

STEVEN FURTICK

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF GREATER

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SEVEN-MILE MIRACLE

JOURNEY INTO THE PRESENCE OF GOD
THROUGH THE LAST WORDS OF JESUS

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INTRODUCTION

M.O.G.

Easter is kind of like the Super Bowl of Christianity, don't you think?

Our church—Elevation Church in Charlotte, North Carolina—expends a tremendous amount of energy every year around Easter. Countless hours of planning and rehearsal go into preparing for our worship experiences with hundreds of volunteers donating thousands of hours to make it all happen.

Our team goes all out for these services. Original music. Dramatic live elements. Video presentations. Projection mapping. Creative lighting and sound effects. And I try to deliver the most powerful presentation of the gospel message I can. All of this—from the technical elements to the proclamation of truth—is executed with our best efforts. All for the greatest possible purpose—to declare that Jesus is Lord over life and death and that God's grace is greater than our sin and shame.

Sure, I know Easter and Christmas have the reputation of being the times of the year when the “nominal” believers show up at a church service just to keep their Christian membership in good standing. But I think these holidays can also be times when God-seekers dare to venture out of the shadows, hoping to sample

something supernatural. What's wrong with that, at least as a start? The spiritually curious are totally welcome at Elevation—at Easter or on any given Sunday. And we've been able to witness thousands of spiritually curious people become seriously devoted followers of Jesus during Easter worship experiences at Elevation.

My wife, Holly, and I and the rest of our original team started Elevation Church with the belief that vast numbers of people in our world are hungry to experience God. Some are far away from him, and they know it, so they're looking for a way to bridge the distance. Others have turned their lives over to Jesus, yet they realize their relationship with God isn't all it could be. It isn't growing. It doesn't measure up to the hopes they had at one time. They know there's got to be more to being in a relationship with God—but how?

More of God. M.O.G. That's what people want—whether they know it or not. Because it's what we all need.

Do you feel that hunger too?

If you do, that's a good thing. That hunger is the starting place of being filled with God's presence. But you don't have to look for God on your own—wandering around aimlessly, frustrated and feeling like a failure. Instead, you can take your first step on a proven path to meeting God and knowing him better and better.

Let me warn you, however, this path isn't an easy one. It's riddled with difficulty and distress. But, if you're willing to take this journey with Jesus as both your companion and your destination, you will experience God's power in ways you didn't even

know were possible. And while knowing it's going to be difficult may discourage you, don't let it. Easy isn't what you're called to. On this journey, fulfillment can never be measured in units of convenience and comfort.

This experience begins with both a map and a set of mile markers. First, the map. You've got a seven-mile journey in front of you, my friend.

Resurrected and on the Road Again

Imagine you're Jesus and it's Resurrection Sunday. In the early morning, you have come back to life and left your tomb. To mark the soul-shaking importance of this event, an earthquake has shaken the land. An angel has rolled aside the stone blocking your tomb's entrance, allowing some of your friends to peer in and see that you are gone. Meanwhile, perhaps you wander around the cemetery garden a bit all alone (the flowers smell great after you've been dead for three days!). But soon you show yourself to Mary Magdalene and, a little later, to some of your disciples to let them know the incredible news that you are back.

So far, so good. But what do you do *next*?

Well, if you're Jesus, you go for a walk. The story is told in Luke 24:13–35, and it provides us with our map—a template or pattern, if you will—for our spiritual journey in life.

According to the story, two of Jesus's followers heard early reports about the Resurrection but didn't take them seriously enough to let these reports alter their plans to leave Jerusalem and

travel to the nearby town of Emmaus. One of these two followers was a guy named Cleopas. Who was the other one? We don't know because the story doesn't give us his or her name. There's a good chance, though, that this second person was Cleopas's wife. Apparently, they had a house in Emmaus and were going home after spending the Passover holiday in Jerusalem.

Whoever these two were, at one time they'd no doubt had high hopes in Jesus. But after his death, it seemed like the show was over. They were still sure he'd been a great man, an outstanding prophet even, but his death seemed to have put an end to their hopes that he would turn out to be the long-promised Messiah who would rescue Israel. As for the reports that Jesus had risen from the dead, that was just bizarre. Come on, to do that—he'd have to be divine!

These two didn't really get Jesus. And he took their misunderstanding so seriously that he spent a big piece of his first day back from the dead making sure they *did* get him. He'd spent much of his ministry years traveling around Israel with his disciples, teaching them as he went, and now he went on the road again to show these two people who he was.

Another motive for Jesus going to Emmaus with Cleopas and Unnamed Follower #2 probably was that he wanted to keep his people corralled in Jerusalem for the time being.¹ The departure of these two was the first sign that Jesus's squad was starting to scatter. So he wanted to head the travelers off at the pass. He wanted to put them back on the path to knowing him, just as he wants to put us back on the same path when we've begun to stray.

Luke, who narrates this story, informs us that the town of Emmaus was sixty stadia, or about seven miles, from Jerusalem. That makes for about a two-hour walk. Jesus appeared at the side of these two people and asked if he could tag along with them.

Sure. Come along.

The strange thing is, Cleopas and his companion had no idea it was Jesus who joined them on their journey.

Why weren't these two followers of Jesus able to recognize him? Maybe because they weren't expecting to see him. After all, in their minds he was a corpse. Or maybe they didn't recognize him because he looked different after his resurrection. Maybe. But perhaps Jesus actually *prevented them* from recognizing him. Maybe he supernaturally interfered with the facial recognition software running in their brains—because he had a big reveal in store for them shortly.

Let's be clear that Jesus wasn't just messing with the two travelers. He had a reason for concealing his identity. Cleopas and his companion didn't accept Jesus's real identity as the Son of God and Messiah, despite the things they'd heard him say and the miracles they'd seen him perform, and so it fit perfectly that now they didn't recognize his face either. They had eyes but failed to see, as Jesus described spiritual blindness on another occasion.²

So Jesus took over the conversation on the road, preaching a walking sermon and using the Hebrew Scriptures to explain that the Messiah had to die and be raised again. He started with Moses and ended with Malachi, putting the Word of God (at least so far as it related to himself) in a new light for them.

As a preacher, I work hard to make sure the truths that I've discovered connect with people in meaningful ways. I love when I see that people are nodding along, shouting amen, or even crying, because these can be indications that God's Word is connecting with their hearts.

I'm in awe of the effect Jesus's preaching had in his two followers because the story tells us that their hearts burned within them while Jesus explained what the Hebrew Scriptures foretold about him.³ They felt like they were on fire inside! Jesus's words burned up their old preconceived notions about the Messiah and lit a fire of hope and new understanding within them. They were catching on to God's plan to redeem all things through the sacrifice of his Son, and it was amazing!

These two were starting to get the picture of who Jesus really was. But they still didn't connect it all with the man who was talking to them.

At the end of their journey, the two travelers finally did realize who the man walking beside them was. I'm going to tell that part of the story when we get to Mile 7. But for now I want us to think about that journey as the pair gradually came to understand Jesus better, ending in a miraculous vision of the risen Lord. Why's it important to us? *Because this is the journey we need to take in our lives.* Like those two people on the road that day, you and I have got to walk with Jesus, learning from him, observing his ways, and more and more seeing him in his greatness.

We've all got a seven-mile road of our own to travel.

The Jesus Highway

Jesus was a walker. Throughout his ministry years, Jesus gathered his team around him and then crisscrossed the country. Sometimes he headed toward towns and villages where people needed his words and his touch. Sometimes he headed away from people, because he needed to get alone with his Father and pray. Sometimes he stopped by Jerusalem for one of the big religious festivals. Sometimes he had strange appointments in out-of-the-way places that nobody else knew anything about (a woman of low morals in Samaria, a demon-possessed man in Gerasa, for instance).

The disciples had to have wondered how Jesus came up with his itinerary. And maybe Google sync could have helped them get their calendars synchronized with his agenda. But whether or not they understood what was going on at any given time, they went along with him. You see, they knew who they were:

Followers.

Jesus's first words of calling to his disciples were really simple: "Follow me."⁴ He wanted them to come along with him and pick things up from him as he went about his business. And so that's what they did. They followed Jesus, both literally and metaphorically, for the duration of his ministry on earth.

Eventually, at the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now."⁵ He was going to the cross alone. So for once these men would have to wait while Jesus went on ahead without them. It must have been disorienting for them.

They were used to following Jesus. They wanted to keep following Jesus. For now, they could only follow so far.

But then Jesus added, “You will follow later.” They would re-join him for a few precious weeks after his resurrection. Then, for the rest of their lives, they would learn to follow his example and leading through the Holy Spirit. In fact, after spreading the word about Jesus far and wide, most of them would become martyrs for his cause. That is, they would follow him all the way to death’s door . . . and through it. They would follow him all the way to heaven.

Let me show you why this is all significant for us.

One morning after Jesus was resurrected, he was having breakfast with the disciples—the original Breakfast Club. This was the setting where he and Peter had the legendary conversation in which Jesus said “Do you love me?” three times. After Peter assured Jesus three times that he did love him, and after Jesus told Peter three times to “feed my lambs,” Jesus said this to Peter: “Follow me.”⁶

At the beginning of their earthly story together, it was “Follow me.” At the end it was “Follow me” too. It seems that following was the basic condition for being one of Jesus’s people.

And it’s not just the original disciples who are Jesus’s followers.

When Jesus gave his Great Commission with the word *go*, he turned us all into people who are to navigate the surface of the planet in obedience to his calling. We’re never alone in doing this. He’s right there by our side. We’ve got Jesus with us “to the very end of the age.”⁷

So we're not just to be *believers*—people who have put our faith in Jesus. We're not just to be *disciples*—pupils who learn from him. We're not just to be *Christians*—those who are known by his name. We're also to be *followers*.

Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”⁸ Like sheep who hear the voice of a shepherd we know and trust, we follow him.⁹

Our spiritual journey is not one we take by striking out on our own. We're following in the footsteps of someone else—Jesus. He's our trailblazer. He has gone ahead of us in life as a human being, and he has gone ahead to heaven to prepare a place for us there.¹⁰

But Jesus is not just our trailblazer; he's also the trail itself!

When Jesus announced he was going away (to heaven), Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”¹¹

Jesus answered, “I am the way.”¹² He's a path, a road, a way.

To elaborate, he said, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” A journey with Jesus, it turns out, is the only way to truly have more of God.

The apostle Paul understood this. He had a hunger for M.O.G., saying, “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”¹³ That's exactly what we're doing in *Seven-Mile Miracle*: following Jesus through his death and into his resurrection so that we can be like him.

Paul was totally determined to keep going. He said, “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”¹⁴

Straining forward.

Pressing on.

Reaching toward.

We’ll make it to our destination if we keep going and do not stop. The way has already been made.

Famous Last Words

I hate exercising, but I do it because I feel like I’m supposed to. I work out with other people to make sure I keep going. One of the guys I work out with likes to do timed exercises and thinks it’s really clever not to tell me how much time we have left on an exercise. He just tells me when we’re done.

I told him one day, “From now on, I need you to give me some mile markers, because I need some encouragement when I’m in the middle of the exercise. Tell me, ‘Halfway there,’ even if I’m not halfway. Lie to me. Just tell me what you need to tell me to keep me going for another rep, because I can’t just be doing this and not know how much longer I have left.”

Wouldn’t it be great if we had a time clock or some mile markers to tell us where we are on our journey with God—and how much further we have to go? To my knowledge, no such definitive measurement of progress exists. But for this seven-mile

journey we're beginning together, we're going to mark our miles with the statements Jesus made on the cross.

There's something about people's last words uttered in this life that inspire our curiosity or cause us to treat them as especially weighty. To the law, a dying declaration is testimony that can be admitted as evidence in court cases despite being hearsay. The survivors of an unsolved crime receive comfort if the perpetrator confesses before passing on. Separated family members wonder if the prospect of dying will cause a loved one to agree to reconciliation. Christians hope dying unbelievers will profess a deathbed faith. The disciples of sages and philosophers wait to hear one last pearl of wisdom drop from the lips of the great one who is crossing the boundary of human existence.

Final words recorded in history range from the stirring . . .

- *Patriot Nathan Hale*: "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country."

To the absurd . . .

- *Humorist W. C. Fields*: "On the whole, I'd rather be in Philadelphia."

To the eerily meaningful . . .

- *Poet Emily Dickinson*: "I must go in; the fog is rising."

To the mundanely characteristic . . .

- *Entrepreneur P. T. Barnum*: "How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?"

To the spiritually profound . . .

- *Missionary William Carey*: "When I am gone, speak less of Dr. Carey and more of Dr. Carey's Savior."

Through the miracle of scripture, we have the unique privilege of eavesdropping on Jesus's last words before he died.

It's Good Friday. He's at Calvary, the last stop of his earthly journey. The Son of God and Savior of the world is giving up his life. What is on his mind? What does he want the people standing at the foot of his cross to hear and to repeat, passing it down to the ages?

If you use a red-letter Bible, you won't find much red ink in the accounts of the crucifixion. The Gospels record a mere seven short statements that Jesus made between being nailed to the cross at around nine in the morning and breathing his last breath at about three in the afternoon. Maybe he said more things from the cross that were never recorded for us. But then again, maybe not. Hanging from a cross made breathing—and therefore talking—difficult. Jesus was dealing with terrible physical pain and unique spiritual turmoil, which would have prevented any sort of extended speech. So we can be sure that each of the seven statements he did utter was something important to him, something he cared so much about that he was willing to make the painful effort required to speak it out loud.

From the cross, Jesus voiced three prayers, a promise, a piece of family business, a complaint, and a declaration. These are usually called Jesus's "seven last words," and they have entered deeply into Christian tradition. Preachers since long before my time have preached on these "seven last words." Liturgists have worked them into Good Friday services. Schütz, Haydn, Gounod, Franck, and other composers have set them to music.

They are only seven short statements. That's not many.

Yet in another way, these seven statements are *everything*.

In the Bible, seven is the symbolic number of completion, and Jesus's statements reflect the complete spiritual life, the whole journey of a Jesus follower. Not only do Jesus's last words reveal what was on his mind as he was dying, but they also offer a sequence of the themes that matter most to you and me if we are determined to follow him through life and into the unobstructed presence of God. They're the mile markers on the road to our own personal Easter—not just as an annual event, but as a daily experience.

Here's a preview of these mile markers and what they mean to us: Receiving God's *forgiveness* (Mile 1) leads to *salvation* (Mile 2). When we are saved, we are brought into proper *relationship* with God and the family of Jesus followers (Mile 3). But that doesn't mean the Christian life is easy. As time goes on, we might experience a temporary sense of *abandonment* from God (Mile 4) as well as *distress* in life's circumstances (Mile 5). If we hold on to God, though, we will experience *triumph* through his grace (Mile 6). And the greatest reward will be *reunion* with God in heaven (Mile 7).

The path that Jesus provides isn't the only path in life. There are other spiritual roads, other philosophical paths, any number of routes that our inner GPS might put us on by default. Selfish hedonism, for example, is a wide path that proves popular in every generation. But Jesus's "way" is the only one that will get us where we want to go: to life in the presence of the fullness and the beauty

of God. So if we're headed in any other direction, the first thing we need to do is make a turnaround and get on the right road. We've got to repent and receive God's forgiveness. The moment we do, we've arrived at mile marker number one.

The Seven Last Words of Jesus from the Cross

1. **A word of forgiveness:** "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).
2. **A word of salvation:** "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).
3. **A word of relationship:** "Woman, here is your son. . . . Here is your mother" (John 19:26-27).
4. **A word of abandonment:** "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).
5. **A word of distress:** "I am thirsty" (John 19:28).
6. **A word of triumph:** "It is finished" (John 19:30).
7. **A word of reunion:** "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

A WORD OF FORGIVENESS

“Father, forgive them, for they do
not know what they are doing.”

—Luke 23:34

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The most important thing to remember about the first “word” Jesus spoke from the cross is that he spoke it about us.

Keep in mind, he went to the cross to atone for sins—the sins of everyone who ever lived, including me and you. So we put him up on the cross as surely as anyone in his own day did. And this means he was interceding with the Father on our behalf, asking God to spare us the judgment we deserve.

Jesus seems to have made his first statement almost immediately after being lifted up on the cross, and it couldn’t have been what anyone was expecting.

Starting the evening before, he had been . . .

- betrayed by one of his own disciples for money
- arrested by temple soldiers
- interrogated by the high priest Annas
- tried with falsified evidence by the Jewish ruling council
- denied by his most vocal supporter, Peter
- beaten by some temple soldiers
- questioned by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate
- questioned by the ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas
- questioned a second time by Pilate
- whipped by some Roman soldiers
- condemned to death by Pilate at the insistence of locals
- mocked by the Roman soldiers and crowned with thorns

- forced to carry his cross to the place of execution
- stripped
- nailed to the cross
- lifted up in the air to hang from his nail-pierced hands and feet until dead

If you were Jesus and you were looking down at the Jewish leaders and their supporters whose schemes had put you there, as well as at the soldiers who had actually carried out the criminal deed, what would you want to say? I won't tell you what I would want to say. It's unprintable.

What Jesus actually said was this: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."¹

I've always been gripped by the power of that statement. I know that I wouldn't be able to find it in my heart to ask God to forgive the enemies who were responsible for my murderous, scandalous death. Yet the very first thing Jesus did was to issue forgiveness in the face of his betrayers.

He wasn't denying their guilt for their part in his murder, but he was recognizing that they didn't understand the full magnitude of what they were doing. The Jews thought they were getting rid of a blasphemer. The Romans thought they were punishing a criminal. None of them realized they were committing the almost incomprehensible offense of putting to death "the Author of life."² So Jesus interceded with the Father on their behalf.

You can't say Jesus didn't practice what he preached.

“Love your enemies,” he had taught, “and pray for those who persecute you.”³ That’s exactly what he did on the cross.

And that’s what he still does today. From his place in heaven, he remains the Great Intercessor.

Think of it in terms of the sacrificial system that played out at the Jerusalem temple. Jesus was like the lambs that were sacrificed. Yet he was also like the high priest who was in charge of offering the sacrifices to atone for sin. That’s why the writer of Hebrews said, “There have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”⁴

If you are a believer in Jesus, he has interceded with the Father to forgive you. And he continues to live to intercede for sinners. At this moment, all around the world, people are turning in faith to Jesus, and in heaven he is asking the Father to forgive them.⁵

Every spiritual journey starts with realizing we need forgiveness.

QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- *What is your personal definition of forgiveness?*
- *Have you ever prayed to receive God’s forgiveness and be saved? If so, when and how? If not, what’s holding you back?*

- *When you think of the things you have done that were wrong and that you needed God's forgiveness for, what stands out in your mind, and why?*
- *What unconfessed wrongdoing do you need God's forgiveness for right now?*
- *What are some ways in which other people have forgiven you in the past?*
- *How have you forgiven others in the past?*
- *Whom do you need to forgive right now? For what? How could you go about it?*

MILE 1

Get Your Slate Cleaned Here

A successful journey begins with the end in mind, and so we need to remember that where we're headed in our journey is the presence of God. There, all is holiness, all is purity, all is light.

Like the court of a king where no one will be admitted without proper attire, the presence of God is a place where none of us can go unless we've been cleansed of the stains on our soul. We can't even *begin* our journey until we've been declared righteous, receiving Jesus's pure-white cloak of holiness in place of our rags of sinfulness.

Don't even think about trying to make yourself spiritually pure. It's nonsensical to imagine you could do so, yet that's the way a lot of people think. *If I go to church every week, read my Bible every day, put money in the offering, stop swearing, avoid gluten, and have more patience with my kids, God will like me.*

Nothing we could do will ever be enough to get rid of our sin. We just have to receive the forgiveness Jesus offers. We repent,

confess, and ask to have our sins washed away. He does the work of purifying us.

When Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” his blood was already dripping down the rough wood of his cross. And it still flows today. It covers the stains on our consciences and washes them clean.

Lots of the old hymns I used to sing in church as a kid esteem the cleansing power of Jesus’s blood. One, for instance, says:

There is a fountain filled with blood
drawn from Emmanuel’s veins;
and sinners plunged beneath that flood
lose all their guilty stains.¹

The imagery could make this feel more like a soundtrack to a horror movie, I admit. And the cross of Jesus Christ was nothing if not horrible, and horrifying. But that same cross was the place where the unthinkable horrible became, to us, something beautiful. Scripture says, “The blood of Jesus . . . purifies us from all sin.”²

Forgiveness may be the first leg of our journey, but it’s not something we ever really get past in this life. Whenever we do wrong (and of course we will), we are to again seek forgiveness from God. Whenever others do wrong to us (and of course they will), we are to freely give them our forgiveness, because Jesus has shown us the example.

Made Pure

Annie Lobert grew up in the Midwest with a dad who was filled with stress and anger. As a teenager, Annie took her father's rages personally. She concluded she was unlovable.

A boy she met in high school told her he loved her, and it reached the emotional need that lay deep within her. When he told her he would marry her and make a life with her, she agreed to sleep with him. She was devastated later when she found out that he was also having sex with some of her friends.

Now she had two men she was angry at: her father and her ex-boyfriend.

She moved to Minneapolis after high school, and there she started going to clubs, hoping to meet a rich man who would love her and take care of her. She did meet some wealthy men, but they wanted something else from her than marriage. She began giving sex for money.

"I think what this really was building inside me," Annie says, "was this vendetta, this deep-seated unforgiveness towards my dad, towards the boy in school. And I just wanted revenge. I was going to prove that I could make it in my life. And money was going to be the answer."³

Later, she went to Hawaii, where she became a high-priced call girl, earning as much as \$2,000 an hour. It seemed like her plan for revenge was working.

One of her clients complimented her, treated her well, and told her that he was falling in love with her. These were the kinds

of things she had always longed to hear. So when he asked her to move with him to Las Vegas, she agreed.

But then he changed toward Annie. He started beating her and forcing her to go out on calls with men and give him the money she brought home. For five years she endured abuse from this pimp-boyfriend before finally getting away from him.

But now she was broke. And things went further downhill for her.

She came down with Hodgkin's lymphoma and began receiving treatment for it. Although she eventually recovered from the disease, she became addicted to the painkillers she received for the cancer pain. This led her to cocaine use.

At this time her self-loathing reached a peak. She'd look in the mirror and not recognize the person staring back at her. She would spend hours in the shower trying to scrub herself clean. To no avail.

Although still able to make a lot of money in the "game," she was suffering a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder because of everything she had been through. She couldn't deal with life. She hated who she had become—sex trafficked, used, abused, and an addict.

Finally one night she freebassed a dangerous amount of cocaine. The room seemed to go dark before her eyes. She felt a demonic presence with her. Then she had a vision of her own funeral, where her friends and family were crying around her body as it lay in a coffin. In the vision she overheard them say, "She was just a prostitute."

This was the turning point. She knew she needed a fresh start, needed forgiveness. While still suffering the effects of her overdose, she cried out, “Jesus, please save me. I don’t know if you’re real, but I don’t want to die.”⁴ Soon a peace came over her, and she knew that Jesus had heard her prayer.

Annie had a lot of lingering guilt about what she’d done with her life. She feared that Christians would reject her, and a part of her thought they would be right in doing so. But the Holy Spirit began remaking her heart.

She says, “I started to stand on Jesus’s word that I’m whole, that I’m healed, that I’m pure, that I’m a virgin in him.”⁵

Annie forgave her father and the other men who had hurt her. She also started the nonprofits Hookers for Jesus and Destiny House to help women like her escape the grip of sex trafficking and pursue a new life by God’s design. She had become pure when God graciously forgave her, and she wants others to have the same chance at purity. It’s a miraculous opportunity that God holds out to us all.

Coming to God Through the Torn Body of Jesus

I’m getting ahead of myself in a way, but I want to tell you something that happened when Jesus died. This happened after Jesus’s seventh “word,” but it relates to how we apply his first “word.”

When Jesus died, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”⁶ This was a thick curtain of blue, purple, and red linen around sixty feet high. It was quite a feat of the

weaver's art and not something that was easily ripped. Yet it *was* torn. And it was torn from *top to bottom*. God put his mighty hands on that curtain and parted it like he parted the Red Sea, making a way for our souls to occupy their Promised Land.

This curtain separated the Most Holy Place—the room in the temple where God's presence dwelled—from the rest of the temple. Only the high priest could go there, and he could go only once a year, on the day of atonement. In other words, the curtain *separated people from God*. Symbolically, God was curtained off. Only the temple system gave hope of getting to him and receiving forgiveness.

Now, though, Jesus is our way to God. We approach God not by a torn curtain but through his body shredded by whips, gouged by thorns, punctured by nails, and pierced with a spear so that blood and water poured out of his side.

His death on the cross is now the means by which people can approach God in repentance, seeking his forgiveness. And we can do this with boldness, not because we deserve forgiveness, but because we have confidence in Jesus's authority and willingness to forgive. There's no reason to hesitate. As the writer of Hebrews says,

Brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full

assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.⁷

If you have never received forgiveness, what's keeping you from crying out to him today? Ask him to forgive you. Place your faith in his sacrifice on the cross. He'll come into your life. He'll resurrect your spirit. The first mile of this journey can be the beginning of a new relationship with God for you.

Consider using this prayer:

Father, forgive me of my sin. I know now that I am unworthy to stand in your holy presence unless you cleanse me by the blood of Jesus. So make me new by your free grace. Accept me because of the sacrifice Jesus offered for me on the cross. Amen.

If you pray a prayer like this “with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings,” as Hebrews says, God *will* forgive you! You *will* begin your journey with Jesus. And it will be a journey paved with grace.

There will be times you fail and make mistakes. The good news is that God's forgiveness doesn't come with an expiration date. It doesn't matter if it's the 1,237th time you've messed up since you prayed the prayer, or if it's the first—you will be just as free to repent and receive God's forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn't just set you on the right road. It keeps you there.

Father, Forgive Them, Even Though They Know Exactly What They Do

Many of the people who helped crucify Jesus were religious Jews. They thought they were doing God a great service by hanging Jesus up on that tree. In their minds he was a blasphemer because he said he was one with the heavenly Father.

These people were familiar with the same prophecies of the Messiah that Jesus talked about with the followers on the road to Emmaus. The two people on the road felt their hearts burning within them, but the religious leaders had hearts that were cold toward God and led them to participate in murdering the Savior whom God had sent to the world.

It's easy to look down on these people. But what I've recently realized is how much I'm like them. I've gone to church and learned about the Bible since I was a little boy. I've studied Scripture in school and served God in the church. He has shown me time and time again who he is and how I should live. Yet too often my heart is cold and I don't live out what I know.

There are so many things that I know are right to do, yet I don't do them. There are so many things that I know are wrong to do, but I do them. I sin against God over and over again. And every time I sin against him, not only do I shame myself but I also dishonor the Lord who died for me.

I'm not alone in this. Maybe you too have had a lot of exposure to church and know a lot about the Bible but still aren't living wholeheartedly for Jesus.

How many times have you known exactly what God wanted you to do and you didn't do it? Or known the words he wanted you to speak and you didn't speak them? Or known the thing he wanted you to give but you didn't give it?

How many times have you known while you were doing something that it was wrong? Or known that you shouldn't say the hurtful words, but you said them? Or known you shouldn't have gone certain places, but you went there?

So many times when we sin, it's not a lack of knowledge. It's a lack of passion in our hearts.

I believe that Jesus would say about us today, "Father, forgive them, even though they know exactly what they're doing."

The thing to remember is that we don't receive just one delivery of grace. Instead, in Jesus, we receive "grace upon grace."⁸

Of course, the availability and reliability of God's forgiveness is no excuse to keep on sinning.⁹ If anything, it's a motivation to change. Why would we deliberately go against a God who is so giving—and so forgiving—toward us?

The thing to do is to keep a sensitive heart, recognize our sin for what it is, and repent immediately. We've got good reasons to be both suspicious about ourselves and confident in Christ. As John Newton, the aging composer of the hymn "Amazing Grace," said, "Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior."¹⁰

John the apostle said, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves." So true. But then he went on with another truth:

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”¹¹

Offenses Revisited

There’s nothing we can do to earn God’s forgiveness. But when we have received his forgiveness, we do have a responsibility. We have to forgive others too.

The forgiveness we receive from God and the forgiveness we give to others are so closely tied together that we can’t separate them. Jesus said, “If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”¹²

Jesus was not teaching us to forgive people in order to earn our salvation. That would run contrary to the whole theme of the New Testament. Jesus was teaching this: *If you don’t give it, you don’t ‘got it’, because if you’ve got it, you’ll give it.* That may not be good grammar, but it’s good theology.

When I turned thirty, I felt like God was calling me to fast for thirty days. Reluctantly, I agreed to obey the Lord and began the fast. I don’t consider myself the most disciplined person in the world, and I am quite fond of the endorphins released by chewing, so I’ll be honest with you—it was challenging.

I started to want to eat things that I normally wouldn’t even want. Rice cakes, for example. I dreamed about rice cakes. I would

practically have betrayed my best friend for a rice cake. But I persevered.

During the fast, people would ask me, “Are you getting any special visions from the Lord? Like, any kind of crazy revelations from God? Some unbelievable times in worship?”

I’d say, “Besides rice cakes? Not really. I’m having some good times of prayer and reading the Bible, but I can’t say that anything breathtaking or earthshaking has happened. I wish I could, but I’m not seeing Philippians 4:19 spelled out in the clouds or anything like that.”

The thirty days came and went. I started eating again, and everything seemed right with the world.

Then, about three or four days after the fast ended, I was upstairs in the house where we lived at the time. I had a little room there to pray and read and basically sequester myself from time to time. I was working on a book, and I was feeling happy because my tummy was full of beef jerky.

All of a sudden, God started to deal with me in the area of forgiveness. I felt as if he said to me, *Now that you are on the other side of humbling yourself and surrendering your will to my will, there are some unresolved issues in your heart I want to deal with, because if you don’t allow me to deal with these issues, it is going to keep you from progressing to the next level of intimacy with me.* I didn’t hear that out loud. As many have said, it was “louder than that.” It was a sense within I couldn’t shake.

Over the next few days, God surfaced the names of six people in my life with whom there had been an offense in the relation-

ship. In each case, the relationship had ended, and even though I thought several had ended decently well, in my heart there was still a residue of regret or bitterness. I needed to go back, reach out to the person, and make amends.

One by one, I made the phone calls. I sent one or two e-mails. I think I wrote one letter by hand. It depended on what I felt that each particular situation called for. I tried my best to not let it be a self-righteous thing that dredged up old hurts for the other person or implied that they were to blame and in need of my forgiveness. Neither did I try to make each relationship what it used to be. I just tried to make things as right as I could by owning my contribution to the relational pain.

It wasn't easy. I remember my stomach hurting after I made contact with the sixth person on the list. It had been so emotionally draining that it was physically affecting me. For days I was tired.

But in the moments, days, and years that have followed, God released me from some issues of bitterness and unforgiveness. And he has rewarded me with the fruit of many reconciled relationships as well. In fact, as if to put an exclamation mark on this truth, just as I was writing this section my phone rang. I looked down to see that it was the sixth person from my list that day who was calling me! At the time I called him to work out the issue of forgiveness, we hadn't spoken in years. Today he's one of my close friends again—and we've even had the privilege to minister together. (I had to let him go to voice mail so I could finish this chapter, but I love him nonetheless.)

I know God wants you to experience this kind of release and reconciliation too. He wants to break the bondage you might not even know is keeping you stuck and unable to move ahead in your life's journey. I hope you will open your heart to the Spirit of God and feel a fresh wind of freedom like you haven't felt in years.

System 77

One time Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?" Then he made a helpful suggestion: "Up to seven times?"¹³

As we've seen, seven is the biblical number of completion, the number of perfection. And when Peter offered to forgive a jerk who did something lousy to him seven times, he must have thought he was offering all the forgiveness he could be expected to give. In fact, he probably believed he was earning extra credit with Jesus for even suggesting such generosity. Such an overachiever, that Peter.

Jesus said something back to Peter that must have blown his mind: "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."¹⁴

Of course Jesus didn't mean that once somebody has treated you badly for the seventy-eighth time, you're free to break his jaw. The opposite is true. The number Jesus cited—seventy-seven—represents completion to an exponential degree. We have to be willing to forgive without limit.

Jesus didn't want to give Peter a new *standard* for forgiveness. He wanted to give him a whole new *system*. System 77, we'll call it. We're not supposed to try harder to forgive others; we're sup-

posed to take the offense we've received and place it at the foot of the cross, where it belongs.

With System 77, Jesus is saying to you and to me, "There is no limit to how many times I will forgive you, and there is no limit to how many times I can empower you to forgive others. There is no limit to how many times I can heal your broken heart when you're hurt. There is no limit to how free you can be."

To help Peter see why he should be willing to forgive to such an extent, Jesus told a story. It was yet another way he related our forgiveness of others to God's forgiveness of us.

In describing System 77, Jesus began, "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents—"15 Stop right there! Jesus has just started his story, but everybody who was within earshot at this point already knew this wasn't a real event, because a single talent represented twenty years of a working man's wage. And Jesus had referred to a debt of *ten thousand* talents. So Jesus was just throwing out a huge number. It's like a *squillion*. No one would ever be able to borrow ten thousand talents, and no one would ever be able to repay it. Yet only a huge number would do to represent the immensity of our sin debt that Jesus had to atone for.

See, we tend to minimize our guilt. "Oh, my mistakes are not that bad," we say. "Others have done a lot worse." But we don't see what our sin really looks like from the perspective of a perfectly holy and pure God.

Why was Jesus's suffering on the cross so terrible? Why is it

such a big deal that he intercedes with the Father to grant us forgiveness? Because our debt is simply enormous.

Now let's return to the parable.

A servant who owes ten thousand talents has come before his master. "Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt."¹⁶

The servant falls on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begs, "and I will pay back everything."¹⁷

Watch what happens next.

"The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go."¹⁸ A debt of a squillion dollars—wiped clean.

When we became followers of Jesus, that's how it went down for you and that's how it went down for me. In a stewardship of justice that seems scandalous on the surface, God canceled our debt and let us go.

What does the guy in the story do next? You would think he would be so happy that he would take everybody out to dinner and pick up the check. But instead he finds another servant, a guy who owes him a hundred denarii.

A denarius was a day's wage. So this debt, while significant, is minuscule compared to the squillion-dollar debt the servant had already been forgiven. This hundred-denarii debt represents the kind of offenses we give to and receive from each other. Things like being cheated, being lied to, being disrespected, and so on. These offenses are real. They matter to us. But stacked next to the mountain of our debt to God, they look like a molehill.

The servant grabs this other guy and begins to choke him. “Pay back what you owe me!” he demands.¹⁹

So the second servant begs for patience and promises to pay back the debt. In other words, he responds exactly the way the first servant responded when confronted with his debt to the king.²⁰

But the first servant refuses this plea for mercy. Instead, he goes off and has the man thrown into prison until he can pay the debt.

When the king hears about all this, he calls the servant in and says to him, “You wicked servant, I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?”²¹

In his anger the king turns him over to the jailers to be tortured until he has paid back all he owed. (Isn’t it interesting how every time you don’t forgive, you’re the one who is held captive by that choice?) So it’s clear that this story gives us a negative example. It’s what System 77 does *not* look like. We are *not* supposed to be like the first servant, receiving forgiveness and then turning around and withholding forgiveness from others. If we do, it’s at our own peril. We imprison ourselves.

Offensive Strategy

The Bible tells us, “Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”²² So let me ask you: *Are you giving forgiveness the same way you’ve received forgiveness? That is, are you giving it freely, generously—not because the other person deserves it—but because it’s the right and*

reasonable thing to do? Before you answer, think honestly about how you've been acting.

When we've been wronged, often we want justice. We want them to pay. We secretly—or not so secretly—hope they get what they deserve.

Sometimes I feel that way even when I see somebody zoom past me and cut me off in traffic. Inside I hope they get pulled over for speeding. I don't want them to break their collarbone in a crash or anything, but I would like them to receive a small serving of justice.

But when *I'm* the one doing the wrong, I don't want justice so much anymore. I want mercy. I no longer pray for blue lights when I'm in a hurry.

The first mile of this journey is a mile of forgiveness. The Savior says, "Forgive them, Father, when they don't know what they're doing or even when they know exactly what they're doing." I'm grateful for the complete seventy-seven-times, seven-mile forgiveness of Jesus. He bears with me all the way to that last mile.

Think of all the times when God could have stopped at the fourth mile, the fifth mile, the sixth mile with you. But he was patient with you every time. He forgave you.

Is there anyone in your life right now whom you need to forgive? Because here's the truth about forgiveness: if you don't give it, you might not have fully received—or understood it.

If there's somebody whom you haven't forgiven, if there's some bitterness that you're holding in your heart about an event, this is the time at the beginning of your journey to release it to the

Father. Do what I did after my fast. Search your heart for grudges. Pray for God's help to forgive. Make contact with another person to ask for or give forgiveness and to set the relationship right, as far as you're able to. Stop holding past injustice against another person.

It's not easy, but as Anne Lamott says, "Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."²³ In other words, forgiveness is not only a defensive mechanism based on what we deserve, it's also an offensive strategy to win the war against bitterness in our hearts.

Becoming pure like Jesus and entering into the presence of God requires that we lose both our offenses against God and our grudges toward others who have offended us. We can't start moving on our journey until we've been liberated by forgiveness.

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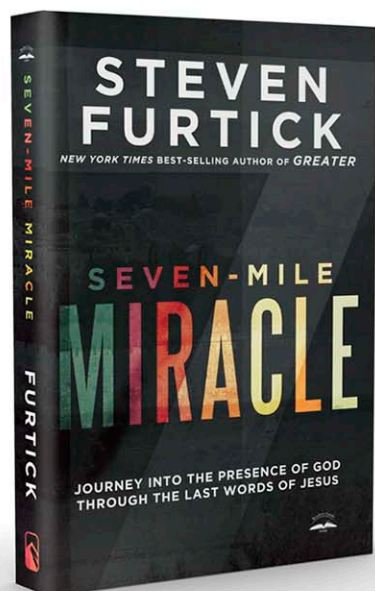


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