

Cries from the Cross, by Erwin W. Lutzer, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 2003. (28
Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. The Seat of Our Trouble.

A.W. Tozer was right when he said, “That part of us that we rescue from the cross is the seat of our troubles.” The part of the cross we refuse to carry is the part that makes us ineffective for the kingdom of God. The lighter our cross, the weaker our witness. (Page 10)

2. What the Cross Meant to Christ & Should Mean to Us

The better we grasp what the cross meant to Christ, the better we will understand what the cross should mean to us. We shall learn that for him the cross meant something quite different from the sentimental notion that often accompany an icon worn around our neck. To stand at the foot of the cross is to witness the purpose for which God created the world. Here we see the attributes of God on display; and if we look carefully, we see ourselves, with all our needs, sin, and self-deception. Thankfully, it is at the cross that God chose to remove His wrath from those who would humbly trust Christ as their sin-bearer. (Page 10, 11).

3. Practical Knowledge Vs. True Knowledge

Thankfully, partial knowledge is still true knowledge; we do not have to understand everything in order to understand something. Thus, any study of the cross brings great personal rewards. (Page 11)

4. The Offence of the Cross

The cross is worn as a pendant by athletes, New Agers, and rock stars. This instrument of indescribable cruelty and death is now a symbol of unity, tolerance, and spirituality of every kind. The “offence of the cross,” as Paul put it, has long since vanished as its message is reinterpreted to fit the modern mind. Many who wear the cross around their necks would be scandalized if they understood its meaning. (Page 14)

5. The Cross Exposes Our Self-righteousness

The cross exposes the futility of our self-righteousness; it reminds us that we are sinners, incapable of bringing about our own reconciliation with God. Before the cross we can only stand with bowed heads and a broken spirit. (Page 16)

6. Human Beings Are Helplessly Guilty of Their Sins

Contrary to popular belief, the central message of Christianity is not the Sermon on the Mount, or Jesus’ parables about love toward one’s neighbor. The message that changed the first-century world was that human beings are guilty, helplessly guilty of sins for which they cannot atone. The cross shatters all pride and undercuts the ultimate value of self-effort. The cross stands as proof of God’s great love but also reveals our own ugliness. Incredibly, the disciples proclaimed that this cruel, humiliating execution of

Jesus was God's most wondrous saving event. No wonder it was a stumbling block to the righteous people and foolishness to those who deemed themselves wise! And no wonder it changed their world! (Page 17, 18)

7. Cultural Christianity

Today we are awash with what might be called "cultural Christianity," a kind of teaching that wraps the cross of Christ in the American flag or the flag of some other nation. In our country, these well-meaning people equate the American dream with God's dream for the nation. Thus there is a Christian political agenda, with nationalistic overtones regarding defense, freedom of religion, and boycotts of various kinds. However worthy these goals, by identifying such initiatives as "Christian" we have often clouded the one message that the world needs to hear with clarity and power. Ask the average American what Christians believe and he will give you multiple answers, often reflecting political agendas. Few know the central doctrine of Christianity is that Christ died on the cross to rescue sinners from an eternal fate. (Page 18)

8. Jesus Endured Physical & Spiritual Suffering

Jesus' suffering was terrible for the simple reason that our sin is terrible. And we must ever keep in mind that the suffering of Jesus was not primarily physical—it was not lacerations, the crown of thorns, and the nails. The spiritual suffering He endured when his fellowship with the Father was broken for three hours on the cross was the ultimate suffering, the kind of agony you and I have never experienced. (Page 20)

9. Who Crucified Jesus? It was God

God took delight in the sacrifice of His Son. "Yet it was the Lord's will to crush Him and to cause Him to suffer, and though the Lord made His life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand" (Isaiah 53:10). If we ask the question, Who put Jesus to death? our first response should not be "the Jews" or Pilate but God. God crushed His Son. Peter says He was handed over to the Jews "by God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23). To put it plainly, in concert with the Father's plan, *Jesus got Himself crucified*.

Did God whip His Son and put nails through His hands and feet? No, to be sure, this cruelty was done by wicked men. And yet these sinners did what God purposed to be done. We must accept as a fact the mystery that the blame for Jesus' death belongs to the evil people; and yet, the plan was God's. Peter, speaking of all the players who conspired to crucify Jesus, said, "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4:28). (Page 22)

10. God cannot extend His grace toward sinners until His holy justice is satisfied

Today we often hear it said that God forgives people on the basis of His love rather than on the basis of His atoning sacrifice. Modern minds, having rationalized their sins, find

it difficult to understand that God cannot extend His grace toward sinners until His holy justice is satisfied. Just yesterday, I was told that it was arrogant to suggest that a well-known leader of an Eastern religion (an obviously good man) would be barred from entry into heaven. But the scriptural answer is this: Only those who have been shielded from God's wrath by the death of Christ shall be saved. Or, to put it more positively, only those who have the righteousness of the crucified Christ credited to them will be given entrance into God's presence. (Page 23)

11. A God with Wounds, the True God

There are many "christs" today, but they lack nail prints. We have teachers and gurus, who will tell us how to live happier and more productive lives. We are told how we can get "in touch with deeper part of ourselves" and how we can be spiritual without being religious. What millions do not have, however, is a God with wounds, a God who entered into our world and suffered on our behalf so that we might be reconciled to the Almighty. (Page 24)

12. The Deepest Injustices Were Addressed at the Cross

He took up our Infirmities and sorrows.

That does not mean that we can live in emotional tranquility any more than we can live free from sin. But it does mean that we can be comforted with the sure conviction that the deepest injustices of humanity were addressed. The cross was God's furthest reach; it is here that we identify most closely with Christ. We cannot, of course, duplicate His experience, but we can identify with His wounds. As we shall learn, Christ was forsaken that we might not be; He experienced hell that we might experience heaven.

Did He die for our physical healing too? Yes, He redeemed all of us—body and soul, and spirit. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this means that we can be healed at any time and that we have a right to "claim our healing." The Scriptures make it clear that we do not see the completion of our redemption in this life. Just as He overcame death, but yet we must endure it, so He purchased our new bodies that await our resurrection. Those who want everything now mislead multitudes who fall prey to the "name it claim it" philosophy. In this life we receive forgiveness of sin and the Holy Spirit as a down payment of future glory. But heaven is not yet here; physical healing, though purchased, still awaits. (Page 28, 29)

13. A Scared Savior Has Prior Claim

In Africa, a fire ravaged a hut, burning quickly and intensely, killing all in the family except one. A stranger was seen running into the burning house. He snatched a small boy from the flames, carried him to safety, and then disappeared into the darkness. The next day the tribe met to decide what should be done with the lad. Perhaps superstitiously, they assumed he must be a special child because he survived the fire. A wise man insisted that he adopt the boy; a rich man thought he was better qualified.

As the discussion ensued, a young unknown man walked into the middle of the circle and insisted that he had prior claim to the child. He then showed them his hands, freshly burned in the fire of the preceding night. He was the rescuer and therefore insisted that the child was rightfully his. Just so, our scarred Savior claims us.

*The other gods were strong, but Thou wast weak.
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to thy throne.
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds but Thou alone.*

(Page 31)

14. Jesus Prays as God's Vengeance on the Ungodly

"Now we stand as sinners at the foot of his cross," wrote Bonhoeffer, "and now a puzzle difficult to understand is solved: Jesus Christ, the innocent one, prays as God's vengeance on the godless, is fulfilled. . . . The one who bore the vengeance, he alone was allowed to ask for the forgiveness of the godless. (Page 43)

15. God's Mercy on the Murders of His Son

Reflect on God's mercy! He did not hold the murder of His beloved Son against these criminals! Many proclaimed, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" (Matthew 27:25), meaning they would bear the guilt of Jesus' death in future generations. But in God's sovereign mercies, His blood was instead applied to their hearts! Jim Nance observed that He "turned their words around and applied Christ's blood for the far more glorious work of their eternal salvation." (Page 44, 45)

16. God Can Not Forgive People Without Their Asking for Forgiveness

Could God have forgiven these people without their asking to be forgiven? No. The prayer was not for those who did not want to be forgiven, but for those who would seek it. Nor was this a general prayer giving blanket pardon to all who were involved in the Crucifixion. This was a prayer for those specific individuals whom God would save. We have no evidence that Jesus ever prayed for the world as such, but He did pray for those who were not yet a part of His family but some day would be (John 17:9). (Page 45)

17. God Graciously Provides Forgiveness For Those Who Believe In Jesus

If you are ever tempted to think that God takes sin lightly, look at Calvary. A friend of mine said he was sharing the gospel with a woman on a plane who felt that she was good enough to go to heaven. When he asked her what she would do if, in fact, her works were not good enough, she replied, "I would tell God that He should lighten up."

Skull Hill, as Calvary was called, reminds us that God can't "lighten up." His searing holiness demanded an infinite penalty. And although God forgives us because of Christ, it is neither His job nor His obligation to do so. He forgives us because of underserved

mercy toward us whose just punishment is hell. The cross is the bridge of redeeming love; on it, we walk across the chasm to God, who graciously provided forgiveness for those who believe. If we do not understand this, we do not understand the gospel. (Page 47)

18. We Must Forgive Whether Asked or Not

Should we forgive those who do not ask for it? Since God does not forgive those who refuse those to ask for His forgiveness, why should we? The answer is that when our forgiveness is not requested, we must still grant it in the sense that we release our bitterness to God and commit our adversaries to Him.

In human relationships, when forgiveness is requested, reconciliation is never a certainty. “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, “I repent,” forgive him” (Luke 17:3-4). The goal of forgiveness is always reconciliation, that is, the uniting of two devoted hearts. But when forgiveness is not required, the offended party must still choose to “forgive” in the sense that the injustice is turned over to God. If not, the hurt and anger destroy the human psyche and grieve the Holy Spirit. The perpetrator has caused enough pain already; the only way to be free from his or her continuing influence is to “forgive” by surrendering the matter to God. (Page 48, 49)

19. We Must Forgive. Forgiveness and Reconciliation Are Not the Same

Should we forgive those who ask for forgiveness even when we doubt their sincerity or cannot trust their motives? The answer is yes, for we cannot see the human heart. Jesus told the disciples that they must be willing to forgive many times—seventy times seven—if they wish to understand God’s forgiveness. However—and this is important—forgiveness must again be distinguished from reconciliation. A wife can forgive her adulterous husband, but that does not mean that she is required to blindly trust his lifestyle. There has to be counseling, the passing of time, and accountability. Regaining trust is a long, often difficult process.

When sin is not taken seriously, forgiveness is received too lightly. Even sincere repentance must be updated with daily surrender to God and responsible discipline. Our entire lives must be characterized by repentance. No one act of repentance in and of itself guarantees future life of obedience. (Page 50, 51)

20. Jesus Died with Criminals and Was Numbered as One of Them

If we were the centurion in charge of the Crucifixion, we would have put the two thieves next to each other and Jesus off to the side. This Roman soldier probably had no idea why he arranged the crosses as he did, but he was fulfilling an ancient prophecy: “He . . . was numbered with the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12). God decreed that He who was most holy should die with those who were most *unholy*. Jesus not only died among criminals but was numbered as one of them, and therein lies the heart of the gospel.

God had his reasons for decreeing that Jesus should graciously hang between two thugs. He wanted to demonstrate the depth of shame to which His Son was willing to descend. At His birth He was surrounded by beasts, and, now, in His death, with criminals. Let no one say that God has stayed aloof from the brokenness of our fallen world. He descended that we might ascend with Him to new life. But I'm ahead of the story. (Page 54)

21. The Dying Thief Believed Jesus Was God

Arthur Pink challenges us to ask, "How can we explain the fact that this dying thief took a suffering, bleeding, crucified man for his God!" The answer cannot be found by doing a psychological analysis of him. The answer is found in the undeserved mercy of God. The Holy Spirit was drawing this hoodlum's heart toward the Man on the middle cross. And he believed. (Page 59, 60)

22. Did Jesus descend into Hades?

Whether or not Jesus descended into hades, as the Apostle's Creed teaches, is debated by theologians. If He did, he was there but for a short time, for He promised the thief they would be together that very day. Some folks, bless them, believe in "soul sleep," the notion that the soul sleeps unconsciously until the day of resurrection. But this doctrine is not taught in scripture but rather is found in the writing of a so-called prophetess who has, on many counts, been found to be unreliable. This is not the place for fancy theories or wordplays. Jesus said, "*Today* you will be with me in paradise."

Obvious, Jesus died before the thief did, and He was on hand to welcome him into the eternal dwelling place. Spurgeon wrote that this "man who was our Lord's last companion on earth" was His "first companion at the gates of paradise." The thief was with Him in condemnation and hours later was with Him in salvation. If the dying Christ could give the thief a promise of eternal salvation, think of what the living Christ can do! (Page 62)

23. Jesus was Numbered with the Transgressors for Us

Jesus was numbered with the transgressors so that you and I could be numbered with the redeemed. Though personally sinless, He was counted as a transgressor by both God and man. He got what He didn't deserve, namely, our sin and we got what we didn't deserve, namely, His righteousness. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). (Page 66)

24. All Nations and Cultures are Divided by the Cross

These thieves represent the entire human race. Ultimately, the world is not divided geographically, racially, or economically. Nor can we draw a line separating the relatively good people from the relatively bad ones. All races, nations, and cultures are divided by the cross. On one side individuals who believe, and on the other are those who choose

to justify themselves, determined to stand before God on their own record. Heaven and hell are not places far away, but near us. Everything depends on what we do with Jesus. (Page 67)

25. Would You Take Christ's Place in the World?

At the cross, we, like John, are asked to take Christ's place in the world. When Christ prayed the night before, He said, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world (John 17:18). Earlier, He taught His disciples, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brother and sister—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. *And anyone who does not carry his own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple*" (Luke 14:26-27, emphasis added).

Would you have taken care of Mary if Jesus had asked? "Of course," you say, but how can we know for sure? We are given the same opportunity every day. When Jesus was interrupted by a man who wanted to tell him that His mother and brothers were looking for Him, Jesus made an astonishing statement, "Who are My mother and brothers? he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother'" (Mark 3:33-35).

We are His brothers, sisters, and mothers! Widows need someone else's son to take care of them. Single mothers need surrogate fathers for their children. The ill and infirm need to be visited and cared for with the same spirit by which Christ would serve them. "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). Our parents need the same tender care we would afford to Mary. We are His body, His hands, His feet. (Page 82, 83)

26. John Scott says God and Jesus Were in Agreement at the Cross

John Scott wrote:

We must not, then, speak of God punishing Jesus or of Jesus punishing God, for to do so is to set them over against each other as if they acted independently of each other or were even in conflict with other. . . . The Father did not lay on the Son an ordeal he was reluctant to bear, nor did the Son extract from the Father a salvation he was reluctant to bestow.

Christ did not die to make the Father loving, for He loved us from the foundation of the world. The will of the Father and the will of the Son coincided in the perfect self-sacrifice of love. If the Father turned away from the Son at the cross, it was because they agreed it must be so to purchase our redemption. It was a horrid necessity. (Page 89)

27. God Chose this Plan of Salvation

Keep in mind that the Father was not forced to suffer because of circumstances beyond His control. God *chose* to suffer. He *chose* to redeem humanity through the suffering of

His Son. The Father chose to be accepted by some people and rejected by others. He suffered because He willed it so. He had before Him an infinite number of possible worlds—worlds in which there was no fall, no sin, no need of redemption. Yet He chose this plan with its injustice and pain. We are invited to believe that, looked at from eternity, this plan was best. (Page 94)

28. Christian Living in View of the World

Bishop Samuel, who died in a hail of gunfire with Anwar Sadat of Egypt back in the early 1980s, told Dr. Ray Bakke how Christianity captured North Africa in the early centuries. He spoke about the love of the Christians that defied explanation. For example, in those days there were no abortion procedures, so unwanted children were just left to die on the streets. And since there were no baby bottles, nursing mothers gathered in the town square. Then there would be “baby runs”—young men seeking abandoned infants. These were brought to the nursing mothers, who adopted them as their own.

The despised Christians were often recruited as garbage collectors. When they found dead bodies (often the result of the plague), they would wash the bodies and give them decent burial, arguing that even the wicked deserve a decent burial in the light of the Resurrection. The pagans were impressed with these unexpected acts of love.

Yes, if we expect people to believe on our Redeemer, we are going to have to look more redeemed. And to look more redeemed, we will have to follow our Redeemer to the cross. Let lay aside our weapons and embrace the cross, not just as our means of salvation but as a way of living. Only then can we expect to bring hope to our hurting world. (Page 255, 156)