

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **The Death of Jesus**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 27:45-56

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

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We come this morning to the pivotal point in all of human history. Our calendars are set to the birth of Christ—B.C. and A.D.—but God’s calendar is set to the death of Christ. It was at Jesus’ death the Old Covenant ended and the New Covenant began. It was at Jesus’ death the detailed demands of the Mosaic Law were canceled and God began to deal with us as adults. Prior to the death of Christ sins were atoned for; afterwards sins could be forgiven. When Jesus died everything changed.

Let’s turn in our Bibles to Matthew 27, and read verses 45-56:

*From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*

*When some of those standing there heard this, they said, "He's calling Elijah."*

*Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him."*

*And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.*

*At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.*

*When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!"*

*Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.*

## **What unique phenomena accompanied the death of Jesus?**

**1. Utter darkness prevailed for three hours in the middle of the day. (45)** From noon until 3:00 P.M. utter darkness covered the land as Jesus hung on the cross. The Greek term for land here can also mean “earth,” indicating the entire world. And several interesting reports in extra biblical literature suggest that this darkness may indeed have been worldwide.

Why would God introduce such a frightening supernatural sign? Well, we must understand. This is not the death of just some innocent Jew. It is not the death of a righteous prophet. It is not the death of a good moral teacher. This is not Buddha, Mohammed Gandhi, or Mother Theresa. The sun stops shining because this is the death of God’s Anointed, God’s Chosen One, The Messiah,

The King of the Jews, The King of Kings, The Son of God, The Son of Man, The Lord, The Lord of Lords. This is a judgment of God, a gigantic divine object lesson to mark the greatest sin ever committed by fallen mankind.

**2. The massive curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom. (51)** A huge woven veil separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, reports that this massive curtain was predominantly blue and ornately decorated. Ever since Moses built the Tabernacle 1400 years earlier, only one person, the High Priest, was allowed to pass through that curtain. And he could only go in there once a year on the Day of Atonement, to sprinkle blood on the brazen altar for the sins of the people.

This ritual had to be repeated year after year to remind the people that atonement for their sin was achieved through a blood sacrifice. But atonement was not final. To “atone” literally means “to cover;” it does not mean “to forgive.” Sin could not be forgiven or removed until a final, perfect sacrifice was offered. Until that happened access to God was restricted and the curtain reminded them of that.

But when Jesus died He became that once-for-all sacrifice and the need for a curtain no longer existed. Therefore, the curtain was torn in two from top to bottom by God’s miraculous act. Because of Jesus any person can now come to God directly, without the need of a priest, a sacrifice, or a ritual.

I ask you to imagine what it would have been like to be in the Temple that day when the curtain was torn in two. No Jewish eye (other than the High Priest’s) had ever seen the Holy of Holies or the Ark of the Covenant since the temple was built and the curtain was hung. Suddenly, as the priests are going through their normal rituals to mediate between the worshiper and God, the curtain is torn asunder and you behold that place you have only imagined, the place you have been taught since childhood houses the Shekinah glory of God. You would be frightened out of your skull and are probably certain you will die.

But that does not happen. The torn curtain does not signify death, but the possibility of fellowship with God, forgiveness of sin, and eternal life!

Here is what the author of Hebrews says about the rending of the curtain:

*“Therefore, brothers, 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 in full assurance of faith . . .”* (Hebrews 10:19-22).

God is no longer distant. He is inviting His people to enjoy Him without human mediation. The priesthood is now irrelevant. Amazing!

**3. An earthquake split the rocks. (51)** The rest of verse 51 tells us that “the earth shook and the rocks split.” God is trying to get the attention of the Jewish people to the effect that they have crossed a line. The crucifixion of Jesus is no ordinary act of rebellion like those they have continually engaged in for 1500 years. So God employs the same sign He used when He

appeared to Moses and to Elijah—both at Mt. Sinai, only 600 years apart—to impress upon them the fact that they are dealing with a holy God.

Exodus 19:18 tells us “Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently.” And in 1 Kings 19:11 we read, “The LORD said (to Elijah), ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.’ Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD . . .”

And you know something? The crucifixion is not the last time God is going to shake the earth in judgment. In Revelation just before the Second Coming of the Kings of Kings we read this in 16:16-19:

*Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon. The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, "It is done!" Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed.*

At the death of Jesus God provides a preview of that final earthquake.

**4. Tombs were broken open and many saints were raised to life. (52)** This is truly amazing. The miracle is not that tombs are opened, for that would happen naturally during an earthquake, especially in Jerusalem, where almost all tombs were above ground. The miracle is that “many holy people who had died were raised to life.” The term “holy people” is the term often translated “saints,” but we have to understand that Matthew is not talking about individuals who have been canonized by some denomination but rather individuals who have led holy lives. Some may have been dead for hundreds of years, others may have just died a short time before. But God rewards them with the privilege of celebrating the death (and even more the resurrection!) of Christ. You will notice that while they apparently come to life at the moment of Christ’s death, they do not appear in Jerusalem until the day of Jesus’ resurrection.

Now this raises lots of questions for which I have no answers.

Were these individuals given their final resurrection bodies early?

Or were they given temporary resurrection bodies, such as Lazarus apparently experienced, only to die again?

What did these OT saints do as they entered Jerusalem?

Whom did they visit?

What did they say?

How long did they stay?

We aren’t given the answers to these questions, but I imagine some inhabitants of Jerusalem were pretty amazed when their deceased parents or grandparents or other relatives appeared at the door. In fact, I expect all four of these supernatural phenomena contributed significantly to the incredible response when Peter preached in Jerusalem just seven weeks later on the Day of

Pentecost. Acts 2:41 tells us 3,000 people surrendered their hearts and lives to Christ on that day. I suspect that many hard hearts were pretty well softened up by the darkness, the rending of the curtain, the earthquake, and especially the resurrection of dead believers.

### **Who witnessed the death of Jesus?**

According to Matthew two groups of people were present at the Cross as Jesus died. One group was His executioners.

#### **1. The centurion and his soldiers guarding Jesus proclaimed Him the Son of God.**

**(54)** As we have mentioned previously, a centurion is a military officer in charge of 100 men, but whether all his men are present at the crucifixion seems doubtful. But at least four of them are, based on the fact that Jesus' clothes are divided between four soldiers. When they see the darkness come upon them and experience the earthquake, the soldiers are terrified. No doubt. After all, these are the same soldiers who have mocked Jesus, flogged Him, planted a crown of thorns on His head, beat him with His own mock scepter, and nailed Him to the Cross, gambling for His garments and jeering at Him as He hung there in agony. I would be afraid, too, if I were in their shoes.

The term for "terrified" in Greek is *phobia* and refers to sheer terror, the absolute panic that causes rapid heartbeat, profuse sweating, and extreme anxiety. These soldiers know instinctively that the phenomena they are witnessing are not natural but supernatural, and they declare, "Surely he was the Son of God." It's hard to determine whether this is a true faith statement or merely a recognition that they had put a person to death who had extraordinary connection to deity. But Luke tells us that the centurion not only confesses Jesus' deity but also begins to "praise God" (23:47). I feel fairly certain that he, at least, was truly converted that day. Already, Jesus' earlier prayer from the Cross, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do," is being answered.

**2. The compassionate women from Galilee refused to abandon Him. (55-56)** Note that nothing is said of the Eleven Disciples being there—just a group of women who "had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs." Jesus was noteworthy for His deep respect for women and for the loving support He received from them. In Luke 8:1-3 we read that this was true from His earliest days in ministry:

*After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.<sup>1</sup>*

Three particular women are named here in Matthew 27—Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons, who, according to Mark 15:40, is Salome, but there were undoubtedly others unnamed. They are not afraid of the soldiers or the Jewish

leaders or the mocking passersby. They are not ashamed of being identified with Jesus.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Who killed Jesus?**

Or, perhaps a better way to ask the question is, “Who was responsible for Jesus’ death?” I didn’t even print my answer in the outline because I feel the need of explaining it as soon as you see it so there is no misunderstanding. The most obvious answer to this question is the Jewish religious leaders.

**1. The Jewish religious leaders did. (Matthew 27:20)** Unfortunately, this answer has generated a great deal of anti-Semitism over the centuries. It was partially responsible for the Crusades and even for the Holocaust, but only because those who appealed to it never examined the full answer to the question of who killed Jesus. Today this answer creates a huge backlash from the Jewish community. But it is true, nevertheless. Nothing is clearer from the Gospel writers that the Jewish religious leaders called for the crucifixion of Jesus.

**2. The Gentiles also did. (Acts 4:27).** That is the thrust of Peter’s prayer in Acts 4:27: “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with *the Gentiles* and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.” That same verse puts particular responsibility upon two individuals, which confirms what we have found in the Book of Matthew:

**3. Herod did. (Acts 4:27)**

**4. Pontius Pilate did. (Acts 4:27)**

**5. Judas did. (Matthew 27:4).** He himself acknowledges this in Matthew 27:4: “I have sinned, for I have betrayed innocent blood.”

**6. Satan did. (Genesis 3:15).** Do you remember that well-know prophecy? “He (i.e. the seed of the woman, Christ) will crush your head, and you (Satan) will strike his heel.” The death of Christ was only a heal bruise because God raised Him from the dead.

**7. God did. (Acts 2:23, 4:28).** This might shock you, but it’s exactly what the Apostle Peter says in his famous sermon on the Day of Pentecost: “This man (Jesus) was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” Of course, when we say that God is in some sense responsible for the death of Jesus, we’re not assigning moral culpability to Him as we are to the human agents; we are simply saying that God was not up in heaven wringing His hands in despair as Jesus hung on the Cross. God was superintending and overseeing the whole process in order to achieve our salvation.

**8. The Holy Spirit did. (Hebrews 9:13-14).** Listen to the author of Hebrews:

*The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are*

*ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!*

But the same verse tells us that in some sense Jesus Himself was responsible, for He “offered Himself.”

**9. Jesus did! (Matthew 27:50)** Did you notice back in Matthew 27:50 that “when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.” The picture here is not of someone whose life is being taken from Him, but rather of One who surrenders it in His own power.

But there’s one last responsible party for the death of Jesus I need to mention:

**10. We did! (Isaiah 53:4-6)** Listen to these profound words:

*Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.*

*But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*

*We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

When the full responsibility for Jesus’ death is spread to all those responsible, there are no grounds for anti-Semitism. Jews are no more responsible than anyone else. Or, perhaps a better way to put it is that Jews were *as* responsible as the rest.

### **Why did Jesus have to die?**

Recently I came across a wonderful little book by John Piper entitled, *Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die*. We obviously do not have time to explain all fifty, or fifteen, or even five. But I do want to read them:

#### Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die

1. To absorb the wrath of God
2. To please His heavenly Father
3. To learn obedience and be perfected
4. To achieve His own resurrection from the dead
5. To show the wealth of God’s love and grace for sinners
6. To show his own love for us
7. To cancel the legal demands of the law against us
8. To become a ransom for many
9. For the forgiveness of our sins
10. To provide the basis for our justification
11. To complete the obedience that becomes ours righteousness

12. To take away our condemnation
13. To abolish circumcision and all rituals as the basis of salvation
14. To bring us to faith and keep us faithful
15. To make us holy, blameless, and perfect
16. To give us a clear conscience
17. To obtain for us all things that are good for us
18. To heal us from moral and physical sickness
19. To give eternal life to all who believe on Him
20. To deliver us from the present evil age
21. To reconcile us to God
22. To bring us to God
23. So that we might belong to Him
24. To give us confident access to the holiest place
25. To become for us the place where we meet God
26. To bring the OT priesthood to an end and become the eternal high priest
27. To become a sympathetic and helpful priest
28. To free us from the futility of our ancestry
29. To free us from the slavery of sin
30. That we might die to sin and live to righteousness
31. So that we would die to the law and bear fruit for God
32. To enable us to live for Christ and not ourselves
33. To make His cross the ground of all our boasting
34. To enable us to live by faith in Him
35. To give marriage its deepest meaning
36. To create a people passionate for good words
37. To call us to follow His example of lowliness and costly love
38. To create a band of crucified followers
39. To free us from bondage to the fear of death
40. So that we would be with Him immediately after death
41. To secure our resurrection from the dead
42. To disarm the rulers and authorities
43. To unleash the power of God in the Gospel
44. To destroy the hostility between races
45. To ransom people from every tribe and language and people and nation
46. To gather all His sheep from around the world
47. To rescue us from final judgment
48. To gain His joy and ours
49. So that He would be crowned with glory and honor
50. To show that the worst evil is meant by God for good

(By the way, we have a number of copies of this little book available at the Welcome Center. They are free for you to take as long as they last.)

I am going to take just two of these reasons for the death of Christ and focus our attention there. I choose the first because I think it may be the most basic reason of all, and because it is actually

addressed right here in Matthew 27:46. Just before He died Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He is crying out in anguish because of the separation He is experiencing from His heavenly Father for the first and only time in all of eternity. How is this explained?

**1. Jesus died to absorb and satisfy the wrath of God. (Matthew 27:46, 1 John 2:2)**

The wrath of God is not a popular topic today. In fact, it is looked upon by many Christians as almost an embarrassment, as something basically unworthy of God. The love of God is a much more popular topic, as is the power of God, or His grace. But we hear little about His wrath or judgment. The biblical writers, however, have no such reticence. They tell us again and again that because God is absolutely holy, He cannot have sin in His presence, and His wrath toward sin must be satisfied.

One problem we have in understanding God’s wrath is that in English “wrath” generally refers to uncontrolled anger. But God’s wrath is never uncontrolled, never a temper tantrum. Instead it is the inevitable concomitant of true holiness. It is righteous indignation.

The principal reason we do not readily understand and accept the appropriateness of God’s wrath is that we do not readily understand and accept how sinful we are. We are sinners who have violated the character and commandments of God; in fact, we are His enemies. If we realized just how sinful we are we would have no problem believing in the wrath of God.

In the OT more than 20 words are used to express the wrath of God, and nearly 600 different passages speak of it. We are told that God’s wrath is against those who sin against others, against Job’s friends because of their foolish and arrogant counsel, against Sodom and Gomorrah, against idol worshipers, and against “all who forsake God” (Ezra 8:22).

The prophet Nahum, to give just one example, speaks the unvarnished truth about God’s wrath toward sin. Nahum 1:2-3, 6-8:

*The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies.*

*The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and clouds are the dust of his feet.*

Some, of course, try to explain this away, claiming that the God of the OT was a God of wrath, but the God of the NT is a God of love and grace. But the fact is that God’s love and grace are certainly not absent from the OT, and the wrath of God is by no means absent from the NT. While we live in a day of grace, a day characterized by the free offer of the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, that does not mean that God has ceased to be wrathful toward sin.

Romans 1 tells us that “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” Paul then goes

on to speak of the natural consequences of sin as one way God's wrath is expressed. When the sexually immoral get STD's and when alcoholics get cirrhosis of the liver and when smokers get lung cancer, that is evidence of God's wrath toward sin.

But God's wrath is not only experienced through the natural consequences of sin; it is also experienced in a judicial way by those who reject His Son. Listen to Hebrews 10:28-31:

*Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

Furthermore, the NT makes it clear that there is coming a future time when God is going to pour out His wrath on this earth in a special day of Judgment. In 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10 we read:

*"God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed."*

Now all this is from the NT. Don't ever let anyone tell you that God's wrath is irrelevant today.

The wrath of God is fundamentally different from the wrath, let's say, of our judicial system. If by chance we run afoul of the law, there is always the chance that we might be able to cop a plea, or escape on a technicality, or plead guilty to some lesser offense. But we cannot do that with God's wrath. As Habakkuk declared of God, "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong." Furthermore, we are dealing with One to whom not only our actions but also our thoughts and intentions are visible. Who can stand before such a God? Who can withstand such wrath? No One. That's the bad news.

But there is good news in that Jesus *absorbed* and *satisfied* God's wrath toward sin. In fact, it is this truth that explains why Jesus speaks as He does from the Cross here in Matthew 27:46: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Since Jesus is bearing the sins of mankind (indeed, *becoming* sin for us, as Paul said, the Father has to turn His back on His Son.

In the movie *The Last Emperor*, the young child who becomes the last emperor of China is asked by his brother, "what happens when you do wrong?" The young emperor replies, "when I do wrong, someone else is punished." He then demonstrates this phenomenon by breaking a jar, which results in one of his servants being beaten. At the cross, Jesus does the exact opposite of the Last Emperor. The King of Kings, the Best Emperor, is punished for the sins of His servants.<sup>iii</sup> Jesus "became a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross" (1 Peter 2:24).

I would be the first to admit that the mystery of this separation of the Son from the Father on the Cross is far too deep for even the most mature believer to fully understand. But it should at the very least help us grasp the fact that in His death Jesus was absorbing the wrath of God. But He did more than that—He satisfied God’s wrath. There is a really big theological word that appears in 1 John 2:1-2, a word we do not use often today, but it is a very important word—propitiation.

*“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice (KJV, propitiation) for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”*

I don’t like the NIV’s translation, “atoning sacrifice,” because it hides the real meaning of the Greek term. It means “satisfaction.” Jesus has satisfied God’s wrath toward sin. God is no longer angry at us. That is why penance for sin is not a biblical concept. Repentance is; godly sorrow is; but not penance. Penance would be needed if God was still angry at His children. But He isn’t. Jesus satisfied that wrath by taking our sin upon Himself.

Now that doesn’t mean that God’s wrath is no longer an issue of concern. It’s no longer an issue for *us* who have accepted Christ as their Savior, but it is still very much in play for those who have refused the offer. Here’s how James Boice puts it: “Grace does not eliminate wrath; wrath is still stored up against the unrepentant. But grace does eliminate the necessity for *everyone* to experience it.”<sup>iv</sup>

Very briefly I want to mention a second reason why Jesus died. It may sound contradictory to the first, but it is not.

**2. Jesus died to demonstrate the love of God. (Romans 5:8, 5:10)** Paul tells us in Romans 5:8, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” And then he adds two verses later, “For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” The most visible expression of love God ever revealed is when He gave His one and only Son to die on the Cross—not for overachievers, not for holy and righteous people, not for those who were seeking God—but for “sinners” and “enemies.”

**Conclusion:** Friends, perhaps the most stunning and life-changing truth you can possibly grasp is that God is not angry with you. You don’t have to satisfy Him. In fact, nothing you could possibly do could satisfy Him because Jesus already did that when He died on the Cross. You don’t have to perform, you don’t have to do penance, you don’t have to buy Him off. All He wants you to do is say, “Thank you, Father, for sending Jesus to die for me. I accept Him as my Lord and Savior.”

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i. The identification of the various Mary’s in the NT is a difficult problem. There may have been

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as many as six different women by that name. Mary Magdalene has often been identified as the “woman who was a sinner” who anointed Christ’s feet in Simon the Pharisee’s house, but there is no real evidence for that. All we really know for sure about her is that she was once delivered from seven demons.

ii. G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 318. Morgan describes these women as “hopeless, disappointed, bereaved, heartbroken; but the love He had created in those hearts for Himself could not be quenched, even by His dying; could not be overcome, even though they were disappointed; could not be extinguished, even though the light of hope had gone out, and over the sea of their sorrow there was no sighing wind that told of the dawn.”

iii. Phil Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace*, 67

iv. James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 255.