

THE LAST 18 HOURS

THE SEVEN
WONDERS
OF THE CROSS



WILKIN VAN DE KAMP



WHITAKER
HOUSE

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THE SEVEN WONDERS OF THE CROSS

The Last 18 Hours

(Originally published in Dutch in 2005 as *Het wonder van het kruis*)
English translation by Hope Visser

Wilkin van de Kamp
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*Dedicated to my father, who
—while I was writing this book—
unexpectedly went to our heavenly Father.
He went home to be at the feet of his Master.*

PREFACE

As a professional translator, I am used to speaking and writing the words of others. When I was asked to share my experiences, emotions and thoughts while translating this book, I had to stop and think hard. Translating this book was not easy. As I worked my way through the chapters of what Jesus' sacrifice really meant, I was forced to take a long, hard look at my own beliefs, ideas and how they influence my life.

I came away from this book a changed woman. The realization that I have yet to fully grasp how far God's love is willing to go to get a hold of my heart, has made me bow down in awe and worship.

The Almighty traded His place in Heaven for unimaginable suffering, for me. Unworthy, yet loved. Wanted. It is my hope and prayer that Wilkin's words will touch your heart, your life, as you read how the God of the universe paid the ultimate price to show you His love. He wants you. He loves you. He wants to free you from all that is preventing you from becoming the person you were designed to be, vibrant and full of life. He has a plan for you. And He is willing to go to great lengths just to show you how much He loves you. He thinks you are worth it. And you are.

Hope Visser

THE WONDER OF THE CROSS

*Think of what he went through;
how he put up with so much hatred from sinners!
So do not let yourselves become
discouraged and give up.*

(Hebrews 12:3, GNB)



A few years ago, I was invited to speak at a Christian summer camp for children and teenagers. I have a background in teaching and have taught children of all ages for many years, so they must have thought that I would easily be able to handle a group of some eighty children, varying in age from six to sixteen. I spontaneously said yes and accepted the invitation. But as the date drew closer, I started to dread it. How could I grab and hold the attention of a group that size, with such a variety of ages? How on earth was I going to do it? I started to pray and had the impression that God said this to me: “Have a Cross built of wood and set it up in front of the kids. Tell them in simple words about the wonder of the Cross. Give them paper and markers and tell them they can write down all the sins they’ve committed in their lives and all the bad things they’ve experienced, and give them to Jesus. Bring a hammer and nails so they can nail these things to the wooden Cross.” I took this to be God’s word and asked a church member to build a transportable wooden Cross for me. I collected hammers from everyone

in the neighborhood and purchased old-fashioned nails that were about ten centimeters long.

When the first morning of the camp came, I began in simple words to tell the young people about the wonder of the Cross. I told them they were allowed to write down or draw pictures on a piece of paper of all the bad things they had done and all the bad things they had been through. To my amazement, nearly all of the children started to fill their sheet of paper right away. I walked around as they worked. I saw what some of them had written and was deeply touched. I couldn't believe some of the things I read and saw, the things some of the children had gone through at such young ages.

HAMMERS AND NAILS

Then came the moment that the children had been waiting for. They were allowed to start using the hammers and nails. Each youngster took his or her sheet of paper filled with words or pictures and started to nail it to the Cross, and before long you couldn't see the wood of the Cross any longer: all you could see was a jumble of paper sheets filled with confessed sins and bad experiences. The children went back to their seats. Then I told them they were not yet rid of their sins, even though they had been nailed to the Cross. I started to share once again about the blood of Jesus that takes away our sins. And that is a wonder, a supernatural wonder. I told them that only the blood of Jesus could take away their sins and that, if they wanted to experience that, they could come forward. At first only a few came, but soon they all came. The summer camp leaders joined me in praying for the children. We took them to the Cross of Jesus. We were able to do what Jesus told His disciples: "If you forgive anyone's sins, they have been forgiven them."¹ Together, we were able to share the forgiveness of God with them. Then something happened that I will never forget. The miracle occurred.

Every time someone goes to the Cross of Jesus, a miracle takes place. A miracle that cannot be performed by a doctor, a psychol-

ogist or a psychiatrist nor any counseling session. It is the wonder of the Cross, which can only take place when you go to Him and confess with your mouth: “Father, I have sinned, I need your wonder in my life.”

The kids had done this, and then the Holy Spirit came upon all the children in the room. It was the first time in my life that I had witnessed the outpouring of God’s Spirit on a group of people. I had heard and read about such things, but I had never experienced anything like it, let alone with children. The Holy Spirit descended on those children and I did nothing at all.

I had no control over what was happening. I said: “Lord, what is going on here?” Little children started to cry; teenagers were touched by God’s hand. Children started to pray for each other. Jesus started to heal and deliver. At the back of the room, there was a boy of about twelve years old who had started to cry, a desperate cry from deep within. All of a sudden the crying turned into screeching. Without anyone having prayed for him, demons started to manifest themselves and to leave this young boy. No one had to say: “Be gone in the name of Jesus.” No one. Why? That is the wonder of the Cross. When our sins are removed and we have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus of all the sins in our lives, the devil has no more power over us.

THE WONDER OF GOD’S LOVE

Yes, I love to speak about the wonder of the Cross because it has totally changed my life. And not only mine but those of millions of others as well. The wonder of the Cross has completely taken hold of me. My whole life is centered on it. For me, the wonder of the Cross is the wonder of God’s love. It is God’s supernatural intervention in this world, in my world. The story of the Cross is a story full of wonders. Wonders on earth and wonders in heaven. All wonders are supernatural wonders; they transcend human capabilities. The wonder of the Cross is the greatest wonder of all.

Medical experts, historians and archeologists from all over the world have studied in depth the crucifixion willingly suffered by Jesus. It is good to listen to them to discover what exactly happened and to become aware of the immense price Jesus paid so that we can be a part of the wonder of the Cross. All experts agree that what He endured was one of the most horrific and painful forms of capital punishment ever conceived by man. But how do we view the story of the crucifixion? If we look at the crucifixion with our natural eyes only, much of what really happened in both the visible and the invisible realm will be lost on us. It's good to ask ourselves, How much do we really know about what happened in and just outside Jerusalem during those last eighteen hours leading up to Jesus' death? For example, have I ever taken the effort to look at the crucifixion of Jesus through the eyes of God the Father?

**The wonder
of the Cross
is the greatest
wonder of all.**

The story of the Cross is a story that has to be seen “from above” as well as from ground level. Jesus hung on a wooden cross between heaven and earth, abandoned by both God and man. If we really want to fully understand the wonder of the Cross and what it means to us, we must explore what happened in that space “between heaven and earth.” Then we will discover the wonder and receive the faith to become a part of the resurrection power of Jesus.

UNDERSTANDING THE WONDER OF THE CROSS

In this book, I want to try to answer the question of what went on during the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. Did the people who were more or less personally involved in the judgment and crucifixion of Jesus understand exactly what was happening and why He died? Did they know that the course of his-

tory would be totally changed within the space of a few hours? The Bible says that “none of the rulers of this world knew.”³ By looking at these men and women, who were eyewitnesses, I am confronted with the question of whether or not I myself really understand the wonder.

A preacher once told me that he was at a loss as to how to handle the story of the Cross. “Jesus did not have to die for me. I want to be held responsible for my own actions. Another person—and especially Jesus—should not have to pay the punishment.” If church leaders do not understand the meaning of the wonder of the Cross, how can they lead a church? The apostle Paul probably had a similar experience, judging by what he wrote to the Corinthians:

For the message about Christ's death on the cross is nonsense to those who are being lost; but for us who are being saved it is God's power.
(1 Corinthians 1:18, GNB)

BRINGING THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS (BACK) INTO FOCUS

We have seen several Muslims come to faith in our church. Initially, many of them struggled with the thought of God allowing His Son, who was innocent, to die for the guilty. What kind of father would do something like that, letting his child take the blame for other people's faults? The number of Muslims is growing rapidly in Europe. Who will tell them of the wonder of the Cross? Who can explain to them what the wonder of the Cross can mean to them? I've noticed that these people yearn to be freed from their sins. I see the same strong desire among the adherents to every other religion. I see people who would give anything to be freed from their sins: they torture themselves (in the Philippines, men literally get themselves crucified for several hours); pilgrims undertake long journeys to holy places, bring costly sacrifices (that they really can't afford) and take annual ritual baths in holy rivers. Who will tell

them how they can truly find redemption by allowing the wonder of the Cross into their lives?

What about Europe and the rest of the world? The world needs the wonder of the Cross now more than ever. Thousands have turned their backs on God and gone their own way. The consequences are visible everywhere. Official statistics tell us that one out of every five Dutch people needs psychological help. The actual numbers are probably much higher, given the numbers of people seeking help from alternative healers. And yet the church has the answer to these problems. It is time for the church to bring the message of the Cross back into focus, just as Paul said:

For I determined not to know anything among you, except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:2, WEB)

THE MAJESTY OF THE CROSS

When the film “The Passion of the Christ,” about the last twelve hours of Jesus’ life, directed by Mel Gibson, was released, one of the responses was as follows: “It is a true torture film. The entire movie is really only about the useless torture of Jesus. I think it is awful to watch someone die in vain like this! What was the point of it? It makes me so angry that they let nice people die in such a completely useless manner!” This is what many people think when they consider Jesus’ suffering on the cross. They see someone who meekly endures suffering and a tragic fate; a man who has been beaten to a pulp, his life coming to an end on the cross. This is what happens to anyone who would be king in the dominion of the emperor: they nail him to a cross, as a king without clothes. A pathetic show that no one wants to see. To unbelievers, the story of His suffering is just fiction. For Muslims, it is a farce; according to the Koran, another person was tortured and crucified in Jesus’ place.

This book is my attempt to give people a different insight into the last eighteen hours of Jesus’ earthly life. Jesus was not a Jewish

martyr, who went to the cross with the courage of despair. God did not send His Son and force Him to die, but meticulously prepared Him for every last detail of the last eighteen hours of His life. The evangelist John testifies that Jesus knew *everything* about what would happen to Him (John 18:4). Six months before Jesus died, God sent Moses and Elijah from Heaven to prepare Him for His death, which would take place in Jerusalem (Luke 9:30–31). They spoke with Him about each step in the great master plan, the painful suffering, but also the joy that lay before Him. (Isaiah 53:10; Hebrews 12:2). Jesus spoke the following words in the Garden of Gethsemane to Peter, who was very confused: *“But all this was done that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled”* (Matthew 26:56 NKJV).

The last eighteen hours form a majestic Easter saga in which we see a sovereign Jesus who reveals Himself as both the Lamb of God and the great High Priest, who regally endured humiliation and ridicule. The last eighteen hours of Jesus’ life testify to exceeding courage, love and strength. Jesus was not a victim of His own success. They did not murder my Jesus. Before He left for Jerusalem, where He would die, He said: *“Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father”* (John 10:17–18, NKJV).

Jesus showed us on the cross what perfect love is and God’s greatness was revealed, as Jesus prayed several hours before His death: *“Father, the hour has come. Glorify and exalt and honor and magnify Your Son, so that Your Son may glorify and extol and honor and magnify You. [Just as] You have granted Him power and authority over all flesh (all humankind), [now glorify Him] so that He may give eternal life to all whom You have given Him”* (John 17:1–2 AMP). Just a little later an angel appeared from Heaven to give Jesus supernatural strength so that He might reveal the greatness of God’s love through His suffering (Luke 22:43). Years later, John,

who was an eyewitness to it all, would write: “*Having loved his dear companions, he continued to love them right to the end*” (John 13:1, MSG). It was pure love that held Jesus nailed to the cross, a love the like of which had never been seen and never will be again. He gave His life so that He could rise again three days later and beat Death at its own game.

Let this book take you back to the seven specific moments when the blood of Jesus flowed, so that the seven wonders of the Cross can take place in your life and you may receive forgiveness, salvation, cleansing, healing, freedom, reconciliation and you can be born again. The seven wonders of the Cross together form one amazing gift from God the Father to His children in this world.

At the end of each chapter, you will find a prayer. This book is not meant just to inform you about the wonder of the Cross, but to allow you to experience that wonder in your own life. That is my prayer. I am convinced that, if you pray these prayers out loud, with an open heart and faith in God the Father, the wonder of the Cross will take place in your own life. Let’s discover together what the fullness of the wonder of the Cross has to offer us.

Wilkin van de Kamp

THE MAN WITHOUT SIN

*For him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf;
so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

(2 Corinthians 5:21, WEB)



CHAPTER 1

When I was growing up I had a neighbor, a single guy who was passionate about collecting stamps. He had an impressive collection with several highly valuable stamps, and all the kids in the neighborhood were very impressed. He loved sharing his passion with us, and it will not come as a surprise that many of the children started their own stamp collections. To this day I still have an album filled with Dutch stamps I collected in those days. People who are passionate are attractive people. Their passion controls their life, determines their agenda. They know what they're talking about and want to share it with you. Passionate people attract other people. Passion is contagious and highly transmissible.

ATTRACTIVE

Above all else, the church of Jesus needs a renewed passion for Jesus Christ.

Our love for Him can be compared to the early, pure and uncontrollable passion between two people who are madly in love with each other. They cannot and will not be without each other for even a moment. They think of nothing and no one else but each other. That's passion. It's ardor; it makes people around them smile and even feel envious of their happiness.

This is what our passion for Jesus should be like. We've been captivated by His unconditional love for us. This is not some mystical experience, or an escape from reality. It is a deep assurance that God has revealed Himself to this world in the form of a person: Jesus Christ, who gave His life because of His love for us, so that we might receive eternal life and know God as our Father in heaven. A church that is full of that kind of passion is an attractive church.

LOVESICK

The Bible book Song of Songs is the book of love. In a very moving way, it tells of two lovers and how they long for each other, describing their innermost feelings and how they rejoice in being together. The story can also be seen as a picture of the love that Jesus (the bridegroom) has for His church (the bride).

At one point in this Bible book, the bride calls out to the young women of Jerusalem:

I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him that I am faint with love. (Song of Songs 5:8, WEB)

What would people say when they noticed my passion for Jesus? Would they say I'm "faint with love"? That would be powerful. Another Bible translation even says: "Tell him I am lovesick." Such passion, such ardor.

THE LOVE VIRUS

This is what our first love for Jesus should be like, and how our love for Him should stay. Everything in us should desire Him. When you wake up early in the morning, let your first thought, the first thing you say, be about Him. And when you go to bed

at night, softly express your desire for Him as you fall asleep. In this way, you will open your heart and begin to hear His loving voice day and night. Try it.

People who are passionate about Jesus have been infected by this heavenly love virus.

People who are passionate about Jesus have been infected by this heavenly love virus injected in their hearts by the Holy Spirit.⁵ They're "love-sick." They do things they didn't think were possible before they fell in love and it makes them attractive and

gives them an air of eternal youth. It is this passion for Jesus that can make the church attractive, turning it into an inviting place for people out in the world, searching for love. The love virus is very contagious. It's also indestructible and equipped to annihilate every form of bitterness, indifference and laziness. This is what the church of Jesus needs now more than ever before.

THE FIRST LOVE

When the apostle John meets the risen Lord at the end of his life, Jesus speaks to him about His church in Ephesus, among other things. Jesus loves His people and knows all about them. His followers in Ephesus are hard workers, making great efforts for God's Kingdom, and He honors them for their persistence. He knows how they refuse to endure evil and how they have suffered in His name without growing weary.⁶ But then He says to them, very lov-

ingly: “But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.” In other words: “You don’t love me as much as you used to.”

Jesus is all about passion. They might not have lost their zeal for Him, but it’s not what it used to be. And that cuts right to the heart of Jesus. That’s why He reprimands them: “Come on, my dear people, return to your first love. Return to your passionate love for me. Everything else I will give to you.”

In the Netherlands we have a saying that goes: “First the job, then the girl,” but in God’s Kingdom, it is exactly the other way around. Our passion for Jesus should supersede everything else. Don’t let your passion be diminished by disappointment in people, by all your hard work for His Kingdom or by painful circumstances. Don’t ever let that happen. If you notice that your original love is dwindling, you need to drastically change your lifestyle. Make a radical U-turn. Who would want to be a Christian without a passion for Christ? It is this passion that will get a church moving again even if it has ground to a halt.

A LETTER OVERFLOWING WITH PASSION

I love to talk about my greatest passion: Jesus. He’s the love of my life and He has convinced me that everything I do and say must be permeated with His passion for this world. The passion of Jesus in us will change people. A little while ago, I received a letter that touched me deeply. This letter shows how powerful the passion of Jesus is:

Dear Wilkin,

Some time ago we brought a friend of ours (Fred) to a meeting where you spoke about being passionate about Jesus and about His love. Fred had a terrible childhood: he was abused and spent time in special homes and foster families. He had ADHD and moved out on

his own at a young age. He had no proper schooling and owing to his lack of discipline he was unable to find a job. He started using a lot of drugs and began drinking. He drove everyone crazy. He couldn't maintain relationships. He never stuck to any agreements and wherever he was, his presence was about 100% clear. Simply being in contact with Fred was a very intense business. He was a thief, and active mostly at night. He owned nothing and had huge debts because of his drug habit. He hated his father and wanted to murder him. We met Fred when he was ten; he used to come to our house. Fred loved being in our home. Wilbert, my eldest brother, stayed in touch with him as we grew up. Last year, in September, we took him to a healing crusade. It was there that he gave his heart to Jesus. He was happy, but soon backslid into his former habits. He lived alone and had no real friends (except for the wrong kind). We kept in touch.

In January we took Fred to the meeting I mentioned at the beginning of this letter. Your message on being passionate about Jesus and receiving His passion in return really touched him deeply. Fred cried his eyes out. God touched his heart there and then.

From that day forward, things moved fast. 'Coincidentally', he met a girl in his apartment building who attended a church. She and her friends encouraged him to read the Bible, pray, surrender his life to God, live a holy life and get rid of his sin. The change was complete: he asked people to forgive him and forgave those who had hurt him. He returned stolen bikes to their rightful owners and completely quit drugs, smoking and drinking. He stopped being a skinhead. He even got a job. He paid off his debts. He started witnessing to young people and shared in our prayer group. He started to call his second father 'Daddy'. He read his Bible until it nearly fell apart. He got rid of his TV. He became a calm and wise person. He told his family, friends and acquaintances about the love of Jesus.

While he was busy with all these things he died, quite suddenly. Thankfully, one of his friends from church was there, so he didn't die alone. Just the Sunday before his passing he had been so upset about the division between the churches. The previous Saturday evening, he had

encouraged the teenagers and on Monday evening he had said that he really wanted to meet Jesus and speak to Him. On Thursday he had been planning to join us in street evangelism. He wanted to tell everyone about the love of Jesus for sinners like him. 'A grain of wheat that falls on the ground will never be more than one grain unless it dies. But if it dies, it will produce lots of wheat.'

We placed the following obituary:

'Praise the Lord, Fred K. has gone home.

A few weeks ago Jesus captured his heart. The result was an overwhelming passion for his Savior and Father. Everyone had to hear; he was not ashamed (Romans 1:16a). Now his greatest wish has been fulfilled: on April the 8th he went to meet his Father for the first time.

On behalf of all your brothers and sisters, one in Christ.'

This obituary was placed in both a local and a national newspaper, along with the date and location of the memorial service and the funeral. Through death, new life arose. The result was that countless people contacted the newspaper editors. A journalist came to the funeral and wrote an article about it. Journalists were interviewing the people who lived in Fred's apartment building. The Dutch Reformed church and the Pentecostal church organized the farewell service together. The church hall was packed and the meeting was full of the gospel and of Christian testimonies. Someone was saved during the funeral service and prayed that morning for the first time. A number of young people wanted to talk afterwards, and God touched many people. Basically, the death of Fred became like a seed planted in fertile soil. The results were salvation and unity, a call to a holy lifestyle and surrender to God. Praise the Lord.

Bert and Mary

IDENTIFYING WITH JESUS

To me, Jesus gets more intriguing all the time. I read the stories about Him again and again, each time in a different Bible translation. I want to learn more from Him. I want to know everything about Him. My hunger for Him cannot be satisfied. I want to identify with Him. I want to think as He thinks, love as He loves, feel as He feels, believe what He believes. When I read the things that have been written about Him, I try to picture how He might have looked at people, touched them, spoken to them. I want to have this picture of Him imprinted on my mind. I want to know Him, follow Him, become like Him: Jesus, the Man without Sin.

That is the heart of the gospel and it fascinates me, even though I know that none of us can fully understand His sinlessness because Jesus had a different nature from ours.

OUR SINFUL NATURE

The word of God says that we have a sinful nature. The Bible calls this our “flesh,”⁷ or our “old man.”⁸ It is clear what our sinful nature produces: adultery, sexual immorality, uncleanness, lustfulness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, strife, jealousies, outbursts of anger, rivalries, divisions, heresies, envy, murder, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.⁹

Nothing in the world is as underestimated as the destructive power of sin. Always and in every situation, sin is destructive. It ruins so many things. It spoils our relationship with God and our relationships with others. Isaiah shows us what sin does to our relationship with God:

Don't think that the Lord is too weak to save you or too deaf to hear your call for help! It is because of your sins that he doesn't hear you. It is your sins that separate you from God when you try to worship him. (Isaiah 59:1–2, GNB)

Sin brings division; it throws up a barrier between God and humankind. The result is that we are unable to see the hand of God in our lives or to hear His voice. On the other hand, God cannot reach us either. The Bible book of Lamentations states this very clearly:

We have transgressed and have rebelled; you have not pardoned (...). You have covered yourself with a cloud, so that no prayer can pass through. (Lamentations 3:42, 44, WEB)

Because of our sins, God is hidden from us; we cannot reach Him. He has covered Himself in a cloud, so that even our prayers cannot reach Him. Many Christians do not realize this: they might complain with regard to their prayers that the heavens seem to be made of brass, but they forget that their own sin may very well be the reason why God does not hear or answer their prayers. Sin is a much bigger problem than most people think. All of human nature has been infected with the sin virus. Some people have such a gentle personality or care for others so selflessly that I might think: “That is such a beautiful person.” Yet God says: “There is no one on earth who does what is right all the time and never makes a mistake.”¹⁰

All of human nature has been infected with the sin virus.

The Bible says that through Adam we all have sinned; through him sin has entered the world and death now rules as king in this world:

Sin came into the world through one man, and his sin brought death with it. As a result, death has spread to the whole human race because everyone has sinned. It is true that through the sin of one man death began to rule because of that one man. But how much greater is the result of what was done by the one man, Jesus

Christ! All who receive God's abundant grace and are freely put right with him will rule in life through Christ. So then, as the one sin condemned all people, in the same way the one righteous act sets all people free and gives them life. (Romans 5:12, 17–18, GNB)

Sin has gained such power over us that our human nature has been irrevocably changed into our current sinful nature. We aren't sinners because we have sinned, but we sin because we're sinners. Through our sinful nature, all kinds of sinful passions and desires are expressed.¹¹

By sinning we have become slaves to sin.¹² Because of our sinful nature, no good lives within us.¹³ Our sinful nature is hostile toward God and refuses to submit to Him.¹⁴ Our sinful nature cannot please God.¹⁵

I can see this sinful nature expressed in people's almost insatiable hunger for bad news, a desire of which practically all of the media eagerly take advantage. I can see it in the gap between rich and poor, maintained by the greed and selfishness of the so-called "first world," which practices a modern form of slavery by having its products produced for scandalously low wages in the so-called "third-world" countries. The only difference between this form of slavery and that of previous ages is that nowadays we don't ship the slaves from one country to another, but the products. It's a lot easier to cope with, as in this way we are not visually confronted with the unfairness and inhumanity of the practice.

I see the sinful nature in the men and women of Baghdad who plundered their "own" hospitals, museums and schools, et cetera, when the regime of Saddam Hussein fell.

I can recognize the sinful nature in statistics that say that more than forty percent of the Dutch population by their own account cannot stand being told what to do by the law. Statistics do not lie. They also tell us that 50,000 to 80,000 children are abused in our country each year. And that every year fifty to eighty children die in the Netherlands as a result of child abuse. Statistics tell us that

every day about 50,000 Dutch people visit a prostitute and that every month twenty percent of Internet users visit erotic sites (each month, at least 47 million sex pages are viewed in the Netherlands). The sex industry in the Netherlands has a 1.6 billion euro turnover each year.

I also discover this same sinful nature in myself, when I come home late at night and am tempted to turn on the TV and surf through the different channels, allowing the filth of the world to invade my spirit.

JESUS' DIVINE NATURE

But Jesus had a divine nature.¹⁶ He was the man without sin. That explains why He, and only He, could remove our sins. Sin had no power over Him. If I'm struggling with a certain sin and cannot seem to free myself from it, I will never be able to help someone else struggling with the same sin. If, for example, I am living in impurity by watching films I shouldn't watch or looking at women in a way in which I shouldn't, how will I ever be able to help someone else to lead a pure and holy life? This is why before Jesus there was no one on earth who could solve the problem of sin for us.

Jesus, the man without sin, was sent by God into this world to set us free from the sinful nature that is cutting us off from God's presence. Jesus has come to set us free from our slavery to sin and our fear of death:

Since the children, as He calls them, are people of flesh and blood, Jesus himself became like them and shared their human nature. He did this so that through his death he might destroy the Devil, who has the power over death, and in this way set free those who

**The biggest
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were slaves all their lives because of their fear of death. (Hebrews 2:14–15, GNB)

The biggest sacrifice that Jesus made was that He gave up His sinlessness and identified with our sin.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS: A MIRACLE OF CREATION

His coming into this world was accompanied by many supernatural events. The prophet Isaiah had prophesied 700 years earlier that the Messiah would be born of a virgin:

But the Lord will still give you proof. A virgin is pregnant; she will have a son and will name him Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14, CEV)

The world cannot understand this. And sometimes I think that many Christians also fail to understand it. Sin has penetrated our humanity, our thinking, our feelings, our senses, our emotions and our bodies so deeply that we say, a man without sin? Impossible. Jesus, born of a virgin? Impossible. Of course, in the natural world it is impossible. But nothing is impossible for God. We need to start thinking in an entirely different way. You see, Jesus could never have been born of a natural man and a natural woman, or their sinful nature would have entered into Him. God had to work a miracle. From the moment of conception, when the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and God performed a miracle of creation in her womb, the heart of God was beating in this baby. Jesus did not inherit genetic material from Joseph, but from God. He received the characteristics and the divine nature of His Father in heaven. It was Joseph's calling to be a good adoptive father to Him, and I know from personal experience what a rich blessing this can be. The birth of Jesus is a great wonder. Nothing like this had happened on earth since Adam and Eve. A human being, without sin from the very

start. An unbelievable story. But then, Jesus' entire life is a series of unbelievable wonders.

AN UNBELIEVABLE STORY

At times I think that God purposely made His plan of salvation seem so foolish. Whichever way you look at it, He certainly didn't try very hard to make it all look plausible. He chose an insignificant girl of about sixteen years old to be the mother of Jesus. A girl of no importance. She did not conceive in a natural way; she conceived because she was touched by the power of the Holy Spirit. God did not make things easy for Mary. Who would ever believe her? How was she ever going to tell Joseph? And even if he believed her, Jesus would be surrounded for his entire life by gossip and rumors: "Jesus is an illegitimate child!"

How do I see the birth of Jesus? He was born in a lowly animal shelter in a poverty-stricken village in a country oppressed by a cruel occupying force. No one would even have taken any notice of his arrival if it hadn't been for the fact that God sent a heavenly army of angels to protect the birth of His Son and to proclaim the news. But how does the Great Director go about it? He sends His angels to a group of shepherds, at that time the scum of the earth. Hardly anyone would believe their story. Men like them weren't even recognized as witnesses in the Jewish court of law. Is this how to convince the world? Is this the way to save the world? Who would believe a story like this? The "foolish" story of Jesus' birth, life, crucifixion and resurrection can only have been thought up by God. If a human had been the author, all the unbelievable elements would have been left out to make the story seem more credible. But the Bible tells us something else:

God was wise and decided not to let the people of this world use their wisdom to learn about him. Instead, God chose to save only those who believe the foolish message we preach. Jews ask for mira-

cles, and Greeks want something that sounds wise. But we preach that Christ was nailed to a cross. Most Jews have problems with this, and most Gentiles think it is foolish. Our message is God's power and wisdom for the Jews and the Greeks that he has chosen. Even when God is foolish, he is wiser than everyone else, and even when God is weak, he is stronger than everyone else. (1 Corinthians 1:21–25, CEV)

We can hardly believe that there was a person who lived on this earth without ever having sinned. We cannot imagine what it's like not to be infected by sin, because we simply do not know what it is like to live without sin. Our lives are so influenced by the power of sin. We don't have a clue how destructive it really is. Sin has so much destructive power that our entire human nature has been infected by it. That's why the life of Jesus is a big mystery to us. That's why to many people, even some Christians, Jesus has become a mythical, illusory figure.

HOW OTHERS VIEWED JESUS

How did the men and women who met Jesus in real life view Him?

- Peter, who spent more than three years with Jesus and who was a witness to the sufferings of Christ,¹⁷ testified to the fact that Jesus never sinned; neither was deceit found in His mouth.¹⁸
- John, the apostle whom Jesus loved, writes: “You know that Christ appeared in order to take away sins, and that there is no sin in him.”¹⁹
- Even the wife of Pilate got involved in Jesus' trial by sending her husband the following message: “Have nothing to do with that innocent man, because in a dream last night I suffered much on account of him.”²⁰ She calls Him *dikaïos*, which means “righteous and without blame.”

- Three times Pilate goes back to the religious leaders and the crowd to ask them what Jesus has done wrong. Three times they adapt their accusation. Three times he says: “I see no evil in him; this man is innocent.” Finally, he gives in to the demands of the Jewish religious leaders, because his own position is in danger, and hands Jesus over to be crucified. But not without first publicly washing his hands in a show of innocence. He says: “You brought this man to me and said that he was misleading the people. Now, I have examined him here in your presence, and I have not found him guilty of any of the crimes you accuse him of.”²¹
- Even Judas, who betrayed Him and handed Him over, sees that Jesus is a man without sin. Before he hangs himself he says, in utter despair: “I have sinned by betraying an innocent man to death!”²²
- And when the Roman centurion sees what happens at the Cross, he glorifies God and says: “Certainly this was a righteous man.” He uses the same word the wife of Pilate used: a righteous man, without blame.²³
- Jesus Himself at one point says to the religious leaders: “Which one of you can prove that I am guilty of sin?”²⁴

Throughout the entire Bible, this is the message about Jesus Christ. It is the heart of the gospel. This is where the message of the Cross starts: Jesus can completely sympathize with all of our weaknesses. He has been through all the trials we go through. Only He never sinned.²⁵ He was holy, guiltless, undefiled.²⁶

A CHARACTER ANALYSIS

I often try to imagine how Jesus lived. What does someone who has never sinned look like? What is His character like? I once tried to make a character analysis of Jesus, until I discovered that the Bible itself already gives us a very precise one. When Paul tells the church in Galatia what our sinful nature brings forth,²⁷ he does

not refrain from telling us what the fruit of the Spirit looks like: in other words, the character of Jesus (His divine nature). Jesus was full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control.²⁸ As I study the life of Jesus, I discover again and again that He had a pure soul, a clean spirit and an untainted body.

JESUS HAD A PURE SOUL

They say the eyes are the windows of the soul. So what would you see if you looked into the eyes of Jesus? What is it like to be a man without sin? The soul is the throne of our emotions, our will and our mind. Our emotions often do battle with our mind in order to take our will captive. My feelings sometimes say: “Just act normal and don’t draw attention to yourself.” And my mind says: “What will people say if you do this or that?” Sometimes there is a battle raging in my soul that paralyzes my will. Some people are more emotional, others are more rational. As for Jesus, I’ve discovered that He always placed all of his emotions and thoughts under the discipline of the Holy Spirit. In all of his emotions, I see a purity that transcends my imagination. Jesus could be filled with joy in the Holy Spirit,²⁹ but He could also be troubled or angry.³⁰ He was moved with compassion for the people and could be so touched by the Holy Spirit that He cried for them.³¹ Fear was another emotion Jesus experienced. In the garden of Gethsemane, He was deeply troubled about what was going to happen to Him.³² But, through all these emotional experiences, Jesus submitted His will to that of His Father:

Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done. (Luke 22:42, WEB)

My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work. (John 4:34, WEB)

Jesus did not allow Himself to be led by His emotions. His soul was subject to His spirit, which was connected to the Spirit of His Father. His mind, His wisdom and His insight surprised many. It was said about His childhood:

The child was growing, and was becoming strong in spirit, being filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. (Luke 2:40, WEB)

As a twelve-year-old boy, He sat among the teachers in the temple and listened to them and asked them questions. Everyone who heard Him was amazed at His understanding and His answers.³³ Many times, the religious leaders tried to trap Him with trick questions. Each time, Jesus had an unexpected answer that amazed His listeners; the people were deeply impressed by Him.³⁴ Jesus was different from us, because His soul was not influenced by sin.

JESUS HAD A CLEAN SPIRIT

Not only did Jesus have a pure soul, but He also had a clean spirit, untainted by sin.

The human spirit was created to seek contact with God, who is Spirit. God's Spirit does not focus initially on my soul (my feelings and mind), but on my spirit. His Spirit wants to connect with my human spirit,³⁵ so that in my spirit I will react to what He wants me to do. God wants us to be sensitive in our spirits to hear His voice, to know His will and to have an intimate relationship with Him. Of course, my soul will also react to the personal voice of God when He addresses my spirit. When, for example, the Holy Spirit convicts me of sin, my soul will not be too pleased, because it means I will have to confess this sin to others³⁶—an activity my soul does not enjoy at all.

I remember the day when God's Spirit told me to go to someone and ask forgiveness for the fact that I had hated him for something that had happened in the past between him and my wife, before I knew her. It was as if a bomb had just exploded in my soul. Everything in me revolted. My mind reasoned that I was not the guilty party; he was. I wasn't the one who should be asking for forgiveness; he was. I reacted emotionally; my feelings rebelled. I became confused. There was a battle raging inside me, in which my soul finally gained control: I did not contact the man in question. Weeks passed without any action on my part. But God never gives up. God spoke to me again, this time through an unknown missionary who was on furlough in the Netherlands and attended our Sunday service. In the middle of the service, he stood up from his seat and shared "a word from the Lord," in which he said there was someone to whom God had spoken, telling him to go to another person, which he had not yet done. That morning God spoke to me again: "Go!" It really scared me. The prophecy was so accurate, I was afraid my name would be called out. However, I still didn't dare to take the step and make an appointment by phone. I was afraid of the confrontation, but most of all I was afraid of facing up to the thoughts and feelings inside myself, which I knew were not very nice. I kept justifying these feelings and my behavior until finally, God, who was very patient with me, spoke to me for a third time. This time I knew I had no choice but to obey. In my spirit, I knew that obeying Him would bring healing to my soul. So I picked up the phone, praying that the other guy wouldn't be home (we really do some strange things at times), yet at the same time I knew that God had other things in mind. In the end, I made an appointment with the man and went to see him. The only thing I can recall of our conversation was that I drank coffee (which I never do) and that—to his utter astonishment—I asked him to forgive me for the hateful thoughts and feelings I'd had toward him. I can't remember anything else; I must have been very nervous. But I did it. A huge weight was lifted from my shoulders. I felt much lighter

and on the inside it felt as if I had more space. A few weeks later, the man walked into a Sunday-morning service. He gave his life to the Lord and some time later I had the privilege of baptizing him myself.

My will should not be directed by my feelings or my mind, but by my spirit, which is connected to the Spirit of God. The spiritual life of many Christians is usually played out in the realm of the soul. They complain about the length of the church service, the “noise” the children make, the type of music or the speaker’s clothing or choice of words. They cannot “worship” if the music is too loud or not loud enough, and when someone lovingly corrects them they mutter that “there is no more love in the church,” or, even worse, they say that “the Holy Spirit is no longer present in the church.” These people come to church with their soul in control; they’re led by what goes on inside their soul or their mind. And if things don’t go the way they want them to, their spiritual thermometer drops from “hot” to “frosty.”

Jesus, on the other hand, stayed tuned to the Father in everything through His Spirit. He said:

God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:24, WEB)

JESUS HAD A CLEAN CONSCIENCE

My conscience is embedded in my spirit. It gives me the ability to discern good from evil. The Greek word for conscience (*suneidesis*) is derived from the verb *suneido*, which means “to understand or become aware of something with another, and to be conscious or (clandestinely) informed of.” My conscience is actually a “knowing with another.” Now we understand how Paul can say: “God’s Spirit joins himself to our spirits to declare that we are God’s children,”³⁷ and what Jesus meant when He said:

The Son can do nothing on his own; he does only what he sees his Father doing. What the Father does, the Son also does. (John 5:19, GNB)

Our conscience has been infected, and dulled, by sin. Sin silences the voice of God in our lives. The Bible says that our conscience has been seared by sin.³⁸ Sin makes it numb and insensitive. The result is that our discernment becomes blurred and we call good evil and evil good. The prophet Isaiah said:

You are doomed. You call evil good and call good evil. You turn darkness into light and light into darkness. You make what is bitter sweet, and what is sweet you make bitter. (Isaiah 5:20, GNB)

Jesus' conscience, however, was completely clean. It was not influenced by sin. That's why He was able to resist Satan's temptations at the beginning of His ministry. He recognized the snares of the evil one. That's why Jesus was able to say, just a short while before He died, that "the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me."³⁹ Jesus' discernment was undamaged. He knew what really mattered and saw what others did not see. This was because His senses were tuned in to the Spirit of God. That's why the Holy Spirit could work through Him so powerfully.

JESUS HAD AN UNTAINTED BODY

All of Jesus' senses were pure and focused solely on God. Not only that, but his senses also functioned under the discipline of the Holy Spirit. He saw in the Spirit, heard, felt, tasted and smelled in the Spirit. He saw what was in the hearts of people;⁴⁰ He saw and heard the Father speak to Him in the Spirit.⁴¹ He could sometimes feel the power of God leave His body,⁴² and could sense whether or not someone's heart attitude was pure.⁴³ He could smell whether someone exuded the fragrance of life or the stench of death.⁴⁴

Jesus, the man without sin, could look at a woman without desiring her. In His presence, people felt completely accepted, loved, safe and protected. He never sent anyone away with the message: “There is no healing, salvation or freedom for you.” He could take a leper, whom everyone avoided, and hold him in His arms. He accepted the outcasts. Matthew, the tax collector who was despised by everybody because he collaborated with the enemy, was chosen out of hundreds of potential disciples to follow Him. Matthew, the man everyone loved to hate, was loved by the Man without Sin. Jesus also chose Simon the Zealot, a revolutionary who had taken up the sword to free Palestine from the Romans by means of violence. Not everyone was pleased about this. But Jesus said to him: “Simon, you belong to me. Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in spirit.” Jesus even chose Judas Iscariot as one of His disciples, even though He knew from the start that eventually he would betray Him.⁴⁵

How do I see Jesus? Is He a good man, a prophet, a teacher? Or is He the Son of God, the Man without Sin, who was so pure, so flawless, that when one of His disciples asked Him to show them God the Father, Jesus said to him:

Have I been with you such a long time, and do you not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father. How do you say, “Show us the Father?” (John 14:9, WEB)

WHY DOES GOD NOT INTERVENE?

Our sinful nature cannot be changed or transformed into the divine nature of Jesus. There is just no way this could happen. God knows better than anyone else that we cannot change our sinful nature. Not by reading the Bible, nor by fasting and praying. Even the Holy Spirit cannot change our sinful nature. In God’s eyes, our sinful nature is hopeless, useless and irreparable.

I have often heard people ask: “Why doesn’t God just intervene?” But how should He intervene? And, more importantly,

where would you want the intervention to stop? Should God have intervened the moment Adolf Hitler decided to eradicate all the Jews in his empire? After all, the death of that one man could have saved millions of lives. Should God intervene when a “father” is about to molest his daughter? Should God intervene when someone is thinking about adultery? Who decides where God should start, or stop, intervening? Maybe the answer is too confronting. Let’s face it, if God were to intervene on the basis of His own values and standards, none of us would be alive.

The fact that God does not intervene—at least not in the way we want Him to—illustrates His mercy and love. In the parable of the prodigal son it becomes clear that God loves us so intensely that He would never force us to stay with Him. God gave us the freedom to live our own lives because He loved us, even though He felt the pain this would cause both Himself and us. God loves mankind so much that He would never force his love on us.

But the deeper truth is that God has intervened, in a way none of us would have expected. The wonder of the Cross is that God decided to intervene supernaturally in human affairs. In order to understand this, we must focus intently on the last eighteen hours of the life of Jesus of Nazareth.



Father in heaven,

I want to fix my eye on Jesus, who bore the pain and stigma of the Cross. Open my eyes, open my mind, so that I will see and understand what You have done for me. Open my eyes to see what happened in the last eighteen hours before Jesus died, so I will understand the message of the Cross and, above all, so that the wonder of the Cross may become reality in my life.

Amen.