

INTRODUCTION

Communicating clearly is always a challenge for us. When we use the wrong word or mix up our words the result is often humorous. Here are some actual examples of excuse notes (with original spelling) parents sent to school with their children:

- 1) My son is under a doctor's care and should not take P.E. today. Please execute him.
- 2) Please ekscuse John being absent on Jan. 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, and also 33.
- 3) Please excuse Lisa for being absent. She was sick and I had her shot.
- 4) Please excuse Ray Friday from school. He has very loose vowels.
- 5) Megan could not come to school today because she has been bothered by very close veins.
- 6). Please excuse Jennifer for missing school yesterday. We forgot to get the Sunday paper off the porch, and when we found it Monday, we thought it was Sunday.
- 7) Please excuse Jimmy for being. It was his father's fault.

It is hard to communicate clearly! Sometimes it's difficult to understand some of the cryptic passage of the Bible—but not this passage. Here Jesus speaks plainly. He doesn't employ apocalyptic language, or use a parable with a hidden message. He says, "Read my lips: 'I'm going to Jerusalem to die.'" And still, the disciples didn't get it. Let's read beginning in Luke 18:31:

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again." Can you get any clearer than that? Yet look at verse 34: The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.

Even before His birth in Bethlehem, Jesus was on the road to the cross. Revelation 13:8 says the Lamb of God was "slain from the foundation of the world." In this passage, Jesus is moving closer to the cross. Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the south, near Jerusalem. He grew up in Nazareth up near the Sea of Galilee. For three years, His base of ministry was Capernaum, which is on the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is a large fresh water lake, about seven miles long and three miles wide. He visited Jerusalem a few times, but He was basically a country boy who didn't care for the big city. When Jews in Galilee visited Jerusalem they traveled south through the valley surrounding the Jordan River. So Jesus said, "Boys, it's time to go *up* to Jerusalem." That sounds awkward because we usually talk about going "up" when we're heading north. We say, "I'm going up to Chicago." But we seldom say, "I'm going up to Houston this weekend." In the Bible people always went up to Jerusalem. It wasn't the highest point in elevation, but it was the Holy City, and was exalted in its holiness. As we retrace the road to the cross, let's learn four important spiritual lessons:

1. THE ROAD TO THE CROSS WAS PREDICTED BY THE PROPHETS

In verse 31 Jesus said, "Everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled." There are over 300 prophecies about Jesus in the Old Testament. Many of them predict the details of His death. If you aren't convinced the Bible is the supernatural Word of God, I invite you to consider the following ten Old Testament prophecies about the death of Jesus. Although they were written hundreds of years before Jesus came to earth, He clearly fulfilled each of them.

1. Betrayed by a friend. "Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." Psalm 41:9. Mark 14:10 tells us that one of his disciples, Judas, went to the Jewish authorities to offer to betray Jesus. He led them to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and kissed Him on the cheek.

2. Sold for thirty pieces of silver. "'If you think it best, give me my pay.' so they paid me thirty pieces of silver" Zechariah 11:12. Matthew 26:15 confirms Judas was paid thirty pieces of silver to betray Jesus.

3. Silent when accused. "He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." Isaiah 53:7. Instead of trying to argue for His innocence, Matthew 26:63 tells us Jesus remained silent when He was given a chance to defend Himself.

4. Slapped and spit upon. "I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting." Isaiah 50:6. Mark 14:65 confirms the Roman soldiers took a whip and tore open the back of Jesus. They plucked out His beard and their foul spittle desecrated the face of the Messiah. What Isaiah wrote 750 years earlier came true!

5. Hands and feet pierced. "A band of evil men have surrounded me, they have pierced my hands and my feet." Psalm 22:16. When David wrote this Psalm in about 1000 B.C., crucifixion wouldn't be invented as a mode of execution for another 400 years, yet, John 20:27 confirms the sadistic Roman soldiers surrounded Jesus and drove massive nails into His hands and feet.

6. Mocked and insulted. "All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: 'He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him!'" Psalm 22:6-8. Matthew 27: 39-40 informs us that the people watching the crucifixion yelled insults at Jesus. They sarcastically demanded that if He was really the Son of God to call on His Father to rescue Him.

7. Soldiers cast lots for his garment. "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." Psalm 22:18. Even this tiny detail was totally fulfilled! According to Mark 15:24, the Roman soldiers divided up His clothes. Because He had a seamless garment, they cast lots to see who would get that prize.

8. Not a bone broken. "He protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken." Psalm 34:20. It was *highly* unusual for someone to suffer crucifixion without having some bones broken. In fact, John 19:33 records that the Roman soldiers broke the legs of the two thieves on either side, but when they came to Jesus, He was already dead, so they didn't break His legs. When the Jews

killed the Passover Lamb, they had instructions that none of its bones were to be broken. As our Passover Lamb none of Jesus' bones were broken.

9. Buried in a rich man's grave. "He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death." Isaiah 53:9. Jesus died between two criminals, but according to Matthew 27:57-60, a wealthy man, Joseph of Arimathea, laid Jesus in his own, new, expensive tomb.

10. His resurrection! "You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay." Psalm 16:10. Jesus died and was buried, but He wasn't abandoned to the grave, and His corpse didn't decay. According to Matthew 28:9, He came out of the grave, and He is alive forevermore!

Now if you are still skeptical about the Bible, how do you respond to these fulfilled prophecies? You may insist Jesus was an ordinary man and, because He knew those prophecies, He intentionally fulfilled them so everyone would think He was the Son of God. Of course He knew the prophecies, but there were many of those predictions over which He had no control. Do you think He said to Judas, "Now Judas, you're my buddy, but I want you to betray me and I want to be sure you get paid exactly 30 pieces of silver?"

Or can you imagine He conspired with the Roman soldiers by saying, "Listen, guys, don't forget to beat me, pluck out my beard, and spit on me. And remember to cast lots for my clothes. And by the way, no bones broken, okay?" They may do that in the WWF, but it takes more faith to believe that conspiracy theory than to believe the Bible!

Or perhaps you believe Jesus *accidentally* fulfilled these scriptures—it was simply a matter of chance. In his book *Science Speaks*, Dr. Peter Stoner, has calculated the mathematical odds of *one* man in history fulfilling just *eight* of these prophecies is 1 in 10^{17} . (That's a one followed by seventeen zeroes.) To comprehend the magnitude of that number, take 10^{17} of silver dollars and mark one coin. Then dump them on the state of Texas and mix them up. The entire state would be covered by a depth of two feet. Then fly over Texas, and parachute out. Wherever you land, reach down into the coins and choose one. The odds of picking the one marked coin your first try is one to 10^{17} .

Those are the odds of fulfilling just eight prophecies. Dr. Stoner writes the odds of randomly fulfilling 48 prophecies is one in 10^{157} . And Jesus didn't just fulfill eight or forty-eight prophecies—He fulfilled over 300! How can you maintain intellectual integrity if you ignore that kind of evidence?

2. THE ROAD TO THE CROSS PROMISED REJECTION AND PAIN

In verse 32 Jesus told His disciples when they arrived in Jerusalem He would be "handed over to the Gentiles (the Romans), they will mock him, insult him, flog him, and kill him."

All the Jews were looking for a Messiah, but they imagined the Messiah would be a great King like David or Solomon. They envisioned the Messiah would come and lead a rebellion against the Roman Empire and set the Jews free. Somehow they missed Isaiah's prediction that the

Messiah would be a suffering servant. God said in Isaiah 53:3-5, “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering...But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

Roman crucifixion was a common practice in His land. It was a common sight to see criminals nailed to trees along the road. Even as a boy, Jesus was aware He had to be about His father’s business—and His Father’s business was redeeming mankind of sin. The only way sin could be forgiven was through a blood sacrifice, and Jesus offered Himself as our sin sacrifice.

At the beginning of His ministry, large multitudes crowded around Jesus because they were amazed by His miracles and wisdom. After all, when you see that a man can feed five thousand people with five biscuits and two sardines, you follow Him because He’s your fast food source. When you learn He can heal any disease, you’ve got your own walking, talking HMO. And teaching? Why go to college, when you can go out into a beautiful grassy field and listen to this Rabbi? But Jesus didn’t come to heal, teach, or to do miracles. He came to die.

As Jesus peered down the road to the cross, His humanity shuddered within. The anticipation of an unpleasant event is usually worse than the event itself. Most people suffer more as they dread an upcoming surgery than from the actual operation. As Jesus looked down the road He saw rejection—ALL His disciples would flee. He saw the physical pain of having His back shredded with a cat of nine tails. He visualized the searing pain of the nails being pounded into His flesh. He sensed the staggering agony of having a spear driven up under His rib cage into His laboring heart. He saw it all—and He kept on walking toward Jerusalem.

3. THE ROAD TO THE CROSS PRODUCED THE RESURRECTION

Verse 32 is scary and full of pain. But after seeing all the pain, agony, and suffering He said, “And oh, by the way, on the third day, I’ll rise again.” (v. 33)

The birth of Jesus in Bethlehem was such an important historical event that all the world pauses at this time of year to celebrate it. The death of Jesus was such a powerful event that to this day the cross is a symbol of peace and sacrifice. From the Red Cross to Blue Cross to Holy Cross, to the Southern Cross, and even Cross pens and pencils, the world recognizes the power of that symbol.

However, without the resurrection of Jesus, we wouldn’t have a Christmas, and the cross would be robbed of its meaning. In His birth, Jesus was the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. On the cross, Jesus became our Passover Lamb bearing our sins, so when the Judgement of God visits mankind, the sentence of eternal death will pass over us. But only in His resurrection was Jesus able to verify everything He did and said. Had there been no resurrection, Jesus would have been just a religious teacher like Moses, Buddha, Mohammed, or Confucius.

Of all the ancient religions, Jesus is the only founder who is alive. Adherents of other religions visit the grave sites of their founders to honor their remains. But there is no corpse for Christians to revere. And you can’t deny the fact Jesus predicted He would come back from the grave. He

told the Jews, “Destroy this temple and three days I will build it back.” (John 2:19) They thought He was speaking about the temple building, but He was talking about His body.

Romans 10:9 says, you *must* believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead if you are going to be saved. You can’t just believe Jesus was a great man if you don’t accept the resurrection. Since Jesus claimed He would come back from the dead, if He wasn’t able to pull it off, He wouldn’t be a good man, He’d be a deceived lunatic! Or worse, He would have been a religious fake, deceiving others.

But from the very start, He knew He had to die, because before there can be a resurrection there must be a death. Here’s how He described it in John 12:24, 27: Jesus said, “The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds...Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father save me from this hour?’ No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.”

The death and resurrection of Jesus can be compared to a seed. A seed that remains a seed will never produce anything. But a seed that is planted literally dies—it ceases to be a seed. Instead it becomes a creative force that produces a plant that produces many more seeds. Jesus was that original seed. He died, but that wasn’t the end. He is alive and as a result of His life, there are tens of millions of seeds in this world today. The road to the cross passed through a dark valley of suffering and death, but it emerged on the other side of the cross into the brilliance of resurrection life!

These first three observations about the road to the cross have all been doctrinal in nature. This final observation is the practical application of the cross for each of us.

4. THE ROAD TO THE CROSS IS THE PATTERN FOR EVERY DISCIPLE

Verse 34 records that the disciples didn’t understand any of this. That’s the theme throughout the gospel—these guys weren’t the sharpest arrows in the quiver if you know what I mean! In Acts 1:6 we see even on the day Jesus ascended back into heaven, the disciples were still playing dumb and dumber. What do you suppose was the very last thing the disciples said to Jesus before He was taken up into heaven? Did they say, “It’s been great, Lord, You can count on us to spread your message throughout this world?” Now, remember, this was after the cross and the resurrection. They had seen the empty tomb. They’d observed Jesus passing through locked doors and making fish appear out of nowhere. And still the very last thing the disciples said to Jesus was, “Lord, are you NOW going to restore the Kingdom to Israel?” After all He had shown them, they were still looking for an earthly kingdom!

The fact that the first disciples weren’t too bright gives me hope—because there’s still a lot about being a disciple I don’t understand! Most of us have a hard time understanding the full meaning of the cross. We must learn that: The cross is not just an historical event; it is a present reality for every disciple. I’m not talking about wearing a cross around your neck or carrying a cross in your pocket. Every disciple of Jesus must walk the road to the cross. It’s our daily pattern. The first verse I learned when I took *MasterLife* years ago was Luke 9:23. Jesus said, “If any man

will come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." That verse is a lot easier to memorize it than to actually practice. It means we must acknowledge that our ego, the "big I," has been crucified. A verse I quote nearly every day is Galatians 2:20. It says, "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." If we allow "I" to remain at the center of our lives, "I" wants to get all the attention. "I" likes to boast, and "I" loves to be recognized and praised by the world. Every real disciple must embrace this attitude: "For my part, I am going to boast in nothing but the Cross of our Master, Jesus Christ. Because of that Cross, I have been crucified in relation to the world, set free from the stifling atmosphere of pleasing others, and fitting into the little patterns that they dictate." (Galatians 6:14, *The Message*)

For years, I thought carrying the cross was some kind of miserable experience in which the more I suffered the holier I was. Some people even seek suffering; they crawl on their knees for miles, or mutilate their bodies. As I was trying to be a holy, miserable disciple, I kept reading about how "the joy of the Lord is my strength." (Nehemiah 8:10) and how I should rejoice in the Lord always! I was confused. Was I supposed to suffer or rejoice? Simple, I was to rejoice in my suffering. Remember there is the pain of the cross, but there's the glory of the resurrection, too.

I found the key in Hebrews 12:2. It says, "For the joy that was set before Him, (Jesus) endured the cross and despised the shame." (Hebrews 12:2). What was the JOY set before Jesus? What enabled Him to look through the pain? I believe it can be found in the very first thing Jesus said from the cross, "Father forgive them." That's the joy that was set before Him—the joy of forgiveness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor in WWII who was arrested and died in a concentration camp for refusing to go along with Hitler's policies. While in prison, He came to understand the cost of discipleship, and was able to experience joy in the midst of his suffering. He wrote: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die... The cross is there right from the beginning, you have only got to pick it up. There is no need for a disciple to go out and look for a cross, no need to deliberately run after suffering. Our forgiveness came by the cross of Christ, thus the call to follow Christ always means to share the work of forgiving men their sins. forgiveness is the Christ-like suffering which it is the Christian's duty to bear." (*The Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 99-100) And Bonhoeffer forgave his Nazi guards before they executed him—he told them, "I forgive you for what you're about to do." But he had to die to himself before he could forgive them. They didn't really hurt him when they executed him because he was already dead—dead to self.

When you've been hurt by someone, your human nature screams for justice and punishment for that person. So in order to forgive them, you must die to your own selfish demand for revenge or retribution. To forgive someone doesn't mean you stop the judicial system from carrying out justice or punishment—the Bible says that's the job of the government. But forgiveness means you don't become your own little judge, jury, and jailer to try and punish that person who has wronged you. Jesus had to die for your forgiveness, and you have to die to forgive others. When "I" is on the throne, you can't forgive another person—"I" is too insulted!

There is a difference between reconciliation and forgiveness. In the cross, Jesus provided for the forgiveness of everyone. But not everyone will be reconciled with Him—because they won't seek to be reconciled with Him. Bonhoeffer forgave his Nazi guards, but he was never reconciled with them. The same is true for you. You can forgive anyone who hurts you, even if they don't seek your reconciliation.

You may not like this talk about forgiveness, because you have been hurt so deeply by someone you think it's impossible to forgive them. Remember, I'm talking about disciples of Jesus. If you aren't a disciple of Jesus it would be much easier for you to kiss your elbow than to forgive another person! But if you are a disciple of Jesus, you can forgive anyone—you just have to die first. Remember a cross is for one thing only—death.

CONCLUSION

Otis Brady and his wife Martha served as Southern Baptist Convention missionaries to Belize for many years. Once, Otis told me story of a delightful young family that moved from New York City to Belize City and became their neighbors. The man was an executive for an oil company, and the two families became close friends. The Bradys were like grandparents to their three small children.

The New York family was Jewish, and the Bradys didn't pressure them to believe, they just loved them. During the holidays the Brady's celebrated Hanukkah with their young neighbors and then invited them to celebrate Christmas. Otis asked his neighbor if he would help him with a Christmas devotional by reading some Old Testament scriptures—then Otis would read some New Testament scriptures. His neighbor gladly agreed.

Otis selected a number of Old Testament Messianic Prophecies for his guest to read, and then Otis read the corresponding verse from the New Testament that showed how Jesus fulfilled it. Otis and Martha could tell their neighbors were amazed by the scriptures they read. For the next few weeks, they asked the Bradys many questions about Jesus and the Bible, but they never committed themselves to Christ. They soon moved back to New York but the Bradys stayed in touch with their friends. One day, Martha got a letter from their New York friends, and on the outside of the envelope she found these words written in large letters: WE HAVE FOUND THE MESSIAH! Inside the letter, she read that their friends had recognized Jesus as the Messiah and had trusted Him for eternal life. Not long after, the family moved to Israel to join a group of Messianic Jews there.

Have you trusted Jesus? The evidence of the Bible is overwhelming, but it's not just the facts that are important. God loves you so much He sent you a personal Christmas present in the form of an infant. The child grew up to die on a cross for your sins, and God raised Him from the dead. Today, if you will put your faith and trust in Him, you can receive the greatest gift ever given to anyone—eternal life.

OUTLINE

THE ROAD TO THE CROSS:

1. WAS PREDICTED BY THE PROPHETS

1. Psalm 41:9 ⇒ Betrayed by a friend
2. Zechariah 11:12 ⇒ Sold for thirty pieces of silver
3. Isaiah 53:7 ⇒ Silent when accused
4. Isaiah 50:6 ⇒ Slapped and spit upon
5. Psalm 22:16 ⇒ Hands and feet pierced
6. Psalm 22:6-8 ⇒ Mocked and insulted
7. Psalm 22:18 ⇒ Soldiers cast lots for his garment
8. Psalm 34:20 ⇒ Not a bone broken
9. Isaiah 53:9 ⇒ Buried in a rich man's grave
10. Psalm 16:10 ⇒ His resurrection!

2. PROMISED REJECTION AND PAIN

"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering...But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." *Isaiah 53:3-5*

3. PRODUCED THE RESURRECTION

Jesus said, "The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds...Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father save me from this hour?' No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour." *John 12:24, 27*

4. IS THE PATTERN FOR EVERY DISCIPLE

"For my part, I am going to boast in nothing but the Cross of our Master, Jesus Christ. Because of that Cross, I have been crucified in relation to the world, set free from the stifling atmosphere of pleasing others, and fitting into the little patterns that they dictate." (Galatians 6:14, *The Message*)



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes