

**LENT - HE CHOSE THE NAILS**  
**LUKE 9:51; MATTHEW 7:11; JAMES 1:17**  
**2025-03-09**

Lent begins today. You know by now that it's a time of intentional focus on Jesus heading resolutely to Jerusalem to the cross. This year I want us to journey together on the theme of Max Lucado's book, *He Chose the Nails*. It's a look at all the gifts of God including the cross, but also around the cross. So here goes.

Have pity on the man. He deserves our compassion. When you see him, do not mock, do not laugh. He is the man in the women's department looking for a gift. It may be Christmas, it may be her birthday, it may be their anniversary. Whatever, he has come out of hiding, leaving behind his familiar habitat of sporting goods stores, Home Hardware or big screen television, venturing into the unknown world of women's wear—a man in a woman's world. But he doesn't know where to go. Max's father taught him and his brother the survival code—*Estee Lauder*—and every year his mom got 3 gifts of perfume from his dad, his brother and father. But trying to switch it up and going for a purse one year was daunting. A man's wallet is simple—black or brown. Not so much for purses—handbag, shoulder bag, glove bag, backpack, shoulder pack, change purse, moneybag, tote bag, pocketbook, satchel...

Oh, the things we do to give gifts to those we love. But we don't mind. We happily (?) do it over and over again. Every Christmas, birthday or special occasion we find ourselves in foreign territory—grownups in toy stores, dads in teen stores, wives in hardware stores. Having been pressed into service we'd do it all again...for the sweetest of reasons—giving. We're at our best when we are giving. In fact, we are most like God when we are giving.

Have you ever wondered why God gives so much. We could exist on much less. But He didn't give us less:  
He splashed orange in the sunrise and cast the sky in blue. And if you love to see geese as they gather, chances are you'll see that too.  
Did He have to make the squirrel's tail furry? Was He obliged to make the birds sing? And the funny way that chickens scurry or the majesty of thunder when it rings?  
Why give a flower fragrance? Why give food its taste? Could it be He loves to see that look upon your face?  
If we give gifts to show our love, how much more would He? Jesus asked,  
“If you hardhearted, sinful men know how to give good gifts to your children, won't your Father in heaven even more certainly give good gifts to those who ask Him for them? (Mt. 7:11).  
God's gifts shed light on God's heart. Jesus' brother James tells us: James 1:17 (MSG) “Every desirable beneficial gift comes from the Father of Light”. Every gift reveals God's love, but none

more than the gifts of the cross—not wrapped in paper, but in passion, not covered with ribbons, but sprinkled with blood. Of course, there is the gift of the cross. But what about the nails, the crown of thorns, Jesus' garments James 1:16-18 MSG the burial garments, the wine-soaked sponge, a sign, two crosses beside Christ—divine gifts. Let's take time to open them. We're bound to utter: "You did this for me?"

The diadem of pain which sliced your gentle face, three spikes piercing flesh and wood to hold you in Your place.

The need for blood I understand. Your sacrifice I embrace. But the bitter sponge, the cutting spear, the spit upon Your face? Did it have to be a cross?

Did not a kinder death exist than six hours hanging between life and death, all spurred by a betrayer's kiss?

"Oh, Father, "You pose, heart-stilled at what could be, "I'm sorry to ask, but I long to know, did you do this for me?"

As we ponder these gifts, listen for His whisper: "I did it just for you."

In the story of Beauty and the Beast the Beast became more beautiful because Beauty loved him. It's a familiar story because it reminds us of ourselves. There's a beast within each of us. It wasn't always so. There was a time when humanity's face was beautiful and the palace pleasant. But that was before the curse, before the shadow fell across the garden of Adam and across the heart of Adam. Ever since, we've been beastly, ugly, defiant, angry, doing things we know we shouldn't and wondering why we did them. Paul told it straight: "I do not do what I want to do, and I do the things I hate (Romans 7:15). Paul wasn't alone: King Saul chased young David with a spear; Shechem raped Dinah; Dinah's brothers (sons of Jacob) murdered Shechem and his friends; Lot sold out Sodom then boogied out of Sodom; Herod murdered toddlers; another Herod murdered Jesus' cousin. It's called the Good Book, but not because its people are.

But the evil of the beast was never so raw as on the day Christ died. The disciples were fast asleep, then fast afoot. Herod wanted a show. Pilate wanted out. The soldiers wanted blood so they scourged Jesus. Their goal? Beat the accused within an inch of his death and then stop. Jesus' back, though rib-boned with wounds, was loaded with His own crossbeam for crucifixion. Those were orders—what wasn't, was what happened in between, where they took off His clothes & put a red robe on Him, used thorny branches to make a crown and put it on His head and put a stick in His right hand. They bowed before Him and mocked Him: "Hail, King of the Jews". They spat on Him, took His stick and beat Him on the head.

Spitting isn't intended to hurt the body—it is intended to degrade the soul and it does. What were the soldiers doing—elevating themselves at the expense of another; feeling big by making Christ look small. Ever done that? Maybe not spitting, but how about slander, gossip,

raising your hand in anger, rolling your eyes in arrogance, blasting your high beams in someone's rearview mirror? Ever made someone feel bad so you would feel good?

That's what the soldiers did to Jesus. When you and I do the same, we do it to Jesus too. "I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these My brothers and sisters, you were doing it to Me? (Matthew 25:40). How we treat others is how we treat Jesus. The fact is there is something beastly within each and every one of us that makes us do things that surprise even us, making us ask, "What got into me?"

The Bible has a three letter answer for that question: S-I-N. We are by nature children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3). It's not that we can't do good—we do. It's just that we can't keep from doing bad. Theologically it's referred to as "totally depraved". Though God made us in His image, the very centre of our being is selfish and perverse. David recognizes he was born a sinner—yes, from the moment my mother conceived me (Psalm 51:5). Depravity is a universal condition.

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way (Isaiah 53:6)."

"The heart is deceitful above all things & beyond cure. Who can understand it (Jer. 17:9)?"  
There is none righteous, no not 1...All have sinned & fall short of the glory of God (Ro. 3:10, 23)

And there's no point in trying the "compared to everyone else, I'm pretty good." The standard for sinlessness isn't found at the pig troughs of earth but at the throne of heaven. God Himself is the standard. We are sinners and the wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23).

We have a problem. We are not holy, and "anyone whose life is not holy will never see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). We have a problem. We are evil, and "evil people are paid with punishment" (Prov. 10:16). Sooooo...what can we do?

Allow the spit of the soldiers to symbolize the filth in our hearts. Then observe what Jesus does with our filth. He carries it to the cross. Through the prophet He said, "I did not hide My face from mocking and spitting" (Isaiah 50:6). Mingled with His blood and sweat was the essence of our sin. God could have deemed otherwise. In God's plan, Jesus was offered wine for His throat, so why not a towel for His face? Simon carried the cross of Jesus, but He didn't mop the cheek of Jesus. Angels were a prayer away. Couldn't they have taken the spit away. They could have, but Jesus never commanded them to. For some reason, the One who chose the nails

also chose the saliva. Along with the spear and the sponge of man, He bore the spit of man. Why? Could it be that He sees the beauty within the beast?

Here the analogy with the Beauty and the Beast ends. In the fable, the beauty kisses the beast. In the Bible, the Beauty does much more. He becomes the beast so the beast can become the beauty. Jesus changes places with us. Like Adam, we were under a curse but Jesus “changed places with us and put Himself under the curse (Galatian’s 3:13).

What if the Beauty had not come? What if the Beauty had not cared? Then we would have remained a beast. But the Beauty did come, and the beauty did care. The sinless One took on the face of a sinner so that we sinners could take on the face of a saint.

So what’s the greatest thing about the coming of Christ, the most remarkable part of the incarnation? Imagine swapping eternity for calendars. There has never been a moment when God was not God. He has never not been. God is not bound by time. Yet when Jesus came to earth He heard a phrase never used in heaven: “Your time is up.” As a child He had to leave the temple because His time was up. As a man He had to leave Nazareth because His time was up. As a Saviour He had to die because His time was up.

Jesus one moment was a boundless spirit; the next He was flesh and bones (Psalm 139:7-10)“Where can I go to flee from Your Spirit?). Asking where is God is like asking a fish, “where is water?” or a bird asking “where is air?” We cannot find a place where God is not. Yet, when God entered time and became a man, the boundless became bound, imprisoned in flesh, restricted by weary-prone muscles and eyelids, His speed checked to the pace of human feet. I wonder if He was ever tempted to reclaim His boundlessness in the middle of a long trip, change the weather when rain chilled Him to the bone. Think about this—not once did Jesus use His supernatural powers for personal comfort. He could have boomeranged the spit of His tormenters back into their faces or paralyzed the soldier’s hand that braided the crown of thorns. But He didn’t.

How about the surrender of sinlessness? Think about the crown of thorns woven for Him, a crown of mockery. The thorns symbolize , not sin, but the consequences of sin. Rebellion results in thorns: “You will know these people by what they do. Grapes don’t come from thornbushes and figs don’t come from thorny weeds (Matthew 7:16). The fruit of sin is thorns. The thorny crown on Christ’s brow can represent the fruit of our sin that pierced His heart. What are those thistles?—shame, fear, disgrace, discouragement, anxiety. Haven’t our hearts been caught in such brambles? The heart of Jesus, however, had not. He had never been cut by the thorns of sin...until He became sin for us. And once He did, the emotions of sin tumbled in on Him—anxiety, aloneness...”My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?”

What's the greatest thing about the One who gave up the crown of heaven for a crown of thorns? Not that He refused to defend Himself when blamed for every sin ever since Adam. Or that He stood silent as a million guilty verdicts echoed and the giver of light was left in the chill of a sinner's night. Not even that after three days in a grave He emerged to say to Lucifer—"Is that your best punch?" Very great, but no.

The greatest thing was that He did it for you. Just for you.