

MEMENTOS OF HIS PASSION



2019 Lenten Worship

The Mementos of Christ's Passion

Wednesdays at 7:00 p.m.

THE ALABASTER JAR

Matthew 26:6-13

First Midweek Lent 1 - March 6, 2019

Written by Pastor Mark Weis

During World War II, my father, Paul Weis, served in the Army Infantry within the European Theater: France, Germany, the Battle of the Bulge, the infamous Bridge at Remagen—made into a movie in 1969, and starring George Segal and Robert Vaughn.

As a boy, I often asked my father, “Dad, tell me a war story. Please?” And he would. Nothing gory or gruesome. Nothing glamorizing bombs, bullets, or bloodshed. Rather, stories of courage, patriotism, sacrifice, comrades-in-arms, brutally cold German winters; and the exploding shrapnel that left my father wounded and hospitalized for two months. “Dad, can I see the scar? Huh? Can I?” Yes, I pestered my father about that too.

Like many American soldiers, my father kept mementos of World War II: insignias from his infantry uniform, his service cap, his Purple Heart medal, his I.D. tags and honorable discharge papers, even a well-preserved German Luger pistol. All of these items were vivid reminders of persons, places, and events; of a world war to defeat tyranny and defend freedom.

Scripture describes another type of war, a far greater war with far greater consequences. A war first mentioned in the Garden of Eden, after the fall of Man into sin. God said: “**And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head, and you will strike His heel,**” Genesis 3:15.

A war which Jesus Christ won for us through His atoning death on the cross. As Paul wrote in Colossians 2: “**And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.**” Or in the joyful words of the hymnist: “The strife is over, the battle

done. Now is the Victor's triumph won. Now is the song of praise begun. Alleluia.," LH 210:1.

In a manner of speaking, the war Jesus won for us also has mementos; that is, items which remind us of persons, places, and events in the Passion History; and especially that which our Savior suffered and sacrificed to save us from our sins.

And so, the theme of our Lenten services this year is MEMENTOS OF CHRIST'S PASSION. These mementos are not on display in our church building. Nevertheless, they are always on display in the pages of the Holy Scriptures. And the mementos we will examine include: an alabaster jar, thirty pieces of silver, a crown of thorns, a cross, a seamless garment, a soldier's spear, a cup of blessing, a heavy stone, and finally, a burial shroud.

Tonight, we focus on the first memento; namely, an ALABASTER JAR, as described in Matthew 26:6-13. **“While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came to Him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on His head as He was reclining at the table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. ‘Why this waste?’ they asked. ‘This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.’ Aware of this, Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to Me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have Me. When she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial. I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.’ ”**

At first reading, this account may seem relatively unimportant compared to the other events in the Passion History: the betrayal in Gethsemane, the trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin,

and certainly the crucifixion at Golgotha.

And yet, Jesus Himself underscored the significance of this event when He said, **“I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her,”** Matthew 26:13. True to the Savior’s words, we are commemorating this same woman, her alabaster jar, and the “beautiful thing” she did to Jesus, two thousand years later.

The Greek word translated as *alabaster jar* is ALABASTRON, which simply means “made of alabaster;” a beautiful stone resembling marble, easily carved and commonly used in antiquity to store precious oils, ointments, and perfumes. And while we don’t know the exact appearance of this alabaster jar—some Bible versions use terms like vial, vessel, cruse, flask, or even box—we do know its owner and its contents.

According to the parallel accounts in Mark 14:3-9 and John 12:1-8, the woman who owned the alabaster jar was none other than Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus—the same Lazarus Jesus had recently raised from the dead. Likewise, the expensive perfume in the jar was **“oil of spikenard,”** a plant which at that time grew only in India, along the banks of the Ganges River, and was therefore highly prized and highly priced.

And speaking of price, the value of the spikenard oil was three hundred denarii, the equivalent of nearly an entire year’s wages. Additionally, the disciple complaining the loudest about ‘perfume wasted on Jesus’ was Judas Iscariot who, according to John 12:6, **“did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.”** Oh, how Judas

would have liked to help himself to three hundred denarii.

This is all we know about the appearance of the alabaster jar. However, more important than the jar's appearance are its lessons. What may we learn from Matthew 26:6-13; from the loving actions of Mary; and especially from these words of Jesus: **“When she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial,”** Matthew 26:12? Let me suggest three lessons summarized in these three words: trust, understanding, and gratitude.

First, trust. The alabaster jar represents trust in the words of Jesus. How? Consider why Mary brought the alabaster jar to the home of Simon the Leper; a jar containing a pound of spikenard oil worth a year's wages. Surely, this was not the type of item Mary would treat carelessly or handle roughly or carry aimlessly through the streets of Bethany with no purpose. Did she intend the alabaster jar merely as a conversation-starter or perfume-sampler? Of course not. Mary brought the alabaster jar to Simon's house for a specific purpose; and that purpose was to anoint Jesus for His death and burial.

This fact is clearly stated in all three parallel accounts. In Matthew 26:12, **“When she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial.”** Or in Mark 14:8, **“She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial.”** Or in John 12:7, **“She has kept this for the day of My burial.”**

Did Mary know the day of Christ's death or burial? No. Remember, Jesus was in Simon's home, not a funeral home. People were dining, conversing, asking about jobs, families, old friends, sick neighbors. According to the New Testament chronology, this dinner at Simon's house occurred on a Saturday. The next day was Palm Sunday, when thousands would line the streets to Jerusalem to wave palm branches and shout hosannas as welcome the approaching King. No sign of trouble...yet. No sign

of hardship, only kingship.

Yet, Mary still brought that alabaster jar to anoint Jesus for burial. Why? Simply because Jesus had taught that He would die—in fact, had taught that He had come to offer His life as a ransom for sinners. Jesus said it. Mary believed it. And therefore Mary acted on it regardless of the scorn, ridicule, and indignation of the disciples. Isn't what faith is? Isn't that what faith does?

None of us here tonight were with Jesus during the Passion History, were we? Yet, we know with absolute certainty that Jesus was betrayed in Gethsemane; that Jesus stood before Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate; that Jesus hung on the cross, suffered and died for our sins, and with His dying breath cried out, "IT IS FINISHED."

We know with absolute certainty that Jesus Christ rose triumphantly from the dead on the First Easter Morning. And we know all this for the same reason that Mary knew all this. God said it. We believe it. And we rejoice in it. As Paul wrote in Romans 4:25, "**He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.**"

And of such trust in God's word that alabaster jar is a memento. Our memento. Trust that disregards the circumstances and ignores the scorn and presses on, saying, "Because God said it, I believe it. I believe I'm loved, because God said so. I believe I'm forgiven, because God said so. I believe I'm eternally saved through faith in Christ, because God said so."

Second, understanding. The alabaster jar represents an understanding of the importance of Christ's death to God's Plan of Redemption. Again, how? Mary went to the home of Simon the Leper to anoint Jesus for His burial; not to plead, protest, or dissuade Him from dying. She accepted the necessity of Christ's death, because Jesus Himself had emphasized that necessity even

from the outset of His ministry.

Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3:14-15, **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.”** Likewise, Jesus told the unbelieving Jews in John 8:28, **“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the One I claim to be, and that I do nothing on My own but speak just what the Father has taught Me.”**

As the Savior’s death approached, He spoke of it more frequently and urgently. And so we read in Matthew 16:21, **“From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”** In fact, in the verses immediately preceding the account of the alabaster jar, we’re told: **“When Jesus had finished saying all these things, He said to His disciples, ‘As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.’”**

Therefore, the necessity and immediacy of Christ’s death was fresh in the minds of the disciples, as they sat down to dinner in the home of Simon the Leper. And yet, it was not the twelve disciples, not Simon the Leper, not Judas the Complainer, but rather Mary of Bethany who anointed Christ’s body for burial. She understood the importance of His death.

Sadly, many churches today—at least those churches more concerned with attendance than salvation, revenue and ratings than religion—have tried to diminish the importance of Christ’s death to God’s Plan of Salvation by removing it from their sermons, creeds, hymns, and even church buildings.

Despite the massive audiences at Joel Osteen’s *Lakewood Church* in Houston, Texas—40,000 attendees over five weekly services and millions of supporters watching on TV—there is not

a single cross in Osteen’s entire church complex, and relatively few mentions of the cross, if any, in Osteen’s sermons. Instead, he focuses on feel-good themes, positive thinking, and material prosperity. “We don’t talk about the cross,” he said in one TV interview. “That’s too negative.”

Frankly, Mary’s understanding of the necessity of Christ’s death is even more remarkable, when compared to Peter’s attempt to prevent the crucifixion. When Jesus spoke of the necessity of the cross, Peter took the Lord aside and rebuked Him, saying, “**Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!**” To which Jesus replied: “**Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men,**” Matthew 16:22-23. Mary did have in mind the things of God. And of this the alabaster jar is a memento.

Third and finally, gratitude. The alabaster jar represents humble gratitude for Christ’s work of redemption, especially that which He suffered and sacrificed to save us from our sins. Yes, Mary brought an expensive gift to Jesus; something she saved for; something she planned for—an alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume.

Equally striking is the manner in which she offered Jesus her gift; not grudgingly or sparingly but completely. According to Mark 14:3, “**She broke the jar and poured the perfume on His head.**” Broke it. Committed it. Gave Jesus every drop.

“**She has done a beautiful thing to Me,**” said Jesus. But what made the thing beautiful? Surely, not the cost of the perfume, but the faith, humility, and gratitude in which Mary offered it—of which the alabaster jar is a memento.

To quote the hymnist: “Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a tribute far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all,” LH 175:4.

“THIRTY SILVER COINS”

Midweek Lent 2 – March 13, 2019

Written by Pastor Mark Weis

Our Lenten series this year is titled MEMENTOS OF CHRIST'S PASSION; that is, items which remind us of persons, places, and events within the Passion History, and especially of that which our Savior suffered and sacrificed to atone for our sins.

The first memento we discussed was the alabaster jar described in Matthew 26:6-13. An alabaster jar containing expensive perfume, which Mary of Bethany used to anoint Jesus for burial. An alabaster jar representing trust, understanding, and gratitude. Mary's trust in Christ's words. Mary's understanding of the need for Christ's death. And finally, Mary's humble gratitude for Christ's willing sacrifice.

Tonight, we consider the second memento: the THIRTY SILVER COINS Judas Iscariot was paid to betray the Son of God. The financial terms of this betrayal are recorded in three of the four Gospels: Matthew 26:14-16; Mark 14:10-11; and Luke 22:3-6. We'll use the first of these readings as our text.

Matthew 26:14-16, “Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, ‘What are you willing to give me if I hand Him over to you?’ So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand Him over.”

What were these thirty silver coins? While the composition of the coins is named in Scripture, specifically, thirty *silver* coins, the exact value of the coins is not named. Yet, whatever their value, a mere thirty silver coins were an impoverished pittance

compared to the vast wealth in the Temple treasury. Yet, to Judas and the religious leaders, thirty silver coins were what Jesus Christ was worth.

And if the thirty silver coins were Hebrew shekels, as seems likely, the value of one shekel, according to some Bible commentators, was only seventy-two cents. And if true, then Jesus Christ, God the Son, the Creator of the entire universe and everything and everyone in it; the One whose priceless blood redeemed us from our sins—if the coins were shekels and their value fixed at seventy-two cents per shekel, then Jesus Christ was betrayed for a grand total of twenty-one dollars and sixty cents.

“So they counted out for him thirty silver coins,” Matthew 26:15. What may we learn from this memento of Christ’s passion—these thirty silver coins? Have you heard the phrase “follow the money”? This phrase was popularized by the 1976 movie *All the President’s Men*; a film about two reporters for the Washington Post, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, whose investigation of the Watergate Scandal eventually led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

At one point in the film, when their investigation fails, the reporters are told by a clandestine informer named Deep Throat: “Follow the money.” Following the financial transactions would lead the reporters to the right people, places, and conclusions. And the transactions did. So, I began to wonder: Where would those thirty silver coins lead us in Scripture if we “followed the money”? Let’s see.

First, the thirty silver coins lead us to the religious leaders of Israel; that is, the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees; the Herodians, elders, high priests, Jewish Sanhedrin, and officers of the temple guard.

Why did Judas approach these *religious* leaders about betraying Jesus? Why not Herod the Jewish King or Pilate the Roman Governor? The answer is: Long before Judas wanted to betray Jesus, the religious leaders of Israel wanted to kill Jesus—a murderous desire which only increased throughout Christ’s ministry, from His first sermons and first miracles to His last breath on the cross.

Yes, even then, as Jesus hung bleeding and dying on the cross, these religious leaders were reviling and ridiculing Him; as stated in Mark 15:31-32, **“In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked Him among themselves. ‘He saved others,’ they said, ‘but He can’t save Himself. Let this Christ, the king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.”**

Over time, the religious leaders of Israel accused Jesus of blasphemy; of being a Sabbath-breaker, law-breaker, tradition breaker, and trouble-maker; of being a glutton, drunkard, and in league with the Devil; of casting aside the laws of Moses and associating with tax collectors and notorious sinners.

And so we read telling statements in the Gospels like: **“This fellow is blaspheming,”** Matthew 9:3. **“It is by the prince of demons that He drives out demons,”** Matthew 9:34. **“Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders?”** Matthew 15:2.

And then in Matthew 26:3-5, immediately before the accounts of the alabaster jar and the thirty silver coins: **“Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and they plotted to arrest Jesus in some sly way and kill Him. ‘But not during the Feast,’ they said, ‘or there may be a riot among the people.’ ”** So, to these religious leaders, Judas Iscariot and his

nefarious plan must have seemed the perfect solution; and a mere thirty silver coins must have seemed an unbelievable bargain.

Most of all, the religious leaders of Israel hated Jesus for telling the truth: the truth about God; the truth about sin, judgment, grace, faith, forgiveness; the truth about the only way for mortal man to be saved—namely, through faith in Him, Jesus Christ: **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me,”** John 14:6. He told them the truth about Himself, saying, **“I and the Father are one,”** John 10:30. One in power. One in glory. One in essence. And the Jews picked up rocks to stone Him.

The religiously leaders especially hated Jesus because He told them the truth about themselves. **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!”** said Jesus in Matthew 23. **“You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to...You blind guides! You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel...You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”** This is what Jesus told the religious leaders of Israel to their faces, and more than once.

Thirty silver coins, twenty-one dollars and sixty cents, to betray Jesus Christ. And the ones who willingly, in fact, gleefully and delightedly paid the money—**“they were delighted,”** states Mark 14:11 and Luke 22:5—were the religious leaders in Israel. And to place this description in a modern context, think of Israel’s religious leaders as the clergy; as pastors, teachers, professors, doctors of theology, youth ministers, even voters, elders, or church council members.

How many church leaders today would be delighted to be rid of Jesus Christ and the truths of His word at any cost—leaders who are, as were many of Israel’s religious leaders, blind guides,

broods of vipers? Leaders who prefer to build cathedrals instead of building people up in the Christian faith. Leaders who prefer to preach material prosperity instead of preaching the cross of Jesus Christ. We can all do the math. Simply follow the money.

Second, the thirty silver coins also lead us to Judas Iscariot. Among the long and varied lists of the world’s most renowned betrayers—for example, Ephialtes of Trachis, who betrayed King Leonides and the Three Hundred Spartans at Thermopylae in 480 B.C.; or Marcus Brutus, who betrayed Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.; or Benedict Arnold, who betrayed the fledgling United States in 1780 A.D.—among such betrayals, Judas Iscariot is surely the most infamous betrayer. After all, he betrayed the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet, despite the infamy of Judas’ public actions, little is known of his personal life. His father’s name was Simon. His first name, Judas, from the Hebrew YEHUDAH, ironically meant “praised”—something Judas the Betrayer would never be. His surname Iscariot may have meant “inhabitant of Kerioth,” though this is uncertain.

Rather, when Judas is mentioned in the Gospels, he is consistently described by two phrases; namely, as one of the twelve original disciples, and as the one disciple who betrayed Jesus Christ. In Luke 6:16, for example, a list of the twelve disciples, Judas is named last and simply called: **“Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.”**

Of course, the fact that Judas was personally called by Jesus only underscores the heinousness and devilishness of his betrayal of Jesus. Remember, Judas was with Jesus for three-and-a-half years—nearly the amount of time I spent in seminary, I greatly respected my seminary professors. But Judas Iscariot was taught by God Himself.

Imagine the powerful sermons Judas heard. Imagine the great miracles Judas witnessed. He saw Jesus cast out demons, control weather, walk on water, heal lepers, restore cripples, even raise the dead. When Jesus miraculously fed thousands from five barley loaves and two small fish, Judas was one of the disciples who served the food and later gathered the leftovers.

And we wonder, “How could such a man betray Jesus? Why would such a man betray Jesus?” In the beginning, Judas must have been sincere in his discipleship. Why else would he have left everything, like the other eleven original disciples, to follow Jesus. Something changed; or at least, something previously in the background came forcibly to the forefront. But what? Scholars have debated this question for centuries.

Some believe that Judas grew disillusioned with Jesus; that Judas had expected riches, not rags; status, not service; associating with society’s best not worst—the nobodies, outcasts, misfits. Others believe that Judas had wanted a different type of Messiah; a Messiah who would oust the hated Romans, restore glory to Israel, and usher in an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity. As such, Judas had no use for a Messiah who was determined to die on a cross for the sins of the undeserving world.

Were these the reasons and motivations which drove Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus? Truthfully, we don’t know, and the Bible doesn’t provide a specific answer. However, it does provide a tantalizing clue. And that clue lies in following the money, the thirty silver coins.

As we learned last week, Judas **“was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it,”** John 12:6. What question did Judas ask the religious leaders when proposing to betray Jesus Christ? He said, **“What are you willing to give me if I hand Him over to you?”** Matthew 26:15.

A financial transaction. And so it seems, my friends, that greed, not patriotism or nationalism or disillusionment—but common greed led Judas Iscariot to betray the Son of God.

Judas Iscariot “followed the money” in a literal sense. He valued thirty pieces of silver more than the precious blood of Jesus Christ. And tragically, in the end, where did the thirty silver coins lead Judas? To absolute despair. To unrepented sin and unrequested forgiveness. To a cliff. To a noose. To a suicide. To a burial in a potter’s field which, ironically, was purchased with those same thirty silver coins. And of all this heartache, surely the greatest tragedy is this: Jesus called Judas. Jesus loved Judas. Jesus died for Judas too.

A man named Colin Smith wrote: “With Judas’ eyes, he saw the clearest evidence. With his ears, he heard the finest teaching. With his feet, he followed the greatest example. And yet, this man still betrayed Jesus.

How many prosperity preachers are there today who willingly betray Jesus Christ—not for thirty silver coins; but for thirty million dollars and expensive mansions and luxury cars and personal jets. Preachers like TD Jakes, Kenneth Copeland, Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, and Rod Parsley, who said: “I just love to talk about money. I just love to talk about your money. Let me be clear: I want your money. I deserve it. This church deserves it.” How many such preachers are there? We can all do the math. Simply follow the money.

Lastly, the thirty silver coins lead us to the truthfulness and dependability of Scripture. How so? We all know that Judas betrayed Jesus. We all know that the amount Judas received was thirty silver coins. But how many of us know that this dreadful betrayal and exact financial transaction were prophesied in Scripture centuries before they happened—and with such

amazing detail that the prophecy not only described the betrayal and the haggling over the price; but also that the thirty silver coins, the blood-money, would be hurled back into the temple for a potter. This is exactly what happened.

We read in Zechariah 11:12-13, “I told them, ‘If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.’ So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said to me, ‘Throw it to the potter’—the handsome price at which they priced me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and through them into the house of the LORD to the potter.”

The same true, reliable word of God tells us this: **“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect,”**
1 Peter 1:18-19.

Mementos of Christ's Passion – Part III
THE CROWN OF THORNS

Matthew 27:27-31

Midweek Lent 3 – March 20, 2019

Written by Pastor Mark Weis

IN THE NAME of Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who also wore a crown of thorns:

Our Lenten series is titled MEMENTOS OF CHRIST'S PASSION; that is, items which remind us of persons, places, and events within the Passion History, and especially of that which our Savior suffered and sacrificed to atone for our sins.

The first memento we discussed was an alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume, which Mary of Bethany used to anoint Jesus for burial. **“She has done a beautiful thing to Me,”** said Jesus. **“When she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial,”** Matthew 26:10, 12.

The second memento was blood-money, specifically, the thirty silver coins Judas Iscariot was paid to betray Jesus to the religious leaders of Israel. Judas asked: **“What are you willing to give me if I hand Him over to you?”** **So they counted out for him thirty silver coins,”** Matthew 26:15.

Tonight, the third memento of Christ's passion, namely, THE CROWN OF THORNS described in Matthew 27:27-31. **“Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around Him. They stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it**

on His head. They put a staff in His right hand and knelt in front of Him. ‘Hail, king of the Jews!’ they said. They spit on Him, and took the staff and struck Him on the head again and again. After they had mocked Him, they took off the robe and put His own clothes on Him. Then they led Him away to crucify Him.”

What was this crown of thorns? Over time, the thorns in the crown have been associated with a variety of plants; and most often, perhaps, with the so-called *Jerusalem Crown of Thorns*. But the exact species of plant, shrub, or tree is unknown. Still, in our electronic age one can go online and purchase an ‘*authentic* crown of thorns from the Holy Land,’ or even a crown-of-thorns headband with images of sharp thorns and smeared blood—surely a form of mockery the Roman soldiers would have endorsed and enjoyed. Jesus in a headband. Jesus in a fake royal robe. Jesus with a make-believe scepter.

Through the centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has made fantastic claims about the crown of thorns; for example, that when Gregory of Tours supposedly saw the crown of thorns in the Sixth Century A.D., it was still tender, green, and blossoming; furthermore, that the crown of thorns was on display in Jerusalem as late as 870 A.D—no doubt for tickets and tours.; and most of all, that the Roman Catholic Church possessed seven hundred thorns of the original crown, with each thorn an object of veneration and worship. Never mind worshipping the Savior who wore the crown of thorns.

All nonsense, of course; as nonsensical as the Catholic claim to have fragments of the cross of Jesus. John Calvin, a Protestant reformer, once observed that, if all the splinters of

the cross allegedly in Rome's possession were gathered together, they would provide enough wood to build a large ship.

Yet, while we don't know the type of thorns in the crown, we do know the rich symbolism of the crown of thorns; at least, when adorning the sacred head of Jesus Christ. In the words of the hymnist: "See, from His head, His hands, His feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down. Did e'er such love and sorrow meet or *thorns compose so rich a crown?*" What then does this memento, the crown of thorns, represent? Many answers could be given. But in the time allotted to us, I'll suggest three.

First, the crown of thorns represents suffering; and more precisely, the dreadful pain and unspeakable suffering that Jesus endured when redeeming us from our sins.

Thorns may be beneficial to thorn-plants; however, they serve but one purpose for human beings—to inflict pain. Most of us have experienced the pain of even one 'thorn in the flesh.' But Jesus Christ was crowned with thorns. The thorns cut. The Savior bled. And when He bled, how many of the six hundred soldiers present expressed sympathy or hurried for antiseptic and bandages? None.

Rather, according to Matthew 27:30, once the crown of thorns was firmly in place, the soldiers "**took the staff and struck Him on the head again and again.**" The Greek verb for "struck" is in the imperfect tense, signifying on going action and therefore continuous blows. An entire company of soldiers. How many of them hit Jesus? All of them? "My turn." "No, my turn."

And remember, Matthew 27:27-31 is only a brief part of the Passion History; and only one part of the torturous pain Jesus endured from the time of His betrayal in Gethsemane to the time of His death on the cross. And in the intervening time: slapping, beating; scourging with the dreaded Roman flagellum, a whip made of leather straps tipped with sharp rocks or jagged metal which literally tore flesh from bone.

And then, the agony of the crucifixion itself; a punishment so painful that it was reserved for only the vilest of criminals and the lowest of slaves. Our English word *excruiciating* is based on the Latin word *excruiciatus*, which literally means “out of the cross.” The pain inflicted by the cross—which, thank God, none of us know; yet pain our Lord Jesus knew intimately.

Overall, the Bible describes the suffering of our Savior in relatively *bloodless* terms. Even the crucifixion of Jesus is related in short, simple phrases; though we know from ancient historians and modern archaeological excavations how gruesome and bloody and lengthy crucifixions were. Still, we read in the Gospels: **“when they had crucified Him,”** Matthew 27:35; **“and they crucified Him,”** Mark 15:23; **“there they crucified Him,”** Luke 23:33; **“here they crucified Him,”** John 19:18.

Yet, dear friends, despite the bloodless descriptions, blood was everywhere—our Lord’s precious blood. Blood from the crown of thorns on His head to the Roman nails in His feet. Blood from Pilate’s Praetorium to the rocky precipice of Golgotha. Blood poured out for the forgiveness of our sins. As Paul wrote: **“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins,”** Ephesians 1:7. As John wrote: **“The**

blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, purifies us from all sin,” 1 John 1:7.

And as Isaiah wrote: **“Surely, He took up *our* infirmities and carried *our* sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted. But He was pierced for *our* transgressions, He was crushed for *our* iniquities; the punishment that brought *us* peace was upon Him, and by His wounds *we* are healed,”** Isaiah 53:5. That crown of thorns was a symbol of our Savior’s suffering. And He wore that crown for us.

Second, the crown of thorns represents abject humility. Humility characterized the Savior’s life. He was born in a barn. He associated with the outcasts and misfits, tax collectors and sinners. By His own admission, He had no place to call home. He said, **“Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head,”** Matthew 8:20.

Yet, consider how deeply Christ humbled Himself through the ordeals of His passion. He was relentlessly mocked. Mocked by the Jewish Sanhedrin: **“Then they spit in His face and struck Him with their fists. Others slapped Him and said, ‘Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit You?’ ”** Matthew 26:67-68.

Even when crucified, Jesus was mocked. Mocked by the soldiers who pounded the nails, while cursing this silly Jewish rabbi and His claims to be the Son of God. Mocked by travelers and curiosity-seekers who came to Golgotha for Friday entertainment. Mocked by the religious leaders of Israel; the pastors, teachers, youth ministers, and doctors of theology. Mocked even by the two thieves crucified on either side of

Jesus. Mocked by the superscription nailed to the cross, above that sacred head crowned with thorns: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. It was meant to be a joke of cosmic proportions. HA-HA-HA.

In Matthew 27:27-31, every action of the soldiers was meant to humiliate and mock the Savior. They stripped Him naked. They gave Him the mock trappings of royalty: a scarlet robe, a staff for a scepter, a crown of thorns. They rendered Him mock obedience, bending the knee before Him and saying, **“Hail, king of the Jews!”** How loud was that chorus with six hundred battle-hardened Roman soldiers chanting it? I wonder: Did their insults and spiteful words hurt Him as much as their whips and thorny crown—hurt this loving God who made them, provided for them, and came to die for them too? Yes, I think their words hurt Jesus too; the curses that should have been praises.

Nor was this the end of their gleeful humiliation. They struck Jesus repeatedly on the head with that make-believe scepter. They spit into the face of God, as the unbelieving still do when they reject Jesus as Lord and Savior. Even the last sentence of the text underscores the extent to which Jesus humbled Himself: **“Then they led Him away to crucify Him,”** Matthew 27:31.

They led Him, because He *let* them lead Him—the One of whom Paul wrote in Colossians 2:9, **“For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.”** The One who could have blinked them out of existence and their universe with them. The One who told Peter in Gethsemane: **“Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think that I cannot call on My Father, and He will**

at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way?" Matthew 26:52-54.

This is why Jesus endured such humiliation, ridicule, spitting, beating, and contemptuous treatment; and without one word of objection or complaint. Not because He had to, Not because He was forced to. But because He wanted to in order to fulfill the Scriptures and to keep God's promises of salvation through the sacrifice of God's Son. Nails did not hold Jesus to the cross; love and faithfulness did.

And so Peter wrote: **"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth.'** When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed," 1 Peter 2:21-24. That crown of thorns was a symbol of our Savior's abject humility. And He wore that crown for us.

Finally, the crown of thorns represents salvation; your salvation, my salvation, the salvation obtained for the whole world through the suffering, death, and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Each midweek Lenten service, we read part of the Passion History. And when reading this history, we may mistakenly conclude that Jesus was merely the victim of uncontrollable and unforeseen circumstances. Jesus betrayed. Jesus denied. Jesus arrested, bound, and shuffled like helpless

human cargo between Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate. Jesus falsely accused and wrongly condemned. And finally, Jesus nailed to the cross.

Yet, the early church came to realize that what happened to Jesus during His passion was not the result of happenstance but of God’s eternal design. So the believers prayed in Acts 4: **“Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the people of Israel in this city to conspire against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed. They did what Your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.”** Which is exactly why Jesus told Pilate in John 19:11, **“You would have no power over Me if it were not given to you from above.”**

My friends, when the Roman soldiers placed a crown of thorns on Christ’s head, their intent was to mock Him. Little did they know how accurately they were describing Him—this God who loved us enough to suffer and die for us; this God who governs the universe and our lives not merely as the King of Kings, but the King who wore a crown of thorns; this God who Himself came to deliver us by becoming a curse for us.

One of the consequences of Man’s fall into sin was this: **“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce THORNS and THISTLES for you,”** Genesis 3:17-18. To which Paul replied in Galatians 3:13, **“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ ”**

That crown of thorns was a symbol of our curse. That crown of thorns was a symbol of Christ our substitute, who took our curse upon Himself. That crown of thorns was a symbol of

our salvation. And Jesus Christ wore that crown of thorns for us.

Mementos of Christ's Passion – Part IV
“THE OLD RUGGED CROSS”

Midweek Lent 4 - March 27, 2019

Written by Pastor Mark Weis

Of all the mementos of Christ's passion, surely the most familiar and the most cherished is the Old Rugged Cross. The cross of Christ is the very symbol of Christianity. The cross of Christ is the primary focus of the Bible—that is, the sacrifice of God's Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to atone for the sins of the world.

And the cross of Christ is to be the sum and substance of all Christian preaching; as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:23-24, **“But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”** Or as Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 2:2, **“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”**

As Christians, we not only proclaim the cross, we display the cross: in our homes and churches; on necklaces, bracelets, and lapels; on Bibles, hymnals, banners, vestments, altars, steeples, church signs, and in some instances, even on communion wafers.

And we sing about the cross, too; loudly, lovingly, gratefully: “Sweet the moments rich in blessing, which before the cross we spend,” LH:155. “When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died,” LH 175. “This the superscription be: ‘Jesus crucified for me,’ ” LH:179. “Lift high the cross; the love of Christ proclaim,” WS:769. And, of course, the old Gospel hymn: “On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame.”

However, imagine calling the cross “wondrous” or “rich in blessing” before the Savior’s crucifixion gave the cross an entirely new meaning. No death was more gruesome, no symbol more feared and dreaded, than that of the Old Rugged Cross. The mere shadow of a cross brought terror.

While the Romans did not invent crucifixion—in fact, the Persians were using crucifixion in the Sixth Century B.C.; and after the Persians, the Greeks; and after the Greeks, the Phoenicians—nevertheless, the Romans certainly perfected this form of execution by making it less costly and more painful; and in the process giving us the happy Latin word *excruciat*, the source of our English word *excruciating* and literally meaning “the pain of the cross”.

The Romans were skilled at crucifixion because they crucified so many people. For example, in 71 B.C. the Romans defeated an army of slaves led by the gladiator Spartacus. As a punishment and a deterrent to other conspirators, the Romans crucified 6,000 slaves over a distance of one hundred and twenty miles along the Appian Way; an average of fifty crosses per mile.

Likewise, during the siege of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the Roman general Titus crucified five hundred Jews daily—in plain view of the city walls, where others Jews, still trapped and starving inside Jerusalem, could hear the screams of the crucified. The crucifixions only stopped when Titus ran out of trees for crosses.

So then, given the cruel history of crucifixion, how can we cherish the Old Rugged Cross? The answer is this: Because Jesus Christ willingly died on that cross to save us from our sins. The cross did not change Jesus. Jesus changed the cross. Through the Savior’s atoning death, the cross itself has become a symbol of many biblical truths. What truths?

First, the Old Rugged Cross reveals the truth of our sin.

Yes, Jesus died on the cross, but for whose sins—ours, not His. Jesus was and is the holy, sinless Son of God; the true, spotless, unblemished Lamb of God merely pictured in the Old Testament Law and through countless Passover sacrifices. Paul wrote of Jesus: **“God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God,”** 2 Corinthians 5:21.

Over the centuries, how many victims did the Romans drag to the cross—drag kicking and flailing, screaming and weeping, professing innocence and cursing crucifiers. Yet, of them all, Jesus Christ alone was truly innocent. The Jewish Sanhedrin knew this. The high priest Caiaphas knew this. The Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate, knew this. Yet, Jews and Gentiles alike still crucified the Son of God. And they crucified Him because He allowed them to, without murmur or complaint—He, God the Son, the almighty Creator of the universe and everything in it. And He allowed them to because He came into this world to save sinners by fully atoning for sin.

Was Jesus surprised by the cross or merely a victim of unfortunate circumstances? Of course not. Read Matthew 16:21. **“From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”**

Consequently, when we look at the cross—whether pictured on Golgotha or dangling from a necklace—let us remember that our sins led Jesus to the cross and pounded the nails as surely as did the Roman soldiers. Because for us to see the brightness of God’s grace, we must also see the blackness of

human sin. **“And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all,”** wrote Isaiah. And of this the Old Rugged Cross is the proof.

Second, the Old Rugged Cross reveals the truth of our forgiveness. Is there anyone here tonight who has never felt overwhelmed by sin and guilt? Is there anyone here who has never resembled that poor, guilt-ridden tax collector in the temple who, unable to lift his eyes heavenward, simply struck his heaving chest and hurting heart and confessed: “God, be merciful to me, the sinner”?

Past sins. Poor choices. Worthless pursuits. Emotional wounds oozing the blood of regret and remorse. The times we’ve all said, “God, I’ll never do that again”—and then did. Or, “God, I promise to try harder, be kinder, treat my spouse better”—and then didn’t. In reality, one day we may feel fine, have a sanctified bounce in our steps and *Amazing Grace* on our lips. And the very next day, if not the very next hour, we may feel like the worst of sinners. Like a Judas, who betrayed. Like a Simon Peter, who denied. Like a Thomas, who doubted.

Like a David, who said: **“If You, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?”** Only, how did David go on? **“But with You there is forgiveness,”** Psalm 130:3-4. Or like a Paul, who groaned: **“What a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death?”** Yet, how did Paul continue? **“Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord,”** Romans 7:24-25.

When you and I feel unforgiven or unforgiveable, where should we go, if not to the Old Rugged Cross. And when standing at that cross, what should we do? By the grace and power of God, in repentance and faith, we should take all those feelings of guilt and make them subject to divine fact; to the infallible, irrevocable IT IS WRITTEN of the word of God. It is written: Jesus Christ

“was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification,” Romans 4:25. It is written: **“Therefore, there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus,”** Romans 8:1. It is written, In Christ **“we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins,”** Ephesians 1:7. It is written: **“And the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin,”** 1 John 1:7. In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. FORGIVEN. And of this the Old Rugged Cross is the proof. And if God forgives you for the sake of Christ, for the sake of Christ forgive yourself.

Third, the Old Rugged Cross reveals the truth of God’s great love for us. Friends, it’s relatively easy to say “God loves me” when times are good and skies are blue and stomachs are full and bills are paid and relationships are happy and medical tests are routine.

Yet, what if times are bad? What if fierce storms are brewing on the horizon? What if bill collectors are calling and relationships are failing and medical reports state DIABETES or CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE or MALIGNANT TUMOR? What then? Do these difficult circumstances indicate that God has stopped loving us; or at the least, that His love for us has diminished? No. And the cross of Jesus Christ is the proof.

God’s love is not feeble, fickle, unreliable, or indeterminable. He loves us in the good times and loves us just as much during the bad times; in health *and* sickness, in wealth *and* poverty, amid blue skies *and* foul weather.

And the clear, undeniable evidence of God’s infinite, unchanging love for us lies in the cross of Jesus Christ. “Well, I don’t think God loves me,” you say. Really? Look at that Old Rugged Cross and the Savior who willingly suffered, bled, and died there for your sins, and then tell me God doesn’t love you—that

God doesn't love you with His every thought and whole being. Jesus Christ died for you.

And this is precisely why the Bible repeatedly links God's great love to God's great sacrifice. The two are inextricably connected. God's love resulted in God's sacrifice. God's sacrifice forever proves God's love. John 3:16, **"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son."** Or Romans 5:8, **"But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** Or Ephesians 2:4-5, **"But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions and sins—it is by grace you have been saved."** Or 1 John 3:16, **"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us."**

When my son Andrew was a kindergartener—I can still see him with crumpled artwork in one hand and a Power Rangers lunchbox in the other—he would often run to me, leap into my arms, kiss my cheek, and ask, "Daddy, wanna know how much I love you?" He'd stretch his little arms as wide as they would go and say, "This much."

I sometimes think of Jesus in this way; His arms stretched wide open, with His wrists nailed to the cross. "Would you like to know how much I love you?" He asks, and then answers: "This much." It's the reality of what Jesus Christ did on the cross at Calvary that led Paul to write this about the unchanging reality of God's love: **"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord,"** Romans 8:38-39. And of this the Old Rugged Cross is the proof.

Fourth, the Old Rugged Cross reveals the truth of God’s ongoing provision for us. How so? Allow me to pose a simple question: If God the Father sacrificed His Only Begotten Son for you; if He gave you the very best that He had to give, do you really think that He will withhold and other godly blessing from your life—a pair of shoes, a change of clothes, a meal to eat, a place to shelter?

Do we begin to understand why Paul’s message was always about Christ crucified? Paul saw Christ and His cross as the answer for everything from eternal life to daily bread. And on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice, He wrote this: **“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?”** Romans 8:31-32. And of this the Old Rugged Cross is the proof.

Fifth, the Old Rugged Cross reveals the truth of our worth to God. Have you ever felt worthless, useless, unwanted? I have too. The feeling is dreadful, and often the result of ongoing rejection or a wrong view of self based on the misguided opinions of others. But I say: Who cares what others think? I care about what God thinks. My worth comes from Him, not myself, not my peers, not my society, and certainly not the latest issue of Cosmopolitan magazine.

If the value of something is determined by what we are willing to pay in order to have it, then of what enormous worth we must be to God. Consider the price He paid to redeem us from our sins and have us as His own. And so Peter wrote: **“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the**

precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect,”
1 Peter 1:18-19.

What if we began and ended each day, thinking, “I am of great worth to God. He willingly died on the cross to cleanse me from all my sins; to have me as His own for all time and eternity. I am His. He is mine.” What would such an attitude do for our lives, marriages, ministries, homes, children, friendships, careers? Folks, this is not wishful thinking. It is the reality. You are of incalculable worth to God. And of this the Old Rugged Cross is the proof.

Finally, the Old Rugged Cross reveals the truth of our call to change, and the power and motivation God gives us through the cross of Christ to willingly make godly changes. Surely, this needs no explanation. How can we stand beneath the Old Rugged Cross and not be changed? How can we witness Christ bleeding and dying for our sakes, and insist we can go our way and God can go His?

No. It’s in the cross of Jesus that we find the strength and willingness to live as Christ lived, love as Christ loved, serve as Christ served, and forgive as Christ forgave. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20, **“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”** And of this the Old Rugged cross is the proof.

Mementos of Christ's Passion – Part V
THE SEAMLESS GARMENT

Midweek Lent 5 - April 3, 2019

Written by Pastor Mark Weis

The Mementos of Christ's Passion: an alabaster jar, thirty silver coins, a crown of thorns, and an old rugged cross. And tonight, the fifth memento; that seamless garment described in John 19:23-24. **“When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took His clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. ‘Let’s not tear it,’ they said to one another. ‘Let’s decide by lot who will get it.’ This happened that the Scripture might be fulfilled which said, ‘They divided My garments among them and cast lots for My clothing.’ So this is what the soldiers did.”**

Two types of clothing are mentioned in this text. First, the outerwear or HIMATIA in Greek, which included accessories like a cloak, belt, sandals, and prayer shawl. These were likely the four items divided into four shares among the four soldiers who crucified Jesus. While we need no historical confirmation to accept the truthfulness of Scripture; the mention of four soldiers and four shares merely underscores the historicity of Scripture. We know from many secular, historical, and archaeological sources that Romans soldiers assigned to crucifixions generally worked in teams of four.

Then the undergarment or CHITON in Greek; a tunic worn next to the skin, usually knee-length and with long sleeves. The CHITON of Jesus was especially remarkable in that it was not sewn together from individual pieces of cloth;

but was rather woven entirely as one piece, no seams from top to bottom.

Who made this CHITON or seamless garment for the Lord? His mother Mary? A woman whose disease Jesus had cured or whose child He had raised from the dead or whose marriage He had saved? Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons? Mary and Martha of Bethany, whose brother Lazarus Jesus had called from the grave? Peter's mother-in-law, whom Jesus had healed of a serious fever? The possibilities are as countless as Christ's miracles.

Yet, Scripture does not tell us who made the seamless garment, or for that matter, which Roman soldier won it by lottery, or what that soldier did with the garment he won. According to one legend, the lucky soldier who obtained the seamless garment sold it to a traveling salesman. To this day, several Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches claim to have this seamless garment of Christ in their possession. Such nonsense aside, what may we learn from this CHITON, this memento of Christ's Passion? Of what does this seamless garment remind us?

First, that seamless garment is a symbol of Christ's humility; that is, the extent to which Jesus humbled Himself for our sakes. And we can't begin to contemplate the extent of that humility without remembering that Jesus was not only true Man but also true God from all eternity.

This is why Paul in that great passage from Philippians 2 wrote of Christ's deity *before* describing His humility; saying, **“Christ Jesus, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant,**

being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross.”

How does that seamless garment underscore Christ’s humility? Consider the fact that Jesus was even wearing this CHITON at all; a simple, lovingly made, homespun garment; the fact that He was not wearing divine garments so bright with glory as to blind the eyes of those who witnessed them.

Remember the description of Christ’s clothes at His transfiguration, when for a brief instant He allowed Peter and Andrew, James and John, to glimpse His true glory? According to Mark 9:3, **“His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.”** And in Luke 9:29, **“As He was praying, the appearance of His face changed, and His clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.”** No, Jesus wasn’t wearing such clothes when crucified, though He could have. He came to be our everyday Savior, and so He wore everyday clothes.

Clothes which He allowed the Roman soldiers to take away, including that special seamless garment. And this too emphasizes His humility; the fact that Jesus permitted His clothes to be divided among Roman legionnaires and His seamless undergarment to be assigned by lottery—He, of whom John wrote in the Prologue of his Gospel, **“Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made,”** John 1:3.

“When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took His clothes,” John 19:23. Do we pause long enough at this verse to consider its implications? Many Christians don’t realize this. Understandably, most Christian art does not depict this. But

when Jesus Christ hung bleeding and dying on the cross, He was almost certainly naked. And so even this shame was added to His agony; a shame He willingly endured when humbly atoning for our sins. Of this humility the seamless garment is a reminder.

Second, that seamless garment is a symbol of Christ's love. This is because any discussion of Christ's humility will lead to a heartfelt praise for Christ's undeserved love. "Why would Jesus so humble Himself? Why would He think of us before thinking about Himself? Why would He choose to be born in a smelly barn instead of a royal palace? Why would He allow Himself to be arrested, mocked, scourged, wrongly condemned, so savagely beaten as to be unrecognizable?"

This is the plain meaning of Isaiah's words written centuries before Christ's birth: "**Just as there were many who were appalled at Him—His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and His form marred beyond human likeness,**" Isaiah 52:14. And why would Jesus permit Roman soldiers to divide His clothes among themselves; to roll dice or flip coins for that special, seamless tunic that someone had lovingly made Him? Why would He willingly die the excruciating death of the cross?

There is only one answer to all these questions, and that one answer is divine, unmerited love. As explained in the cherished words of John 3:16-17, "**For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.**" Love. The Greek word AGAPE. The love that took into account everything

wrong with us and went on loving us anyway. Love that moved Jesus to lay down His life for us and literally ‘give us the tunic off His back.’ God’s love. Of this love the seamless garment is a reminder.

Third, that seamless garment is a symbol of God’s absolute faithfulness. Note carefully the words of John 19:24, **“This happened that the Scripture might be fulfilled which said, ‘They divided My garments among them and cast lots for My clothing.’ ”** Do you know who wrote these words? King David. Do you know where these words are found? In Psalm 22, a psalm which prophetically describes the crucifixion of Jesus Christ—and in such detail as to mention the Savior’s pierced hands and feet, His dislocated bones, and the dreadful words He would cry from the cross: **“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”** Psalm 22:1. And do you know when this psalm was written? Nearly a thousand years before Christ was even born.

In fact, throughout the Passion History we find similar affirmations of God’s faithfulness: ‘This happened so that the Scripture would be fulfilled.’ When betrayed in Gethsemane, Jesus said, **“Do you think I cannot call on My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way?”** Matthew 26:53-54.

When speaking of the betrayer, Judas, Jesus said, **“None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled,”** John 17:12. Of Judas and his thirty silver coins we read: **“Then what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ‘They took the thirty silver coins, the price set on Him by the people of Israel, and they**

used them to buy the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me,” Matthew 27:9-10.

Of words Jesus spoke from the cross we read: **“Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, ‘I am thirsty,’ ”** John 19:28. And of the fact that the bones of Jesus were not broken as He hung on the cross we read: **“These things happened so that the Scripture would be fulfilled: ‘Not one of His bones will be broken;’ and, as another Scripture says, ‘They will look on the One they have pierced,’”** John 19:36-37.

Why am I offering so many examples? Because when you leave here tonight, I want you to be certain that our God keeps His Word; our God keeps His promises—every sentence, every word, every letter. And that includes every promise He has ever made to you. The promise to love you eternally and unconditionally. The promise to deliver you in times of trouble. The promise to forgive your sins when you turn to Him in repentance and faith. The promise to provide for all your daily needs. The promise to bring you safely from grace to glory, from time to eternity. from this life to the next. Of this faithfulness the seamless garment is a reminder.

Fourth, that seamless garment is a symbol of God’s complete control. The Roman soldiers, of course, thought that they were in control when they nailed Christ to the cross. They thought their goddess Fortuna or Lady Luck was in control when they rolled the dice for that seamless garment. Just as the High Priest Caiaphas thought he was in control when he delivered Jesus to Pilate; and Pilate thought he was in control when He sentenced Jesus to be crucified; and Tiberius Caesar

thought he was in control when he appointed Pontius Pilate to be Prefect of Judea.

Yet, that which happened to Jesus during His passion, from His betrayal to His arrest, from His death on the cross to the dividing of his garments by four Roman soldiers, was not coincidence, not accident, not in the control of mortal men, but the result of the eternal plans and purposes of Almighty God. As explained so simply in the last verse of tonight’s text: **“So this is what the soldiers did.”** Why did they do it? Because God ordained it. Because God used even the hostile intensions of the Jewish religious leaders, the wicked power of imperial Rome, and even the unjust condemnation and crucifixion of His one and only Son, to accomplish the salvation of the world.

No matter what the circumstances—whether ill that results from our own foolish choices or illness that comes through no fault of our own—God is always Sovereign. God is always in control, God is always working out everything and every detail in accordance with His will and His grand and glorious purposes for our lives. **“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him,”** Romans 8:28. This is the resounding testimony of the Bible. And of this gracious control and sovereignty that seamless garment is a reminder.

Finally, that seamless garment is a symbol of Christ’s righteousness. The images are heartbreaking. Jesus, nearly beaten beyond recognition, bleeding profusely, nailed to a cross. Jesus, crowned with thorns, a mocking superscription placed above His head as if it were a FOR SALE or UNWANTED sign and reading: JESUS OF NAZARETH. KING OF THE JEWS. Jesus, gasping for each breath; yet, still

speaking words of blessing and benediction: **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,”** Luke 23:34. Jesus, suffering in ways we simply cannot fathom; for along with the physical torture He endured, He was also carrying the weight and guilt of the world’s sins. **“And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all,”** Isaiah 53:6. Jesus, enduring the indignity of hanging naked from the cross, even as Roman soldiers divided His clothes and cast lots for that seamless garment; laughing, cursing, bartering.

But here, on Golgotha, there is another picture; another garden, another tree of life—amazingly, an old rugged cross—where our Savior, Jesus Christ, atoned for our sins. In Eden, Mankind was overcome by a tree. On Golgotha, Jesus Christ, overcame by a tree. In Eden, cursed the earth with thorns. On Golgotha, Jesus wore a crown of thorns. In Eden, Adam and Eve ran from God because of their shameful nakedness. On Golgotha, Jesus took our shameful nakedness and gave us the seamless garment of His righteousness. For **“God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God,”** 2 Corinthians 5:10. And of this everlasting robe of righteousness from Christ, that seamless garment is a reminder.

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus’ name.
On Christ, the solid rock I stand.
All other ground is sinking sand.

Mementos of Christ's Passion – Part VI
A SOLDIER'S SPEAR

Midweek Lent-6 - April 10, 2019

Written by Pastor Mark Weis

Over the centuries, the spear that pierced the side of Jesus Christ became shrouded in legend. It was said to wield great mystical power. It was given many names, including the Holy Lance, the Holy Spear, the Spear of Destiny, and the Spear of Longinus—named for Gaius Cassius Longinus, the Roman soldier who allegedly pierced the side of Christ and later became a Christian. According to legend, Longinus, if such a soldier truly existed, was assigned to crucifixion duty that Good Friday because his cataracts made him unfit for other forms of military service.

Today, the spear is said to reside in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome; also in Armenia, Turkey, Poland, and Austria. Interestingly, the Austrian location has a connection to Adolf Hitler. While living in Vienna, Austria, Hitler grew entranced with the Sword of Destiny, often staring at the relic for hours. He wrote in *Mein Kampf*: "I felt as though I myself had held it in my hands before in an earlier century of history—that I myself had once claimed it as my talisman of power and held the destiny of the world in my hands."

Many believe that Hitler invaded Austria in 1938 to retrieve the Sword of Destiny before pursuing his dreams of global domination and a Thousand-Year Third Reich. Historically, this much is certain: After invading Austria, one of Hitler's first actions was to take the spear from the Hapsburg Palace.

These are merely some of the fables surrounding the spear that pierced Christ's side. But what are the realities? What lessons may we learn from this memento of Christ's passion?

First, the soldier's spear reminds us that Jesus died on the cross. And yes, this is a simple, obvious lesson. After all, how many crucified victims survived crucifixion? How many detached themselves from the seven-inch iron spikes driven through their wrists and feet? And even if this were possible—and it was not—how many left the scene of a *public* execution, surrounded by battle-hardened Roman soldiers armed with swords and spears? The Romans used crucifixion because it was so painful, so lethal, so inescapable.

Yes, as true Man and true God, Jesus had the infinite power to do anything, including avoiding the cross or leaving it. But He came to die for our sins; indeed, to endure every aspect of our punishment—and to such an extent that, when offered a mild sedative of wine and myrrh to slightly diminish the pain of the cross, Jesus refused to drink it. Instead, He took all of our sin, pain, and punishment on Himself.

However, to this very day, enemies of Christ insist that He did not die on the cross; that Roman soldiers whether from plot or pity, spared His life; that Pilate had a change of heart; that Jesus was drugged to merely appear dead; that after surviving the cross, Jesus married Mary Magdalene, went to France, and founded the royal dynasties of Europe—to which author Dan Brown alluded in his religious fairytale *The DaVinci Code*. Such claims are more than ridiculous. They are blasphemous, contrary to Scripture, and offered in the desperate hope that denying Christ's death on the cross will

also undermine Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday, the Gospel, and the Christian Faith itself.

Yet, ironically, even Christ's first-century enemies did not dispute His death. After the First Easter, their fabrication was that disciples had stolen the Savior's dead body. They wanted Christ dead and knew with certainty that He had died. They were there. They had eyewitness accounts—not simply from disciples like John who said, **“The man who saw it has given testimony; and his testimony is true,”** John 19:35. They also had the eyewitness testimony of the Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus and the religious leaders who stood at the cross reviling Jesus and the funeral entourage that removed the dead body of Jesus from the cross. No easy task, pulling the iron spikes from the body or the body from the iron spokes; then lowering the dead weight of a dead body from a height of perhaps nine feet.

And they had the unmistakable forensic evidence of that soldier's spear. As stated in John 19:32-34, **“The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus *and found that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.*”**

Many physicians and forensic experts have studied the suffering and death of Jesus Christ; specifically, the physical traumas and injuries that caused His death—in a sense, a literary autopsy; that is, an autopsy based on the record of Scripture. As I've said before, though Scripture describes the

passion of Christ in relatively bloodless terms, there was blood everywhere. His precious blood.

Already in Gethsemane, Jesus began to sweat great drops of blood; a fact recorded in Luke 22:44. And remember, Luke was a physician. Modern physicians refer to this rare condition as Hematidrosis. It happens when small capillaries break and blood leaks into the sweat glands. And its cause is extreme emotional stress. For Jesus, what could have been more stressful than knowing the torturous agonies He would soon endure, or the hell He would suffer for our sakes? No wonder He sweat great drops of blood. No wonder He earnestly prayed: **“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from Me. Yet not as I will, but as You will,”** Matthew 26:39.

Furthermore, after hours of interrogation—no food, no drink, no sleep, no sympathy—Jesus was scourged with the Roman flagellum; a whip made of leather straps tipped with metal balls or jagged rocks. Many victims of this type of flogging died before they reached the cross.

According to one surgeon who studied this cruel punishment, scourging left the back an unrecognizable mess of blood and torn flesh. Isaiah prophetically described this appearance of Jesus seven centuries before the Savior was born, saying: **“His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and His form marred beyond human likeness,”** Isaiah 52:13. And on that marred, bleeding back, Jesus was forced to carry the 100-pound patibulum or crossbeam of the cross nearly six hundred and fifty yards, from the Fortress of Antonia to the execution site of Golgotha—until, at length, along the way, exhausted and suffering enormous blood loss, He finally stumbled beneath its weight.

Then followed the indescribable agony of crucifixion: the spikes driven through wrists and feet; the dislocated bones; the shame of being crucified naked; and perhaps worst of all, the constant struggle to breathe. Most deaths by cross were slow deaths of suffocation. Breaking the legs hastened death, not simply because of added pain, but because broken legs would make it impossible for victims to push themselves up on the cross to exhale trapped air and gasp for fresh air. Yet, given the pain of the cross, perhaps many welcomed broken legs as a twisted form of mercy.

But in addition to all this, Jesus was also carrying the weight, guilt, and punishment of the world's sins—mine, yours, ours, everyone's. As the prophet wrote, **“The LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all,”** Isaiah 53:6. Most of us have felt the enormous weight and guilt of just one sin; like David did after committing adultery with Bathsheba, saying, **“My bones wasted away through my groaning all day long,”** Psalm 32:3. Imagine the weight and guilt Jesus carried.

According to many medical experts who've studied the death of Christ: When that soldier's spear was thrust upward into Jesus' side, it likely pierced the pericardial sac surrounding the Savior's heart. A sac and also lungs filled with fluid from all the traumatic injuries. Fluid which eventually compressed and stopped the Savior's heart. Yet, even here His life was not taken from Him. He gave it up. As written in the Passion History, John 19:30, **“When He had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that, He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.”**

One medical article I read stated that Jesus died of a broken heart. Another said that He died of heart failure. This

may be true medically. But Scripturally, I would argue just the opposite. Jesus died because His heart did not fail; because He loved us to the very end of His life and the very end of His redemptive work; as stated in Hebrews 12: **“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”**

This is why the Bible records the death of Jesus in so many ways and places—the complete and irrevocable giving of Himself through death pictured in every Old Testament sacrifice and stated unequivocally in the New Testament, including the account of the spear that pierced the side of Christ and the account His certified burial and the account of the three days He spent in the grave.

For in the certainty of His death lies the certainty of our salvation; the certainty that our debt before Almighty God has been PAID IN FULL; the certainty that when Jesus Christ cried out from the cross, “it is finished,” our salvation really was finished. Nothing left undone. Nothing left for us to do but to receive this salvation through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

And so the Scriptures declare: **“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins,”** Ephesians 1:7; and, **“The blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin,”** 1 John 1:7; and, **“He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification,”** Romans 4:25; and, **“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you**

were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect,” 1 Peter 1:18-19; and, “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God,” 1 Peter 3:18; and so many, many more passages.

Or in the words of our next hymn: “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name. On Christ, the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand.” LH 370:1.

My friends, you and I go through times and circumstances when, like Paul, we look at our lives and sins and failings and cry out, ‘What a wretched person I am.’ All true. Yet, God has completely forgiven us through the death of Jesus Christ. And of this that soldier’s spear is a blessed reminder—yes, a reminder of Christ’s death, but also in His willing death, a reminder of how much God loves us, how much God wants us, how God will always provide for us, supplying all that we need for this life and the next. Surely, this is what Paul meant in Romans 8:32 when he wrote: **“He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?”** Romans 8:32.

Perhaps we should keep a replica of a Roman spear in a room of our home. Perhaps we should look at it whenever we feel unwanted, lost, forgotten, unsaved, and unforgiven. Perhaps we should remember that the original Roman spear carried by the Roman soldier on Golgotha was once stained with the blood of God. Because that spear tells a story. That

spear says “Jesus died for me.” That spear says “I am forgiven.” And that spear says something more.

Second, the soldier’s spear reminds us of God’s absolutely faithfulness. And if you are wondering how, listen again to the last two verses of tonight’s text, John 19:36-36. **“These things happened so that the Scripture would be fulfilled: ‘Not one of His bones will be broken,’ and, as another Scripture says, ‘They will look on the One they have pierced.’ ”**

“Not one of His bones will be broken” refers to Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12; that is, specific regulations regarding the celebration of the Jewish Passover, and how the spotless lamb sacrificed, of which Jesus Christ was always the true fulfilment—for which reason John the Baptist introduced Jesus to the Israelites, saying, **“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,”** John 1:29—how the bones of the paschal Lamb were never to be broken. The psalmist also prophesied, **“He protects all His bones, not one of them will be broken,”** Psalm 34:20.

Likewise, the words **“They will look on the One they have pierced”** are taken from Zechariah 12:10, which reads: **“They will look on Me, the One they have pierced, and they will mourn for Him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for Him as one grieves for a firstborn son.”**

Friends, these prophecies were made centuries before Jesus Christ was even born. And on Good Friday, when the Roman soldiers had no need to break the legs of Jesus, and subsequently, a soldier thrust a spear into Christ’s side, these very prophecies and promises of God were fulfilled to the letter. Now, do you think anything in this world or any detail of your

life is beyond God's control? Do you think He will somehow fail to faithfully fulfill every promise He has made to you? Never. And of this that soldier's spear is the proof.

Mementos of Christ's Passion – Part VII
A CUP OF BLESSING

Maunday Thursday - April 18, 2019

Written by Pastor Mark Weis

1 Corinthians 10:16-17

For the past six weeks, we've discussed various mementos of Christ's passion: the **Alabaster Jar** with which Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus for burial; the **Thirty Silver Coins** Judas Iscariot was paid to betray Jesus; the **Crown of Thorns** mockingly placed on Jesus' head; the **Old Rugged Cross** on which Jesus died; the **Seamless Garment** Jesus wore; and the **Soldier's Spear** that pierced Jesus' side.

Tonight, the seventh memento of Christ's Passion; namely, a **Cup of Blessing**. And while this cup is mentioned in the Gospel records of Maunday Thursday and the Last Supper, 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 will be our text. Paul wrote: **“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.”**

Clearly, Paul was describing the Lord's Supper. And he had an important reason for doing so. Whether through ignorance or indifference, the Christians in Corinth were misusing the Lord's Supper, in essence turning it into a gluttonous church picnic and suffering dreadful consequences. Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 11:20-21, **“When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat,**

each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.”

Yet, the phrase “cup of blessing” also has another important context; namely, the Jewish Passover. Remember, when Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper on Maunday Thursday, the night of His betrayal, He was celebrating the Passover with His disciples. In fact, before eating the Passover Meal, Jesus told them: **“I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer,”** Luke 22:15.

According to the Mishna, a collection of Jewish traditions from as early as 450 B.C., four ritual cups of red wine were used during the Passover. These four cups were considered so important to the Passover celebration, that the Mishna urged even the poor to sell all their possessions, if necessary, to provide these four cups of wine for everyone in the house.

At each cup of wine, the father of the household read a portion of Exodus 6:6-7. Each cup had a purpose. The purpose of the fourth cup was to bless and praise God for His goodness and grace in making the Israelites His people. **“I will take you as My people,”** God said in Exodus 6:7, **“and I will be your God.”** Blessing or praising God is why the fourth cup of wine in the Passover was called “the cup of blessing”. And it was almost certainly this fourth cup that Jesus used when instituting His Holy Supper.

Predictably, over the centuries the original Cup of Blessing—like the crown of thorns, cross, seamless garment, and soldier’s spear—became an object of myth, superstition, and veneration. According to one legend, Joseph of Arimathea retrieved the cup from the Last Supper and filled it with the

blood dripping from Christ’s crucified body. According to another legend, anyone who drank from this cup was granted complete healing, eternal youth, and everlasting happiness.

By the Thirteenth Century A.D., the Cup of Blessing was the focus of many King Arthur legends and his endless quest to find the “Holy Grail”—as the cup or chalice came to be called. Even today, the quest for the Grail continues. As recently as 2014, two historians claimed to have found this long-sought cup in Leon, Spain. The problem is, two hundred other organizations claim to have the same cup.

And of course, the Grail or Cup of Blessing has been the subject of many movies: *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, 1975; *Excalibur*, 1981; *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, 1989; and *The Fisher King*, 1991. It was also the focus of Dan Brown’s religious fairytale *The Da Vinci Code*; though, in a bizarre twist, the receptacle in this novel was not a cup but the womb of Mary Magdalene—again, the blasphemous notion that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and produced the royal dynasties of Europe.

Such nonsense aside, what may we learn from this memento of Christ’s Passion? Of what does the Cup of Blessing remind us? To quote Jesus Himself: **“This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”** As always, there are too many lessons and too little time. So, in the time allotted, I will focus on three.

First, the Cup of Blessing is a cup overflowing with forgiveness. When we partake of the Lord’s Supper, as we will again tonight, according to the words and promises of Jesus Himself, we will receive the very body and blood, given and shed, for the forgiveness of our sins.

The bread and wine do not become the body and blood of Christ, as the Roman Catholic Church teaches. Nor do they merely symbolize the body and blood of Christ, as the Reformed Church teaches. Rather, as Scripture teaches, when the Lord’s Supper is celebrated according to Christ’s institution, His body and His blood are really present along with the bread and wine. Hence the term “real presence”.

Luther rightly explained: The Sacrament of the Altar “is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink, instituted by Christ Himself.” And again, when discussing the benefits of the Lord’s Supper, Luther said: “That is shown us by these words, ‘Given and shed for you for the remission of sins’; namely, that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.”

Human reason cannot grasp how the body and blood of Christ are really present in the Lord’s Supper, along with the bread and wine—any more than human reason can grasp how God created all things from no things, or how God is Triune, or how Jesus Christ is both true God and true Man. Yet, we believe and accept these truths because Scripture clearly teaches these truths.

Say what one will, but there is no mistaking the simple meaning of Christ’s words when He instituted His Holy Supper. Taking bread, He said, “**This is My body.**” Taking the cup of wine, He said, “**This is My blood.**” Or as Paul wrote in our text: “**The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?**”

And dear friends, it is precisely because the Lord’s body and blood really are present in His Holy Supper that the practice of “open communion”—essentially, turning the Lord’s Supper into a gluttonous church picnic, a smorgasbord, as the Corinthian Christians were doing—is so wrong and so unloving. Regardless of the complaints and accusations of others, never fall for the argument that “open communion” is loving. It is not. It’s the very opposite of loving and caring for the spiritual well-being of every communicant.

Because to eat or drink of the Lord’s Supper without understanding its nature is to eat and drink judgement instead of forgiveness. These are not my words, but Paul’s. The apostle wrote in 1 Corinthians 11: **“But let a man examine himself and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.”**

So tell me, given the plain teaching of Scripture, is open communion really loving? No. And of course, the ability to examine oneself requires knowledge, and knowledge requires learning, and learning requires time. This is why our confirmation classes are often two years and not two minutes. This is why we don’t practice open communion at St. Luke’s Lutheran—not because we want to exclude people, but because we want them to partake of the Lord’s Supper to their blessing and not to their harm.

Tonight, as you in faith partake of the Lord’s Supper, remember the words of Jesus as **“He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat;**

this is My body,” Matthew 26:26. Remember the words of our Savior as **“He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins,’ ”** Matthew 26:27-28.

Approach the Lord’s Supper in repentance and faith; and leave it in the certainty of your forgiveness; in the personal assurance of Christ Himself that He died to atone for all your sins. The Cup of Blessing is a cup overflowing with forgiveness.

Second, the Cup of Blessing is a cup overflowing with love. Surely, God’s great love for us is evident in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; in the body broken and the blood shed for the remission of our sins. And therefore the Lord’s Supper is not only a Meal of God’s Forgiveness but a Meal of God’s Love.

This is why the early Christian Church often referred to the Lord’s Supper as an Agape Feast. AGAPE, that deep, committed, undeserved love of God that took into account everything wrong with us and insisted on loving us anyway. Insisted on sacrificing that which was nearest and dearest to God the Father, that is, the life of God the Son. You know the passages as well as I do. **“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,”** John 3:16. **“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us,”** 1 John 3:16.

Yes, we know these simple, beautiful passages; but how often do we actually apply them to the hurts and heartaches of our everyday lives? Thankfully, Paul applied them for us. In the willing death of Jesus Christ for each one of us, Paul saw the undeniable, irrevocable, unchangeable proof of God’s love

and God’s providence from cradle to grave, from time to eternity.

And so Paul said what you and I should say each time we feel hurt, helpless, alone, even forsaken by God: **“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

Indeed, on the same night in which Jesus instituted His Holy Supper, only hours before His own death and as that Cup of Blessing rested, waiting, on the Passover Table; Jesus Christ, God the Son, the Creator of the Universe; the One of whom we confess on most Communion Sundays in the words of the Nicene Creed: “And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God”—this Jesus Christ stood, removed His outer garment, wrapped a towel around His waist, stooped down, and washed the filthy feet of His disciples.

Think of it, dear friends. God on His hands and knees. God doing the menial work of a servant. What kind of God is this? What kind of love is this? A God, a love, clearly revealed in the coming, suffering, dying, and rising of our Lord Jesus Christ. A God, a love, that spared no cost in saving us from our sins.

Yes, there are moments when our problems and predicaments and Satan himself tempt us to question God’s love. But precisely then must we hasten to the cross. For who

can stand beneath the cross of Christ; see Him bleeding and dying; hear Him crying out in pain, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”—and somehow doubt God’s love? That Cup of Blessing is a cup overflowing with love.

Third and finally, the Cup of Blessing is a cup overflowing with fulfillment. In the strictest sense, the Lord’s Supper, grounded as it is in the death of Jesus—the body broken and the blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins—is an ongoing illustration of the fulfillment of every promise God has ever made about redeeming lost humanity through the death of Christ; from the multitude of prophecies in the Old Testament to their complete fulfillment in the New Testament; from the countless lambs slain during countless Passovers, to the true Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, who was slain once-for-all to atone for the sins of every sinner; from the blood of the paschal lamb on the doorposts in Egypt to the **“blood of Jesus Christ His Son”** which **“cleanses us from all sin,”** 1 John 1:7.

Do we realize that, when we partake of the Lord’s Supper, we are also celebrating and illustrating the fulfillment of all God’s promises of salvation through the death of Jesus Christ? As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:26, **“For whenever you eat of this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.”**

God is a God who fulfills His promises and keeps His word. Think about that on the drive home from church tonight. Think about that the next time you face some crisis—from a life-threatening illness to a heartbreaking loss—and question whether God really will deliver you, support you, provide for you, save you, deliver you from grace to glory, and all the other

promises He has made to you in the black-and-white, read-it-and-believe-it pages of Scripture.

“For I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you,” Genesis 28:15. God said this to Abraham. God promises this to us too. And the death of Jesus Christ for our sins is the ultimate proof that God is a God who keeps His promises. That Cup of Blessing is a cup overflowing with fulfillment.