

Calls of Hope from the Cross

It has been said that you know the true character of a person when they are in a crisis situation. Nothing could be a more difficult situation than being nailed to a cross, beaten and mocked. And, Jesus didn't do anything wrong to deserve being there.

Shortly after the September 11th terrorist attack on New York City my daughter gave me a book authored by her New York City Pastor, Rev. David Epstein. His book, A Time for Hope, summarizes sermons he preached immediately after 9/11. I can't imagine what it was like to pastor a church just a few blocks from the World Trade Center, and to comfort his congregation as they came to grips with this senseless tragedy. For me, that day was one of the most disheartening days of my life. How did Rev. Epstein derive a message of Hope from the chaos and senseless loss of life at Ground Zero? He looked at the Hope Jesus provided to us on the cross at Calvary.

Pastor Epstein outlines the 7 calls Jesus made from the time He was nailed to the cross until when He died. They are often referred to as the "7 last words of Christ." Pastor Epstein's explanation helps us to better understand the meaning of the crucifixion today.

Hope of Forgiveness: The first call was to His Father asking for forgiveness for those who persecuted Him. *Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots (Luke 23:34).* That is a tough one. Jesus was beaten and mocked. Even after Jesus asked His Father for forgiveness they gambled for His clothes at the foot of the cross. There are many times when we feel a person doesn't deserve forgiveness, especially when it is premeditated or there is no remorse.

Elizabeth Smart, the 14 year old Salt Lake City girl who was abducted from her home in 2002 and victimized for 9 months, reminded us that "forgiving someone is not for the other person but for ourselves, so that we can let it go." Although her attacker took away 9 months of her life she wasn't going to let it destroy the rest of her life. So, she forgave.

Hope of Paradise: Jesus' cry for forgiveness did have an effect on others around Him. One of the criminals on a cross next to Jesus said, *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom (Luke 23:42). Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42).* Jesus was dying on the cross and yet He was inspiring others to come to Him. Revenge is not part of what Jesus wants us to do. Rev. Epstein said, "In powerful contrast, Jesus says you don't get to paradise by killing God's enemies; you get to paradise by loving and trusting God's son, who then empowers you to love your neighbor as yourself."

Hope for Justice: One of the Easter passages I find the most difficult to understand is: *About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ... "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).* We wonder, why did God forsake his son? Jesus was nailed to the cross as a substitute for us and our sins. God was pouring out his justice on His innocent son, as the substitute for us. It was the justice that we deserved. "Jesus became a sin offering on the cross – so that guilty people like you and me can receive God's forgiveness and mercy – because Jesus, the innocent one, 'became sin for us' and took God's holy and just wrath upon Himself." (Rev. Epstein).

Hope for Loved Ones: Jesus took care of His loved ones. His loved ones include you and me today. *Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home (John 19:25-27).* In effect, Jesus was telling His mother that He was not coming down from the cross, but that she would be taken care of.



Hope in Weakness: *Jesus said, "I am thirsty" (John 19:28).* As Jesus was dying on the cross he was displaying to all that He was human – "God in the flesh." We, also, are weak and vulnerable. We know that God will strengthen us. *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).* When we face insults, hardships and persecutions – we may be weak, but God is strong. His strength carries us through our difficulties.

Hope for Peace: We all remember the words Jesus spoke from the cross. *When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30).* Jesus' mission was accomplished. Rev. Epstein described it in this way: "God has declared a peace treaty with the human race." Because of Jesus' redemption we can have the "peace of God, with ourselves and with one another." There will come a time when our mission is finished. It will be God's timing and not our own. We can be at peace knowing that God determines when that is and we can know with satisfaction, it is finished.

Hope for Healing: *Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).* Jesus was saying that He was now in God's hands. We, too, can put ourselves in God's hands.

One of my favorite Sara Groves songs is based on Romans 8:28-39. At a memorial service to remember those who lost their lives on 9/11 President Bush quoted those verses, starting out with the familiar verse that says: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (verse 28).* God can do something positive out of the difficulties we face. We don't know what those results will be but we can trust God. President Bush concluded with, *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (verse 39).*

There are those in the world with evil intentions and who create havoc in our lives. Thankfully, they are not our ways because we are children of a loving God. *For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does (2 Corinthians 10:3).* But, through it all, evil is powerless to separate us from God.