

## The Three Nails in Christ's Cross

Emil Mettler, a restaurant owner in London, was known for his generosity. He often fed people for nothing. If a representative of a Christian organization came in and told him of a need, he'd open his cash drawer and give a sizable donation. One day Emil opened his cash drawer in the presence of a missionary official who noticed a nail among the bills and coins. Surprised at what he saw, the man asked, "What's that doing there?"

Emil picked up the 6-inch spike and replied, "I keep this with my money to remind me of the price Christ paid for my salvation and what I owe Him in return." Emil used that nail to remind himself that he owed the Lord a great debt of love and gratitude because Jesus laid down His life for him.

How often do we think about the sacrifice on Calvary where Jesus paid the penalty for our sin with His own death on the cross? Emil's example inspires us in the midst of our most mundane activities to remember not just the thorns, the nails, and the spear-thrust, but the loving heart of Him who gave His life for us.

Jesus' life and ministry on this planet were all about identification – identification with humanity, with you and me. From His humble birth to the wilderness temptations, Jesus identified with our humanness, our struggles and weaknesses. As the Bible says, "*We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all -- all but the sin*" (Hebrews 4:15, *The Message*).

Against the horrible backdrop of Christ's cross, something glorious stood out like a brilliant diamond against a black-velvet display case. The harder Jesus' body was hit with grief and torture, the more His radiant spirit shone, especially seen in the three prayers that He prayed from the cross, "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*" (Luke 23:34).

On the cross Jesus displayed such a loving perspective. Nothing is more loving, or more difficult, than forgiveness. Jesus looked into the faces of His mocking executioners and felt compassion for them. He looked beyond their cursing mouths and saw tongues yet untamed; He looked beyond the pounding of the nails and saw hammer-holding hands yet uncleansed; He looked beyond impassioned anger and saw hearts He came to save.

Jesus had every right at the Cross to judge those men who wounded Him, to annihilate them for their blasphemies and crimes. He chose instead to forgive. What we deserved was judgment; what we needed was forgiveness. Jesus forgave freely. The diamond sparkled, but few on earth even noticed.

"*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Mark 15:34). On the Cross Jesus asked a desperate question of His Heavenly Father; not the question we would have expected, certainly not from the Son of God.

We would have expected something more like the one He asked at Gethsemane – one directed to His disciples, such as: "Why have you men forsaken Me? I saved you from sea storms and sickness. Why in My darkest hour of need would you forsake and reject Me?" But Jesus' deepest question was not for the friends around Him, but for His Father above Him. These were the most haunting words Jesus ever spoke: "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*"

This moment was the climax of Jesus' life of identifying with mankind and humanity's needs, the moment when He fully became all that we needed Him to be. He not only bore our sins, He became our sin (2 Corinthians 5:21) and called on heaven itself to unleash every ounce of punishment we deserved, not on us, but on Him. The most terrifying component of that price was Jesus' vicarious sense of separation from His Father. He identified fully. He felt what we surely deserved to feel.

"*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*" (Luke 23:46). On the cross Jesus made an ultimate decision. The conflict of the Cross was the unprecedented intersection of divinity and humanity. Heaven and hell collided with each another on Calvary and Jesus found Himself caught in the crossfire fighting for our very souls. Yet He found a way to trust His Father through the torment.

"*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.*" When facing the worst the Cross had to offer, Jesus braced Himself with an incredible trust in His Father's care. When His "spirit" became overwhelmed as He faced death, He committed His spirit to the One who alone could keep Him safe.

**As we are crucified with Christ: We identify with Him.** Jesus said that our following Him would involve a cross of our own: "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me*" (Luke 9:23). In life, there are certain "crosses" to bear -- certain hardships, conflicts and limitations. There is a big difference, however, between carrying a cross and being crucified on one. That difference can be summed up in one word, **nails**. In order to live for God and His purposes, I must first die to myself and my own. In order to be crucified with Christ, three "nails" must pierce my soul to the point of death.

**1. There is the nail of forgiveness.** We are never more like God than when we forgive. And we are never more unlike Him than when we won't. It takes nothing less than divine grace to help us forgive the people we find the most difficult

to forgive. In order to forgive, it's essential to identify with this moment in Jesus' life, and to ask: Who could be harder to forgive than the person driving a nail into Christ's innocent soul? If Jesus could forgive them, then surely I can forgive...

Jesus' prayer, "*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing*" has helped me move toward forgiving others. When I'm offended my natural instinct is to write the offender off. I want to build a long legal defense against them and seal it, case closed. William Ward summed it up well: "*We are most like beasts when we kill. We are most like men when we judge. We are most like God when we forgive.*"

Jesus' prayer looked beyond the individual offense and considered the heart, the soul and need of the offender. People who pour out anger are usually the ones who have had it poured out upon them. Gossiping souls have usually been exposed to a steady diet of gossip. It doesn't make it right, but it does bring something essential to forgiveness: A new perspective; one that looks right through the offense and into the heart of the offender. As Archibald Hart said, "*Forgiveness is surrendering my right to hurt you for hurting me.*"

**2. There is the nail of mystery.** Jesus spent the last three hours on the cross in absolute darkness. When Jesus asked the question of His Heavenly Father -- "*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*" -- as far as we know, He never received an answer.

Questions fill our lives, questions with which we often struggle to find answers: What's the reason for this obstacle in my way? Why did I get laid off from work? Why hasn't my prayer been answered? The reason is a mystery. In the Information Age, one of the most difficult things for us to accept is that we don't have all of the answers. God possesses something we do not: omniscience. He knows everything about you and me, from the first chapter to the last.

We don't know if Jesus ever received an answer from the Father for His haunting question. There's something perhaps more significant, however. At the darkest hours of the cross, when Jesus felt alone and without God in this world, He had fully and finally found Himself identified with mankind in all of humanity's lostness, loneliness and separation from God.

God never rebuked Jesus for expressing His anguish of soul, or for asking such a question. Jesus struggled on the cross, but His struggle was toward God and not away from Him. There's no sin in that. Sometimes the challenges and "crosses" of our lives raise questions that haunt us to the core. But Jesus knew the secret to navigating the mysteries (and hardships) of life: trust. He looked beyond the present crisis and trusted in a Father who can use everything in our lives -- the blessings and the struggles -- to work His greater purpose.

**3. There is the nail of surrender.** Jesus' third prayer from the cross reveals a wonderful attitude about death. Instead of fearing death and its darkness, Jesus committed His spirit into the safe keeping of His Heavenly Father. At the cross His spirit faced things too terrible for us to conceive. But Jesus had a secret: He did not face them alone. Even when He felt alone, He was not. Though His soul felt the sting of separation, His will remained fastened with faith. When His spirit was overwhelmed even to the point of death, He chose to commit His spirit to the Father.

There is great comfort in "committing" whatever we are facing to the Lord. If you find yourself overwhelmed by the responsibilities of marriage or parenting, you can say, "Father, into Your hands I commit my marriage...my children." When your work schedule backs you into a corner, you can say, "Father, into Your hands I commit my calendar."

The Apostle Paul clearly was in the habit of committing his struggles to the Lord, for he affirmed, "*I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day*" (2 Timothy 1:12, NKJV).

On the cross Jesus completely identified with us and with our needs -- that's what the Savior of the world does. Now He calls us to identify with Him in His life, His death and His resurrection -- that's what a follower of Christ does. To have the right Easter I.D. we must identify with Jesus on the cross.

Too often we Christians tend to hurry past the Cross and rush on to the Resurrection. That's understandable, but regrettable. The Resurrection represents the victory, and all of us love the exhilaration of a victory.

Yet, there's so much to consider and experience at the Cross. So much we can't afford to miss. Unless we take the time and look long enough at the Cross, the Resurrection will never mean nearly as much to us as it did to Jesus Christ. As we prepare for Resurrection Sunday, let's take time to reflect and remember the nails of Jesus' Cross -- the nail of forgiveness, the nail of mystery and the nail of surrender.