

THE
HEART
OF THE
CROSS

JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE
PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN

CROSSWAY BOOKS

A MINISTRY OF
GOOD NEWS PUBLISHERS
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

The Heart of the Cross

Copyright © 1999 by James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken

Published by Crossway Books
A ministry of Good News Publishers
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION ©. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

The “NIV” and “New International Version” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by International Bible Society. Use of either trademark requires the permission of International Bible Society.

Cover design: Jon McGrath

Cover photo: Getty Images

First printing, original edition, 1999

First trade paperback edition, 2005

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Boice, James Montgomery, 1938-

The heart of the cross / James Montgomery Boice, Philip Graham Ryken.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-58134-678-6 (tpb alk. paper)

I. Holy Cross. I. Ryken, Philip Graham, 1966- . II. Title.

BT465.B65 1999

232.96—dc21

98-47905

CH	15	14	13	12	11	10	09	08	07	06	05			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

PREFACE



It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the cross of Jesus Christ. For whether we are thinking about Christ's words from the cross, his words about the cross, or the biblical doctrines of the cross, in every case the cross is central to Christianity. Indeed, we are saying more. We are saying that without the cross there is no Christianity. By itself the Incarnation does not provide us with genuine Christianity. It merely gives us sentimental stories for Christmas. The example of Christ alone is not Christianity since no one is saved by imitating Jesus. Even the Resurrection alone is not the essence of biblical religion.

So I repeat, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of what Jesus accomplished for his people on the cross.

Two truths follow. On the one hand, if the cross of Christ is the very heart and essence of Christianity, we should expect that its meaning is simplicity itself. And it is. For example, "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3). What could be plainer than that? Or we read, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). The Bible often presents the cross that way—simply and with the most direct and pressing demand for faith.

On the other hand, if the cross is the very essence of Christianity, we might also expect it to stretch our minds to the utmost as we try to probe its depths. And we find that too. Indeed, we find that in some measure the full meaning of the cross is always well beyond our grasp. In this double sense, the doctrines of the cross might be described by the words one writer used to describe the theology of the fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John.

He called it “a pool in which a child can wade” as well as “an ocean in which an elephant can swim.”

How does one deal with a matter as central, simple, and yet as fully rich and inexhaustible as the cross? What my colleague Philip Ryken and I decided to do was to expound the Bible’s teaching about the cross in three series of Lenten messages at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia where we serve together as pastors. He has done the bulk of this Lenten preaching, handling sixteen of the following twenty-one studies. But I have had the privilege of sharing with him by handling the others. I have been blessed by his preaching, as I trust he has with mine. Together both of us pray that you will be blessed as you reflect with us on the meaning and application of these important Bible texts.

Apart from the cross the Christian religion becomes only a type of human self-deification that leads to arrogance and presumption, a religion that supposes wrongly that we can somehow save ourselves. With the cross at the center, Christianity offers the sole ground for our standing before God as justified men and women and the only adequate motivation for a life of rest in God and genuine self-sacrifice for others. We are led to give all we have because on the cross Jesus gave all he had for us.

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Isaac Watts wrote those words in 1701, and he was right. I trust you will discover this truth in new ways as you read, think about, and pray over these important Bible passages with us.

JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

THE HEART OF GOD

James Montgomery Boice

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know
what they are doing.”

LUKE 23:34



There is something significant about the last words of men and women because when a person comes face to face with death, what he or she is often rises to the surface. Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), the French general and emperor, said, “I die before my time, and my body will be given back to the earth. Such is the fate of him who has been called the great Napoleon. What an abyss between my deep misery and the eternal kingdom of Christ.”

Voltaire (1694-1778), the famous French infidel, is reported to have said to his doctor, “I am abandoned by God and man! I will give you half of what I am worth if you will give me six months’ life.”

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), the brilliant skeptic who corrupted the faith of some of England’s great men, exclaimed, “If I had the whole world, I would give it to live one day. I shall be glad to find a hole to creep out of the world at. I am about to take a leap into the dark.”

FAMOUS “LAST WORDS”

I have always thought it unfortunate that the seven sayings of Jesus on the cross have been called his “last words,” because the perhaps unwitting implication is that Jesus did not rise again and therefore never said anything else. Jesus did rise again, of course. The existence of Christianity is one of the best proofs of that astonishing fact. And Jesus had more to say, even before he returned to heaven forty days after returning to life. Those words are the true “last words,” if any are.

On the other hand, the sayings from the cross, although wrongly called Jesus’ last words, are significant, for several reasons. (1) They show that Jesus was in clear possession of his faculties until the very last moment, when he delivered up his spirit to God. (2) They show that he understood his death to be an atonement for the sin of the world. And (3) they show that he knew his death would be effective in doing that. He was satisfied with what he was doing, and he did not die in despair. Moreover, the words also exhibit his well-known concern and love for other persons, even at the moment of his most acute suffering.

Jesus’ words from the cross are these:

1. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). These words are a prayer for God to forgive those who were crucifying him. They show the merciful heart of the Savior.

2. “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). These words were spoken to the believing thief and were a confident promise of salvation. They show that while life lasts, it is never too late to believe on Jesus and be saved.

3. “Dear woman, here is your son” and “Here is your mother” (John 19:26-27). Here Jesus commended his mother, Mary, to the care of John, one of his disciples. It shows Jesus’ concern for family ties.

4. “I am thirsty” (John 19:28). This request shows the true

humanity of Jesus. But it also shows his concern that every facet of his death be in accord with the Bible's prophecies about him.

5. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46). This statement is the most shattering of all. It reveals more than any other what was really happening on the cross. It teaches the nature of the atonement and what our salvation cost God.

6. "It is finished" (John 19:30). These are the most important words, because they refer not to Jesus' life, as if he were saying, "It is over," but to his atonement for sin. It is because Jesus made a complete and final atonement for sin that we can be sure of our salvation.

7. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). These words show Jesus to have been in control of his life until the very end. They also show that the relationship between himself and the Father, which earlier had in some sense been broken, was now restored.

These sayings have fascinated preachers and laymen for two thousand years. They have been interpreted as teaching seven duties: 1) to forgive our enemies, 2) to have faith in Christ, 3) to honor our parents, 4) to set the highest possible value on the fulfillment of God's Word, 5) to cling to God even in life's darkest moments, 6) to persevere at whatever task God has given us to the very end, and 7) to yield all things, even life itself, to God at God's bidding.

Yet, far more important than looking at these words to learn our duties is to look at them for what they teach us about the nature and work of Christ himself, which is how we are looking at them in this book. They teach that Jesus died to save us from our sin; that is what his coming to earth was all about. They teach that as long as we are alive, it is never too late to turn from our sin and trust in Jesus as our Savior. The dying thief did that, and he was told by Jesus, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). It is our most important wish that as a result of

this book, some might pass from spiritual death to spiritual life, as that man did.

A GREAT FORGIVENESS

We start with the first of these “last” sayings: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). These words were spoken in the first moments of the crucifixion when Jesus, along with the two criminals who were executed with him, was stretched out on the rough timbers and felt excruciating pain as the thick iron nails were driven through the bones of his wrists and feet and the cumbersome cross was hoisted upward and allowed to fall down suddenly into the hole prepared for it. Death by crucifixion was probably the most cruel and lingering mode of execution ever devised by human beings.

But the crucifixion of Jesus was not only *cruel*. In his case it was also *unjust*, because he was innocent of any crime. That very morning the judge in his trial, Pontius Pilate, had declared him innocent—not only once but three times: “I find no basis for a charge against him” (John 18:38; 19:4, 6). Pilate had consented to the crucifixion only because Jesus’ enemies had threatened to send a report to Caesar saying that Pilate was harboring a dangerous insurrectionist, a person who made himself out to be a king. That is why Pilate attached his written notice to the cross: “This is the King of the Jews.” He didn’t want anyone to be able to say that he was soft on political pretenders.

Not only was the crucifixion cruel and unjust. It was a *disgrace* and a *humiliation* too. Cicero, the famous orator, said rightly, although with an exalted sense of Roman dignity and ethnic pride, “To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him is an abomination, to slay him almost an act of murder: to crucify him is—what? There is no word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed.”¹

Here is the situation. Jesus was cruelly, unjustly, and disgracefully executed. Yet in the very moment of his most acute suffer-

ing he prayed for forgiveness for his enemies: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Did God hear that prayer? Of course, though we will never know the full extent of God’s answer until we get to heaven and find out how many who were involved in that unjust trial and crucifixion later repented of their sin and came to believe on Jesus as their Savior.

John Charles Ryle, a great Anglican bishop of the last century, wrote: “We have probably not the least idea how many of the conversions to God at Jerusalem which took place during the first six months after the crucifixion, were the direct reply to this marvelous prayer. Perhaps this prayer was the first step towards the penitent thief’s repentance. Perhaps it was one means of affecting the centurion, who declared our Lord ‘a righteous man,’ and the people who ‘smote their breasts and returned.’ Perhaps the three thousand converted on the day of Pentecost, foremost, it may be at one time among our Lord’s murderers, owed their conversion to this very prayer. . . . We may be sure that this wondrous prayer was heard.”²

Many people have been converted by this prayer since that time too as it has been explained in scores of preaching services. It teaches that Jesus is amazingly compassionate, inexplicably gracious. There is no one on earth, either now or at any other time, who is too far gone in sin or too hard of heart for him to care for. He cares for you and offers you forgiveness for your sin, if you will have it. If you are seeking any encouragement to repent and believe on Christ, this prayer provides it.

FORGIVENESS AT A GREAT COST

There is something else we should understand about this first saying of Jesus from the cross, and it is this: Not only was this a prayer for forgiveness and a great forgiveness at that—it was also a forgiveness prayed for at an enormous cost. This is because forgiveness does not come cheap. And the reason it does not come cheap

is because God is God, the holy and just ruler of the universe, and a just God must act justly. Even God, especially God, must do what is right.

What is right? The right thing is that sin should be punished, evil must be judged. What we should expect if God were to act justly in this situation and do nothing else is that Pilate who judged, the soldiers who killed, the leaders who plotted, and the people who cried out for Jesus' death should have been punished. Because their sin was the great one of murdering the only beloved Son of God, they should have been punished for their sins in hell.

We can understand how God might want to forgive at no cost. We would like to do that too. Who does not want to be forgiving? But how can a just God both forgive and be just at the same time? The answer is the cross. And it is why these particular words were spoken from the cross and not before or in some other situation. It is because Jesus was taking the place of sinners in his death, taking your place and mine, that he was able to pray, "Father, forgive them." God was able to forgive because he was not simply forgetting about or overlooking sin. He was dealing with it. He was providing for its just punishment. But he was punishing it in the person of his Son rather than in the person of the sinner.

This is the very heart of God—forgiving but at a tremendous cost.

That does not always sound right to ears that are more accustomed to the thinking of our secular world than to the teachings of the Bible. But it had better be right, since it is our only hope of being able to stand before God when we ourselves die and are required to give an accounting for our lives. We will not be able to plead innocence of sin, because we are not innocent. Our only hope will be the death of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

Can we believe that? We can, since God himself encourages us to do so. The Bible says, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). This is not only the heart of God. It is the heart of Christianity.

THE LUCKIEST MAN ALIVE

Philip Graham Ryken

“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

LUKE 23:43



The thief on the cross had to be the luckiest man alive. He was nothing more than a low-life criminal, a loser. He had committed a crime. He was convicted for it, and he was crucified for it. So he had no future; he was going nowhere; or worse, he was going to hell. Yet of all the criminals, on all the crosses, on all the hills in the Roman Empire, he was crucified next to Jesus Christ.

Just before he died, just before he plunged into the abyss of eternity, at the last possible instant he received the gift of eternal life. If he had died on any other cross, at any other time, in any other place, he would have been forgotten forever. But he did not die on any other cross, at any other time, in any other place. He died at the Place of the Skull, outside Jerusalem, on a cross right next to the cross Jesus died on. Because he died on *that* cross, he was able to ask for eternal life and hear the beautiful words that Jesus spoke from the cross: “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” He not only heard those words—he went to heaven that very day and has been there ever since.

If that sounds pretty lucky, you can be just as “lucky.” That penitent thief did not get anything from Jesus that you cannot get from him. You can meet Jesus at the cross the same way he did. You do not even have to be crucified for your troubles. But you do have to do three things this bandit did.

FACING UP TO SIN

First, you have to admit you are a sinner. Salvation is for sinners. By *sinner*, I mean someone who lives life in rebellion against God. That rebellion includes everything you might think of as sin—like lying, stealing, adultery, and hypocrisy—and a few things you might not think of—like impatience, greed, pride, unforgivingness, and prayerlessness.

You might think it would be easy for a convicted criminal, dying on a cross, to admit that he is a sinner living in rebellion against God. Not so. There were two criminals who were crucified with Jesus, one on either side of him, but only one of them repented. The other criminal refused to admit he was a sinner. The Bible says, “One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at [Jesus]: ‘Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!’” (v. 39). There was no way he was going to admit he had done anything wrong. He was the kind of man who always looks for someone who is in worse shape than he is, someone he can kick when he is down. Even when he was dying a death by slow torture, he took advantage of his opportunity to pour abuse on the Savior of the world.

It is not easy for sinners to admit that they are sinners. It can be the hardest confession a sinner ever makes. We usually try to make ourselves feel better by finding someone who is worse than we are so we do not have to deal with our own guilty consciences. The minds of sinners are confused. They cannot see clearly into their own hearts. They do not realize how rebellious they are. They do not understand how much God hates sin.

That is what makes the confession of the penitent criminal, the

criminal who became Jesus' friend, so amazing. He said to the unrepentant criminal who was hurling insults at Jesus, "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve." He admitted he was a sinner. He admitted that it was right for him to die for his sins. He admitted that his crucifixion was only a matter of getting his just deserts.

He also admitted that his sins were an offense against God, and not just an offense against humanity. Dying on a cross put the fear of God into him. It should have, because a sinner who lives in rebellion against God ought to be afraid of God . . . if you listen to it. This man listened to his conscience, and he was moved to admit that he was a sinner who deserved to die for his sins. He knew that he deserved not only a physical death at the hands of Rome, but also a spiritual death at the hands of God.

You cannot take your sins with you to paradise. If you want to go there, you have to admit that you are a sinner and thus take the first step to having them removed through faith in Christ.

CONFESSING THAT JESUS IS SINLESS

You will also have to confess that Jesus was not a sinner. That is the second thing the penitent criminal did: he confessed that Jesus is the perfect Son of God. "We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Even though he himself was a sinner, he could tell that Jesus Christ was sinless. It was obvious to him that Jesus had done nothing wrong.

He seems to have figured that out while he was dying on his own cross. Remember the first thing Jesus said on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." The penitent criminal heard those words, and he must have been moved by the forgiving heart of God that was revealed in Jesus'

prayer. He rightly concluded that a man who could pray for his enemies like that must be a perfect man.

In any case, what the penitent criminal said about Jesus was true. Jesus was innocent. He was illegally incarcerated, falsely accused, wrongfully convicted, and unjustly executed. It was the greatest miscarriage of justice the world has ever known. Study the teachings of Jesus, and you will see how good and true all his words were. Examine the biography of Jesus, and you will see how right and perfect all his actions were. The more you get to know Jesus, the clearer it becomes that he was the perfect Son of God. You must confess that Jesus is sinless if you want to get to paradise.

ASKING FOR WHAT JESUS OFFERS

There is one more thing you must do, and that is, ask for the salvation Jesus offers. One of the remarkable things about Luke's history of the two criminals crucified with Jesus is that both of them asked for salvation. Have you ever noticed this? "One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at [Jesus]: 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!'" This man met Jesus Christ face to face at the cross; he asked for salvation, and he did not receive it! That fact should terrify us. It is possible to meet Jesus at the cross and fail to receive salvation!

How is that possible? Both thieves were bad men, and they both asked for salvation. So why didn't they both receive salvation? How can it be that only one thief went to paradise?

For one thing, the unrepentant criminal was not sincere when he asked for salvation. He was insulting Jesus, abusing him with sarcasm. "Aren't you the Christ?" he sneered. He was asking Jesus for salvation with his lips, but he was not trusting Jesus for salvation in his heart. He did not accept Jesus as King.

But there was another problem with his request. He was not asking for the salvation that Jesus actually offers. "Save yourself and us!" he said. That is to say, "Climb down off that cross and

get me out of this mess!” He was not asking for eternal life so much as he was trying to save his skin. He was not trying to get salvation for his soul in the life to come; he was only trying to get protection for his body in the here and now.

Jesus could have delivered that criminal from the cross, of course, but he had more important things to do, like paying for the sins of his people, winning a permanent victory over death, and opening up the pathway to eternal life.

The penitent criminal who became Jesus’ friend and was invited to paradise must have understood some of these things because he did just the opposite of what the unrepentant criminal did: he asked Jesus for the salvation Jesus actually offers. He said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

The penitent thief was asking for an *eternal* salvation. He was asking for something from Jesus in the future, asking that Jesus would remember him when he came into his kingdom. He was not asking to be delivered from the temporary and momentary troubles of this life. He was asking for a lasting and permanent salvation.

The penitent thief also seems to have understood that he would have to wait for that salvation until Jesus had finished his business on the cross. Jesus could not have saved anyone if he had climbed down from the cross. That was part of the unrepentant criminal’s problem: he wanted Jesus to leave the cross. But Jesus had to stay on the cross to win salvation. He had to die first before he could save anybody. Only after he had finished dying for sins could he offer salvation.

The penitent thief was also asking for a *personal* salvation. Notice how he addresses the man next to him on the cross. He calls him “Jesus.” That is not found anywhere else in the Gospels. Usually people addressed Jesus as “Teacher” or “Master.” But this man, convicted criminal that he was, addressed Jesus intimately by his first name. He talked to him in a personal way because he was asking him for a personal salvation.

That is the kind of salvation to ask for because it is exactly the kind of salvation Jesus offers. When we hear what Jesus said on the cross to this penitent criminal, we think the important word is “paradise.” It is true that Jesus has gone to prepare a place in heaven for every sinner who repents (cf. John 14:1-6), but salvation is not really about paradise. What Jesus offers is better than paradise. He offers intimacy with himself. “Today you will be *with me*,” Jesus said. Being with Jesus is what makes paradise paradise. As that penitent criminal hung on his own cross, he finally found the personal relationship he had been waiting for his whole life—a personal, intimate, love relationship with the living God.

You can have the same thing. You can be as “lucky” as the penitent criminal was, although the Bible teaches that salvation is not a matter of luck. Salvation is a matter of God giving his grace. You can receive that grace. You can meet Jesus at the cross the way the penitent criminal did. But you have to admit that you are sinful and confess that Jesus is sinless. You have to ask Jesus for the eternal, personal salvation that he offers. When you do, Jesus will give you the same answer he gave to the criminal: “I tell you the truth, . . . you will be with me in paradise.”

FAMILY TIES

Philip Graham Ryken

“Dear woman, here is your son.” “Here is your mother.”

JOHN 19:26-27



In his first two words from the cross, Jesus forgave his enemies and invited his friends to paradise. Now he has to take care of some family business. In order to understand what that business was about, we need to learn some family history.

JESUS STRAINED HIS FAMILY TIES

It all began with what people these days would call a problem pregnancy. Mary and Joseph were engaged to be married, but before they had intercourse, Mary discovered that she was carrying a baby. An angel explained to Mary and her fiancé that the child had been conceived by the Holy Spirit. They believed God, but it was not the easiest thing in the world for everyone else to understand. People in Nazareth could do a little arithmetic. They could tell that Mary was further along than she ought to be. And if you think that was easy to live down, then you have never lived in a small town with small-town gossip.

After Jesus was born, Mary was given a scare. She took Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised, and she was given

this prophecy: “A sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2:35). If you think that is the kind of forecast a young mother likes to hear, then you have never had someone cast a long, dark shadow over your maternity.

Then there was that little junket to Egypt. King Herod heard that a king had been born and felt threatened. So he ordered all the infants of Judea to be put to death. Joseph took Mary and Jesus, and they fled to Egypt (Matt. 2:7-18). If you think that was a fun vacation, then you have never made an international journey with an infant crying in the backseat . . . of a donkey.

Or how about the time when Jesus was twelve and the family went up to Jerusalem for Passover? After the feast was over and Mary and Joseph had traveled a full day’s journey back toward Nazareth, they suddenly realized that Jesus was not with his cousins after all. He was gone! If you do not think Mary ran all the way back to Jerusalem with her heart in her throat, then you have never lost track of a child in a shopping mall. Three days later—when they finally found Jesus—he was talking theology with the scholars at the temple. His mother said, “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.” “And after all we’ve done for you!” she might have added.

Jesus simply said, with some astonishment, “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:41-50).

I am not saying that Jesus was a problem child, although there were times when it may have seemed that way to his parents. Jesus was a good boy; the Bible says that he obeyed his parents (Luke 2:51). But make no mistake: as Jesus was growing up, his unique identity as the Son of God and his unique ministry as the Savior of the world did put a strain on his family ties.

All of that was nothing compared to what the family went through when Jesus began his teaching ministry. He abandoned the family business to become an itinerant preacher. If you think that was easy to accept, then you have never had a child quit a steady job in order to freelance. One of the first things Jesus did

in his new career was alienate his neighbors, declaring that “no prophet is accepted in his home town” (Luke 4:24). They drove him out of town, of course. That must have been something for the women to talk about when they gathered to draw water from the well in Nazareth.

Then there was the time when Mary tried to help Jesus with his ministry. They were at a wedding in Cana, and the host had run out of wine. Mary suggested that Jesus should do something about it. You can hear the rebuke in Jesus’ voice: “Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come” (John 2:4). His identity as the Son of God had to take precedence over his identity as the son of Mary.

Or how about the time Mary and the rest of her boys heard that Jesus was teaching in a nearby town? There was a large crowd, and they had to wait around outside for a while. Finally someone sent a message to Jesus: “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ He replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:46-50). Jesus was redefining his family in spiritual terms as those who do the will of God.

JESUS BROKE HIS FAMILY TIES

Finally, Jesus broke his family ties altogether. They had been strained before, but they were broken at the cross. What anguish Mary endured at the cross where her eldest son was crucified! “Dear woman,” Jesus said to Mary. Not even “mother,” as a son ought to say, but just “woman.” “Here is your son.” Mary was no longer to be his mother, and Jesus was no longer to be her son.

Right up until that moment, Mary may well have held out the hope that her son would not have to die. She knew that Jesus had the power to perform miracles. She knew that he could call upon legions of angels to deliver him. She knew that Jesus could

even get himself down from the cross. But when he said, “Dear woman, here is your son,” she knew that Jesus was taking his leave of her in order to die. His words to her from the cross must have been the soul-piercing sword she had dreaded for so long.

Those words may have been like a sword, but there was also tenderness in them. “*Dear* woman,” he called her. Jesus was speaking to Mary with real affection, speaking to her in love. It was really because of his great love for her that he said what he said. Jesus was committing Mary to the care of the disciple whom he loved. That disciple was probably John himself, who was an eyewitness of the crucifixion and a recipient of the love of Christ. John was to become like a son to Mary and was to treat her like his own mother. And John did just what Jesus had told him to do. “From that time on, this disciple took her into his home” (v. 27).

Jesus teaches us by this example to love our mothers. That is so obvious, it seems unnecessary to say it. Yet it needs to be said because we live in a culture that believes that family ties are made to be broken. Robertson McQuilkin gives this glimpse of contemporary attitudes about loving family members:

I attended a workshop in which an . . . expert told us that there were two reasons people keep a family member at home rather than in a nursing facility: economic necessity or feelings of guilt. Afterwards I spoke with her privately, trying to elicit some other possible motive for keeping someone at home. But she insisted those were the only two motives. Finally I asked, “What about love?” “Oh, she replied, “we put that under guilt.” So much for love.’

We live in a culture that devalues the old and infirm, even discards them.

Jesus teaches us to do just the opposite. He teaches us to love our siblings, cherish our children, and honor our parents (cf. Exod. 20:12). Jesus teaches us to provide for the needs of our family members, especially as they grow old. Even though Jesus is at the point where he can no longer care for his mother himself, he

entrusts her to one of his most trusted friends. He wants his mother to have a place to live and food to eat. He also wants her to have the love and support of a family. William Barclay says, “There is something infinitely moving in the fact that Jesus in the agony of the cross, in the moment when the salvation of the world hung in the balance, thought of the loneliness of his mother in the days when he was taken away.”²

JESUS BINDS NEW FAMILY TIES

There was one more thing Jesus did for his mother, and it was the most important thing. At the same time he broke his ties with Mary as her son, he established a new spiritual relationship with her as her Savior.

Mary first met Jesus at the manger. She was the first person to meet him. She felt him stirring in her womb, gave birth to him, held him in her arms, and nursed him at her breast. Mary met Jesus as her son at the manger, but she did not meet him as her Savior until she met him at the cross. Mary needed to lose Jesus as a son in order to find him as a Savior. Mary needed to take her place with the other disciples, standing as a sinner at the foot of the cross. She needed Jesus to die for her own sins.

There is a poem by Thomas Warton the Elder that may capture something of Mary’s experience in losing her son at the cross:

*Beneath, lo! Mary weeping stands,
In tears most pitifully fair,
And beats the breast, where Christ had hung,
And tears her long dishevelled hair—
“Where can I lay my mournful head?
My son, my king, my God is dead!”³*

That last line explains how Mary’s relationship with Jesus has been transformed: “My son, my king, my God.” At the beginning Jesus was her son. Now he is her God and King, for she has met him at the cross.

If Mary needed to meet Jesus at the cross, then you need to

meet him there too. If Mary needed to stand as a sinner at the cross, then you need to stand as a sinner at the cross. If Mary needed Jesus to die for her sins, then you need Jesus to die for your sins. If Mary needed to trust in Jesus for her salvation, then you need to trust in Jesus for your salvation.

Once you have met Jesus at the cross that way, something wonderful happens. You become a member of God's family. That is how it was for Mary. After Jesus died, was raised from the dead, and was taken into heaven, the first Christians gathered to pray in the upper room of a building on the Mount of Olives. The Bible mentions the names of some of the disciples who were there. Then it says, "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Acts 1:14). That is a snapshot of Mary in her new family. She is with her brothers and sisters in Christ, praising God for the salvation that they all share together in Jesus Christ. The old family ties have been broken, but Jesus has established new family ties.

You can belong to that same family. If you meet Jesus at the cross the way Mary did, admitting that you are a sinner and trusting that Jesus died on the cross for your sins, then you will be welcomed into God's family. When you accept the salvation that Jesus offers, God adopts you into his family as his own son or daughter.

God's daughters and sons discover that their new family ties are stronger than any they have ever experienced before. If you come from a broken family, then Jesus invites you to participate in the family you have often longed for. He invites you to receive more support, affection, intimacy, and joy than you have ever dared to dream were possible. If you come from a strong and loving family, you will find that the ties in your new spiritual family are even stronger and better than those old family ties. The new family ties are stronger because they are bound by the love of God himself. And they are better because they cannot be broken, even by death.

NOTES



CHAPTER 1: THE HEART OF GOD

1. Cicero, *The Verrine Orations*, trans. L. H. G. Greenwood, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), vol. 2, p. 170.
2. John Charles Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: St. Luke* (Cambridge, England: James Clarke & Co., 1976), vol. 2, p. 463.

CHAPTER 3: FAMILY TIES

1. Robertson McQuilkin, "Muriel's Blessing," *Christianity Today*, February 5, 1996, p. 32.
2. William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), vol. 2, p. 257.
3. Thomas Warton the Elder, "Ode on the Passion," in Robert Atwan and Lawrence Wieder, eds., *Chapters into Verse: Poetry in English Inspired by the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), vol. 2, pp. 214-215.

CHAPTER 4: HUMAN AFTER ALL

1. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 5, *Matthew to John* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), p. 1200.

CHAPTER 5: FORSAKEN, YET NOT FORSAKEN

1. Jonathan Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Crown, 1988), pp. 67, 69.
2. J. Blinzler, *The Trial of Jesus* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1959), p. 261.

CHAPTER 6: MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

1. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "Christ's Dying Word for His Church," in *Sermons on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1966), p. 170.