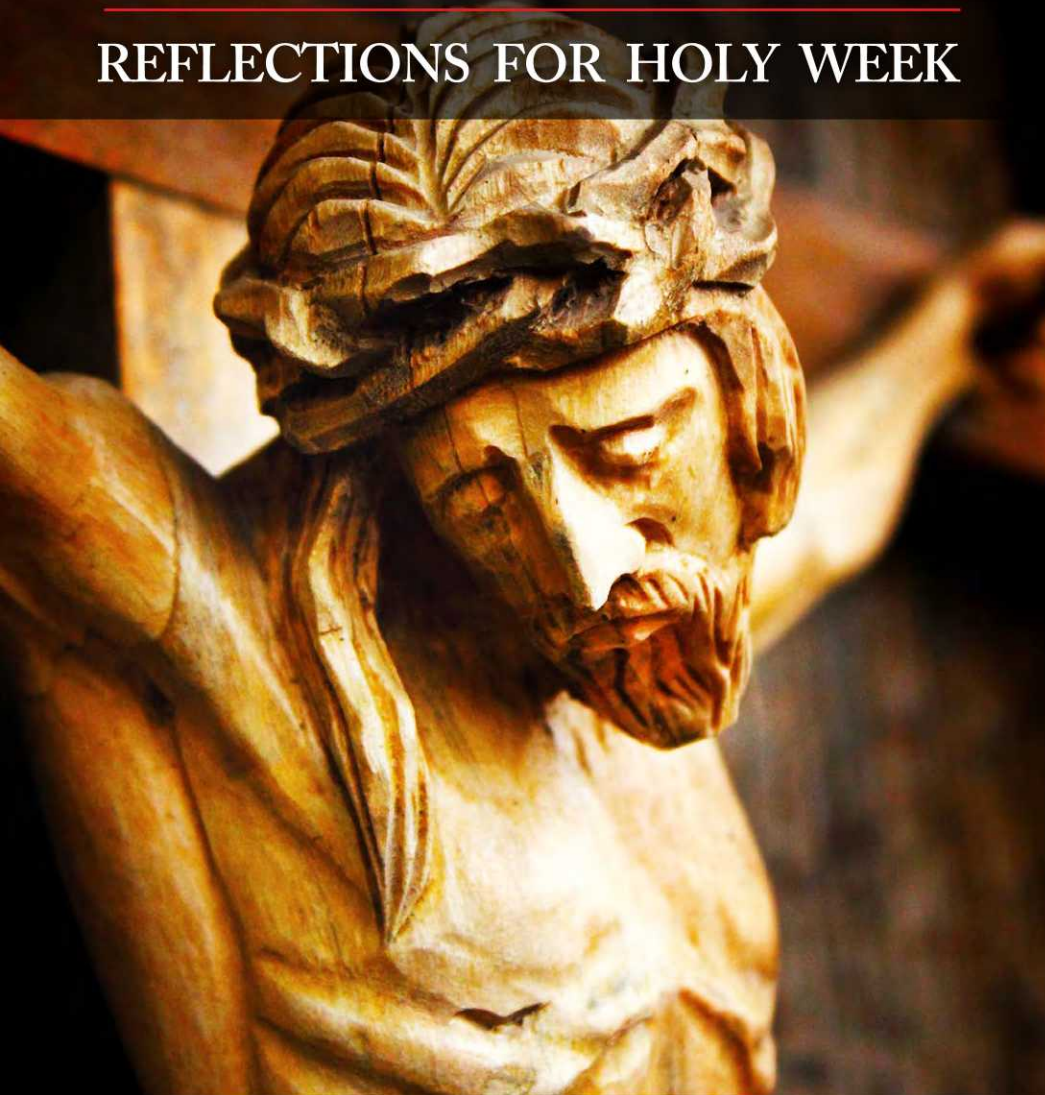


THE SEVEN LAST SAYINGS OF JESUS FROM THE CROSS:

REFLECTIONS FOR HOLY WEEK



by the staff of the Colson Center for Christian Worldview

AN INVITATION

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AN INVITATION

There is an inherent tension to Holy Week. We are, as Fr. Richard John Neuhaus observed, too quick to rush past the Triumphal Entry and the events of Good Friday to Resurrection Sunday. But the only way to Sunday is through, not around, the week before.

On the other hand, we ought not think about Friday as if we don't know what happens three days later. "Sunday's a coming," the great African-American preacher once bellowed, describing that brilliant new day which awaits confused disciples, triumphant religious authorities, and the angry mob. Sunday is not a maybe for Christians. Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed! Thus, we won't rightly understand anything from the birth, life, miracles, words, or last week of Jesus Christ without the resurrection fully in view.

Life, as Soren Kierkegaard observed, is lived forward and understood backward. In examining the events of Holy Week, we have a benefit that Christ's first followers did not. We can look backward. Not only that, but we also have the benefit of reading how the disciples' perspectives shifted from confusion to clarity.

Peter's sermon at Pentecost is the very first, clear, Holy Spirit led, backward-looking exposition of the Holy Week events that we are given. The punchline of that rhetorical tour de force is this unequivocal claim: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly, that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified" (Acts 2:36).

Peter, like the rest of the disciples and the masses that welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem, did not have this perspective looking forward. They expected a kingdom of this world, specifically of Israel. Even





after the resurrection, the disciples had asked Jesus, “Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

The answer, Peter only realized after the Ascension, was both yes and no. Yes, the kingdom is inaugurated. No, the kingdom is not limited to Israel. God has, by bringing Jesus to heaven, placed all things in heaven and earth under the feet of Jesus. His rule is over all.

In the pages that follow, members of the Colson Center family reflect on the worldview realities revealed in the Seven Last Words of Jesus on the cross. We invite you to join us as we look back at the statements of our Savior from that Friday, with Sunday fully in view.

John Stonestreet
President of the Colson Center
Easter 2017

FATHER, FORGIVE THEM

BY GINA DALFONZO

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

LUKE 23:34

We live in a nervous age. Christians are constantly warning each other about the machinations of our enemies—religious, political, ideological—and talking about our need to strike back at them before they can strike us down for good. I hear it every day.

Those warnings aren’t mistaken. There are people who would like Christians to shut up and go away, and would gladly do anything to make that happen. Consider what our Lord did when his enemies struck Him down. When they put Him through a sham trial, mocked Him, tortured Him, and publicly, painfully executed Him. When He was hanging on a cross with nails through His hands, suffocating to death, what did the Son of God say about the enemies who had put Him there?

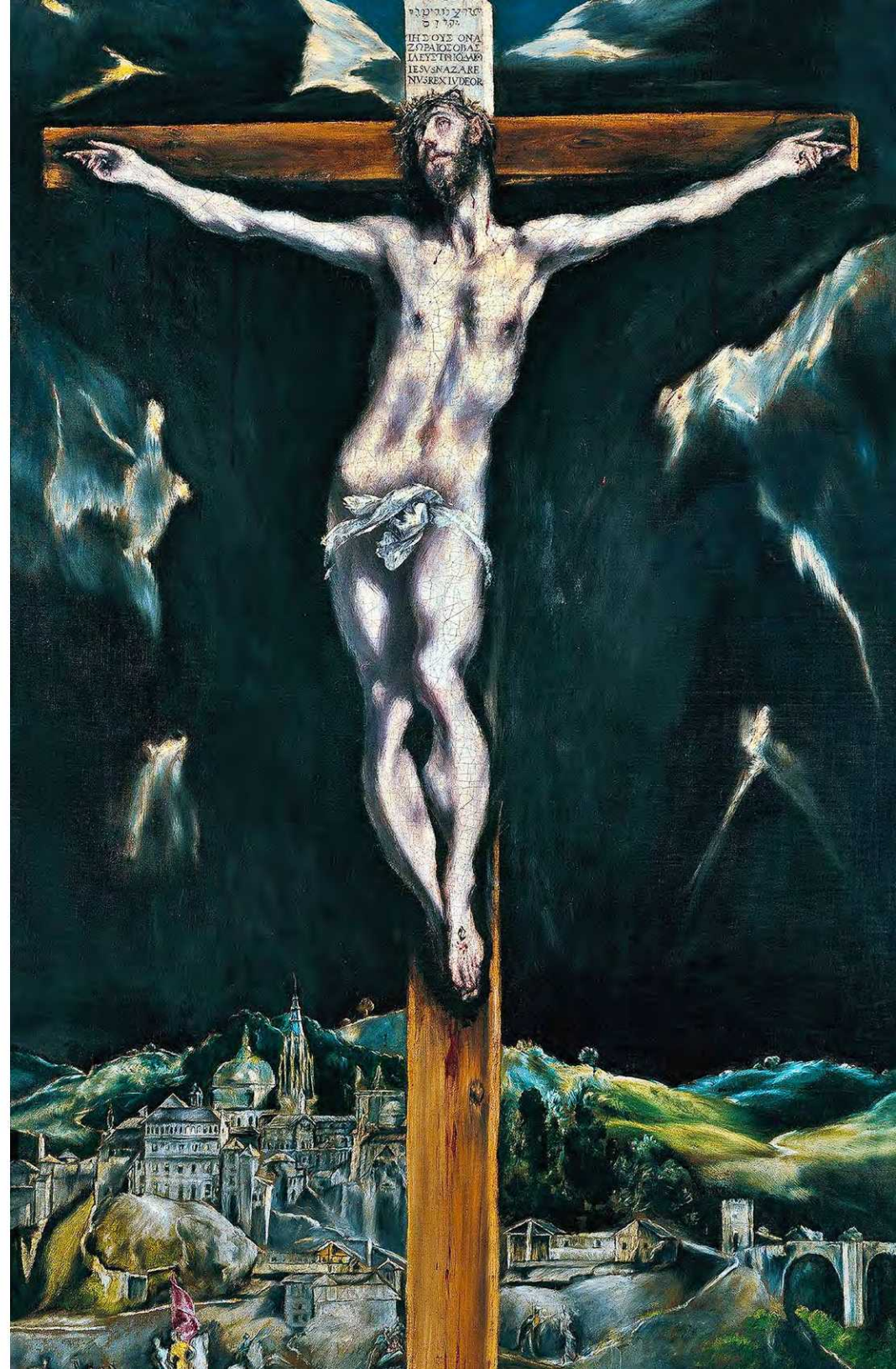
“Forgive them.”

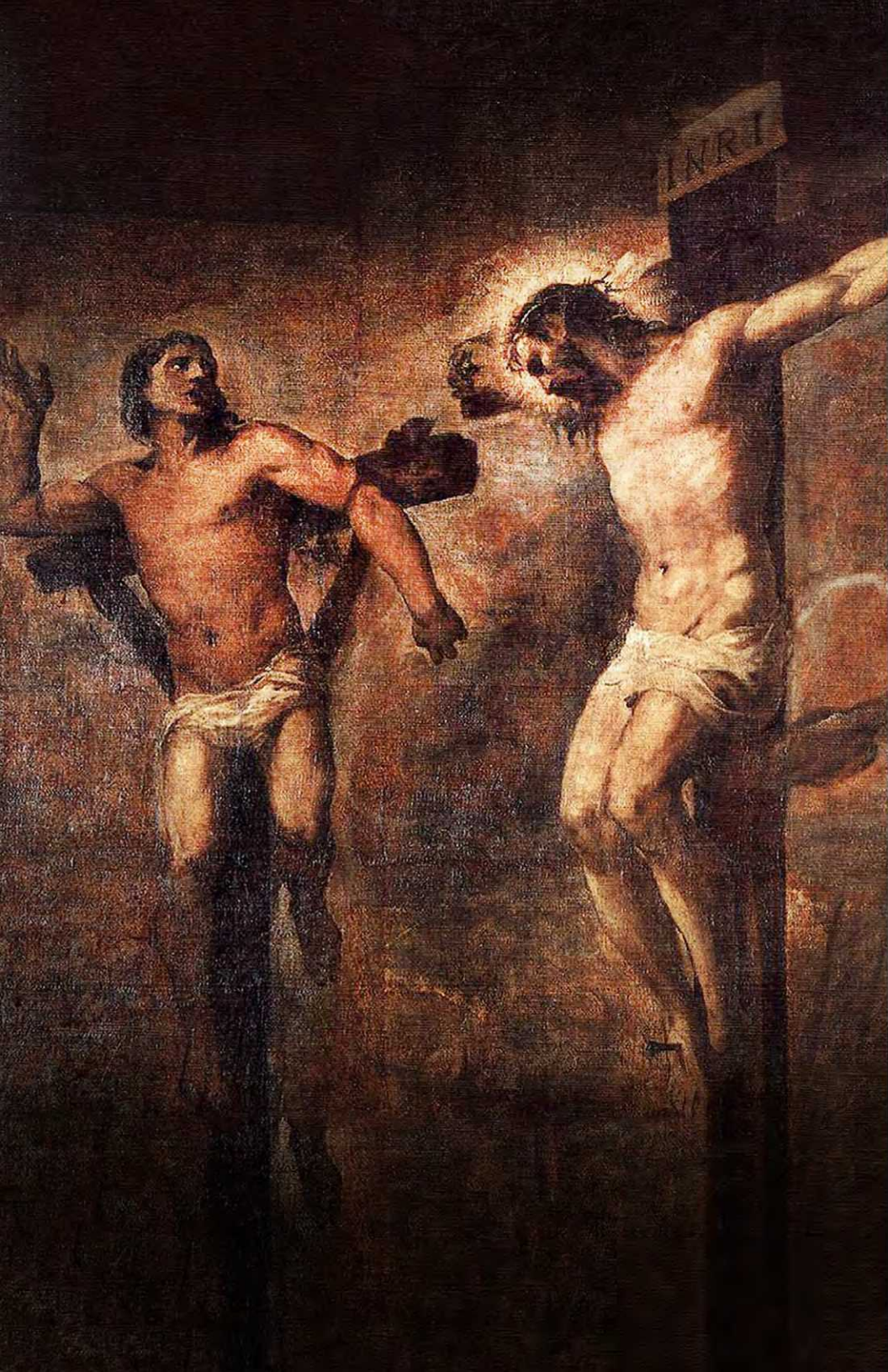
There is no anger in those words, no bitterness, no vengeance—as richly deserved as all those things would have been. There is absolutely no sense of self-preservation. There is only divine love.

Is this what we, His followers, aspire to now? Do we look at our enemies with forgiveness and love? Do we grieve for their hardness of heart and their tragic distance from God, and long for their restoration? Or do we hug each slight and insult to our hearts, nurturing our anger and resentment, carefully formulating our responses to be as malicious as possible, and rejoicing when our arrows find their mark?

When I put these questions to myself, I don’t like what I find in my own heart. Maybe this is true for you, too. May this Easter season remind us that, as he was murdered, Jesus chose the way of grace—and so can we.

Gina Dalfonzo is Associate Editor, Features, Christianity Today





WITH ME IN PARADISE

BY WARREN COLE SMITH

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

LUKE 23:43

One of the many ironies in Scripture is this: Hope often shines brightest in the darkest of moments. It is certainly difficult to think of a darker moment than Jesus on the cross. The physical torment had reached its climax. His suffering must have been extreme. Extreme, too, was the suffering of the two men hanging on crosses to Jesus’ left and right. One criminal, we learn in verse 39, “hurled insults at Jesus,” saying, “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!”

But the other criminal responded differently. He knew the end of life was near, so he rebuked the first criminal by asking: “Don’t you fear God?” It’s a question we should all ask ourselves. After all, in the grand sweep of time, in which even the longest life is but a fleeting moment, aren’t each of us little more than an instant away from standing before the Judgment of God?

The answer is “yes,” and that answer is bleak and morbid . . . if it is the final answer. But thanks be to God, it is not! Fear and death needn’t be the end of man. The humbled criminal’s fear of God brings into sharp focus his position before God, and that in turn leads him to depend fully on the grace of God.

The repentant criminal then states plainly the hope of the Gospel. It is hard to find—in all of Scripture—a clearer expression of that Gospel than what comes from this condemned man in his last moments: “We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus responds the only way His character will allow: “I tell you the truth: Today you will be with me in paradise.” For this criminal, with moments to live, still there was hope. So it is for us, too, if we repent and believe.

Warren Cole Smith is the Vice-President of Mission Advancement for the Colson Center for Christian Worldview.

BEHOLD YOUR MOTHER

BY EMILY COLSON

“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!”

JOHN 19:26-27

Jesus looked down from the cross, His eyes squinting with the sun and searing pain. Scattered below Him were those whose mocking voices still pierced the air. His eyes came to rest on two figures. There, near the foot of the cross, He saw His own mother and His disciple, John. With the weight of all sin heaped on His shoulders and the agony of separation from God, our suffering savior breathes words to ease *their* suffering.

“Dear woman,” He whispers as he looks into the grieving face of His mother. “Behold your son.” He then turns to John and says, “Behold your mother.” Jesus, who is dying in *our* place, asks a faithful follower to take *His* place and care for His mother. Jesus is not calling them to love *as if* they were family; He is establishing that *they are family*. Even as He is dying on the cross, offering life to us in the world to come, He offers His divine compassion in the here and now. Soon Jesus would defeat death, return to His devoted disciples, and send them to be His witnesses “to the ends of the earth.” But first, with words uttered from the cross, Jesus calls his disciple to care for the needs of the one who is near.

Our Jesus sees us, too. He hears the deep ache and groans of this world – the widows and orphans, the oppressed and the fatherless, the prisoner and the disabled, the elderly and the unborn. And He whispers to the heart of His church, to *His family* of believers -

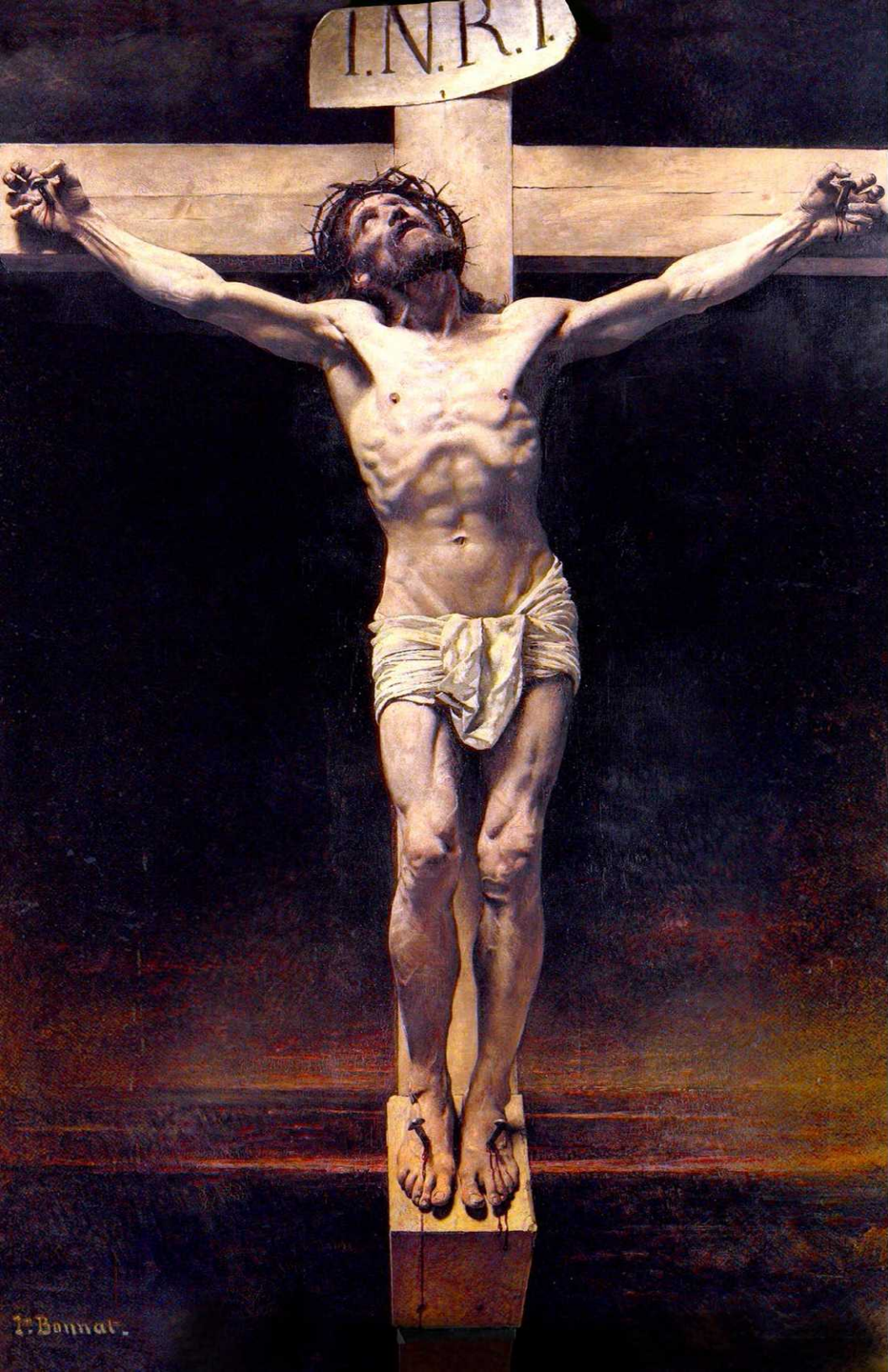
You belong to me and to each other.

Love each other as I have loved you.

And make my love visible to this suffering and dying world.

Author of “Dancing with Max,” Emily Colson is a member of the Board of Directors of the Colson Center for Christian Worldview.





MY GOD, MY GOD

BY ROBERTO RIVERA

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

MATTHEW 27:46

It is tempting to see this as the “low point” of Jesus’ Good Friday. During his interrogation by the Sanhedrin, Herod, and Pilate, Jesus was in command. He said little. What He did say left his interrogators sensing that they were the ones being judged (See John 12:31). Then came the ninth hour and His “cry of dereliction”: **ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?** Had His command vanished under the weight of suffering?

I don’t think so. On the contrary, I think it was, in some ways, the ultimate expression of His command—rooted in His trust of the Father and His embrace of His vocation. Jesus knew the Father’s promises to never leave us nor forsake us could be trusted. That trust received its fullest expression in the complete embrace of His vocation as Messiah—“Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end.” From the Scriptures, He knew it “was necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things” (Luke 24).

Chief among those Scriptures was Psalm 22. All of us are familiar with its opening refrain: “My God, my God . . .” Many are acquainted with its other laments: “All who see me mock me;” “they divide my garments among them;” “for my clothing they cast lots.” But what we overlook are the expressions of praise and trust in YHWH that run through the lament: “Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.” “In you our fathers trusted . . . In you they trusted and were not put to shame.”

And, most gloriously, “And I will live for the Lord; my descendants will serve you. The generation to come will be told of the Lord, that they may proclaim to a people yet unborn the deliverance you have brought.” We are those descendants. Jesus’ words weren’t a cry of dereliction, they were an act of trust—of confidence—that the deliverance His Father promised was at hand.

Roberto Rivera is Senior Fellow at the Colson Center for Christian Worldview.

I THIRST

BY JOHN STONESTREET

“After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), ‘I Thirst.’”

JOHN 19:28

Earlier in his ministry, Jesus had, on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, “stood up and cried out, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink’” (7:37). Now, on the cross, He who said these words was, Himself, thirsty.

According to moral philosopher Susan Neiman the world changed on All Saints Day in 1755. In Lisbon, Portugal, a ten-minute earthquake, followed by a tsunami and fires, killed an estimated 60,000 people, many crushed by collapsing churches where they gathered to celebrate that Christian holy day.

For many Western intellectuals, this incident of natural evil proved God could no longer be trusted. French philosopher Voltaire offered scathing words in a poem:

“Are you then sure, the power which would create
The universe and fix the laws of fate,
Could not have found for man a proper place,
But earthquakes must destroy the human race?”

So, in the modern era, trust moved from God to man. And it seemed to work: technological advances, scientific progress, scholarly criticism of the Bible.

The moral evils of the 20th century, however, revealed that trust in man was misplaced: Auschwitz, fascism, and global violence.

The cross directly addresses this world of moral and natural evils. God is not aloof from human suffering as Voltaire imagined, nor will human evil have the final say. Our God once thirsted, like we



do. Our God entered the world of human suffering, suffered Himself, and has the scars to prove it.

Nearly two centuries after Voltaire, another poem, by theologian Edward Shillito, offers a different take on the suffering we experience:

If we have never sought, we seek Thee now;
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow;
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.

The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
In all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm
Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars we claim Thy grace.

If when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
We know today what wounds are; have no fear;
Show us Thy Scars; we know the countersign.

The other gods were strong, but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.





IT IS FINISHED

BY SHANE MORRIS

“When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished,’ and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”

JOHN 19:30

The inspired Greek translation of these words, which Jesus likely spoke in Aramaic, is “tetelestai,” often rendered in English as “it is finished.” John’s choice of words is significant. In the Greco-Roman world, “tetelestai” was stamped on receipts to indicate a completed purchase. But what did Jesus purchase? Who were the parties in this transaction?

For 1,400 years, Israelites sacrificed animals, both in the Tabernacle and eventually in the Temple. The volume of blood would assault our modern senses. Ceremonial cleansing and atonement was carried out for millions of people by full-time priests who slit animals’ throats, broke their bodies, and immolated them before God. Priests performed these offices daily, offering atonement not only for the people, but for themselves (Hebrews 7:27).

Christ took up the work of these Levitical priests, but something about His priesthood was crucially different. When this High Priest in a more ancient order offered Himself to the Father as a perfect sacrificial lamb, He atoned for His people’s sin in a way the deaths of bulls and goats never could (Hebrews 10:4). After declaring “tetelestai” over His completed suffering on Calvary, He returned to life and sat down at the right hand of the Father, having accomplished everything He’d set out to do (Hebrews 10:11-12).

Christians now live in this completed work. We work, play, worship, and die reconciled to God, needing no other sacrifice for sin than the blood of Jesus, which He continually pleads before the Father on our behalf. While religions throughout history demand constant propitiation for their ever-hungry gods, Christianity offers a perfect relationship based on justice fully satisfied. It is accomplished. The debt is fully paid. We who were enemies of God now live as children and heirs, reconciled to the Creator, the creation, and to one another.

Shane Morris is Senior Writer at the Colson Center for Christian Worldview.

FATHER!

BY BILL BROWN

“Father! Into your hands, I commit my spirit”

LUKE 23:46

With his last words, Jesus called out to the Father. This one word says it all. When Jesus first called God his own Father, the Jewish leaders “tried all the more to kill Him” (John 5:16-18). They bristled at the familiarity of the name, judging it blasphemous. He ignored the threat and consistently referred to God as his Father—170 more times. This was His last.

At a public forum, an Islamic scholar challenged me, “There are 99 names for Allah in the Quran; ‘Father’ is not one of them.” He went on to say, “To call Allah ‘Father’ is blasphemy for it brings him down to the human level.”

“But this is the point,” I said to him. “Jesus reveals the creator and sustainer of the universe as His Father. And ours. God came down to earth to bring His family back together.”

“Into your hands, I commit my spirit.” A few hours before, Jesus tried to calm the troubled hearts of the disciples who were utterly misunderstanding the unfolding story he was telling them around the supper table. He was leaving, he said, but coming back for them. They still did not understand his leaving meant his death. Their worldly point of view could not include death as any sort of success.

But with His last breath, Jesus uttered words still resonating hope today. His victorious surrender forever answers the ultimate mystery, “What happens when we die?” Death is not the end—it is a comma, not a period. Physical death is but the movement of our essential nature to God’s presence. The body dies, the spirit lives on to be newly clothed, embodied, vibrant, eternal.

In three days, it will all make sense.

Bill Brown is National Director, Colson Fellows, the Colson Center for Christian Worldview.

