

They Call Him Savior - Part 2

by Max Lucado

Max Lucado's sermon explores the themes of second chances, emotional authenticity, and the transformative power of faith through the stories of Peter and Thomas.

Duration: 1:28:02

Scripture: Matthew 26:34-75, Mark 16:7

Topics: "Savior"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on the importance of seizing and cherishing moments of contentment in life. He shares a personal experience of holding his daughter and feeling a deep sense of joy and peace. The speaker emphasizes the need to pay attention to the miracles happening around us, such as the beauty of nature and the daily testimony of God on the cross. He also shares a touching story of a young girl who longs to return home and receives an invitation of unconditional love and acceptance. The sermon encourages listeners to appreciate and embrace the moments of contentment and to trust in God's love and grace.

Transcript

This is side three of No Wonder They Call Him the Saviour, by Max Lucado. It was like discovering the prize in a box of Cracker Jacks, or spotting a little pearl in a box of buttons, or stumbling across a ten-dollar bill in a drawer full of envelopes. It was small enough to overlook, only two words.

I know I'd read that passage a hundred times, but I'd never seen it. Maybe I'd passed over it in the excitement of the Resurrection, or, since Mark's account of the Resurrection is by far the briefest of the four, maybe I'd just not paid too much attention. Or maybe, since it's in the last chapter of the Gospel, my weary eyes had already read too quickly to note this little phrase.

But I won't miss it again. It's highlighted in yellow and underlined in red. You might want to do the same.

Look in Mark, chapter 16. Read the first five verses about the women's surprise when they find the stone moved to the side. And then feast on that beautiful phrase spoken by the angel.

He is not here. He is risen. But don't pause for too long.

Go a bit further. Get your pencil ready and enjoy this jewel in the seventh verse. Here it comes.

The verse reads like this. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. Read it again.

This time I'll emphasize the words. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. Now, tell me if that's not a hidden treasure.

If I might paraphrase the words. Don't stay here. Go tell the disciples.

A pause. Then a smile. And especially tell Peter that he's going before you to Galilee.

Oh, what a line. It's as if all of heaven had watched Peter fall. And it's as if all of heaven wanted to help him back up again.

Be sure and tell Peter that he's not left out. Tell him that one failure doesn't make a flop. No wonder they call it the gospel of the second chance.

Not many second chances exist in the world today. Just ask the kid who didn't make the Little League team. Or the fellow who got the pink slip.

Or the mother of the three who got dumped for a pretty little thing. Not many second chances. Nowadays it's more like it's now or never.

Around here we don't tolerate incompetence. Gotta get tough to get going. Not much room at the top.

Three strikes and you're out. It's a dog-eat-dog world. Jesus has a simple answer to our masochistic mania.

It's a dog-eat-dog world, he would say. Then don't live with the dogs. That makes sense, doesn't it? Why let a bunch of other failures tell you how much of a failure you are? Sure you can have a second chance.

Just ask Peter. One minute he felt lower than a snake's belly. And the next minute he was the high hog at the trough.

Even the angels wanted this distraught netcaster to know that it wasn't over. The message came loud and clear from the Celestial Throne Room through the Divine Courier. Be sure and tell Peter that he gets to bat again.

Those who know these types of things say that the Gospel of Mark is really the transcribed notes and dictated thoughts of Peter. If this is true, then it was Peter himself who included these two words. And if these really are his words, I can't help but imagine that the old fisherman had to brush away a tear and swallow a lump when he got to this point in the story.

It's not every day that you get a second chance. Peter must have known that. The next time he saw Jesus he got so excited that he barely got his britches on before he jumped into the cold water of the Sea of Galilee.

It was also enough, so they say, to cause this backwoods Galilean to carry the Gospel of the second chance all the way to Rome, where they killed him. If you've ever wondered what would cause a man to be willing to be crucified upside down, maybe now you know. It's not every day that you find someone who will give you a second chance, much less someone who will give you a second chance every day.

But in Jesus, Peter found both. Thomas. He defies tidy summary.

Oh, I know, we've labeled him somewhere in some sermon. Somebody called him Doubting Thomas. And the nickname stuck.

And it's true, he did doubt. It's just that there was more to it than that. There was more to his questioning than a simple lack of faith.

It was more due to a lack of imagination. You see it in more than just the resurrection story. Consider, for instance, the time that Jesus was talking in all eloquence about the home he was going to prepare.

Though the imagery wasn't easy for Thomas to grasp, he was doing his best. You can see his eyes filling his face as he tries to envision a big White House on St. Thomas Avenue. And just when Thomas is about to get the picture, Jesus assumes, You know the way that I am going.

Thomas blinks a time or two, looks around at the other blank faces, and then bursts out with candid aplomb. Lord, we don't know where you're going, so how can we know the way? Thomas didn't mind speaking his mind. If you don't understand something, say so.

His imagination would only stretch so far. And then there was the time that Jesus told his disciples he was going to be with Lazarus, even though Lazarus was already dead and buried. Thomas couldn't imagine what Jesus was referring to.

But if Jesus was wanting to go back into the arena with those Jews who had tried once before to stone him, Thomas wasn't going to let him face them alone. So he patted his trusty sidearm and said, Let's die with him. Thomas had spent his life waiting on the Messiah, and now that the Messiah was here, Thomas was willing to spend his life for him.

Not much imagination, but a lot of loyalty. Perhaps it's this trait of loyalty that explains why Thomas wasn't in the upper room when Jesus appeared to the other apostles. You see, I think Thomas took the death of Jesus pretty hard.

Even though he couldn't quite comprehend all the metaphors that Jesus at times employed, he was still willing to go to the end with him. But he had never expected that the end would come so abruptly and prematurely. As a result, Thomas was left with a crossword puzzle full of unanswered riddles.

On the one hand, the idea of a resurrected Jesus was too far-fetched for dogmatic Thomas. His limited creativity left little room for magic or razzle-dazzle. Besides, he wasn't about to set himself up to be disappointed once again.

One disappointment was enough, thank you. Yet, on the other hand, his loyalty made him yearn to believe. As long as there was the slimmest thread of hope, he wanted to be counted in.

His turmoil then came from a fusion between his lack of imagination and his unwavering loyalty. He was too honest with life to be gullible, and yet was too loyal to Jesus to be unfaithful. In the end, it was this realistic devotion that caused him to utter the now famous condition, Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my fingers where the nails were, I will not believe it.

So I guess you could say that he did doubt. But it was a different kind of doubting that springs not from timidity or mistrust, but from a reluctance to believe the impossible and a simple fear of being hurt twice.

Most of us are the same way, aren't we? In our world of budgets, long-range planning and computers, don't we find it hard to trust in the unbelievable? Don't most of us tend to scrutinize life behind furrowed brows and walk with cautious steps? It's hard for us to imagine that God can surprise us.

To make a little room for miracles today, well, it's just not sound thinking. As a result, we, like Thomas, find it hard to believe that God can do the very thing that he is best at, replacing death with life. Our infertile imaginations bear little hope that the improbable will occur.

We then, like Thomas, let our dreams fall victim to doubt. We make the same mistake that Thomas made. We forget that impossible is one of God's favorite words.

How about you? How's your imagination these days? When was the last time you let some of your dreams elbow out your logic? When was the last time you imagined the unimaginable? When was the last time you dreamed of an entire world united in peace or all believers united in fellowship? When was the last time you dared dream of the day when every mouth will be fed and every nation dwell in peace? When was the last time you dreamed about every creature on earth hearing about the Messiah? Has it been a while since you claimed God's promise to do more than all we ask or imagine? Though it went against every logical bone in his body, Thomas said he would believe if he could have just a little proof. And Jesus, who is ever so patient with our doubting, gave Thomas exactly what he requested. He extended his hands one more time.

And was Thomas ever surprised? He did a double take, fell flat on his face, and cried, My Lord and my God! Jesus must have smiled. He knew he had a winner in Thomas. Any time you mix loyalty with a little imagination, you've got a man of God on your hands, a man who will die for a truth.

Just look at Thomas. Legend has him hopping a freighter to India, where they had to kill him to get him to quit talking about his home prepared in the world to come, and his friend who came back from the dead. They're coming as friends, secret friends, but friends nonetheless.

You can take him down now, soldier. I'll take care of him. The afternoon sun is high as they stand silently on the hill.

It's much quieter than it was earlier. Most of the crowd has left. The two thieves gasp and groan as they hang near death.

A soldier leans a ladder against the center tree, ascends it, and removes the stake that holds the beam to the upright part of the cross. Two of the other soldiers, glad that the day's work is nearing completion, assist with the heavy chore of laying the cypress cross piece and body on the ground. Careful now, says Joseph.

The five-inch nails are wrenched from the hard wood, freeing the limp hands. The body that encased the Savior is lifted and laid on a large rock. He's yours, says the sentry.

The cross is set aside, soon to be carried into the supply room until it's needed again. The two are not accustomed to this type of work, yet their hands move quickly to their tasks. Joseph of Arimathea kneels behind the head of Jesus and tenderly wipes the wounded face.

With a soft wet cloth he cleans the blood that came in the garden, that came from the lashings and from the crown of thorns. With this done, he closes the eyes tight. Nicodemus unrolls some linen sheeting that

Joseph brought and places it on the rock beside the body.

The two Jewish leaders lift the lifeless body of Jesus and set it on the linen. Parts of the body are now anointed with perfume spices. As Nicodemus touches the cheeks of the Master with aloe, the emotion he's been containing escapes.

His own tear falls on the face of the crucified King. He pauses to brush away another. The middle-aged Jew looks longingly at the young Galilean.

It's a bit ironic that the burial of Jesus should be conducted not by those who had boasted they would never leave, but by two members of the Sanhedrin, two representatives of the religious group that killed the Messiah. But then again, of all who were indebted to this broken body, none were as much as those two. Many had been freed from the deep pits of slavery and sickness.

Many had been found in the darkest of tunnels, tunnels of perversion and death. But no tunnel was ever darker than the tunnel from which these two had been rescued, the tunnel of religion. They don't come any darker.

Its caverns are many and its pitfalls are deep. Its subterranean stench reeks with the spirit of good intentions. Its endless maze of channels are cluttered with the disoriented.

Its paths are covered with cracked wineskins and spilt wine. You wouldn't want to carry a young faith into this tunnel. Young minds, probing with questions, quickly stale in the numbing darkness.

Fresh insights are squelched in order to protect fragile traditions. Originality is discouraged, curiosity is stifled, priorities are reshuffled. Christ had nothing but stinging words of rebuke for those who dwell in the caverns.

Hypocrites, He called them. Godless actors, fence-builders, inflexible judges, unauthorized hedge-trimmers, hair-splitters, blind guides, white-washed tombs, snakes, vipers. Bang! Bang! Bang! Jesus had no room for those who specialized in making religion a warlord and faith a footrace.

No room at all. Joseph and Nicodemus were tired of it, too. They had seen it for themselves.

They had seen the list of rules and regulations. They had watched the people tremble under unbearable burdens. They had heard the hours of senseless wrangling over legalistic details.

They had worn the robes and sat at the places of honor and seen the word of God be made void. They had seen religion become the crutch that cripples, and they wanted out. It was a sizable risk.

The high society of Jerusalem wasn't going to look too kindly on two of their religious leaders burying a revolutionist. But for Joseph and Nicodemus the choice was obvious. The stories this young preacher from Nazareth told rang with a truth that they had never heard in the cavern.

And besides, they'd much rather save their souls than their skin. So they lifted the body slowly and carried it to the unused tomb. In doing so, they lit a candle in the cavern.

Supposing these two had been observing the religious world during the last 2,000 years, they probably found things to be not too terribly different. There's still a sizable amount of evil that wears the robe of religion and uses the Bible as a sledgehammer. It's still fashionable to have sacred titles and wear holy

chains, and it's still often the case that one has to find faith in spite of the church instead of in the church.

But they have also observed that just when the religious get too much religion and the righteous get too right, God finds somebody in the cavern who will light a candle. It was lit by Luther at Wittenberg, by Latimer in London, and by Tyndall in Germany. John Knox fanned the flame as a galley slave, and Alexander Campbell did the same as a preacher.

It's not easy to light a candle in a dark cavern. Yet those of us whose lives have been enlightened because of these courageous men are eternally grateful. And of all the acts of enlightenment, there is no doubt which one was the noblest.

You can take him down now, soldier. I'll take care of him. Before we bid goodbye to those present at the cross, I have one more introduction to make.

This introduction is very special. There was one group in attendance that day whose role was critical. They didn't speak much, but they were there.

Few noticed them, but that's not surprising. Their very nature is so silent, they're often overlooked. In fact, the gospel writers scarcely gave them a reference.

But we do know they were there. They had to be. They had a job to do.

Yes, this representation did much more than witness the divine drama. They expressed it. They captured it.

They displayed the despair of Peter. They betrayed the guilt of Pilate and unveiled the anguish of Judas. They transmitted John's confusion and translated Mary's compassion.

Their prime role, however, was with that of the Messiah. With utter delicacy and tenderness, they offered relief to his pain and expression to his yearning. Who am I describing? You may be surprised.

Tears, those tiny drops of humanity, those round wet balls of fluid that tumble from our eyes, creep down our cheeks and splash on the floor of our hearts. They were there that day. They're always present at such times.

They should be. That's their job. They are miniature messengers, on call twenty-four hours a day to substitute for crippled words.

They drip, drop and pour from the corner of our souls, carrying with them the deepest emotions we possess. They tumble down our faces with announcements that range from the most blissful joy to darkest despair. The principle is simple.

When words are most empty, tears are most apt. A tear stain on a letter says much more than the sum of all its words. A tear falling on a casket says what a spoken farewell never could.

What summons a mother's compassion and concern more quickly than a tear on a child's cheek? What gives more support than a sympathetic tear on the face of a friend? What do you do when words won't come? When all the nouns and verbs lay deflated at your feet, with what do you communicate? When even the loftiest statements stumble, what do you do? Are you one of the fortunate who isn't ashamed to let a tear take over? Can you be so happy that your eyes water and your throat swells? Can you be so

proud that your pupils blur and your vision mists? And in sorrow, do you let your tears decompress that tight chest and untie that knot in your throat, or do you re-root your tears and let them only fall on the inside? Not many of us are good at showing our feelings, you know, especially us fellows. Oh, we can yell and curse and smoke, yes, sir, but tears? Save those for the weak-kneed and timid. I've got a world to conquer.

We do well, guys, to pause and look at the tear-stained faces that appear at the cross. Peter, the burly fisherman, strong enough to yank a full net out of the sea, brave enough to weather the toughest storm, the man who only hours before had bared his sword against the entire Roman guard, but now look at him, weeping, no, wailing, huddled in a corner with his face hidden in his calloused hands. Would a real man be doing this, admitting his fault, confessing his failure, begging forgiveness, or would a real man bottle it up, justify it, rationalize it, keep a stiff upper lip and stand his ground? Has Peter lost his manhood? We know better, don't we? Maybe he's less a man of the world, but less a man of God? No way.

And John, look at his tears, his face swollen with sorrow as he stands eye-level with the bloody feet of his master. Is his emotion a lack of courage? Is his despair a lack of guts? And the tears of Jesus? They came in the garden, I'm sure they came on the cross. Are they a sign of weakness? Do those stains on his cheeks mean he had no fire in his belly or grit in his gut? Of course not.

Here's the point. It's not just tears that are the issue, it's what they represent. They represent the heart, the spirit and the soul of a person.

To put a lock and key on your emotions is to bury part of your Christ-likeness, especially when you come to Calvary. You can't go to the cross with just your head and not your heart. It doesn't work that way.

Calvary is not a mental trip, it's not an intellectual exercise, it's not a divine calculation or a cold theological principle. It's a heart-splitting hour of emotion. Don't walk away from it, dry-eyed and unstirred.

Don't just straighten your tie and clear your throat. Don't allow yourself to descend Calvary cool and collected. Please, please pause.

Look again. Those are nails in those hands. That's God on that cross.

It's us who put him there. Peter knew it, John knew it, Mary knew it. They knew a great price was being paid.

They knew who really pierced his side. They also somehow knew that history was being remade. That's why they wept.

They saw the Savior. God, may we never be so educated, may we never be so mature, may we never be so religious that we can see your passion without tears. They aren't exactly what you'd call a list of who's who in purity and sainthood.

In fact, some of their antics and attitudes would make you think of the Saturday night crowd at the county jail. What few halos there are among this befuddled bunch could probably use a bit of straightening and polish. Yet, strange as it may seem, it's this very humanness that makes these people refreshing.

They're so refreshing that should you ever need a reminder of God's tolerance, you'd find it in these people. If you ever wonder how in the world God could use you to change the world, look at these people.

What people? The people God used to change history.

A ragbag of ne'er-do-wells and has-beens who found hope not in their performance, but in God's proverbially open arms. Let's start with Abraham. Though eulogized by Paul for his faith, this father of a nation wasn't without his weaknesses.

He had a fibbing tongue that wouldn't stop. One time, in order to save his neck, he let the word get out that Sarah wasn't his wife, but his sister, which was only half true. And then, not long later, he did it again.

And Abraham said of Sarah, his wife, she is my sister. Twice he traded in his integrity for security. That's what you call confidence in God's promises? Can you build a nation on that kind of faith? God can.

God took what was good and forgave what was bad, and used old forked tongue to start a nation. Another household name is Moses, definitely one of history's greatest. But until he was eighty years old, he looked like he wouldn't amount to much more than a once-upon-a-time prince turned outlaw.

Would you choose a wanted murderer to lead a nation out of bondage? Would you call upon a fugitive to carry the Ten Commandments? God did. And he called him, of all places, right out of a sheep pasture. Called his name through a burning bush.

There, with knees knocking and, who, me? written all over his face, Moses agreed to go back into the ring. And what can you say about a fellow whose lust got so lusty that he got a woman pregnant, tried to blame it on her husband, had her husband killed, and then went on living like nothing ever happened? Well, you could say he was a man after God's own heart. David's track record left little to be desired, but his repentant spirit was unquestionable.

Then comes Jonah, God's ambassador to Nineveh. Jonah, however, had other ideas. He had no desire to go to that heathen city, so he opt on another boat while God wasn't looking, or at least that's what Jonah thought.

God put him in a whale's belly to bring him back to his senses. But even the whale couldn't stomach this missionary for too long. A good burp and Jonah went flying over the surf and landed big-eyed and repentant on the beach, which just goes to show you that you can't keep a good man down.

And on and on the stories go. Elijah the prophet who pouted, Solomon the king who knew too much, Jacob the wheeler-dealer, Gomer the prostitute, Sarah the woman who giggled at God. One story after another of God using man's best and overcoming man's worst.

Even the genealogy of Jesus is salted with a dubious character or two. Tamar the adulteress, Rahab the harlot, and Bathsheba who tended to take baths in questionable locations. The reassuring lesson is clear.

God used and uses people to change the world. People, not saints or superhumans or geniuses, but people, crooks, creeps, lovers and liars. He uses them all.

And what they may lack in perfection, God makes up for in love. Jesus later summarized God's stubborn love with a parable. He told about a teenager who decided that life at the farm was too slow for his tastes.

So, with pockets full of inheritance money, he set out to find the big time. What he found instead were hangovers, fair-weather friends, and long unemployment lines. When he had had just about as much of the pig's life as he could take, he swallowed his pride, dug his hands deeply into his empty pockets, and

began the long walk home, all the while rehearsing a speech that he planned to give to his father.

He never used it. Just when he got to the top of the hill, his father, who had been waiting at the gate, saw him. The boy's words of apology were quickly muffled by the father's words of forgiveness, and the boy's weary body fell into his father's opened arms.

The same open arms welcomed him that had welcomed Abraham, Moses, David, and Jonah. No wagging fingers, no clenched fists. No, I told you so, slaps.

Or, where have you been, interrogations. No crossed arms, no black eyes or fat lips. No, only sweet open arms.

If you ever wonder how God can use you to make a difference in your world, just look at those He has already used, and take heart. Look at the forgiveness found in those open arms, and take courage. And by the way, never were those arms opened so wide as they were on the Roman cross.

One arm extended back into history, and the other reaching into the future. An embrace of forgiveness offered for anyone who will come. A hen gathering her chicks, a father receiving his own, a Redeemer redeeming the world.

No wonder they call him the Saviour. Ah, an hour of contentment, a precious moment of peace, a few minutes of relaxation. Each of us has a setting in which contentment pays a visit.

Early in the morning, while the coffee is hot and everyone else is asleep. Late at night, as you kiss your six-year-old's sleepy eyes. In a boat on a lake, when memories of a life well-lived are vivid.

In the companionship of a well-worn, dog-eared, even tear-stained Bible. In the arms of a spouse, at Thanksgiving dinner, or sitting near the Christmas tree. An hour of contentment, an hour when deadlines are forgotten and strivings have ceased.

An hour when what we have overshadows what we want. An hour when we realize that a lifetime of blood-sweating and head-hunting can't give us what the cross gave us in one day, a clean conscience and a new start. But, unfortunately, in our squirrel cages of schedules, contests and side-glancing, hours like these are about as common as one-legged monkeys.

In our world, contentment is a strange street vendor, roaming, looking for a home, but seldom finding an open door. This old salesman moves slowly from house to house, tapping on windows, knocking on doors, offering his wares, an hour of peace, a smile of acceptance, a sigh of relief. But his goods are seldom taken.

We are too busy to be content. Which is crazy, since the reason we kill ourselves today is because we think it will make us content tomorrow. Not now, thank you.

I've too much to do, we say. Too many marks to be made, too many achievements to be achieved, too many dollars to be saved, too many promotions to be earned. And besides, if I'm content, someone might think I've lost my ambition.

So the street vendor named Contentment moves on. When I ask him why so few welcomed him into their homes, his answer left me convicted. I charge a high price, you know.

My fee is steep. I ask people to trade in their schedules, frustrations and anxieties. I demand that they put a torch to their fourteen-hour days and sleepless nights.

You'd think I'd have more buyers. But he scratched his beard, then added pensively, But people seem strangely proud of their ulcers and headaches. Can I say something a bit personal? I'd like to give a testimony, a live one.

I'm here to tell you that I welcomed this bearded friend into my living room this morning. It wasn't easy. My list of things was, for the most part, undone.

My responsibilities were just as burdensome as ever. Calls to be made, letters to be written, checkbooks to be balanced. But a funny thing happened on the way to the rat race that made me slip into neutral.

Just as I got my sleeves rolled up, just as the old engine was starting to purr, just as I was getting up a good head of steam, my infant daughter Jenna needed to be held. She had a stomachache. Mom was in the bath, so it fell to Daddy to pick her up.

She's three weeks old today. At first I started trying to do things with one hand and hold her with the other. You're smiling.

You've tried that too? Well, just when I realized that it was impossible, I also realized that it was not at all what I was wanting to do. I sat down and held her tight little tummy against my chest. She began to relax.

A big sigh escaped her lungs. Her whimpers became gurgles. She slid down my chest until her little ear was right on top of my heart.

That's when her arms went limp. And she fell asleep. And that's when the street vendor knocked at my door.

Good-bye, schedule. See you later, routine. Come back tomorrow, deadlines.

Hello, contentment. Come on in. So here we sit.

Contentment, my daughter, and I. Pen in hand, notepad on Jenna's back. She'll never remember this moment, and I'll never forget it. The sweet fragrance of a moment captured fills the room.

The taste of an opportunity seized sweetens my mouth. The sunlight of a lesson learned illuminates my understanding. This is one moment that didn't get away.

The tasks, they'll get done. The calls, they'll get made. The letters, they'll be written.

And you know what? They'll get done with a smile. I don't do this enough, but I'm going to do it more. In fact, I was thinking of giving that street vendor a key to my door.

By the way, contentment, what are you doing this afternoon? There was some dice-throwing that went on at the foot of the cross. Imagine this scene. The soldiers are huddled in a circle, their eyes turned downward.

The criminal above them is forgotten. They gamble for some used clothes. The tunic, the cloak, the sandals are all up for grabs.

Each soldier lays his luck on the hard earth, hoping to expand his wardrobe at the expense of a cross-killed carpenter. I've wondered what that scene must have looked like to Jesus. As he looked downward past his bloody feet at the circle of gamblers, what did he think? What emotions did he feel? He must have been amazed.

Here are common soldiers witnessing the world's most uncommon event, and they don't even know it. As far as they're concerned, it's just another Friday morning, and he's just another criminal. Come on, hurry up, it's my turn.

All right, all right, this throw is for the sandals. Casting lots for the possessions of Christ. Heads ducked, eyes downward, cross forgotten.

The symbolism is striking. Do you see it? It makes me think of us, the religious, those who claim heritage at the cross. I'm thinking of all of us, every believer in the land, the stuffy, the loose, the strict, the simple, upper church, lower church, spirit-filled, millennialists, evangelical, political, mystical, literal, cynical, robes, collars, three-piece suits, born-againers, ameners.

I'm thinking of us. I'm thinking that we aren't so unlike those soldiers, I'm sorry to say. We, too, play games at the foot of the cross.

We compete for members, we scramble for status, we deal out judgments and condemnations. Competition, selfishness, personal gain, it's all there. We don't like what the other did, so we take the sandal we won and walk away in a huff.

So close to the timber, yet so far from the blood. We are so close to the world's most uncommon event, but we act like common crapshooters, huddled in bickering groups and fighting over silly opinions. How many pulpit hours have been wasted on preaching the trivial? How many churches have tumbled at the throes of miniscuity? How many leaders have saddled their pet peeves, drawn their swords of bitterness, and launched into battle against brethren over issues that aren't worth discussing? So close to the cross, but so far from the Christ.

We specialize in I-am-right rallies. We write books about what the other does wrong. We major in finding gossip and becoming experts in unveiling weaknesses.

We split into little huddles and then, God forbid, we split again. Another name, another doctrine, another error, another denomination, another poker game. Our Lord must be amazed.

Those selfish soldiers we smirk with our thumbs in lapels, they were so close to the cross and yet so far from the Christ. And yet, are we so different? Our divisions are so numerous that we can't be catalogued. There are so many offshoots that even the offshoots have shoots.

Now, really, are our differences that divisive? Are our opinions that obtrusive? Are our walls that wide? Is it that impossible to find a common cause? May they all be one, Jesus prayed. One. Not one in groups of two thousand, but one in one.

One church, one faith, one Lord. Not Baptist, not Methodist, not Adventist. Just Christians.

No denominations, no hierarchies, no traditions, just Christ. Too idealistic? Impossible to achieve? I don't think so. Harder things have been done, you know.

For example, once upon a tree a creator gave his life for his creation. Maybe all we need are a few hearts that are willing to follow suit. What about you? Can you build a bridge, toss a rope, span a chasm, pray for someone? Pray for oneness? Can you be the soldier who snaps to his senses, jumps to his feet, and reminds the rest of us, hey, that's God on that cross? The similarity between the soldier's game and our game is scary.

What did Jesus think? What does he think today? There is still dice-throwing going on, and it is at the foot of the cross. The fog of the broken heart. It's a dark fog that slyly imprisons the soul and refuses easy escape.

It's a silent mist that eclipses the sun and beckons the darkness. It's a heavy cloud that honors no hour and respects no person. Depression, discouragement, disappointments, doubt, all are companions of this dreaded presence.

The fog of the broken heart disorients our life. It makes it hard to see the road. Dim your lights, wipe off the windshield, slow down, do what you wish, nothing helps.

When this fog encircles us, our vision is blocked and tomorrow is a forever away. When this billowy blackness envelops us, the most earnest words of help and hope are but vacant phrases. If you've ever been betrayed by a friend, you know what I mean.

If you've ever been dumped by a spouse or abandoned by a parent, you've seen this fog. If you've ever placed a spade of dirt on a loved one's casket or kept vigil at a dear one's bedside, you too recognize this cloud. If you've been in this fog or are in it now, you can be sure of one thing.

You're not alone. Even the saltiest of sea captains have lost their bearings because of the appearance of this unwanted cloud. Like the comedian said, if broken hearts were commercials, we'd all be on TV.

Think back over the last two or three months. How many broken hearts did you encounter? How many wounded spirits did you witness? How many stories of tragedy did you read about? My own reflection is sobering. The woman who lost her husband and son in a freak car wreck.

The attractive mother of three who was abandoned by her husband. The child who was hit and killed by a passing garbage truck as he was getting off the school bus. His mother, who was waiting for him, witnessed the tragedy.

The parents who found their teenager dead in the forest behind their home. He had hung himself from a tree with his own belt. The list goes on and on, doesn't it? Foggy tragedies.

How they blind our vision and destroy our dreams. Forget any great hopes of reaching the world. Forget any plans of changing society.

Forget any aspirations of moving mountains. Forget all that. Just help me make it through the night.

The Suffering of the Broken Heart Go with me for a moment to witness what was perhaps the foggiest night in history. The scene is very simple. You'll recognize it quickly.

A grove of twisted olive trees, ground cluttered with large rocks, a low stone fence, a dark, dark night. Now, look into the picture. Look closely through the shadowy foliage.

See that person? See that solitary figure? What's he doing? Flat on the ground, face stained with dirt and tears, fists pounding the hard earth, eyes wide with a stupor of fear, hair matted with salty sweat. Is that blood on his forehead? That's Jesus. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Maybe you've seen the classic portrait of Christ in the garden, kneeling beside a big rock, snow-white robe, hands peacefully folded in prayer, a look of serenity on his face, halo over his head, a spotlight from heaven illuminating his golden brown hair. Now, I'm no artist, but I can tell you one thing. The man who painted that picture didn't use the Gospel of Mark as a pattern.

Look what Mark wrote about that pitiful night, that painful night. When they reached a place called Gethsemane, he said to his disciples, Sit here while I pray. And he took Peter and James and John with him.

Horror and dismay came over him, and he said to them, My heart is ready to break with grief. Stop here and stay awake. Then he went forward a little, threw himself on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass him by.

Abba, Father, he said, all things are possible to thee. Take this cup away from me, yet not what I will, but what thou wilt. He came back and found them asleep, and he said to Peter, Asleep, Simon? Were you not able to stay awake for one hour? Stay awake, all of you, and pray that you may be spared the test.

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Once more he went away and prayed. On his return he found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy, and they did not know how to answer him.

The third time he came and said to them, Still sleeping, still taking your ease? Enough! The hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed to sinful men. Up! Let us go forward.

My betrayer is upon us. And look at those phrases. Horror and dismay came over him.

My heart is ready to break with grief. He went a little forward and threw himself on the ground. Does this look like the picture of a saintly Jesus resting in the palm of God? Hardly.

Mark used black paint to describe this scene. We see an agonizing, straining, and struggling Jesus. We see a man of sorrows.

We see a man struggling with fear, wrestling with commitments, and yearning for relief. We see Jesus in the fog of a broken heart. The writer of Hebrews would later pen, During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death.

My, what a portrait! Jesus is in pain. Jesus is on the stage of fear. Jesus is cloaked, not in sainthood, but in humanity.

The next time the fog finds you, you might do well to remember Jesus in the garden. The next time you think that no one understands, re-read the fourteenth chapter of Mark. The next time your self-pity convinces you that no one cares, pay a visit to Gethsemane.

And the next time you wonder if God really perceives the pain that prevails on this dusty planet, listen to Him pleading among the twisted trees. Here's my point. Seeing God like this does wonders for our own suffering.

God was never more human than at this hour. God was never nearer to us than when He hurt. The incarnation was never so fulfilled as in the garden.

As a result, time spent in the fog of pain could be God's greatest gift. It could be the hour that we finally see our Maker. If it's true that in suffering God is most like man, maybe in our suffering we can see God like never before.

The next time you're called to suffer, pay attention. It may be the closest you'll ever get to God. And watch closely.

It could very well be that the hand that extends itself to lead you out of the fog is a pierced one. He couldn't have been over six years old, dirty face, barefooted, torn T-shirt, matted hair. He wasn't too different from the other hundred thousand or so street orphans that roamed Rio de Janeiro.

I was walking to get a cup of coffee at a nearby café when he came up behind me. With my thoughts somewhere between the task I had just finished and the class I was about to teach, I scarcely felt the tap, tap, tap on my hand. I stopped and turned, seeing no one.

I continued on my way. I'd only taken a few steps, however, when I felt another insistent tap, tap, tap. This time I stopped and looked downward, and there he stood.

His eyes were whiter because of his grubby cheeks and coal-black hair. "Pio, senhor," read sir. "Living in Brazil, one has daily opportunities to buy a candy bar or sandwich for these little outcasts.

It's the least one can do.' I told him to come with me, and we entered the sidewalk café. "Coffee for me, and something tasty for my little friend.' The boy ran to the pastry counter and made his choice. Normally these youngsters take the food and scamper back, out into the streets, without a word.

But this little fellow surprised me. The café consisted of a long bar, one end for pastries and the other for coffee. As the boy was making his choice, I went to the other end of the bar and began drinking my coffee.

Just as I was getting my derailed train of thought back on track, I saw him again. He was standing in the café entrance on tiptoe, bread in hand, looking in at the people. "What's he doing?' I thought.

Then he saw me and scurried in my direction. He came and stood in front of me, about eye-level with my belt buckle. The little Brazilian orphan looked up at the big American missionary, smiled a smile that would have stolen your heart, and said, "Obrigado! Thank you.' Then, nervously scratching the back of his ankle with his big toe, he added, "Muito obrigado! Thank you very much.' All of a sudden I had a crazy craving to buy him the whole restaurant.

But before I could say anything, he turned and scampered out the door. As I write this, I am still standing at the coffee bar, my coffee is cold, and I am late for my class, but I still feel the sensation that I felt half an hour ago. And I am pondering this question.

If I am so moved by a street orphan who says, "Thank you for a piece of bread,' how much more is God moved when I pause to thank Him, really thank Him, for saving my soul? When I was ten years old, I had a puppy named Tina. You would have loved her. She was the perfect pet, an irresistible pug-nosed Pekingese pup.

One ear fell over and the other ear stood up straight. She never tired of playing and yet never got in the way. Her mother died when she was born, so the rearing of the puppy fell to me.

I fed her milk from a doll bottle and used to sneak out at night to see if she was warm. I'll never forget the night I took her to bed with me, only to have her mess on my pillow. We made quite a pair, my first brush with parenthood.

One day I went to the backyard to give Tina her dinner. I looked around and spotted her in a corner near the fence. She had cornered a butterfly, as much as a butterfly can be cornered, and was playfully yelping and jumping in the air, trying to catch the butterfly in her mouth.

Amused, I watched her for a few minutes and then called to her. Tina, come here, girl, come here, it's time to eat. What happened next surprised me.

Tina stopped her playing and looked at me, but instead of immediately scampering in my direction, she sat back on her haunches. Then she tilted her head back toward the butterfly, looked back at me, then back to the butterfly, and then back to me. For the first time in her life she had to make a decision.

Her want to longed to pursue the butterfly, which tauntingly awaited her in mid-air. Her should knew she was supposed to obey her master. A classic struggle of the will, a war between the want and the should.

The same question that has faced every adult now faced my little puppy. And do you know what she did? She chased the butterfly. Scurrying and barking, she ignored my call and chased that silly thing until it flew over the fence.

That's when the guilt hit. She stopped at the fence for a long time, sitting back on her hind legs, looking up in the air where the butterfly had made its exit. Slowly the excitement of the chase was overshadowed by the guilt of disobedience.

She turned painfully and walked back to encounter her owner. To be honest, I was a little bit miffed. Her head was ducked as she regretfully trudged across the yard.

For the first time in her life she felt guilty. She had violated her should and had given in to her want. My heart melted, however, and I called her name again.

Sensing forgiveness, Tina darted into my hands. I always was a softy. Now, I may be overdoing it a bit.

I don't know if a dog can really feel guilty or not, but I do know a human can. And whether the sin is as slight as chasing a butterfly or as serious as sleeping with another man's wife, the effects are the same. Guilt creeps in on cat's paws and steals whatever joy might have flickered in our eyes.

Confidence is replaced by doubt, and honesty is elbowed out by rationalization. Exit peace, enter turmoil. Just as the pleasure of indulgence ceases, the hunger for relief begins.

Our vision is short-sighted, and our myopic life now has but one purpose--to find release for our guilt. Or, as Paul questioned for all of us, what a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? That's not a new question. One hardly opens the Bible before he encounters humanity coping, or, more frequently, failing to cope with guilt.

Adam and Eve's rebellion led to shame and hiding. Cain's jealousy led to murder and banishment. And before long the entire human race was afflicted.

Evil abounded, and the people grew wicked. The heart of man grew so cold that he no longer sought relief for his calloused conscience. And in what has to be the most fearful Scripture in the Bible, God says that He was sorry that He had made man on earth.

All of this from man's inability to cope with sin. If only we had a guilt kidney that would pass on our failures, or a built-in eraser that would help us live with ourselves, but we don't. In fact, that's precisely the problem.

Man cannot cope with guilt alone. When Adam was created, he was created without the ability to cope with guilt. Why? Because he was not made to make mistakes.

But when he did, he had no way to deal with it. When God pursued him to help him, Adam covered his nakedness and hid in shame. Man by himself cannot deal with his own guilt.

He must have help from the outside. In order to forgive himself, he must have forgiveness from the one he has offended. Yet man is unworthy to ask God for forgiveness.

That, then, is the whole reason for the cross. The cross did what sacrificed lambs could not do. It erased our sins, not for a year, but for eternity.

The cross did what man could not do. It granted us the right to talk with, love, and even live with God. You can't do that by yourself.

I don't care how many worship services you attend or good deeds you do. Your goodness is insufficient. You can't be good enough to deserve forgiveness.

No one bats a thousand. No one bowls three hundred. No one.

Not you, not me, not anyone. That's why we have guilt in the world. That's why we need a Savior.

You can't forgive me for my sins, nor can I forgive you for yours. Two kids in a mud puddle can't clean each other. They need someone clean, someone spotless.

We need someone clean, too. That's why we need a Savior. What my little puppy needed was exactly what you and I need.

A master who would extend his hands and say, Come on, that's okay. We don't need a master who will judge us on our performance or we'll fall woefully short. Trying to make it to heaven on our own goodness is like trying to get to the moon on a moonbeam.

Nice idea, but try it and see what happens. Listen, quit trying to quench your own guilt. You can't do it.

There's no way. Not with a bottle of whiskey or perfect Sunday school attendance. Sorry, I don't care how bad you are.

You can't be bad enough to forget it. And I don't care how good you are. You can't be good enough to overcome it.

You need a Savior. Though the little farm was only two hours away in mileage, it was at least a century away in time. My friend Sebastio had invited me to his hometown of Maricá, a spot in the road town about 70 miles from Rio de Janeiro.

He was a 26-year-old factory worker who had visited our congregation and was involved in a Bible study. Slow-talking, tall, gangly, this fellow was no city slicker. He was a bit too honest, simple, and quick to smile to have any roots in the urban jungle.

I welcomed the opportunity to see some of the Brazilian countryside. What I didn't know, however, was that I was about to learn a lesson on faith. I could feel my neck muscles relax as we left Rio and her polluted war of traffic in the rear-view mirror.

My little VW sedan leaned in and out of the picturesque roads that wound through the hills. The scenery was not unlike bluegrass Kentucky. Thick, rich green grass, generous valleys, friendly hillsides dotted with grazing herefords.

Soon we pulled off the four-lane onto a two-lane. Then, after a half-dozen bare rights and stay-lefts, we emptied out onto a one-lane dirt road. Normally I come by bus, Sebastiao explained.

I usually have to walk this piece. A piece it was not. For at least another four miles we stirred up the rarely-driven-upon country dust.

In the process we passed a younger fellow leading a mule that carried two churns of milk. That's my cousin, Sebastiao volunteered. He comes by every morning at sun-up with fresh milk.

The thin road carried us through a myriad of colors. The white-trunked eucalyptus trees sat like candles on a cake of dark green pasture. The Brazilian sky was brilliantly blue and the hills rustic and red.

Stop here, I was instructed. I pulled to a stop in front of a big wooden gate suspended between two fence posts. Just a second and I'll open the gate.

If I thought the road we had just taken was small, the one that led us from the gate to the house was invisible. I kept thinking how I needed a jeep as we bounded through the grass, slid under the bushes, crept between the trees, and finally appeared in a clearing next to an old stucco house. Waiting for us was Sebastiao's father, Señor Jose.

He certainly didn't look his seventy-plus years. Eyes shaded by an old straw hat, he smiled a toothless grin when he saw us. His barreled brown chest and narrow waist testified to thousands of hours of hoeing and planting.

His flat bare feet were stained the color of the soil, and his hands were crusty and thick. Good to have you, he welcomed. You could tell he meant it.

The little house made me think of pictures I'd seen of the United States during the Depression. Unlit kerosene lanterns, no electricity. Basins of water to wash up in, no running water.

A wall lined with well-worn hoes, shovels, and picks, no modern equipment. The kitchen was a separate hut that sat next to the front door of the house. I was intrigued by the stove.

It was made of hard baked mud, molded in a long narrow piece about four feet long and three feet tall. A four- or five-inch trough ran down the center to hold the wood. The ever-present pots cooking the beans and rice straddled the hot trough.

I felt a long way from Rio. Señor José took me on a tour through his segment of the world. For thirty-seven years he had plowed and tilled his two acres.

It was obvious that he knew every hole and turn. I fed fourteen mouths off this land, he smiled, fingering a lettuce plant. Where did you say you were from? The U.S. What do you do here? I explained a bit about my work.

He did not respond, but led me over to a little creek where he sat on a rock and began undressing. Gonna take a bath, Pop? Sebastio asked. Yep, it's Saturday.

Well, we'll see you back at the house, then. Sebastio led me through a sugar-cane patch where he cut a stalk, skinned it, and gave me a piece to eat. We made our way back to the house and sat down at the outdoor dinner table.

The benches were worn smooth from decades of use. About that time, Señor José appeared with clean trousers, hat removed, and hair wet. Though we hadn't talked for half an hour, he renewed the conversation exactly where we had left it.

You could tell he'd been thinking. A missionary, huh? Your job must be pretty easy. How's that, I asked? I have no trouble believing in God.

After I see what he has done on my little farm year after year, it is easy to believe. He smiled another toothless grin and yelled to his wife to bring out some beans. What a simple life! No traffic jams, airline schedules, or long lines.

Far removed from Wall Street, IRS, and mortgages. Unacquainted with Johnanine theology, Martin Luther, or Christian evidences. I thought of his faith, his ability to believe, and his surprise that there were some who couldn't.

I compared his faith with others I knew had more difficulty believing. A university student, a wealthy import-export man, an engineer. There was such a difference between José and the others.

His faith was rooted in the simple miracles that he witnessed every day. A small seed becoming a towering tree, a thin stalk pushing back the earth, a rainbow arching in the midst of the thundercloud. Yes, it was easy for him to believe.

I can see why. Someone who witnesses God's daily display of majesty doesn't find the secret of Easter absurd. Someone who depends upon the mysteries of nature for his livelihood doesn't find it difficult to depend on an unseen God for his salvation.

Nature, wrote Jonathan Edwards, is God's greatest evangelist. Faith, wrote Paul, does not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. God's testimony, wrote David, makes wise the simple.

God's testimony. When was the last time you witnessed it? A stroll through knee-high grass in a green meadow, an hour listening to seagulls, or looking at seashells on the beach, or witnessing the shafts of sunlight brighten the snow on a crisp winter dawn. Miracles that almost match the magnitude of the empty

tomb happen all around us.

We only have to pay attention. The old Brazilian farmer gave me a time-tested principle to take home. He reminded me that there is a certain understanding of God on the cross that comes only with witnessing His daily testimony.

There comes a time when we should lay down our pens and commentaries and step out of our offices and libraries. To really understand and believe in the miracles on the cross, we do well to witness God's miracles every day. I still chuckle when I think about the joke I heard about the game warden who got a quick lesson on fishing.

It seems he noticed how this one particular fellow named Sam consistently caught more fish than anyone else. Whereas the other guys would only catch three or four a day, Sam would come in off the lake with a boat full. Stringer after stringer was always packed with freshly caught trout.

The warden, curious, asked Sam his secret. The successful fisherman invited the game warden to accompany him and observe, so the next morning the two met at the dock and took off in Sam's boat. When they got to the middle of the lake, they stopped the boat, and the warden sat back to see how it was done.

Sam's approach was simple. He took out a stick of dynamite, lit it, and threw it in the air. The explosion rocked the lake with such a force that dead fish immediately began to surface.

Sam took out a net and started scooping them up. Well, you can imagine the reaction of the game warden when he recovered from the shock of it all. He began yelling at Sam, You can't do this! I'll put you in jail, buddy! You'll be paying every fine there is in a book! Sam, meanwhile, set his net down and took out another stick of dynamite.

He lit it and tossed it into the lap of the game warden with these words, Are you going to sit there all day complaining, or are you going to fish? The poor warden was left with a fast decision to make. He was yanked in one second from an observer to a participant. A dynamite of a choice had to be made, and they made quickly.

Life is like that. Few days go by without our coming face to face with an uninvited, unanticipated, yet unavoidable decision. Like a crashing snowbank, these decisions tumbled upon us without warning.

They disoriented and bewildered. Quick, immediate, sudden. No counsel, no study, no advice.

Pow! All of a sudden you're hurled into the air of uncertainty, and only instinct will determine if you'll land on your feet. What a good example! Look at the three apostles in the garden, sound asleep, weary from a full meal and a full week. Their eyelids too heavy, they are awakened by Jesus, only to tumble back into dreamland.

The last time, however, they were awakened by Jesus to clanging swords, bright torches, and loud voices. There He is! Let's get Him! A shout, a kiss, a shuffling of feet, a slight skirmish. All of a sudden it's decision time.

No time to huddle, no time to pray, no time to meditate or consult friends. Decision! Peter makes his. Out comes the sword.

Off goes the ear. Jesus rebukes him. Now what? Mark, who apparently was a young eyewitness, wrote these words, Then everyone deserted him and fled.

It's a nice way of saying they ran like scared mice. All of them, all of them, even Peter. Yes, even Peter.

James? Yes, James. John? John, his beloved one? Yes. Yes, John ran away too.

They all did. The decision came upon them like a Halloween ghost, and they ran fast. The only thing that was moving faster than their feet was their pulse rate.

All those words of loyalty and commitment were left behind in a cloud of dust. But before we get too hard on these quick-footed followers, let's look at ourselves. Maybe you've been in the garden of decision a few times yourself.

Has your loyalty ever been challenged? Have you ever passed by this trap door of the devil? For the teenager, it could be a joint being passed around the circle. For the businessman, it could be an offer to make a little cash under the table. For the wife, it could be a chance for her to give her two bits of juicy gossip.

For the student, it could be an opportunity to improve his grade while looking at his friend's quiz. For the husband, it could mean an urge to lose his temper over his wife's spending. One minute we're in a calm boat on a lake talking about fishing, and the next we have a stick of dynamite in our hands.

More often than not, the end result is catastrophe. Rather than calmly diffusing the bomb, we let it explode. We find ourselves doing the very thing we detest.

The child in us lunges forward, uncontrolled and unrestrained, and the adult in us follows behind, shaking his head. Now, it doesn't have to be like that. Jesus didn't panic.

He, too, heard the swords and saw the clubs, but he didn't lose his head. And it was his head that the Romans wanted. In rereading the garden scene, we can see why.

One statement made by our Master offers two basic tools for keeping our cool in the heat of a decision. Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The first tool, watch.

They don't come any more practical than that. Watch. Stay alert.

Keep your eyes open. When you see sin coming, duck. When you anticipate an awkward encounter, turn around.

When you sense temptation, go the other way. All Jesus is saying is, pay attention. You know your weaknesses.

You also know the situations in which your weaknesses are most vulnerable. Stay out of those situations. Back seats, late hours, nightclubs, poker games, bridge parties, movie theaters, whatever it is that gives Satan a foothold in your life, stay away from it.

Watch out. Second tool, pray. Prayer isn't telling God anything new.

There's not a sinner nor a saint who would surprise Him. What prayer does is invite God to walk the shadowy pathways of life with us. Prayer is asking God to watch ahead for falling trees and tumbling

boulders, and to bring up the rear, guarding our backside from the poison darts of the devil.

Watch and pray. Good advice. Let's take it.

It could be the difference between a peaceful day on the lake and a stick of dynamite blowing up in our faces. My first rub with expectations came when I was a red-headed, freckled-faced fourth grader. It all had to do with my first girlfriend, Marlene.

Man, I was high on Marlene. She was the queen's queen. She could turn my head and accelerate my pulse rate like no one else.

She must have been part hypnotist, because when I was with her, all I could do was grin, stare, and grin. No words, no dialogue, just a gawking, drooling ten-year-old in love. Then one day she consented to go with me, or in adult terms, be my girlfriend.

Wow! Fireworks, music, stars! Strike up the band! I'm yours, Your Highness. There was only one problem. I'd never had a girlfriend before.

Maybe that's why a well-meaning friend gave me some advice during recess one day. A boyfriend is supposed to do things for his girl. Like what? Like walk her to class, dummy.

Sit with her at the lunch table. That kind of stuff. So, that day at lunch, I waited at the cafeteria door for her to arrive.

When she appeared, I gentlemanly took her books, extended my arm, and walked her to the lunch line. Prince Charles and Lady Diana never looked so eloquent. All was fine and good until the next day after school.

Her best friend came up to me and broke the news. Marlene wants to break up. I was dumbfounded.

What for? Because you didn't sit with her at lunch today. What had I done? I had my first questions about women that day. I would later learn, however, that the problem was not a female problem.

It was and is a human problem. It's the problem of expectations. You see, Marlene now had certain expectations of me.

I sat with her at lunch one day, therefore I should sit with her at lunch every day. Though nothing was ever stated, the perception was there. Though no agreement was ever made, the assumption was just as strong.

She expected me to be there. I let her down. We broke up.

Sound familiar? How about your experience with expectations? They can get serious, you know. They've been known to do a lot more than just mess up a fourth-grade romance. Divorce, job tension, poor self-image, family dissension, world wars, embittered friendships.

All these can be caused by this same little culprit, expectations. Expectations are like rifles. Used correctly and appropriately, they're valuable and necessary.

But oh, how quickly they are misused. How quickly do we load their chambers, cock their triggers, and draw a bead on those we love. Quietly we pull the trigger.

You let me down. And we both fall victim to the bullet of expectation. Ever caught yourself using these tell-tale words of unhealthy expectations? How about with your children? Now, your big brother made an A in chemistry, and we know you'll do just as well.

When I was your age, son, I made the varsity football team. And are you going to be a smart doctor, just like your dad? Now, honey, don't even think about that university. When you graduate, you're going to our alma mater.

I'm already saving for your tuition. Or maybe these lines with your spouse. If you had a better salary, John, we could afford that house.

Honey, I promised Paul I'd play golf next Saturday. You don't mind, do you? It's not my fault that the kitchen is a mess. It's the wife's job to keep the house.

Or at work. Eric, I've got high hopes for you and this company. Now, don't let me down.

I know it's after 5 p.m., but I thought you wouldn't mind if we saw one more client. I know you haven't had a vacation, Phil, but those who really care about this firm are willing to sacrifice. Expectations.

They create conditional love. I love you, but I'll love you even more if... Now, I know what you're thinking. Shouldn't we expect the best out of each other? Shouldn't we encourage each other to strive for excellence and never settle for anything else? Absolutely.

But it was Christ on the cross who taught us how to use expectations. Does He demand a lot? You better believe it. Does He expect much? Only our best.

Does He have expectations? Just that we leave everything, deny all, and follow Him. The difference? Jesus couched His expectations with two important companions, forgiveness and acceptance. Study attentively these words written by Paul.

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. When did He die for us? When we reached perfection? No. When we overcame all temptation? Hardly.

When we mastered the Christian walk? Far from it. Christ died when we were still sinners. His sacrifice then was not dependent on our performance.

When we love with expectations, we say, I love you, but I'll love you even more if... Now, Christ's love had none of this. No strings, no expectations, no hidden agendas, no secrets. His love for us was and is upfront and clear.

I love you, He says, even if you let me down. I love you in spite of your failures. One step behind the expectations of Christ come His forgiveness and tenderness.

Tumble off the tightrope of what our Master expects, and you land safely in His net of tolerance. Expectations. Alone, they're bullets that can kill, but buffered by acceptance and forgiveness, they can bring out the best, even in teenage romances.

The practice of using earthly happenings to clarify heavenly truths is no easy task. Yet occasionally one comes across a story, legend, or fable that conveys a message as accurately as a hundred sermons and with ten times the creativity. Such is the case with the reading below.

I heard it first told by a Brazilian preacher in Sao Paulo. And though I've shared it countless times with each telling, I'm newly warmed and reassured by its message. The small house was simple but adequate.

It consisted of one large room on a dusty street. Its red-tiled roof was one of many in this poor neighborhood on the outskirts of the Brazilian village. It was a comfortable home.

Maria and her daughter, Cristina, had done what they could to add color to the gray walls and warmth to the hard dirt floor. An old calendar, a faded photograph of a relative, a wooden crucifix. The furnishings were modest.

A pallet on either side of the room, a wash basin, and a wood-burning stove. Maria's husband had died when Cristina was an infant. The young mother, stubbornly refusing opportunities to remarry, got a job and set out to raise her young daughter.

And now, fifteen years later, the worst years were over. Though Maria's salary as a maid afforded few luxuries, it was reliable and it did provide food and clothes. And now Cristina was old enough to get a job to help out.

Some said Cristina got her independence from her mother. She recoiled at the traditional idea of marrying young and raising a family. Not that she couldn't have had her pick of husbands.

Her olive skin and brown eyes kept a steady stream of prospects at her door. She had an infectious way of throwing her head back and filling the room with laughter. She also had that rare magic some women have that makes every man feel like a king just by being near them.

But it was her spirited curiosity that made her keep all the men at arm's length. She spoke often of going to the city. She dreamed of trading her dusty neighborhood for exciting avenues and city life.

Just the thought of this horrified her mother. Maria was always quick to remind Cristina of the harshness of the streets. People don't know you there.

Jobs are scarce and the life is cruel. And besides, if you went there, what would you do for a living? Maria knew exactly what Cristina would do, or would have to do, for a living. That's why her heart broke when she awoke one morning to find her daughter's bed empty.

Maria knew immediately where her daughter had gone. She also knew immediately what she must do to find her. She quickly threw some clothes in a bag, gathered up all her money, and ran out of the house.

On her way to the bus stop, she entered a drugstore to get one last thing, pictures. She sat in the photograph booth, closed the curtain, and spent all she could on pictures of herself. With her purse full of small black-and-white photos, she boarded the next bus to Rio de Janeiro.

Maria knew Cristina had no way of earning money. She also knew that her daughter was too stubborn to give up. When pride meets hunger, a human will do things that were before unthinkable.

Knowing this, Maria began her search. Bars, hotels, nightclubs, any place with the reputation for streetwalkers or prostitutes. She went to the mall, and at each place she left her picture, taped on a bathroom mirror, tacked to a hotel bulletin board, fastened to a corner phone booth.

And on the back of each photo she wrote a note. It wasn't too long before both the money and the pictures ran out, and Maria had to go home. The weary mother wept as the bus began its long journey back to her small village.

It was a few weeks later that young Cristina descended the hotel stairs. Her young face was tired. Her brown eyes no longer danced with youth, but spoke of pain and fear.

Her laughter was broken. Her dream had become a nightmare. A thousand times over, she had longed to trade these countless beds for her secure pallet.

Yet the little village was in too many ways too far away. As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes noticed a familiar face. She looked again, and there on the lobby mirror was a small picture of her mother.

Cristina's eyes burned and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo. Written on the back was this compelling invitation. Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter.

Please come home. She did. The sun is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. I suspect that the most consistent thing about life has to be its inconsistency. Choosing not to be neatly categorized, life is opted to be a tossed salad of tragedies and triumphs, profanity and purity, despair and hope.

The bad is perplexingly close to the good, the just is frighteningly near to the unfair, and life, life is always a clock's tick away from death. And evil, evil is paradoxically close to goodness. It's as if only a sheer curtain separates the two.

Given the right lure, at the right moment, aimed at the right weakness, there is not a person alive who wouldn't pull back his curtain and live out his vilest fantasy. The inconsistency of life. As a result, one moment can simultaneously usher in sweet victory and crushing defeat.

The same day can bring both reunion and separation. The same birth can bring both pain and peace. Truth and half-truth often ride in the same saddle.

And yes, James, good and evil can come out of the same mouth. If life is just simpler, we reason, more predictable. But it isn't.

Even for the best among us, life is like a wild roller coaster ride of hairpin curves and diving dips. Maybe that's why there is within all of us just a bit of paranoia, an unsettling insecurity. Oh, we may submerge it some with pinstripe shirts and martinis, but the anxiety of the future is still present.

Don't all of us live with a fear of the unknown? Don't all of us dread the horrible day when the thin curtain that separates us from evil might be pulled back and in we would tumble? Cancer, murder, rape, death--how haunting is that gnawing awareness that we are not immune to life's mishaps and perils. It's this eerie inconsistency that keeps all of us, to one degree or another, living our lives on the edge of our chairs. Yet it was in this inconsistency that God had His finest hour.

Never did the obscene come so close to the holy as it did on Calvary. Never did the good in the world so tightly intertwined with the bad as it did on the cross. Never did what is right involve itself so intimately with

what is wrong as it did when Jesus was suspended between heaven and earth.

God on a cross, humanity at its worst, divinity at its best. Something is said of the cross about inconsistencies, something hopeful, something healing. Simply stated, that which is consistent did battle with that which is inconsistent and the consistent one.

Something is also said about God Himself. God is not stumped by an evil world. He doesn't gasp in amazement at the dearth of our faith or the depth of our failures.

We can't surprise God with our cruelties. He knows the condition of the world and loves it just the same. For just when we find a place where God would never be, like on a cross, we look again, and there He is in the flesh.

The door is locked, deadbolted, maybe even a chair under the doorknob. Inside sit ten knee-knocking itinerants who are a straddled defense between faith and fear. As you look around the room, you wouldn't take them for a bunch who are about to put the kettle of history on high boil.

Uneducated, confused, calloused hands, heavy accents, few social graces, limited knowledge of the world, no money, undefined leadership, and on and on. No, as you look at this motley crew, you wouldn't wager too many paychecks on their future. But something happens to a man when he witnesses someone who has risen from the dead.

Something stirs within the soul of a man who has stood within inches of God. Something stirs that is hotter than gold fever and more permanent than passion. It all started with ten stammering, stuttering men.

Though the door was locked, he still stood in their midst. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And send them he did.

Ports, courtyards, boats, synagogues, prisons, palaces, they went everywhere. Their message of the Nazarene dominated across the civilized world. They were an infectious fever.

They were a moving organism. They refused to be stopped. Uneducated drifters who shook history like a housewife shakes a rug.

My, wouldn't it be great to see it happen again? Many say it's impossible. The world's too hard, too secular, too post-Christian. This is the age of information, not regeneration.

So we deadbolt the door for fear of the world. And as a result, the world goes largely untouched and untaught. Over half of the world has yet to hear the story of the Messiah, much less study it.

The few believers who do go out often come home weary and wounded, numbed at the odds and frustrated at the needs. What would it take to light the fire again? Somehow those followers in the upper room did it. They did it without dragging their feet or making excuses.

For them it was rather obvious. All I know is that he was dead, and now he's alive. Something happens to a man when he stands within inches of the Judean lion.

Something happens when he hears the roar, when he touches the golden mane. Something happens when he gets so close he can feel the lion's breath. Maybe we could all use a return visit.

Maybe we all need to witness his majesty and sigh at his victory. Maybe we need to hear our own commission again. Will you tell them? Jesus challenged.

Will you tell them that I came back, and that I am coming back again? We will, they nodded. And they did. Will you? No wonder they call him the savior.

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