

HOW CAN I BE SAVED?

A modern-day conversation
based on the Bible



Michael Swiger



introduction

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There are some questions that are both extraordinarily simple and exceedingly complex. The question of how we can be saved is one of those questions. On the one hand the answer is as straightforward as believing in Jesus Christ, that His life, death, resurrection,

and ascension made it possible to be right with God. On the other hand, understanding what those things mean and how they brought us peace with God is an intricate and detailed conversation.

Yet it is a question that must be asked and when it is, it needs to be answered. In the pages that follow, Mike Swiger retells a compelling story from Scripture of when this question was asked and answered. We offer this with the prayer that it will help you appreciate the beautifully simple and complex salvation that Christ has won for us.

Our Daily Bread Ministries

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9:55 P.M.

Deputy John Kirchner ascended the white marble steps two at a time at the Crawford County Courthouse, just before ten o'clock, as wispy clouds obscured the waning full-moon. The nip of late October flared Kirchner's nostrils. He hustled to work every evening just before shift change, usually jogging the two blocks from his home where he lived with his wife and two daughters. Kirchner jerked open the hefty oak-paneled door.

"Anything exciting tonight, Sam?" he asked, stepping through the metal detector at the top of the stairs leading to the jail.

"Couple religious nuts got pounded pretty good by a group of skinheads on the square today," the heavyset deputy said.

"How'd that get started?"

"Who knows? By the time our boys got there, they were already busted up."

"What are they doing here?"

"They resisted arrest," he said, tracing invisible quotation marks in the air with his pudgy fingers, "and got tuned up again when they got here."

“Where are they now?”

“Cuffed and stuffed in the hole.”

“I won’t get much sleep tonight with those guys moanin’.”

“Good luck.” He tossed a thick set of keys in the air.

Kirchner’s thick-soled boots thudded down the well-worn marble steps. Even after six years of working the graveyard shift, he still could not get used to the dank, musty smell of the jail. He looked down the narrow corridor between the floor-to-ceiling grid of bars and braces, ten cells on each side. White knuckles gripped the bars on the first cell to his right.

“What up, Roller?”

“On your rack, inmate.” Kirchner banged the bars with his nightstick. “Go to sleep.”

The deputies who worked the jail had been called “rollers” by the inmates since the jail first opened. The cell doors rolled open or closed simultaneously by the officer who turned the large steel wheel jutting out from the wall at the end of the range. Kirchner slowly paced the corridor inspecting each cell, making sure everyone was alive. Two narrow steel doors stood side-by-side at the end of the range, sealing the two concrete, cube-shaped cells known as *the hole*, reserved for inmates deemed to be a risk to themselves or others. He tapped his stick against the door on the left as he squinted through the narrow Plexiglas observation window.

“Let me see you move in there,” Kirchner yelled.

A middle-aged man in an orange jumpsuit moaned

as he shifted on the plastic mattress pocked with cigarette burns, handcuffs and shackles biting into his wrists and ankles, his right eye swollen shut.

“All right.” Kirchner stepped over to the right-hand cell and tapped on the door. “Show me you’re alive.”

No response from the man huddled in a fetal position on the mattress facing the cell wall.

“Let me see you move,” he yelled, then kicked the cell door, rattling the hinges.

The man flopped over on his back, revealing a face beaten and distorted almost beyond recognition. Red-purple contusions swelled both eyes into mere slits. Dried, crusted blood rimmed both nostrils. Kirchner grimaced.

“All right, boys, lights out,” he shouted, flipping a switch on the wall that dimmed the cell lights. “I don’t want to hear a peep until morning.”

11:05 P.M.

Kirchner awoke to the sound of singing. He shook his head, then ground his fists into his eyes. The sound seemed too harmonious, too melodious to be coming from real humans. Someone must have smuggled a radio into the jail. No. Impossible. As he gathered his bearings the words of the song started registering in his mind, words of worship and praise to God.

Where is that music coming from?

The slightly muted a cappella vocals drifted from

behind the doors of solitary confinement.

But why would they be singing?

He grabbed his nightstick and drew it back to pound on the desk, but something stilled his hand. He hung the stick from his belt, then hesitated for a few moments before pacing down the range. Swiveling his head from side-to-side, he noticed all the inmates awake and listening intently.

“Hey, Roller,” said the man in the first cell. “Em boys can blow, can’t they?”

Kirchner reached the wall and peered into the first cell. He could not believe his eyes: The man knelt beside his bed, eyes closed, face lifted toward the ceiling with a rapturous expression lighting his pummeled features. His voice blended perfectly in harmony with the man in the neighboring cell.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he said, rapping the back of his hand against the cell door on his right. “I told you I did not want to hear a peep until morning.”

The singing stopped.

“Sorry, sir,” the first man said. “It’s kind of hard to sleep in this condition.” He held up his handcuffed wrists.

“Why are you praising God?” Kirchner shook his head. “Look at you. You’re all busted up in a jail cell.”

“Are you some kind of minister?” Kirchner asked.

“Not me, I’m the worship leader.” He nodded toward the next cell. “He’s the pastor.”

“What kind of God allows His followers to get

their brains beaten out for doing His will?”

“Our God could let us out right now, if He wanted to,” said the man in the right-hand cell. “But even if He doesn’t, we will still praise Him.”

“Let ’em boys sing, Roller,” shouted a voice from the other end of the range.

“It beats the cussin’ and fussin’ we used to,” a high-pitched voice chimed in.

“Be my guest,” Kirchner said, as he walked back to his desk and plunked back down. “Just keep it down.”

Moments later Kirchner drifted off to sleep again to the soothing, resounding strains of the most beautiful praises to God he had ever heard.

12:01 A.M.

Around midnight Kirchner jolted awake to the sensation of giant footfalls shaking the floor. His eyes opened. His mind focused. The whole jail rumbled. He stood. Ceiling beams cracked. Glass shattered. Steel bars clattered. The filing cabinet behind him lurched forward, spilling its contents. The quaking intensified. The floor heaved beneath him, tossing him to the ground like a ragdoll. His eyes squinted against the ceiling debris raining down. The lights went out. He curled up on the floor, his fingernails clawing at the cement. Something fell from the ceiling and thumped across his upper back. He knocked it away, then resumed the fetal position, shielding his head with his arms, waiting to die.

Moment after eternal moment the floor bucked and heaved.

The earth stopped quaking.

Kirchner reached his left hand back to his belt and unsnapped the flap over his flashlight. He shined the beam down the range; the light struggling against the thick veil of dust and smoke. Twisted cell doors lay in pieces on the floor. He could see the dark openings at the end of the range where the steel doors used to seal in the high-risk prisoners. A shiver traced his spine. Everything was too quiet. The inmates must have escaped. He struggled to his feet, then searched the ground with his flashlight for his radio.

“Don’t worry, sir,” said a voice he recognized as one of the singers. “We are all here.”

Kirchner shined the light back down the range to see the two savagely beaten men emerge from their cells, their handcuffs and shackles gone. Peace radiated from their faces. A sudden, soul-suffocating dread swept over his heart.

These men caused this. Their God set them free.

Kirchner felt drawn to them. Some strange force tugged him, quickened him. A new awareness awakened deep within him. He scampered over the wreckage toward them, the tiny beam of his flashlight darting with every stumble. When he reached the two men, he fell at their feet and in a primal voice from the bottom of his being he cried out:

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

“Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.”

“How can I believe in Jesus Christ when I don’t even believe in God?”

2:30 A.M.

John Kirchner shook his head to clear the stupor. For the first time, he noticed the chilly night air against the sweat on the back of his neck. The pounding of his pulse in his ears began to subside as he surveyed the surreal scene in front of him. A blanket of blackness draped the city. No streetlights. No traffic lights. Only cones of light darting around from flashlights. Miraculously, no harm came to anyone in the jail, and even more remarkable, none of the prisoners tried to escape. As the adrenaline rush wore off, Kirchner searched the faces of the inmates sitting in a circle on the ground. When he found the battered face of the pastor, an involuntary smile turned up the corner of his mouth. He walked over, bent down, and placed a hand on his shoulder, and said, “Can I have a word with you?”

The two men walked a few paces away from the group, just out of earshot.

“What’s your name?” Kirchner asked, stretching out his hand.

“Thompson. Bill Thompson.”

“And you’re a pastor?”

“That’s right.”

“I don’t know what happened tonight or why, but I can’t get your words out of my head.”

“Sometimes God uses something dramatic to get our attention.”

“I’d say an earthquake might be overkill.”

“Sometimes it takes extremes.”

“If He exists, He’s got mine.”

“Have you ever read the Bible?”

“When I was a kid,” Kirchner said, looking at the ground. “My grandmother dragged me to church every Sunday.”

“You work in the criminal justice system, right?”

“Since I was twenty years old.”

“Well, the criminal justice system in America is based on the Bible, and for someone who works in law enforcement, it provides a pretty good lens through which to examine spiritual things.”

“I don’t follow you.”

“Well, let’s start at the beginning. Whenever a crime is committed, what’s the first thing that has to be established before the investigation can begin?”

“Jurisdiction.”

“That’s right. If a crime takes place in the city of Akron, a judge from Cleveland has no legal authority to hear the case because he lacks jurisdiction.”

“So, what’s your point?”

“The Bible claims that because God created the world, He has proper jurisdiction over everyone who has ever lived.”

“I don’t believe the Bible.”

“You don’t have to believe the Bible to see the proof. In fact, the best evidence comes from math and science.”

“I’ve always thought that science disproved the Bible.”

“Absolutely not so.”

“The *Law of Conservation of Energy* states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed, it only changes form.”

“I learned that back in high school.”

“So, that means the potential energy in . . .”

Thompson looked around in the moonlight and picked up a broken branch on the ground at his feet. “. . . this piece of wood is converted into the same amount of kinetic energy in the form of heat and light when it is caught on fire.”

“Agreed.”

“The total amount of energy in the universe is exactly the same before and after the twig is burned, the energy only changed form. Similarly, the *Law of Conservation of Mass* states that matter can neither be created nor destroyed, it only changes shape or state. An ounce of water when frozen is an ounce of ice, and an ounce of water boiled produces an ounce of steam. The matter still exists, it has only changed form.”

“I follow you.”

“Think about how much matter and energy is in the sun alone—over one million Earths would fit into the sun.”

“Whoa, that’s a lot of matter.”

“And the sun is a relatively small star. A hypergiant star is so big that about seven billion of our suns would fit inside it!”

“No way.”

“I just finished reading a book by David Blatner called *Spectrums: Our Mind-Boggling Universe*, and he claimed that there are ten million stars for every grain of sand on planet earth.”

“That’s almost impossible to believe.”

“Take mathematics for example. The laws of mathematics cannot change. Zero times zero equals what?”

“Zero.”

“Correct. And zero times zero equals zero whether you believe it or not, and sixty billion years of time and chance cannot change the result. Zero is the mathematical definition of nothingness.”

“I agree with all this, but what’s your point?”

“Just this. If matter and energy can neither be created nor destroyed, and if *something* cannot come from *nothing*, then where did all of this matter and energy in the universe come from?”

Kirchner opened his mouth to reply, but his mind could not conjure up an answer. The question had occurred to him when he first rejected God, but he never found an adequate answer. He tried to embrace the theory that matter was eternal, but he knew this was intellectually dishonest. After all, how could he reject an eternal being as illogical, but then accept matter as eternal. After a long pause, Kirchner answered honestly: “I don’t know.”

“The Bible says that God exists outside of the physical universe and that He created everything *ex nihilo*. That’s a Latin phrase that means ‘out of nothing.’”

“If God exists,” Kirchner started, “and I’m not sayin’ that He does, why would we be worried about Him as a judge? I mean, the whole thing sounds a bit unfair.”

“The concept of *Probable Cause* is helpful here.”

“I thought you said you were a pastor.”

“I am.”

“You sound more like a lawyer.”

“I went to law school for two years before I became a Christian.”

“Now I know I’m in trouble.”

“*Probable Cause* does not require airtight evidence in order to *arrest* someone as a suspect for a crime. All that is needed are enough apparent facts, supported by logical inferences, that would lead a reasonable person to believe that something is true. The Bible tells us that God’s invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, are clearly seen in the things that He made. So, we are without excuse.”

“I’ve never had a problem finding excuses for not believing.”

“People only believe what they want to believe.” He waved his hand toward the cloudless sky. “Think about the clock-like movement of the moon. Did you know that the moon is only about one quarter the size of earth and orbits about a quarter-million miles away? It spins so very slowly that it takes twenty-seven days to revolve on its axis one time. That’s precisely how long it takes for the moon to loop around the Earth one time.”

“So the same side of the moon always faces the earth.”

“Exactly. This stable counterbalance also produces the ocean tides essential for life on earth.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“The moon gives silent testimony to God’s order and design.”

“On a smaller scale, one look in the mirror validates the Bible’s claim that humans are fearfully and wonderfully made. Your reflection is evidence of the incomprehensible complexity that makes up the human body.” He held up his hand and flexed his fingers.

“The body is quite remarkable.”

“Consider the brain,” Thompson knocked his first against the side of his head. “The human brain is often compared to a computer in its remarkable ability to store and process information, but as it turns out, this analogy doesn’t go far enough. I read a recent report from Stanford that said new imaging technology revealed that just one human brain contains more switches and connections than every computer and router and internet connection on Earth combined!” And this intricate array of biological super technology weighs only three pounds and fits inside your skull. I’d say that suggests God’s fingerprints are all over the human body.”

“How do you find so much time to read?”

“I don’t watch television.”

Kirchner chuckled. “I think I’ll throw mine away.”

“Would you agree, for the sake of argument, that

through astronomy and human anatomy there is enough *Probable Cause* for us to believe that God exists and that He created the world?”

2:45 A.M.

Somewhere in the darkness a diesel-powered generator sputtered to life. John Kirchner rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, trying to understand all of this. Many years had passed since he pondered such things. The older he got, the more the busyness of life crowded out such considerations. Now he only fretted about paying the bills and trying to save enough money for his daughters to go to college.

Did God really create the world? If so, did He really have jurisdiction over my life?

“Let’s say there is a God,” Kirchner said. “Isn’t He supposed to be loving?”

“He is. In fact, the Bible says that God is love.”

“But if that’s true, how did the world get so screwed up?”

“The way things are now is a far cry from where things started. When God first created the world, everything was perfect. No sin or sickness or death.”

“Man, what happened?”

“God created mankind to have loving fellowship with Him. But to make that relationship possible, He gave Adam and Eve free will. They had the capacity to love or reject Him, to obey or disobey Him. And

He only gave them a couple of restrictions they had to follow. To put it in your terms, God placed them on probation when they were in the Garden of Eden.”

“I never thought of it like that.”

“When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they broke their probation, and suffered the consequences, which included sickness, death, and broken fellowship with God. Unfortunately, those sanctions were passed down to all their descendants, including me and you.”

“There’s a whole lot more to this than I thought.”

“Fortunately, it doesn’t end there. Because of God’s great love for us He promised to provide a way to reestablish that broken relationship, and bring forgiveness and reconciliation. But few people realize they have an indictment waiting for them at Judgment Day,” Thompson said, stretching his neck. “They think that entrance into heaven is based upon their good deeds outweighing the bad.”

“That’s what I thought when I was a kid.” Kirchner looked down and shook his head. “I guess I still kind of believe that.”

“At first blush it seems plausible,” Thompson said, “until you consider all the possible ways human beings can do bad things, which the Bible calls *sins*.”

“Are you going to preach to me now?”

“Nope. I’m just going to tell you the truth. Whenever someone performs any act forbidden by God, he or she commits a sin. For instance, in the Bible God forbids stealing. If someone takes anything that does not belong to him—whether it be robbing valuables at gunpoint or taking a pen from work

without permission—that person has committed a sin.”

“Even taking a pen, huh?”

“Absolutely. But did you know that it’s possible to sin without actually doing anything?”

“How’s that possible?”

“It’s called a sin of omission.”

“How does that work?”

“By not doing the good deeds.”

“Man, I probably don’t have a lot going on in that category.”

“Throughout the Bible God compels His people to give to those in need. If someone withholds assistance from a person in need when it’s within his power to help, that person is guilty of a sin of omission.”

“I thought of good deeds as, sort of, extra credit.”

“There’s no extra credit for doing what’s required.”

“Man, I always heard God was loving, and I guess I just took it for granted that if He existed, I would be accepted no matter what. But from what you’re saying, it sounds like I’ve got a few things to worry about.”

“We can also sin with our minds, just by thinking evil thoughts.” Thompson touched both temples of his forehead with his index fingers. “Between the ears is where most sins occur.”

“I know all about that.”

“Before we do or say anything, we have to think it first. God forbids everything from envy and greed to unforgiveness and lust.”

“I’ve always tried my best to be a good person.”

“How good do you have to be to get to heaven?”

“Pretty good, I guess.”

“Let me give you a hypothetical situation. Then you tell me if you are good enough to go to heaven.”

“All right.”

“Suppose there was a woman who lived an unusually good life. From the moment of her birth until the day she died seventy-five years later, she never broke a single commandment, didn’t sleep around, never stole a paperclip, never even took more aspirins than prescribed to her. Would you say she was a good person?”

“Of course.”

“Better than you?”

“Probably.”

“But, let’s take it a step further and say that at every opportunity she always did the good deeds. She helped the poor, comforted the sick, and visited prisoners. Would you say she was a good person?”

“Absolutely.”

“Better than you?”

Kirchner paused. He suddenly did not feel very confident in his own goodness. “Yeah.”

“Still further, assume that from the time she learned to talk until her final words tumbled over her lips, she never spoke a single unkind or untruthful word. From all outward appearances, she lived a completely sin-free life. Would you say she was good enough to go to heaven?”

“Man, she’d be a saint. I’d hope she’d be on the list.”

“But let’s suppose just three times a day while preparing meals for the homeless and gazing out her kitchen window, she secretly envied and coveted

her neighbor's red brick colonial home with the fancy white pillars near the front door. She felt terrible about these sinful thoughts, and tried her best not to repeat them. By living such a righteous life, do you think she was good enough to go to heaven?"

"Without question."

"Would you say that she's a better person than you?"

"I would."

"Let's take a moment to do the math. If she only committed three sins per day, she would still rack up over a thousand sins each year. By the time she died at the age of seventy-five, she would have over eighty thousand sins to answer for!"

"Whoa."

"And this with only three sins per day. How much mercy do you think she could expect to receive if she went in front of a judge with over eighty thousand prior offenses?"

"None."

"How much mercy do you think you would have received if you had died in that earthquake?"

"Bout the same."

"And I have even worse news for you. According to the Bible, the entrance requirement to heaven is way higher than just doing more good than bad."

"What is it?"

"In the book of Matthew, Jesus spelled out exactly what God requires of us to earn our way to heaven: 'You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'"

“Perfection?”

“From birth until death.”

“But that’s impossible,” Kirchner said, taking a step back and crossing his arms. “Nobody can do that.”

“Only one person ever did, but we’ll get to that in a minute.”

“I’ve always done my best to keep the Ten Commandments. I thought that was good enough.”

“Can you name six of them?”

Kirchner paused, looked down, “Probably not.”

“How can you live what you don’t know?”

Kirchner just shrugged.

“And by the way, there are more than Ten Commandments in the Bible.”

“Really? How many?”

“Six hundred and thirteen!”

“Who can possibly keep all of those straight in his head?”

“Just like in our criminal justice system, ignorance of the law is no excuse. A violation of any one of those statutes is a crime against God which will result in an indictment against us.”

“What if the person we hurt forgives us?” Kirchner thought about a certain matter between him and his wife. “Is that sin still held against us?”

“According to the Bible, every sin is an offense directed against God: ‘Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.’ This is a remarkable statement when you consider the actions of the man who penned those words.”

“As you probably figured out,” Kirchner said, “I’m

not much of a Bible scholar. I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“King David, a married man, had sex with the wife of one of his most loyal friends. Today he would be charged with statutory rape for using his position and power to coerce a woman under his authority into having sex with him. As the story unfolds, the woman became pregnant. David tried to cover it up, but when that failed, he had her husband murdered. Later the baby dies as well.”

“Man, that’s some raw stuff. How long ago did that happen?”

“About three thousand years ago.”

“Just like the headlines we read today.”

“Think of it, because of one man’s sin, a woman was raped, two people lost their lives, and an entire family was destroyed.”

“I see that happen a lot in my job.”

“I bet you do. While this is a significant amount of collateral damage, David’s sin was a crime against God alone, because He was the one who forbade those behaviors in the first place.”

“I never thought of it like that.”

“Like David we have all sinned against God. And the Bible says, ‘The wages of sin is death.’ That means all mankind is facing the same punishment—the death penalty.”

“Won’t God show mercy?”

“He could, and He wants to. How does God determine who will receive mercy and go to heaven?”

“That’s a great question,” Kirchner said. “Got an answer?”

“The answer is found in the person of Jesus Christ. But before we talk about how this all works, we first have to understand who Jesus is.”

“Jesus is Jesus, isn’t He?”

“Over the past two thousand years a lot of misconceptions have grown up over the true nature of Jesus. What’s the greatest thing you’ve ever heard about who Jesus is?”

“He healed people, didn’t He?”

“That’s what He did, but what’s the greatest thing you’ve heard about who He is?”

“He was a great moral teacher, wasn’t He?”

“He was, but He’s even greater than that.”

“Then you got me.”

“Scripture declares that Jesus Christ was God in the flesh, completely divine and fully human.”

“How is that possible?”

“That’s a great question. While we know it is true, we can’t fully understand or fully explain how one person had two natures.”

“Man, you’re blowing my mind.”

“Jesus, as a man, experienced the same life cycle as other humans: birth, growth, and death. He became hungry, thirsty, and tired. But the Bible also says that He healed the sick, defied the laws of nature by walking on water, performed exorcisms, and even forgave people of their sins. Only God can do those things. And there are even stories where we see both His humanity and divinity being exercised at

the same time. In the gospel of John there's a scene where Jesus, while visiting the grave of a close friend, is so moved with emotion that tears spilled down His cheeks. Moments later He supernaturally raises His friend from the dead. Fully God, fully man."

"I've heard about the miracles."

"The miracles were only a side benefit intended as a proof to His ultimate mission."

"Which was?"

"Jesus came to live a perfect, sinless life to offer Himself as a sacrifice and receive the death penalty that we rightfully deserve."

"That's why He died?"

3:15 A.M.

Kirchner grew up going to church with his grandmother. As a boy, he celebrated Christmas the way any child would: decorated trees, pictures with Santa, presents under the tree, but he never gave much thought to the true nature of the little baby. *Was the infant in the middle of his grandma's manger scene really God?* Kirchner thought back to Sunday school teachers always talking about Jesus dying on the cross, but he couldn't remember anyone ever explaining *why* He died.

"Jesus received capital punishment in our place." Thompson spread out his arms so that his body made the shape of the cross. "And the Romans sought to inflict as much pain and suffering as possible before

allowing the condemned man to die. When most people think of the crucifixion, they only think of Jesus being nailed to large wooden beams in the shape of a cross.”

“I thought that was the definition of crucifixion.”

“It is. But before that happened, Jesus endured a savage beating known as a scourging. The soldiers stripped Him completely naked and tied him to a post with His hands stretched above His head. One soldier, used a whip made from several leather strands with metal fragments tied to the ends to lash Jesus’s back and legs again and again. The thongs ripped through His skin and muscles. The metal thumped against His ribs, causing deep bruises from the repeated blows. The beating continued until the centurion gave the order to stop, leaving Jesus dangling from the whipping post, drenched in His own blood.”

“I never heard that before,” Kirchner said. “That’s pretty gruesome.”

“But it got worse. Then they made Jesus carry part of the cross He would die on all that way to the hill where executions took place outside of Jerusalem. Then the soldiers slammed Jesus backward against the horizontal wooden beam. While one soldier stretched out Jesus’s arm, a second felt for the indentation at the front of the wrist,” Thompson pressed two fingers into his wrist at the base of his left hand, “before driving a large, iron nail through the wrist and deep into the wood. The nail severed the two large nerves running into the hand. Can you imagine how that felt?”

“No. I really can’t.”

“Think about a dentist hitting a raw nerve, but the pain never going away.”

Kirchner shuddered.

“The process was repeated with the second arm. Next the soldiers pressed Jesus’s left foot over his right, then drove an inch-thick spike through his arches deep into the vertical beam. Finally, they hoisted the cross up and slid it into a hole in the rock. Bolts of searing pain blasted through His wrists and feet as the entire weight of His body hung suspended by nails. He only sucked in short puffs of air and quickly exhaled, and this only by pulling Himself up by the nails and dragging His shredded back against the rough beam.”

“It gives me chills picturing the scene,” Kirchner said.

“Speech was nearly impossible. He manages to blurt out only seven brief phrases throughout the ordeal. Hours passed. Blood drained. Muscles cramped. As exhaustion, dehydration, and finally asphyxiation overtook Him, Jesus pulls Himself up on the nails and cries out, *‘It is finished.’* With His mission completed, Jesus bowed His head and died.”

“Wow,” Kirchner said, “That’s horrifying.”

“Because Jesus committed no sin, He owed no debt. Therefore, He could offer Himself in our place.”

“So, what you are saying is that Jesus literally died for me.”

“That’s the Gospel, the Good News.”

“Man, I’ve never heard that before.” He paused. “At least, I never understood it that way before.”

“What took place on the cross was the greatest exchange imaginable: Jesus traded His righteousness

for our sinfulness. He took our punishment, so we could receive forgiveness. He died to give us eternal life. The Bible, in the book of Romans says, “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

“So that indictment you talked about earlier that is hanging over my head is all taken care of because of what Jesus did on the cross?”

“Our indictment was nailed to the cross, and the debt we owed paid in full. Our moral stain has been washed away by the sinless blood of Christ. But the story doesn’t end at the cross. Three days later He rose from the dead!”

“Easter, right?”

“That’s right. Christianity rests on the historical certainty that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. The resurrection was the Father’s seal on the completed work of Christ.”

“Not only did Jesus’s resurrection demonstrate His victory over death and prove His divinity, but it guarantees the forgiveness and justification of all who believe in Him. That’s why belief in Jesus’s physical and bodily resurrection is a necessary element in receiving the gift of eternal life.”

3:45 A.M.

John Kirchner tipped his head back, took a deep breath, and looked up into the sky. How come he had never seen all those points of light before? It was as

if blinders fell from his eyes; he saw the world for the first time fresh and new. Thompson's words echoed and amplified though his mind. He knew from somewhere deeper than his mind, his very soul, that Jesus's death and resurrection way back from the past was his key to the future. He felt drawn, compelled, but still questions plagued his mind.

"So, are you saying," Kirchner began, "that Jesus died for everyone?"

"He died for the sins of the whole world."

"Then doesn't that mean that everyone will go to heaven?"

"Unfortunately, not."

"Why not?"

"While His death was *sufficient* to pay the debt for all, it is only *efficient* for those who believe."

"I don't see the difference."

"Are you familiar with President's power to grant a pardon?"

"Sure. Governors can do it too."

"That's right. But unless the pardon is knowingly accepted by the guilty party, it has no effect. Have you ever heard of the bizarre case of George Wilson?"

"No."

"George Wilson and his friend James Porter went on a multistate crime spree that included robbing and endangering the life of a mail carrier. Both men were ultimately convicted and sentenced to die. James Porter was executed. But through the influence of well-placed political friends, George Wilson received a presidential pardon. The case then took a mystifying

turn. Wilson came before the sentencing court and refused the pardon.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Who knows?”

“What a fool.”

“His lawyer appealed the case all the way to the United States Supreme Court. Chief Justice John Marshall, writing for the majority said, ‘A pardon is an act of grace, proceeding from the power entrusted with the execution of the laws. But delivery is not completed without acceptance. It may then be rejected by the person to whom it is tendered; and if it is rejected, we have discovered no power in this court to force it upon him. A pardon is a slip of paper, the value of which is determined by the acceptance of the person to be pardoned. If it is refused, it is no pardon. George Wilson must be hanged.’”

“Did they execute him?”

“They did.”

“I can’t believe someone would refuse such an amazing gift.”

“It still happens every day. God the Father is right now offering everyone a full and unconditional pardon based on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But for the pardon to be effective it must be acknowledged and received through faith.”

“I’m not sure I understand what faith really is,” Kirchner said.

“Faith is the vehicle God provided for us to claim His offer of a pardon. Faith is not a feeling or a wishful hope about some future event. True faith is

knowing with your mind that Jesus Christ really died on the cross and, and believing in your heart that He rose from the dead. When knowledge is combined with deep-seated belief, trust is produced. Trust is belief in action.”

“So, faith is belief plus trust?”

“That’s right.” Thompson placed one finger on his forehead and the other on his heart. “Many people miss heaven by eighteen inches.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let me tell you a story that I think will help here. Have you ever heard of Jean-François Gravelet?”

“No.”

“He was perhaps the most spectacular tightrope-walker of all time. Nicknamed Blondin for his yellow hair, he attempted to cross Niagara Falls on a tightrope in 1859.”

“Didn’t someone just do that recently?”

“Nik Wallenda. A strong Christian, by the way.”

“I thought I saw something about that on the news.”

“Blondin attempted this before safety nets and harness. As you can imagine, the stunt drew national publicity. On the morning of June 30, 1859, about 25,000 thrill-seekers arrived to see a rope 1,300 feet long and only two inches in diameter stretched above the churning waters below. The enormous weight of the rope caused it to sag nearly sixty feet in the middle, creating a steep slope down to the center. For Blondin to safely complete his journey, he would have to walk downhill to the midpoint then uphill the rest of the way.

“Dressed in flamboyant pink tights, Blondin took his position on the American side carrying a 26-foot-long balancing pole weighing nearly fifty pounds. Silence shrouded the crowd as he took a deep breath before stepping onto the rope. Tension climbed with each passing footfall. Women covered their faces, peeking between their fingers. One onlooker fainted. About a third of the way across, Blondin shocked the crowd by stopping, sitting down on the rope, then calling for the *Maid of the Mist*, the famous tourist vessel, to pull up beneath him.”

“Why did he do that?”

“So he could retrieve a ball of twine from his backpack. Lowering it to the waiting ship, he hauled up a bottle of wine.”

“No way.”

“He took a drink then tossed the bottle into the water. He picked up the balancing pole, then broke into a dead run until reaching the Canadian side. The crowd went crazy.”

“Man, I bet that was something to see.”

“But Blondin wasn’t done yet. He took a break then started back toward the American side, this time carrying a camera strapped to his back. After advancing about a hundred yards, he stopped, bent down and balanced his pole on the rope. He carefully removed the pack from his back, set up the tripod of the camera on the pole and rope, then took a picture of the multitude on the American side. He re-strapped the camera to his back, picked up his pole, then safely returning to the American

side. The crowd roared as he stepped off the rope, pressing in on him, cheering wildly. He motioned for silence, then shouted to the throng.

“Is there anything too hard for me to do on the rope?” Blondin shouted.

“No, no!” The crowd yelled. ‘You can do anything!’”

“How many believe I could carry a person across the falls on my back?”

“The crowd again burst into rapturous shouts of approving belief.

“He waved his arms again to hush the crowd. ‘I need one volunteer.’

“Silence.”

“No one volunteered.”

“Ahh, I get it,” Kirchner said. “There is a big difference between saying you believe, and truly believing.”

“There is. But it all starts with only believing.” A smile stretched across Thompson’s battered face. “The thief on the cross never had the chance to do anything good or bad. He simply believed.”

4:00 A.M.

John Kirchner felt like an invisible hand instantly rewired his brain so that the mysteries that eluded him for a lifetime finally made sense. For the first time, he understood the void in the pit of his soul was his relationship with Jesus Christ, the infinite God-man who loved him so much that He willingly died in

his place. He felt irresistibly drawn to place his faith in Jesus and surrender his will to God the Father. He wanted to experience forgiveness and freedom from the guilt that shackled him and weighed him down for so many years. He wanted the peace and joy he witnessed in the life of Bill Thompson.

“Are you ready to trust Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?”

“I am,” Kirchner said, “but I don’t know how.”

“There’s nothing magic in these words, but the Bible says, ‘if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.’”

“I’m ready.”

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What you have just read is a work of fiction based on an event that took place in the life of the apostle Paul found in the book of Acts. In both the account above and the one recorded in the Bible, the jailer asks the same simple, yet profound question that has bewildered mankind for thousands of years.

“What must I do to be saved?”

The answer is of ultimate importance, with eternal life weighing in the balance. The correct answer is belief in Jesus Christ. That same opportunity is being offered to you right now. Will you accept God’s pardon today?



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