

*“God could quite justly have abandoned us to our fate. He could have left us alone to reap the fruit of our wrongdoing and to perish in our sins. It is what we deserved. But he did not. Because he loved us, he came after us in Christ. He pursued us even to the desolate anguish of the cross, where he bore our sins, guilt, judgement and death. It takes a hard and stony heart to remain unmoved by love like that.” - John Stott, The Cross of Christ*

## **Redemption**

The cross of Jesus Christ is the central event in all of human history. Furthermore, it is the central idea of Christianity and its animating event. Simply, Christianity does not exist without the cross and resurrection. In this section, we will set out to discover what it is that actually happened on the cross and why it is so central to the Christian faith and human history.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul lays out a concise definition of the gospel, saying, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve." For Paul, there are several key elements to the good news of the gospel. First, Jesus was the Christ or the "anointed one" and not just some moral teacher. The word Christ has always carried with it divine connotations that Paul is intentionally invoking here. Second, that Christ "died for our sins". Jesus didn't just die in the sense of an historical fact, but he died for a purpose, he died for our sins.

Theologians have argued for years about what exactly the phrase “died for our sins” means, and they are still arguing today. Does it mean that he died as a result of our sins, or that it was punishment? Did he die to forgive our sins, to wipe them away? And whose sins did he die for, everyone's or just those who believe in him? If he did die for everyone, does that mean everyone is saved? If he only died for those who would one day believe, is the offer of salvation to all people genuine? These are but a few of the many important questions that theologians have been asking and that Christians should be asking in order to more fully understand the core of their faith.

But the cross is not the end of the gospel for Paul. He continues the narrative saying that Jesus was also buried, raised and appeared bodily to many people. This is the other side of the redemptive story. The cross is the central symbol of the faith and the crux of our theology but without the resurrection, it leaves us forgiven but doomed to repeat our sin. The cross forgives and satisfies the necessary wrath of a just God, but it gives little hope for the future. That is why Paul includes the resurrection and public appearances in his telling of the gospel. God's plan was never simply one of absolution but of redemption and restoration. God sent his son to die so that we might live and be the kinds of people that we were originally created to be.

The gospel is a circular story. It begins with creation, devolves into chaos, hints at salvation, climaxes paradoxically in death but the real, glorious ending is the hope of the resurrection and the promise of a new world that is the renewed version of the original. We'll explore the resurrection and its implications for the future in an upcoming lesson but let's not forget its pivotal role in the whole gospel story and its relationship to the cross.

### **Forgiveness and Salvation.**

For a generation, the Romans Road was the path to salvation. It was created to be an easy way for a Christian to lead a nonChristian to faith, using only the book of Romans. While it certainly has its limitations, it will serve as the backbone of this discussion of the atonement.

The road begins in chapter 3, verse 23 which says, "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." There is a lot packed into this short verse. First, there is an assertion that all people have sinned. This idea doesn't first appear in this passage of course, it is rooted in the origin story of our world. Genesis 3 tells the story of mankind's demise and is the foundation upon which Paul builds his case. In Romans 3, his point is that sin knows no borders, ethnic or otherwise. All people have hurt other people, lied to them, stolen from them and made idols out of created things.

Paul goes a step further to say that all of this sin has created a glory gap between us and God. This idea is a bit more nuanced than the first since created beings are inherently less glorious than the creator. The idea here isn't that sin makes us less glorious than God, it means that sin makes us less glorious than God made us to be. Having been made in the image of God, our

purpose was to be icons, representatives of a truer, better and more glorious thing. But sin has caused us to fall short even of that. Simply, none of us are who we were made to be.

The introduction of sin and the resulting destruction of God's world put humans directly into God's wrathful crosshairs. We have systematically perverted, destroyed and hollowed out his beautiful creation and so his wrath is certainly justified. That's what makes the next stop on the Romans Road so counterintuitively remarkable. Romans 5:8 tells us that "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Think about that for a second because it is truly a radical concept.

Most of our human experience has swung one of two directions. Humans either dismiss sin as simply part of the human condition and not to be overreacted to or they affirm the evil of sin but seek to punish the evildoer. These are our options, a soft permissiveness that grossly understates the destruction that sin causes or merciless adherence to the law and consequences without exception. Jesus does neither of these things but shows us a third way.

Jesus doesn't minimize sin the way our culture might but calls it a path to death (as we'll see in the next section). He rightly calls out the severity of our offenses and minces no words describing its totalitarian effect on his good creation. He acknowledges the depth of sin and its effects by dying on the cross. If sin were not so bad, the cross would have been a foolish overreaction, but sin is bad and the depth and breadth of it unmistakably pervasive. And yet! His response is not condemnation but love.

This is the other half of the paradox. As Tim Keller puts it, the gospel says that you are worse than you ever dared admit but more loved than you ever dared hope. At the same time. In history, only Jesus has been able to successfully hold these two competing ideas together and he did so at infinite cost to himself. So, what was the effect of Christ's sacrificial death? Glad you asked.

The next step along this road is Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord." This verse echoes one of Jesus most famous sayings, John 3:16. In that passage, Jesus promises "eternal life" to those who believe in him instead of the alternative, which he calls "perishing". This is an important and fundamental idea

for Christianity. Central to the gospel is the idea that there are eternal consequences for our actions, not just temporal ones. We believe what Jesus teaches repeatedly, that the consequences of sin are temporal experiences of death in this life and eternal death in the next.

This is difficult for us to reckon with emotionally, but it makes intuitive sense. If a person chooses to spend their life pursuing their own destructive ends, while ignoring or intentionally rejecting God, why wouldn't there be consequences for those decisions? Paul uses the word wages here to make the point, hell is earned by a lifetime of decisions to reject or ignore God and hurt his creation. Eternal life without God is the natural end of a lifetime of godless desires. In some sense, hell is the never-ending pursuit of self and rejection of God, which leads inevitably to exponential pain, destruction and "gnashing of teeth".

Christ's death on the cross is the alternative to this path of perishing. The result of humans placing their faith (and by extension their lives) in the hands of God is eternal life with God. This "free gift" is only free to us because it was infinitely costly to Christ. He made the path to life by walking the path of death for us.

What does it take to walk down this path? For that answer we turn to Romans 10:9-10 which says, "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." Paul gives us two things here that are interrelated.

The first is internal, he says that if we believe then we will be justified. Believe in what? For starters, we have to believe the whole story, from Creation to Fall to Redemption and beyond. We have to believe that God is the ultimate source of the universe and it was by his Word that all things were made. We believe that we were made in the image of God, uniquely crafted for his purposes. We believe that what is wrong with the world finds its origins inside of us, not outside of us. We believe that sin begins in our hearts, manifests in our actions and has been codified in the culture and systems of this world. We believe that our only hope to see that brokenness mended is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus was and is God made flesh, sent to Earth to be our Redeemer and Lord. We believe that the life he lived was the model for what it means to be human AND a representative life lived on our behalf. We believe the same thing about his death on the cross, that it was the ultimate act of

sacrificial love that should be mimicked by his followers AND the very act that enables us to truly live!

Before we go on, it is so important to understand that the act of believing and confessing are not deeds to be done in order to earn the saving work of God. The Bible is abundantly clear that our salvation is solely the result of the gracious work of God and requires no work on our part. Martin Luther described religious and law-oriented thinking as the default mode of the human heart, so it is tempting to believe that the degree or quality of our faith is what matters. We are prone to make even faith a competition to be won and God's saving love something to be earned! The act of faith has been described as simply falling backwards into the arms of God, but even that requires righteous action on our part that Romans 3 taught us that we cannot do apart from God. It is better to think of the saving belief required of us not that we have to fall backwards but is simply acknowledging that God has been holding us up all along!

Paul says that when we believe these things in our heart, when we are truly transformed by these truths and we see the hope that lies in them, we will be justified. Justified here means "made righteous". We are, from this point forward, considered by God to be pure, exactly what he made us to be. In addition, Christ's death paid the penalty for our sin so that now, in God's eyes, we have nothing left to pay. This is the core of our redemption, that Jesus's death paid our penalty in our place. The theological term is "penal substitutionary atonement". This intimidating phrase simply means that laws were broken (penal) and there needed to be a reckoning for those wrongs (atonement) but that instead of the lawbreakers being held responsible for the reckoning, the lawgiver himself did so in their place (substitution). This is the core of the good news of the Gospel, that despite the fact that humans have not been who they were meant to be and, in the process, have wreaked havoc on God's good creation, God himself paid the price so that his creation could be restored once again.

The second clause in Paul's sentence mirrors the first but adds an external element. He says that when we confess with our mouth, we are saved. This doesn't mean that believing justifies us, but we aren't saved unless we confess out loud. Paul is simply describing the whole experience of salvation as both an internal conviction and external testimony. We cannot simply "believe in our hearts" as if Christianity were just a philosophy to consider and give mental assent to. When we confess with our mouths, we confess that the world is what Jesus said it is.

We confess belief in an entire worldview that includes an origin story, an explanation of suffering, hope for redemption and a way of being in the world that gives us identity and guides our decisions. Christianity is so much more than a "personal faith", it is a new way of understanding the world and if we don't walk out that understanding, it is reasonable to ask if we actually believe it. Confession also speaks to the public face of our belief. Christians are expected to bear witness to our faith by our words and our actions. In these ways we confess our belief and understanding of the world around us.

Romans 10:13 takes us to the final phase of our journey. It says that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." This statement isn't about the mechanism of salvation but the universal invitation that Jesus gives. Most of the world's religions have either an implicit or explicit ethnic identity but Christianity does not. Jesus' death broke down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles so that, in Paul's words in Colossians 3:11, "there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all." This statement is radical in its uniqueness. For most of world history, religion has been closely tied to geography and ethnic identity but now, Christianity claims to transcend all human boundaries. Paul says here in Romans 10 that no one who calls on the name of the Lord will be refused salvation. All people, regardless of color, ethnicity or geography, are included in Christ's Kingdom if they will only call upon him as their Savior and Lord. Christianity, more than any other world religion, has crossed all of these human barriers so that now you can find Christians in every corner of the world worshipping God and submitting their lives to him.

### **Sanctification and Renewal.**

The cross is the event by which mankind can be reconciled back to God and have their relationship with him restored. This is what we call salvation. But that is not the only effect of the cross. The cross saves us from our sins, but it also saves us for a new life. To unpack this idea, let's look at Romans 6:20-22, which says, "When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. but now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life." Paul is making an argument that our behavior has consequences, both temporal and

eternal. There is a way of life that leads to pain, separation, suffering and ultimately death, but there is another way of life that leads to joy, satisfaction and ultimately, eternal life. The path laid out by Genesis 3 is a path that only leads to death, but the death of Jesus blazed a new path that leads to life. The path was laid before us by the gracious act of the cross, infinitely expensive to Jesus but freely offered to us. We may choose to walk down this life-giving path but have to understand that it is a complete life-reorientation.

Our salvation is best understood when we take a step back and see the whole story of God. Christians believe that we were made for perfect relationship with God, ourselves, each other and the rest of creation. This is our starting point and default mode. When sin enters the story in Genesis 3, it disrupts this default and creates an alternative, broken reality where, for the first time, we humans were not in any perfect relationships. This had catastrophic effects on all of creation. Consider how different life would be if sin had never entered the world. But for us, thousands of years later, that alternative reality is the only one we've ever known. If we think about salvation as a means to be absolved from our personal sins, we miss the bigger picture completely.

The life of Jesus was a partial peek at what God originally intended for his creation in the default reality. Jesus lived without sin and so was in perfect relationship with God and himself. He demonstrated what the Kingdom of God looked like when he healed the sick and raised the dead, restoring them to their default and undoing the effects of sin on their lives. Jesus' life was only a partial peek because all of the people and creation around him was still deeply broken by sin, so his relationships with them were far from perfect, but we see glimpses. He loves the people around him selflessly and relentlessly, as we were made to do. He speaks the complete and deepest truths that cut through the lies, partial truths and shallowness of our broken world. He demonstrates divine command over the physical universe by walking on water and turning water into wine.

The sneak peek of Jesus life also serves as an invitation to us. The cross not only saves us from the culpability of our own sin but makes a way for us to live lives closer to the ones we were made to live. Salvation is an invitation to become who we have always been, image bearers of God made to reflect him in every way. Paul tells us that we are now free from sin, no longer shackled to it the way we were before we were saved.

One way to think about it is as if sin were a cage that until we were saved, was locked from the outside. When we give ourselves to Christ, he unlocks the cage and we are free to walk out into real life. Paul's question to the Romans above suggests that when we continue to sin after being saved, we are willingly stepping back into the cage to live the caged life even though we've been freed. He asks the rhetorical question, "what fruit were you getting" from that caged life? When Christians live sinfully, they are choosing to live out the alternative reality that flowed out of Genesis 3 instead of the reality made possible by the cross. That cross-shaped reality is the one we were created for, though one still marred by ongoing sin in and around us.

As we discussed above, the cross is about forgiveness for sin, but it is also about so much more. The cross doesn't only absolve us from sin, but it redeems and renews us as well. When we are saved by God, we begin a lifelong process of transformation into the very thing God created us to be, image bearers of God who fully reflect his character and goodness.

### **Reconciliation and Relationship.**

It is impossible to understand the full scope of the atonement without fully grasping Genesis 1-3. Those chapters are the foundation of the Christian worldview because in them we learn about the nature and purpose of mankind, God's essential character, and what went wrong with God's world. One of the essential things we learn from those chapters in Genesis is that man and woman were made for each other. When God created man, he made him "very good" but that does not mean that he was independent or self-sufficient. God created man with inherent needs, including a need for God himself and a need for companionship. Man needed woman before the fall, which means that it is part of human nature to need complimentary relationship. We are not enough but that lack is on purpose, it's not a deficit. We were made to be interdependent.

It is commonly understood that Eve and Adam's decision to eat the fruit in the garden was the first sin, and that's true. What is interesting about that story though is that when Eve is being tempted by the serpent and ultimately eats the fruit, Adam is standing next to her and doesn't intervene. Eve's sin may have been the first, but Adam missed an opportunity to be for Eve

what she needed him to be. Eve needed Adam, as Adam needed Eve, to be strong in her weakness. She needed him to remind her of God's Law and his goodness that the Serpent was undercutting. Adam failed Eve in that moment and humans have been failing each other in similar ways ever since.

God made humans in such a way that we need healthy relationship with him and with each other. We need to be able to depend on each other, care for and protect each other. This doesn't make us weak, it makes us human. The romanticized American ideal of the lone wolf or pioneer is not God's design but is simply an idolatrous vision of self-reliance. The cross is the ideal place for this problem to be remedied because, as they say, at the foot of the cross, all men are equal. We are all made in the image of God, but all deeply and irrevocably broken by sin and in deep need for our savior. Sure, our needs are different and our sin is diverse but there is no economy of sin that makes one needier for redemption than another. Thus, my unique sin patterns create unique need for others in my life to point out and help me to fight. I need people who don't sin like me because they will be able to see my sin far more clearly than I will. And they need me too, to lovingly walk with them through their sin and consistently point them back to our universal need for Jesus.

Another way that the cross reunites people is rooted in the theology of the imago dei. The essential value and purpose of all humans is the same. We are all equally made in the image of God and equally called and equipped to glorify him with our lives. The fact that the cross deals with all of our sin with one unifying act of love speaks to the sameness of our problem. I am just as human as my neighbor, just as sinful as my neighbor and just as loved by God as my neighbor. This idea ought to break down all of the dividing lines that humans create between races, ethnicities and geographies. There is simply no difference between humans regarding the questions of value, need and solution. The gospel unites people in every aspect.

## **Restoration and Hope.**

The whole arc of the Redemption story begins in Genesis 1 and ends in Revelation 22. It is a story of creation and restoration of that creation. It's easy to limit the scope of redemption to the saving of souls because that is what is talked about most commonly in the scriptures and is the

most pressing for our own lives but it is not the whole story. There is no doubt that the effect of the cross is salvation for those who give themselves to Christ but that is only one, relatively small, part of the redemptive whole. God's love extends to everything that he created, including the plant and animal worlds, the earth itself and even the culture that he commanded his people to build.

We'll spend a lot more time on this in section 10 of this resource so I won't spend a lot of time on it here, but it is important to know that the cross set off a redemptive process that extends just as far as God's creative work and sin's destructive reach. As J.R.R. Tolkien described in his epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, "everything sad will come untrue." This is the full scope of Christ's redemptive work. It's why a gospel of "Jesus saving me from my sins" is really rather trite and reductionistic. It takes the great whole and cuts out one little piece, elevating it above the rest.

Another important implication of this is that God's redemptive work extends past individuals and actually applies to cultural systems and structures as well. It is not enough to say that problems like racism, sexism and xenophobia are "sin issues" as if that means that the only way we can talk about them is as individual people sinning against each other. We have to recognize that the aggregate result of millions of people sinning against one another has slowly developed cultural biases and sinful laws that consistently work against minorities and people without power. The eventual result of the cross will not be simply saving people from their sins but also wiping away the result of that sin, compounded on itself for generations, restoring justice and shalom to God's world as he intended it.

## **Why Judgment?**

Now, you may ask, "why must there be a reckoning at all, why can't God just decide to forgive, and everyone can move on?" This is an important question to consider and it is most helpful to consider it from the perspective of the victim. Imagine you have been the victim of a crime, say your car was stolen. You were minding your own business, and someone broke a window, hot-wired the car and drove it away. Now you are left without a car. You have several options. You can call the police and ask them to hunt down the thief until they restore back to you what has

been taken. This would certainly be a justifiable response. Your car was stolen, therefore the thief should bear the responsibility of returning to you what was taken.

Would it be just to tell someone who has had their car stolen that they have no right to restitution? Of course not. It's easy to suggest someone "just forgive and move on" but that vastly underestimates the impact of the wrongdoing, both on the victim and on society itself. Do we really want to live in a world where wrongdoing is overlooked? Certainly not, crime would run rampant in a world where there were no consequences for it. And are you prepared to be told to just get over someone's sin against you? Having a car stolen is challenging at a practical level but probably will not leave a big emotional scar. There are other far more heinous acts of violence done every day that we would never dream of telling someone to "just get over".

But someone might ask you, "OK I get that we can't force people to forgive, but why can't you just decide to forgive the thief? Why would you demand punishment and justice for that act? Wouldn't it be a more gracious act to simply overlook the offense?" You could do that, you could decide that you weren't going to press charges or hold the thief responsible but, if you do that, the loss doesn't simply evaporate into thin air. In the scenario where you decide to "just forgive" the thief, you have decided to bear the burden of the injustice yourself. You are still out a car and will have to pay for it yourself. The impact of sin cannot simply disappear by deciding to forgive the perpetrator, the burden of sin has to be borne by someone. Having a car stolen is a tangible loss and is easier to understand. The damage done by physical or sexual abuse is far harder to quantify but no less damaging. It would be deeply unjust to simply forgive someone as if their sin had no effect.

In the cosmic sense, God has been wronged by the way that humans have treated his creation. Humans have hurt and killed each other, mistreated the environment and turned their backs on God himself, abandoning the very relationship they were made for and nourished by. Humanity's sins against God cannot be overlooked any more than abuse can be. It has to be reconciled in some way.

Religions that abide by Law place the burden of that reconciliation on the perpetrator, expecting them to pay penance or do good deeds to overcome their evil ones. Practically speaking, this is impossible. What good deed could one do to make up for murder or abuse? No amount of good

deeds can earn your way back to a moral equilibrium because good deeds don't cancel out bad ones. Evil and destructive actions exist independently of a person's good deeds. Robin Hood famously stole from the rich to give to the poor and has been generally lauded for it, but the evil act of stealing isn't justified by the generosity he showed to the poor. Even if you assume that the money was first taken from the poor by unjust taxation, the solution isn't more stealing. Since good and evil deeds are not interrelated, one cannot make up for the other. The only just response is punishment that is equal to the crime.

