

BECOMING PASSIONATE

FOR MISSIONS

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LOVE
FOR THE
SOULS

3

Missional Thinking Series

Becoming Passionate for Missions:

**Studies on missions from
the Passion Week**

Volume Three

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Forward

Jesus was the first and greatest missionary to ever live on this earth. He left his home culture of heaven and fully incorporated himself into the life and culture of a particular people at a particular point in time. He made his life an open book for us to observe and learn from.

His passion for His Father's work was clearly revealed in everything he did and said. The Passion Week brings his teaching and life into even sharper focus as he encountered the different groups that made up the culture, both religious and secular, of his time.

This is the second of a series of three collections. This collection of studies takes a look at what Jesus said and did and how those events can help us be more effective in reaching out to the lost of our world today. The issues, questions and conflicts have not changed. They are the same.

Each study includes three options for continued reflection on the issues and information being presented.

Bible Study (BS) – A look at other key scriptures that give us further insight into Jesus' works, activity and teaching.

Mission Application (MA) – Questions that help to apply the lesson to our involvement in God's mission to the world.

Personal Reflection (PR) – Thoughts and questions that are designed to help us look at our own lives and the level of our passion for missions.

Introduction

Passion – A definition

Ardent love

Strong feeling or emotion

Boundless enthusiasm

An irrational but irresistible motive for belief or action

For the past year I have been studying the last week of Jesus' life and ministry. It has been a challenge to consider his desire to complete the mission given to him by his Father, to look at how that commitment affected the people around him, and how he communicated that mission to others. It all began with the choice he made as recorded in:

Lucas 9:51 As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

When we look at our life, what activities, people, or beliefs do we commit ourselves to? What does it mean to resolutely follow a choice we have made? What keeps us going toward that choice, in the face of obstacles and challenges? How does that choice affect others around us?

As we make that commitment, we need to consider what it will require of us to succeed. Many people will say they have the skill needed for what is being done. Others will say that they have the time needed to do the task assigned. Another reason may be that they have the resources they need. These are good answers but not always true. There are many people who succeed in a given goal who don't have the necessary skills, or who don't have the time or

resources for the task. So why do they succeed while others with greater ability and resources fail?

When we talk about Jesus and that last week of his life, one word is often used to describe it. It is called the “Passion Week” and we look at the “Passion of Christ.” There was something more behind his commitment than just a decision to finish his assignment. He had a passion for his Father’s work and mission.

Before we go on we need to consider the meaning of this word passion. Here are three definitions that are typical of what is in the dictionary: 1) ardent love; 2) boundless enthusiasm; 3) an irrational but irresistible motive for belief or action.

Jesus’ choice was based on an ardent love for his Father, a boundless enthusiasm for the work given to him and the people who needed to hear, and an irresistible belief in the mission of his Father. His choice to go to Jerusalem was built on his passion for the work of the one who had sent him.

So let’s come back to us and our lives. Why do you love that activity or person or location? What absorbs your time and energy? Do you know why you have a passion for that activity or person? What are you passionate about? What does it take to become passionate about anything?

Our choices are based on facts and not just emotions. Our choices are based on what we know and don’t know. Sometimes our choices can appear irrational, not because there is no information, but because the extent of the choice and commitment defies normal explanations and actions. We cannot easily explain the difference between normal commitments and passionate decisions.

Every choice we make involves risk. The more committed or passionate we become the more willing we should be to accept the

risks involved. Let us consider what the risks are in becoming passionate.

- 1) Misunderstood – There is always the risk that people will just not understand our choice.
- 2) Disappointment – We always risk being disappointed. We may discover that our choice does not provide us with the level of satisfaction we expected. It may not be as much fun as we had hoped. It may not result in the level of acceptance we were looking for. We may be disappointed in the results. We may not do as well as we thought we could. The potential for being disappointed often prevents people from even getting started.
- 3) Embarrassment – Embarrassment works two ways. We may find that our choices and activities and ability to perform cause others to be embarrassed. Or we become embarrassed by our failures and lack of ability. We begin to think we look foolish to others. Failure is embarrassing and any time we move into new areas of activity and choice we must deal with the possibility of failing and then having to try all over again. If our embarrassment is high enough we quit.
- 4) Exclusion – This is another risk that works two ways. Our choices may result in excluding others from our lives. We just can't be with everyone or attend every activity that is scheduled because of our choice. It also may mean that others will exclude us. They may not agree with us or they may not want to be involved in what we are doing and so choose not to be part of our choice. This may mean they decide we are not part of their world.
- 5) Criticism – There will be those who criticize our choice of activity. They will tell us that we are wasting our time, we are hurting others, and we are inconsiderate or wasting valuable resources. The list goes on and on.
- 6) Ridicule – People may make fun of us and laugh at our attempts to accomplish the task we have set for ourselves.
- 7) Failure – This is not the same as disappointment. This means that even when we know our choice is fun, good or

right, we can still fail. We will not succeed in reaching our goal.

- 8) Loneliness – This is a higher level of exclusion. We may have to deal with the fact that we are in this alone. Others just don't understand, others are not willing to help. Others are not there to encourage.
- 9) Rejection – Our choices may result in rejection by key people in our lives. This is where people just don't understand or choose not to understand our choice. They decide it is not valid and reject what we are doing and, in many ways, reject us.
- 10) Danger – All of the above are about emotional levels of risk. But in many activities and choices there are also potential dangers that are physical in nature. Many sports involve potential risk if one is going to be involved at a more serious level. Likewise commitment to a belief can result in others physically trying to hurt us and discourage us in our choices.

That is a short list of potential risks Jesus had to deal with each of them in order to follow his passion. As he resolutely headed toward Jerusalem, Let's take a quick look at them again.

- 1) Misunderstood – Many times Jesus had to deal with the fact that family, friends and even his disciples just did not understand what he was doing.
- 2) Disappointment – Jesus was often disappointed in the response of the people. There were times when he was frustrated with their response and lack of faith.
- 3) Embarrassment – Jesus' family was embarrassed by Jesus. At one point they tried to take him away because they felt he was out of his head.
- 4) Exclusion – The Pharisees excluded Jesus from their group.
- 5) Criticism – The Pharisees attacked Jesus' involvement with sinners, the publicans, and the prostitutes. They attacked him when a woman wasted a jar of perfume on his feet.

- 6) Ridicule – At one point Jesus' family told him he should go to Jerusalem. If he thought he was so good he should show himself to others. The family was hoping that he would wake up and come home. Some called him demon possessed.
- 7) Failure – Jesus had to deal with many who failed to understand what he was doing. Satan was always trying to trip him up and get him to fail in various ways. But failure for Jesus would mean the end of any hope for man.
- 8) Loneliness – Even the disciples often did not understand what Jesus was trying to do and he found himself alone. At his trial and crucifixion they all ran away.
- 9) Rejection – In the end, many rejected his teaching. A large number of people left him until only the twelve remained.
- 10) Danger – The people of his own village tried to kill him. The Pharisees tried on several occasions to seize him and harm him. In the end he was beaten and crucified.

Risks are the first thing we start to worry about. But if we get past these then we must deal with the cost. What will it cost us to truly become passionate about anything?

- 1) Time – No matter what we do with our life, or who is important to us, time is required. The more time we commit, the greater the potential for success. However, it is not just about how much time we give, but how long we are willing to continue devoting that amount of time to an activity, belief or person.
- 2) Training – What will we do to obtain the needed skills to accomplish our goals? This could mean admitting what we know (and don't know) about our skills and our needs. It may cost us our pride and submission to others to obtain the skills we need.
- 3) Resources – Just how much of what we own will we be willing to commit? This includes finances, possessions and future wants. It is not just about what we have now but

what we hope to have and are willing to obtain. What will we do to have what is needed?

- 4) People – What relationships will we need to develop and what relationships will we need to give up to accomplish the goals we have set for ourselves.?
- 5) Location – We may have to relocate ourselves to do what we desire to do. Will we be willing to move if it is necessary?

Again, let's look at the life of Jesus and see how his passion for the mission of his Father affected his life.

- 1) Time – When Jesus went into active ministry he had very little time for himself. People were always looking for him. When the crowds were absent the disciples were always near, wanting to learn from him. He devoted all of his time and life to the work his Father had given him.
- 2) Training – In his younger years, Jesus submitted to his parents and their training as a child and a carpenter. Jesus later submitted in obedience to baptism by John and willingly followed the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to face a testing time by Satan.
- 3) Resources – Jesus kept nothing for himself. All his resources were committed to the ministry. In fact he was dependent on the support of others to continue.
- 4) People – Jesus had to leave his family behind to follow God's will. He had to develop a new family in the disciples and others.
- 5) Location – Jesus relocated to Capernaum. He traveled throughout Galilee and Judea as well as other areas. He finally had to go to Jerusalem to complete the work he had accepted from his Father.

What are some examples of choices and activities that require passion for one to succeed? How does passion impact our level of success?

Marriage – Everywhere we turn there is information that tells us how to keep the passion in our marriage. It takes a special passion to take the first step and even consider getting married and going through the ceremony of marriage. But what really takes true passion is to maintain the marriage relationship not for just a couple of years but for a lifetime. A false concept of passion will leave you with only a physical concept of marriage. A true concept will keep you going through all the twists and turns, highs and lows, and everything in between.

Competitive sports – We have a son who is passionate about soccer. He loves the sport. He would get up in the early morning to work out and then go to soccer practice in the afternoon. He worked hard to become a player on the community team. When he went to college he tried out as a walk-on player and made the team. He worked and trained and in his senior year he was made captain of the team. This is his love, his passion. He is typical of all those who love a sport and love competition. Failure only makes them work harder.

Job/career – The difference between a job and a career is passion. A job is something we do because we need an income. A career is something we really love to do and a side benefit of that is it generates an income. We will do more than just be trained for a career. We will work long hours without grumbling for a career.

Religious life - Those who are truly committed to their beliefs are easy to find. They do not hide their beliefs. They will risk the scorn and ridicule of others. They will give up jobs, benefits, material goods and much more to put their belief first and make it part of

every aspect of life. They know what they believe and why they believe. In many cases they are willing to suffer for what they believe. Their passion infects their life and impacts others around them.

As you consider these lessons, ask yourself:

1. What are the results of true passion?
2. How do others see and know that we are truly passionate about what we are doing?
- 3.

In looking at these two questions here are a few areas to consider.

Satisfaction –In anything that we are passionate about, we hope that we will find a point at which we are satisfied and at peace from a worldly standpoint so much of that is dependent on our skills and our ability to achieve. In sports, it is in reaching a certain level of competence. In a career, a certain level of recognition and success. In marriage, knowing we are loved and have a partner who truly shares our life. These are all heavily dependent on our abilities. But Jesus, in John 14, told the disciples not to be afraid. They would have peace. They would know a level of satisfaction the world could not give. In our relationship with God, the key to satisfaction is in God's hand. No matter what does or doesn't happen, that will remain intact. At every level of effort and achievement, that will remain the same. We can always have peace.

Relationship – It is always easier if there are others who share the passion we have and we can build a relationship with them. Jesus said if we become passionate about God we will know the Father. Further that he would send the Holy Spirit to help us develop this relationship. We are to be part of a family and to know where we fit. We will have a relationship designed to help us develop our passion and maintain it.

Success – In most of the activities we have a passion about there is a need to succeed. The problem is that only a few can really reach the top levels. There can only be one winner, or a few at the top. You love what you are doing but you are not as successful as others. However in our relationship with God everyone has a place. We all succeed. We are all the children of God. He is with us and guides us. The more passion we have, the more we understand what that means. Everyone is a winner.

Fruit – One of the key measures of a true passion is that your involvement will get others interested and excited about what you are doing. The best way to encourage marriage is to observe a couple who are truly passionate. The best way to get others involved in a sport is for them to see your passion for it. The best way to challenge people with a career is for them to talk to someone who is passionate about that career. Jesus told the disciples that the best evidence of their love and their passion for him would be that they would bear fruit. Likewise others should see and hear our passion for Christ and be drawn to God through us.

Legacy – All of this is wonderful. But what if it only lasts for a moment and no one remembers who we are or what we did?

Being the best in a sport is great. There are all kinds athletes from the various sports who are remembered by long lists of records and achievements. These records are being kept in waiting for the next person who will come along and break them. Some records last longer than others. The legacy is that there is something left behind to challenge and encourage others to get involved and see what can happen. The legacies in marriage are about children, grand children, great grand-children - an ancestry. John wanted to leave a legacy of his life with Christ and so wrote in John 20:31, “These

things I have written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ and in believing have life in his name.”

A true passion leaves a record behind that will help others to become part of that passion. It will provide needed guidance and help to be able to succeed and then leave a legacy for another. Jesus said the same about his life in John 12:46 “I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.”

So do we have passion? What is our Christian life about? Do we burn with desire to be a Christian? What resources do we commit? What risks do we take? Do we know the cost?

How will others respond? Are we ready to be misunderstood even ridiculed? Will we become passionate? Will we be able to maintain our passion?

Just like you these are all questions that I wanted answers to. So I began to study the passion of Christ to learn about his passion and how it affected his life and those around him. I did this to understand, what I should be doing in my life and how to regain and maintain my passion as a Christian.

Jesus resolutely set his face to Jerusalem. He was passionate about what he was doing and was intent on letting others become a part of that passion. In that last week he let others see, hear, and choose. It is time for us to listen again, see again, and choose again to make our life one of passion for God.

Passion 51 - A dangerous gift

John 17:6-19

Jesus came as a gift. This gift would cause strife in the world. It would divide families and friends. Receiving the gift could easily alienate a person from the world around them. Jesus' choice to obey his father's plan caused this at many levels and in many ways.

First, it alienated Jesus from his earthly family. At one point they tried to meet him and take him away because they thought that he was behaving in an unacceptable manner. Some of his family treated him with derision. They did not understand what he was doing and were afraid, concerned, and worried about the impact his actions and words could have because they were strong and challenged the authority of the leaders, both religious and secular.

It also alienated Him from having a normal life among the people. He could not move about freely. He was constantly being watched and followed. The common people treated him differently from everyone else and this resulted in a form of isolation that could be difficult to live with and adapt to. When a large number of his followers abandoned Him, he turned to the twelve and asked if they too would slip away and leave him in isolation and forsaken. He talked about not having a normal life like others; there was no place for him to rest and sleep, no bed or pillow, just a long and lonely road.

It alienated Him from normal relations with those around him. There was a constant air of expectation, even demand, for Jesus to do more and more to care for them. Since he had the power then he should use that power to provide everything they needed. In many ways he did, yet it was not enough. It was never enough. He healed everyone who came. He drove out all the demons he encountered,

he was constantly with them listening and teaching, but it was not enough. Healing a person once will never be enough. They will be sick again and eventually they will die. Driving out the demons is great but unless there is a change in a person's focus and life, the demons will be back. The depth of the struggle was seen when he fed the 5000 and the people followed him to make him king with the hope they would be fed without limit. But soon that would not have been enough and they would want more. More than health, more than protection, more than food. They would want more and they would want to control the life and activity of Jesus. Jesus refused and the crowds became mobs which the Pharisees used to help gain their objective.

It alienated Him from the religious leaders. He did not meet with their expectations and most definitely did not tow the party line when it came to keeping THE LAW (as defined by them) and maintaining a life aloof from the people. He was unafraid to expose their duplicity and double standards. He refused to behave the way they expected a Messiah to behave and they struggled with almost everything he had to say. This animosity created an ever-growing anger on their part and they began to work at discrediting him at every turn. When this failed, they began planning to arrest him and exclude him from active participation in the world. When that failed and they could not find the means to simply remove him, they plotted his death. This would have failed except for the help of an insider and Jesus' willingness to carry out God's plan in its entirety.

It alienated Him politically. At one point Jesus left one region because Herod was seeking a way to restrain him. Herod was afraid that somehow John the Baptist had returned and this scared him. He couldn't have John running around again accusing him both of adultery and now of murder. So Jesus left Judea and

returned to Galilee to reduce the threat to him and his followers. The threat did not go away. It was just delayed. At a later point Jesus was warned by others that Herod was still looking for him. Jesus boldly proclaimed to all his plans and even told the people where he would be. He was on his way to Jerusalem and nothing would deter him. Even the threats of the king.

This alienation reached a new level when dealing with Pilate. Jesus stood before the one person who had the authority to approve and carry out Jesus' execution. Jesus could have easily avoided the threat inherent in the meeting with Pilate. He could have chosen other words and avoided and even escaped what lay ahead. The Pharisees were playing a deadly game of brinksmanship. If Jesus wouldn't respond to their threats, then they were more than willing to manipulate the political environment to get one of two results. At the very least, the humiliation and submission of Jesus in the face of a threat of certain death, or if that didn't work then they were ready to push things to the next step to bring about Jesus' death (the ultimate form of alienation).

In the end, Jesus was alienated from life itself. They killed him; no, murdered him, a type of alienation that is intended to be permanent. They wanted him out of the picture. They wanted his influence and presence destroyed. They wanted the people to see him as a criminal and have all memory of him tainted with the idea of failure and impotency. Or even better, they wanted the memories to be so painful, so distasteful that the people would forget him and return to the way things had always been, as if he had never existed, never had done anything of worth, just another ordinary, featureless piece of humanity which blurred into insignificance with the passing of time.

Jesus knew this was the ultimate goal of Satan and all who opposed the presence of God in their lives. The ultimate alienation,

to be rendered meaningless by those who sought to control the world and exclude God from every aspect of life. Jesus knew this was the threat that he was facing and that the disciples would soon face. He knew that the opposition would not stop, even with his death. The desire to alienate people from the truth in order to maintain control would continue.

He knew that the gift he had given to the apostles would bring them into conflict with the world and its' fear of the truth. He knew they would be hated for their knowledge and proclamation of this truth. It was a dangerous gift they had received and so he prayed. He prayed for their protection and for their sanctification.

Praying for protection is the obvious prayer. We all know the world we live in is filled with danger and it comes in many forms. Every day people pray for, wish for, and desire protection from all that can happen that would destroy who they are and how they wish to live. Praying for sanctification is a little harder to understand. But if you think about this, it makes a great deal of sense. It may help if we start with a simpler form of the idea of sanctification, the idea of commitment (sanctification is the highest level of commitment).

What gets us up every day to face the struggles that await us? What is it that motivates us to get in a car, on a bus, in a plane or do anything else that contains the possibility of failure or personal harm? Commitment. We are committed to earning a living so we can feed and care for ourselves. We are committed to taking care of those we love. We are committed to making a sincere effort to enjoy the world around us. We are committed to carrying out our responsibilities. We are committed to protecting our rights and the rights of others. The greater the dangers or risks involved, the greater the level of commitment required.

For example, to go to work involves a level of risk but it is not considered overly significant. But expressing ones political or religious views at work involves greater risk. Protecting the rights of others and defending them from attack takes us to another level. Serving in the military to make sure others do not try to take away our rights or invade our country, places one in harm's way (it is pretty much guaranteed that some of these people will die for their commitment). In all of these, there are ways to minimize the potential of risk. We can choose the route we take to work, we can chose the time and place for declaring our views, we can take precautions in how we protect others, and we can chose the nature of our response to those who attack us.

Sanctification is the greatest form of commitment as defined in the Bible. This is simply a complete commitment to God and His service. This commitment also brings us into conflict with the most powerful enemy to be found in the world, an enemy whose sole purpose is the destruction of the truth and all who serve the truth. But unlike the commitments mentioned above, there are no means to minimize the risk. No choices we can make, no use of different methods or techniques, no special protection we can design, will reduce the risk. Nothing we can do will make a difference.

Jesus knew this. We can do nothing, but He knew that His Father could intervene. God can protect us from permanent harm. We may lose our life here on earth but we will not lose our place as His children. He also knew that the only way to truly access this protection was by being completely committed, completely convinced that only through God can we find the truth, and completely ready to tell anyone and everyone this truth. Only in sanctification, like that of Jesus, will we know the true power of God to protect us from the attacks that will come, from the hate

that will be expressed, from the alienation that will exist because we choose to follow God and not Satan.

Jesus wants to give us an incredible gift. A gift, which will free us from the domination of Satan, of the world and of our own sin. A gift that will be dangerous and will cause those who serve Satan, the world and their sin, to hate us and seek to destroy us. A gift that will only be understood completely as we are sanctified by God to that truth. This gift will give us more than we could dream possible both now and in eternity.

We have this same responsibility - to give the gift of truth. As we give it, we must understand what receiving this gift means to those who listen. We need to understand the risks involved, the costs for them to believe. For some it will be simple. They may live in a country where everyone has great freedom to choose. The risks will be subtle in nature. At the other extreme it could be deadly - making such a choice could result in physical harm and even death.

To share the truth will require being sanctified, fully committed to God, and a belief that the truth must be shared. Others must have the chance to be freed from Satan, the world and their sin. Only a complete commitment on our part will make it possible for others to make a clear choice. Only a sanctified life can deal with the alienation that will come as we help others to see the truth, see God and be able to choose.

It is a deadly gift, the truth, but only in the short term. Here and now a commitment to the truth may bring alienation, but only from what is temporary. The one thing the truth will not alienate us from is God. Jesus knew this. He prayed. He led the way. We now have the choice of whether we will follow and if we will sanctify ourselves to this choice.

BS – Study the following scriptures and write a statement about the importance of a sanctified life in proclaiming the gospel. 1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15; 2 Timothy 2:21; James 1:22-25; 1 Peter 1:22-23

PR – Evaluate your life and your level of commitment. Do you feel like you are at risk for your beliefs? Do you sense God’s presence and protection to help you share the truth with others? Reread Jesus’ prayer in John 17 and place your name in the prayer.

MT – Read John 15:18-21. How do you feel about this idea that telling people the truth will not only free them but also place them in danger? What do we need to do to help people deal with this as we obey God’s command to carry the gospel to the world?

Passion 52 - A blanket prayer for the unknown

John 17:20-26

How many times have we heard a “blanket prayer” given during times of prayer? The prayer that goes like this, “God bless the missionaries.” A prayer with no names, no places and no information about the need and the blessing sought.

I have often been critical of this prayer. To me, it implied a lack of awareness of the people serving and where they are serving. It revealed a lack of willingness to risk praying for specifics and the faith needed to pray believing God will respond specifically. To me it represented a weak and useless form of prayer.

However, as I read this prayer of Jesus I found that I must rethink this attitude of criticism. For here Jesus prays a very general prayer. He prays for all who will believe because of the testimony of the disciples. He makes no reference to a specific place or

ministry. He does not pray for each disciple individually but as a group, (all the missionaries). There are no specific needs mentioned nor specific battles, problems or difficulties to be overcome. It is in many ways a blanket prayer with some key differences.

Jesus prays for much more than a blessing for all the disciples (My prayer is not for them alone). He prays for the results of their ministries (I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message). He prays for those who will hear and for the results that are needed from their ministry. He prays the following, “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

He prays for two critical requests related to the ministry of the disciples and all who respond generation after generation. 1. That they will be one with the Father and the Son and that they will know personally the one who saves them. 2. That the lives they will live will help others to believe that Jesus was sent by God to save us.

I have a prayer calendar with people groups listed for each day. It is a monthly calendar that includes various churches, pastors, missionaries and mission fields. I use this for my times of devotion and prayer. It is my goal to pray as specifically as possible for each on my list but I find that I do not always know the specific needs of the place or person when I come to their name on my calendar. I often find myself praying much like Jesus did, in a general way, for the name on my list. I find myself praying for them that God will be present, that he will guide them and that his name will be proclaimed clearly so that people will respond. I pray that God will be present to guide, to protect, and to provide what is needed.

It is much like the blanket prayer I criticize and yet it is not. So many times people stop at the end of ‘God bless the missionaries’ and go no further. They do not specify the nature of the blessing, of what they want God to do, of what God should provide and of the results they want that would be evidence of the blessing.

As I read this portion of Jesus’ prayer again, I was reminded that at this point in time there were no missionaries, no ministries, no activities of any kind. Jesus could not pray for any specific person or place. So he prayed accordingly. He prayed for their unity, their awareness of God among them. He prayed for their protection (earlier in the prayer), he prayed that the people would believe their testimony, he prayed for those who believed and would carry the message to the next generation. He prayed that the love the Father had for him would be known and experienced by them. He prayed that they would clearly see and experience his presence in their lives. He prayed for specific blessings and specific results to be theirs.

If we take time to review Jesus’ prayer life and specific prayers we will further discover that whenever possible he prayed specifically. He prayed for the multiplication of the loaves of bread. He prayed specifically for Peter and that he would survive the sifting of Satan. He prayed for the disciples that they would be protected and would return after they deserted him. He even prayed for Judas. When he had specific information he prayed specifically.

To do this my wife and I have another book that we use for prayer. Each week we enter specific people and needs in this book for prayer. As the week passes we often add more to the list as we receive emails, phone calls or other information that needs specific prayer. Often we reenter names and needs week after week, depending on the nature of the need and the time frame involved.

Even then we can use Jesus' general prayer as a guide for our specific prayers. Always we need to pray that they will be aware of God's presence and that they are not alone but united with many others in the work. Always we need to pray that through their lives and all that happens, others will know and believe in God. From there we continue on into the specifics of wisdom, provision, and protection. But always we need to be aware that no matter what we do nor do not know we must pray that God will 'bless all the missionaries.'

Take time and read again Jesus' prayer for all those who are witnesses, all who are called to testify, and all who will believe. Then let it guide you into a deeper commitment to pray for one another and for those serving around the world.

John 17:20-26

20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23 I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

24 "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

25 "Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. 26 I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

BS – Read Matthew 6:9-13. How can this prayer be used to help us pray for the mission of God around the world? Rewrite the prayer reflecting a focus on praying for missionaries in general and then a specific missionary you know.

PR- Reflect on how you pray for missionaries. What are the key things you pray for? How do they compare with the key points that Jesus prayed for?

MT – Answer the following question. What is the ultimate goal of missions? Now use that answer to evaluate how we pray for missions and then write a guide on how to pray for missionaries.

Passion 53 - Garden of Hurt or Hope?

Matthew 26:36-46 (Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:35-46)

It was 1992 and there was a rebel war in Sierra Leone. The fighting was in the east and things were not going well. The government soldiers were unhappy and a group of them left the battlefield and went to Freetown, and suddenly we had a new president. The elected president fled the country and a sergeant in the army declared himself president. Almost all the foreign embassies began evacuating their people as well as strongly encouraging all other non-citizens of Sierra Leone leave. The US embassy did the same thing and gave us a deadline to be in Freetown for evacuation.

Just like that, we found ourselves back in the US wondering what would happen next. Within a week of our return to the USA all of the missionaries met and we prayed and discussed what we would do next. We unanimously agreed that at soon as it was possible we would return to Sierra Leone. Three months later we were back.

The country had settled down and the rebels were pulling back. We went back to work training pastors.

Two years later the situation changed again. This time the rebels were stronger and moving towards us. The fighting was only 40 miles away. The people of our village were nervous. They posted watchmen on various roads and pathways into the village. Those who believed in spirits held a sacrifice asking for protection. The church leaders refused to participate and organized times of prayer. (I believe this action was why the church and bible school buildings were spared when the rebels finally captured our village).

It was now May of 1994 and my wife and I were sitting on the veranda discussing the situation and what we would do. We were scheduled to go on furlough in June. We felt strongly that we should return if possible. But the question on my mind was what would we do if we could not return to Sierra Leone. During that discussion it became clear to us that we were called to be missionaries. It did not matter where we served. What mattered was that we were ready to go where God sent us and do what he asked us to do. This became the basis of our prayers and decisions over the next year. It opened the way for us to accept reappointment to Papua New Guinea when it became clear we could not return to Sierra Leone.

You could call that discussion our garden of Gethsemane. A choice was before us and we needed to choose what we would do. It would become the reference point for future decisions about going where God was sending us. In each situation the decision to be made was the same. Would we obey God and fulfill his purpose for our lives? Would we face the challenges and difficulties and risks to carry out that purpose?

As I sit here and reflect on this passage and on that day in Sierra Leone, I realize that each of us must make a similar decision. The nature of the threats or challenges will be different. You may not be facing death, like Jesus, or dealing with the threat of an attack by rebels like we did, but you will be faced with a choice that will involve obedience and risking something in order to carry out God's work in the world around you.

This decision is really not about the events around us. It is about our will, God's will and which one we will obey. It is about whether we do A or B, not whether we choose from two possible roads to the same destination. When you read Jesus' prayer, you will realize he was not trying to choose between A or B. He was asking if the Father could find or create an option that would allow him to avoid, evade, even escape the road before him. Even as he asked the question he knew that there was no other road. That there was only one decision to make, go forward and obey, or turn away and disobey. And so he responded, "not my will but your will."

So many times we are hoping that the decision will have an alternative possibility. A 'B' option, something less dangerous, less difficult, more within our abilities, our strengths, I place the emphasis on the word 'our', because we are not thinking about what God wants but what we are comfortable with. Or we are afraid of what we might have to give up and miss out on if we go where God sends us and do what He asks us to do.

We may be granted an option, but that is only a temporary solution. But it is a sad and less fulfilling way to go. We have not fully obeyed and only put on hold the choice that we didn't make. The truth is, the need to obey God will never go away and will come back again in one form or another. I have heard so many testimonies from people of how they avoided doing what God had asked them to do and then finally could no longer avoid it. They

finally were obedient and discovered a peace and joy that had evaded them when seeking an option.

The garden is not an easy place to be. The decision to be made is not a simple one. It is a battle of the wills and this battle is always a difficult one. It is only accomplished through wrestling with the reality of the needs of those around us and our desire to be selfish. We want to avoid even the slightest suggestion of pain, anguish and struggle. We want the easy way, it's just our nature.

The decision once made will often be revisited and need to be renewed. Our decision in Sierra Leone did not end the process. We went through it again, when asked to go to Papua New Guinea. Once more, when asked to move to Guyana. Again when considering the move to Panama. We deal with the process every time we ask what God wants us to do in a particular situation.

Does it get easier? Not necessarily. But it does get easier to recognize the issues involved. It gets easier to recognize when it is God speaking and not just me wondering 'what if.' It gets easier to make the decision to go to the garden and began to pray and seek the wisdom to know what God wants from me in this situation, in this place. It gets easier to know what needs to be done. But each time it is the same decision. Will I obey God's will and do what He has asked me to do? Will I see the needs of others over my desires, my comfort, my will?

BS – Read the following passages: 1 Kings 17:1-18:14. Three people in this passage were asked to do something difficult and potentially dangerous. What were they asked to do? Why was it difficult or dangerous? What would have been the results of not obeying?

Now read Acts 9:11-16. Two people in this passage were asked to make decisions. Answer the same questions as above. What was the benefit from obeying?

PR – This study is about making difficult decisions. Reflect on your life and several key times of decision.

1. The day you decided to be a Christian.
2. the first time you told someone, who was not a Christian about your faith
3. The day you were baptized.
4. The first time you were asked to share a testimony, teach a class or lead a group.

What happened? Did you struggle to make a decision? Why was it hard? Did you say yes the first time you had to choose or did you resist? What happened when you said no? Did you get another chance to obey? Do you need another chance? What will help you be able to obey and do what you are asked to do?

MT – Read the book of Jonah. Jonah was given a mission, a cross-cultural mission. What were the reasons he used to avoid obeying? What would have been the consequences if he continued to disobey? Why is so difficult to obey God when it involves people of another culture? What are the consequences of not obeying? How are they different from not obeying God and sharing the gospel with your family and friends?

Passion 54 - A terrified Mob

Matthew 26:47-57 (Luke 22:47-53; Mark 14:43-52; John 18:1-11)

The prayer time is over. Now is the time for the stuff that goes bump in the night and scares us. Time for the mob to take control and panic everybody. Time for the traitor to come and petrify us into a state of terror and fear. Even those who think they are stout-hearted and fearless, can barely take action because of the intensity

of the intimidation of the mob's presence. That is what one would expect. That is the goal of Satan. It is what one sees in the horror movies that are so common today - mobs rule and traitors bring terror to their friends through torture. Any attempts at defending oneself are feeble because of the debilitating effect of fear.

Normally, that is what one would expect, but this night is not normal. The person that should be terrified is not. In fact he has his accusers terrified and confused. They are the ones reacting in fear. They are scared. They are terrified of one solitary man.

Look at who is present.

1. Roman Guards –the elite soldiers of the Roman Empire. They are afraid of nothing. They are the ones to be feared. Yet at the sound of the voice of one man they collapse to the ground. How embarrassing! How utterly uncharacteristic. One wonders what they have been told by those that sent them. They have probably seen what has been happening, or at least heard of the incredible powers of the man Jesus. They have seen the size of the crowds surrounding him every day because their fortress overlooks the temple court. They cannot help but see. But here all the leaders find is eleven men and Jesus. And only one of them is armed. Yet they are the ones falling on the ground in terror and fear.

We have felt the intimidation that soldiers can create. I well remember being in Sierra Leone and being told that we had to leave the country because of political unrest. I remember the fear and uncertainty that accompanied our trip to the capitol city. The many checkpoints and the display of power and control were evident at each stop. The goal was to intimidate, to instill fear, to render a person helpless.

2. Temple Guard – These are the special guards of the temple. They are selected for their courage and strength. They are there to protect the temple from the crowds, the thieves and any appearance of disorderly conduct. Yet they have already been humiliated once by a man with a whip. They lost their control. Then every day for the next week that same man walked into their domain and took control of their environment. At this moment they were probably glad for the presence of the Roman Guard, yet they too joined their superiors on the ground in fear and trembling.

I have never dealt with the presence of temple guards. I can only imagine what it would be like to enter a place of worship knowing people are watching. Watching not to help me fully experience the sanctity of the location, but to make sure I do nothing to offend, nothing to denigrate the building or the beliefs represented by this place of worship. These guards are ready at an instant to physically restrain, remove such people and do so with little concern for the person's safety or comfort.

3. Leaders – Luke tells us that the officials from the chief priests, leaders of the temple guard and elders are present. A lot of authority. Enough to intimidate and overwhelm a person. Enough to make a person shudder and squirm. Enough to bully a person into submission. But it is they who are forced into submission. They are the ones being queried. They are stymied and forced to obey. Jesus makes them let his disciples go free. Jesus judges them for their activity. Earlier, they were powerless and terrified of Jesus when he took control of the temple. Now, even with a mob, roman soldiers, and the temple guard to back them, they are the ones who are scared of what might happen.

We have dealt with those who are in charge in various environments, policemen, government officials, and others. They are not afraid to suggest we are in violation of various laws and regulations. They are more than willing to make us feel small and that they are in control. Some do so looking for bribes, others to assert their control over foreigners, others just to be spiteful, to make life difficult for those they don't want around.

4. The mob – This scary situation included a mob. They came with clubs, knives, and anything that could be used to beat anyone within reach. Mobs are violent and terrifying. They side with the one that will bring them the greatest benefit. It is easy to lose control of a mob. Any offense, any injury and the mob will attack without remorse. They had the opportunity. The disciples normally would have been beaten and left for dead because of Peter's rash action. It was a poor decision and should have infuriated the mob. But they did nothing. Jesus spoke and they were frozen in place. Their awesome power to instill fear, to terrorize, was reduced to nothing.

I remember being caught in the middle of a mob. It was very disconcerting. We were traveling into Freetown to do some shopping. I turned into a street and came face to face with a mob. The good news is that the mob did not care about our presence. They had caught a thief and were beating him. They drove him onto our car, continued to beat him on the car, down the side of the car and on down the road. They were oblivious to us, they were angry and all their energy was focused on terrorizing the person, a thief.

5. The traitor – we all fear being betrayed. The betrayal can range from being embarrassed, to being submitted to torture and death. Traitors are a sly and deceitful group. They attack when they can gain the most and can cause the most damage. They seek the dark place of life to hide and carry out their venom on those they don't like, those that have disappointed them, those who caused them some form of hurt or embarrassment, even those who don't measure up to their standards and their way of thinking. Yet this traitor betrayed himself. He didn't get what he wanted. He was exposed and then ignored. His power to control, to gain recognition, to gloat, all were taken away. His victim did not bend, bow or waiver.

I have been betrayed in life. I do not enjoy the feeling. I do not like the sudden break in trust and confidence. The knowledge that I have been played, deceived by false friendship so that another could control my life and bring harm to me and those I love. It leaves one with an unwillingness to trust others for fear of being betrayed again. It creates alienation from others, isolation, and loss of confidence. It undermines our ability to live, to love and to grow.

This was a day that Satan had planned. It was his chance to make God run in fear. Yet it all failed. It not only failed, it backfired. There was more to come, more attempts to destroy, to cause fear but they were all anticlimactic in light of what happened in the garden that night. Jesus revealed clearly that he knew exactly what was happening, he knew why it was happening, and he chose to allow it to happen. He chose to stand, and stand in strength. He faced the things that go bump in the night, revealed them for what they were, weak and ineffective attempts to force God's hand, to force God to do what they wanted. However, what was revealed to

all was that God and not man was in control. It revealed that when God is in control, nothing has the power to control through fear, terror, or violence.

The mob and all those that were part of it - soldiers, guards, leaders and traitor- all needed to know this truth. God is always in control. In God, there is nothing to fear. Jesus faced all the things that make us afraid. He chose to face the dangers ahead, not in fear, but in His Father's power, to reveal the Father's love and his purpose.

Fear is a real part of our life. It is even more present when we are in unfamiliar environments, when we are out of our element, our culture, our familiar surroundings. It is more present because we don't know what to expect. We don't know what makes people happy, what makes them angry. We don't know what is offensive and what is not. It is so easy to make a mistake, to say the wrong thing, to be in the wrong place and find ourselves in the presence of a mob.

Missions is about going to the places, to the people that make us afraid. Jesus helps us understand how to deal with the fear, the danger, and how to overcome the mob. He prayed and sought out His Father. He knew that difficult events were just ahead. He knew the danger. He knew that if he focused on himself then he would succumb and the terror would freeze him in his tracks. So he went came to the Father, laid out his fear, and as he spoke, learned about God's control, about His Father's love and plan for everyone. He learned that if he faced the terror, faced the mob driven by the madness that is sin, he would not be alone, he would not have to depend on himself, then He would provide all that was necessary to do all that was needed.

That is what each of us must do. We are all afraid. Listen to any group talking about witnessing; any group talking about how they

could never be a missionary. Listen to those who fear telling someone they are a sinner and need God's forgiveness. Actually, fear dominates much of our lives and our decisions. We are a people living in darkness. We are a people who are afraid, not just of what goes bump in the night, but of everyday life. But with God we have an awareness of how temporary fear really is, how impotent it is in the light of God's plan and presence and how we can face the fear and bring hope to the members of the mob that terrifies us. We can tell others, we can be missionaries, we can go wherever God sends us and do whatever He asks us to do.

Go to the garden and meet the Supreme God, the loving Father, the Creator of the universe, and you will find a peace that those who seek to terrify you will never be able to overcome.

BS – Paul faced many mobs during his life and ministry. Read the following accounts. Acts 13:42-52; 14:19-22; 16:18-28; 18:5-17; 21:26-33:30. What can you learn from his life about how to deal with situations that involve people who are opposed to the gospel?

PR – Reflect on why telling others about Christ makes you afraid. Reflect on why you think people respond negatively towards hearing the gospel. Are they responding out of fear? How is their fear the same as or different from your fear?

MT – Cross cultural ministry is filled with situations that can cause us to be afraid. You feel like everyone is watching us and looking for an excuse to attack and to criticize. Our response to this fear can have a profound effect on the nature and direction of a person's ministry. Take some time to think about why a person feels afraid when with people whose customs and actions are different. Think about why they respond to outsiders with enmity and even anger. What will it take for you to overcome your fear and help them overcome their distrust of you?

Passion 55 - All things private

John 18:12-24

There are three stories here which may seem disconnected but center around one key idea, the public. It will be helpful to quickly review each with a little commentary.

The first centers around the person Annas. He was the high priest at one time and is the father of the current high priest. He is the first to meet with Jesus after being arrested. The interchange focuses on Jesus teaching and life in the public eye. Annas has questions but, Jesus has done nothing that requires investigation to find the truth. His answers to the questions are just that. You have seen what I do. You have heard my teaching in the temple.

Thousands have heard me, you can ask them and verify all that I have said. Basically Jesus makes it clear that he knows he is not there for the truth. The leaders of the Sanhedrin are looking for him to back down, change his story, and alter his words so they can parade him to the public as a charlatan, a false prophet; One who seeks after fame and power and will say anything to gain the attention of the public. But nothing is altered. Jesus simply tells them what they already know and for which there are thousands of witnesses. He does not cower, He does not back down.

The second person is John. Have you ever wondered how John gained access to the house of the enemy and later access to the trial before the Sanhedrin? All we are told is that he was known to the leaders. But how does a lowly fisherman gain such contacts? Why would they allow him into their midst and not bother to threaten him? Only a short time earlier everyone was running away in fear, and yet here is John.

As I reflect on the focus of this story and I consider the goal to expose and discredit Jesus private life as different from his public

life. I think I see why John was allowed to be present and even given preferential treatment. The authorities wanted him to see all that was done, to see them break Jesus, to see Jesus admit that he was a fake and submit to their authority. They wanted John to see the truth from their perspective. That is what they hoped would happen.

Imagine what would have happened to the followers of Jesus if John had come back with a negative report. A report where Jesus is shown to be a coward, fearful for his life, willing to change his story and his teaching when confronted with the full authority and power of the priests and Sanhedrin. If this had happened then there would have been no hope. No chance for entering into the kingdom of God except by the way defined by the Pharisees and Sadducees. This was their goal, to confuse and subvert the words of Jesus, to get him to trip up and begin talking. Talking until he contradicted himself.

It did not happen. So Jesus was sent to the next group and John was allowed to go along.

The third story is about Peter. This is a story about what happens when fear enters our life and we think more about our security and our life, than the truth. Again it is interesting that Peter is allowed access to the house of the former high priest. The text says that John asked for him to be allowed to come inside the gate but not into the house. But Peter was close enough to hear all that was happening.

Peter was not face to face with the authorities of the land. He was not surrounded by the leaders as was John. He was not known by those around him as were Jesus and John. Instead he had to deal with those present, then a servant girl, and finally a relative of the person whose ear he had cut off. Each question directed at Peter

resulted in a denial and fear, such fear that he couldn't even face a servant girl. Actually, the only one that might have caused any fear could have been the relative, but even that was limited. It is clear that the relative had little or no information about those events in the garden.

Yet Peter changed his words. Changed his testimony. He hid from his public life and did exactly what the leaders were hoping Jesus would do. Deny his words. Deny his activity. Submit to the control and influence of others.

Through all of this Jesus remained firm. This helped John to remain strong in a terrifying environment. But Peter, as close as he was, close enough to see Jesus, to hear the conversation, caved in and fled from the truth. He denied the truth to protect himself.

This same situation can confront us at any moment. A coworker, a friend, a person we see in our everyday life can ask us questions about who we are and what we believe. In that moment, our public and private lives crash into each other and we are in the middle. We will either stand firm and deal with the possible struggle and persecution of telling the truth or we will find a way to bob and weave like a boxer hoping to evade what we fear. This fear can be as simple as being laughed at for our beliefs or be as serious as the risk of physical attack for our faith.

Standing firm may bring problems, but we will gain respect. We will reveal a strength that only those who truly believe and follow the truth can have. We may not escape being attacked but we will open doors that cannot be opened in any other way. Running only brings doubt and mistrust. We will never be trusted or respected if we buckle and change our story to satisfy those around us.

During the war in Sierra Leone there were leaders in our village who decided that they need to make a sacrifice to the spirits in

order to protect the village. They told everyone that they had to come and participate. When we heard this we quickly made the decision that we would not participate and we would not even go to observe because that could be construed as support for what was happening. The leaders of our church also sent word that they would not participate and encouraged all of the church members to avoid going to the center of the village at the time set for the offering. There was one church from another denomination that chose to participate. They felt that it couldn't hurt to support the desire of the village leaders to seek all means of protection.

Normally, in a village, those who refuse to participate will be blamed for any bad that happens. Even to the point that others will not do business with them and shun them. Years later we heard what happened when the rebels finally attacked our village. When they entered the village they destroyed the church and school of the group that had participated in the sacrifice. Our church and bible school survived and are again being used to worship God and train future leaders. Many of those who stood firm for the truth survived the attack and are a testimony to the power of following the truth even when it could be dangerous.

The mission of God will always bring us into conflict with those who do not want to hear the truth or alter it so they can live the way they want to live and have power in this world. Sometimes this conflict will not be too costly or bring a great deal of risk. At other times to reveal who we are as followers of Christ can cause great danger and even place one's life at risk. We have friends who are serving as missionaries in such places. They have to be very careful about what they say and yet be bold as they demonstrate Jesus' love to that group of people. They need a clear understanding of the connection between their public life and what

happens in private because the private can suddenly become public.

BS – Read the following: Luke 8:16-18; 11:1-12. Jesus tells us everything done in secret will be revealed. Reflect on his words and consider what it is you are doing in private and how you will respond if it becomes public. Would people be able to accuse you of being a Christian if they could see your private life?

PR – Have you ever done or said something in private that then became public? How did it affect people's opinion of you and their trust in you? How could their response affect your testimony and the willingness of others to listen to you when talking about Jesus' love for them?

MT – Missionaries usually stand out. Everyone knows they are strangers. The missionary does not know the language or local idioms of the language. They are not familiar with the customs and activities. They ask questions that reveal they are from another place. The moment they arrive they become the object of observation. It seems like everyone is watching and evaluating them. Nothing is private and any mistakes quickly become public knowledge. How would such scrutiny affect you? Why is important to be open when living in another culture? How important is it to let people see and know what you are like even in your private life?

Passion 56 - How to become a fool

Matthew 26:57-68 (Mk 14:53-65)

One way to become a fool is to ignore the truth everyone knows and try to convince people that it is not true.

Why does this make someone a fool? Well that is related to the definition of the term fool. Here are a few samples of definitions from various sources.

Oxford – a person who acts unwisely or imprudently

Webster – a person lacking in judgment or prudence

Dictionary.com – a silly or stupid person; a person who lacks judgment or sense.

A common element is that a fool is someone who has lost sight of the truth about themselves and the world around them. This results in actions and decisions that are foolish, not based in truth and reality. These decisions can place that person and others in various types of risk, the simplest being that of looking foolish to others (out of touch with reality and truth) to complicated and dangerous (loss of freedom, friendship and even death).

Fools need to justify their decisions and so need to recreate the world according to their own ideas and concepts. The more involved the effort, the more foolish a person becomes and appears to others. The fool expends a great deal of energy in their effort to alter the truth and make it fit the way they want to live and in convincing others that they are right.

There is a second level of danger present that we must be aware of. Not all fools are simpletons or powerless. Becoming a fool is not restricted to a person with limited ability or limited intelligence. Actually the most dangerous fools are those in positions of power and authority. People fear to oppose them and often accept their ideas as truth in spite of the fact that they know the ideas are not true.

Here is a situation where a fool is at work. It reveals the destructive and influential nature of a fool of this caliber. Look at the situation. Caiaphas feels threatened. He refuses to see what is happening. The evidence is clear that the person standing before him has extraordinary power, a power that can only come from God. He rejects that truth. The person standing before him is a teacher of incredible profundity, such that has only been seen in the lives of the prophets of God. He rejects that truth. The person standing before him is loved and respected by the people. He (Caiaphas) is not, but could choose to accept this person, make key changes, and find himself in a position of authority and respect he has never experienced before. He rejects that truth. The person before him has withstood all the attacks and challenges of the Pharisees, the scribes, and the Sadducees. There is no flaw in his life, in his teaching nor his attitude. He could choose to admire this fact but, he rejects that truth.

Instead Caiaphas parades one false witness after another before the people. One after the other these false witnesses fail because lies cannot succeed. The lies always reveal themselves. The lies also expose those who use them as fools. People who have fooled themselves and so become foolish in their actions and decisions.

It finally comes down to using the truth, something the leaders don't want to do. Once they declare it, and Jesus responds, they are committed to a course of action that will reveal the depth of their foolishness. Winning with a lie would leave them in a secure position. It would show just who is in charge. Resorting to the truth has a different result.

And so Caiaphas cries out in desperation, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus' answer is one of confidence, without fear. It is a declaration of truth. A truth they all were seeking but a truth they wanted to control so they would be able to

have some say, some control in the kingdom of God (according to them). If Jesus is, in fact, who he says he is, then all of this is lost; they and all who follow their way of thinking are lost and God's kingdom will be God's kingdom. The leaders have lost much more than they had hoped to gain.

But even this event is not enough to bring about the results they desire. They will have to lie and humiliate themselves before Pilate for that to happen. They will have to eat their own words, curse themselves and more in the attempt to be rid of Jesus. Each step is the step of a fool. Once they started down this road, the way back becomes more and more impossible as each step is taken.

Jesus knew this. He let them stew. He let them squirm. Only when the truth, the central truth was in question did he respond. Without enmity, without reprisal, he made the declaration that he in fact was the Messiah, the one sent from God. He took it one step farther to reveal to all what he had already declared on many occasions. He was, is the Son of God and he would be the one they would have to answer to.

I remember an interesting conversation that I had with an Imam from the Amaddiyan sect of Islam. He was very concerned about proving that Jesus was just another prophet, that Jesus was the successor of Elijah. Many attempts were made to support this idea. I responded to each with the same idea that Jesus was not just a successor but much more. This conversation lasted for almost an hour. By then we had quite a crowd listening to us. They wanted to hear what the missionary and the Imam had to say. Finally I said it was my turn to ask a question. He agreed. My question was simple. What happened to the body? If Jesus was just a man why didn't the Priests, Pharisees, and Roman authorities find the body and simply show it to everybody? Didn't they have all the authority? Didn't they have all the finances needed? Didn't they have the desire to

do so? He agreed to all of these points. So I repeated, why couldn't they produce the body?

At this point the Imam decided he had other things to do. He chose not to respond to the question because it dealt with the truth of the resurrection. The truth that Jesus was not just a man, not just a prophet, not just a great teacher. He was/is so much more. He is the Son of God. He is God.

Caiaphas followed the path of a fool. He did not want to face the truth and tried every method possible to evade dealing with the truth. It did not matter how much he twisted it and altered. It didn't matter what he would have to do. He did not want to face the truth and so the consequence of admitting his life was, in fact, a lie.

This is what sin does to us. It makes us a fool by convincing us to believe a lie and then live the lie; to believe that we know what is right, to believe that we are good people, to believe that we don't need help, don't need to be forgiven. Jesus came to reveal the truth and place clearly before us the facts and the consequences of our foolishness. Jesus is the truth and we become fools when we refuse to see this and will reap the consequences that always follow a fool.

Choose we must. There are only two options - see the truth or continue in the path of a fool. That was the real issue that faced Caiaphas the day he stood before Jesus. It wasn't Jesus who was on trial that Friday morning. It was Caiaphas and all those with him who chose to obey their own lies and not the living truth that stood revealed before them. They were defending themselves and doing so horribly. Each challenge, each attempt to pervert that truth, hammered home the judgment of fool that day.

Each of us will be required to stand in this court. Each of us will need to decide if we will try to defend ourselves and our foolish

behavior and so continue to be a fool, or confess the truth that we have been a fool and that only in Jesus' name, the only name under heaven that can save us, can we be rescued from the life of a fool. Only then can we see the truth of our sin and leave the life of a fool behind.

BS – Read the following Scriptures Psalms 14:1; Proverbs 15:14; 18:2; 26:11; 28:26; Ecclesiastes 10:12-14; Isaiah 32:6. What can you learn about the way a fool thinks and acts? Why are these words true of every person you meet, including yourself? How does a personal relationship with God help a person no longer walk in the path of a fool?

PR – Write your own definition of a fool and how they live? Have you ever done anything that resulted in you being a fool? If one of the key parts of defining the word fool is denying the truth then we all have lived the life of a fool. Look at your life today. Are there areas that suggest you are acting like a fool? Are you denying what God tells you is true and avoiding living according to that truth? Have you ever tried to defend your actions even when you know they involved denying the word of God, the truth?

MT – The word fool is a very strong word. The Bible advises us to be very careful in how we use it. It can affect how we see the people around us, how we view their culture, and thus how we relate to them. The Bible does not define being a fool as being different. One of the dangers in cross-cultural ministry is judging people to be foolish because they are different or don't do things the way we do. Reflect on how you respond to the differences you encounter in the lives of people you meet from a different culture or background. How often do you think that what they are doing is foolish or they are fools for acting that way? How does this affect your ability to accept them and be accepted by them? How would this affect how you share the gospel with them?

Passion 57 - Denial comes in many forms

Matthew 26:69-75 (Mk 14:66-72; Lk 22:54-65; Jn 18:15-18,25-27)

After denying the Lord the rooster crows.

Denial of God and his Son Jesus comes in many forms. Peter had denied his relationship with Jesus before he found himself in the court of the high priest and denying any relationship with his master. In a sense Peter denied Jesus three times, two of them before he entered the court and watched Jesus' trial, and there when confronted about his relationship to Jesus he repeated his denial three times. Three events with five declarations of denial.

The first was in the garden. This denial had two aspects. The key one was when he chose to run away and avoid being connected with Jesus and risk being arrested. This was to avoid personal damage. This was preceded by the attack on the priest's servant, which would be a form of denial. Denial that Jesus had the power to take control. Denial that Jesus knew what was happening and was in control. It was a foolish act and involved a denial of the situation. It forced Jesus to act or risk all those with him being seized as well. It also ignited fear and denial in the rest of the group. They all ran and only one regained control and followed Jesus into the lion's den.

We can interpret this denial in two ways.

1) We can look at it as the denial every one of us acts out every day since the day we were born or as some would say, when we reach the age of accountability. Every day we sin and deny God. We sin and deny God as our creator and so deny him access as Father and friend. Peter's action to attack is interesting. He did not attack the Roman soldiers. That would have been foolish and could have resulted in an immediate response by the soldiers. They had

been trained that if the enemy attacks, you defend yourself and kill them so they can't attack again. He also did not attack the temple guard. While not as highly trained as the Romans they would have had weapons and in this situation probably would have responded. Again the result could have been disastrous. No, Peter attacked a servant. A person who was part of the mob. This person most likely did not have a sword or a spear and was as inexperienced as Peter in its use. (Peter missed with his attack and cut off an ear).

Peter's action was not thought out. It is hard to say what he was thinking. You have soldiers, guards, members of the Sanhedrin and a mob. Attacking in this manner makes no sense but still he did. Sin is like that. We are attacking God, denying his word and authority, denying all of the history that proves that man is sinful. Our acts of sin make no sense and yet we do them anyway. We act and then run for cover. Hoping that no one sees or follows. It is a denial of God and a denial of responsibility for our actions.

2) We could also think of this as a denial of God's authority and power. A belief that we know better than God what action, what response is best. We act like God is not paying attention and so we need to do something, anything. If I move forward then God will have to respond. Sometimes God does tell us to take steps of faith so that we will see what he had prepared and in that case we need to act in faith. But the action is based on instructions given about what we need to do. In this case there are no instructions to attack, no instructions to protect Jesus. If Peter had been listening he would have realized Jesus was in control. But this was not the response Peter wanted. So he acted and denied Jesus as his authority. He acted and put all of them at risk. He did not help others increase in their faith but caused them to become fearful. So fearful they all fled the scene. They all abandoned Jesus. They all

denied the truth that Jesus was in control. They rejected all he had taught them about what was going to happen.

Actually as we review this situation both forms of denial were at work in this event - disobedience to God's law and disregard for his power and authority. Even though Jesus was clearly in control: the mob collapsed once at Jesus' word, they were frozen in place until Jesus released his control and allowed them to escort him back to Jerusalem, He caused them to pause while he healed the injured man, He prevented the mob from arresting or attacking the disciples.

But our denial of God blocks our vision of all that is happening and all that God is doing. Yes the first time Peter denied his Lord was in the Garden.

The second denial came when he chose not to identify himself to the guards and only gained access to the courtyard of the high priest because John spoke on his behalf not because he chose to identify himself with Jesus. This denial is about something more subtle. It is avoiding being associated too closely with Jesus.

It is not clear how far or how long Peter ran after he attacked the high priest's servant. But at some point he overcame his fear and realized he had abandoned Jesus to the mob and those who wanted to kill him. He recovered enough courage to turn around and find the place where Jesus was being tried. It took some time because he missed being present at the house of Annas and only catches up with Jesus at the house of Caiaphas. He is still hesitant. He arrives at the gateway but is reluctant to enter. He chooses not to inform anyone that he is a follower of the man on trial. He is again denying any knowledge of Jesus and any relationship with him. He is taking on the appearance of the curious bystander who wants to know what is happening but is reluctant to get too close.

Over the years we have seen an interesting phenomenon. When people hear about riots and violence, instead of running away, they head toward the trouble. We saw this on several occasions in Guyana. One occurred during the days after the presidential election. We were working at the Bible School and a riot started in the block next to us. Because we were working on the upper floors we had a clear view of what was happening and could see people coming from various locations to see the commotion. None of them got too close but just close enough to see and to hear. On another occasion the police trapped several escaped convicts in a house just two blocks from our home. This resulted in a gun battle that lasted at least 2 hours. We lived on the second floor of our house. We could not see the house where the gun battle was but we could see the movements of the people from our neighborhood. They ran toward the noise with the hope of seeing something but were unwilling to get too close and place themselves at risk.

In both cases the people came to see what was happening. They came close enough to observe but did not want to get too close for fear they may become identified as part of the problem. They did not want to risk committing themselves to one side or the other. They may have secretly supported one of the groups but not to the point of actually identifying themselves with that group and so place themselves at risk.

How often do we act in this way? How many people come to church but not with the intent of truly becoming involved, of truly committing themselves? They come to see what is happening, to see if they might be benefited in some way. They attend programs and events not for what they can do or contribute but for what they can gain. They may not like the government but will stand in line to receive free food or other benefits - just close enough but not be

in danger. They deny their responsibility; deny their support to those who are actually involved or in danger.

I wonder how excited Peter was that John saw him and spoke to the guard to let him in. It is not clear what John said but I doubt it included the information that Peter was a follower of the man on trial. Maybe John came to him and Peter said don't tell them who I am. So John told the guard that Peter was his friend and asked permission for Peter to enter and wait for him. The questions that Peter encountered make that clear as the people present didn't know why he was allowed in and the guard did not clarify things when Peter responded. Even as Peter entered he was denying his relationship with Jesus.

We are much the same. We go to work. We go to school. We go to church but no one really knows our relationship to God. Even when we go to church we do so in ways that will not cause people to wonder why we are going to church. We go often enough to look interested. We do only enough so we can benefit from what is happening but not enough to be accused of being a follower. We deny having a relationship with Jesus. We are like Peter. Standing at the gate but unwilling to commit ourselves. And so Peter and us, who follow his example, are denying the Lord again.

The third denial comes when Peter is confronted directly by several people about being a follower of Jesus. (He repeats this denial three times). This time there is no place to run. He either must confess his relationship with the man on trial or speak out clearly his denial of that relationship. He had boasted in the past that he would die with Jesus. His boasts proved to be empty and the only escape was to deny any relation with the man on trial.

We might be able to excuse the first because he had just committed a crime. He had assaulted a person. Today we would call this

assault and battery with intent to commit bodily harm. Many people saw him do it and if not for Jesus' quick action to cure the person Peter would surely have been seized by the guards or soldiers. To avoid this Peter likely took advantage of the shock that occurred when the man's ear was reattached to flee the scene like the rest of the disciples.

The second could possibly be excused on the basis that he didn't know exactly what to do or how to gain access. It was the high priests house and he had not been invited and had no authority to enter. So why should they let him enter? Besides this the person he attacked was inside. Simpler to stay outside and not say anything. A silent denial of the relationship.

But the third one was blatant. He was clearly afraid to admit his relationship with Jesus. They saw him and believed he was a follower. One even suggested he had seen him in the garden. Three times he boldly and (in the end) vehemently denied any relationship with the man on trial. Peter was in the enemy's camp and he was afraid. All his boasting. All his posturing meant nothing. It is easy to boast and make extravagant promises when with his friends and the master; one who clearly had the power to protect him from his own foolishness. But now he was afraid. The one he depended on for protection and guidance was on trial. He was alone and the rest were, at best, uninterested in his situation and, at worst, ready to turn him over to his enemies. Peter could only see the worst happening. And so he denied his relationship with Jesus. He saved himself and let the Lord die.

But what did he save himself from? Death? Eventually he would die anyway. From ridicule? Hard to know. But it is possible. If Peter believed that all was lost then it was wise to disassociate himself from Jesus and protect himself and avoid being ridiculed for following such a man, from suffering? Hard to say. If Jesus did

not survive then Peter and the others could easily be targets for all those who felt abandoned by Jesus. They might attack him for not protecting Jesus. For not acting to save him. His failure meant they would lose all the benefits that Jesus represented. They would make him pay and he would suffer.

There is no clear indication of what was going through Peter's mind. What is clear is he was afraid and to protect himself chose to deny his relationship. Even further he did it vehemently and with cursing. How could they think such a thing.

Every day there are people in the church, even myself, who for one reason or another choose not to confirm our relationship with Jesus. We deny this fact. We do so out of convenience, out of fear, out of self-preservation and many other reasons. All of them to avoid others knowing about our relationship and causing us to suffer for our faith. We do it when we don't speak up to tell others about Jesus. We do it when we are asked questions that would reveal our relationship and we choose to avoid telling the truth. Sometimes it is easy to deny and other times we must swear and act in sinful ways to convince them of our non-relationship. How we do it is unimportant. The fact is, we verbally deny our relationship with God and abandon Jesus to the cross.

Yes, Peter denied the Lord. He did it three times and the third time repeated the denial three times to drive home the point. Then the rooster crowed and the shame descended on Peter. All his blustering, boasting and bluffing came crashing down on him and he fled once again. Fled to cry in shame over what he had done.

Peter's eyes were opened and he realized the depth of his sin and his failure. He sobbed. His body racked with the depth of his perverseness. He had abandoned the only one who had the truth that could save him. Yet in this moment of realization he was

changed. Unlike Judas who went and hung himself, Peter remained. Somewhere in his pain he knew there was hope that what he had done could be corrected. He fled the house of Caiaphas but did not abandon all hope. He cried over his denial and opened the door to the truth.

May each of us hear the rooster crow. May our minds be illumined with the nature of our denial. May we see the Lord's face clearly and choose to reveal to all our relationship. May we face our denial and open the door to the truth and restoration through that truth. We are not worthy but we are loved and He will restore us if we will be honest about our denial.

BS – Read the following scriptures Titus 1:16; 1 Timothy 3:1-5; Matthew 7:21; Isaiah 48:1. Explain what these verses have to say about how people deny God.

PR – Reflect on the three types of denial described above. How have you denied Jesus in your life? How did that affect you and the people around you? What will it take to recover from the effects of such denial?

MT – One of the most dangerous environments to confess one's faith in Jesus is when living among people of another religion or faith. Consider what will be necessary for a person to declare their faith without incurring the enmity and anger of those who reject Christianity, at times violently. What are the risks involved in proclaiming your faith? What are the risks of denying your faith?

Passion 58 - Truth Lost

Matthew 27:1-26 (Mark 15:1-15; Luke 23:1-24; John 18:28-19:16)

How many lies does it take to defeat the truth?

How much fear is required to ignore the truth?

The Pharisees held their little meeting. They did everything they could to get Jesus to make a mistake and, yet they failed. They ended up using the truth and employing a law to make their lies look like the truth. Actually I wonder what they would have said to the human figure that appeared to Abraham who claimed to be God. How would they have responded to various appearances of the angel of the Lord who many believed were appearances of God? Jesus claimed they would have killed the prophets just like their fathers did. But I digress.

They have held their meeting, but they still can't carry out their desire to end Jesus' life. For all their posturing and threatening they do not have the authority to carry out the death sentence. If they did so they would violate Roman law and would be subject to the death penalty themselves.

So once more they have to lie and they will have to do so in a convincing manner, because the person who has the authority to carry out a death sentence has no love for these leaders. They are a nuisance and he has had many problems with them. Many conflicts that turned bloody over religious beliefs. He will not be happy to see them and even less willing to do as they desire.

They arrive at the court but refuse to go in. To do so would be to defile themselves. They have to risk offending Pilate, while making themselves look righteous and all while lying and perverting themselves because of their jealousy and hatred for the only good person among them. They will have to become

despicable and still look righteous to get what they want from Pilate.

Round one begins with a lie. That is the only option they have. Pilate tells them to deal with it themselves and is ready to walk away when they say that Jesus calls himself a king. This gets Pilate's attention and we have the first interview. Pilate is quick to see that Jesus is no threat to him or to Rome. Yet he is intrigued by the idea that this man could be a king. He correctly understands that if Jesus was a king in the traditional sense there would be a problem. He also realizes that Jesus is not promoting what the leaders are claiming. This leads to a brief discussion of truth. Pilate is fascinated and perplexed but sees the truth of the situation. He tries to release Jesus.

The leaders begin round two but it is delayed as Jesus is sent off to Herod. Herod has heard of Jesus but is more interested in seeing a miracle than learning the truth. Yet again he sees the truth of the situation. His aggression towards Jesus is not about punishing a criminal but lashing out at someone who is not responding properly to a man of his position and power. Again no sentence, but the reality that Jesus is innocent of the lies the leaders have been accusing him of.

Back to Pilate and round three. This round takes on some strange turns. He tries again to release Jesus and instead the leaders call for the release of Barabbas, a known criminal. He doesn't really want to release Barabbas because he is guilty and an enemy of Rome. So he has Jesus beaten. While sitting in the seat of judgment his wife appears. This is unusual and so is her message. She has had a vision about the man her husband is having beaten. This shakes Pilate and he again tries to release Jesus.

Round four begins with Pilate presenting Jesus to the crowd. They respond by shouting “crucify him.” It is like hammer blows aimed at him. He is trying to release a good man and the crowd is trying to kill him. This is backwards. Then they pound him further and we hear truth for the first time in this process. “He claims to be the Son of God and our law says he must die.” Once more Pilate speaks with Jesus and more truth is given. Pilate thinks he is in control but Jesus knows the truth. Pilate is not and will not win this battle. Jesus pronounces judgment. Pilate will yield and will be guilty of sin but not as great as those outside who are lying and acting vilely in the name of, well, not in the name of God.

Round five and Pilate is desperate to release Jesus. He understands clearly the guilt that lies before him. He has had many killed who were innocent. All of his wickedness is revealed in great clarity. He is frantic in his effort to win the crowd over but it will not be and they announce to all that they will betray him before Caesar. If he releases Jesus they will do what they must to make it look like he is opposing Caesar and responsible for the riots and anything else that goes wrong. To further solidify their willingness to lie and ruin Pilate they lie and claim they have no king but Caesar.

Final round. Pilate has lost. He knows the truth but he is trapped by his fear that their lies will be believed. He pronounces the judgment. Jesus is to be crucified but he tries to cover his guilt by saying that Jesus is innocent. They have forced him to kill an innocent man. The truth has been lost and for the moment all the lies have won.

The leaders have lied repeatedly to bury the truth. They have intimidated and threatened until the person in charge backs down out of fear that their lies will be heard and believed as truth. It has taken repeated efforts to bury the truth and create the fear needed to make it happen. From these events one would think that it is

hard to deny the truth, hard to create the kind of fear needed to deny the truth to protect oneself. Oh, but that is so far from the truth.

This day the battle was extreme. They were dealing with the author of truth. And if that author had chosen to respond they would not have won. In the garden Jesus reproved Peter's attack on the servant. He made it clear that he could call a legion of angels to protect him and save him. But that would not have saved us from our denial of the truth, from our sin which by its very nature seeks to destroy the truth. Yep that little white lie, that secret thought, that hidden hatred of a person. All of them destroy the truth and prevent us from making the right decision and hearing the truth.

Actually it is much harder to hear the truth than it is to bury the truth.

Let me give you an example. Have you ever heard the phrase 'sell your soul to the devil?' Most people talk about this when they see great evil winning. Or a wicked person living the life of ease. The idea is that person must have sold their soul to Satan. Actually that is a lie. Everyone living in sin is already part of the realm of Satan. Your soul is already lost and you can do nothing to change the state of where it will spend eternity. But we need to change direction here.

It would be easy to continue this line of thought of how the impact of sin works to bury the truth. Instead let us look at the power of truth to be revealed no matter what sin attempts to do. This was Jesus' mission. He spoke of this possibility early in his ministry. He let them know on several occasions that there would be oppression and they would have to choose how to respond. He also told them not to worry about what they would say when faced with

such situations. The Holy Spirit would be there to guide and strengthen them.

Here are a few of Jesus' thoughts. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said blessed are those who are reviled and attacked because of me, because of the truth (Mt 5:11). This is how mankind has always treated those who speak the truth. And yet no matter how much they have tried to silence the truth, they have always failed. God's truth lives and in the midst of the attack people are touched and changed.

He warns that they will be attacked because of him and their relationship to him and the truth. The people will reject the truth and attack anyone who seeks to follow the truth. They will be betrayed, even put to death but they will gain life by standing firm (Lk 21:16-19). Just before this warning and promise he tells the disciples that they do not need to worry about how they will defend themselves. They will be given words that none can resist or contradict (vs 15).

In his final prayer Jesus again focuses on the reality that the world will hate the truth and his disciples because they dare to follow that truth. What is interesting as well is how he prays for them. He does not pray that they will be saved from the attacks of others or that they will escape these attacks. Rather he prays that they will be protected from the evil one (John 17:14-15).

Now we need to return to the passage. Over and over again it is made clear that Jesus is innocent of all charges. He is the truth and they refuse to accept it. But their attacks only heighten the reality of the truth. Pilate is deeply affected by the statements that reveal the truth. Jesus is a king but like never before seen. He seeks to rule something much greater than an earthly realm. He seeks to proclaim a richness far beyond what the world has to offer. His

kingdom will connect all of mankind in a way not possible by earthly rule. Pilate sees that this king is not a threat to Rome in the normal sense. Actually the threat is much more profound. (Three centuries later Rome is conquered, not by military powers but by truth revealed in love through all those who refused to deny the truth and paid with their lives.)The truth is: Jesus is the One King and He will rule.

Pilate is further impacted by the statement that Jesus claims to be the Son of God. For a Roman this is a potentially dangerous situation. They have many stories of the gods coming down to walk among men. Most of the stories end badly when the humans mistrust and mistreat the gods in their human form. So again Pilate enters into a discussion with Jesus. He wants to know where Jesus comes from. He is confused by Jesus' refusal to answer. He finally, in frustration or an attempt to force the issue, threatens this god in human form. Jesus' answer is unexpected and heightens Pilate's fear. "You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above." The second statement seals Pilate's doom. It basically is that "you are guilty but not as guilty as those who handed me over to you."

Pilate's worst fears are at hand. He is in the presence of God. But this is not a Roman god who is capricious and unpredictable. This person has complete control. This person knows exactly what is happening. Pilate is trapped and though he tries to get out of the trap, he cannot. Ultimately he is more concerned about his future existence in this world than his future existence in eternity. But the point is made and made very profoundly. This man is God and He is in control and He knows the truth about all that is happening. Truth two: Jesus is God and everyone will be held accountable for the part they play in this event. That includes every one of us. We have all sinned. We have all gone our own way, denying the truth.

These are the only two times Jesus speaks in relation to his trial. Yet he speaks volumes over and over by his refusal to respond to any of the lies. He does not need to speak. The moment they are uttered everyone knows they are lies. It was one of the prophecies. He would be led as a lamb to the slaughter and say nothing (Isaiah 53:7). His silence shouts out the truth. After the resurrection, the Pharisees and religion leaders did everything they could to silence the apostles. It was not possible. The world had heard the lies and seen the response. They had heard of the words of forgiveness from the cross. Jesus decision to not respond only amplified the truth. Stephen would echo this action and those words and it would finally reach into the tortured soul of Saul. Saul would see the truth that he was fighting desperately to deny it.

Now it is time for us to review our lives. How do we handle being lied about, mistreated, even attacked for following the truth? It can't be avoided. There will always be someone who does not want to know the truth and our presence, our relationship to the truth, could reveal how wrong they are. The only solution is to attack, to destroy, so they won't have to deal with who they really are.

Some of the greatest stories are the stories of the martyrs, of those who suffered for their faith and the impact it had on those who saw how they were treated and, more importantly, how they responded. Jesus only responded to proclaim key pieces of truth. The rest he accepted in silence with the knowledge that when it was over it would make the truth even clearer and more accessible to others.

This should be the focus of our lives. It is not about how much we may or may not suffer. It is about how everything in our lives should make the truth clearer and more accessible to those we touch.

BS – Read Philippians 1:12-20. Now find at least two other Scriptures in the letters of Paul, Peter and John that talk about suffering for the truth and living for Christ. Write a statement that explains the function and results of suffering for the truth and why we should not fear it.

PR – What would cause someone to hate you? Have you been hated or mistreated or avoided because of your testimony that you are a Christian? Was your response such that people could see Jesus' actions reflected in you? If not, reflect on whether the people around you truly know about your faith in Christ.

MT – Find a story about a martyr or someone who suffered for their faith. What was the result of the price they paid? Think about what constitutes suffering. Is it only about physical pain and death? Is it only about rejection and abuse? Jesus left his home, gave up His life and power in heaven to live among us. Paul gave up his position and power. He left his family and home. Loss is a key aspect of suffering. What is being lost and what is being gained when we seek to proclaim the truth where God sends us?

Passion 59 - Let the show begin

Luke 23:6-12

Everywhere we turn in this story someone wants to experience something special. Everyone wants definitive proof that Jesus is who he says he is. They want something that will define clearly for them what they should do and should expect from the miracle worker, prophet, and teacher who has caused such a stir the past three years. Herod is no different. He has heard and has wondered and has hoped for the day he could meet Jesus and maybe, just maybe see a miracle.

They all want a miracle, either to confirm and anchor their belief or to help them in the decision to follow Jesus or....

To gain control of others through the influence that they believe they have on the source of that power. Herod represents the 'or.' An 'or' that focuses on a danger that can quickly alter and damage the gospel. But before we get into that let us look at the story.

Herod is the king of a portion of the old kingdom of Israel. It has been divided into several sections. We know three of these very well from the information given to us in the gospels. Jesus is from Nazareth which is in the north and is part of the area that Herod rules. In the middle is the area we know as Samaria. In the south is an area administered by the Romans. There is one other area which is only mentioned briefly and this is the area east of the Jordan River in the south. It is governed by a relative of Herod. At one time all of these were part of a kingdom ruled by Herod the Great. At his death his kingdom was divided into four areas. Only Herod retains the title of King, but only with the permission of the Romans.

This is the same Herod that imprisoned John the Baptist for denouncing Herod's marriage to his brother's wife as adultery. Even then Herod feared John and we are told often spoke with John. It was only during a drunken orgy and a foolish promise that John was finally beheaded. This act left Herod in a dangerous position because the people respected John and had little love for their foolish king.

This is also the Herod that was searching for Jesus. He had heard about the miracles and wondered if John had risen from the dead. If so this miracle worker needed to be watched and restricted. He was fascinated by what he heard and afraid that another prophet would begin attacking him and cause rebellion against his

authority. The first time that Herod sought to encounter Jesus, Jesus left and went to a safer area, that of the brother of Herod. Later Jesus would be warned that again Herod was seeking him. This time Jesus boldly declared where he was going. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and Herod would not be allowed to interfere with the plan.

Now jump past the current event to the end of Herod's life. Jesus has been crucified and the apostles are preaching the resurrection of Jesus to all who will listen. Herod has been hearing about the frustration of the priests and their attempts to silence the apostles. He sees an opportunity to endear himself to the leadership and increase authority and prestige with the priests. So he arrests James and has him killed. This thrills the leaders but has no significant impact on the activity of the Apostles. (Acts 12:1-4)

There is one last piece of information we have about Herod. He is in his throne room and involved in receiving a trade delegation. He makes a speech and the delegation began to proclaim that his words are that of a god. Herod, in his pride, revels in this accolade, against the better judgment of others and in opposition to all that his Jewish subjects believe (for them there is only one God and it is not Herod). Judgment falls on Herod from the true God and he dies a horrible death. (Acts 12:19-24)

Now back to the story at hand. When Pilate sends Jesus to Herod, he finally has an opportunity to verify if Jesus is John. He also wants to satisfy himself about the truth of the stories about the miracle worker. Like many of us he is fascinated by them but has never actually witnessed a miracle. He wants to see one for himself and presumes that as the king of a portion of the old kingdom of Israel he has the right to request, no require, a miracle of this person, who is technically his subject. It was not to be and out of anger and frustration, or in an attempt to humiliate Jesus into

acting, the king orders his guards to dress Jesus as a king and mock him. Finally he has Jesus beaten and sent back to Pilate.

But this was not the first time that Jesus was requested to perform a miracle and prove his claims. Nor would it be the last. As seen earlier, he was challenged by the chief priest and Sanhedrin to provide proof of his claims. During a break in the trial, the guards blindfolded Jesus and demanded he guess/tell them who had hit him. Later, at the cross, he would be challenged to prove himself by performing the greatest miracle of saving himself and stopping his own crucifixion.

What a show it would have been if he had performed as the people had hoped, even demanded, of the one who would be Savior of the world. That would be the true evidence that they desired from the one they believed would lead them to new heights of power and prosperity. That would be the show they wanted, from a king who could control their enemies with a word, a glance, even a whisper. They wanted a show that would silence the world and bring it to its knees.

Herod wanted a private show. But what would he have done if Jesus had, in fact, performed a miracle? Would he have been willing to yield his throne to Jesus? The guards wanted a show. A show where they had control. What would have happened if he had told them who hit him? Would they have bowed in worship and protected him from the Sanhedrin and those who wanted his death? What would have happened if Jesus had come down from the cross? Would the leaders have bowed? Would the Roman authorities flee and give up their power and control of their vast kingdom?

The problem with this is that one miracle, one correct answer, one display of power would never be enough. Herod would have

wanted another miracle and yet another and then still would resent yielding his position to anyone. The guards would see one right answer as a lucky guess. It would take a perfect string of answers and then they would not worship Jesus but become afraid. They would not be freed from their sin but forced into a deeper fear of what Jesus might reveal about them and their thoughts. This would be even more evident in the lives of the Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, and the people who were the leaders. They were already filled with hate for what Jesus was revealing about them and their selfish, self-centered existence.

As for the Romans, nothing in their history remotely suggests that they would have willingly given up a land and a people they had conquered and made part of the great Roman Empire. Empires don't back down because of a local messiah, a local wonder. They may have backed down for the moment but would have quickly reorganized and returned in force to reclaim the land, to reclaim their power.

If Jesus had responded to even one of the demands that he put on a display of power for the amazement of the spectators, that show, once begun, would need to be continued and expanded day by day. It would have to grow to meet the ever-increasing demands and attacks of those who both wanted to be a part of the show, or wanted to gain control of the show. The expectation would be simple. Everyone would expect, or have the right to, a miracle. The result of this would be that each day would require greater displays of power to defeat the attack of the enemies and to deal with the hunger for power of both sides who would now believe in the need to conquer. One, to conquer others to expand the kingdom now created by this messiah, the other to conquer this new kingdom in order to gain personal control over it and so benefit personally

from their control of the power this person now displayed for all to see.

This is the way of the miracle. One miracle will never be enough.

People will bow their knee for the wrong reason; not because they love their king, but because of what they hope to gain from their king. They will not bow the knee because of a desire to serve, but because of a hope to receive more. A kingdom based on this type of power display will never be one that finds peace. It will be filled with strife. Strife as every member fights for access to the king, fights for prominence and the possibility of having another miracle, another proof. Strife as all those on the outside battle with those on the inside. Even a benevolent despot has enemies. It doesn't matter how much good you do, how well you rule. There will always be those who want power and will do whatever it takes to seize that power.

Jesus knew all of this and chose a different path. There would be no public show, no miracles on demand, no evidence of all that he knew about man, no evidence that he could in fact make the world bow before him. He would take the harder more difficult road. He would yield for the moment in order to do something even greater. Something that would change eternity. He would submit to death so he could conquer death and reveal the true nature of God's kingdom. His was not a conquest gained by war, but a conquest gained by love. Not control gained by constant proofs for everyone who asked but a control gained through forgiveness, redefining the nature of truth. Not a kingdom based in conquest by power that would need to defeat its enemies and cause much death, but a kingdom that people would choose to unite with, people that were enemies, people from diverse groups, people from all classes and walks of life.

Jesus submitted to the plan and changed the playing field. He changed the dynamics of what was to come. The war would not be about gaining power over people but gaining people through personal choice and love.

Now we need to look at how we proclaim the gospel. What are we telling the people and what kind of expectations are we creating based on our message? Are we creating an expectation of miracles and displays of power? What happens when we proclaim a gospel that could become dependent on such displays and expectations? Is what we do designed to bribe people into the kingdom or guide them in?

Here is an example of what concerns me. While we were living in Guyana, a church group decided to organize an evangelistic crusade. They invited a person known as a healer and preacher. They then began to rent billboards to announce to all parties the upcoming event. The billboards contained a message that caused me great concern. It said, "come and receive your miracle from the evangelist. Come and witness miracles of healing and power."

This caused one of several reactions. One group made plans to come because they wanted healing or other miracles. Another group scoffed at such a claim and were openly critical of such claims. The third group wondered what such an announcement really meant. For me the message caused concern about how such claims would impact the message of the gospel. If the gospel became linked to successfully receiving a miracle, what would happen in the future if that person didn't receive a miracle each time they asked for one? Would everyone who came seeking a miracle actually receive one or only those who had enough faith or were ready? How would the limited results affect the overall response to the gospel message?

As I review the history of the early church there are two things that are very clear about the message. There were, in fact, many instances when miracles were present during the preaching of the gospel. But I also note that none of those who were preaching the gospel were telling people to expect miracles. The records suggest that they were not coming with the intent of performing miracles, but with the intent of preaching the gospel. The presence of miracles seemed to be a reflection that God was working at another level in support of the obedience of those proclaiming the message. Another interesting fact is that miracles were not always present as part of the work of evangelism.

There is no clear pattern. Sometimes a miracle occurs and the doors open to wider ministry and proclamation. Other times people are responding to the message and miracles occur in response to the faith being gained through this response. There are other times when the gospel is preached and there are no miracles, and still the people respond. There is never the idea that because the gospel is being preached miracles, are guaranteed to happen.

There is one type of miracle that is always present and often misrepresented. It is a greater miracle than the healing of a broken body. It is the restoration of a broken soul. This miracle begins at the point of confession and forgiveness and carries a person into eternity. All other miracles are short term fixes that have a limited time frame. So often we forget that most of the miracles we seek only work for a limited time. We will become ill again. At some point we will be sick and that illness will result in our death.

As you can see, I have questions about linking the search for a miracle with the presentation of the gospel. This could easily open the door to the very circus that Jesus avoided by not responding with power. One miracle could require another. One display of power might require increased use of power to maintain control.

When that happens people will come, not for the gospel, but for the miracle.

Does this mean there are no miracles? Absolutely not! What it means is that the decision of when and how remains in God's timing and control. It is not for me to make promises that God is not interested in fulfilling just so I can grandstand and prance about for all to see.

Miracles do not guarantee faith. How many people in the crowd that called for Jesus' crucifixion had been the benefactors of a miracle or had seen those who had been healed? How many were present when Jesus fed the 5000 and sought to make him king; only to be warned that they were not interested in following the truth but in filling their bellies? How often are miracles counterproductive when they are sought for personal comfort and personal benefit?

Paul sought to be healed and God said "No!" God told Paul that he was to focus his faith in other areas and he would receive other resources to carry out the work. Paul told Timothy to have a glass of wine for his stomach problem, not a miracle of healing. However we are not told to avoid seeking healing. In fact, James encourages us to seek the prayers of leaders when we are struggling. One thing that becomes clear is that healing and the decision to heal are in God's control, not ours.

It would make proclaiming the gospel much easier if we could heal everyone who came - Right?. It would attract great crowds. But that would not guarantee the most important miracle, that of true repentance and healing of a broken soul. The multitude of Israel received a daily miracle for forty years and yet on many occasions they chose to forget what God was doing and demanded more. They were quick to complain when they didn't get what they

wanted. This selfishness caused the death of an entire generation. Ultimately they forgot about God, sought out other gods and followed their desires.

Sometimes there will be no miracles. No displays of power. God will ask us and others to serve him, to trust him and keep on doing so through great struggle: to keep on working to help people see the truth through our faithfulness and confidence in his love, not because we can perform signs and wonders and so make life better and easier. This is the heart of Paul's passage on love. We can perform all the amazing feats we want but without love, the amazing feats will produce nothing. But if we live a life of love we will be able to produce so much more and we won't need any amazing displays of power and pyrotechnics for people to see and understand the true miracle that God has for everyone who believes.

On this day there would be no miracles, no displays of power on demand - at least not of the kind they were looking for. The people, the leaders, even the king would not be allowed to choose the how and when. Instead God would perform a greater miracle that would benefit all who would believe.

This miracle would be profound in its impact on the total history of mankind. It would be both defined by, and define, eternity and so define the purpose and value of all miracles of all types. It would define the purpose of the gospel and define the work of all who would serve the gospel and the savior who chose not perform on demand.

It goes back to the temptation of Jesus and Satan's offer to place all the nations at Jesus' feet if he would bow and worship him. Jesus refused then, he refused now and will always refuse to submit to anyone who tries to negotiate their obedience based on a

miracle designed to satisfy their needs, and in that act serve them and their desires. This decision is basic to understanding what God is calling us to do, calling us to proclaim. It would be so much simpler if he would just perform a couple of miracles on demand. But this is not just about God performing miracles. It is about doing what will produce true faith, true repentance, true disciples of Jesus. If that includes a miracle that is up to God. We are called to obey and demonstrate the gospel by our obedience.

BS Read 2 Kings 5:3-13. Read the story of Naaman, a man who went in search of a miracle. What happened to him? Did he get what he expected? Read Matthew 16:2-6 and Luke 11:29-32. What was Jesus' concern in these passages? What did he promise the people? Why did he refuse one miracle and promise another?

PR – Everyone wants to see a true miracle. Even more everyone would love to be the recipient of a miracle. What about yourself. What do you want? How would that desire affect your relationship with Jesus and impact your witness to the world? What if God chose not to give you the miracle you sought but chose to do something different? How would you respond?

MT – While serving in a remote part of a country we saw another church send a family into the same area. They came in with bales of clothing, large quantities of food and other goods. They promised to share these resources with those who came to church. The church grew rapidly as did the demand for more clothing and food. After a couple of years the group responsible for sending this family decided to move them to another area to do evangelism. Within months the church was abandoned. What do you think the people learned about the Jesus who had come to save men from their sins? Think about other actions, promises and attitudes could cause people to choose to be a Christian for the wrong reason. At the same time we need to reflect on our responsibility to care for

those in need. Did this church consider what the true needs of the people were?

Passion 60 - The worst possible exchange - ME

Matthew 27:15-26 (Mark 15:6-15; Luke 23:13-25; John 18:38-40)

The decision made no sense. He was not a good man. He represented all that was wrong with the situation. Yet he went free and the good man was to die. And no one protested. Even the one in charge buckled and yielded to letting a good man die in the place of a wicked man.

Now we need to consider the situation at hand. The crowd wants blood. The crowd always wants blood. But this desire is held under control by social rule and culture. Otherwise the bloodlust could run wild and many would be hurt and even killed. On this day though the authorities do everything possible to remove the barriers. They incite the crowd, they prod them, they demonstrate for all to see the behavior they want, the behavior that will be approved on this day. They want the bloodlust to rise and use it to subvert justice and force the verdict they want.

It is a macabre scene. A crowd crying for the death of an innocent man. A man who just the day before was healing those who were sick among them, who was teaching them the truth, who was all they thought the Messiah should be. Now they wanted him dead and they wanted Barabbas freed.

But who is Barabbas and why release him?

We have only three words that help us understand who Barabbas is. He is described as a thief, a murderer and an insurrectionist. By both Jewish and Roman law his fate was clear, death by stoning or

by crucifixion. Dead he can do no more damage. Alive he represents a serious threat to the safety of those with whom he comes in contact. As a thief he is to be feared because he wants what others cherish and will do whatever it takes to acquire it for his own benefit. He has no concern for the suffering his stealing would cause in the lives of others, only in the benefits he can gain at the expense of others. As a murderer he is feared because he is unafraid to kill others when it suits his plans. He is willing to kill those he robbed to silence them. He is willing to kill others if it means advancing his position. He is an insurrectionist. He is willing to cause turmoil to advance his position, to gain his liberties. He is a threat to the peace and is willing to risk the lives of others in the process. Actually an insurrectionist must have followers he can place at risk, people willing to be hurt and even die to gain whatever he is telling them they need and are lacking. A successful insurrectionist will cause conflict and will cause death.

Barabbas was a wicked, evil, horrible person. But then, isn't this true of every person on this planet? The bible is very clear that there is no one who is righteous. Not even one. Even what people describe as good, God calls a filthy rag. Think about it.

Isn't every person more than willing to steal in order to advance themselves, to improve their position? Maybe not steal money, or gold, or objects. But we are willing to steal from others in a variety of ways. When we do not speak up in a person's defense, we steal a little of their freedom. When we do not accept that a person has a done a good job, we steal a little of their self-esteem. When we criticize others unjustly, steal ideas, refuse to pay what is a legitimate price, are we not stealing from their hope of a better life, of better relations with others? Yes we are all thieves.

Isn't every person willing to kill others to protect themselves? To destroy another when it serves their own goals and purposes? We

may not take a knife or a gun and stop the beating of their heart, but we do a multitude of things to stop their growth and development as a person. We work at revealing their faults and errors. We highlight everything that is negative about a person. We work at ruining their reputation or at the very least make others reject them so that we can look good. Even when we refuse to give well earned praise, are we not working at killing the person and their future? Yes we are all murderers.

Isn't everyone willing to be an insurrectionist? We are willing to let others suffer so that we can succeed. We are willing to use others to improve our status. We are willing to lead but let others do the hard, difficult, boring stuff. We want to be in front but not pay the price. We spread gossip so that we can stir up trouble and maybe advance our position, our status. We go about convincing people that something is not right, that there is a problem, and that something must be done, no matter how risky or dangerous it might be. We are in rebellion against the authorities and the rules. We act and behave in ways that say the rules don't apply to us. Every rule we bend, avoid, and break is an act of rebellion, an act to inform others that we don't have to obey the rules and it doesn't matter how it affects others. Yes we are all insurrectionists. All leading our own personal rebellion against God.

Before we go on we need to keep in mind several scriptures. Paul says in Romans 5:7, 'Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.' And in Romans 3:10 "There is no one righteous not even one" (based on a passage from Psalms 36). And from Psalms 53:3, "there is no one who does good."

These scriptures talk about the true value of a person and why a person would die for another person. It is interesting that he suggests no one would die for a righteous man. It sounds strange,

but it makes sense. A righteous man is one who is walking with God. Death is not loss but gain. Much like Paul's statement, "for me to live is Christ to die is gain (Ph 1:27)." A righteous man does not need to be saved.

A good man, however, is a totally different situation. To die for a good man might make it possible for them to continue doing good, to continue serving. To die for a good man would allow them to complete the work they are doing that may benefit others. But is there such a thing as a good man? A person who we could not live without, that without this person the work would cease? According the Bible there is only one person who fits this category and he was about to be sentenced to death.

Jesus made no complaint, no objection. He knew clearly the heart of the man that was about to be set free. And he quietly watched and accepted the outcome. He willingly became the substitute for a known sinner, and in that act became our substitute as well. The point is quite clear. Barabbas represents every one of us. And every one of us is a thief, murderer and rebel. There was nothing in Barabbas worthy of being saved and there is nothing in us worthy of being saved. He and we are definitely not righteous. No one accused him of being a good person and no matter what we may think of ourselves the Bible makes it painfully clear that we too can make no claims to being a good person. Truly, no one should be willing to die for us. Yet Jesus did. He let them choose and accepted the decision.

Now what about us? Is there someone you would be willing to die for, or suffer for so that they would not be under the sentence of death? Is there anyone for whom you would willingly sacrifice your freedom, your goals, your life so that they would be free?

Jesus came here on a mission. He came to set the captives free. He came to die for those lost in darkness. He came to become the substitute so that sinners under the judgment of death for their sin would be set free. He embraced that mission and then called us to join in the mission. He called us to seek out those under the verdict of death and sacrifice ourselves so they would hear the truth and be set free. Do we know a Barabbas? What will we do about him?

I often wonder what happened to Barabbas after that moment when he was released. How did Jesus' death in his place affect his life and activity? I want to believe that the event had a profound effect on Barabbas and that his life changed dramatically. But there is no story, no tradition about what did or did not happen to him after his release. That is important for us to keep in mind. Jesus came to die for sinners. His sacrifice was not based on a guarantee that people would respond. His sacrifice was to make it possible for those who did respond to be saved.

A true sacrifice is not based on the response of those who receive it.

How does one explain what Jesus did? He made the sacrifice knowing that many who would hear of this event and the offer of forgiveness would reject it. He made the sacrifice knowing that it would not be enough to convince many to believe in God and His love for them. He made the sacrifice knowing many would use it as a reason to reject him. But He still made the sacrifice. He allowed, yes allowed, the Jews the chance to free Barabbas and send him to the cross. Yes allowed. He used the event to highlight exactly what was going to happen. His sacrifice would make it possible for all to be freed from the penalty of death. How many would actually be saved was yet to be seen.

Barabbas is our representative for better or worse and our lack of knowledge of what happened to him is important. We are called to go and proclaim the good news. We are called to make the needed sacrifices so that people will hear. We are not given guarantees about who and how many will respond. That is not the point of the mission. The mission is go, be God's representative. Be the living example of Jesus' sacrifice. Give up your life so they may hear. Bring words of forgiveness. Their response is not the basis of the mission. The basis of the mission is our willingness to make the sacrifice necessary so that others will know that Jesus died as their substitute.

Jesus became our substitute, He died for us. Each one of us has the opportunity to be freed from the penalty of death. Our task is to follow Jesus' example and be the sacrifice Jesus needs us to be so our generation of Barabbas's can be freed to consider their future and their need for forgiveness.

I have often thought about the idea of giving my life for others. I remember lying in my bed in Sierra Leone with what turned out to be a mild case of hepatitis. But at the time I became sick I did not know this. What I did know was that In the month before I became sick two people from other missions had died of fulminant hepatitis. They died within days of becoming sick. So when I learned I had hepatitis I began to ask God if my work was to come and die. It would not be the first time such a thing had happened in Sierra Leone. There is a cemetery there for missionaries who have died in Sierra Leone. Many served only a few years or less before dying. On another occasion I stood on a hillside looking at the grave of a missionary child who had died at the age of 7. These missionaries did not know when they arrived that their lives or those of their children would soon be over. But they willingly went because of the hope that their lives could make a difference.

Their sacrifices made the gospel real to those who saw their willingness to give all with the hope that someone would be set free. Not all who saw them die responded. Yet over the years we have heard many of our friends in Sierra Leone comment on their sacrifices and how these sacrifices brought opportunities to hear the gospel. Those sacrifices opened the door for the gospel to enter and be received.

We need to learn to give, to sacrifice, to yield our lives so that others will go free; so they will see that someone is willing to take their place, to suffer for them. It doesn't matter what their final decision is. What matters is that we are willing. We are willing to take Barabbas' place.

BT – Read the following scriptures: Matthew 10:39; 16:26; Psalms 49:7-8; Romans 5:7. Based on these scriptures create a statement of the value of giving one's life for another.

PR – What have you sacrificed in your life so that someone would have the chance to know the love of God? What impact did that sacrifice have on you, on your friends, on the one who benefitted from that sacrifice?

MT – Missions is built on the sacrifices of the lives of those called to serve, to go, to proclaim the gospel wherever they are sent. Find a book on the life of someone who gave their life to bring the gospel to another group. Now read Colossians 1:24. Reflect on what Paul meant by the phrase, "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of the body, which is the church. Read this passage in at least three different versions.

Passion 61 - Road of Mockery

Matthew 27:27-34 (Mark 15:16-24; Luke 23:28-28; John 19:17-25)

No one likes to be mocked. No one likes to be told they don't have what it takes to succeed. No one likes to be told they are going to fail. No one likes others to see their weakness. No one wants to be replaced because they appear weak or others don't think they can finish the task. I could continue the long list of ways that people can be mocked and the reasons we don't like to be treated in this manner.

Jesus was mocked, over and over, derided, laughed at, challenged and made to appear a fool for what he was doing.

- They dressed him in royal robes and mocked him as a would-be king.
- They made a crown of thorns and pressed it on his head until he bled.
- The soldiers spit on him and struck him, demanding that he tell them who had hit him. They bowed before him and then beat him.
- They exposed his weak condition and inability to defend himself and others by forcing another person to carry the cross for him.
- They hurled insults at him. Even one of the thieves crucified with him reviled him.
- They challenged him to reveal his power by saving himself.
- They stripped his clothes off in public to humiliate him and then gambled for his robe.
- A group of women followed him and wailed and mourned for him. They were convinced his case was hopeless and their wailing was a public announcement that he had failed.

- Maybe the greatest mockery was the fact that his disciples continued to abandon him. They only watched from afar. They did nothing to defend their master or express outrage at the travesty of justice that was occurring for all to see.

This was the hour Satan had waited for. The hour to mock God and maybe succeed.

Over the years I have heard and read the following evaluation of those who choose to serve God as missionaries. “They become missionaries because they don’t have the skills to succeed in anything else.” I have also heard the families of my students comment that they didn’t want their child to become a pastor... “because there was no future in the work, their child would never amount to anything.

Other comments are more subtle and more subversive. “How can you give up all that you have to go and live in a foreign country? How can you take your children to such a dangerous place? How can you go and live with those people? Why would anyone want to learn another language, eat weird food, and live there?”

These doubters are quick to judge the work and quick to evaluate the results. But they evaluate based on what they think the results should be; like the number of conversions, the number of new churches, the number of students, and so on. All of these are based on standards of production that come from a market approach to measuring productivity. If the results don’t measure up, then the missionary or pastor, is a failure. The attitudes and comments of the evaluator contain mockery about who he/she is, what he/she is doing, and even why he/she would want to do it.

This is also true in the church. People mock those who want to witness and share their faith with others. The mockery is subtle, but it is there. It often comes in reverse form. Phrases like “I could

never do it, so why should you do it and then make me look bad” or “I don’t have the skill to tell others, don’t embarrass me by actually telling someone about your faith” or “that is the pastor’s job. Who do you think you are to try and act like him?” And finally “I am too busy to get involved, so why should you witness and make me look selfish.”

There are so many ways to mock, to deride others, to inhibit them from taking the risk of caring about others. We thrive on discouraging others for doing what is right and following Christ’s command to love others and to forgive those who abuse us. For after all the insults, all the mockery, all the derision, Jesus called on his father to forgive them. Why? Because they did not understand.

We criticize what we don’t understand. We criticize what does not fit into our concept of the proper life and activity. We criticize anyone who may make us appear to be in error. They all criticized Jesus. Most people criticized and mocked Jesus.

Even his disciples were caught in the trap, not because of their actions and words but because of their inaction, their unwillingness to step forward and be counted as true followers, as true disciples. This is the ultimate form of mockery. We say one thing and do something entirely contrary to what we say. We call ourselves Christians but we don’t love others. We call ourselves witnesses but tell no one what we have witnessed, every time we remain silent, every time we remain inactive and do not help, every time we see the truth and turn away, we mock Jesus. We cry to the world that his dream is empty and his sacrifice was in vain.

But...

We have the chance to join with Jesus and be mocked because the mockers don’t want to hear the truth. We have the chance to bear

the burdens of others and be laughed at because they believe what we are trying to do is worthless. We have the chance to be derided for our attempts to show love to the wicked sinners of this world because they don't want to see themselves as among the wicked. We have the chance to join Jesus and be seen as weak and unable to do anything of value because they don't see the reality of eternity and can only live for today.

This is the mission: to be willing to be mocked for the truth and make a difference in the lives of others. To be willing to be laughed at as hopeless dreamers and see God work miracles of change and restoration. To be willing to be failures in the eyes of the world and reap a harvest of souls for eternity, a reward that has no equal in the riches of this world. To be willing to be beaten and abused so that the least of these will hear and know God as their loving Father.

This is the mission, to set aside ourselves, our concept of success, our sense of pride, and learn humility. This is the mission: to become a child of God and change how others see God. This is the mission: to walk the path before us no matter what it may bring and receive the word "well done my good and faithful servant, enter into your reward." This is the mission. It will be filled with those who don't understand, but who, because we accepted their insults, may one day understand the truth and find forgiveness.

Walk the path from the court of Pilate with me. Hear the mockery, the insults, the contempt. Learn the truth that their attacks are impotent. Their attacks reveal their weakness, their need for love and forgiveness. Walk the path from the court of Pilate with me and know that by walking this path many will hear and one day join us until there is a mighty throng who will gather together and sing the praise of the one who asked us to join him on that path - the path that leads to salvation for all. This is the path that defines

who we are as Christians and will mold us into a true disciple of Christ.

BS – Read the following scriptures on mockery. Psalm 22:6-8; 119:49-51; Lamentations 3:14; Isaiah 50:4-8. Now read Matthew 5:11. Consider why people mock those who serve God and why they are blessed when they endure being mocked.

PR – How do you feel when someone makes fun of you? How do you respond? Have you ever made fun of or mocked someone? How did you feel while you were mocking them? Afterwards did you think about how you had treated that person? How did they respond? What would have happened if you had spoken kindly to that person?

MT – One of the facts of entering a new culture is the risk of being laughed at and even made fun of or mocked because of the cultural mistakes that will be made. There will be those who mock the newcomer and let everyone know how they feel about their presence and their belief in Christ. How important is our response to such mockery in relation to our testimony and to the people being able to hear the truth? Why?

Passion 62 - Prince among thieves

Matthew 27:38 (Mark 15:27; Luke 23:39-43)

Are you innocent or are you guilty?

What do we mean by such terms? How are they used to judge who we are and the nature of our relationship to God?

It is a short story in the bigger story of the crucifixion. Jesus is not alone on the cross. He is not the only one being crucified on this

day. Two others are hung out for display. They have their sin put on display for all to see. They got caught and the Romans are making sure everyone knows that they were caught and that this type of action and person will not be tolerated. Criminal behavior will be punished even with extreme measures. And death is pretty extreme for the simple act of stealing. But then nothing is said about what they stole and who they stole from.

But I wonder what these two are thinking about. Are they thinking that they don't deserve to die, that they don't deserve this level of punishment? After all they didn't kill anyone. They didn't start a riot or uprising against the authorities. They are scared and angry and lash out at the closest target - Jesus. Why Jesus? Probably because they, like everyone else, have heard the stories about all the miracles he has performed. They have heard how he has defied the leaders and their authority, which up until this moment has kept him safe from harm. They may have even heard stories about the few whom he has raised to life. Likely they have heard the stories about his power over the demons and the kingdom of Satan.

So when Jesus does not respond to the challenge to save himself and they see their only hope of being rescued disappear, they begin to lash out. They attack Jesus because he is being selfish. He is not thinking about them and their dire situation. He has power and he refuses to use it. They may have made promises to change and to follow him if only he will save himself and use that power to rescue them. For some reason they feel that he is not interested in them and their future life. So the vileness pours out from their mouths and the crowd probably is cheering them on, hoping that this outpouring of insults and ridicule might be what it takes for Jesus to respond.

We have no idea how long this lasted. It probably went on for a while, at least until the pain of hanging on the cross brought

silence as they fought for breath, exhausted by the effort to attack Jesus. For every word uttered depended on them forcing themselves to stand on their feet in order breathe and that act caused the nails to tear into the flesh of their feet. They could manage a sentence or two before collapsing and trying to ease the pain only to find themselves fighting for air as the weight of their bodies caused a strangling effect on their lungs. This caused them to fight the pain in their feet and amplified their anger and frustration adding bile to their attack and anger.

At some point, during one of these cycles of collapse and struggling to breathe, one of the thieves was impacted by all that was happening. We don't know what caused him to shift his thinking. Was it the nature of Jesus' silence and patience in the face of such anger? Was it the look of love and understanding that might have been visible on Jesus' face? Was it the reality that even if Jesus did save them the real problem would remain? Was this entire episode the one thing necessary to reveal that the real issue, the very real problem of sin, existed and that no matter what happened on this day, a day would come when they would have to face God and receive a much more severe judgment than simply physical death? Maybe it was all of the above.

Whatever brought about the clarity of thought is unimportant. What is important is that in the midst of this pain, of this disillusionment, of this reality that death was at hand, one thief saw the truth of his life and the truth of who was hanging on the cross next to him. In this moment he saw that what was more important in this moment was to be restored in his relationship with God, to have his sin forgiven.

In this moment he realized that there was a way he could be saved and not just for the short time that might be left to him if, in fact, he escaped the cross. He realized that he could be forgiven and

enter into the promised rest talked about in the prophets. He could enter into Abraham's bosom and be restored to God. He realized that the person next to him was the one person who could make this happen and that Jesus had the power to rescue him for eternity.

In that moment he renounced his past. He admitted the error of his treatment of God's promises. He confessed that he was deserving of death for his sin, not just for stealing, but for everything he had done to dishonor God in his life. In that moment he turned and realized that Jesus was going to come down from the cross, just not in the way everyone else expected, and would conquer. Jesus, by delaying his action would prove to all that he truly was God's son and had the power to save all who called on him.

He committed himself to that truth and asked Jesus to do one simple thing, "Remember me." He knew he did not deserve it. This request was an admission of that fact. But he chose to take the risk and confess that Jesus was a righteous person and that he had the authority to choose who would be received into his kingdom. And he got it right. Jesus' response makes that clear. And the response was powerful. No one else that day would experience the true power of God. Only the thief who confessed and sought forgiveness. That day he would arrive in paradise and be welcome. That very day he, the confessed thief, would be saved. The rest would either have to wait another three days or more or would never experience the door to heaven that opened the day that Jesus came down from the cross and conquered death.

Even the disciples didn't see it that day. Even three days later in front of an empty tomb they would still be confused. Jesus would have to appear to them several times before they began to realize that Jesus had responded to the challenge to save himself. They would finally see that Jesus had saved himself by first dying, and by that act he opened the door to being raised back to life and

become the way for everyone who believes to be saved from the cross.

One of the hardest things to deal with when witnessing to people is to let them struggle. To let them be angry at God. To let them express their fear and deal with what they really are. Confession is not meant to be easy. It is a heart-wrenching activity. It is rightfully called a crisis of the soul that each person must go through in order to understand just what Jesus did on the cross for us.

The challenge we face is not to soften or diminish this process of confession. We cannot try to soften it because to smooth the way is to diminish the depth and depravity of who we are as sinners. But, at the same time, we cannot force it to happen. To try and force the truth on a person is to be cruel and heartless in our presentation of the truth. We risk making God looking vengeful and insensitive.

Some will come quickly to the realization. They will come with deep emotion and profound sobbing. Others will come slowly and quietly to the truth. They will come with a calm sense of the depth of their sin and a simple, quiet commitment. There is no standard response, no standard process. The only thing that is standard is the truth that Jesus, who did not sin and did not deserve to die, died for me who does not, nor ever will, deserve his sacrifice. In fact, the very reason for his presence on the cross is my sin and my sin alone.

What is important for us to keep in focus as a Christian is to make sure that others see this Jesus in our lives, in our words, and in our actions. They need to see our willingness to sacrifice our lives for them because of our love for Jesus. They need to see it and we need to allow them to see. We need to hear them, wait on them, be near them so that when the moment of realization comes they will

know the truth of the words of Jesus; “Today you will be with me in paradise. Today you will be forgiven and given a place in my family, be a member of my kingdom, be my child. Today you will be saved.”

That is why we go to all of the world. We go so others can see Jesus on the cross for them and be able to receive the truth, the gospel.

BS - Read the following scriptures Ezekiel 18:20; John 3:17-18; Romans 6:23; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 3:10, 6:7-8; James 1:15; Revelations 21:8. Write out a clear definition of the judgment of God on those who sin. Write out clearly why you need to tell everyone you meet about their sin and what God has done for them.

PR - Reflect on your decision to ask Jesus to forgive you. Was it clear to you what sin was and why it was so important to confess your sin? Write out your testimony of what Jesus did in your life the day you asked him to forgive you.

Mt - One of the great dangers of missions is to soften the truth about sin. What are the dangers of not telling a person the nature of sin and what will happen to them if they do not confess their sin?

Passion 63 - Stealing from the Master Thief

Luke 23:39-43 (Matthew 27:38; Mark 15:27)

Do we understand that we are all stolen property? We originally belonged to God. That was the plan from the beginning. We would be God’s special creation, created for relationship with him. But a thief entered and through a series of lies stole us away. Then he convinced us to help him to steal every single offspring of our

forefathers. He started the process and we, willingly or unwillingly, help this thieving of souls to continue.

Here on the cross Jesus encounters two examples of this reality. Two men, appropriately called thieves. Men whose lives represent the reality of each of us. Each one of us is a thief. We may not be under judgment for stealing money, food, or property, but we all will be convicted of stealing from God and helping Satan to steal the lives and souls of others from God. We steal time. We steal love. We steal from creation. We do all of this to get what we want (or, at least we have been convinced that, that is what we want). And the truth is, what we want is a lie. Which means we lie to ourselves so that we believe we are not really stealing but rather getting what is rightfully ours.

You realize that behind all theft exists a lie. A lie that says we should have more. We deserve more. We have rights to more and should not have to struggle excessively to have more. We spend our lives in the process of getting more, but to have more means others take from us and in turn we take from them. The goal is to, in some way, get more while giving less than what we get.

Thieving is in our nature. The problem is we have no clear idea of what the 'more' we are seeking really is and just how we will know when we have more. People talk about having more to be safe, secure or comfortable, to have more to gain respect and approval. To have more so...and the list could go on because every person has a variation on what the 'more' is that they are seeking and what they will do, or steal, to have more.

I say steal because, while we may not be stealing the property of others, we are taking, stealing materials of a different nature. We were created to spend time with God. But we steal this time and give it away to gain more. We were created to care for the world.

But we constantly steal from the environment, destroying it, poisoning it, so we can have more. We were created for relationship with others, but we are constantly stealing from each other, especially to gain attention. We steal so others can't have. We steal so we can have more than anyone else. We are thieves and have been thieves from birth.

So here are two thieves and they represent the reality of our lives. Thieves. They also represent the two options available to each of us. The one is to admit we are thieves and the other is to hide behind a lie; a lie that represents what Satan originally stole. He stole the truth about God and convinced us of a lie so we, in turn, could help him keep on stealing the truth. The lie is, 'We can be whole without God.' The truth is we can only experience all we can be when we give ourselves back to God. This wholeness is only possible when we admit the truth, we are all thieves.

The thieves represent how people handle this truth. On one hand we blame everyone else for our circumstances and expect God to rescue us no matter what our circumstances. We deserve to be rescued. Aren't we his creation? How could he send anyone to hell? Or, we can accept the blame and realize that while others have helped in the process of stealing the truth, we are ultimately responsible. We let it happen. We agreed to allow others to steal from us and then, in turn, continued the process by stealing from anyone we could. We are individually all thieves and the only solution is to confess and seek God's forgiveness.

This encounter with the two thieves makes it clear what God is expecting from each person. Each person has to choose. This is not a group decision. It comes with a deadline, clearly defined by the events on the cross. We have until the moment of our death to realize the truth of who we are.

Actually all of life is like this. We are always having to make choices and once made we can't go back and change them. There is a finality in the process of choosing. I chose to be a Christian. I can't go back and rescind that decision. I may choose to ignore it but the impact of that moment on my life and on others cannot be changed. People will watch and judge me based on that moment, especially those who were there when the decision was made. I chose to marry a specific, very wonderful woman, my wife. I cannot undo that decision. I can misuse it, abuse it, destroy the potential in it but I cannot go back and change it. I am sitting in an airport at this moment, about to get on a plane to another country. Once I land in that country my decision to go is final. I can't change that decision.

At some point though, all the past decisions will be totaled up and finalized. That moment will reveal whether I have recognized the truth that I am a thief or continue to deny it. It will show if I learned the truth about how to be restored and so help others recover. Or, have I chosen to spend my life as a thief until the last moment and even then refuse to see what I really am? This is who the thieves represent: those who see the truth and find redemption, or those who refuse to see anything and, up until the last minute, believe that even God owes them something. They feel that no matter what they have done they have the right to be rescued at any cost, even if it should cost the soul of another. The fact is, that if Christ had come down from the cross and only rescued himself and the thief that day, none of us would have the opportunity to be rescued.

The question for us today is this - where are we in this image? Are we the person hanging between two thieves? Do we realize that we, in fact, are Christ's representative and we have people all around us waiting to be rescued? Will there be people who will see

how we live, how we have left behind the life of thievery? Will they know that we have been walking with Jesus and see the answer in their search for truth, for a way out of their life of stealing?

At the same time, are we ready to deal with the obstinate thief? There will always be people like him; people who expect us to make them comfortable, tell them they are doing alright, encourage them to believe that by being a good person and doing good they should make it. They expect us to help them maintain their belief that their failure is not their fault and that they are not responsible for what has happened, that even God should feel sorry for them and rescue them.

Serving in the kingdom means, clearly understanding our situation and being willing to expose the truth that we are all thieves. We must be willing to respond as a representative of Christ to those who, having witnessed our life and testimony, see the truth about themselves. We must be willing to suffer the attacks of others in love with the hope that at some moment they will see the truth. It is not easy to hang on a cross or live among thieves, but that is exactly what Christ did for us and what we need to do for others. If we are willing, we will help reclaim the stolen property of their souls and aid in their return to their creator.

BS - Read the following Luke 4:18; 2 Corinthians 2:10, 11:14; Ephesians 6:16; 1:13; 2 Timothy 2:26; 1 Peter 5:8. Review them and write a description of the challenge that lies before us and the work of reclaiming those created by God from the kingdom of Satan.

PR - Read a story about someone who risked themselves to save another person. What do you think was in their thoughts as they made the decision to risk themselves to help another person? Now

consider what risks are involved in saving something even more valuable, a soul. What will it cost you, what risk will be involved to rescue them so they can hear the gospel? What will you be willing to do to rescue someone?

MT - Missions involves taking risks to reach those who have become trapped in Satan's kingdom. A key truth to understand is that they don't believe they have been tricked or need to be rescued. What do you think it will take to convince them of the truth?

Passion 64 - Forgiveness, Cleansing the wound

Luke 23:34

Have you ever had a wound or a scrape that needed cleaning? Which pain was worse? When you first hurt it or when it had to be cleaned? Stop and think about that a minute.

Now ask yourself why the cleaning hurt so much, maybe even more than the original injury. Was it because the original injury was sudden, unexpected and maybe short in duration? Was it out of fear? Maybe it was the medicine used or the needed scrubbing that caused the increased pain. Maybe it was the bandaging that made it more painful. It is never comfortable to treat an open wound.

Jesus made a few comments before the crucifixion and each one was like causing a wound. The Pharisees challenged Jesus. His response was that they would see him sitting at the right hand of God. Pilate threatened him and Jesus calmly told him he had no power except as allowed by God. The women cried for Jesus and he warned them clearly that all that was happening was clearly

unjust. Now he arrives at the cross and applies the first cleansing act.

Those who came to watch were all sinning. Their actions were causing deep and painful wounds to their souls and their existence. They didn't realize it but they were reacting to the impact of their wounds. Now Jesus touches the wound with a healing salve. He forgives them. And this causes another round of pain and reaction. They cried out against him. They challenged him to save himself and prove his claims. Others mocked him. The soldiers cast lots for his clothes, a symbolic action that they used to reinforce their choice and avoid dealing with the pain that was so close to the surface of many.

But these words of forgiveness are absolutely necessary if any healing was to come. The wound must be exposed and treatment applied. The treatment for sin is forgiveness, but it is not easily received. For forgiveness only amplifies the true nature of the wound in one's soul and heightens the awareness of how severe is the pain.

Many do not want to hear such words. They fight against them. To accept words of forgiveness means to admit to the existence of the wound, of the sin in our life. People cover it up by hurling insults, by attacking and trying to expose the sin of others, by comparing themselves to others. They don't want anyone to touch the wound of sin and revive the nerves of conscience in their soul. They are like a leper, who because of the disease, loses the ability to feel in the areas affected. Because of this they don't see the danger and many will refuse to look at those areas because that would confirm what they are trying to deny. They don't want anyone to tell them they are a leper(a sinner) or have it revealed to anyone else.

Sin is like that. It makes us numb to the reality. Forgiveness exposes the truth and that truth brings with it the pain of the reality of our condition. We have wounded ourselves. We cannot treat ourselves. But the treatment we need is the one that will reveal the truth of our condition. This revelation is by its very nature painful. Understanding our sin brings home the reality of how we are damaged and how we have damaged others.

Just stop and think about it.

Jesus' life, right up to the end, exposed the sin in each person he encountered. These words were not just for those present at the cross. They were for everyone. They were stated so each of us could see the nature of sin in our lives. They were spoken because they revealed the only treatment that would clean the wound and bring healing. We, or our sin, put him on the cross. His life exposes us, and his forgiveness is needed to clean what has been exposed. The cleansing will be gentle but it still hurts. For it to be effective we need to accept it, allow it to be applied, and let it work its way into our wound and bring cleansing.

These words of Jesus, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing," reveal to each person these truths. God knows exactly what we are doing, and the wounds we have given ourselves. If we listen to these words, then we too will know exactly what we are doing and the way we have wounded ourselves. God knows this proclamation will bring pain. He also knows that we must hear them if we are to be healed and returned to health in our soul.

Listen to them again, "Father forgive Mary, Tom, Peter, Elizabeth. They don't know what they are doing." Now listen again and put your name in its proper place.

Once we have listened - once we have understood - once we are healed, we need to speak these same words to those we meet as we pass through this world. We must tell them that they are forgiven. They don't know what they are doing but they are forgiven. Some will respond with cruelty and anger. Others will just ignore us. It will not make it easy to keep proclaiming forgiveness. But we must because as we continue we will find those who will listen, those who want to be healed. The forgiveness is for all but only those who accept it will be healed.

In sickness, it is only when the patient accepts the statement that he is sick and needs help that the doctor can do anything. Think about how many people refuse to hear those words and do not receive the critical care they need. As a result, they die.

We are those called by God to declare the truth about sin and to declare these words of forgiveness. We are called by God to echo Jesus' words down through the halls of time until Jesus returns. We may not be hung on a cross, but we will be attacked. We will be reviled and insulted. Never mind. If we do as Jesus did then we will find those ready to respond. And if we are faithful, even those who resist can be reached. Love brought Jesus to earth. Love brought him to the cross. Love made it possible for him to proclaim forgiveness for each of us and for the part we played in hanging him on the cross. That love has been given to us so that we can continue proclaiming that forgiveness until the ends of the earth and until our Savior's return.

BS - Read the following scriptures Matthew 7:1-5; John 8:7-9; Romans 2:21-25, 8:1-14. Here you will find comments about exposing sin in others and understanding the sinful nature. In order to help others see their sin what must we do first? What do we need to understand about ourselves before we can talk to others about their sin?

PR - Reflect on the following statement, “your life should reveal the sin in the lives of others.” How does this idea affect you? Are we willing to be clear about the sin in the lives of others? Are we willing as well to be honest about the sin in our life in order for others to clearly see their sin?

MT - Missions by its very nature involves exposing the sinfulness of others for them to see. This process can result in being attacked and discredited by those we seek to help. They will use the fact that we are not part of their culture, that we have foreign ideas and many other approaches to avoid dealing with the truth. Consider what it will take to maintain a clear testimony and help them see the truth.

Passion 65 - The ever present why?

Matthew 27:46

We have arrived at the last words of Jesus. They cover a vast amount of territory. So much is said in so few words. We have looked at his simple words to the thief. We will move on and look at the rest. We must look at them. They contain comments on the reality of life in the service of our Heavenly Father. Some are marvelous and some tear at the roots of the soul. None more so than Jesus’ cry of “why have you forsaken me?”

No one who wishes to serve can avoid confronting this question. Everyone who walks the path of truth, the path God leads them down will - no - must answer this question. We will face crisis moments in life and our willingness to pose the question and wrestle with the answer will forever mark and define us and our relationship with God.

There may be only one time when we face this question. There may be several. But always they will bring us before God to learn why we are here and why we have been asked to bear whatever crushing cross is ours to bear. The event is never the same from one person to the next. The process may follow a pattern but can never be duplicated. Those who have been there know what is being experienced by those in the middle of the “valley of the shadow of death,” which is how David described it in Psalm 23.

This moment of crisis may come and go quickly as it did for Jesus. Or it may take longer as for Elijah and his 40 day trek just to hear the whisper of God. No matter how long it takes, it changes everything. Elijah returned in greater boldness than when he left. Jesus changed the flow of eternity. We could go on and on with such examples and what God did in the lives of those who faced the why and were bold enough to speak their fear and confusion to their Heavenly Father.

We are going through a rather extended period of trying to understand why. My wife was diagnosed with cancer 7 years ago. She went into remission for 4 years and the cancer returned. Another year of remission and then the cancer reappeared in another location. The cancer is under control or ‘stable’ as the doctors describe it. We do not speak much about it but there is the ever-present question of why. Why her, why is it still there, why is the medicine not more effective, why is she not being healed?

I am part of the equation. It is not just my wife who is dealing with cancer. I am dealing with it too. A part of me is under attack, suffering and I have similar, but different questions. Why must a part of me suffer so; why can’t I do anything to change the situation, why? I too am sick and struggling.

A great part of the why is having the courage to declare the doubt clearly and concisely. Jesus' declaration is absolutely clear. It was a sense of being absolutely alone, abandoned. There was a point in time when all the communion he had known with the father seemed to just disappear, vanish into the surrounding darkness. He wanted to come down from the cross, but instead he got a tomb.

Elijah experienced a sense of complete failure. He had done the miraculous, he had defeated a false god and its prophets, yet one person still wanted him dead and no one stood up to defend or protect him. He wanted a mighty display of power but got a whisper. He followed that whisper, learning to trust God. As a result he saw a child resurrected and received a one way ticket past death into eternity.

Back to our life. We are hoping for...well what everyone hopes for, being cancer free. So far it is not gone as we have prayed and hoped for. The question is, will we stay in the place God has placed us long enough to find out what will happen? Will we cry out, not afraid of what others may say, because we know that something incredible is being prepared by God, because we have willingly gone where he has sent, done what he has asked, and accepted in faith the events that are at hand?

What is really clear is we have no idea how many people are watching us. We have no idea where they are and what our struggle means to them.

The struggle on the cross was immense. The results? The centurion figured it out. He saw the struggle, he heard the words, and declared that this must be the son of God. The people saw the change in Elijah. No one dared to challenge him. The king and his wife were forever terrified about what he would say or do next. His life and obedience sounded the death knell for all who refused to

follow through on the proclamation they had made on the mount by declaring that the only true God was the God that Elijah served.

We could talk about Daniel and being carried into slavery or Joseph and being sold into slavery by his own brothers. How about Moses and his first attempt at a miracle and its' disastrous results or David and the constant threat of Saul wanting him dead. Reflect on each of these and realize that every one of them had valid reasons to ask why, and they did just that. However, each one of them chose to continue listening and continue following until God cleared the darkness and let them finally see. Each were used by God to carry out a key task. For some the process lasted for years; years of waiting and wondering but faithfully going forward, believing God would reveal. Believing God would use the situation for his glory. Believing that all would be right in the end if they just stayed on track.

This is the heart of missions. You cannot escape the feeling of isolation, of failure, of, yes the feeling of being forsaken. Entering into this world so filled with pain, so filled with anger, so filled with emptiness that you feel like a net is surrounding you and being tightened until you feel suffocated. Then compound it all with confusion in language, culture, food, and how life functions. But enter it we must. And we must be willing to struggle if we are to find the keys that will bring light to those we seek to reach.

Why the struggle? Oh there are so many reasons why. The people we need to reach don't trust strangers. They don't trust people who believe differently and seem to be judging them (Actually we are you know. The moment you share the gospel they are under judgment.) They don't believe we could ever understand their world (again they are right because it takes a lifetime to understand, truly understand, another culture.) Can you really do missions with anything less than the sacrifice of a life? What do

those people who only half-heartedly serve, or say they will try missions to see if they like it, and never really struggle, look like to the “ones they came to serve.”

Each of the people above (Elijah, Centurion, Daniel, Moses, David, Joseph) put their lives on the line. They didn’t back down just because life became (not simply difficult) really impossible. The real impact of their lives came after those moments of crying out – why? The answer did not come without a cost. But the recompense was just as Jesus had promised to his disciples when they asked what they would get in return for giving up their homes and family. Jesus promised they would receive a hundred times what they had sacrificed to walk the narrow road.

Missions is about walking a narrow dark road; a road filled with danger. It is a journey only made possible by unswerving faith that one day we will pass through because the rod and staff of God have never left us. The image of the footprints in the sand has become almost redundant but it contains the clearest expression of this moment in Jesus’ life. He was being carried by his Father. He was never abandoned.

Too many are looking for an easy faith, a faith that has no strength, a faith that will attract no one and has no real confidence in God. But, Jesus proclaimed for all to hear; faith is only truly revealed in the crucible of life.

Does that scare you? It should. It scared Jesus. Just go back and read the prayer in the Garden. But the fear does not have to control you. What would happen if the world once again experienced the truly fearless faith that was the norm of the early church? What would the world think and do if Christians became a people unafraid to face the task before them; the task of giving themselves so the lost would be redeemed.

It is in the moment we cry out to God, when we face our fear, that we will truly learn how God has plans to move in and through our lives.

Jesus cried, “Father why have you abandoned me?” And then the world knew...

BS - Read Psalm 22 in its entirety. This is one of the Messianic Psalms and Jesus’ final words are echoed in this Psalm. Read it again. Do we understand what it means to be truly abandoned? Do we understand how far we are from God because of our sin? Do we really know how to help those who feel totally abandoned and lost in their sin?

PR - Have you ever felt like everyone has left you? Or that no one remembered you at a critical time in your life? Have you ever felt lost and completely helpless? Have you ever felt so confused you didn’t know what to do? What did you do to overcome the feeling of being abandoned? How will that help you communicate with others that God understands where they are and knows what they need?

MT - The world is afraid of being abandoned, of not being remembered. People go to extreme ends to be noticed and be part of a group, any group. They don’t want to be alone. But the solutions they use are only superficial and temporary.(Make a list of things people are willing to do to avoid being forgotten, excluded and abandoned.) Compare God’s solution to answering our fear of being abandoned with the solutions of your friends.

Passion 66 - What is really behind the door?

Luke 23:43

I want to return to the thieves on the cross. Picture two men about to die. Actually they were dying. They represent two opposite responses to the truth. We could think of these responses as two doors that we choose to open and enter. They represent how we choose to respond to the truth about sin. The first door is denial. Denial of responsibility and of the possibility that each person will pay for their sin. They were judged for stealing. The judgment was correct. We may debate the severity of the punishment they received at the hands of the government, but it represents what is waiting for every person judged guilty of sin. One chose to fight this truth and sought to blame and attack others.

The second door is the one of admission. Every one fights the truth of their condition. No one wants to be called a sinner. Those who are honest will see the truth. Again, the thief was judged for stealing. The judgment was correct. He knew it and knew that he must pay but... At this moment something about Jesus made him change his attitude. Instead of fighting the truth he accepted it and then sought the one thing that could change the final result. He sought forgiveness. And he sought it from the one person who could forgive him. Not just for the act of stealing such as money, food or some other object, but stealing from God - stealing respect, stealing honor, stealing from all that God had promised. And he selfishly squandered it all on himself.

This short story clarifies what God's gift is really about. It is about what happens to each person when they must stand before God: when it is no longer possible to dissemble and disguise the truth: when there is no more time to set things right. We will approach God in one of two ways: not forgiven or forgiven.

Jesus' words make it clear that for those who are forgiven they are given the one thing they need. Entrance into paradise, which really means entrance into God's presence; streets of gold, eternal hymn sings, unending peace. None of these mean anything if God is not present. I love C.S. Lewis' depiction of hell in the book The Great Divorce. Hell was not about fire and brimstone, at least not in a physical sense. His description is of an unending desire for more with no hope of ever finding it. People had all the resources they needed but never were satisfied. The words of Jesus carry two messages. The first we all want to hear. We want to know we will be in paradise. But paradise (at least how many imagine it) will grow dull and become its own hell without the second message. "You will be with me." It is God's presence that creates a true paradise. Imagine a worship time that lasts 10,000 years and it only seems like you sang the first verse of the first song. That's what paradise is when God (Jesus) is present.

How often does the message of the gospel get quickly confused with having 'stuff' in this world? So many evangelists and popular preachers link the gospel with good health, having all our physical needs met, and being blessed in so many ways with worldly stuff. This event on the cross throws all of that into question. This man would never be healed, or become well off. (at least not in the short time left him on earth). He was not going to be rescued from death on the cross. No promise related to any of that was offered. However he was offered one thing, eternity with Jesus.

So many things are brought into focus by the cross.

Does this mean there will be no blessings, no healing, no benefits? No, because God cares for us and provides what we need. Many things change and improve because of our changed relationship with God. Our activities change and our finances improve as a result. Our desires and appetites change and so our health

improves. We learn to love others and our relationships change and broken ones are repaired. But, again there is the gentle reminder that this is not always true. None of this happened with the thief on the cross. Yet he rejoiced to hear Jesus' words and receive the one blessing that everyone who repents will receive.

For many the blessings we will receive will be very different from what we want or desire. The blessings will focus on what we need and what is necessary so we can help others hear the message and respond. They will be about increasing our faith, increasing our hope, increasing our love.

Sometimes we need resources so we can serve and help others. Sometimes we need health so we can do the work we have been given. But then there are the situations where something quite different will be provided. Sometimes we must learn to live in difficult conditions as a way of growing in God and revealing him to others. For some death is the way to true healing and helping others to find God.

As I read the New Testament I am reminded of the times when rescue, healing and provision were not provided. James was arrested and martyred. Paul was not healed. Stephen was stoned. Saul oppressed and incarcerated many believers. Paul was attacked and beaten many times. There are many references to being oppressed for one's faith. But all of this didn't matter because the one truth could not be changed. Each of them had heard and received the most important message, "no matter what happens, I forgive you and you will be with me in paradise."

I have seen missionaries who were more focused on making sure they lived comfortably in the land of service than on proclaiming the message. I have seen visitors who acted selfishly and with no concern about how their actions impacted the message. They

brought their gifts to win people yet left their hearts at home and so their message was tainted.

The cross keeps things very clear. If we take time to do a little review we will remember that Jesus promised that all who served him faithfully would have struggles in this world. It would not be a life of receiving but a life of giving. Jesus gave his life not so we could have more in this world but so we could have the one thing we need for our eternity, his forgiveness and his presence.

It is how we must live. Having, but not possessing. Alive, but not dependent on health. Ready to live or die as Paul was so that the gospel would be proclaimed. Understanding how to be content so that no one would ever confuse true comfort and peace with being comfortable.

Jesus talked about two paths, one wide and dangerous, the other narrow and straight. Paths usually have an entrance, maybe even a door. A man asked Jesus about people being saved in Luke 13:23-24. Jesus told him to make every effort to enter the narrow door. Can we help them see clearly what the doors represent and understand why one is so dangerous and the other a blessing?

What do others see when you proclaim the gospel? What do they believe they are going to receive if they respond? What is the heart of the message you proclaim? Can you become exactly what Christ needs you to be and keep living that way so they will hear the true message clearly? So they will see what is behind the door and make the right choice?

BS - Read the following passages about truth, John 8:31-32; Ephesians 4:20-24; Colossians 1:5-6; Titus 1:1-3. Write a statement defining what truth is and what we are to tell others about the truth.

PR - Review your personal life and the goals and desires you have. Do they represent a person who is following the truth or one who has mixed the truth with the desires and goals of this world? How would you be able to determine if what you want represents a desire to follow the truth?

MT - Missionaries are people called to make key sacrifices so that the truth can be proclaimed and so that the people they are sent to can clearly understand the reality of sin and the truth that God offers salvation to all who will believe. What actions, desires, and behaviors of a missionary can make it difficult to communicate this truth? The thief wanted to be saved from suffering, to escape the cross and live a better life. Is it wrong to want to help people improve the conditions of their lives? Can missionaries help people have better health, a better economy without damaging the truth?

Passion 67 - And there was family

John 19:25-27

How many of us have struggled to understand Jesus' comments about hating our parents if we are to truly love and follow the Lord? Or when Jesus declared that his true family (mother and brothers) were those who obeyed his teaching? So often, when the decision to serve God is in conflict with the desires and wishes of parents and family, these passages are brought up in order to help a person place God before family. But is that really what Jesus was saying or intending?

I say that because here at the end of his life, a life that obeys to the point of sacrificing it for all mankind, he pauses and sees his mother - the embodiment of all that represents family. She is the one who gave birth to him, who raised him, who watched him

grow into manhood and carry out the ministry given to him by his heavenly Father.

Yes, there were times when Mary wondered just what her son was doing, even wondering if he were acting in a sane manner. Yes, she at times placed him in awkward positions, like at the wedding in Cana, pressuring him to act. Another time she and her other sons tried to rescue him, at least that was their intent (Mark 3:21). They thought they knew what was best for him and maybe they were tired of the constant presence of others. Can you imagine what it might have been like to have Jesus as your son or your brother? People constantly badgering you with questions or hoping that you would introduce them to Jesus.

Was Jesus really telling us that our family is unimportant, that we should ignore and even abandon them?

In some situations that may be the only reasonable decision. An example may be when we hear the gospel and choose Jesus over the religion of our family or choose Jesus over empty and dangerous tradition. Yes, then Jesus becomes our true family; the one who is there to support and care for us as we leave behind, or (as in many cases) we are thrown out by our earthly family. Or it could be true when the family expects their children to serve them above all else or when they expect their children to find a job that will contribute to the economic stability of the family instead of obeying God. Or it may be when critical help is withdrawn because they are not following or carrying out the expectations of our family. I have seen this and heard parents say that they will never let their child serve the Lord because there is no profit in it.

But are we to deny in an absolute sense who we are and our family? Did Jesus really mean we should hate our family? That would be contrary to all the other teaching on loving others, even

loving our enemies and doing good to those who abuse us. Did he really mean for us to cut our ties to our family and make those of the family of God our only source of family? That again would be contrary to much of the teaching of the Word because it refers to honoring our parents and caring about them even when they are far from God.

So what is happening in this moment on the cross? It is quite clear that Jesus cares about his mother. He is concerned for her well-being. She is getting old and he knows that as the head of the house he will no longer be there to care for her as a son should do. It is not clear why he calls on John to fulfill this role. It may be that none of his brothers are there. In the past they have scoffed, ridiculed and rejected his activity and his claim that he is obeying his Father in heaven. So it may be that they are nowhere to be seen and in this moment he sees John and calls on him to replace him as son to his mother and so care for her.

Setting all of that aside what we see here is a son who loves his mother; has always loved his mother. His journeys have taken him far from home but she has not been far from his thoughts and prayers (I can't imagine him not praying for and caring for her.) He sees her and carries out a key duty of a son, especially the eldest son. He provides for her.

I have often wondered what I might do if my mother could no longer care for herself. I have watched other missionaries take a leave from their work to care for an ailing parent, and after their death, they return to the work God called them to. I have seen others who depended on other family members to fill that role and remain on the field and far from home. We are at that place in our lives. The remaining parent for both of us is our mother. For one, the family is close. But, I have heard the concern in my wife's voice and seen how it affects her demeanor when her mother, who

is so far away, goes through a difficult time with her health. Fortunately many of the sons and daughters are near and able to care for her when needed. We are also fortunate to have a phone system that allows my wife to call her mother at any time.

My mother is at the same age. While back in the USA we bought a house and moved her and her husband into the house with us. They are comfortable and I have a brother just a few blocks away. They are doing well for the moment and I too can call them and they can call if there is a need. But what if that all changed? Would I be required to ignore their needs and resolutely stay at my job? Is that really what we are expected to do?

I have lived in many cultures and have yet to encounter one where that would be completely acceptable. To care for one's parents, to be sure they are cared for when you can't be there is essential to being a true son. To care about your family is a measure of maturity and understanding who a person is. The people of these cultures would not expect us to stay and abandon our mothers. They would not expect us to ignore the needs of our families.

This is a personal opinion but I don't think Jesus did either. While his family struggled with what Jesus was doing he never shut the door on them. He never abandoned them. I say this because in the end we know that two of those brothers became key leaders in the church. James, who was the key leader in Jerusalem and Jude, who wrote the book with his name on it. And as devastating as the crucifixion was, Mary remained true. She went to the grave, and she and the brothers are listed among those in the upper room (Acts 1:14).

We are called to never lose sight of our earthly family, while obeying diligently the work God has called us to, whether as a member of the local church, a pastor, or a missionary. We are to

care for our families even when they reject us. They need us to love them, and help them so that when the time is right they will listen, and able to understand what we do and why we do it.

Even in the midst of the pain of the crucifixion Jesus sees and remembers his mother. We are reminded to never lose sight of our family and their needs. They need to know we care about them even when they don't care about us. They need to see us as faithful in our service to God even if they reject that work. And if we are among those who are doubly blessed to have parents and family who support us and pray for us, they too need to know that we will not lose sight of them while we are part of the greater family of God.

We need to keep our eyes open and heart tuned to our earthly family as well as our heavenly family. Jesus' obedience to his Heavenly Father never precluded or excluded caring for and loving his earthly family. It is a key anchor that helps keep us grounded and connected to those around us. Everybody has family and our example will help others to learn how to respond to their families.

BS Read the following passages Matthew 10:34-39 ; Luke 9:23, 57-62, 14:26-27, 18:29-30. What does it mean to deny our family in order to follow Christ? Does that mean we no longer care about them and their needs?

PR - Have you ever had a conflict with your family over a decision you made in your life about work, friendships, marriage or education? Describe briefly the situation and what happened. How did the final decision affect your relationship? Does a person's family have the right to influence the decisions they make? Do those decisions change ones responsibility as a member of our family?

MT - Does becoming a missionary mean you must abandon your family? How does the attitude of your family impact your decision to leave them to go where God is sending you? Are there those who are not in favor of your decision? Leaving family involves separation and limiting our involvement in their lives. The final question will be, who do you love more? Look at the total scope of the impact of loving God more than your family, not just now, but what it may mean to the development of their relationship with God 10 years from now, 20 years from now.

Passion 68 - Being human

John 19:28

So often people in ministry are seen as incredible. People who can almost walk on water. I have several pastor friends who refer to me as “man of God.” It is a sign of respect but being placed on a pedestal can be unnerving and create expectations that may be just a bit unreal and non-human.

I mean - I am not Jesus or Paul. I am not Moses or David. I am not Sarah or Deborah. I am just me. Each of them served God in incredible ways and accomplished the miraculous with the power of God. They seemed to come from another world or walked on another plane of existence. It is hard to imagine them having any struggles.

Then I hear these three words from the cross, “I am thirsty.” Then I realize something important. Jesus and these incredible were people like me - flesh and blood who had the same needs, same physical boundaries, just like any one of us. Let’s review the few names mentioned earlier and see some of their limitation.

1. Sarah – She obediently followed her husband into the unknown, yet she could not accept the idea that she would have a child. She gave her servant to her husband, and then in a fit of jealousy she told her husband to abandon the child of that union in order to protect her son.
2. Moses – The one who led the people out of Egypt and to the Promised Land. He complained that he struggled with public speaking; he may have even had a speech impediment. His father in law saw that his strength was failing because of the constant pressures and demand of the work and recommended a structural change in leadership to save his son in law from himself.
3. David – The true founder of the monarchy. The one honored by God and protected by God. Yet he fell prey to his pride and took a census of the people just to gloat over the greatness of his kingdom. He committed adultery. He often cried unashamedly that life was not treating him right.
4. Mary – The mother of Jesus. She obediently submitted to God and gave birth to the Messiah. Yet she played the role of the interfering mother at the wedding of Cana. She tried to save her son whom she thought was a bit disturbed by all that was happening.
5. Paul – The great evangelist and writer of so many of the books in the New Testament. Yet he suffered from hindsight. He misjudged Mark and had a fierce disagreement with his best friend. So serious was this falling out that they went their separate ways.

Now we cannot talk about Jesus in the same way as those above. They fell prey to their own desires and wants. This did not happen to Jesus. But we see Jesus' humanness and his physical limitations in other ways. He did not have unlimited strength and ability.

1. He was so tired he slept in the midst of a storm.

2. He was so weary of the public that he often withdrew to isolated places and even left the country to escape them.
3. He was, at times frustrated, with the fact that people just weren't listening to him - even his disciples. He wondered how long it would take for them to understand.
4. And, in that moment on the cross, he was thirsty. He was bound by the physical limits of his body.

God does not expect us to defy the laws of nature. He does not expect us to destroy ourselves in an attempt to accomplish what we think is necessary. God knows our limits and they are a normal acceptable part of who we are.

It is a great relief to hear these words from Jesus at such a serious point in the work he had come to do.” I am thirsty.” In a sense he was saying, I am struggling physically with what I must do. Just a little water or something will help me continue. Just a moment of rest and respite so I can refocus.

God has great things for us to do. At the same time they are based on and balanced with the reality that we have limits as humans. We can only go so long without sleep, water, food and restoration. We function so much better when our basic needs are recognized and provided for.

For example, God knew that Elijah would not be able to survive the famine he had proclaimed in the name of the Lord. So God sent him to a brook and sent ravens to feed him. Then he sent him to a widow and set up a means of providing food for the duration of the famine. When God told Elijah to travel to Mount Sinai, he also sent an angel to feed him and give him water to prepare for the journey.

Many of the miracles of Moses relate to providing water and food for the people. There was a great task ahead but it would only be

accomplished as the physical limitations of the people were cared for. On several occasions we see God providing food for David and his group; the bread of the tabernacle, the wife of Nabal bringing food. Samson, too, was hungry and thirsty and God provided for him. Five loaves and two fish fed a multitude.

God is not insensitive to our needs. He has called us to do great things in his name and at the same time allows for, provides for our physical needs. This is the focus of the 23rd Psalm. It is a key part of the Lord's prayer. It is not wrong to care for our physical needs and look to God to obtain what is needed.

People may seek to place us on a pedestal and believe that missionaries, or anyone who serves in ministry, can do incredible things. But the truth is they are no more incredible than anyone else. They have the same needs, same limits. Only one thing sets them apart. They are willing to go where they are sent and do what they are asked to do, yet aware that a certain amount of time and resources must be given to taking care of their bodies and its needs.

I have been so thirsty. Living in the tropics for 27 years helps one appreciate what thirst is and the value of a drink to restore and reinvigorate. A pause for a cup of water does incredible things in the restoration of focus and energy. A short break can be the difference between finishing a job and becoming too exhausted to finish. Eating properly is critical to being able to finish a task that may take years. Abuse of the body, or a lack of care for its needs, can bring an abrupt end to ministry.

Jesus was thirsty. True, he only had a short time to live, but there were a few more critical words to be spoken. His body, his throat cried for a little water or anything to satisfy that need. Without that moisture he may not have been able to make His last comments.

He might not have lasted long enough to complete a couple more tasks.

It is not clear why he waited until this moment to declare he was thirsty. We do know that early on he declined a drink. But now he needed moisture. He had made a number of critical declarations. He had told the thief he would meet him in paradise. He forgave the leaders. He cried out to his father. He cared for his mother. Yet there was one more statement that needed to be made. He needed to declare for all to hear, "It is finished." All that had been done was declared sufficient. But his mouth was dry, his voice cracking and his body demanded water if he were to speak those final words.

I am human and I have needs that must be met and it is not wrong to take care of them. Even in the midst of important times and activities it is okay to be human. It is okay to take care of myself. By doing so it will be possible to do what God has called me to do for as long as I have been called to do so.

"I am thirsty." Nothing more was done until the thirst was cared for.

BS - Read Psalms 69:1-3 now read Psalm 23. Consider the reality of your physical limitations. What resources are available to you when your strength reaches its limit?

PR - When you reach the point where you have no energy left what do you do? Do you give up? Do you feel sorry for yourself? Do you take time to recover and restore your energy? Do you look to God and simply ask for the help you need?

MA - Is it possible to be a missionary and do all the work in your own strength and ability? What resources will you need to be able

to do what is beyond the limit of who you are and what you are capable of doing?

Reflect on the following statement: The truth is, the work will always be more than you are ever capable of doing.

Passion 69 - Handing it all over

Luke 23:46

Into your hands I commit the work. It is hard to say which of Jesus' two final words came last. 'It is finished' or 'Into your hands I commit my spirit.' But to me it seems to make more sense to first say the work is done and then hand everything over to the one who is ultimately in control. I have done the job given me and now it is time to exit.

Jesus spent 33 years on this planet. The first 30 were to learn about life and a specific culture so he could do the task given to him. Then he spent the next three years preparing a key group to be the future leaders as well as setting the stage for the reason for his coming and living among us. The next steps involved obedience. First, to keep things in focus and bring the work to completion and then, to let go so the Father could take that work and apply it to the world.

Jesus knew in advance that the day would come when his part in the work would be over. There would be a day when he would have to leave. He told this to the disciples on several occasions. He talked about going to prepare a place for them to join him. He talked about sending the Holy Spirit to take his place and provide all that they would need. He prayed for them that they would be

strengthened by His Father for the task of taking over the work for him.

Up until he left they were dependent on him for everything. While he sent them out to practice and grow, they always knew he wasn't far away to take care of the things they couldn't and to answer their questions. And unless he left, this would not change. They would resist leaving him. But by choosing to let go and leave, the doors were flung wide open to a whole new possibility; a reality that made it possible for them to go anywhere and for Jesus to always be with them.

This is one of the central challenges that faces everyone working in the mission of God. Everyone who is committed to doing discipleship, to serving and teaching so that they will, one day, be able to leave and commit everything into the Father's hands.

This means doing just what Jesus did.

First it means committing sufficient time to understanding those we serve.

When I was in seminary a key point of emphasis in my pastoral ministry class was on the time necessary to be an effective pastor. As students we were told over and over to plan on at least three years of learning and developing relationships; of understanding the people of your church, the community they lived in, and the best way to serve them. If we spent that amount of time carefully building the connections then we would be able to pastor that church and be effective in discipling those we were called to pastor.

I don't know where they got the idea of three years but it makes a lot of sense as I review my life as a missionary. It takes that long to even begin to be fluent in a language. It takes that long and more to

start the process of understanding a culture. It takes that long to evaluate the needs and be able to develop the resources and relationships that will be essential to having a truly fruitful ministry.

So many ministries and ideas do not allow for or seek to access this truth and simply launch a program only to end in failure. So many think a 3-point plan or 5-step approach will work everywhere without ever considering the need to build relationships and trust.

Of course, significant ministry can happen in less than three years and sometimes it will take more. But the key is that we need to enter every situation as a student - a learner first - one open to being taught all over how to live. Just like a child learning to roll over, then crawl, then walk before he can run. That is what Jesus did. I wonder how many of us would be willing to give a lifetime, as Jesus did, in order to learn how best to serve and to teach.

Second it means committing ourselves to teaching what we have been learning.

This is not just about teaching the things we learned in a book, in a class or in our life. These things are heavily influenced by our culture and our way of doing, teaching and living. No, it means committing ourselves to teaching those lessons in the context that we have been so diligently learning about. Teaching and sharing life in context; through their life, their way of learning, their way of living. It may mean learning new ways to teach. There may be no steps to follow or there may be steps we had never considered.

Jesus learned to teach in parables based on his observations of the culture and life of the people. He chose the style of teaching that was relevant to that place and culture, that of a master with his band of students who shared in a common life of living and

working together. Paul chose a different style; while living in Ephesus. He became a teacher in the style of a Greek philosopher, setting up a class where people would come to debate and listen to the master teacher.

I wish I could say I have gotten it right in every situation where I have lived. Only time will tell. But the goal is to always be learning more about the culture and the people so the teaching and discipling methods will always be as effective and appropriate as possible.

Third it means realizing from the start that a day will come when we need to leave.

We need to accept the fact that someday our part in the work will be finished. We cannot stay forever, even if we want to. This realization will keep us focused and help us to see when our part in the task is over. It will provide the structure we need to prepare those who will someday take over the work we are doing. It will help us maintain our humility and the realization that except for the call of God and the gifts we were given we would not be able to do the work at all.

Realizing and planning for our departure will help us do a better job of preparation. It will help us be more willing to let those we are teaching have the opportunity to share in the work. We will be more willing to let them have opportunities to be in charge and even to lead us when they have a better idea.

It will prepare us for the day we have to hand over the work to others.

So many don't keep this in focus and then when they leave, no one is ready to lead, and trouble follows. They have created their own little realm and everyone is dependent on them. Nothing was done

without their approval and constant supervision. Errors were not allowed and were often dealt with severely. There was no intent to train anyone to take over. This type of person never considered what would happen if they were unable to continue the work. As a result, when they departed no one knew what to do or how to lead. This resulted in the work being confused, wasteful, and terminated for lack of anyone who was prepared to maintain the work.

The reality is that no one is permanent. We cannot guarantee our continued presence in any way. Nor can we guarantee our continued support. Jesus could have stayed. But he didn't. What he did was better- He left. Further, he made sure the disciples understood the work and he left them in charge. Plus he let them know that, unlike a human leader, he could guarantee his presence and help but only by leaving. In a sense we can do the same if we are wise. We can leave. We can make sure that when we leave, those we have trained understand fully how to carry out the work. And while we can't send the Holy Spirit we can leave them with something - our confidence in them and the example of our life of service and confidence in the Lord.

We all will leave at some time. It is part of life. Wisdom dictates that we follow Jesus' example and make sure those we work with are prepared to take over the work when that day arrives.

BS - Read 2 Timothy 2:1-7. Consider where the soldier's orders come from, what the true prize is for the athlete, and what the first fruits of the harvest really are? First, think of the answer as one who wants to have complete control and then considered it again from the perspective of one who wants God's name to be honored.

PR - It is a sobering thought to consider the results of my life and what will happen after I am gone. Stop and think about how you are investing in the lives of others. Are you teaching your children

how to live or how to depend on you? Are you helping your fellow workers to be more competent in their work or don't you care how they do? Are you part of a program that helps develop the next generation or do you just want to be in control?

MT - Nowhere does this issue become more apparent or more sensitive than when working cross culturally. It is always easier to just tell people what to do and not even explore what others think about what is being done. It is always easier to have them depend on you for direction and not take the time to see that you may need to depend on them. It is always easier to lead than to follow. Why would this be more evident when people from two cultures are working together? Why could this be a source of great tension? How could this be resolved?

Passion 70 - Never again, forever

John 19:29

Do you realize that nothing in this world is permanent? And that nothing lasts without constant care and maintenance; that the moment you stop caring for something it begins to deteriorate and fall apart?

Yet we use such words as finished, done, completed and others to suggest that what we are doing will no longer require attention.

Consider the following examples:

Relationships – They are never fully developed, perfect. They are always in a state of flux and change. Why? Because we can never know everything about another person, know exactly what they are thinking, anticipate everything that can happen, nor respond correctly to all that they are doing.

Work – The work we do is never done. It is a constant cycle of repeating what we did in the past. Farmers must plant every year. Office workers repeat over and over the same work to keep the plans of the boss moving forward. Even though the boss may finish developing his plan, carrying it out will require constant supervision and adaptation.

Machinery – The construction or assembly of a machine may be completed but the maintenance has only just begun. And even with great care, eventually every machine, every tool, every object created to carry out a task, will eventually wear out and need to be made again.

Buildings – The contractor may say the work is done but the truth is it has only just begun. The better the materials the longer the construction will last. But still over time there will be decay. Even the objects built to endure, like the pyramids, finally begin to crumble.

Yet, here on the cross Jesus declared that his work was finished. This was the only time in history that this statement was true and the only time it will ever be true of anything done by a human being. The work on the cross would never need to be repeated and would never need to be improved on. There would be no need for maintenance and service or repair to be done. It was finished on that day.

Jesus came to save mankind from sin. He gave his life and the sacrifice was complete. He obeyed and the grave was conquered. He came to bring peace and reconnected us with our Creator forever. He came to defeat Satan and left him in ruins. In this act he truly fulfilled the words of Isaiah about coming to set the captive free. He came to fulfill the promises regarding the Messiah

and did so without missing a single one, even revealing a few that people had not seen.

Those words, “it is finished,” create an immovable foundation that will never change and represents the fulfillment of God’s promise to provide an answer to our need and a promise related to all that lies ahead.

The debt of the past is paid. The riches of the future are secured. “it is finished.” This is a promise on which to build our lives.

Sadly, so many try to add to this and tell us that we must do more, that the work Jesus did was not enough. Just look at all the false religions and false beliefs that have been created by man to undermine these words of Jesus. Sometimes we struggle to believe that it is finished. For some reason we believe we know better and so we add our own false interpretation:

It is finished when...

You go to my church – unfortunately denominationalism or egotism is not completely dead. There are still groups and individuals claiming that only they know the truth; that their specific formula (also called doctrine) contains the real truth. Only those baptized in the correct manner by the correct person are truly destined for heaven.

You follow these rules – while this sounds a lot like denominationalism. It is not. People from any denomination may tell you that for Christ’s work to be complete there is more that you must do. Repentance is not enough. You must follow a special set of rules before you can truly be saved. The official term for this is legalism.

You follow my interpretation of the cosmos – some say that Jesus was a great man and did great things but he cannot save anyone. He was a great example and a great teacher but he cannot bring you to ultimate truth. Nothing is finished. There is so much more to do. We are all on a journey and if we do our best we may become like Jesus. This is the false anthem of all the false religions of the world.

We could continue this kind of thinking and repeat the idea over and over but they would simply be variations on these three concepts. Actually there is one other possibility but it is quite different.

It is finished when...

You die. Many believe that at that moment there is nothing else. Nothing really matters because in the end you are simply dead. You can't reach any higher plane of existence or enter any kind of heaven or future because they don't exist. The best you can do is live right (a concept that has a multitude of definitions) and be the best person you know how to be (again a multitude of interpretations of what that means.) the best you can do is leave the world in a better state than when you found it. (But what does that really mean?)

It doesn't matter which of these ideas is used, they have the same result. Others will try to convince you that what Jesus did was not enough. Nothing was finished. This is a repeat of the lie in the Garden; you can be God or only you can do enough to save yourself. The truth is, we can never be like God and it is impossible to do enough to save or restore ourselves. In like manner, there is nothing we can do that would be enough to resolve any unfinished business on the cross. That would involve the implication that God could not finish what needed to be done,

which further implies that God is limited in some way, which leaves us with a god and not God.

So when Jesus declared so clearly, “It is finished,” he was making it clear for all of us that God knew what he was doing and that this act would be all that needed to be done to restore our broken relationship. He declared that only two things would be necessary, our acceptance of this truth and our repentance as the evidence of that acceptance.

This declaration defines the work of missions. It is finished. We have one message to give. It is finished. Others only have to meet Jesus and learn of God’s love and what God has done to end the reign of sin in their lives.

They don’t have to become like us in any way other than to follow Jesus and be a witness to others. They don’t have to learn a special language, a special way of living, they don’t even have to learn our culture. They don’t have to do so many things that we, often in error, suggest or hint would be good to do.

Does that mean there shouldn’t be changes? No. there will be changes. But not in order to make them acceptable to God. The changes will come as those words, “it is finished,” work their way into their lives and reveal to them why Jesus had to come, had to live, and had to die for them. Those changes will not be done to somehow make Jesus’ work effective, but rather to reveal the impact of God’s finished work in their lives.

Does it mean that we will stop living, stop growing, stop needing to work on our problems? No. This is a normal part of life. We need to live, to grow, to work on developing who we are and deal with the issues that arise because of our actions and our limitations. But this will be easier to handle knowing that God has finished the key work. We are forgiven and so it is possible to become all that

God intended us to be. It is possible to live a life that leads others to the same truth. It is possible to begin to experience a little of heaven here because it is finished.

What a relief to know that I don't have to figure out what needs to be changed, what needs to be done so others will be acceptable. Jesus took care of that. He forgave us all. He told us that if we received that forgiveness we would be in heaven. And to finalize that truth, he declared for all to hear that everything needed for that to happen was done. It was finished.

That is our task and nothing more. Declare to all that, 'It is finished.' Jesus is waiting for all those who accept that fact and choose to walk in that truth.

BS - Read the following 1 Kings 19:16, 19-21; 2 Kings 2:1-14. This is the story of a transfer of work from one prophet to another. What can you learn about preparing others from this story?

PR - Have you ever been responsible for the training of another person? What were your responsibilities? Have you ever been asked to take care of another person? What did you do? Did you just try to fill the time until your work was done or did you invest some of yourself in that time?

MT - One of the facts we must keep clearly in focus is that what we are doing is only temporary. Someday we will leave and others will be responsible for the work. If the work is to continue without serious problems what must we begin doing from the very first day that we arrive.

Passion 71 - The shout

Mt 27:45-56 (Mk 15:33-41; Lk 23:44-45; Jn 19:28-37)

Jesus shouts. No idea what he shouts. Maybe it was one of the last two words. “Into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke suggests this) and “it is finished.” (John favors this one.) (Mathew and Mark have it as independent from any other statement. One last shout.) Either of these two statements are appropriate words to trigger a chain of events that would leave people terrified, astounded and even convinced.

1. There have been several hours of profound darkness leading up to this moment as if creation is trying to hide from the sight of what is happening.
2. The curtain in the temple is torn in two from the top down. Human action could start at the bottom and tear it upward but those watching clearly observed that it was torn from the top down.
3. The earth begins to tremble and shake. The earth shudders at the greatest travesty of truth that creation has ever witnessed.
4. The people are terrified. This only makes sense. After hours of profound darkness and now an earthquake, who wouldn't be afraid?
5. The tombs are opened. Rocks that have stood in place as silent guards over the dead, some for centuries, are flung aside in a moment. No number is given of how many but enough to cause the information to be included; enough to further disturb an already frightened population.
6. A confession is given by one of those who participated in crucifying Jesus; one who witnessed the whole event, heard the words, felt the darkness and the earth shake. In the end his words shout out the truth. “Truly this was the son of

God.” This is not an impossible idea for a Roman who believed that their gods often slept with and gave birth to human/divine offspring. But it is an unlikely statement for him to consider a rejected, conquered race to be the source of a divine being.

7. Walking dead. Not the zombie-like stuff of modern horror movies, but instead these were people of faith, people who had served God. These people did not come to terrify anyone but to help them see the truth that Jesus was/is the son of God. Again, there is no idea if this happened immediately or in the time following the actual death of Jesus or how many reports there were. Yet once again there were enough of these events to cause the people to repeat the stories and realize there were a fairly large number of these appearances.

The comment following all of these instances is that Mary and the women watched from a distance.

What would it have been like to watch all of this happening? To see them bring Jesus, nail him to the cross, and watch the leaders and soldiers abuse and ridicule him. To hear the words spoken. Words reflecting the pain of a human being suffering. Words that revealed the depth of God’s love and offer of hope to all of us lost in our sin. To feel the darkness as it covered the mount and then the trembling of the earth as it shuddered in disbelief that mankind could do such a thing to its creator.

To remember, knowing how it all began. That incredible miracle of his birth. The uniqueness and simplicity of his life as a child. The whirlwind of ministry and teaching as an adult. And now the tortured passing of his life. Watching and wondering if it was all over, if that spark of life that began in her body had been snuffed out before her eyes? Wondering how Gabriel’s promise, that her

son would sit on the throne of David forever, would be fulfilled? She watched the very people he was to reign over bring about his destruction. Wondering about his words of love and hope and the kingdom of God and realizing that not even his closest followers (other than John) had the courage to stand and be counted as His followers, or even as friends?

Watching all the dreams and hopes being destroyed and then hearing those final two shouts.

Were they shouts of pain, shouts of anguish, shouts of despair?

If this was all that the people heard, just the noise of the shout, then I doubt they would have seen or heard any of the rest of the events listed above. Why should the earth hide him in darkness if he deserved to die? Why should the temple curtain split if his sacrifice meant nothing? Why would a Roman soldier change his mind and decide, in opposition to all the actions of those in authority, that they were wrong and Jesus was who he said he was? Why would the earth tremble if this was just another sinner dying for his sins?

Or were they shouts of victory, shouts of power, shouts of hope?

If this is what Mary and the others saw and heard then the rest makes sense. They fit the last two recorded words of Jesus. Words that suggest victory, not defeat. "It is finished." I have successfully carried out the plan. I have completed the work needed to provide salvation to all who will believe. "Into your hands I commit my spirit." These are words of confidence. I know who I am and I know where I belong. I know that my work was given to me by my Father and because I have completed it I know I will never be separated from my Father who sent me. I have a home, a Father who loves me and I can trust him with all I have done. He will take all of this and guard it so everyone will someday know why I came and the depth of his love for everyone.

The shout.

“It is finished,” all the planning, all the preparation has finally accomplished the salvation of all who will believe.” Into your hands, Father.” Satan has lost everything he hoped to gain. He thought he had control over all of mankind. He thought he could prove it by tempting Jesus and later by destroying him. But everything he has done, all the tempting, attacks, and conniving has only made his loss more profound and final. He has lost and his kingdom is now destroyed because Jesus’ spirit belongs to, has always belonged to, his Father.

Think about our darkest moments. Those days, weeks, and months when it looked like all we had strived to do were about to be destroyed. Those sacrifices we had made appeared to have been wasted effort. In the moment that we cried out, what were we thinking? What did we trust in? Did we really understand that there is no such thing as defeat when serving the ruler of heaven? Did we really understand that no tragedy is impossible for him to overcome, even use, to reveal his presence and love?

Too quickly we see the impossibility of a situation, the damage that is possible, the resources that will be lost and the cost of recovery. The death of a key leader as a martyr, such as Stephen, is not a positive event and could have been seen as evidence of the continued power and existence of Satan and his dominion.

But the truth is that the impossible and negative events are often the door to God’s victory. That means that the loss of one avenue of resources may actually be the opportunity to see how truly extensive God’s resources are and open new avenues of access to them that were not possible before.

Based on this truth we can see that the martyr’s death is not the evidence of Satan’s power and dominion but really the proof of

how limited his power is. He has to resort to a desperate act, the murder of a believer. He orchestrated James' and Stephen's deaths in the New Testament in the hope of silencing the message of the gospel. But instead of silence, a greater shout arose. The people of the early church only spoke louder and stronger. Instead of restricting the spread of the gospel, the shout grew and expanded.

Jesus came to this moment and, instead of hanging his head in shame, instead of whimpering, instead of giving in, he lifted his head so all could see him. Instead of growing silent he lifted his head so he could shout. Instead of giving in and dying he handed his spirit and the future of the plan over to the Father and those appointed to continue the work.

We will face these moments. Moments when everything looks dark. We will find ourselves in David's valley of the shadow of death. It is there that we will learn who we really are and the true nature and power of the God who loves us and whom we serve. We will understand the guidance available for us, the rod and staff. We will understand the blessing that awaits us, the banquet, a banquet prepared so our enemies understand how futile their efforts are to destroy all that God is accomplishing in us and through us in the world.

Jesus challenged us to take up our cross and follow him. A cross that brings revelation, a cross that provides strength, a cross that opens the door to God's presence and truth.

Are we ready to shout? Is God able to carry to full term the work he wants to accomplish through us? Do we know that we can place our spirit in God's capable hands? Do we believe that it is not about us but about God in us?

This is the mission. This is what we are called to do. Shout out the victory that is ours.

It is not about how many we win over but how many see God because of the faith we place in him at every point in our life. Our presence and participation may come to an end, but if we have walked with God and done what we were called to do, and confidently place it in his hands, then it will never stop producing fruit.

When your time is over what will you do? Will you be able to shout? Will you commit it all to God in a shout of confidence of what He will do after you are gone?

BS - Read Joshua 6:8-20; 1 Samuel 4:5; Ezra 3:11; Psalm 33:3, 47:1, 66:1, Isaiah 12:6; Zechariah 2:10. These passages describe events where people were shouting. What can you learn about the significance and power of a shout?

PR - Have you ever participated in a competition? Did you win? How did that make you feel? If not, have you observed the results when a team wins? What is the first thing a winning team and their fans usually do? What is the effect of this action on the team and others?

MT – shouting can be negative. What actions or events may cause people to shout in this manner? When Jesus was standing before Pilate there was no joy, no celebration, but the people were shouting. Why? How would you respond? When Paul was speaking to the people in Jerusalem they were silent until he made a comment and then they began to shout and attack (Acts 22:19-22). As Christians our message can bring joy and can cause anger. How would this knowledge affect your ministry?

Passion 72 - Buried with evidence

Matthew 27:57-61 (Mk 15:42-47; Lk 23:50-56; Jn 19:38-42)

The day is almost over. Jewish law kicks in. It does not permit a dead body to be left hanging after dark. So steps must be taken to ensure that these three men are dead and cannot be revived. They break the legs of the thieves, which guarantees death by suffocation in minutes. They come to Jesus and discover he is dead. But to be sure a soldier pierces his side with a spear until he penetrates the heart. If Jesus wasn't dead, he is now.

But now what? If no one claims the body it will be thrown into a common grave and left to rot. Time is growing short. The sun is setting and the soldiers are thinking about finishing the work, disposing of the bodies and heading home. One person senses what is about to happen and hurries quickly to Pilate to request permission to care for the remains of a once great teacher.

He receives permission. With the help of another friend they buy a burial cloth and spices. It is done in haste. Time is short and they must be home before the sun sets and Sabbath begins. They do their best to follow the Jewish burial traditions. One more thing is needed, a grave. Again they are forced to make a quick decision. There was no previous warning, no anticipation that a grave would need to be prepared. There is no time to even dig a hole much less carve a tomb into the hillside. So one of the two offers the use of his newly completed tomb. They quickly go and place the body inside and roll the stone in place to seal it in.

While all this is happening we are told that the women followed them, observed the preparations, and took note of the location of the tomb. It also says they decided that, more care would be necessary, even though what had been done to prepare the body

was adequate. So they left and prepared more spices and perfumes so they could return and do a proper job of caring for Jesus' body.

To me, what is important here is not the process of obtaining the body, preparing and interring the body. What is important is the obviously public manner in which it was done and the people who were doing it. Two men - respected men, wealthy men, leaders of the people, and members of the Sanhedrin made a decision. We might ask why they waited to show their allegiance to Jesus until it was too late. Yes, we might, but their decision at this moment was no less difficult, no less dangerous. It could have far-reaching effect on their lives and position.

They chose to give respect to the man the Sanhedrin had condemned. They cast a powerful vote, stating the decision was wrong, it was a travesty. They did this in a very public manner.

1. The one saw the situation and went directly to Pilate to obtain permission to care for the body of Jesus. This would not sit well with the rest of the leaders who simply wanted Jesus to be gone. Not just dead, but buried and forgotten. Treated like any other thief. Buried in a common, unmarked grave. To have one of their own request the body meant this was not going to happen. Everyone would hear and know where the body was.
2. The other saw this and chose to support his brother in caring for the body. They spent their own money to provide what was needed to properly bury him. Again, this action would contradict all that the Sanhedrin had said and done to be rid of Jesus. He was not one of them, did not deserve to be treated with respect, even in death. Yet, here again, were two men acting in defiance of the decision and desire of the council.

3. Together they lowered the body and cared for it. This was a difficult moment. Such an action would cause them to become ceremonially unclean. This action meant they could not hold a proper Sabbath or enter the temple until they were cleansed from the stain of touching a dead body. Their traditions suddenly lost any significance to them and again they are in direct opposition to the Sanhedrin and the culture of legalism that had defined their life for so long. I cannot imagine what their fellow leaders were thinking or saying as they watched these two accept the shame, and willing to become unclean for the man they had condemned.
4. Together they buried the body. Not just in a common grave, not in some isolated location, not in a hurried and careless manner. No, they didn't just grab the body, run to the nearest hole and toss it in. Instead the one offered his private tomb, freshly prepared, for the final repose of the great teacher; a grave easily seen and identified. It would have a family seal, a prominent location, and be easily accessible to all who wished to come and mourn and honor the one who was buried there. This would allow Jesus to be remembered. The people would have a place to go, a monument to visit, a place to contemplate what had happened. This was a final slap in the face to those who brought about his death. Jesus would not be counted among the thieves and be forgotten. He would be buried among the revered, an ever-present reminder of what they had done and the innocent blood they had shed. The people would not be allowed to forget and they would always know where the body was.
5. Together for all to see, these two men, who had once visited in private and were secretly disciples of Jesus, chose to make sure everyone saw what was happening. They

chose to end the secrecy and place all they had at risk. What they had not done when he was alive they would now do in his death. They would declare to all that they believed. Though they had not consented to the action, they had not been able to stop it. But now they would not be stopped.

6. Together they acted and made sure they were seen and heard. Pilate was informed and surprised. He did not have to give them the body, but he did. The soldiers saw and probably helped lower the body from the cross. The women saw and followed them to the grave. They would tell everyone where to find Jesus. (That meant they would also be able to tell everyone where to find the grave three days later.) The Sanhedrin saw and manipulated Pilate into posting a guard, further notifying the whole world where Jesus' body was.

These two men, respected members of the Sanhedrin, became the first of this group to choose to honor Jesus and believe. They did not know what would happen next but they were ready to risk their lives, their resources, and their future to declare to all that here lies an innocent man, who was sent by God to teach us how to truly walk with God.

These two men gently lowered the body, wrapped it and placed it with all tenderness in a freshly constructed grave. These two men rolled the stone in place. These two men served notice to all, that no longer would they hide the truth or hide from the truth. Jesus was sent by God. Jesus had the words of truth. Jesus was worthy of all honor and respect.

One of these two men was Nicodemus, who came secretly one night to learn more. The other was Joseph of Arimathea who had remained hidden in the shadows until this moment. We will not see

either of them again in the story of the church but they are forever linked to Jesus' death because of their act of kindness, not done in secret but for all to see. They became the first example of following the truth no matter what the risk.

Jesus' crucifixion saved a thief who, in his final moments of life, saw the truth. Jesus' burial helped two more make their faith public and declare to all that Jesus was the truth that everyone needed. The days ahead would build on these events. The actions of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus would mark the path clearly so there would be no mistake when the apostles declared to all that Jesus was alive and had risen from the grave. Their decision would prevent people from claiming the apostles were lying because they did not bury Jesus' in an unmarked grave but one easily found because the owner was a well-known leader in the community.

Even in his burial, Jesus was speaking and helping people to make critical decisions about their lives and their belief. The result had a profound impact on many, who otherwise would have had reason to question the validity of the claim that Jesus had risen from the dead. Even the members of the Sanhedrin could not avoid the truth. The body was gone. They never tried to declare to anyone that the disciples had made a mistake and gone to the wrong tomb. In fact the best they could do was say that the disciples had stolen the body. However this was very unlikely considering the tomb was guarded by Roman soldiers and everyone knew there was no way the disciples could overpower a Roman guard without help.

These two men remind us of the importance of our actions. Are we publicly living in a way that reveals our faith, our belief in Jesus as the Son of God sent to save the world? Are we publicly acting in ways that help people see the truth, help people understand there is only one way to God? Are we willing to defy public opinion to do

what is right? What are we willing to risk in order to be true to God and the truth?

BS - Read 1 Kings 18:7-14; Jeremiah 36:15-19, 25-26. These passages contain the stories of two men who risked their lives and careers to do what is right. Compare the two stories. How are they the same and different? Now read 2 Chronicles 24:20-22. Think about the risks involved in doing what is right.

PR - What are the costs, risks and benefits of doing what is right? Have you ever had to make such a decision? What was involved in making that decision?

MT - Our task as missionaries, as members of the family of God, is to tell people a message that many do not want to hear. To faithfully carry out this responsibility will require us to take risks. Make a list of the possible risks and blessings and then describe why you are willing to take the risks to gain the blessings.

Passion 73 - Guarding the deception

Matthew 27:62-66; 28:1-15

This was a dangerous time. The body was no longer like that of a common thief tossed into an unmarked grave in some hidden corner of the cemetery. It was now in a prominent location, well known and easily accessible to all. Then the leaders remember Jesus' words about destroying the temple and raising it in three days. At the time he made that declaration they could not understand what he meant. All they could think of was the temple building which had taken over 4 decades to build. Now they realized that there was another type of temple that Jesus could have been referring to. His body.

Their teachings considered the body a special creation of God, a place he wanted to inhabit. They had heard many stories of people who had been healed and even raised from the dead. The most prominent one being that of Lazarus, who was raised from the dead less than 10 miles from the main city. He was a person many of them knew. Now they made the connection and wondered if Jesus meant that he would raise himself to life? Or what if the disciples in an effort to maintain their popularity tried to steal the body? The possible outcomes of this were too much for them to even contemplate.

The public followed this rabble from Galilee, this mixture of rejects and undesirables. This group represented a continued threat to them. And the risk of them believing the body had disappeared was just too much for the Jewish leaders and so they begin to break any number of traditions. They broke the Sabbath to visit Pilate. This meant they would become unclean on the Sabbath as a result. They then required that other people work on the Sabbath to guard the grave, another violation of the law. They even went to the grave site and made themselves unclean for the rest of the Passover, just to be sure no one would steal the body.

They broke so many laws in an attempt to protect themselves and to keep the body from disappearing. If that happened it would be a worse deception for the people or so they tried to convince themselves. But who were the ones that were going to be deceived?

The disciples – They were a broken group at this moment and not in any position to steal a body. They felt lost, betrayed and were hiding. Could they feel any more deceived? They had followed the person who they believed was the Messiah and now he was dead. Why would they even consider stealing a body? They all had run in fear.

The people – They had believed that Jesus was to be the new king. They wanted to see him take control of the situation, reveal his power and claim the throne. He did none of this. The news of a missing body would not be readily accepted. They would be more likely to resist this claim to avoid being deceived again.

Pilate – he already knew what the real problem was. The leaders didn't like Jesus. He knew Jesus was innocent but for the sake of peace and to save his own political career he had allowed them to crucify the man. He was not deceived about their intentions. He probably saw this as just another step in their jealousy of Jesus and their wrath still needing avenues of expression. He had decided to give them what they wanted, they were the only ones suffering from deception.

Leaders – They believed the Messiah would be a great king, one who would remove the conquering Romans and reestablish the kingdom of David. They were not interested in admitting their sin or admitting they were wrong. Truly, they were the ones who were deceived and worked diligently in deceiving the people regarding Jesus. They managed to convince, sway, and confuse the people into calling for Jesus' crucifixion. If the body disappeared then it would take another greater deception by them directed at the people to maintain their position and control.

While it may appear that the leaders were protecting the people from being furthered deceived, they, in fact, were the ones desperately needing the people to allow them to carry out that first deception (convincing everyone that Jesus needed to die). A deception required all their resources and efforts to accomplish. To accomplish this another deception would be needed, one that would require even greater efforts and also a greater subversion of the truth and a willingness to further violate their laws and traditions.

So they convince, rather deceive, Pilate again that they are concerned for the people in order to maintain the peace and avoid the possibility of becoming destabilized and causing even greater burden on Pilate, they break a number of laws to get Pilate to post a guard. If there were riots and a loss of control, Pilate would bear the brunt of the impact of such a sequence of events. A guard will help to keep the peace.

But that is not the end of the situation. Just 24 hours or so after the guards are posted, their peace and slumber is disturbed yet again by a fantastic story. The guards are terrified; earthquakes and angels would be enough to unsettle anyone. But even worse is the fact that the body is gone. The very thing they were sent to protect had disappeared. By Roman law this meant they would be executed for dereliction of duty. Their lives would be forfeited because the body they were supposed to guard had escaped. To make matters worse they had simply fainted as though they were dead and they had no good explanation for it. They had not been attacked. No one had been wounded or taken captive. There were no signs of a struggle or proof that they had been overpowered. No damage to sword, shield, or body.

Some of the guards did what any smart person would do. They ran. More important, some of them ran to the ones they believed could possibly save them from death, the ones who had requested them in the first place. The ones responsible for their precarious state. So one more time, the leaders break their own laws. They lie, they bribe, they promise to cover up the truth and keep Pilate from executing them. They convince the guards to lie. The leaders break so many commandments – how ironic as they are the ones who make a very public show of obeying them.

Can you imagine how foolish the guards would feel telling everyone that a group of fishermen, people untrained in combat,

had overcome Rome's finest? They must have received a lot of money for that. It is hard to envision how this news would have been received by their compatriots. The lie would be an admission that they didn't belong in the Roman army, that they were unworthy of the title, legionnaire. They had failed in the simple task of guarding a dead man. Deception piled upon deception. (It is easy to imagine that very soon these soldiers deserted to avoid dealing with their shame and having to answer any questions that would further embarrass them.)

The greatest deception. The Sanhedrin has heard the story, seen the fright in the guards' eyes, and yet they know the disciples didn't steal the body. They probably had their spies watching for them. But, rather than admit anything, they pay the bribe and willingly agree that they will lie to the governor. They deceive themselves, deceive the guards into believing them, and promise to deceive Pilate to further protect the deception. All of this to deceive the people about the truth.

The greatest source of deception and danger often comes from those who know the truth. They know that what they believe and serve is not true, at least, not as true and real as they want others to believe. They do everything they can to maintain the people's belief in their credibility in order to maintain control. They will lie, cheat, steal, murder and bribe anyone they need to before they will admit they are or were wrong. They have intimate knowledge of the beliefs they follow. They know the weaknesses and limits of that truth. To admit this would require a strength of character and leadership ability that they just don't have nor desire to have.

Jesus quietly lay in the grave and revealed the true nature of the world. He revealed the nature of the opposition we will all face. There is no reason or logic to it. Those who serve this nature will deny the truth no matter how clearly it is revealed. The greatest

opposition will come from those seeking to protect themselves from being confronted by the reality that they are wrong and have led the people in a lie. As you read the book of Acts this will become very apparent. The leaders had access to the truth. They knew what they had done to hide the truth. To maintain their control they were willing to do anything, even kill James and Stephen, and then employ Saul to arrest, torture and kill anyone he could catch.

Our greatest test will come from those trying desperately to maintain their belief in the face of overwhelming doubt and the revelation that all they have believed in, is in reality, a deception. The truth is we will be accused of being liars and deceivers. People will be bribed and threatened to lie about those who present the truth of the gospel and even attack them to the point of killing them in their fear and anger.

This all began in the vacuum between the crucifixion and the resurrection. Satan is always afraid that once people hear the truth they will believe and so he has been preparing those under his control for the day the gospel arrives at their doorstep. We need to be aware of this and not be surprised by the depth of hate and fear that we may encounter as we share the good news with those around us. People have been deceived into believing that we are the ones trying to deceive them and cause them to suffer if they listen to us.

It is our knowledge of this that can give us greater courage and perseverance in facing the opposition. If we are faithful, many will see the truth and respond. In Acts we are told that because of the faithfulness of the disciples, in the face of such opposition, many of the priests chose to abandon their deception and follow Jesus (Acts 6:7). Remember he who is with us has overcome.

BS – Read Jeremiah 9:1-6. Compare this description to the actions and attitudes of the leaders in the above passage. Consider why people are willing to go to great extremes to deceive others and in the process deceive themselves.

PR – Have you ever been accused of trying to deceive someone? Have you ever been the target of a deception? Actually all of us are the target of one great deception. Review the story of the serpent in the garden and how that deception affects you and your decision to be involved in the mission of God.

MT – Respond to the following statements. Are they true? How do they impact your ability to share the truth with those who have been deceived by the lies of Satan and by those of the story above?

Every person you encounter has been affected by both the deception that began in the garden and the continuation of that deception at the tomb. It includes two key elements. First the idea that I am in control of my own destiny and don't need God's help. Second that God can only act in ways that are acceptable to me.

Passion 74 - Breaking Rock

Matthew 28:1-7 (Mk 16:1-8; Lk 24:1-12; Jn 20:1-10)

The angel came! His coming caused an earthquake. He came to break the rock. No, he came to not just break but pulverize the rock. His coming caused the earth to quake in the presence of such power. Death, the rock that blocked all mankind from approaching God, was broken. The stone in front of the tomb was a symbol of the weight of this rock that crushed mankind, burying his soul.

The stone, with a touch of the angel's hand, slid aside to reveal an empty tomb.

The power of Rome, the rock that dominated the world, was cracked. Their finest soldiers trembled in fear in the presence of one solitary angel. They trembled and fell to the ground as dead men. Helplessly they watched as this solitary angel passed by them, broke the seal of the power of Rome and effortlessly moved the stone away. As the angel moved to sit on the stone, they did nothing. They were frozen in fear and helplessly watched as a group of women arrived. They heard the angel's words to the women and could do nothing to prevent the arrival of the women, the pronouncement of the message of the resurrection, and the departure of this frightened group of women. The mighty Roman soldiers had been reduced to whimpering pups wanting desperately to flee but unable to move, unable to resist. It is almost prophetic, for the time would come when the mighty Rome would submit, not to an enemy from outside but to the simple power of the resurrection and love of God from within. Here, the rock of their power was broken.

The rock of unbelief also began to crumble. The angel was joined by another and they would wait calmly and deliver their message. It was an incredible message. Death had failed to contain the Messiah. Death, the implacable undefeatable enemy, had fallen. Death - whom none could escape, had lost its grip on one and would forever be unable to hold any who called on the name of the one who had defeated its' power. The power of their simple words, "why are you looking for the living among the dead, he is not here, he is risen as he promised," would fracture the rock and create a permanent break for all who would believe.

At first the message would be given verbally, then silently as Peter and John arrived to view the empty tomb. It is not hard to imagine that many others would come in the days that followed to see for themselves the empty tomb and depart in wonder. Even the lies

that would come, the story that the disciples had stolen the body, would not deter them all from coming and discovering that the hardened rock of their hearts was being softened, being prepared for the message yet to be proclaimed in its entirety in the days ahead. You just can't hide an empty tomb.

The rock of unbelief would require several blows before the first ones truly believed that Jesus was in fact risen. God sent the angels to start the process. First, one to roll the stone away. Then another would join the first to reinforce the message and declare Jesus was not dead. They would encourage the women to enter and see the empty tomb. They even declared where Jesus could be found and encourage them to go to Galilee.

Jesus himself would appear four times that day. He would surprise Mary Magdalene who struggled deeply over the missing body. She just could not believe that he was alive. It was difficult but Jesus' words demolished the rock in her heart. He would meet Peter. This would not be an easy rock because of the guilt of denial. But this meeting would break the rock, Simon - a person of fear and doubts, and creates Peter - a rock of unbreakable faith. Later Jesus would walk with two others along the road, hidden from them while they, with his help, reviewed the teachings and prophecies regarding the resurrection. They would finally understand when he broke bread with them and the rock of confusion would be pulverized. Then Jesus arrived in the room where the disciples hid behind locked doors in fear. He would eat with them and evaporate any lingering residue of the rock of their disbelief and prepare for dealing with Thomas' unbelief.

Unbelief is a highly durable rock. Like granite, it is hard to break. It is hard to work with. It is why so many buildings have lasted for so long from ancient civilizations. They chose rocks, like granite to build with because they could withstand the weight and attacks of

time. People work hard to create a world in which they can live and survive. They use key materials to build a world that can withstand attack from without and within. They create belief systems to protect and shield themselves from the unknown and from their fears about life and death.

It is not easy to break through these structures of religion and culture to reach the heart of a person. Being logical does not usually work or have much value. There is nothing logical about a person rising from the dead. There is nothing logical about a person dying for the sins of everyone who has or ever will live. There is nothing logical about God, the creator, the eternal one, giving up his place in heaven to live like a human.

The distorted faith of the lost, their belief, is a hard and dense rock. In a sense it is like death, impossible to break. But we are given the task of breaking the rock of unbelief. Breaking the rock of fear. Breaking the rock of false religion. We are to hammer at this rock. Hammer it until cracks appear. Hammer it until an opening is made. Hammer it until the light of God's love can penetrate. Hammer it until the truth can break the rock away so they can learn about a God who cares for them.

Unlike that Sunday so long ago we won't have earthquakes and an angel to move the rock in front of the grave. We will not see our enemies collapse in fear at the mention of the empty tomb. Christ will not come and walk with the unbelievers of today so they can talk with him. That was a special day and the rock broken on that day is what makes our work possible.

Today we have the truth in our lives. We are a living example of what happens when the rock of unbelief is broken. We are the revelation that death has been destroyed, that sin has been conquered, that our debt has been paid. Each day we can reveal

this truth with acts of love, words of kindness, and teaching about truth. In that way we help break the barriers, the rock that prevents others from realizing the truth and being freed from the rock that would entomb them forever.

Step up and swing the hammer. Let them feel God's love through you.

BS - Read the following Jeremiah 5:3;Ezekiel 11:19-20, 36:26; Zechariah 7:12. Here you will find a description of the heart of man. Why would the idea of a stone or rock be used for the heart? Why would it be hard to penetrate such a heart?

PR - Have ever hardened yourself or steeled yourself to do something? Hardened in the sense that you blocked out anything anyone had to say and refused to give in to those who opposed what you wanted to do? What does it do to a person when they behave in this manner? How does it affect those around them, friends, family, and coworkers? What are the positive and negative effects of such an attitude?

MT - The bible is filled with descriptions of God as our rock, our secure place, our confidence in difficult places. Peter declares that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus tells Peter that this truth is the rock, the solid foundation of the church. Why is the same image used of both the truth and a heart opposed to God? Think about ministry in a cross cultural situation. Using the idea of a rock to represent a culture describe its characteristics and why it will be difficult to break it and replace it with the true rock.

Passion 75 – At the end of the day

Mark 16:12-13 (Luke 24:13-24)

It has been a crazy day. It all started with the very strange report of the women that when they arrived at the tomb they were met by angels. Even stranger was the message they were given that Jesus was no longer dead and that if they wanted to see him they needed to leave Jerusalem and head for Galilee. That was followed by the report of Peter and John that the tomb was indeed empty. Of course they didn't see any angels but there were questions that they could not answer. The first being, if the women were hallucinating how did they manage to scare the Roman guard away and then move the stone?

As the day progresses, things got stranger by the minute as friends came by to warn them they should get out of Jerusalem as quickly and quietly as possible. They reported the rumors being spread by the guards that the disciples had stolen the body and had hidden it somewhere. Then Mary Magdalene returned from the garden and declared that she had actually seen Jesus and touched him. They chose not to believe her. Still it was not easy to discount her story as imagination because too many unexplainable things were happening.

Two of the company decided that it would be wise for them to leave town. No reason is given, they are simply going to the next village. While on the way another person joins them and so begins a lively discussion about the events of the past days and the difficulty they are having in believing the story of the women. The stranger begins to walk them through the Scriptures explaining it to them in the light of those same events. Then the stranger performs a traditional act as part of the evening meal. Their eyes open in amazement as they realize who they have been talking with the

past couple of hours. At that moment Jesus disappears from their sight.

Off they go at a run to tell the others what has happened. Before they can even finish their story Jesus appears. The emotional roller coaster of this day hits the roof. Their first response is not unexpected. They are startled. Who wouldn't be? The man they saw hanging on a cross until dead three days ago appears out of nowhere in a locked room. Women seeing angels, empty tombs, rumors of them stealing the body, and now the incredible story of the two. Startled would be putting things mildly. It is little wonder that the sudden appearance of Jesus frightens them. They think they are seeing a ghost and that is a terrifying concept in their world.

His words of comfort begin to ease their fears and stress. Still they are struggling to believe that Jesus is not just, at best, a hallucination and at worst a ghost come to taunt them with their failures. Finally, to help them take the final step into belief, Jesus asks for something to eat. He brings them down to earth and reconnects with their world. This calms their fears and uncertainty. Hallucinations and ghosts don't eat and you most certainly cannot touch them.

This begins a 40 day journey for them. Events where they will hear again all the teaching and Scriptures. Events where they will sit, talk, eat and live together. At the end of this period they are ready. Ready to wait for the Holy Spirit, ready to do whatever their master has in mind. At the end of this journey they will know and they will be without fear. In fact, they will be resolute in their commitment to tell others what they believe and have witnessed. Their courage would begin the process of changing the world one person at a time. At the end of the day that is the reason Jesus came. So that we could be changed, could be reborn, could again

be called a child of the king. All because Jesus came, died, and rose from the grave. His passion for the lost, his passion to bring the good news to the world became theirs and day after day, person by person that same passion has reached to you.

At the end of the day.

The Bible calls it the day of the Lord and we are in that day. He has come. He rules. At the end of the day he will call all who have been touched and changed by his passions to be with him for eternity.

That Sunday came to an end. Jesus was with them and they were convinced that he was risen, that all he had promised was true and that they were indeed saved and now members of the kingdom of God, members of the family of God.

At the end of the day. Each of us must decide what we believe. Each of us must commit ourselves to that belief. Each of us must be ready to live so that we can convince others of that belief and help them see Jesus. It became the focus of John's life. He wanted this for everyone he met. Read his words and think about your decisions. Where will your faith take you at the end of the day?

1 John 1:1-4

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. 2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. 3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father

and with his Son, Jesus Christ. 4 We write this to make our joy complete.

BS, PR, MT - Go back and review Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:1-20. Now read his teaching to the Pharisees in John 8:13-32. Write out clearly what you believe about Jesus and his passion for God's mission. Now write a description of how your belief is changing you and how you are learning to be passionate for God's mission.

