He had a special love for the nation of Israel. However, many turned their backs on Him and rejected Him. Nevertheless, He was the source of their spiritual life. Only He had the bread of life that could meet their spiritual need. Jesus offers this spiritual life to all people and is willing to forgive all.

Like Joseph, Jesus left His home, was falsely accused, and "punished even though he had done nothing wrong" (Lloyd-Jones, p.82). Then He was spit upon, beaten, struck on the head repeatedly, and flogged. Finally He was led out and nailed to a cross until He died. Amazingly, even as Jesus hung on the cross in intense pain, His merciful spirit spoke to God saying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Today we may not realize how we have turned our backs on Jesus. We have all made mistakes and have fallen spiritually. In addition, we also find ourselves in need of Jesus's mercy. He wants us to come back to Him and seek forgiveness. He offers us a new life in a much more beautiful place.

Jesus,
Merciful
Jesus!

Pharaoh's Closed Ears and Heart

The magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the Lord had said. (Exodus 8:19)

Pharaoh was a great ruler in Egypt. However, he relied on his own skills and wisdom. A great weakness was that he would not listen to God. He was told repeatedly what God wanted him to do but he "hardened his heart" (Exodus 8:32). He was shown many miraculous signs, but he chose to ignore God. As a result of his refusal to heed God, much of Egypt was destroyed and many died needlessly.

Many years later, there was a man named Jesus who relied on God for all that He did. He knew the Word of God in Scripture and applied it to His daily life. Although He was busy and popular, He would seek a "solitary place" to pray (Mark 1:35). He was in tune with the will of God and prayed that all believers would be one as He was one with God (John 17:20–22).

We too must decide if we will listen to God. We may be highly respected by others or have very busy lifestyles. Yet if we are deaf to God, unnecessary destruction will be our fate, and death in our relationship with God will occur. God continues to call. There was One who fully listened and responded to the call. He was faithful in responding to God no matter what it cost Him:

Jesus,
Listening
Jesus!

Moses: “Let My People Go!”

Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let my people go . . .’” (Exodus 5:1)

One of the great heroes of faith was Moses. He turned his back to a position of riches, power, and prestige to identify with the people of God who were slaves at the time. After killing an Egyptian who was beating a slave, he fled from Egypt and from his place of prominence. Yet God used him to deliver the Israelites from slavery. Moses returned to Egypt and told Pharaoh what God had instructed him to say: “Let my people go.” Pharaoh resisted, but after the great loss of his crops, his livestock, and finally, his son, he consented. And the Israelites were freed!

Later in the time of Jesus, the Israelites wanted to be set free from Roman rule and oppression. Like Moses, many looked to Jesus to be their deliverer. However, Jesus had something better in mind—to set all mankind free! Jesus planned to deliver not only that generation but also every generation that would follow.

Though we come together from many different walks in life, we have all found ourselves ensnared in various forms of sin. Satan still tries to entangle us in sin. He makes evil look attractive. Soon we become captive to our own desires which can destroy us. Jesus can set us free from our captivity and the guilt of all our sins. We can be free to live with God forever. As John 8:36 says: “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” Jesus came to set us free and continues to tell Satan,

“Let my people go.”

The Israelites' Passover

Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. Not one of you shall go out the door of his house until morning. When the Lord goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down." (Exodus 12:21–23)

While the Jews were in slavery in Egypt, the nation of Egypt was proud. Then the night of the Passover feast came. Egypt appeared to be grand and strong. It was the greatest civilization the world had ever known. The Egyptians were proud of their riches, power, and accomplishments. The nation may have seemed invincible to the surrounding countries. Certainly, the Jewish people living in the land as slaves must have felt powerless against Egypt.

Nevertheless, the people of Egypt were about to experience the judgment of God. Death arrived in each Egyptian house that night. The Jewish people were not only delivered from God's judgment but from slavery in Egypt as well. Each Jewish house had to sacrifice a lamb without defect and apply the blood of the lamb to the top and sides of the doorposts. When God came through that night, He passed over the houses with the blood on the doorposts. Each Egyptian household lost their firstborn that night. However, the Jewish people were spared death and then set free to go to the Promised Land.

Today we come before God as a great nation. Many consider us the greatest civilization the world has known. We too are proud of our accomplishments. We may think we can make it by our own efforts. Yet if we reject the blood of the Lamb of God, (John 1:29), we will face God's judgment. The end result will be death and eternal separation from God.

We too need a lamb's blood to protect us from the judgment of God. We need a lamb without defects. However, our best sacrifice is insufficient.

Jesus became the perfect Lamb for each of us. His blood was shed for us and saves us from God's judgment. Only His blood is sufficient. Jesus can spare us from eternal death and separation from God. He wants to lead us to God's Promised Land in heaven.

Jesus,
Our Passover Lamb
Jesus!

The Israelites' Rock

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea.

They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:1–4)

After leaving Egypt, the Israelites wandered for forty years in a wilderness which had few resources for living. During this time, they were not on their own, but they were led and cared for by God Himself. We are told that during the day, “the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light . . .” (Exodus 13:21). This was a vivid and continual reminder of God’s presence on their journey. God fed them daily with manna, and their clothes did not wear out during the forty years of traveling. What a beautiful demonstration of God’s love in providing for their needs and sustaining them. God provided water, and on two occasions, water came out of a rock. We are told, “They drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:4). It was Jesus who sustained them in their times of need.

We too often find ourselves in a wilderness as we journey through life. We have needs, struggles, and fears just as the Israelites did. Yet Jesus also sustains us. As the Israelites’ lives depended on the water that flowed from the rock, our spiritual lives depend on the same rock. That rock was identified as Jesus, and our spiritual life is awakened by what flows from Him. That rock was struck and pierced for us. We are told that a “flow of blood and water” came from Jesus’s side when He was pierced on the cross (John 19:34).

Jesus is our bread of life (John 6:35), and He offers a “spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). Jesus is present on our journey, and among His last words, He said, “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20). Jesus has also assured us that we will be filled with His Holy Spirit when we become His children (Acts 2:38). Jesus offers to lead us today and give us guiding light. He said: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). “When we observe the Lord’s Supper, let us reflect on the rock that was struck for our sins, and how we are able to drink the living water, flowing from him, that leads to eternal life” (Longhenry, p. 130). No one can lead us, and no one can sustain us like Jesus.

Jesus,
Sustaining
Jesus!

Rahab's Fear

Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof and said to them, "I know that the Lord has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and that you will save us from death." (Joshua 2:8–13)

Rahab was a prostitute in the city of Jericho. She lived a life emptying and degrading herself for the pleasures of others. She knew the Israelites were going to attack Jericho and that the city was facing death. Therefore, when two spies from the Israelites came to look at Jericho and entered her house, she had a choice. She could turn the spies in to the king of Jericho or hide them. She had to decide with whom she would place her allegiance.

Ultimately, she had to choose whether to pursue the God of Israel or place her confidence in one of the gods in Canaan. She chose to go in a new direction by risking her life, hiding the spies from the king. She then assisted the spies in escaping safely from the city by letting them down by a rope from her window located on the outside wall of the city.

Prior to escaping from the city, the spies made an agreement with Rahab. "Our lives for your lives . . ." (Joshua 2:14). They agreed to spare the lives of Rahab and her family when the city was attacked if Rahab would spare their lives. They instructed Rahab to keep her family in her house and tie a scarlet cord in her window when the Israelites entered the land.

How ironic that Rahab the prostitute, one known by many but valued by few, would have such an encounter with men of God. What an unexpected convert. If only one family of a mighty city were to be saved, who would have thought it would be the family of a prostitute? But that's how God works. He looks at us for what we could be, not what we are.

The scarlet cord was an interesting selection. It was like the blood of the Passover lamb which had previously been put on the doorposts of the Israelites' homes to have their lives spared. In this case, the lives of Rahab and her family were saved from death because the scarlet cord was in her window. For us today, the blood of another Lamb can save our lives. God was planning on this Lamb being born in Israel even before the Israelites had captured the cities of the land.

One day, we will also face death. The thought of dying after living a life contrary to God can be terrifying. Rahab was given an opportunity to change her life and was later "considered righteous" because of what she did (James 2:25). Rahab's life was not only spared, but she was chosen to be in the family line of the Messiah.

There is One who can bring us peace when we face death. We are told that "he himself is our peace . . ." (Ephesians 2:14). His blood spares us from eternal destruction.

Jesus,
Our peace
Jesus.

Joshua's Savior

The Lord gave this command to Joshua son of Nun: "Be strong and courageous, for you will bring the Israelites into the land I promised them on oath, and I myself will be with you." (Deuteronomy 31:23)

Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?"

"Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?" The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so. (Joshua 5:13–15)

After the Israelites had wandered for forty years in the wilderness, Joshua was chosen to lead the people into the Promised Land. However, the land was inhabited, and some of the cities were well fortified.

Joshua's Hebrew name meant *the Lord Saves*, and Joshua turned to the Lord to save them. The Lord had delivered the Israelites in amazing ways in the wilderness, but here, the Israelites were opposed by the people living in the land.

Joshua was a great military leader. God told him he would have to be strong and courageous to accomplish the assignment ahead of him. Joshua was to trust God above his own military experience and what seemed right to his natural senses. Before he attacked the first city, Jericho, he had an unusual experience. He saw someone standing in front of him with a drawn sword who identified himself as the *commander of the army of the Lord*.

Joshua took instruction from him in how to proceed and conquer Jericho. The strategy must have seemed absurd from a military point of view. The people of Israel were to march around the city, carrying the ark and the priests blowing trumpets. The people were to go around the city once a day for six days. On the seventh day, they were to march around the city seven times and then shout. Finally they were to attack the city which was surrounded by a wall. Even though some questioned the strategy, they followed his lead. Because they trusted God, the walls of the city fell, and the city was won.

Early in the history of the Israelites, Joshua had to decide whether to trust in his military skills or the *commander of the army of the Lord*. He put his faith in the commander and implemented the strange strategy. God honored his faith and provided a great victory. Joshua's commander saved them.

Although the commander was not identified by name, He appears to be Jesus. Joshua fell face down on the ground in reverence to Him. If the commander were simply an angel, then Joshua would not have been allowed to show such reverence. Joshua also would not have been told to take off his sandals due to standing on holy ground.

Jesus has been involved in saving His people in more ways than we may ever know. Jesus is the Greek name for Joshua, and it also means *the Lord saves*. Only Jesus wants to deliver His people from more than just a physical battle. Scripture refers to Jesus when it says, ". . . he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21) The commander of the army of the Lord made the difference then, and He can make the difference for us now.

Jesus still expects us to trust Him in faith. The question is whether we will allow Him to lead us. He desires to bring all of us into His Promised Land to enjoy His blessings forever.

Jesus,
Our Savior,
Jesus!

Gideon's Reassurance

Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said." And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water.

Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew." That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew. (Judges 6:36–40)

After the Israelites entered the Promised Land, they did not fully remove all the nations there as they were instructed by God. As a result, those nations were a problem for the Israelites for many years. One group of people who remained were the Midianites.

An Israelite named Gideon was afraid of the Midianites and was threshing wheat in a winepress one day to hide it from them. He had given up hope that the Lord was still with the Israelites. When an angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him that the Lord was with him, he had a hard time believing it. He asked for a sign and immediately received it. When the angel touched Gideon's offering, a fire flared up, and the angel disappeared.

Although Gideon initially hoped for God's deliverance, he needed reassurance. The Midianites, Amalekites, and other Eastern people had joined forces to invade the country of Israel. Gideon asked God for another sign and requested that God bring dew on his wool fleece while the ground remained dry in the morning. God granted his request. Still, Gideon was not sure. Was this luck or a real sign from God? After all, Gideon was risking his life to save the Israelites. Gideon asked for yet another sign in requesting that the wool fleece be dry and the ground around it be wet with dew the next morning. God granted this request as well and reassured Gideon. With just three hundred men, God led Gideon to defeat the Midianites, Amalekites, and the other Eastern people who together numbered over 120,000 swordsmen.

We too may look at the circumstances that surround us and lose hope that God is with us. Often, our beliefs may be at odds with what the world says. Those in power may have many different gods. Meanwhile, we may be ridiculed for believing in the God of the Bible and told that the stories are just myths or fairytales. We may wonder if our beliefs are real. Are they worth giving our life for? Is Jesus really God's Son? Is there life after death?

God knows we have many doubts. However, He revived our hopes in sending Jesus to the earth. He gave us a sign to reassure us that this was His Son by the virgin birth of Jesus. He further reassured us by the numerous Old Testament prophecies which were fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus. If there were any doubts about the truth of what Jesus said during his lifetime, they were quickly extinguished by the numerous miracles Jesus did confirming He was from God. If there was any question about there being life after death, Jesus's resurrection reassures us that we can put our trust in Him:

Jesus,
Our reassurance
Jesus!

Ruth's Trust

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God . . ." (Ruth 1:16)

Ruth was a Moabite woman who married a Jewish man in Moab. However, her husband died and her mother-in-law, Naomi, decided to return to Bethlehem. Naomi had lost her husband and two sons while she had lived in Moab. Ruth could have easily stayed in Moab where she was raised. Instead, she left her homeland to follow Naomi into a foreign country where she did not know anyone. She trusted Naomi and did not want to be separated from her.

What was it about her in-laws family that made Ruth so devoted to Naomi? What would make a widow with nothing of material value choose her mother-in-law, another poor widow, over her family? Could it be the evidences of the God Naomi served?

Ruth demonstrated a sacrificial love in caring for Naomi. She chose to become part of a people she had not been raised among. More importantly, she chose to follow Naomi's God instead of her nation's god. Ruth came into Israel vulnerable and in need, but she made wise choices in whom to trust. The Lord God blessed her decision. Ruth came into the country empty, but before long, her life was full of blessings. The Lord led her to Boaz, a relative of Naomi, who cared for Ruth's needs and soon married her. Ruth, the foreigner, ended up giving birth to a son and became part of the genealogy of Jesus.

We too must choose. Will we stay with our familiar family or trust Jesus to bring us into His family? It is difficult to let go of what is familiar and comfortable. Yet Ruth's one decision made the difference in her ultimate home. Our one decision, whether or not to trust Jesus, will determine our eternal home. As Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Do we want a life with Jesus? The cross makes it possible for us to join God's family. We too need to decide. Who will we trust?

Jesus,
Trustworthy
Jesus!

Gracious Hannah

In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord. And she made a vow, saying, “O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life . . .” (I Samuel 1:10–11)

Hannah was a woman who was married to Elkanah. Unfortunately, Elkanah was also married to Peninnah. Peninnah had sons and daughters, but Hannah had no children. To make matters worse, Peninnah would provoke and irritate Hannah year after year. The situation must have looked terrible to Hannah. She wanted a son desperately. Therefore, she made a vow to the Lord to give her child to the Lord if only God would grant her request.

God was not surprised by this situation which was so troubling to Hannah. In fact, early in the chapter, we find “the Lord had closed her womb . . .” (I Samuel 1:6). Nevertheless, Hannah surrendered her desires to God’s will after she had made her request to God.

There were no strong spiritual leaders for the nation of Israel during this time. Eli was a priest, but his two sons who were also priests were wicked men. In light of this, God evidently had a much greater purpose in mind for Hannah and was still working for the good of His people. God wanted a leader who would lead His people back to Him. God selected Hannah to have a special son whom she named Samuel. Hannah kept her vow to the Lord, and after Samuel was weaned, she gave him back to the Lord. She delivered Samuel to the house of the Lord and presented him to the priest Eli to serve the Lord all the days of his life. Samuel ultimately became a great judge and prophet, leading the nation back to God.

The name Hannah means *grace*, and she showed a gracious love in giving her only son at the time to the Lord’s service (Smith, p.231). Later, we find that “the Lord was gracious to Hannah” and gave her three other sons and two daughters (I Samuel 2:21). The pain a woman endures when infertile can feel almost unbearable. We witness this in the way Hannah pleaded with God. This scene before God, begging for a child, may be compared to the intensity of which God desires a father-child relationship with each of us.

The Lord has been gracious to us as well and has not left us alone without hope. His concern was for the soul of each person. To make a relationship possible, God would have to sacrifice His Son, Jesus.

In Jesus, we find the grace of God demonstrated. In Jesus, the father-child relationship can finally be found. Yet to make this possible, Jesus would have to account for our sins and give up His life for our lives. Jesus voluntarily surrendered to God’s will, paying the full price, so God can have all His children back in His arms.

Jesus,
Gracious
Jesus!

David: A Man After God's Own Heart

When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord."

But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, "The Lord has not chosen this one either." Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, "Nor has the Lord chosen this one." Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, "The Lord has not chosen these." So, he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?"

"There is still the youngest," Jesse answered, "but he is tending the sheep."

Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives."

So he sent and had him brought in. He was ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; he is the one."

So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power . . . (1 Samuel 16:6–13)

David was selected to be king by God because of the condition of his heart. In his youth David used to care for the sheep, but he looked to God to be his shepherd through life. He depended on God, and God delivered him from a huge Philistine warrior named Goliath. David chose to believe in someone much more powerful than an awesome warrior, and it made all the difference. He also wrote beautiful psalms of praise that have inspired people through the centuries. Yet even David got off track and sinned in tragic ways, ending in adultery and murder. It cost David the life of his son, and his family experienced turmoil for years. However, when David realized how terribly wrong he was, he surrendered his will, sought God's forgiveness, and God once again blessed him.

Then one day, David decided to have the fighting men of Israel counted. His trust changed from relying on God to trusting in his army. After the men were counted, David was "conscience-stricken" (2 Samuel 24:10). He was willing to humble himself when he realized what he had done and put his trust back in God. David had many needs, but his greatest need was for the mercy and forgiveness of God. David experienced this and once again had a heart for God.

We too can focus on the wrong things and rely on that which will not last. Soon we may find ourselves far from God and in need of His forgiveness. Like David, we need God's mercy for what we have done.

Jesus paid the full cost for David's sins. Jesus paid the price for our sins as well. He gave up His life, so we could have eternal life with Him. He wants us to become people after God's own heart. It begins when we ask for His forgiveness.

Jesus,
God's heart
Jesus!

Solomon as King

King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart. (I Kings 10:23–24)

Solomon became a great king of the nation of Israel. His parents were David and Bathsheba. In growing up under their care, he witnessed the kingdom of Israel being led by his father, David. Nevertheless, when Solomon considered ruling God's chosen people, he felt inadequate as if he were *only a little child* (1 Kings 3:7). Then during God's appearance to Solomon in a dream, God instructed him to ask for whatever he wanted God to give him. Solomon requested a *discerning heart* to govern God's people. God granted his request, making him very wise. God also gave him great riches and honor. Solomon went on to build the first temple to God. It was a majestic structure for the Creator of the world.

Solomon's temple was glorious by all accounts and was meant to house the Spirit of God. Yet Jesus created another temple. His final sacrifice made it possible for His children to become a temple for the Holy Spirit.

Normally, a kingdom will serve its king. Jesus, however, left His throne in heaven to give His life for His kingdom. Jesus was a king who did not have rich belongings and did not even wear a royal crown while He was on earth. Instead, He was willing to suffer humiliation and torture to save His kingdom. He was fully devoted to completing the will of God in His life. He invites the world to become part of His kingdom, and then He blesses His kingdom by sending His Holy Spirit to dwell in us.

Jesus,
Our King
Jesus!

Elijah's Search

The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by."

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"
(I Kings 19:11–13)

Elijah appeared to be a man with total confidence in who God was and put his trust in Him. For example, at one point, he challenged the prophets of Baal. Four hundred and fifty false prophets had called upon their god, but there was no response. However, there was one prophet, Elijah, who called upon the Lord God. He wanted the people to turn their hearts back to God. God responded in a mighty way: with fire from heaven! The people "fell prostrate and cried, 'The Lord—He is God! The Lord—He is God!'" (I Kings 18:39).

Nevertheless, the queen of Israel was not moved by God's mighty work and was determined to kill Elijah. Therefore, "Elijah was afraid and ran for his life" (I Kings 19:3). He traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached the mountain of God.

Elijah desperately sought the presence of the Lord, but the Lord was not found in a great wind, an earthquake, or a fire. Rather than a grand display of power, the Lord came in a "gentle whisper" and prepared Elijah for what he was to do next (I Kings 19:12).

We come to God in need of a restored relationship with Him. We may be desperate, but we cannot secure it on our own. God still comes in a gentle whisper and draws us out of our caves. He wants to come into our lives. Jesus says, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in . . ." (Revelation 3:20). The search for deliverance depends on our response. Jesus can restore our relationship with God. He died to make such a relationship possible.

Jesus,
Gentle whisperer
Jesus!

Naaman Healed

So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy. Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel . . .” (II Kings 5:14–15)

Naaman was a commander of the Aramean army. We are told that he was a *valiant soldier*. However, he had the terrible disease of leprosy that would eat away at the flesh of his body until he died. Even though Naaman was not an Israelite, he traveled to Israel to see Elisha, the prophet, whom he hoped would heal him. When Naaman arrived at Elisha’s house, Elisha sent his messenger to him. The messenger told Naaman to go to the Jordan River and dip in the river seven times. Naaman was angry when he left because it was not what he expected Elisha to do. Although the instruction did not make sense to Naaman, his servants encouraged him to go ahead and dip in the Jordan River as he was told. When he rose up out of the water, he was healed!

Today we all find ourselves in need of being healed of the destruction our sin has caused in our lives. Sin gradually takes over our lives and can consume us. Like Naaman, we cannot heal ourselves. Though we are not from Israel, the Great Healer is. He has already instructed us of what we need to do to be healed. He has said, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). The message may seem too simple. It may not make sense to us. Yet we, like Naaman, must decide if we will follow the Healer’s directions. The Great Healer waits for those who wish to be healed. The Healer’s name is Jesus, and He still heals today.

Jesus,
Healer of our souls
Jesus!

Job's Redeemer

And the Lord said to Satan, "Where have you come from?" Satan answered the Lord, "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it."

Then the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil. And he still maintains his integrity, though you incited me against him to ruin him without any reason."

"Skin for skin!" Satan replied. "A man will give all he has for his own life. But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face."

The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, then, he is in your hands, but you must spare his life."

So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes.

His wife said to him, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" (Job 2:2-9)

Job was considered to be upright by God, and he shunned evil. However, Satan accused Job of being self-serving and only following God because of the blessings God had given him. Satan was given permission to take away Job's wealth as well as the lives of his sons and daughters. Only Job and his wife were spared. Finally, Satan was given permission to afflict Job's health, so he had sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. Even Job's wife encouraged him to ". . . curse God and die"(Job 2:9)!

When it seemed like it could not get worse, Job's friends emotionally tormented him by blaming him for all of the terrible things happening in his life. Job knew he was innocent of the charges brought against him by his friends. Regardless, he openly declared that he knew that his Redeemer lived (Job 19:25). Still, he struggled with how God could be just and allow him to suffer so much when he had done no wrong. Though he sought an answer, his friends' replies did not make sense to Job. He even questioned God and thought God was treating him unjustly. Yet when he had an opportunity to speak directly with God, he quickly realized his unworthy condition and God's holiness. Job acknowledged speaking about things "too wonderful" for him to know and was once again at peace with his relationship with God (Job 42:3).

When Jesus lived on earth, He knew not only how He would suffer but also why He would suffer. He came to take the sins of the world upon Himself, and thereby redeem those who would follow Him. He accepted the injustice of being punished for sins He had not committed. He was determined that all who would follow God would never be eternally alienated from God. Satan is still alive and well. He continues to try to alienate man from God. Nevertheless, we can say our Redeemer lives.

Jesus,
Our Redeemer,
Jesus!

Hosea's Faithfulness

“But I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt. You shall acknowledge no God but me, no Savior except me. I cared for you in the desert, in the land of burning heat. When I fed them, they were satisfied; when they were satisfied, they became proud; Then they forgot me . . .” (Hosea 13:4–6)

Hosea was a prophet of God in Israel. He was married to Gomer. Gomer was an adulteress wife and pursued her lovers relentlessly. Nevertheless, God instructed Hosea to show his love to his wife in spite of her infidelities. Her choices led to a life of darkness and eventual slavery. Even at this low position, Hosea pursued Gomer and paid for her freedom.

Hosea's love for his wife was an illustration of God's love for Israel. God described His people's love as being like a “morning mist” and the “early dew that disappears” (Hosea 6:4). God, however, pursued unfaithful Israel.

Like Hosea, we also may have unhealthy relationships. We may be disappointed and badly hurt by people who betray us. Yet there is One who remains faithful to us. His name is Jesus.

Even when we are unfaithful, Jesus has already paid the price to buy us back. The price was His life! He has atoned for our unfaithfulness. Jesus longs to have us back. He seeks a renewed relationship with us.

Jesus,
Faithful
Jesus!

Isaiah Reveals the Cost of Restoration

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:3–6)

Isaiah was a great prophet of God. He warned the people of God's punishment when they strayed from His will. He spoke of the coming judgment of God upon the nations of the world. Israel would also be held accountable and be taken into captivity. The prospects for Israel's future appeared bleak. Yet even before Israel was taken into captivity, God made plans for its restoration.

Isaiah foretold about One who would suffer and bear our iniquities for each of us. That person would take our punishment upon Himself. An accurate description of His death was given here in Isaiah hundreds of years in advance. That person was Jesus.

Jesus came into this world to redeem mankind. He entered into a world full of distress and took distress upon Himself. He left His throne in heaven to bear the worst kind of pain man could give. We avoid pain, but Jesus consciously descended into it. He suffered in anguish in order to carry our sorrows. He chose to leave heaven's beauty and accept the worst of earth's pain—for us.

Jesus,
Suffering
Jesus!

Ezekiel: From Dry Bones to Abundant Life

Ezekiel was brought by the Spirit of the Lord in a vision to a valley that was full of bones. Life had long since left, and the bones were dry. However, the Lord told Ezekiel:

“Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.’” (Ezekiel 37:4–6)

Ezekiel prophesied as he was instructed, and the dry bones came to life. Soon, tendons and flesh appeared on the bones and skin covered them. Breath then entered them, so that they came to life. The Lord was showing Ezekiel that although the Israelites felt like their bones were dried up and their hope was gone (Ezekiel 37:11), the Lord would bring them back from captivity to the land of Israel to live again.

We also may find that we have wasted our lives. Perhaps, we have pursued gods other than the Lord. We may have been used by others. We may have even abused ourselves in vain pursuits. Instead of being fulfilled, we end up feeling empty or realize our efforts are futile.

Jesus came, so we might “have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). He can breathe the breath of life into our dried up bones and hopeless lives. He knows what we were made for, and He can help us become what we were created to be. This new life is possible in

Jesus,
Life-giving
Jesus!

Daniel: God's Presence in Facing Beasts

At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?"

Daniel answered, "O king, live forever! My God sent His angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in His sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king."

The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him because he had trusted in his God. (Daniel 6:19-23)

Due to the unfaithfulness of Israel, the kingdom fell. The nation was taken captive to Babylon. In Babylon, Daniel faced many beasts which could have destroyed him. Even his own peers were like beasts and sought to have him killed though he had done no wrong. They succeeded in deceiving the king and having Daniel thrown into the lions' den. There, Daniel faced vicious lions which could quickly devour him. Nevertheless, Daniel trusted in God and was delivered from all the beasts he faced.

Today we too may face many beasts. These may include our peers who plot evil things against us. Our beasts may include a struggle against alcohol, drugs, pornography, or the endless pursuit of money and material possessions. Our enemy may be within us as well as around us. Will we, like Daniel, put our trust in God?

There is One who offers to be there no matter what beasts we may face. We do not have to face our struggles alone. He can help us through our trials. The question is whether we will ask Him to be involved in our lives. The disciples longed for Jesus to physically stay with them. Therefore, before Jesus ascended into heaven He reassured His disciples and said, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Jesus,
Ever-present
Jesus!

Esther: Just in Time

“For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14)

Esther was born while the Jews were in captivity. She seemed to be an ordinary Jew until she was chosen to become the queen of the land. The king, however, did not realize she was a Jew, and Esther did not reveal her nationality to the king.

There was a government official named Haman who was determined that all the Jews were to be put to death, and he secured a date for the killing to occur. Esther’s cousin, Mordecai, appealed to Esther to go before the king and beg for mercy for the Jewish people. Mordecai pleaded with Esther that, perhaps, she had come to the *royal position for such a time as this*. She could make a difference and save her people.

God is not mentioned in the book of Esther. Yet it is evident that His unseen hand was active in the incidents which occurred to bring about the deliverance of the Jewish people.

Others might realize that they also were created for *such a time as this*. It may be that every person is created for a unique purpose for a particular time. Just as Esther’s life was no coincidence, neither was the life and death of Jesus. Hebrews 9:26–28 says, “But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself . . . to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

God raised Esther to rescue the Jewish people from being killed. She risked her life to save her people, and it made the difference.

God sent Jesus to rescue all people who seek to be saved from eternal separation from Him. Jesus came for this very purpose. Only Jesus can still save us in *such a time as this*.

Jesus,
Our Rescuer
Jesus!

Nehemiah: Building with God

They said to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”

(Nehemiah 1:3)

Although Nehemiah lived in comfort being the cupbearer to the king, his heart ached for his people back home who lived in disgrace and were defenseless against their neighboring enemies. He asked to return to his people in Jerusalem, so he might rebuild the wall around the city. The enemies of Nehemiah ridiculed him and plotted together to put an end to the work. Nevertheless, with the help of God, Nehemiah led the people to complete the wall around Jerusalem in just fifty-two days. More importantly, he led the people back to God.

Centuries later, there was One who lived in comfort in the presence of God. Nevertheless, His heart ached for His people who were defenseless against the schemes of the evil one. Jesus gave up His comfort, moved in with His people, suffered, and died to overcome the enemy. Jesus can lead us back to God.

Even today, Jesus is available to help us restore our lives that have been torn down by sin. He can rebuild the walls of protection to prevent evil from coming into our lives. He can help us become all that we were meant to be and lead us back home to be with God.

Jesus,
Restoring our lives
Jesus!

Mary: A Loving Mother

But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

“How will this be?” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” (Luke 1:30–38)

Although Mary was a virgin, the angel Gabriel told her that she would have a child. She believed the angel and trusted in the Lord even though this was humanly impossible. Despite understanding little, she made herself available to God and His plan.

Mary trusted in the Lord instead of putting her reputation first. After all, what would her fiancé think when he found out she was pregnant? Would he believe her story of what happened to her? Would he leave her? What about her friends and family? Would they consider her immoral? Would she be banished from those she loved? Would she be stoned?

Mary was told that the baby would be great and even be called the Son of God. Did she realize that deity would be within her? She likely had no idea that she would deliver the very source of her deliverance from sin.

Why would the Son of God humble Himself to descend from overseeing the creation to become a few cells within the womb of a woman? How could the Son of God then be raised for the expressed purpose of becoming the sacrifice for mankind’s sin? Why would the Son of God allow Himself to be abused in order to save anyone who turns to Him for salvation (even His abusers)? Could it be because of the depth of His love?

Jesus,
The Son who loved us
Jesus!

Anna's Choice to Glorify God

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36–38)

A widow most of her life, Anna was identified as a prophetess. Although she was old, her faith was alive. She worshiped God night and day in the temple and did what she could despite her age. She regularly was involved in fasting and prayer.

Alone for much of her life, Anna could have become bitter. To many, Anna did not appear to have much to offer. Yet she evidently had the wisdom to know what was most important. She pursued God. Her life was spent serving and glorifying God.

One day, as Anna was in the temple, the baby Jesus was brought in by His parents as required by the law. Perhaps because of the decades devoted to pursuing God, Anna recognized who Jesus was. Anna gave thanks to God for the child and spoke about Jesus as the Messiah.

Jesus also spent His life serving and glorifying God. Only to Jesus, glorifying God meant much more. At the end of Jesus's life, He said, "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you" (John 17:1). To Jesus, glorifying God meant giving up His life. He did this so we could be with God forever.

Jesus,
Glorifying God
Jesus!

John the Baptist: A Man in the Wilderness

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me,’ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:29–34)

John spoke in the wilderness in preparation for the arrival of the Messiah. John was bold. He would confront the Pharisees and even Herod the King. On this occasion, he proclaimed that Jesus was the *Lamb of God* and the *Son of God*. John knew this was true because he had seen the Spirit come down from heaven in the form of a dove and land on Jesus when Jesus came up out of the water during His baptism. In addition, when Jesus was baptized by John, a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). John trusted that this special experience was from God, and Jesus was, in fact, God’s Son.

However, John later had doubts about the identity of Jesus and sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus whether He was the Messiah. John had been walking by faith that Jesus was the Messiah. Unfortunately, John’s expectations of the Messiah had not been fully met. John may also have sensed that his time on earth was coming to an end. Even great leaders like John become discouraged at times and have doubts. It seems John was experiencing an emotional wilderness.

Jesus gently replied to John’s disciples that they should go report to him what they had seen and heard. The evidence would then become clear to John that Jesus’s healings and acts of love were the very things that had been predicted of the Messiah from Scripture.

There are times in our lives when we may have doubts about Jesus. Perhaps, Jesus does not respond to us as we had thought He would. He may not meet our expectations. Jesus still encourages us to examine the evidence while we continue walking in faith. He can lead us through our wilderness. His love still shines through.

Jesus,
Shining in the wilderness
Jesus!

Peter: From Fisherman to Fisher of Men

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”

Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon’s partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men.” So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. (Luke 5:4–11)

Peter was a man of action. He was anything but boring. His business in life was fishing. One night, he and his partners spent the whole night fishing but had caught nothing.

The next day, Peter was with Jesus who was teaching people about the Word of God along the shore of the lake. After Jesus was done speaking, he instructed Peter to go back into the deep water to fish again. This request must have seemed strange, if not foolish for Peter. Nevertheless, Peter followed Jesus’s direction and tried again. This time, the results were entirely different. He and his partners’ boats were so full of fish they began to sink.

When Peter realized he was “in the presence of one who displayed heavenly power” and he knew his own “unworthiness,” he requested that Jesus leave him (New Bible Commentary, p.897). Jesus, however, reassured Peter to not be afraid and turned Peter to an even more exciting purpose in life. Peter decided to leave everything and follow Jesus.

Peter was able to do some amazing things because he listened to Jesus and followed Him. Peter was even able to walk on water when he focused on Jesus. It was only when Peter focused on the danger around him that he became afraid and began to sink (Matthew 14:29-30). We too can do some amazing things when we listen to the call of Jesus in our lives.

Jesus knew the unworthiness of Peter and pursued him anyway. Jesus was all about rescuing humans and saving souls lost in the ocean of life. He was passionate about mankind. He was willing to give up His life to save our souls.

Jesus,
Pursuing our soul
Jesus!

Satan: Putting Himself First

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" (Luke 4:5–8)

Throughout Jesus's life, Satan pursued Him. Satan saw the birth of Jesus coming. He knew the curse against mankind was about to be broken. Man was separated from God, and this separation would be eternal unless there was a redeemer to save the people. Satan also knew when Mary became pregnant while still a virgin that this baby was from God.

Therefore, Satan fanned the flames of jealousy in Herod, the king, so Herod thought his kingdom was threatened by this newborn baby. The edict went out that all boys less than two years of age were to be killed. However, Joseph was warned in a dream and fled to Egypt. Jesus was spared from Herod's wrath.

Satan continued to pursue Jesus when He became a man. He followed Jesus into the wilderness and enticed Him when Jesus was weak with hunger. All the kingdoms of the world and their splendor were offered to Jesus if only He would worship Satan. What an easy way to rule the kingdoms of the world and avoid the pain and agony of the cross. Jesus would only have to worship Satan. It must have been tempting.

Instead, Jesus kept walking toward the pain of the cross and turned His back on Satan's offer. Satan later used Jesus's close friend, Peter, to entice Him further as the cruelty of the cross became an imminent reality. When Peter learned that Jesus was to be killed, he took Jesus aside and said, "Never Lord . . . This shall never happen to you" (Matthew 16:22)! Surely, Peter thought that since Jesus was not guilty, He should not have to bear such intense pain. However, without the sacrifice of Jesus, mankind would be left without a redeemer. Jesus identified the source of this resistance and said, "Get behind me Satan" (Matthew 16:23)! Jesus continued walking toward the cross.

Finally when Jesus was on the cross, the rulers, soldiers, and one of the criminals who was crucified with Jesus mocked Him. They thought that Jesus was helpless, so they harassed Him telling Him to save Himself. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself" (Matthew 27:42)! In fact, He could have saved Himself and have shown all those who were mocking Him that they were completely wrong. Jesus was left with a difficult choice. If He saved Himself, our hope to be saved would be lost. He could save Himself or us.

Who would choose the intense pain of the cross over having instant relief from pain? Who would choose the humiliation and ridicule of others over the power and prestige of ruling mankind? Who would choose a cross over an immediate throne? Only the love of God would make such a choice. He would rather redeem the world than to simply rule it. He would rather die than to live through eternity without us.

Jesus,
Choosing us
Jesus!

Nicodemus's Birthday?

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. (John 3:1-9)

One night, Nicodemus came to talk with Jesus. As a man of status on the Jewish ruling council, Nicodemus had many qualities most people would want. He had a high level of prestige and influence as a teacher in Israel. However, on the night he came to see Jesus, he seemed to be searching for something. The Scriptures never tell us what Nicodemus wanted, but Jesus spoke of what Nicodemus needed. Jesus indicated that one needed to be born again in order to see the kingdom of God. He then pointed out how we need to be born of the "water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). Nicodemus may not have understood much about being born again, but he was in the right place to have the need met. He was in the presence of Jesus.

Today we may think we are doing well. We may even have many characteristics that the world admires. Yet when it comes to the kingdom of God, something more is needed. When we learn of God's holiness, we become aware of our sinfulness. We realize we are lost, and we need forgiveness. We desperately need help and cannot save ourselves. We need God.

When we meet at the Lord's supper, we find God with open arms. We remember what Jesus did to deliver us. Jesus bore the punishment for our sins. He suffered and died on a cross to make a way for us. He can save us and we can become a new creation in God's family. When we come into the presence of Jesus, we can be born again.

Jesus,
Giving new birth
Jesus!

The Helpless Leper

While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man, “I am willing,” he said, “Be clean!” And immediately the leprosy left him.

(Luke 5:12–13)

The man was a leper. He was, perhaps, considered the lowest class of mankind. He was shunned by the community and had to live apart from those he loved. No one dared to touch him for fear of contracting the deadly disease. He must have felt alone, longing for human contact but waiting to die.

One day, however, he saw Jesus. He had heard about the amazing things Jesus had done, and he believed in Jesus. He looked to Jesus for escape from his certain death sentence. Jesus, in His mercy, not only touched the leper but healed him.

Jesus spent His life touching people’s hearts and healing them of all their diseases. No matter what their struggle—physical, emotional, or spiritual—Jesus could heal them. We too have struggles. Due to our sins, we face an eternal death sentence of being separated from God. We are desperate in our need for help. Will we just wait until we die? Jesus still heals.

Jesus,
Our hope
Jesus!

Jairus: Needing Deliverance

When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, “My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.”

(Mark 5:21–23)

Jairus was a ruler of the synagogue. His twelve-year-old daughter was dying, and he was desperate. He knew about Jesus healing others and hoped that He would deliver his daughter from death. However, before Jesus could get to the little girl, men arrived from Jairus’s house to inform Jairus of his daughter’s death. Jairus’s greatest fear of losing his daughter seemed to be a reality.

Jesus had a different perspective and said, “Don’t be afraid; just believe” (Mark 5:36). He knew that the girl would rise up again and be healed. Despite the crowd’s unbelief, Jesus was touched by Jairus’s effort to save his daughter. Jesus raised the girl from death and restored her to her family.

There is an eternal death that Jesus was more concerned about. He was on His way to deliver mankind from that death. Jairus had it right when he looked to Jesus for his source of hope, and his decision made all the difference. Jesus’s words can continue to make the difference for us. “Don’t be afraid; just believe” (Mark 5:36).

Jesus,
Our deliverer
Jesus!

Andrew and a Boy: A Feast from Heaven

When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, “Eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite.”

Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up, “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?”

(John 6:5–9)

The need was great due to the large crowd that followed Jesus. He could have sent them away, but He chose to care for each of them instead. About five thousand men were present besides the women and children. How could the disciples afford to feed so many people?

Andrew spoke up and said, “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish . . .” This was an insignificant amount of food for the thousands of people there. Yet Andrew and the boy brought what they had available. Jesus took what was available and gave thanks. Then He distributed the loaves and the fish to the people. Amazingly, all of the people had enough to eat. When they were done, they were even able to gather twelve baskets full of leftover pieces.

The question for us is whether we will make our resources and talents available to Jesus. Our resources may be insignificant compared to the needs of the world around us. Jesus can still do amazing things through us today. Will we make our lunch available to Jesus?

He continues to bless people and meet our daily needs. Jesus met our greatest need in providing a way for us to be forgiven. He took our place and paid the price, so we could be released from the penalty of our sins. The cost to make forgiveness possible was His death on a cross. He was willing to pay the cost.

Jesus,
Meeting our needs
Jesus!

The Good Samaritan: Barriers Broken

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’”

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

(Luke 10:30–36)

A man was beaten, robbed, and left alone to die. He needed help desperately. One could expect to receive aid from a religious person, but that was not who rescued him. Instead, there came a foreigner who was hated by many. He was called a Samaritan. He was considered more of an enemy than a friend to most of the people of Judea. Yet the Samaritan was the one who had compassion and ministered to the man in need.

In the time of Jesus, the Samaritans were not considered to be faithful to God because they had compromised their faith by including foreign practices. Consequently, the Jewish people in Judea often looked down on the Samaritans as though they were half-breeds. As a result, emotional and spiritual barriers developed between them.

As Jesus spoke to people, He repeatedly broke down barriers. He broke down barriers between us and our enemies, between those that have and those that have not, between the free and the enslaved, between men and women, and Jews and Gentiles as well as the religious elite and the common man. Most importantly, Jesus’s death broke down the barrier between us and God.

Jesus,
Our barrier breaker
Jesus!

The Crippled Man Walks

Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

“Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

(John 5:2–9)

There was a crippled man who was alive but was limited physically. He had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. His days were spent gazing at the pool of water for hours waiting for it to stir, so he could be the first one in the water and hopefully be healed. He longed to be made whole. Instead, Jesus got the man’s attention on Him, and then the man was healed. Because of Jesus, the man was free to become more than he ever could have imagined.

We too can be looking in all the wrong places for help. We long to be made whole but we may seek our help in fruitless ways. We need Jesus. He alone can heal us of our most desperate need.

Jesus asks if we want to be healed. He brings healing in ways we often cannot comprehend. When He died, His arms were spread out as if He were showing the world that His love is available for all. Jesus does not force Himself on anyone but touches those who are willing. His death on the cross shows how He cares.

Jesus offers hope. He can help us become more than we can imagine. Jesus still cares.

Jesus,
Caring
Jesus!

The Blind Man's Sight

A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."

He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"

Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.

. . . Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.

(John 9:24–34,39)

There were prophecies that the Messiah would give sight to the blind. One prophecy said, "In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see" (Isaiah 29:18).

One day, Jesus saw a blind man from birth and healed him. Some people did not believe that the man had been born blind and had been healed by Jesus. Not willing to believe this miracle, the Pharisees sent for the man's parents. The parents verified that their son had been born blind and that he could now see. However, the parents could not say who healed their son or how he was healed. They suggested that their son be asked since he was "of age" (John 9:23). Although the son had been previously asked about his healing, his response was not accepted. Therefore, they asked him again how he was healed. The son concluded that Jesus must be "from God" to be able to do such an amazing thing as give him sight (John 9:33). Not only were the son's eyes opened by Jesus, but his mind and heart were opened to Him as well. Jesus brought light to this man's dark world.

Due to the fall of mankind, there is much darkness in our world. Since many of us have physical sight, we assume we can see. Yet we have difficulty perceiving the spiritual darkness that surrounds us. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world" (John 9:5). By His light, we can see beyond what we have seen before. Will we allow Jesus to open our eyes? Will we take the time to see what Jesus accomplished on the cross?

Jesus,
The Light
Jesus!

The Disciples' Realization of the Messiah

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

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

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

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."

(Matthew 16:13–17)

Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

(Matthew 16:20–21)

There was much confusion about the identity of Jesus. Some thought He was John the Baptist. Others thought He was Elijah or one of the prophets like Jeremiah. Jesus especially wanted His disciples to be clear about who He was and was pleased to find that God had revealed His identity to Peter.

Certainly, the disciples must have felt euphoric at the realization that Jesus was *the Christ*, the Messiah, the very *Son of the living God*. The nation of Israel had been waiting eagerly for this ruler for hundreds of years. Then to their astonishment, Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about who He was.

Although there was an increased understanding about who Jesus was, there was much confusion about what Jesus planned to do. The type of Messiah Jesus was living was not what the disciples had envisioned. Jesus began preparing His disciples for His coming suffering and death. The disciples struggled with the thought that *the Son of the living God* was going to go to Jerusalem and be killed. This was not what the disciples or the Jewish people expected for the Messiah.

Before Jesus was ever born, He was in heaven with God. He was involved in the creation of the world. However, due to mankind's self-destructive behavior, there was a hopeless end to humanity without a Savior. Only Jesus could rescue man from their doomed condition. To do this, He would have to leave the peace and splendor of heaven and enter the sin-filled world. In addition, the way back home for His lost children required the giving of His life. Our deliverance could only be obtained by His death. Jesus chose to enter into a world of pain, bear misunderstandings, and face the realities of a cruel cross. He would rather bear a painful death than to live in the spender of heaven without us!

Jesus,
The Son of the living God
Jesus!

The Rich Man's Lack of Peace

Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

"Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments."

"Which ones?" the man inquired.

Jesus replied, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself."

"All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

(Matthew 19:16–22)

There was a young man who had a lot of possessions and wealth. He was apparently a conscientious man because of his lifelong efforts to do what was right. We know that he attempted to live by the Ten Commandments from his youth (Mark 10:20). However, he was not satisfied and wanted assurance of eternal life. He evidently was not at peace and seemed to think he could earn his way into heaven by doing good works. He sought Jesus out in hopes that he could obtain some assurance about his eternal condition. When he asked about what he lacked, he was instructed to sell his possessions to give to the poor, and he would have treasure in heaven. Due to his great wealth, he struggled and went away sad. He chose to pursue the treasures on earth instead of the eternal treasures in heaven.

Today we are given a choice. There is much to distract us and many attractive things capture our focus. We can trust in our possessions or our status in the eyes of others. However, there are no possessions that can grant us peace or eternal security. The empty void in us cannot be satisfied by things we possess or by impressing others. What we pursue will affect our destiny as well.

Jesus said, "In me you may have peace" (John 16:33). Yet our peace and eternal security was obtained at a heavy price. It cost Jesus His life. He was willing to sacrifice His riches to bring us peace.

Jesus,
Our Prince of Peace
Jesus!

James and John's Misconception

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

"What is it you want?" he asked.

She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

"You don't know what you are asking." Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

"We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."

When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:20–28)

James and John were brothers who were both very close to Jesus. John, in fact, is usually thought to be the disciple who was closest to Jesus. Therefore, when James and John's mother came to Jesus and asked that her sons be granted seats on each side of Jesus in His kingdom, the request may have seemed reasonable.

Mankind has consistently been concerned about status. Mothers typically want what is best for their sons and daughters. We all like to know how we measure up, and we want to be treated with respect. We like to be popular. We strive to be the toughest, the smartest, the most beautiful, the fastest, or the strongest.

However, Jesus's standard for greatness was different. He spoke about how one must be a slave in order to be first. Serving others or being a slave is not how we typically pursue greatness. Yet Jesus was revealing God's type of love to this hurting world.

Jesus not only spoke of this unusual way to greatness, but He also lived it. Scripture says that Jesus had "equality with God" but took the "very nature of a servant" and "made himself nothing" (Philippians 2:5–8). He spent His life serving others and caring for people.

Who would choose to leave the exalted position of *equality with God* to become a servant? What king would make his life ambition to live in service to his servants? What kind of king would volunteer to take the most intense suffering which was reserved to punish the wicked in order to save his lowly subjects? There is such a king:

Our King
Jesus!

Lazarus: Hope for the Hopeless

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

“Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

(John 11:23–27)

Jesus’s close friend Lazarus had died. By the time Jesus and His disciples arrived at the grave, Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Mary and Martha had hoped that Jesus would return before Lazarus had died, so Jesus could heal him. They individually met with Jesus and stated that if Jesus had been there, their brother “would not have died” (John 11:21,32). From all appearances, it was too late. When Jesus saw Mary and her friends weeping, He was touched by their grief, and Jesus wept.

The focus on the sorrow and the loss did not last long however. Jesus had other plans. He asked where the tomb of Lazarus was. When He arrived at the tomb, He called out in a loud voice for Lazarus to come out of the tomb. The Bible says the “dead man came out” (John 11:44).

Although Mary and Martha had concluded that Lazarus was forever dead, they soon learned that Jesus could even revive the dead. That can affect our life and death also. We are reminded that “for as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (I Corinthians 15:22). Without Jesus, we are described as “dead in your transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). We find ourselves living in darkness. Our lives can be full of guilt, pain, and destruction. Jesus calls us to come out from the dead. He wants us to be born again and to live a new life. He wants to give us “eternal life” which is found in Him. (1 John 5:11). We are called out of the darkness to walk with God.

Jesus first informed Martha that He was *the resurrection and the life*. Then He showed the world that He even had power over death itself. His power not only affected them but touches us as well. The hope of our resurrection into heaven also depends on whether Jesus can raise the dead.

Mary and Martha had given up hope for their brother living by the time Jesus arrived. Martha simply stated her belief that Jesus was *the Christ, the Son of God . . .*

Yet it was Jesus’s love that made all the difference.

Jesus,
Our hope when hope is gone
Jesus!

Malchus's Real Enemy

While he was still speaking a crowd came up, and the man who was called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him, but Jesus asked him, "Judas are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?"

When Jesus's followers saw what was going to happen, they said, "Lord, should we strike with our swords?" And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear.

But Jesus answered, "No more of this!" And he touched the man's ear and healed him.

Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour—when darkness reigns."

Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest . . .

(Luke 22:47–54)

This is an account of the astonishing betrayal of Jesus by one of His disciples, Judas. It was at night when Judas arrived with soldiers to arrest Jesus on the Mount of Olives where Jesus had been praying. A conflict quickly erupted, resulting in a follower of Jesus drawing his sword and cutting off the right ear of the servant of the high priest. In the Gospel of John, we find that the follower of Jesus was Peter and the servant of the high priest was Malchus (John 18:10). Even more astonishing than the betrayal of Jesus by one of His disciples was Jesus's response to the crisis which Malchus faced.

Malchus was part of the enemy crowd. Certainly, Peter must have viewed him this way as he tried to kill him with his sword. Now Malchus found himself in a painful, fearful position. He needed help when no doctors were available. His injury could have even been life-threatening. To make matters worse, the only person who could heal his severed ear was the one he had come to arrest. Although Malchus did not even make a plea for help, Jesus gently healed his ear. Despite this clear evidence of the divinity of Jesus, they continued to arrest Jesus as if the healing had never occurred. One can only wonder if the healing at least changed the heart of Malchus.

Jesus never viewed Malchus as the real enemy. Instead, Jesus was concerned about that which had severed God's relationship with mankind. Jesus still needed to deal with this enemy. He left with those who came to arrest Him and walked toward the cross.

We too may find ourselves in a painful and fearful position. We may realize how totally dependent we are on the very person that we have treated like an enemy, the One who can save our souls.

Jesus,
The enemy healer
Jesus!

Barabbas: Doomed but Released

Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

“Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate, knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

“What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them.

“Crucify him!” they shouted.

“Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them.

He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

(Mark 15:6–15)

Barabbas was a “notorious prisoner” who was part of an uprising (Matthew 27:16). During the uprising, someone was killed. It was clear that Barabbas was a dangerous criminal. He was guilty and deserved to be punished.

Jesus, on the other hand, was not guilty of any crime, especially one requiring His death. Pilate knew that the chief priests were envious of Jesus and wanted Him to be put to death. Pilate wanted to get out of this dilemma. However, Pilate had the idea that the people would not let an innocent man be tortured to death on a cross. Surely, the people would also not let a dangerous man like Barabbas go free. Therefore, Pilate accepted the request of the people to release a prisoner as “was the governor’s custom at the Feast” (Matthew 27:15). He asked them to choose between Barabbas and Jesus. To the amazement of Pilate, the chief priests were able to persuade the crowd to request the release of Barabbas. Jesus was crucified, and Barabbas was set free!

Today we find ourselves in Barabbas’s shoes. We are guilty. We may not have done what Barabbas did, but we have sinned. We have all fallen short of God’s standards. Fortunately, Jesus also intervenes for us. He has atoned for our sins as well. We can either be set free or bear the burden and penalty for our guilt. Astonishingly, Jesus lets us decide whether to bear our own punishment or allow Him to take the punishment for us.

Jesus,
Our burden bearer
Jesus!

Pilate's Dilemma

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

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

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

"Barabbas," they answered.

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

(Matthew 27:19–22)

Pilate, the Roman governor, was confused about the identity of Jesus. He asked Jesus if He was the king of the Jews. Jesus acknowledged that He was. Before long, it was pointed out that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. Therefore, Pilate asked Him about His origin. Jesus was silent. There was much Pilate did not understand about Jesus.

However, Pilate was convinced about Jesus's innocence, and his wife was adamant about this fact. Pilate repeatedly stated, "I find no basis for a charge against him" (John 18:38, 19:4,19:6). He finally asked the people, "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?" What was their response? "Crucify him" (Matthew 27:22)! Pilate responded by handing Jesus over to those who wanted to kill Him.

Even today many are confused about the identity of Jesus. Was He the king of the Jews? Was He the Son of God? Was He the Christ, the Messiah? We too must struggle with these questions. There may be much we still do not understand about Jesus.

Yet as generations pass through the centuries, this same question comes to each of us individually, "What shall I do, then, with Jesus?"

Jesus,
Innocent
Jesus!

The Religious Leaders Wonder

And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

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

“Surely he was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:50–54)

Isaiah said your “iniquities have separated you from your God” (Isaiah 59:2). To the Israelites, this separation was evident. None of the Israelites, except the High Priest, could go before the presence of God in the temple area called the Holy of Holies. The High Priest entered the Holy of Holies only once a year with the blood of the sacrifice which was offered for his sins as well as the sins of all the people. The Holy of Holies was separated from the Holy Place by a great curtain, which extended from the floor to the ceiling where it was secured by several rings.

What could have possibly convinced the religious leaders that Jesus was indeed the Son of God? We may never know for sure, but we read that upon His death, the curtain of the temple was torn. Not from the bottom up where men could have possibly pulled it from two different sides, but instead, it was torn from the top down even though rings were holding it at the top. Only God could have torn it in such a way as this. Upon Jesus's death, the problem of sin separating us from God had suddenly been resolved. Jesus bore the penalty for our sins and had taken our sins upon himself on the cross. In the temple God had opened the way into His presence in the Holy of Holies and had graphically displayed it by tearing the curtain open. There was no longer anything that separated us from the love of God.

If there was any question about the identity of Jesus, it should have been answered by the tombs breaking open upon His death and the bodies of holy people who had died being raised back to life. Jesus came to bring eternal life, and at the moment of His death, many dead people physically came back to life. The answer to Jesus's identity was so obvious that even those who were likely Pagans such as the Roman centurion and those with him exclaimed, “Surely he was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:54).

Jesus,
The Son of God
Jesus!

The Disciples Revived

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.

(John 20:1–8)

At the time, it may have appeared to be the worst day of the disciples’ lives. That day began about two thousand years ago in the city of Jerusalem.

As the midday blackness of the previous Friday had foreshadowed, Jesus’s death draped darkness around His disciples. Mourning and weeping were common among His followers because their hopes were gone. Perhaps Jesus’s last words lingered in their minds and expressed how they felt: “It is finished!” By all appearances, evil had triumphed over good. Their Savior had been put to death. Then it was discovered that the body of their dear friend was missing from the tomb. Did someone steal His body? There was much confusion. Peter and the disciple who Jesus loved ran to the tomb to discover the truth for themselves.

For the followers of Jesus this day was different. As the light of dawn scatters darkness, so their fears and tears soon vanished. The words “It is finished!” were soon understood to mean that Jesus’s mission was accomplished. His efforts to redeem mankind were completed.

Although rumors of a stolen body surfaced, the evil one could not restrain the life of Jesus. Jesus was first seen by two women, then by two male followers of Jesus, then by the disciples, and soon more than 500 people saw Him at one gathering. It was true! Jesus was alive! He had risen and overcome death itself! The disciples’ hopes were revived. The promise of eternal life was confirmed in the resurrected life of Jesus. Their Savior was alive! Our Savior still lives!

Jesus,
Risen
Jesus!

Cleopas's Walk

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. (Luke 24:28-33)

Three days after the death of Jesus, Cleopas and his friend, who were followers of Jesus, were walking toward a village called Emmaus. They were downcast due to the death of Jesus. Yet within a few hours they became inspired. How? By taking a walk with Jesus.

Although Cleopas thought Jesus was dead, the resurrected Jesus pursued a relationship with him as they walked. However, Cleopas did not recognize Jesus. As they walked, Jesus explained how the Scriptures had foretold the suffering and death of the Christ. Then as they prepared to eat, Jesus handed bread to Cleopas and his friend. It was then that their eyes were opened. Perhaps they saw the scars on Jesus's wrists for the first time. They realized they were with the resurrected Jesus. Their spirits were revived. Although Cleopas and his friend had arrived at their destination in Emmaus, they could not stay there that night. They were too excited and rushed back to Jerusalem. They had to share the good news with the disciples. Jesus was alive!

Jesus still wants a relationship with His creation. Like Cleopas, Jesus wants us to know Him. He offers us the bread of life and asks that we remember Him. He opens our eyes to know His love. He wants to take a walk with us.

Because He lives, we can have a relationship with Jesus as well. Because He lives, we can have hope in the midst of our struggles and even in the face of death. Because He lives, we can be reassured of one day living with Him. He still inspires because He lives;

Jesus lives!

The Perfect Sacrifice

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. Yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

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

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

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

And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

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

Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. (Isaiah 53: 4–10)

In the past, many sacrifices were needed throughout the year to have a favorable relationship with God. The passage above refers to one of the sacrifices, the guilt offering, and points out that God made Jesus a guilt offering for us. The guilt offering was for the damage someone had inflicted on another and for which restitution was to be made. The sin offering emphasized transgressions against God. The burnt offering was a sacrifice that expressed one's dedication and complete surrender to God. The grain offering was a dedication to God which acknowledged His blessing on their harvest. The drink offering, presented after the animal sacrifices, was accomplished when wine was poured out on the alter symbolizing "life being poured out in dedication to God" (Wiersbe, p.24). The fellowship offering was a joyful expression of thanksgiving that a person was "at peace" and "in communion with God" (Wiersbe, p.25).

Today we can have a favorable relationship with God because of one sacrifice: that of God's Son, Jesus! He is our guilt and sin offering because "he bore our sins" (Wiersbe, p.29) on the cross and paid the price for all our transgressions. He is the perfect burnt offering as He completely surrendered Himself to God's will. Jesus is the representation of the grain offering as the "bread of life" which nourishes our souls (John 6:35). He is the complete drink offering as He "poured out his life unto death" for us (Isaiah 53:12). He is our fellowship offering, bringing joy to our lives by reconciling us in our relationship with God and bringing us peace.

Jesus,
The perfect sacrifice!
Jesus!

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