

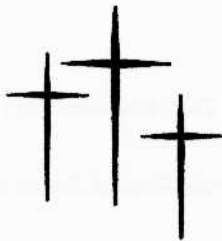


Words of Men at the Cross

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MEDITATIONS FOR LENT

C. NEIL STRAIT



**Words of Men
at the
Cross**

Meditations for Lent

by

C. NEIL STRAIT



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Dedication

To

Mother and Dad

who first told me

of the Cross

Preface

Lent is a spiritually enriching time. It is a part of the church calendar too many people take casually, and this to their loss. It affords an opportunity to move within the shadows of the Cross and linger for a while. And as always when one has been to Calvary, he returns to life more adequate. Great truths have fed his soul.

We are acquainted with the words of Christ at the Cross. Less so are we familiar with the words of men around the Cross. These meditations probe the latter. This book is an attempt to say something about the Cross, about Christ, and about those who played a part in Calvary's drama.

One cannot send forth a volume without feeling that there are others who are a part of it. And especially is this true for me. My wife, Ina, gave a lot of encouragement and not a few evenings to her husband's project. And the congregation of the East Liberty Church of the Nazarene, Akron, Ohio, has been an inspiring people to serve. Many of these thoughts they allowed me to share with them.

I trust that this book will speak something of Calvary's great truths. May something of Calvary linger with you. If this be true, this book will have found a cause, a reason for being.

—C. NEIL STRAIT

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7

"Is It I?"

Now when the even was come, he sat down with the twelve.

And as they did eat, he said, Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me.

And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord, Is It I?

And he answered and said, He that dippeth his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me.

The Son of man goeth as it is written of him; but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born.

Then Judas, which betrayed him, answered and said, Master, is it I? He said unto him, Thou hast said.

—Matt. 26:20-25

Hypocrisy, that's what it is. Judas asking, "Is it I?" He knew it was. Yet maybe he is not asking a question. Could he be asking himself, Could I do a thing like this?

Man seldom talks to himself. He should. He should travel the back roads of his mind and find out what he's thinking.

Had this question been asked before, it would not be necessary now. But he waited. And now this. "Is it I?" Too little, too late.

Judas and the thief have something in common. The thief counts only the potential spoil. He never asks what the spoil will make of him as a man. Judas counted only the silver—and then, only 30 pieces. He never viewed the silver from the ugly side. He did not examine betrayal to see what it could do to him.

There's a lot of Judas in all of us. We rationalize. Offer explanations. But we never get down to looking at ourselves.

But Calvary is a look at yourself. Inside. Down deep. Way back. It's a glimpse of the real you. Facades gone. Sham peeled away. The put-on put off. Appearance gives way to reality. And, oh, how it hurts! Shocks, too. Could this be me?

What do you find there when you take a look? *Truth.* That monster that pursues us day and night. That specter of realization that never leaves us. "Is it I?" Yes. With all its ugliness, that's you. With all the warts, that's you. Calvary does not lie about the

real you. And as the little boy said after the hammer blow, "Kinda hurts, bad."

And it does hurt. Deeply. For before Calvary we had a different view of ourselves. A pretty good view, we thought. We felt better anyhow. Now we hurt. And Calvary is supposed to make us feel better.

All of us long for our own view, not Calvary's. The light of the Cross intrudes. It upsets our plans. Disturbs our opinion of ourselves. But it's truth. And truth must be reckoned with.

When Judas saw the truth, something in him died. Or was it already dead? Just now realized? Yes, that's it. For his death came back at the point of rejection.

That's always where death comes. When we break off our relationship with the Father. He is Life. And anything apart from Him will die. Judas did. He left the supper a dead man—inside. Something in him died when he sold out. It always does.

But that deadness grows. It grows until it consumes the whole man. And with the deadness comes an end to all that might have been. The credentials to discipleship were surrendered. Judas' passport to life's excitement was surrendered. He died.

Now the truth of deadness weighed upon Judas. It was haunting. It was terrible. Had he bargained for this? No. Not in his finer moments, at least. He just never stopped to look inside. To take inventory. Now the bankruptcy of his soul was apparent. "Is it I?" But the greater question, perhaps: How can it be? And this is the question that disturbs.

What else was there in Judas? Along with truth, there was his *personal predicament*. And ages since then have been trying to figure out that predicament. What caused it? Why? And not a few have painted a more ugly picture of Judas than I dare to paint. For I cannot view his predicament without having it boomerang back upon my own life.

Sooner or later we cross paths with God. We meet Him. Judas did. I have. You will. Judas met Him on a number of occasions. Our setting today is not one of those better meetings for Judas. The two had met under friendlier circumstances. At the table. With a towel. With tears. Remember?

That was a great meeting. A moment to remember. And Judas did. It might have been his greatest hour—but it wasn't. Things now go from that high moment to the low act of betrayal. How swiftly the moments pass and how quickly the scene changes!

Almost abruptly our biblical narration takes us from the compassionate setting of the supper to the bitter betrayal scene. Here the meeting between Judas and Christ is marked with tragic circumstances. Here is the real Judas meeting the real Christ. Calvary does this. It brings man and God together. And it strips a man and leaves him standing in all of his reality. Sometimes it hurts.

We are made by our meetings in life. Our meeting people. Our meeting ideas. Our meeting circumstances. Judas had met the Christ a few years before. He was called to be a disciple. That Person who called him made a difference in his life.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in *The Words*, tells of his meeting God. This is how he relates it:

I needed God, He was given to me, I received Him without realizing that I was seeking Him. Failing to take root in my heart, He vegetated in me for a while, then He died. Whenever anyone speaks to me about Him today, I say, with the easy amusement of an old beau who meets a former belle: "Fifty years ago, had it not been for that misunderstanding, that mistake, the accident that separated us, there might have been something between us."*

That meeting between Judas and God could have meant so much. But it was marred by a misunder-

* (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1964), pp. 64-65.

standing, a mistake. And such misunderstandings and mistakes are always on our side of the ledger.

God has come to us. He came to Judas. He lived in his heart. Then something happened. Things? Money? Something. And whatever it was, it marred the relationship.

Judas now realizes it. And all men do, finally. Thus the relationship that might have been beautiful is tragically defaced with an ugly betrayal.

Their meeting in the Garden, then, is strained and stiff. There is real hurt here.

In the Garden, we are down to circumstances. And man has his meeting time with circumstances. Some circumstances are pleasant. Many are not. This one is tragic. Judas has here a meeting which washes all the filth into the front of his soul. Now he knows the answer to his question, "Is it I?" And that answer is yes. And it hurts.

Terrible Judas! Shame, we cry. But look again. That's me. And you are there too. And the Judas predicament is one more reminder of our failure. Our betrayal. Our compromise. Our miserable wreck of this privilege called life.

But Calvary does this. It gets a man to look at himself. And that's good. But it hurts.

But there is something more at Calvary. *Possibility*. It's always there. In Christ. Amidst the deepest gloom Christ dips underneath to spread the path of possibility.

It wasn't too late. Not even for Judas. Nor for you and me. It never is. Christ mentioned this as He washed the feet of Judas. Those warm tears were begging reminders that there was hope. And help. It's never too late with the Father.

Someone has observed that we are in the midnight hour of our existence. They say we have come to the crossroads to find the signboards down. And that may be true. But somewhere in that midnight darkness, at

that forbidding crossroad, there is God. He is there—in Christ—with signboards. He is there with Light. He is there with guidance and with hope.

The possibilities for Judas were tremendous. He bargained them away. How sobering to realize that such great possibilities can be drained away with so few acts and in so short a time! And all that history writes concerning his end is: "He went and hanged himself" (Matt. 27:5).

Thus the book closes on Judas. But it opens on us. Yes, we would like to close the case and say, "That was Judas. Too bad." We even are prone to add words of shame to his record. But our view of Judas has only given us a better one of ourselves. And it is not good. It disturbs. Can this be me? Calvary asks questions like this.

Could I betray the Christ through, say, my compromise? My prejudice? My selfishness? My indifference? My unconcern? My gossip? My silence? Yes! And these acts of betrayal may hurt Him more deeply than a kiss worth only 30 pieces of silver.

Maybe we never thought of it this way. But this is Calvary. It clarifies the perspective. Calvary gets a man to where he can see himself.

But there is good news. Calvary also gets a man to where he can see Christ. For in Christ there is forgiveness. There is hope for our despair. There is healing for our prejudices. There is new life awaiting our repentance and belief. New life that crowds out the old. New life that opens channels of newness and health in our souls and in our hearts.

This is Calvary. It hurts, at first. But it eventually helps. It brings God into our lives.

2

"Hail, Master"

Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me.

And while he yet spake, lo, Judas, one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and elders of the people.

Now he that betrayed him gave them a sign, saying, Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he: hold him fast.

And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and kissed him.

And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come? Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him.

—Matt. 26:47-50

Scenes at Calvary change quickly. From the table we move to the Garden. Then the bitter betrayal act. Suddenly! That's how fast life can change.

This is a puzzling scene. Here is betrayal mixed with commitment, for Judas was a disciple. Here is the earthly amidst the spiritual. Here is rejection, and yet there is acceptance, deep within. Everything about this betrayal act is confusing.

Whatever this Garden scene reveals, it shows Judas torn between the man he was and the man he wanted to be.

And Calvary always reveals this. It shows man as he really is. It lays his soul bare. But it also sparks within him hopes of the man he would like to be, and could be.

The scriptural account of this story begins with Christ coming from prayer. Beads of perspiration are fresh on His brow. He comes forth now to speak with His disciples. But He comes a ready Warrior for the battle. Prayer has made Him ready. Not alone the prayer of the hour just past, but those frequent and regular prayer moments which characterized His life.

Prayer has too often been thought of as a means of getting what we want from God. Not so. It is more appropriately used to get us into a position where God can use us.

Billy Graham tells of watching the deck hands on the ocean liner "United States" as they docked the ship in New York harbor. First, they threw out a rope to the

men on the dock. Then, from within the boat, great motors went to work, pulling on the big cables. But, naturally, the pier was not pulled out to the ship. Instead, the ship moved snugly up to the pier.

Graham concluded by saying: "Prayer is the rope that pulls God and man together. But it doesn't pull God down to us: it pulls us up to him."*

This is what Christ teaches us here. His Garden prayer meeting had placed Him in the hands of the Father. Now He was ready to pursue His mission.

Christ's prayer in the Garden was, to be sure, the agony of a Man in decision. But, more, for us it shows how important is preparation for the crisis.

How many times have we gone to great and opportune moments with too little soul and heart preparation? Calvary asks us to stop and to consider the priorities. And prayer is one of those priorities.

The late Harry Denman would often go up to a perfect stranger and ask them to pray for him. Often the immediate reply he got was a question: "What kind of trouble are you in?"

We equate prayer with trouble. And we do it to our peril. Our Lord did not postpone His praying until life closed in around Him. He had come to this hour prepared. Is it not a summons to His Church? To His disciples?

Soon after the prayer comes Judas. But the Scriptures claim that he is not alone. "Judas, one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude."

We must ask what part the crowd played in this betrayal decision of Judas. What difference might it have made had Judas been alone? Would Judas have acted more rationally apart from the influence of the crowd?

**Guideposts*, June, 1967, p. 24.

There is a reminder, here, that the crowd must always be contended with. Voices rise out of the crowd, strong and appealing, urging man, tempting him, confusing him. And where the crowd forces its will, it is usually at the expense of some individual. Someone must be a loser. Judas was the loser here.

There is something else startling about the crowd with Judas. "Judas, one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude . . . from the chief priests and elders of the people."

Strange that sometimes those who should serve us are actually our traitors. It happens. In high government circles. In society. Yes, even in the church. The plight of modernism is sad testimony of this.

Those who were to serve the best interests of the people were creating the destructive road over which those best interests would travel to their death.

Sad that often the best resources are corrupted. The best minds are bent. The most able become the most helpless. It is a picture of sin's awful influence.

The scene moves on. Now Judas is ready for his part in the crucifixion drama—the kiss of betrayal. "And forthwith, he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and kissed him."

There are three options open to us, as we try to figure out this man Judas.

First, Judas might have wanted to force Jesus to defend himself against what was building up against Him. Judas might have wanted Jesus to react to the intents of the crowd.

Judas, close to the town-talk, could well have known of plans to destroy the Christ. He might have grown impatient with Jesus and His way of meek submission. He might have wanted action.

Scripture does leave a ray of hope that this may indeed have been his purpose. The word used for the

"kiss" is a word meaning "lovingly, passionately." We could well ask why Judas would kiss Jesus lovingly if seeds of betrayal had actually riveted his soul to such an act.

A second possibility is that Judas might have feared that the followers of Jesus would lead an insurrection. Thus, before the battle lines were drawn, Judas wanted to get on the winning side. Therefore he cast his fate with the caution and compromise of the crowd.

A third option remains. Judas just gave way to human weakness. Thus, betrayal. If this is true, then his kiss is the most terrible kiss in all of history.

But yet a couple of questions keep begging for answer. Was Judas kissing the Christ to seek approval of his act? Was he trying to ease his conscience?

Not a few times has the world sought to get the Church's approval for its wrongs. Often men try to make a little room for God so their shady deeds will have a legitimate look.

The evidence is against Judas. It appears that betrayal can be the only conclusion. We wish for something else. But the scriptural dialogue points to his guilt. His words, "Hail, master," echo of mockery. For Judas had another master, really. He was mastered by possessions, by things, by money. And it is a story told over and over. Calvary has a way of revealing our true master.

Judas tried to cover up, but Calvary makes any cover-up hard. Whatever front we might pose, Calvary eventually gets to the real self.

At a women's club meeting it was estimated that 20 percent of those present wore rouge, 35 percent tinted their hair, 75 percent plucked their eyebrows, 80 percent had permanent waves, 85 percent wore eye shadow, 90 percent wore fingernail polish, 100 percent used lipstick, and 10 percent wore false eyelashes and

other cosmetic items. Their subject for discussion: "Deceptive Packaging."

The greeting of Judas, "Hail, master," was a case of "deceptive packaging." For underneath his words was a heart riddled with deceit. For Christ was no longer his Master. Someone or something else had taken His place.

There was a struggle within Judas. A struggle between the right and the wanted. Judas wanted Christ. But conflicting with this were his wants. Ultimately it is always a choice between Christ or something else. And all too often, as in the case with Judas, the "something else" has a way of winning out.

But our Lord speaks a warning. "No man can serve two masters" (Matt. 6:24). Calvary brings a man to decision time. There he is confronted with an either/or situation.

What Judas actually shows is the nature of man. One side acts out of sincerity. Another acts out of sin. The outcome depends on the side that is conquered. So Calvary is a time of choice.

But our text is not finished speaking to us. "Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come?"

Always there is the why. Judas left the Garden asking it. And it is a question that lingers still.

Why did Judas betray Christ? Sin is the only explanation. This episode of human weakness shows us the shocking picture of the destructive possibilities of sin. Judas staggers away from this moment a broken man. And it is a reminder to us that all men are broken when sin is finished.

Judas entered a hell-on-earth arena. For the worst kind of existence lies in the full realization of the terrible consequences of sin. The realization that "what might have been" will never be. Gone forever were his tremendous possibilities. Sin extracts a high price, but metes out no reward.

There is another side to this story which we should consider. This betrayal is, actually, not a betrayal of Christ. Judas actually betrays himself. For any betrayal of God is, in final analysis, a betrayal of self. Sin carries a man to the brink of despair, and often beyond. But it offers no avenue of return to human decency. It is a one-way street. Instead of Judas closing the door on Christ, he closed it on himself.

That world into which Judas closed himself was dark with despair and haunting with helplessness. Thus the chapter ends on his life with the fateful words: He "went and hanged himself." What a tragic end to a life so full of possibility!

And to think that such possibility was bargained away for so little—30 pieces of silver!

Years ago the pioneer missionary Dan Crawford took a converted chief of an African tribe to London. He showed him the buildings and all the splendor of that city. Then he asked his guest what he thought of it all. The converted chief replied: "It is fine. But to be better off is not to be better."

And it is true. While Judas had change in his pocket, he had lost the joy out of life. While he was better off financially, he was not better.

Calvary asks us to consider our sense of values. Judas had lost perspective along the way. The value of lesser things eroded the better.

Calvary stood ready to help. And it always does. But the heart of Judas was closed. Closed to possibility. Closed to hope. And that is sin's plan—to take everything a man has and claim him as total victim. To keep him forever blinded to better things and forever blurred to a better life. And where sin has its way, this is the result.

Calvary has designed another way. That's why this Judas story is so important. It asks us to consider the master of our lives. It asks us to check our priorities.

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It asks us if our lives are closed to God and what He wants to give us.

The missionary martyr Jim Elliott said one time: "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

And this is Calvary's message to us.

3

"I Know Not the Man"

And as Peter was beneath in the palace, there cometh one of the maids of the high priest:

And when she saw Peter warming himself, she looked upon him, and said, And thou also wast with Jesus of Nazareth.

But he denied, saying, I know not, neither understand I what thou sayest. And he went out into the porch; and the cock crew.

And a maid saw him again, and began to say to them that stood by, This is one of them.

And he denied it again. And a little after, they that stood by said again to Peter, Surely thou art one of them: for thou art a Galilaeen, and thy speech agreeth thereto.

But he began to curse and to swear, saying, I know not this man of whom ye speak.

And the second time the cock crew. And Peter called to mind the word that Jesus said unto him, Before the cock crow twice, thou shalt deny me thrice. And when he thought thereon, he wept.

—Mark 14:66-72

This is an interesting story—Peter's denial. And, would you believe, Peter tells it himself! That's right. Authorities generally agree that Mark was the writer of Peter's ministry. And Matthew, who has a lengthy description of this denial, probably got his information from Mark. More interesting still, Mark has the longest section on the denial of all the four Gospels.

Why? Why would Peter tell such a story on himself? Was he trying to get across the point of forgiveness? "He forgave me when I failed Him in His greatest hour of need." This would be a good reason. Certainly a needed message in any age.

Or was Peter trying to show the possibilities of redemption? Was he trying to show how Christ took a broken life and mended it? How He took a coward and made him courageous? This would make a good message. It is true. Christ *does* take a broken life and touch it with healing.

Maybe the "why" will always elude us. But at least it is interesting to know that Peter relived those awful moments. And we can only imagine that he did it with pure motive.

We should examine Peter closely. Maybe we have been too quick to condemn him. Maybe there is something in this story we have missed.

Only someone with courage could have done what Peter did—follow Christ into the trial center. The other disciples were not present. And sometimes we forget this.

We have painted Peter so much as the coward that we miss his real moments of courage. Not many would have dared to follow Christ to this trial. In Palestine, houses of the well-to-do were built in hollow squares, around an open courtyard off which various rooms opened. For Peter to walk into that courtyard was indeed courageous.

But Peter *did* walk into that courtyard. So, however this story might end, let us remember that it does begin with courage.

The words of the deposed Russian leader Nikita Khrushchev have a meaningful ring at this point. He said, in a report to the Central Committee of the Communist Party: "A Communist has no right to be an onlooker."

Peter sensed the expectations of Christ. He knew that a disciple of the Master had no right to be an onlooker. Somewhere Peter knew he had to get involved. So Peter's very presence shows identification. There's some involvement here. But the other disciples, except John, are not even reported as onlookers.

The trilogy of denial is on the record. We should not attempt to ignore it, nor to dress it up. But we should try to probe these moments for some truths.

The first denial brought recognition. Now Peter could have fled. A true coward would have slipped out the closest door, and fast. But Peter did not. Peter stayed. While he did retire to a porch, yet he did not leave the trial. Why?

The scene is not without its lesson. Here is Peter torn between two feelings: the feeling of fear that said run, and the feeling of love that said stay. Did love win out? He stayed.

Peter, during his second denial, was recognized by another girl as having been seen with Jesus. Yet he did not run. This would have been the time for a

coward to get out of there. Peter stayed. Why? Courage? Love?

The third denial was Peter's downfall. He swore and cursed his Master's name. Here was Peter's greater sin. His denial involved only Peter. But his cursing involved both Peter and Christ. Yet it is worthy of note, Peter did not leave the trial. Was courage trying to have its way? Or love?

This third denial came at the cock-crowing time in Jerusalem. And here the flashback of memory stabs the heart of Peter.

William Barclay has some interesting thoughts about this cock-crowing ceremony. He holds that no cocks or hens were allowed in Jerusalem, as they were considered unclean. So what we picture as a cock crowing, for Barclay, is not true. Instead, at 3 a.m. the Roman guard is changed. And the sign of this change was a trumpet call. The reason for the Bible terminology is that the Latin meaning is "cock crow." Thus, if Barclay is correct, the trumpet call for the changing of the guard was the summons to the conscience of Peter.

Whatever the situation, we are sure that memory has a way of coming along with bitter reminders. Something in Peter broke. And now, for the first time, he leaves the scene of that trial, a broken man, and weeps bitter tears.

It takes a man with real courage to face up to his wrong. It takes a man of genuine heart to allow the tears of sorrow to wash his soul. Peter did just this. He found forgiveness. He was given an assignment in the kingdom of God. And of all the lessons from Calvary, one of the greatest is right here: Christ is never done with those who fail. Christ never abandons hope for human life. Out of the ashes of human failure Christ has raised up some of His choicest ambassadors. Peter was one of them.

Now the facts clothe Peter in different garments, don't they? So before we condemn Peter, there are some things we need to consider.

Few, if any, of us would have had the courage to be in the courtyard at all. John was the only other follower of Christ who was anywhere around. Why? Maybe they were the true cowards.

It is a picture of the Christian often, and of the Church at times—afraid to identify with causes that might bring danger and inconvenience. I have heard Peter condemned by those who themselves never raised their voices against racial prejudice, or poverty, or war, or a lot of other things, for fear of the consequences. Theirs was a denial of sorts. Their condemnation of Peter was swift and terrible, their response to human need very sluggish.

There is a second thought to consider about Peter. It was love that gave Peter courage. True, it broke down at the trial. And human love does weaken sometimes and needs reviving.

An artist had painted a picture of the Christ. He had put his best efforts into the work. He took it to his instructor and presented it with pride. The instructor, experienced in the field of art, complimented the young artist on the composition of the background. He pointed out that his choice of colors was near perfect. He could find no fault with the etching, and all the secondary elements were in proper perspective.

But the instructor studied the face of Christ for a long time. Then he said to the young artist: "Had you loved Him more you could have painted Him better."

And that was Peter's problem. And it is ours. It is always a problem of a love relationship. A problem of loving Him enough. Enough to identify with Him in the crisis. Enough to identify with Him when all others denounce Him.

But let us not forget, love sent Peter to that trial

in the first place. Love made him remember when the trumpet blasted. Love sent him from that trial weeping to find a way back into the Master's heart.

And I am thrilled to remember that it is love, the love of the Master, that covers a multitude of sins. Whether these sins be denials, debauchery, or desecration, the Master has a healing love.

Here is what Christ did with Peter. While it is true that Peter left the trial a broken man—disfigured with denial—it was not the end. Through repentance on Peter's part, and redemption by the Master, Peter was transformed into a vessel of honor. And what happened at Pentecost is testimony to this.

After a day's fishing, a party of men were gathered in a mountain hotel in Scotland, drinking coffee and discussing the day's events. In the crowded congestion, a fisherman collided with a waitress carrying coffee. An ugly stain marred the whitewashed wall.

Landseer, the celebrated animal painter, was one of the members of the fishing party. He took a crayon from his pocket and began to sketch around the ugly mark until the stain was transformed into a highland stag with its antlers outstretched.

Because he was a gifted artist, he was able to take the dark and disfiguring blot and transform it into a thing of beauty. Like what Christ did with Peter. He transformed the dark blots of denial into bright possibilities of discipleship. And He does it still with lives that are open.

We cannot study this scene from Peter's life but what love crops up again and again. It seems that we are reminded that love is the final answer. And it is.

This story is not one of denial entirely. It is that, in part, to be sure. But it is also one of love, finally. Love that is rich and warm with forgiveness. Love that is lasting and effective.

An artist, assigned to illustrate a book describing

the trial of Jesus, showed Simon Peter denying his Master, but it showed a halo around his head. Someone pointed out that this was not really an artistic blunder. For the man who denied Christ had the makings of a saint in him. We would probably not put a halo around his head in that particular setting. But Christ could see the finer part in Peter. And this is always what Calvary shows.

It is a story, then, of a love relationship. Stormy at times, but finally it comes to a happy ending. And where love has its way, there is a happy ending. Calvary teaches us this.

The first heart-transplant patient a few years ago said of Christiaan Barnard, the surgeon who effected the transplant, "He is the man with the golden hand." That's what Peter could say of Christ, after he was retrieved from failure. And all men say it who have been touched in their worst moments with new life.

Calvary asks us to consider our love for Christ. How strong is it? Is it the fiber of our hearts? Bob Richards speaks often of "the will to win." And it's important. Love creates within us "the will to win." Peter, like not a few of us, was weak in "the will to win."

A coach once observed that physical ability is only half of the ingredient necessary for a champion. The other half, he said, is heart—determination, courage, "the will to win." He told of coaching men in his career who never stood out in any sport simply because they had only the bodies of champions. They did not have the hearts of champions.

To illustrate his point, this coach told of the fable of the mouse and the magician. The mouse squeaked about the house in constant fear of the neighborhood cats. Taking pity on the mouse, the magician made him a cat. But immediately he began to suffer with fear of dogs. So the magician made him into a dog.

Now he began to fear tigers, and the magician made him into a tiger. But now he feared hunters. In disgust, the magician shouted: "Out with you! You have only the heart of a mouse."

Man's biggest problem in his discipleship is his will—his heart. He has good intentions, but his heart is slow. He has grand designs, but feeble attempts. Too often the circumstances crowd in around us and our wills become weak and submissive. Peter was caught in such a moment. And his collapse is a warning for us that we will never be the champions of our battles until there is a will that captures our fears, our hearts, our total beings.

We cannot close this chapter at Calvary without feeling something of the shame that was Peter's. For we have failed, often. Many of us sense something of his sorrow, for we have walked the sorrowing road that leads to repentance. It began in darkness for Peter, and it does for every man. But it ended in light—eternal light. And it always does.

That's the happy ending to Peter's story. And repentance writes a happy ending to the life of any who come to the Father.

This is the purpose of Calvary. Calvary is not condemnation. It is forgiveness. It is understanding. It is a new start. It is a fresh beginning. And we all need it.

4

"Not This Man . . ."

*Pilate saith unto him, What is truth?
And when he had said this, he went out
again unto the Jews, and saith unto
them, I find in him no fault at all.*

*But ye have a custom, that I should re-
lease unto you one at the passover: will
ye therefore that I release unto you the
King of the Jews?*

*Then cried they all again, saying, Not
this man, but Barabbas. Now Barabbas
was a robber.*

—John 18:38-40

Not this man . . ." This is a capsule summary of all that tragic week's disappointment for Christ. At every turn, rejection.

But more bitter still is to realize the one for whom He is rejected. Barabbas—prisoner, robber.

To be rejected for something conceivably better is one thing. But to be rejected for something not only worse but reprehensible, that's something else. But it's here. And it hurts.

Barabbas was a popular prisoner with the people. And history has a long list of occasions wherein prisoners were popular. It is a sad commentary on human nature.

Barabbas had influence. He had the ability to rally people to his cause. Even in his terrible acts of violence and corruption, his followers were fascinated by him.

Now, prior to the trial of Barabbas, word spreads that Christ is also to be tried. So the followers of Barabbas go to work. They pack the galleries. They stack the crowd in favor of their prisoner. Thus, when Pilate remembers (or perhaps is reminded) that this is a religious festival time when custom decrees that a prisoner be released, this crowd makes with majority acclaim: "Not this man, but Barabbas."

Who wouldn't be persuaded? The crowd's loud cry for Barabbas would make any leader stop and do some thinking. It was plain to see that this was a pro-Barabbas crowd. They had come for one purpose and that was to secure the release of their man, Barabbas.

So Barabbas is released. Set free, if you please. And here in master fashion we see how Christ becomes, for all mankind, the One who carries our sins away. For in that moment Christ took the place of Barabbas, who should have died. Christ took the place of the condemned, that through His life the condemned might live.

And it is a true picture of Calvary. Christ giving life, that men with the pronouncement of death upon their souls might live.

Paul puts it like this: "He hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (II Cor. 5:21).

Again, to the Romans, Paul writes: "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:6-8).

And so Barabbas is free. But he is not free at all. John Oxenham, in one of his books, pictures Barabbas as a man who, upon his release, thinks of nothing but his freedom. He makes glad celebration with the crowd that secured his release. But in the midst of the celebration, Barabbas stops. He asks, with pain, who it was that took his place. He becomes fascinated with the thought of someone doing such a thing. Then the merry-making turns to seriousness.

Barabbas walks from the crowd to join the procession heading toward the hill. And he catches a glimpse of Jesus, carrying his cross. Barabbas becomes inwardly stirred. Oxenham has him say: "I should be carrying that cross, not he. He saved me!"*

Oxenham pictures Barabbas slipping from that

*Quoted in William Barclay, *The Gospel of John* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1955), II, 290.

scene with that thought hanging heavy upon his mind. And Barabbas never rejoins the crowd. He wanders into the night, heavy with thought. Really, he is not free at all!

So the choice of the crowd, while it is granted, is short-lived. Their dreams dissipate quickly. Their plans evaporate hurriedly. Yet it is the truth that when men reject Christ they flirt with potential doom and invite the sad prospects of despair.

The crowd had cast their vote: "Not this man, but Barabbas." Now, hours later, even Barabbas is gone. The only one around, now, with any aroma of hope is the Christ.

Arthur J. Moore tells of standing before Hitler's Chancellery when the dictator was rising to power and hearing the throng shout, "Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!" While he could not understand German, he knew Hitler was telling the crowd that he would build a Germany that would last forever.

Mr. Moore stood on the site of the Chancellery 20 years later. He found himself gazing into sheer space. Grass was struggling to grow on the leveled ground. Every trace of the imposing structure was gone. "Where is this man who was going to build a Germany that would last forever?"*

The Barabbas crowd, hours after Barabbas was released from prison, was asking the same question. Where was Barabbas who was going to lead their sinful quests? He was gone. Gone the way of all who do not have an eternal destiny as their goal.

An artist traced a picture portraying a highway stretching into the distance to the rim of a yawning chasm. A mass of humanity pressed forward in the highway. A cross stood just at the edge of the cliff. People surged past it. The caption under the picture

**Fight On! Fear Not!* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 38.

read: "Tragedy, tragedy of it all, there is nothing yonder." The masses were seeking something, but they had gone past the source of satisfaction.

And this is a picture of the crowd in the judgment hall. They had overlooked the One who could have satisfied their needs. They had cast their lot with one who had nothing to offer the heart or the soul of men. And it is always true that when men choose less than Christ there is nothing yonder.

Oh, the sad lessons of wrong choices! We must not forget that choices have consequences, many of which are haunting and terrible.

There is an important side to choice that we too often overlook. It is that of rejection. It is as significant as that of selection.

In the study of the German attempt and failure in World War II, an author makes a remark that could well apply to other affairs besides the military. "Marked on a map, the conquests of the Wehrmacht were awesome but the combination of decisions that led to them was military madness. He who cannot reject cannot select, and the downfall of the Third Reich was due, in no small measure, to Adolf Hitler's inability to realize that, in strategic terms, the road to everywhere is the road to nowhere."*

The crowd wanted Barabbas, perhaps because he seemed to represent freedom—freedom to do what they wanted. The Christ seemed to impose restrictions. What they thought was a road to everywhere, a road without limits, turned out to be a road to nowhere.

This setting also illustrates the danger of being swept along with the crowd. The majority are not always right. But, right or wrong, when a person gets

*Pelford Taylor, *The Breaking Wave: The Second World War in the Summer of 1940* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958). Quoted by Gerald Kennedy, *The Worlds of the Minister* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 152.

caught up in their thinking, a lifetime can be lost in a few moments.

But these are not the greatest lessons to be learned from this episode. The truth trying to creep through is the truth that men never learn from history. While they have seen the terrible mess people make of life when God is left out, yet they feel they can somehow turn the tables and make it work. While they have volumes to remind them that there is really no choice, only Christ, yet men try to create another option.

And often a man will cast his fate with this other option. To his peril he will do it. It is a modern version of these old words, "Not this man, but . . ." Not Christ, but things. Not Christ, but mine. And however it is stated, it is always translated the same. It is man simply saying, Christ for me is too inconvenient. Christ for me is a threat. Christ is a barrier to what I want.

Thus life closes the options, not on the bad, but on the good. The crowd eliminated the options for the good by choosing the bad.

And always where this is so, life will come to a bad end. It will end in some side street, removed from the great, exciting options of life. It will end in futility and in disgust, severed from the resources that would have made for purpose and joy.

Calvary's road is filled with such episodes to remind us that there are options in life. And that these options are never closed by God. Only by our choices do we close the doors upon them. Either we close the doors upon the bad, opening them to the better, or, as the crowd in our setting, we close the doors upon the good and invite the bad.

The words of Harry Emerson Fosdick have meaning for us. He says: "Life is a landscaping job. We are handed a site, ample or small, rugged or flat, picturesque or commonplace, whose general outlines and contours are largely determined for us. Both limitation and op-

portunity are involved in every site and the most unforeseeable results ensue from the handling—some grand opportunities are muffed, and some utterly unpromising situations become notable.”*

“Some grand opportunities are muffed.” How true of the crowd’s choice! Doors to greater things and better days were closed. Who knows what was lost in their choice, forever! We are reminded, again, that the saddest words and the saddest thought of all are, “It might have been.”

Life might have been different. The landscape of life for man would be more beautiful for many lives if only the choices were different.

Calvary never stops talking to us about choices. The big ones. The little ones. And this is true because Calvary sees life in total perspective. It desires the best for all of us.

A wireless operator on the “Californian” tried repeatedly to warn the “Titanic” of impending danger. Five times within two hours the ship had received warning signals.

The “Titanic” would not listen. Instead, this message was sent: “Shut up, I am busy, I am working the Cape race.” They were keeping people informed about the progress of ships in the Cape Sailing Regatta, April 14, 1912.

Within minutes the pride of the oceans struck an iceberg and within four hours, 1,500 people perished.

It is our problem, set to a different tune. Calvary issues warnings, but we are busy. Busy with other interests. We are intent on having our way, undisturbed.

Calvary asks us to consider slowly. Calvary asks us to choose wisely. For choices do determine the conditions and destiny of our lives.

Calvary tries to tell us that life is too valuable to

**Pulpit Digest*, Oct., 1968, p. 41.

be bargained away for something earthly and temporal. Life needs the eternal dimension. Life needs security. And these are found only in Christ.

Barabbas, the choice of the crowd, is gone. So is the crowd. Only the Christ, whom they rejected, remains. He remains still an option for us.

5

"Crucify Him, Crucify Him"

Pilate therefore, willing to release Jesus, spake again to them.

But they cried, saying, Crucify him, crucify him.

And he said unto them the third time, Why, what evil hath he done? I have found no cause of death in him: I will therefore chastise him, and let him go.

And they were instant with loud voices, requiring that he might be crucified. And the voices of them and of the chief priests prevailed.

—Luke 23:20-23

Strange words these are—"Crucify him, crucify him." They come less than one week after the cheers of Palm Sunday. How soon welcome can turn to wrath! How quickly joy can turn to jeering!

Why? The answer is not easy to come by. True, there are pat answers that we have given across the years. But they somehow have a hollow ring to them. Isn't there something here for us to learn?

The crowd, for one, should be examined. It always pays to notice the crowd. It's important. Where were the Palm Sunday people? Perhaps they did not know that the Sanhedrin would violate their own law and set a nighttime trial. The sympathizers would not be alerted. Thus the Palm Sunday crowd was absent.

The Sanhedrin had planned for them to be absent. They had enough trouble on their hands as it was. This man Jesus was a handful. His potential power scared them. They did not need a pro-Jesus crowd to add to their frustration.

So the only ones who knew of the scheming of the Sanhedrin were the rabble—the cohorts of Barabbas. And they were out in full force. This inciting of the crowd had been planned well. They were ready to fan the flames of hate and arouse the ominous chant, "Crucify him, crucify him."

This crowd could hardly be called a fickle crowd. It was just a different crowd from that throng of people who lined the streets on Palm Sunday. Their convictions had not melted away. The crowd had not brought com-

promise. This was just a different crowd. They knew what and whom they wanted, and they were going to go all out to get their wish.

Now perhaps it would be appropriate to ask why the Palm Sunday crowd did not act decisively when they found out about the miscarriage of justice. But how could they? There was a quick moving from trial to crucifixion, which probably carried things past their ability to act once they knew the details.

Two things stand out about this crowd. One, the crowd does make a difference. Had this mob been evenly divided between Jesus and Barabbas, the decision for Pilate would have been pressure-packed. As it was, he readily saw he was in no trouble with the crowd if he released Barabbas. Really, then, his decision was easy. Just please the crowd. But what if there had been two factions? It's easy to see that the crowd does make a difference.

Another fact revealed by the actions of this crowd is that the majority is not always right. The crowd has been wrong many times. Adam Thompson of Cincinnati, Ohio, filled the first bathtub in the United States in 1842, and doctors predicted rheumatism and inflammation of the lungs would result. A ban against baths was posted in Philadelphia from November 1 to March 1, and Providence and Hartford set up extra heavy water rates. But as the years rolled on, Adam Thompson proved that the majority can be wrong.

Samuel Morse had adverse criticism from the press and from Congress when he proposed the telegraph. But it revolutionized communications and today it is heard around the world.

Alexander Bell was called a fool when he demonstrated his crude telephone. But today the telephone is a common household item that puts us in touch with any part of the world. Proof, again, that the crowd can be wrong.

McCormick's reaper was derided as a cross between a chariot, a wheelbarrow, and a flying machine. But it brought on a revolution in mechanical harvesting to the benefit of all mankind.

Westinghouse was derided when he proposed that air brakes be used on trains. The effective use of them ever since proves the crowd can be wrong.

Goodyear was "booed" by everyone as he worked to vulcanize rubber. Yet his efforts brought dividends to both business and traveler.

When Jenner discovered a way to produce smallpox vaccine, he was jeered by serious-minded men who claimed that man would contract all sorts of animal diseases by using it. Yet that very vaccination has curbed the menace of smallpox in our world. The crowd was wrong.

Robert Fulton's steamboat was called "Fulton's Folly" by the crowd. He proved them wrong.

Madame Curie sorted through tons of waste material in search of radium while the crowd laughingly asked, "What is radium?" Did she not prove that crowds can be wrong?

We have heard even in our generation, not a few times, that man would not be able to fly into space and certainly would never reach the moon. But technical skills have proved the detractors wrong.

Now let us examine the choice of this crowd. Calvary always confronts us with choice. What were they choosing in Barabbas? For one thing, they were choosing lawlessness instead of law. But it's not too surprising. One of the New Testament words for sin is "lawlessness." So the choice of this crowd only pictures for us the path of sin. Sin gets a man to choose lawlessness. It is the nature of sin. Sin resents law. It sets itself against law and vents itself in acts of anarchy. And that's what this crowd did. Isn't it a picture of mankind?

Sinful man feels uncomfortable in the presence of

truth and right. The Ten Commandments are a threat to his kind of living. Truth stands in the way of what he wants. Righteousness haunts his way of life. The "new morality" and the so-called situation ethics are testimonies of this.

Also, the choice of this crowd was one of war over peace. Barabbas, a man of blood, over against Christ, the Prince of Peace. But this was not alone a war of outward crimes and lawlessness. It was also a war of inward conflict. And one fact we too often forget when we are choosing is that we are at war with ourselves when we do not choose the better part. Where peace does not abide within, there is sure to be war both within and without. We try to blame it on circumstances. We try to tack the cause on another. But we know it is within where the war rages and the conscience smarts and the heart is torn.

Historians tell us that in only 130 years of the past 3,000 has there not been war somewhere in our world.

The choice of war over peace is a tragic one. For where men are not at peace with themselves they will enlarge the war with their fellowmen. The chaotic mess of the twentieth century is a commentary on this very fact.

Sadaku was in Hiroshima when the first atomic bomb fell. She was badly burned, but lived. A few years later the dread signs of radiation sickness appeared. She was placed in a hospital and given only a few weeks to live.

Sadaku began making paper cranes, tearing out of paper the shape of the familiar Japanese bird—the symbol of peace.

She formed the idea of making 1,000 paper cranes before she died, and of sending them forth as messengers of peace.

The last crane that Sadaku made was the six hundred and forty-fourth. Then she died.

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After Sadaku's death, a Japanese poet wrote her story in verse. He finished his poem in this way:

*You yourself must fold the six-hundred-and-
forty-fifth,
You must fold all the other paper cranes,
Never let their fluttering wings be still,
Never let them die,
But see them winging, winging, winging.*

Calvary asks us to choose the way of peace. It asks us to drape our souls with the peace of God and become peacemakers in our world. Calvary asks us, in effect, to fold paper cranes instead of fighting our brothers.

A final glance at the choice of this crowd shows that they elected hate instead of love. And this is the ugliest choice of all. This is a page from Calvary's trial that lingers yet with haunting reality.

The crowd at the trial was fenced in by hatred. Their minds were prejudiced against any other choice. And the cycle continues, pulling into its destructive center the minds of men. Tragic how the mind, so capable of great things, can lose all sense of priorities and can become a switchboard for vicious acts.

An African convert was sent to America to further his education. One day he visited the church that had sent the missionary that led him to Christ. But he was refused entrance to worship because of the color of his skin. He could not understand their refusal. He walked away perplexed that a church would put out thousands of dollars to send missionaries across the waters but would turn away the results of their labor. But it is the way of hatred. It is the reaping of prejudice.

There is another side to this crowd and their choice—the consequences. And consequences there always are. They follow choice, as night follows day.

Oxenham's depiction of Barabbas, referred to in the last chapter, fits in here too. Leaving the scene of merry-

making with his friends, he is pictured as hurrying to the edge of the city to see Jesus carrying His cross. He is so moved and haunted by the scene that he slips out of the crowd and wanders away. Who knows where?

If this portrayal of Barabbas is true, then the very thing for which the crowd had bargained was gone in a matter of hours. Their hopes came tumbling down. Their great plans dissipated. Suddenly, their cause was gone. Even had Barabbas remained with them, their cause would finally have come to naught, for it did not bear the credentials of eternity.

And so often it is true, the immediate pleasure blurs the future pain. We are poor at remembering that there is always tomorrow. There is an eternity. Sometime we must face the consequences of wrong choices.

The crowd. The choice. The consequences. Calvary gives us a glimpse of all of them. And where we go from here is ours to choose. And what we gain or lose from this point on, our choice will determine. If we select anything other than Christ, it is second best. And when we take second best, we chart a course of uncertain consequences.

Calvary lays life on the line. Calvary sizes up the alternatives pretty well. And we cannot leave any of its scenes just as we came. We leave enlightened. We leave with duty and with responsibility hanging heavy upon our lives.

6

"Hail, King of the Jews!"

And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand: and they bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews!

And they spit upon him, and took the reed, and smote him on the head.

And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him.

—Matt. 27:29-31

The future never looked darker. The Advent now seems so distant. The three short years of Christ's ministry have now come to this. And it seems an awful way to close the curtains upon a life so full of purpose and bursting with such possibility.

But sin extracts a huge price. It does not settle for little things. It lays claim to the best and clings until it possesses it. The hideous drama of Calvary is proof of this.

As we go from Palm Sunday through Holy Week, we see how quickly justice can turn to injustice. How bravery can fade into betrayal. How lovely crowds can vanish and how a lonely garden can move to center stage. How a dramatic display of friendship can turn into denial. How acceptance can evolve into rejection. Holy Week shows it all.

Too soon the shouts of adulation turn to silence. "Hail, King of the Jews!" How we wish these words of acclaim could be the caption of Holy Week! But they aren't. Rather, they are the capsheaf of mockery that follows the trial. Just one more insult. They reflect the evil sentiment that creeps through and stamps rejection and injustice and hatred across the pages of history. Pages that might otherwise have been glorious.

But, again, this is sin. It robs man of his best. It keeps him from reaching his potential. It keeps life forever mired in lesser things, barricaded to the great things that might have been.

Some years ago Dr. Charles Drew developed a

method of blood-plasma transfusion that has saved numberless lives. Dr. Drew became involved in an automobile accident one time in which a large blood vessel was severed. He was refused admittance at the nearest hospital because he was a Negro. Soon thereafter he died. He died because he could not receive the help of his own medical discovery.

This is something like the plight of man. Because of his sin he is kept from reaching the best. He is kept from reaching the design of life for which he was created.

We see also from our scripture the taint of bitterness. "Hail, King of the Jews!" It was false acclaim, for in their hearts there was no such recognition. Hatred can blur the love that should shine through. We get a picture of how terrible life can get without God. It focuses the extent to which men will go when they follow their impulses.

Often we forget just how terrible and how cruel Calvary really was. It was not alone the cruelty of physical torture. There was the mental anguish, deeply sensed, in the mockery and in the rejection voiced by the crowd, as well as the lonesomeness that comes from abandonment.

But being alone and rejected was often Jesus' lot. R. E. O. White has said: "This is the saddest irony of history, that He who came farthest to meet with us, stepping down from glory to walk with men their homeward journey to an evening rest, should walk unknown, unrecognized, and, far too frequently, unwelcome."*

The cruelty of Calvary has never been experienced by mankind. We can only imagine, and here we are limited. We know it was awful. We declare it a terrible scene. And all too often we shove it aside by saying it was the Father's way. We pass it from our mind and rest it with Him. It was not the Father's

**The Stranger of Galilee* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), p. 93.

wish, let us remember. Nor His plan, had He a choice. It was God's only option. But this does not lessen the cruelty of it. To know that sin exacts God's best before relinquishing its deadly grip on life is no small thought.

So what we see at Calvary, amidst all the rejection, and sneering, and torture, is God walking the corridors of physical death that mankind might have spiritual life. He walks that corridor knowing that He is being rejected. So the shout from the mob, "Hail, King of the Jews!" is just another jab at His heart, another reminder that "he came unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11).

My late brother-in-law, Joseph Niccum, kept an interesting and creative diary. In it was found this interesting entry: "Through the pages of this diary have occurred many, many times these three words in succession: 'Joe and I.' This morning I was a pallbearer for that Joe. This a.m. could easily have been referred to as MOURN-ING."

And it was a time of mourning for Christ. For those whom He had come to win and to help were posing as His enemies.

Man is not only capable of violence in a physical way. Calvary shows how capable man is of mental cruelty. Calvary is history's darkest hour because it is man's most cruel act—the rejection of the Prince of Peace.

Whatever else man has done, or will ever do, will not compare with the cutting cruelty heaped upon the Son of God at Calvary. There man became his meanest. There man was his most inhuman. There man pierced the heart of Christ with a hurt far more terrible and painful than that of a physical wound. It was pierced with rejection, with loneliness, with closed hearts. And these are the most terrible.

One dark midnight in France on the Toul line,

William Stidger was driving a truckload of supplies to the front lines. On the way he got lost. He climbed down from his truck at a French crossroad and walked over to a little shrine. He knew there would be directions carved there.

He turned his flashlight on the markings and got his directions. Then he turned the light above the stone marker and got a glimpse of the shrine itself. It was a beautiful carved figure of Christ on a cross, and above the figure were inscribed these significant words: "Traveler, hast thou ever seen so great a grief as mine?"*

Calvary asks us to consider the grief of our Master. And then to remember, again, that He underwent such grief for us.

Can any meaning come from such cruelty? From such grief? Yes, for here we see God against the crowd. God against sin. And He is telling us that He has entered our struggle. That He has entered the human arena to engage in this terrible battle for us. He is bringing the resources of God to bear upon the sinful predicament, that man might escape its penalty and its grip.

Christ, on the Cross, is expressing the love and the concern of God. Bishop Thomas, of Iowa, tells of the three soldiers in Vietnam on a patrol who suddenly came upon a live grenade. Without hesitation the Negro corporal threw himself on top of the bomb as it exploded, thus saving his buddies. When the question was asked why he would do this, one of his platoon remembered the corporal often saying: "You gotta care, baby; you gotta care."**

Love and concern are important factors in life. We have seen societies crumble where they are not evidenced. Man becomes warped where love is not part of

**There Are Sermons in Stories* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1942), pp. 89-90.

***The Christian Athlete*, Sept., 1967, p. 12. Used by permission of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

his environment. The East German government released an eight-volume socialist encyclopedia. In it there is a major and significant omission—the word “love.” This might explain why Communism must hold its people by force, rather than by faith. But God is trying to show us a better way at Calvary.

And we had better listen to God’s message. Our world is on a collision course. Violence, hatred, and crime weave tragic patterns across its tapestry. And all too often we settle for the world as we see it, instead of trying to make it the world it can be through Calvary. Our values are fast changing, and not always for the best.

W. C. Tupling points out that in an old edition of a standard encyclopedia there were nine pages on the word “love” and only nine lines on the word “atom.” In a recent edition of the same encyclopedia the proportions were exactly reversed. Nine pages were given to the word “atom,” and only nine lines to the word “love.” But love will still prevail above the atom.

Calvary’s love has something to say to us. Something we need desperately to hear. God is telling man that man’s rejection of Him does not imply God’s rejection of man.

Julia Ward Howe, author of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” was making an impassioned plea to a politician, seeking his aid for a friend of hers who badly needed assistance. The man replied: “Julia, I’ve become so busy I can no longer concern myself with individual cases.” “Fortunately,” replied Mrs. Howe, “God hasn’t reached that stage yet.”

Calvary teaches us that God is never finished with His creation. God is telling us that He is King, the eternal King. And that His kingship in our lives can make a difference.

This Calvary event, further, serves as a reminder to us of God’s concern for us in the midst of our conflicts.

It is a comfort to us, in our trials and in our tests, to know that One with mighty power and with capable strength has gone this road before us to pave the way for final victory.

So, while the crowd shouted, "Hail, King of the Jews!" all the while rejecting Him, we are given the option to claim Him as Lord and Master. We can place Him on the throne of our hearts and declare Him King of our lives.

But the awful thought lingers that where He is not invited to dwell, and where He is not recognized as Lord, deep and terrible hurt again confronts the Christ.

So again we are brought face-to-face with choice. And Calvary asks us to probe the depths of our hearts to check on our loyalties. Vocal acclaim is not enough. There must be something deeper in life. There must be a personal identification. There must be rugged discipleship. There must be involvement. There must be a surrender of what we are to what He is. There must be a fiber to our faith that draws us to Christ, so that wherever He goes, be it through rejection, trial, or crucifixion, we will identify with Him and pursue His mission.

We must be made to know that Calvary is not alone the giving of what God has. It is also a summons to the resources of man. It is God saying, in essence, that our best, plus God's, can bring our wavering predicament back into focus and restore a right relationship with Him.

7

"Save Thyself"

*And they that passed by reviled him,
wagging their heads,*

*And saying, Thou that destroyest the
temple, and buildest it in three days, save
thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come
down from the cross.*

—Matt. 27:39-40

Our text hardly seems appropriate for an Easter meditation. The proclamation, "He is risen," would seem more fitting.

For He who was seemingly Victim is, on Easter morn, Victor. He who was defeated only a few hours before, is now triumphant. He who was smashed upon a cross in a hideous death, that lingers yet in our memory, now is resurrected into a glorious life. And it is all glad testimony of the power of God. And His love.

That first Easter morning began in a rather dismal way. Despair encamped about. Everything was confused. Gloom spread thickly over the scene. And why shouldn't it? Good men who had done their best had failed, it seemed. Bad men who had done their worst had succeeded. And because of such terrible happenings, the disciples' faith was about to give way.

But then, the evidence! "He is risen." Christ is alive! Glad and welcome news. So, just as faith was breathing its last, it received its most convincing demonstration. The silence of Saturday is met with the shout of Sunday's good news. "He is risen."

When Wellington went to battle against Napoleon at Waterloo, all England waited for news of the outcome. There were no telegrams or speedy means of communication in those days. A sailing ship brought news to a harbor's edge, and by hand signals conveyed the message to a signalman on top of Winchester Cathedral. This signalman, in turn, relayed the news to an-

other man on a hill. Thus was the message carried across England.

The first signal from the ship indicated the word "Wellington." The next word was "defeated." Then a heavy fog blotted the ship from sight. The signalman at the Cathedral relayed the message, "Wellington defeated," and it spread across England.

Some hours later the fog lifted from the harbor. Again the signal came from the ship, but this time it read: "Wellington defeated the enemy."

That Saturday following the Crucifixion was a time of perplexity. He who was the Hope of the world was now silenced. He who brought news of a better life was now dead. But all the facts were not in. The full message had not been read.

For those who wandered off with sinking faith on Saturday, God came with Easter's message: "He is risen." Thus He answered the questions of their faith with the evidence of His presence. This is Easter. This is what it means. It means that God always answers. He always comes to us. In His own way, He comes. But He does come. He is alive.

But where does our text fit into all of this? The scripture relates for us the words of some Jews at the Cross. The Jews could see God only in relationship to power. But here they see God showing himself—through Jesus Christ—in sacrificial love. And for the Jews, this submissive love seemed futile—certainly unimpressive. They wanted some evidence of His power.

But for us on this Easter, or any Easter, this love has new meaning. Indeed, now we see what the Cross and Easter are all about. It is love and nothing else. Love triumphant. Love tried and found true. Love sufficient. Love victorious. Appropriately, then, could one write: "Love divine, all love excelling." And that's why this text does have meaning for us. It shows

the power of self-denying love that would save not itself but others.

The mob at the Cross cried for action. "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross." But we must understand that had Christ come down from that cross all hope would have come down with Him. It is precisely because He did not come down from the Cross that we believe in Him.

And Easter is our celebration of His persistence. God's persistence in the face of temptation and challenge. Easter is our celebration of Life that died for a cause. It is our celebration of redemption. And it is all true because He did not come down from the Cross. His love was truly persistent.

Because Christ stayed on His cross, sin is conquered. Because Christ did not come down from His cross, death is subdued. The power of the enemy is defeated because Christ is not trapped into responding to some enticing words from men.

So at Easter, as we look back, we see Him as the Son of God because He stayed on the Cross until He could say, "It is finished." He waged the battle to the full, and because He did, He comes out victorious with the credentials of life fully His. And, now, they are ours too! This is Easter. He did not save himself, that through His giving we might be saved.

Easter is God in Christ reigning in spite of the plan to put Him away and forever silence His voice. Easter is God's pronouncement that cruelty and hate never have the last word. Easter is proof of God's presence in the midst of disaster, speaking words of love, of forgiveness, and of hope.

So what we celebrate at Easter is victory. A victory over all the things that would defeat us and make life miserable. A victory won for us by God through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Here is God's answer to evil. His answer to hate. His answer to cruelty and to violence. It is God's answer to anything that holds life back from the best.

Easter is not a time for mourning. It is a time for joy. For God has come to fill the vacuum of despair with the vitality of life. He has come to speak good words to our souls. He has come to spread hope among His people.

Easter opens a new chapter in the lives of men. It is a chapter of hope. Life is its theme. And with the opening of this new chapter in his sojourn, man is faced with decision-making all over again. For this Christ who is alive seeks a channel through which to express His aliveness. He seeks a heart in which to establish His throne. He seeks disciples to carry forth to a saddened world this news of gladness and hope.

Resurrection day is not alone our moment of celebration and rejoicing. It is that, first, to be sure. But it is also our moment to put at rest forever the things that bother us about life. The trials, the tests, the temptations. Not that our lives will ever be done completely with them. Never. For they are too much the fiber of life. But rather, at Easter, we must see anew the resources now made available to us for our times of perplexity and our times of doubt.

We must see that He who was obedient unto death, and won the victory over death, hell, and the grave, has won something for us in that awesome victory. He has won for us a new companionship, a vital strength, a lasting hope. The very things life needs if we are to live adequately.

Christ's life, after Easter, is a glad reminder that never again need we fear the long nights, nor the lonesome hours, nor the narrow places. For He who has engaged the enemy through the longest of nights did it for us. And He who did battle with the forces in the most lonesome of hours did it for us. And He who

walked the path of rejection and death did all of this for us.

Now His life says to us that the force of that victory is ours. It says that the strength of that victory is ours. It says that the power that made Him Conqueror is ours. It says that the endurance available to Him is available for us. This is Easter's message. And it is all possible because He did not come down from the Cross. He did not seek to save himself.

Easter, then, is not only good news of a risen Saviour, but good news of what that Saviour can mean to us in the nitty-gritty circumstances of life. And that's where the news really becomes significant and meaningful.

Someone has said that "Christianity does not leave you on a cold, lonely hillside called Golgotha, but on a Mount of Transfiguration, with all your yesterdays, todays, and tomorrows changed in the light of the unbelievable good news of Easter."*

And this is why Easter is such a glorious event. It declares new hope. A hope that has the authority of God behind it. It is a hope men can grasp and trust. And it comes as a fresh wind to souls smothered by the crushing blows of life.

Easter opens new doors with its hope. It opens doors that lead to new possibilities. It opens doors that lead to life on a higher plane. It opens doors to the spiritual heights. This is Easter.

Our tomorrows, then, should never be like our yesterdays. Our doubts should give way to belief. Our despair should give way to trust. Our discouragement should give way to encouragement. The Easter news should send joyful thoughts through our souls. For He

*Michael Daves, "Morning Always Comes," *Pulpit Digest*, Mar., 1969, p. 38.

who is Author of life has now conquered all that can stand in life's way. And all the resources for meaningful life are ours for the asking.

And Easter is that too—the asking, that is. Yes, Easter is our asking God for His help. It is our asking God for His guidance. Easter is our acknowledging that God is alive and that He is the Fountain and Source of all that is good. Easter is our asking Him to use our lives as channels for His mission.

Easter is many things. Love, hope, victory. All of these, and more. But Easter, for us, is none of these until we believe. That's where Easter begins. With believing!

From the Preface . . .

*Lent is a spiritually enriching time. . . .
It affords an opportunity to move within the
shadows of the Cross and linger for a while.
And, as always when one has been to Calvary,
he returns to life more adequate. Great truths
have fed his soul.*

*We are acquainted with the words of Christ at
the Cross. Less so are we familiar with the
the words of men around the Cross. These
meditations probe the latter.*

Words of Men at the Cross

"Is It I?" • "Hail, Master" • "I Know Not the Man"

"Not This Man . . ." • "Crucify Him, Crucify Him"

"Hail, King of the Jews!" • "Save Thyself"