

## **“The Greatest Sacrifice”**

### **Romans 5:6-8**

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### **Memorial Day Weekend**

This year, Memorial Day will take on special significance for our neighbors in Winfield, Alabama, a four stop light town eighty miles northwest of Birmingham. This is the home of Mike Spann, the first American killed in the line of duty in Afghanistan. Mike was a thirty-two year old CIA agent who was killed on November 25, 2001, when a riot broke out while he and other agents were interrogating Taliban prisoners. Spann joined the CIA in 1999 after graduating from Auburn with a degree in criminal justice and serving four years in the Marine Corps.

Over seven hundred people attended his funeral at Arlington Cemetery on December 8. His wife, Shannon, spoke at that service and said, “Mike was not a hero because of the way he died defending his country. He was a hero because of the way he lived for his country.” No doubt he will be remembered again tomorrow when the citizens of Winfield gather for their annual Memorial Day service.

All over America, in every village, town and city, Americans will pause on Monday to remember those who paid the ultimate price while defending our country. Since the beginning of our country, almost two million have lost their lives defending America. Even today, we have remembered your family members who died in the line of duty. Our hearts go out to you as you recall fond memories of the person you lost. Thank you for supplying us with their names and allowing us to share your grief. It has been a privilege.

Your loved ones did not die in vain. They died for a cause that is still being defended. Their efforts and sacrifices have made it possible for us to continue living as a free people that can seek and do God’s will. How grateful we are and ever will be.

On this historic weekend, there is another sacrifice that we remember. It did not occur in one of our wars or even our lifetime. This sacrifice occurred two thousand years ago on a hill called Calvary. Of course, I am referring to the crucifixion of our Lord at the hands of the Romans.

There is something very unusual about this sacrifice that sets it apart from all others. I’ll let Paul tell you what that is.

**“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” Romans 5:6-8.**

**Did you pick up on what was so unusual about Jesus’ death?** He died to save God’s enemies. He died for people who loved evil and hated good. He died for people who ignored God so they could become gods. He died for people who declared war on God with the hope of destroying Him.

This scripture holds out the possibility of someone dying for another. Even though it was rare, someone might die for a moral or charitable person and certainly one might give his or her life for a noble cause. But, to die in place of an evil person that deserves their punishment, no way. That would never happen. Or at least it never had until Jesus died. No wonder we are still talking about his sacrificial death. It was unheard of then and now.

**Do you recall what was in the headlines a year ago?** Timothy McVeigh’s execution saturated the news. Do you remember a question I asked you during that ordeal? “Would you be willing to die in his place so that he could live?”

None of us did. The Oklahoma City bomber was executed by lethal injection in June, 2001, and polls reveal that the majority felt that justice had been served. No one was about to take the place of this evil man. He got what he deserved.

That's the way the world thinks. That's what makes Jesus' sacrifice so unbelievable. He died for the Timothy McVeigh's of the world. As Paul wrote, he died for "ungodly sinners who were God's enemies." The worst of the worst. The lowest of the low. He died for the people the world felt relieved were gone.

As hard as it is to admit it, at times that includes all of us. Everyone is a combination of the good, bad and ugly. All of us can be "ungodly sinners."

**Why did he do it?** Why did Jesus die for sinners? Again, Paul answers that question. *"God demonstrates His love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

He died out of obedience to a loving God. Now I know it is hard to think about love and death in the same sentence. The two are usually polar opposites. How did Jesus' death demonstrate God's love for us?

As sinners, we were on the wrong track headed in the wrong direction with our lives. Quite frankly, we were destroying His world and ourselves. God sent His son to teach us a better way to live, show us the direction we needed to go and forgive us for the mistakes we had made. He sent His son to give us the abundant and eternal lives we squandered with selfish and foolish decisions. He came to take us home to the Father.

When it became apparent that it was going to cost Jesus his life in order to do God's will, he willingly gave it. Jesus died in order to save the very people who were crucifying him. Furthermore, God allowed His son to die, not because He did not love him, but because He loved us so much.

See why I referred to Jesus' death as the greatest sacrifice? An innocent man died to save the whole world, friend and foe alike. This weekend, let us remember with humble and grateful hearts the sacrifices of all who died defending our freedom. At the top of our list, though, let's include God's own son who redefined the meaning of "sacrifice." Then, let us also follow in his footsteps and commit ourselves to his noble cause so that his death will not be in vain.

One evening in 1958, a young Korean student at the University of Pennsylvania was killed by eleven teenage boys. Many citizens of Philadelphia cried for vengeance. The district attorney secured authority to try the offenders as adults so that they could be given the death penalty if found guilty. Then a letter arrived from the parents of the boy who was killed. It read, "Our family has met and decided to petition that the most generous treatment possible within the laws of your government be given to those who have committed this criminal act. In order to give evidence of our sincere hope contained in this petition, we have decided to save money to start a fund to be used for the religious, educational, vocational and social guidance of the boys when they are released. We have dared to express our hope with the spirit received from the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ who died for our sins."

"Lord, help us to rise to this level of love and sacrifice."