What They Need to Hear

SHARING CHRIST with Family and Friends

KLEMET I. PREUS
On Epiphany, Sunday morning, January 6, 2008, Lloyd Bingaman died. The onslaught of cancer and ninety-two years of life had done their worst to my father-in-law, Lloyd. Eighteen months earlier, I had visited him at his home in Fresno, assuming that this would be our last conversation. Since he was dying, I decided I would talk to him about his faith. “Lloyd, it looks like you may die in the next few days or weeks. What are your thoughts about death?” Thus began a conversation that rambled through all sorts of topics relating in some way to the Christian message, eventually leading to this book.

Lloyd Bingaman had been baptized in a river at age ten. In his twenties he had been instructed into the teachings of the Lutheran Church and had joined that church when he married his wife, Edith. In the early years he had regularly attended services, but as his daughters grew up and left home, his commitment to the church decreased. After Edith died, he severed his relationship with any congregation. He didn’t have any animosity toward the Church. He had even visited the church I pastored on occasion. He thought about God a lot, and we had had some interesting theological discussions over the years. He just didn’t attend worship services or show much interest in wanting what Christ and the Church have to offer.

During our conversation it became apparent that Lloyd was uncertain of what was going to happen upon his death. He understood that if there were a place like heaven, then it would take a miracle for him to get there. Being mysteriously transported to the arms of Jesus upon the cessation of life is a miracle. Lloyd candidly admitted that he did not believe in miracles. He was especially skeptical about the veracity of the biblical account of the virgin birth of Christ. So I asked, “Lloyd, I know that you used to believe in miracles. You went to church. You took the Sacrament. You heard the stories. I know you used to believe.”
He nodded agreement.

“So, what happened? Why did you stop believing?”

“I prayed to God that He would strengthen my faith, and He just didn’t answer me,” was his instant reply.

“Lloyd, you went about it all wrong. You prayed for faith, but that is not where faith comes from. ‘Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ’ (Romans 10:17). If you wanted God to increase your faith, you should have listened to His Word.” I wasn’t so sure it was wise to correct Lloyd on his deathbed, but I felt I needed to point Lloyd to the promises of God, not his own prayerful strivings.

He then gave me a look as if to say, “Well, this is great. I want faith. It comes from the Word. I’m about to die, and where am I supposed get this ‘Word’ at this point? I can’t go to church. I’m hardly even able to read anymore. How am I supposed to hear the Word? You’re going back to your home tomorrow and I am helpless to get the Word.”

So I answered his unarticulated questions. “Lloyd, if I were to write to you about Jesus a couple times a week for the rest of your life, would you read the letters?”

“Yes.”

As it turned out, Lloyd lived another eighteen months, and I wrote him ninety-one letters. They were my attempt to tell someone who was not a Christian about Jesus. Thankfully, the Lord worked through these letters, and by all accounts Lloyd became a Christian in the months before he died.

In the process of writing to a family member about Christ, certain lessons about sharing the Gospel with family and friends became apparent to me. They are:

- Evangelists speak to one person often.
- Evangelists answer questions.
- Evangelists know that they work better in an environment of trust.
❖ No matter how unpleasant, true evangelists will always correct false doctrine when necessary.
❖ Risky as it may seem, evangelists learn to speak the Law.
❖ Evangelists learn to speak what they know of Christ in a variety of ways.

These lessons seem daunting, but as with any unpleasant situation, we know that “with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). The letters that follow can be a template for you to follow with your own Lloyd—that person in your life who is questioning God and the Church. Maybe you want to provide answers but feel uncertain about your abilities. Use the lessons I have learned and will share in the following pages. Pray for guidance, and God will be with you.
Did Jesus Really Die?

One of the more intriguing attempts to explain the empty tomb without accepting the resurrection of Christ is called the Swoon Theory. This theory holds that Jesus never died. What happened, it is claimed, is that Jesus just appeared to die—He swooned.

Typically, crucifixion causes asphyxiation. Someone who is crucified would be nailed or tied to the cross and gradually lose the ability to hold himself upright. Once he leaned forward, he would be unable to breathe. So, he would hoist himself back up, hold himself erect, and commence breathing again. Then the cycle would start over. The end result was that, exhausted from exposure, dehydration, bleeding, and sleeplessness, the crucified person would inevitably lose the ability to hold himself erect and would die. Sometimes the process would take days. Sometimes, if the officials wanted to hasten the process, they would break the legs of the crucified. Then the man on the cross would slump over and, unable to breathe, die quickly. It was actually a merciful thing to do, given the circumstances.

Jesus hung on the cross a mere six hours, next to two crucified criminals (Mark 15:25–37). When Friday evening approached, it occurred to the Jews who were responsible that they did not want the bodies on the grave past sundown because the Jewish Sabbath always began on Friday evening and ended Saturday evening. To hasten death, the soldiers were told to break the bones of the three men on the crosses. According to the Book of John, the soldiers found that Jesus was already dead, so they did not break His bones (19:33).

The swoon theory says that Jesus simply did not have enough time to die in a scant six hours. Further, this theory holds that the soldiers made a mistake by not breaking His bones and by taking Him down off the cross too early. Subsequently Jesus, who had been wrapped in clothes
and buried, came out of His state of unconsciousness and escaped from the grave.

I hope you can see how difficult it is to believe this theory. It requires us to believe that the soldiers just happened to make a mistake on the one man who predicted that He would rise. It seems to me that they would have taken special pains to make sure that Jesus, of all people, was dead. This theory also requires us to believe that Joseph of Arimathea, the man who placed Jesus in the tomb, did not see that He was breathing and alive. It also holds that Jesus gained consciousness in the grave, mustered up enough strength to break out of the tightly-wrapped linen clothes, and rolled away the stone at the entrance of the tomb—all without disturbing the guards. Finally, this theory holds that Jesus appeared to His disciples that very evening and instilled such confidence in them that immediately they went out and began preaching. It seems more likely, if He was merely a man who had swooned, that Jesus would have sought medical help instead of meeting with His disciples.

This theory, and others, shows the lengths people will go to deny the resurrection. It is not the facts, the common sense, or the eyewitness accounts that make people skeptical. There is only one reason, ultimately, why people do not accept that Jesus rose from the dead: it is just too uncomfortable for them. It is a truth far too painful.
Why Don’t People Believe?

Letter 19

In the previous weeks I have shown, Lloyd, that the grave of Jesus was empty and that the only reasonable explanation of that empty grave is that Jesus rose from the dead. Yet people do not often believe the accounts of the resurrection. Why not?

Some claim that they are being true skeptics. That is a fine posture to take, I believe, but there comes a time when skepticism must bow to the facts. Here are the facts: The eyewitnesses, and there were many, were utterly convinced of it. The earliest writings testify to the resurrection. There were plenty of opportunities to disprove it. Resurrections are easily falsifiable, as I have shown. The motivation to lie about it is simply not present. The ability to steal the body either by stealth or force is not there. Jesus must have risen from the dead. So why the reluctance to believe?

I am convinced that there is really one primary reason why people do not believe that Jesus rose from the dead: because it is too painful. Let me explain.

If Jesus rose from the dead, then He must be God. He claimed as much throughout His ministry (which I will write about next time). If He is God, then He has a claim on us. If He has a claim on us, then we do not belong to ourselves, but to Him. And human nature does not want to admit that we must answer to someone else. It’s as simple as that.

A few weeks after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Peter was preaching a sermon. In it he told the people that they had unjustly killed Jesus. He concluded with this claim: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). According to Peter, the resurrection of Jesus demonstrated that Jesus is our Lord and the promised Messiah.
The word *Lord* is the same word as the name of God in the Old Testament. (Again, I’ll explain this in a future letter). The word *Christ* is the Greek word for the Hebrew word *Messiah*. Both words mean, in English, “Anointed One.”

Remarkably, just a few days after his sermon, Peter was dragged before the Jewish court and told to cease and desist from his preaching. Why would these men try to silence Peter? Because they could not afford to admit that Jesus was Lord and Christ. For them to admit that Jesus was Lord would mean that He, not they, was really in charge of the Jewish nation; and not that nation only but all nations. They would have had to accept Jesus’ commentary on their religion—and it wasn’t particularly positive. For me to admit and concede that Jesus rose from the dead forces me also to admit that He is my Lord. And when I admit He is Lord, then my life belongs to Him, not to me anymore.

The historical fact of the resurrection is not and can never remain merely a historical fact. If Jesus was raised, then I owe Him my devotion, my allegiance, my loyalty, and everything I am and have. If He is Lord, then I must pray to Him and worship Him. If He is Lord, then I must rely on Him for my identity as a Christian and as a man. If He is Lord, then, as Paul says, “Every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10–11). If He is Lord, then I must be willing to risk everything rather than offend or lose Him. If He is Lord, then I lose myself. I am no longer the master of my destiny. I am no longer the captain of my ship. If Jesus is Lord, then I must learn to rely on Him and not upon myself, my own heart, or my own understanding. That is scary. It is painful. It is one aspect of faith.
Jesus was not called Lord for the first time only after His resurrection. Certainly, people knew much better that He was the Lord once they saw He had risen. Thomas confessed Christ when he saw and touched Jesus’ wounds after His resurrection. “My Lord and my God!” were his words (John 20:28). But there are indications that Jesus was called Lord throughout His own lifetime.

One of the most familiar stories in the entire New Testament is the Christmas story from Luke 2. It tells of how the shepherds were watching their flocks when the entire heavenly host showed up with remarkable news: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). Notice that the same titles given to Him upon His resurrection were also placed upon Jesus when His birth was announced. He is Christ and Lord, though He hid who He was under the humanity and lowliness that He had assumed. But every once in a while it showed. Here are a couple of examples.

Matthew relates how Jesus was questioning the disciples about what people were saying about Him. They gave Him a couple of answers and then He turned things personal. “Who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Now, Lloyd, if Jesus did not claim to be God then, He certainly would have corrected Peter. Even Paul corrected those who thought he was a god (Acts 14:11–18). But Jesus, knowing who He was, answered Peter: “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:17). He claimed to be the Son of God.

Luke tells the story of Jesus healing ten leprous men (17:11–18). Lepers were to live apart from all others due to their contagious disease. When Jesus healed the ten, He told them to go on their way to the priests who would give them a clean bill of health and allow them back into
society. One of the men, a Samaritan, turned around and fell before Jesus (the Greek literally means bend the knee so as to worship). Jesus asked: “Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Now I have to believe that the other nine had praised God for being healed. The one who bowed before Jesus, however, is identified as returning to praise God. Jesus is claiming to be God in a specific place and time.

When the high priests questioned Jesus (Matthew 26:62–65), they demanded, “Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God.” “You have said so,” Jesus replied, “But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” This is clearly a claim that He is the glorious Son of God, the Christ, who sits at the right hand of the “Mighty One.” In the Bible, the expression “sitting at the right hand” indicates equality. Jesus truly is the Christ, the Son of God, who sits at the right hand of the Father and will come again in glory.
Jesus’ Claim to Have God’s Name

Possibly the most extravagant claim of Jesus is recorded in John 8. The chapter contains a prolonged conversation between Jesus and His detractors concerning Jesus’ relationship with His heavenly father, as well as His relationship with father Abraham. Jesus proclaimed, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see My day. He saw it and was glad.” At this point his Jewish opponents were incredulous. “You are not yet fifty years old,” they exclaimed, “and have You seen Abraham?” Jesus replied, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am” (vv. 56–58).

This claim contains much more than immediately meets the eye. Let me explain.

Exodus 3 records a conversation between God and Moses. It’s the famous story of God speaking through the burning bush. God wants Moses to lead His children to the freedom of the Promised Land, but Moses is reluctant. Who is he to lead God’s nation? Suppose the people question him about this very conversation. Moses wants to know God’s name. “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And He said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you” ’” (3:14).

The name of God is “I AM.” The Hebrew word from which comes the phrase “I AM” is Yahweh, the name of God. Some Christians will use the word “Jehovah,” which is derived from the Hebrew word “Yahweh.” In Hebrew there are no vowels, so the name of God is actually YHWH.

However, Jewish people would never use this particular word. They considered the name of God to be so holy that they wouldn’t speak it out loud. When they read the Hebrew Scriptures and came to the word Yahweh they would substitute a synonym for it, the word Adonai, which
is translated as “Lord.” This is not so much the name of God but His title. He is Lord.

The New Testament was written in Greek. The word for Lord in Greek is Kyrios, yet another title for God. We get the expression Kyrie Eleison from this word, which means, “Lord, have mercy.” The word Lord is usually a reference to God but is not precisely the use of His name. Rather is it the most dominant of the many titles that God has. When Jesus is called Lord, it is a strong assertion about His deity because He is given the title of God. Other titles would be “Creator,” “Son of God,” “Almighty,” or “Mighty One.” But there is an even stronger way to talk about God, and that is to use His name.

Back to John 8:58. There, Jesus is not content to simply use the title of God by saying, “I am the Lord” or “I am the mighty one of Israel.” Instead, He takes the name of God. He says, “Before Abraham was, I am.” Jesus assumes the name of God by using the forbidden word, I AM, to refer to Himself. He takes the names of God and places it upon Himself.

Notice the reaction of His opponents in John 8:59. They take up stones to kill Him! It is a capital offense to take upon yourself the name of God.

The same thing happens in Luke 22:70. Jesus is asked if He is the Son of God. His response is, “You say that I am.” It’s like He’s saying, “You said so; I am.” Again the reaction indicates the profundity of the claim. The Jews respond by killing Jesus. He has used the name of God for Himself.

Why is this important? Because the resurrection is not the first time that it occurred to people that Jesus is God. It is proof of His claims. There’s a little “show and tell” going on in the Bible. First He tells us who He is, and then He shows us.
The word of God that you hear from the pulpit should always explain to you the single most important event recorded in the Bible: the crucifixion. The crucifixion is the greatest miracle that never happened. (Don’t misunderstand me—the crucifixion actually took place; it just wasn’t miraculous, as I’ll explain.)

The three miracles that I explained a few letters ago all had lessons far more significant than the miracles themselves. (1) That we have our rest in Christ and that we don’t have to work our way into His good graces. (2) That we are cleansed in Christ and that He has absorbed all of our impurities. (3) That Jesus forgives us by His Word. All three of these miracles, along with the other miracles Jesus performed, point to an event that was singularly non-miraculous: the crucifixion of Christ. The cross is what the Christian religion is really all about.

While Jesus was dying on the cross, the bystanders, the soldiers, and even the other criminals mocked Him. “If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross. . . . He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him come down now from the cross” (Matthew 27:40, 42). What an interesting scenario. Here you have the man who has claimed to be the greatest miracle worker of all times dying on the cross,
apparently unable to help Himself. Wouldn’t a miracle worker jump at the chance to save himself, proving his powers? However, this was not the first time Jesus refused to perform a miracle.

Earlier in His life, Jesus was very hungry, and the devil tempted Him to turn a stone into bread. “If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread” (Luke 4:3). But Jesus refused. Why would He refuse to help Himself?

The answer is back at the cross. Jesus did not come into the world to do miracles. The real mission of Jesus was to die.

Picture Jesus on the last day of His life. Christians call it Good Friday, but it was anything but good for Jesus. He has been forced to stay up all night since being arrested late on Thursday evening. He is paraded from one unjust court to another in the middle of the night. First the Jewish court condemns Him. Then Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, tries to pawn Him off on Herod, the governor of Galilee, which was Jesus’ home. Herod just wants to see a miracle. But Jesus again refuses, even though it might have freed Him. Pilate is pressured by the mob to condemn Him, so he has Jesus whipped, hoping to placate the bloodthirsty mob. The flogging consists of thirty-nine lashes from a whip with stones or sharp pieces of metal attached to nine strips of leather. So Jesus has to endure both terrible pain and complete humiliation. The result of this whipping is that Jesus has been reduced to a bloody mess. All this is experienced by the greatest miracle worker of all times. Why would He allow this?

The flogging does not placate the crowd, and Jesus is condemned to execution outside the city. Battered, bleeding, and weak, He was even forced to carry the cross He would be hung on out of the city and up a hill to the place of His own execution. And this is where the real pain commences.
When Jesus reaches the top of the hill, the soldiers take the crossbeam that, due to Christ’s weakened condition, was forced upon another man to carry. They pound nails through His hands. These nails might have been placed just above the wrists and the soldiers might have also tied Him to the crossbeam. That way His hands would not rip away from the nails when they were forced to bear the full weight of His body. The soldiers hoist Jesus up to the cross and secure the beam. They nail His feet in place to prolong the crucifixion. There He hangs.

Jesus has had no water for about eighteen hours. He has not slept for about thirty hours. He is naked and exposed to both enemies and erstwhile friends. His head, upon which they had placed the infamous crown of thorns, has bled profusely, resulting in a face covered with His own blood. His hair and beard are caked with His own dried blood. His back bears the scars of the whipping recently administered with sadistic efficiency. He’s been hit on the head and slapped on the face (the deepest insult you could render in the Mediterranean world).

Doesn’t it seem that this might have been a good time for a miracle?

Seven hundred years before the time of Christ, a prophet named Isaiah described the death of a man whom God would send for His people. This man was called the “Suffering Servant.” With uncanny precision Isaiah describes His death:

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men
hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:3–5)

This description of Christ’s death, penned seven hundred years before it occurred, was a miracle. No one could predict the event with such accuracy. But the death of Christ was itself not miraculous—still it accomplished much more than a miracle. Lloyd, the message of Christ is not that a miracle can be worked in your life. Nor is it that a bunch of miracles were done two thousand years ago by an enigmatic man in a strange land. The message of Christ is that His innocent and painful death was actually used by God for your benefit. Let me paraphrase that last verse of the passage above so that its meaning is plain: He was pierced because of your offenses against God. He was crushed to take away your guilt. He was punished so that you could have peace with God. His wounds have healed you of your sin.

This forgiveness is not accomplished by a miracle. It is accomplished because Jesus refused to do a miracle. He knew that He could either save Himself by a miracle or He could save you by His bitter pain and death. He chose you over Himself.

Faith in Jesus is not the acceptance of miracles—though no Christian would deny them. Faith in Jesus is trusting in His terrible death. That’s what makes you a Christian.
The death of Christ occurred rather quickly and almost suddenly compared to other crucifixions. That requires a bit of analysis.

John tells us that the Jewish leaders did not want to desecrate their Sabbath by leaving naked and dying men on the cross. Recall that the crucifixion took place on Friday. By Jewish custom the Sabbath day actually began on Friday evening at 6:00 p.m. and ended the same time on Saturday evening. So it was important to them that their wicked business would come to an end before 6:00 p.m. that day. They convinced Pilate to have the legs of the three men broken. The soldiers complied and broke the legs of the two criminals who were crucified with Jesus. Surprisingly, they found Jesus already dead. His execution began at 9:00 a.m. and six hours later He was dead. How did death happen so soon?

Perhaps it was Jesus’ weakened condition. He had been whipped. He had been deprived of food and water. He was sleep deprived. But there is a more profound answer. Jesus died quickly simply because He willed Himself to die.

Earlier in His ministry Jesus had said, “No one takes [My life] from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again” (John 10:18). That means that others did not foist His death upon Him. He was not an unwillingly participant in this drama. Unlike the other criminals, Jesus chose to be on the cross. And, unlike the criminals, He was actually in control of the entire affair. Jesus was dying on the cross not simply because He was the victim of hatred, injustice, and cowardice. He was suffering by His choice. And when the suffering was finished, He died by His choice.

The last word Jesus spoke on the cross in the Gospel of John is the word “It is finished” (John 19:30). (In Greek the phrase “It is finished” is actually only one word.) When it was finished there was no reason for
Him to continue. Once He had suffered enough, He simply chose to die. That is why the soldiers did not need to kill Him quickly by breaking His legs. He had already finished it.

What is the “it” that He had finished?
When Jesus said, “It is finished,” He was partly referring to His pain and suffering. He had suffered enough. The suffering was now over. But there is much more to the phrase than that.

I can think of at least three things that are included in the word “it.” During these next three letters I want you to keep in mind that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God and proved it by His resurrection. That means that these next three letters are based on the claims of God Himself. They are not burdensome lessons; they offer you great encouragement and assurance.

First, “it” is Jesus carrying the sin of the world. He had come into the world to carry our sins and now He was finished with that job. “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). John the Baptist spoke that phrase at the very beginning of Christ’s ministry. He was saying, “Look at the Lamb of God who is (right now) carrying the sin of the world.” That means that Jesus had taken upon Himself all of our offenses against God. It’s the same idea as was taught in the miracles of touching, which I mentioned above. It is as if Jesus absorbed the uncleanness of all people. The section of Isaiah I quoted a few letters ago declares, “He bore the sin of many” (Isaiah 53:12). Actually, Lloyd, you should take the time to read that entire section of the Bible from Isaiah 52:13—53:12. It talks about the servant of God (Christ) who will bear the sins of the world.

Probably the best expression for Christ bearing our sins is in 1 Peter 2:24: “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree.” So when the body of Jesus was punished, your sins were also being punished. And when the body of Jesus was laid into the cold stone tomb on that Good Friday, then that is precisely where your offenses against God were placed. But when
Jesus was raised on Easter Sunday morning, your trespasses against God were left in the grave.

Psalm 103 beautifully talks about forgiveness. There David says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgression from us” (v. 12). You may have heard Christians say, “Look to the east.” We look to the east because that is the place, according to the psalm, where God has removed our sins. We also look east because that is where the Son rises. Note the play on words: the sun rises and the Son rises. Every Christian looks to the resurrection, when the Son of God rose from the dead. There is an old Christian burial custom of making headstones on graves face east, thinking that when Jesus comes again and raises the dead, they will be able to sit up and look directly east without craning their necks. Christians look “east” with the positive assurance that our sins have been carried by Jesus and placed far, far away—so far that they will never accuse us or condemn us again.
But there is more to Jesus’ expression, “It is finished.”

“It” is the accusation of God’s Law. If Jesus has taken away our offenses, then there is nothing for which we can be accused. When Jesus says, “It is finished,” He is saying that all legitimate accusations against us have ended.

Theologians use an old Latin saying: “Lex semper accusat,” which means, “The law always accuses.” There is a lot of truth to this old saying. Whenever we hear the Law, we feel guilty. When I was a kid watching TV at night, my mom would ask, “Have you finished your homework?” The question accused me because I knew that I had not really finished. I knew the rules: no TV until your homework is done! That rule declared me guilty. The other week a cop stopped me for speeding. Even before my car had rolled to stop on the side of the road I was feeling accused. I knew the law: 55 miles per hour. I knew my offense: 72 in a 55. I was accused by the law and found guilty.

That’s the way of God’s Law too. It always accuses me. Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder’ . . . But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment” (Matthew 5:21–22). I know, Lloyd, that both you and I are fairly even-tempered guys. But Jesus accuses us if we hold a grudge or if we simply “let the sun set on our anger.”

Jesus also said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43–44). Well, I feel accused by these words. My prayer life is not particularly stellar even when it comes to friends and family. And I typically complain about my enemies more than I pray for them. When Luther gave an explanation of the First Commandment, he said, “We should fear, love, and trust in God
above all things.” Again, I feel accused. I think that any honest person would also feel accused. We simply do not love God more than ourselves. We place ourselves first. Our advertisements say, “Because I’m worth it.” They do not say, “Because God is worth it.” We look out for number one—ourselves.

Now listen to the apostle Paul as he tells us that these accusations of the Law are a thing of the past because of Jesus’ death: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law. . . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’ ” (Galatians 4:4–5; 3:13). Paul is telling us that Jesus took the accusation for us. He was accused of what we had done against the Law so that we could escape accusation.

Jesus said, “It is finished.” That means that accusations against us are now gone because of Jesus. He has taken the accusations and died because of them. Paul says, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).
What More Is “It”?  

The Passover  

Letter 33

“It” is our sin. Jesus has finished carrying away our sin. “It” is also any accusations against us. Jesus has finished removing any condemnation. There is yet another “It”: our redemption. To redeem means to pay a price necessary to free someone from slavery. The best way to explain redemption is through the story of the Passover.

When the people of God were brought out of Egypt into the Promised Land, their cross-country trek began with an event called the Passover. The people were treated as slaves in Egypt and oppressed severely by one of the Egyptian Pharaohs. God afflicted the king of Egypt and his people with any number of plagues to pressure Pharaoh into letting the Hebrews, God’s people, go into freedom (Exodus 7–11). He sent flies, frogs, and boils, but Pharaoh would not relent. God turned the sun dark and the river to blood. Each time the king would relent, only to change his mind when the plague was past. The plagues were God’s way of insulting the false gods of the Egyptians, who worshiped the river and the sun and various other fertility gods and goddesses whom the true God dominated through the miracles of the plagues.

Finally, God procured the freedom of His people through a singular destructive act. He prescribed the Passover (Exodus 12).

God instructed the people to choose a spotless, male, one-year-old lamb from among their flocks. They were to bring it into their homes and treat it almost like a family member. The little kids would even play with the lambs. Then, on the prescribed day, they were to slaughter the lamb and prepare a meal with it. If a family could not afford a lamb, then two or three families could work together on the meal.
The meat from the lamb was to be eaten along with unleavened bread and certain bitter herbs and spices. The bread had to be unleavened—without yeast—as a sign that they were ready to leave at any time. You could not just sit around and wait for the yeast to rise. You were to eat with your outer cloak tucked into your waist so that at any time you could move quickly. The people of God were to be ready at all times for their journey.

The lamb’s blood was to be painted on the doorposts of the house. At midnight of that fateful evening God sent an angel of death. Any household that did not have blood on the door suffered the death of the firstborn. However, God “passed over” every house with blood on its door.

Pharaoh and his son were thought to be gods. But the son of the false god lay dead at the hands of the true God. With such defeat and death surrounding him, Pharaoh finally relented and released the Jews. Having been prepared for such an event for days, the Jews left slavery on their way to freedom.

God redeemed His people from slavery through the blood of the Passover lamb, who paid the price necessary to procure their freedom.
What More Is “It”?

Our Redemption

In the Old Testament, the blood of a lamb saved the people from death. In the New Testament the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God, saves us all from eternal death. Let me tell you about what happened after the Passover.

God told the people that they should remember and observe the manner in which He had redeemed them by following a certain divinely ordained custom. They were to “set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the Lord’s. . . . Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem” (Exodus 13:12–13). This meant that if you had a sheep and it gave birth to a male lamb you were to slaughter the lamb and eat it as a reminder of that lamb which gave his life to redeem the people those many years ago. If you had a donkey and the donkey gave birth, that male donkey colt belonged to God. You redeemed it by sacrificing a lamb. If a young couple gave birth to a firstborn son, then that son belonged to God. You redeemed the son by sacrificing a lamb. So the idea of paying a price to free your children through the death of a spotless lamb was an idea built into the way the people thought and lived. Therefore, when Jesus was born, His earthly parents, Mary and Joseph, went to the temple in Jerusalem and made the obligatory sacrifice for their firstborn Son. It was a vital sacrifice for God’s people.

Now let’s go back to Calvary and the cross of Christ. In fact, let’s go back to a week before the crucifixion. Jesus has been designated “The Lamb of God” (John 1:29) at the beginning of His ministry. He has lived among the children of God and they have initially accepted and loved Him just as the children of the Jewish families back in Egypt would play
with the lambs destined for sacrifice. He is spotless—without any sin. It is spring, when the annual celebration of the Passover was about to occur. At the time of Christ, the custom was that about a week prior to the celebration of the Passover in Jerusalem the shepherds would herd thousands of lambs into the city for the annual slaughter and celebration of the Passover. One year—the year Christ died—a smaller procession takes place alongside the running of the lambs. We call it Palm Sunday. On this day Jesus comes into town, surrounded by thousands of spotless yearling lambs. And the people sing a song to Him as He travels to His own slaughter: “Hosanna to the son of David. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.” “Hosanna” is a Hebrew word that means, “He saves.”

Picture the scene. A spotless human sacrificial lamb approaches His death amidst thousands of spotless lambs. The people hail Him as Savior, but will later cry for His blood.

Jesus is the spotless lamb whose blood protects us from the anger of God justly provoked. His blood is not placed on the doorposts of our houses, but it is poured out to redeem us. We are the firstborn sons of God, redeemed by Jesus to belong to God as His children. When Jesus said, “It is finished,” He was saying that He had paid with His life the price necessary for us to be the sons of God. “It is finished,” means that you belong to God because of Jesus.

Luther wrote something that many Lutheran confirmation students memorize:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. (Small Catechism, Second Article)

“It is finished,” means you belong to God.
We don’t have an annual slaughter and sacrifice of lambs today, but we do still have a Passover. It is slightly different and much better. Let me explain.

In the Old Testament, God commanded His people to remember the night the angel of death passed over their houses. The people were to have a special meal of lamb, bitter herbs, unleavened bread, and wine, while recounting the story of the Passover. They also sang songs, typically taken from Psalms 111 to 118. The most common psalm for the celebration of the Passover was Psalm 118. The whole family traditionally sang this during the Passover meal. Toward the end of the psalm the people would sing, “Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!” (vv. 25–26).

Where have we heard these words before? Well, we heard them from the lips of the people who praised Jesus as He came into Jerusalem intent to die for them (Luke 19:38). And they are hopefully familiar to you from another source. One of the songs in the Lutheran liturgy is called the Sanctus, and it is sung just before the people take Communion:

Holy, holy, holy Lord God of pow’r and might: Heaven and earth are full of Your glory. Hosanna. Hosanna. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest. (LSB 161)

The first part is from Isaiah 6; the second part is from Psalm 118. It was sung at the annual celebration of the Passover, and it was sung just prior to the death of Christ, our Passover Lamb. Today, it is sung whenever Christians go to Holy Communion. It has been sung for thousands of years. It is a song that says that God is our Savior in Christ because He has redeemed us by the shedding of blood.
In the Old Testament, the blood was placed on the doorposts of the people’s houses. But God has something more intimate in mind for the people who celebrate the new Passover in Christ. He places the true blood of the Lamb on our lips and tongues: “Take, drink, this is the blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins.” You celebrate and acknowledge this wonderful gift by singing the song that was sung when the lambs were sacrificed in the Old Testament and the song that was sung just before Jesus was sacrificed for us on the cross.

Lloyd, I want to tell you the two great high points of the worship service. The first is the news from the pulpit that “It is finished.” I trust you hear a sermon about the forgiveness of sins every Sunday. The second high point is the Lord’s Supper. There you get the true body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. No matter what else you get in church, those are the two most important things, and they are from God.
Lloyd, I’d also like to tell you about the Invocation, which occurs at the beginning of the Divine Service. We tend to not appreciate the Invocation fully.

Most services open with a hymn, but the real start of the service is when the pastor says, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” That oft-quoted little phrase occurs only one time in the Bible. Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). When you were baptized, these words were spoken. What does Baptism do for us?

The word *baptize* means “to wash.” When you were baptized, God was taking the forgiveness of sins that Jesus earned for you through His death and intimately applying this forgiveness to you. Just as He washed away our sins on the cross, so He washes them away in Baptism. Jesus earned and accomplished forgiveness on the cross. He applies and gives forgiveness in Baptism. (This is similar to the Lord’s Supper. He earned forgiveness when He shed His blood on the cross and He gives forgiveness when we drink the blood in Holy Communion.) That is why the Bible says, “Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16). Notice that Baptism washes away our sins through “the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Every time you hear the words of the pastor opening the service you are being reminded of the forgiveness of sins that is yours through your Baptism into Christ.

Sometimes we use the word *christen* when we baptize people, which has the name Christ in it. The word *Christ* is a Greek word that means “anointed one.” When you were “christened” you were given the name
“Christian” at your Baptism because that is when God adopted you as His son and became your loving Father.

Baptism is when God placed His name upon you. Just as you became the son of your parents at your birth, so you became a “son of God” at your Baptism. (We are adopted sons; Jesus is the natural son.) That is why the Bible often will refer to Baptism as the “new birth” or the “second birth” (John 3:3–5, Titus 3:4–6). People sometimes disparage the Baptism of children or infants. They say that Baptism cannot be important if you do not remember it or if it was not something you chose. But you don’t remember your birth, and that was important. And you did not choose your parents, but they are certainly important. So even if you don’t remember your Baptism, it is still crucial. And it is still a wonderful work of God, even though you may not have chosen it. I have personally discovered that most of the great blessings in life were not the things I chose. Every time you hear the words of the Invocation at the beginning of the service you are reminded that God has placed His name upon you. In fact He is placing His name upon you again and again through that brief blessing.

Baptism forgives our sins in the name of Jesus, and Baptism makes us Christians by placing the name of Jesus upon us. It is like a birth certificate guaranteeing that God is our Father and Jesus is our Brother.
The final words spoken by the pastor, the Benediction, are surely familiar to you: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:24–26).

These were the words that God gave to Aaron, the priest, who was to speak them over the people of Israel. All subsequent priests were to bless the people with these words. When God told Aaron to speak these words, He also promised, “So shall they put My name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them” (Numbers 6:27). So, in the Old Testament God placed His name upon the people through the words of the Benediction. And it is the same today.

Note that the name of God is used three times. God is three in one—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The one true God who is three in one gives all the blessings of this life and of the life to come. The thrice-holy God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Second, God actually uses His Word to bless us. When the pastor says, “The Lord bless you and keep you,” the words place the blessing upon you. When the pastor says, “The Lord be gracious to you,” through those words the Lord is being gracious to you. He is forgiving your sins and He is putting His name upon you. When the pastor says, “The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace,” God is placing His favor upon you and is at peace with you through those words.

Everything God does is through His word. “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). In the Lutheran Church we sing a great hymn: “Thy strong Word bespeaks us righteous; Bright with Thine own holiness” (LSB 578:3).
We are pleasing to God and enjoy His favor; we are forgiven and at peace; we have His name upon us and rejoice in His grace because He has spoken to us. Consequently, our confidence in Him is based 100 percent on His Word and nothing else.

Even the word *benediction* teaches us this important truth. “Bene” means good, as in benefit. “Diction” is to speak. So a benediction is to speak a good word. God speaks His blessings upon us. God speaks good words upon us and so gives us everything we need for heaven.

In our Sunday morning services we start with the Invocation (“In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”), which is a reminder of the name that was placed upon us in Baptism. We end with the Benediction, which is the way God places His name upon us. Throughout the entire service God is speaking love, forgiveness, and acceptance upon us. His acceptance is through what we have also called the “Means of Grace.”
What They Need to Hear