

At The CROSS With The People Who Were There † Nelson Searcy & C.A. Meyer

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With The People
Who Were There

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At the Cross: With the People Who Were There

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To everyone Jesus loved and died for
at the cross nearly 2,000 years ago.

†

INTRODUCTION

The lights dimmed in the auditorium. The cross's shadow laid starkly across the stage. All over the wood were sticky notes written with the prayers of the congregants: tiny, neat, and large, oblong letters on upturning yellow squares. They made a checkerboard of the oak beams, paper-thin but weighted with anticipation, joy, regret, and secret suffering.

The pastor told his church to write down on the provided sticky notes all the burdens in their wearied hearts, all the answered miracles worthy of praise—anything they needed to give to God—and then “lay them at the cross.”

At the cross.

You may have heard that phrase before. You may have heard it so many times it's become a catchphrase in your mind. Amid all the distractions we face today it's easy to

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forget the true origin story of believers' salvation and why it's so important.

Even if you know the story of the Crucifixion and Resurrection, that the Son of God died for your sins and was raised again on the third day, conquering sin and death, stop for a moment and ask yourself: what might it have been like to be truly at the cross?

What happened there nearly 2,000 years ago?

Who was there to see it?

What can I discover through their experiences?

In this book, we're going to explore the events that took place that Friday afternoon when obeying His Father's will, Jesus Christ was nailed to a cross for us. We're going to gaze up at those blood-stained wooden beams through the eyes of four witnesses: a hardened skeptic, a devoted servant, a heart-broken mother, and a condemned criminal.

But you're going to see yourself among

these pages, too.

No matter what your story is, you'll likely recognize something in each of these characters, people Scripture tells us were there the day Jesus paid the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of the world. In their struggle, ignorance, pain, frustration, heartbreak, and healing, we see the beauty of God's grace and mercy playing out. We see the power of what Jesus did at the cross and how it is still just as powerful, just as life-changing, just as soul-saving as ever.

You may think there's nothing new to learn about Jesus' experience, or that you've read enough books about the events we call Easter. But for those moments in your life in which the lights grow dim, in which your burdens weigh heavily on your heart, and you're called to surrender them at the cross, you'll want to know what "at the cross" looks like. When what you struggle with is more than what a sticky note can bear, you'll desire for those words—*at the cross*—to be

more than a catchphrase. Because they are. Look to the apostle Paul.

In a letter to the Galatians, he wrote, “As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in this world has been crucified, and the world’s interest in me has also died.” (Galatians 6:14)

You see, at the cross is where our sins are forgiven.

At the cross is where our brokenness is healed.

At the cross is where our hope is secured, in Jesus, forever.

Let’s go there...

“Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed”

A Church Hymn by Isaac Watts (1707)

The title of the book you hold in your hands is based on one of the most famous Easter church hymns of all time (“hymn” being just a fancy name for songs sung at church). Throughout this book, we’ve offered selections from this powerful work to inspire you and reinforce the teachings of this book. We encourage you to take a moment to reflect on these lyrics; even though the 18th Century language may not be common today, it will allow you to experience a different perspective of what being “At the Cross” means. Turn the page for the first selection...

*Alas, and did my Savior bleed,
And did my Sovereign die!
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I?*

*At the cross, at the cross where
I first saw the light,
And the burden of my heart rolled away,
It was there by faith I received my sight,
And now I am happy all the day!*

“Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed”

Isaac Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707)

AT THE CROSS WITH THE HARDENED SKEPTIC

*“Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them,
for they don’t know what they are doing.’”*

Luke 23:34

Under the stark rays of a late morning sun, on a skull-shaped hill named Golgotha outside ancient Jerusalem, the Son of God allowed Himself to be hung from a wooden cross.

Whipped, mocked, spit upon, and betrayed, Jesus endured the worst of injustices at the hands of His enemies. Though He lived a life entirely free of sin, Jesus took on the criminal punishment of death on a cross abandoned by His closest friends, condemned by the religious leaders of His community, and delivered over to this terrible

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end by the Roman government.

His body was already weak and torn and sleep deprived. A thorny crown pressed into the skin of His head, cruelly twisted together by Roman soldiers. These same soldiers had flogged Him with a lead-tipped whip, tearing the flesh off His body to ensure He would die faster on the cross. They had mocked Him by dressing Him up as a pretend king, saying, “Hail, King of the Jews!” They had beaten Him and spat on Him before nailing Him to a final humiliation in the middle of two robbers on crosses to His right and left. Jesus’ response was incredible.

Luke 23:34 tells us: “Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.’ And the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice.”

Clearly, for the Roman soldier keeping guard below Jesus on the cross, gambling for His clothing, this was a typical day on the job—yet another crucifixion.

Reserved for the lowest of the low,

crucifixion wasn't just meant to kill the criminal, but to humiliate him. It was to send a powerful message to all those who saw the cross that Rome was in control. When Roman soldiers crucified someone, it wasn't the spikes going through the criminal's wrists and feet that killed him. Death would come when he was eventually so weak he couldn't lift his head, leading him to suffocate. It was a shaming death and extraordinarily painful.

The very symbol of the cross became an instrument the Romans used to terrorize people. It said, "We are superior. You are inferior." Even a Roman statesman, the famous Marcus Tullius Cicero, called crucifixion the cruelest and most undignified punishment. He urged Roman citizens to turn their thoughts, eyes, and ears away from even the thought of the cross. But for the Roman soldier who helped crucify Jesus, it was all in a day's work. Mocking, beating, torturing, and killing rebels was common

practice. It's easy to imagine how a soldier could be a hardened skeptic on the morning he oversaw Jesus' execution.

Luke 23:35-38 shows us as much: "The crowd watched and the leaders scoffed. 'He saved others,' they said, 'let him save himself if he is really God's Messiah, the Chosen One.' The soldiers mocked him, too, by offering him a drink of sour wine. They called out to him, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' A sign was fastened above him with these words: 'This is the King of the Jews.'"

Little did the Roman soldier know, Jesus was not just another rebel to the Roman Empire and its overseer, Tiberius Caesar. This crucifixion would not be like any other. It would be a moment that changed him, and the world, forever. Even though the Roman soldier woke up that morning an unbeliever—in all likelihood, a hard-hearted skeptic—by that afternoon, his life, and his heart, would be transformed by God's grace.

Luke 23:44-46 continues: "By this time

it was about noon, and darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. The light from the sun was gone. And suddenly, the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn down the middle. Then Jesus shouted, 'Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!' And with those words he breathed his last."

The events leading up to the moment of Jesus' death happened very quickly. He had only been arrested the night before. But by 9 a.m. the next morning, Jesus had been put on trial, brought before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, and sentenced to death. Most people condemned to death by crucifixion survived for several hours, some even clinging to life for days. But Jesus was tortured so brutally He died faster than most would, suffocating after about six hours on the cross and dying around 3 p.m. that day.

When Jesus died, several extraordinary things occurred. The Bible tells us there was an earthquake. During the quake, rocks split apart, and in the temple, the Jews' holy

place of worship, a curtain separating the area where everyday people could go and the sacred place where only the priests could enter split in two. No longer did sin and its consequences keep the people from drawing near to their God.

On the cross, Jesus took on the punishment for every person's sin. That punishment is death. Even someone like the Roman soldier was then able to go directly to God and have a personal relationship with Him. The same is true for us today.

But God wasn't finished doing miracles that afternoon. The Bible reveals not only was the temple curtain split in two, but tombs in and around Jerusalem were opened. Godly men and women were raised from the dead. And the Roman soldier witnessed this.

Matthew 27:54 reveals, in a moment, his cynicism melted away. Miraculously, he believed: "The Roman officer and the other soldiers at the crucifixion were terrified by the earthquake and all that had

happened. They said, ‘This man truly was the Son of God!’”

At this moment, our hardened skeptic, the Roman soldier at the foot of the cross, was saved by God’s grace—a gift of love and mercy that isn’t earned but is given by God simply because He desires to give it.

Romans 6:23 says it best: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.”

It was by God’s grace, through faith in Jesus, that the soldier was rescued from his sin.

We can learn a thing or two from his story. Grace is God’s undeserved favor, forgiveness and kindness on sinners, so let’s explore some Grace Lessons from 2,000 years ago that still apply today.



**Grace Lesson #1:
God Is Always At Work
Drawing People To Him.**

The life of a Roman soldier in the first century wasn't easy. It was a lot like the lives of those in the military today.

Called to be far from home, far from their families, they lived in difficult circumstances and worked in hostile territories. Covered in weighty armor and weaponry, they would often start their day before dawn, packing their tents and kits loaded with heavy rations and tools. Marching up to 20 miles a day, they were at the whim of the Roman government, whether that meant putting down rebellions, building walls, forts, and roads, or crucifying rebels. You can imagine when our Roman soldier woke up that Friday morning, he was expecting another day of the same old drudgery.

Maybe your life looks similar: the alarm clock goes off, and you eat the same thing for

breakfast. You take the same route to work. When you get to work, you do the same task over and over and over again. It seems futile. You wonder to yourself, “What’s the purpose? What’s the value, the *eternal* value in what I’m doing?” That futility can harden you to the point where you don’t recognize God when He’s working in your life. You may start to doubt He cares or that He has a purpose and plan for you.

The Roman soldier wasn’t aware when he woke up that Friday morning that he was about to encounter God’s radical grace. He didn’t see it, but God was about to cut through the mundane of his life, the sin in his heart, and change him forever. That’s how powerful God’s love is.

Romans 2:4 says, “Don’t you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can’t you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?”

The way God drew the Roman soldier to

Him, at the foot of the same cross to which that soldier had just nailed His son, should give you a greater perspective on God's character and ways. Through the good and bad in your life, even when you don't recognize it, He's working for your very best. God wants you to trust Him with your purpose, with your future, with everything. His intent is to turn you away from sin by His grace—that gift of love and mercy. Is it any wonder He's described as a good Father?

**Grace Lesson #2:
God Demonstrates His
Grace At The Cross.**

Try to imagine the number of people the Roman soldier mocked and tortured and killed—how overwhelmingly this behavior was a part of his identity. It must've hardened him.

On the morning he nailed Jesus to the cross, it's obvious he had no idea who he was

executing. Worse, he probably didn't care. It was one more person, one more rebel, to mock, torture, and crucify. If God were selfish, vengeful, and fickle like one of us humans, the Roman soldier who killed His Son would be the last person He would want to save.

But God is not like us. He's holy. He's perfect. He has this incredible, perfect, faithful love for sinners, sinners like us, sinners like this Roman soldier.

And Luke 23:34 tells us Jesus Himself, while dying, prayed for God to show mercy to His enemies.

This is the scandal of Christianity. This is the scandal of God's grace.

Despite the suffering the world inflicted on Him, Jesus willingly gave Himself on the cross so everyone who believed in Him would be saved, even the Roman soldier who crucified Him.

Think about that for a moment.

Maybe you would've done the same for

the people you love the most—your parents or your spouse, or your closest friend. Maybe, if they'd done something that bore a cost, for their slate to be wiped clean, you would take death for them. Perhaps you would even be crucified for them on a cross, for the people you love and who love you. That would be an unbelievably noble thing to do.

But would you get up there for your enemies? For people who hate you, for people who defiantly sin or for people you don't even know? Would you be as willing to wipe their slates clean if it cost you your life?

Romans 5:7-8 says, "Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners."

This is what real love looks like: being willing to die for someone who doesn't love you, for someone who doesn't even deserve

it. And that's what Jesus did. That's what the Bible calls "grace." Grace is God's love, showered on us, even though we don't deserve it.

**Grace Lesson #3:
God Uses You To Share His
Transforming Grace.**

The apostle Matthew doesn't reveal to us what happened to the Roman soldier after Jesus died on the cross that day. We don't know where he went or who he talked to, or in what ways his encounter with the cross changed his life.

Maybe he stayed on that skull-shaped hill called Golgotha, gazing up at the sky and the blood-soaked cross, undone by the prayer Jesus prayed for him. Perhaps he stumbled home in a daze, telling everyone he came across of the grace Jesus showed him despite his sins. We can't know for sure. What we do know is once you encounter the power of the cross and believe in your heart who Jesus is

and what He did, it changes you. When you experience God's grace, it transforms your heart. And God uses that transformation to draw others to Himself.

Only the power of God's grace can break through a darkened heart. The Roman soldier was instantly transformed when he declared his belief in Jesus, saying, "This man truly was the Son of God!"

The same is true for you. If you openly declare Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead after His crucifixion, you will be saved, too. In an instant, you can experience God's grace and salvation.

The author of the book of Hebrews teaches how we can follow Jesus, even during difficult times, by reminding us of His sacrifice.

He writes in Hebrews 12:2, "We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross,

disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne."



Although the Crucifixion took place nearly 2,000 years ago, believers and non-believers around the world today recognize it as the moment in time that changed all of human history. Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, willingly endured the cross to the point of death, and through His death, a weapon of shame was transformed into the ultimate symbol of hope for the world. Although Jesus died on that cross, He was resurrected three days later, and that changes everything.

His resurrection is the cornerstone of the Christian faith: Jesus is alive. Sin and death are defeated. When we believe in Jesus, we can have our relationship with God restored. We can be reshaped into the people God created us to be. We can have a home in

heaven. There is no other moment in human history that offers more hope, more grace.

That's why it's so important to look closer at the cross. When you understand the death and shame of it, the fact each of us, as sinners, deserved an end like that, yet Jesus took it for us—only then can you truly understand the power of the resurrection, the beauty of God's love, and the radical, transforming grace God gives to each of us who believe in His Son.

*Was it for sins that I had done,
He groaned upon the tree?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown!
And love beyond degree!*

*At the cross, at the cross where
I first saw the light,
And the burden of my heart rolled away,
It was there by faith I received my sight,
And now I am happy all the day!*

“Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed”
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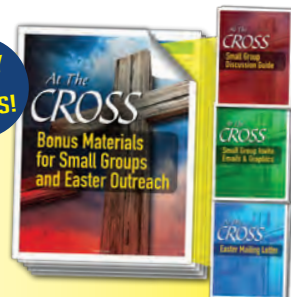
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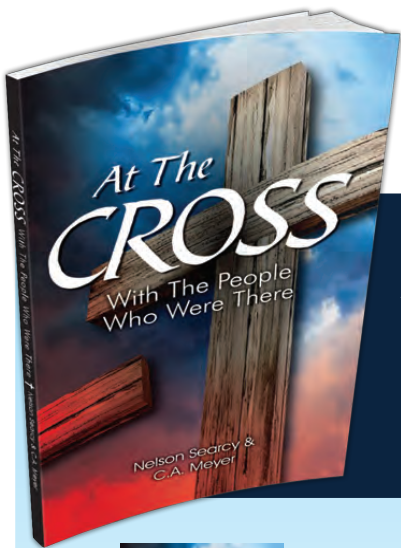


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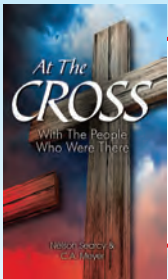
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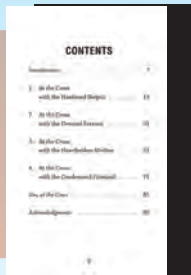
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Dr. Nelson Searcy is the Founding and Lead Pastor of The Journey Church, with locations in New York City and Boca Raton, FL. He is also the founder of Church Leader Insights and the Renegade Pastors Network, where he coaches and equips thousands of pastors. He is the author of over 90 church leadership resources and 17 bestselling books, including *The Generosity Secret* and *The Difference Maker*.

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