

CHAPTER ONE

COMMUNION STARTS WITH FORGIVENESS

DURING MY (JOE'S) EARLY CHILDHOOD, MY PARENTS PASTORED A church. In our home, learning Bible verses was synonymous with learning how to talk. My family seemed almost bilingual—speaking Southern English at home and King James English at church. The first verse I memorized was John 3:16 (from the King James Version, of course): “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Verse 17 is equally impactful: “For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.” As we reflect on these two verses, we begin to understand the magnitude of this selfless act. God the Father willingly sent His perfect Son, Jesus, to shed His blood and forgive our sins.

Jesus willingly came to earth, knowing He would suffer and die, so we could be forgiven. When we believe in Him and receive His forgiveness, we are restored to the Father. The

forgiveness we receive from God enables us to forgive others. Forgiveness makes Communion possible.

JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED

Luke 23 describes how God provided a savior—it is the story of Jesus’s crucifixion. Two criminals and Jesus were sentenced to die at the same time. Three men were crucified that day—two died for crimes they committed, and one suffered the greatest injustice any person has ever faced. Though Jesus was innocent, He died for our sins.

In Jesus’s dying words, we see the beautiful forgiveness offered to us: “While they were nailing Jesus to the cross, he prayed over and over, ‘Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing’” (Luke 23:34). Imagine: As each spike was pounded into Jesus’s body, He repeatedly cried out the most important words ever spoken on earth: “Father, forgive them.”

At a moment of grave injustice, a moment of deep anguish, Jesus chose forgiveness instead of bitterness or anger. God, the Creator of the universe, demonstrated how to deal with injustice: He forgave.

Verse 44 tells us the whole world became dark during the last three hours of the crucifixion. Then Jesus loudly proclaimed, “Father, I surrender my Spirit into your hands,” (v. 46) just before His last breath.

The officer who watched over the bloody torture realized Jesus was innocent. Scripture says, “When the Roman captain overseeing the crucifixion witnessed all that took place, he was awestruck and glorified God. Acknowledging what they had done, he said, ‘I have no doubt; we just killed the righteous one’” (v. 47).

Imagine the officer's reaction to what he witnessed. He became simultaneously conscious of his sin and of his pardon—instantly aware he was a sinner, complicit in torture and death, yet forgiven by the one who died. Oh, what freedom, forgiveness, and joy he must have felt!

My prayer is for none of us to ever grow numb to the reality that the righteous one, God's perfect Son, Jesus, was crucified so we could be forgiven.

JESUS FORGIVES

When we realize the enormity of what occurred and accept the sacrifice Jesus became for us, our emotions can overwhelm us. Oh, how He loves!

The same hands that healed the sick and comforted the lonely were nailed to a cross and held there by passionate, eternal love for us. Jesus's blood, which flowed freely from His body, bought forgiveness, healing, and freedom for everyone who confesses that He is Lord.

The depth of forgiveness found only at the cross is what we long for in the center of our souls. Experiencing freedom from the weight of our sin fills us with awe at God's gift of salvation.

Hebrews 12:24 reads, "And we have come to Jesus who established a new covenant with his blood sprinkled upon the mercy seat; blood that continues to speak from heaven, 'forgiveness,' a better message than Abel's blood that cries from the earth, 'justice.'" What is a better word than justice? Forgiveness! Justice gives us what we deserve, but forgiveness gives us what we don't deserve—mercy and grace.

Jesus invites us to the Communion table, where we encounter the power of His blood. When we apply the blood of Jesus to our lives, we are cleansed, healed, forgiven, and freed. Chains of addiction and sin fall off. The Father declares, “You are forgiven.”

AS YOU RECEIVE COMMUNION, PRAY THIS
PRAYER:

Father, I come to You through the blood of Jesus. I receive Your forgiveness, wholeness, and freedom. Thank You for sending Jesus to be my rescuer and not my judge. I choose not to condemn but to forgive everyone who has hurt or wronged me in any way. Holy Spirit, heal my body, soul, and spirit with Your freedom and power. In Jesus's name, I pray. Amen.