

Life: Death like no other

March 12, 2015

• *The Bible Studies for Life* lesson for March 29 focuses on Matthew 27:28-31, 45-50, 54.

According to Open Doors, a nonprofit ministry serving persecuted Christians, more than 100 million Christ-followers are persecuted for their faith—mostly in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Recent photos circulating on the Internet of Christian men in Iraq on their knees, waiting to be executed, are horrific. In February, [CNN reported](#) 262 Assyrian Christians were held hostage in Syria.

Although Christians in the United States do not experience persecution similar to what is happening in other parts of the world, our reputation has eroded in the last several decades as it seems fewer and fewer people see Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity, as a positive influence on American culture.

The way of Jesus is revolutionary

Since the earliest days of the church, the way of Jesus has threatened governments and religions. Yet the love of Jesus is so strong and his salvation is so revolutionary to the lives of his followers, we are willing to suffer humiliation in his name and—for many of our brothers and sisters around the world—die for him.

Jesus warned his followers they would be persecuted just as he was: “Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20). The Messiah’s popularity surged and waned during his three-year earthly ministry. He was wildly popular with the people when he entered Jerusalem for the last time, riding on a donkey through the gates of the city while the

people waved palm branches and cried: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!" (John 12:13).

A few days later, however, the Savior was arrested, jailed and tortured. The crowds changed their chants of praise to shouts of murder. "Crucify him!" they cried (Matthew 27:22). The guards ridiculed Jesus' kingship by dressing him in a scarlet robe, pushing a crown of thorns onto his head and putting a staff in his right hand. "Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him. 'Hail, king of the Jews!' they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. ... Then they led him away to crucify him" (Matthew 27:28-31).

Darkness enveloped the land

While Jesus hung from the cross, darkness enveloped the land as if God's creation were mourning the death of the one in whom "all things were created" (Colossians 1:16). While a few onlookers wondered if he would call on Elijah to save him, Jesus "cried out again in a loud voice" and died (Matthew 27:50). Creation continued to mourn as an earthquake disinterred bodies from their graves and ripped apart the veil guarding the Holy of Holies in the temple.

The Apostle John says Jesus' dying shout was "It is finished." This phrase means much more than a pronouncement of death. It means Jesus, the promised one, God incarnate, the good teacher, had completed the work God sent him to do. God had prepared his people to understand the need for Jesus' sacrifice since the beginning of time. God provided coverings from animal skins for Adam and Eve when their sin caused them to be ashamed of their nakedness before God.

He provided a ram for Abraham instead of requiring him to sacrifice Isaac, his only son. He saved the first-born of the enslaved Hebrew people when they spread the blood of the lamb on their doorposts. Sacrifice for

redemption is central to the gospel message. The sacrificial blood of Jesus, God's only Son, is the covering we need for our sin. When we accept his sacrifice, we claim the eternal victory over death that Christ won for us.

'Surely he was the Son of God!'

The centurion who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion accepted his sacrifice. Looking around at the earthquake, the darkness, the resurrected bodies and up at the cross, he and the others with him said, "Surely he was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54).

Sometimes in our relatively safe American churches, we get a little uncomfortable singing or talking about the blood of Jesus. It can seem somewhat morbid. Considering the unfathomable sacrifice of our Savior, this seems ridiculous if not heretical. It is essential to reinforce our spiritual memories of the sacrifice Jesus made. Without blood, there is no life. Without death, there is no resurrection. Ultimately, the story of the crucifixion is a story of love—God's love for us.