

WHAT THE CROSS DOES FOR YOU

ROMANS 3:21-26

A well-known preacher was invited to deliver a message in the chapel of a college for deaf people. He described it later as a “preacher’s paradise.” He explained that it was the only place where you could get two laughs for every joke. The first laugh came right after the punch line from all those in the audience who were able to hear. Then, the second laugh followed a few seconds later when the sign language interpreter translated the joke for those who were deaf. This same preacher mentioned something else that made an impression on him. He noticed how the interpreter pointed to the palms of her hands in a very graceful way many times during his message. He learned that pointing to your palms stands for Jesus in sign language. How appropriate is that? Of all the signs that might be chosen to identify Jesus, it’s the nail prints – the wounds that the cross made – that symbolize who Jesus is and what He’s done.

The cross is more than a piece of wood. If you want to understand the worldwide impact of Christianity, if you want to understand the Christian faith, and – most importantly - if you want to follow Jesus personally, you must understand the cross. That’s what we’re making an effort to do this Lenten season leading up to the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul, the great Christian leader, wrote many letters to the first followers of Jesus in the first century. One letter was written to the Christians living in the city of Rome. In the first part of that letter (what we now refer to as the first three chapters), Paul makes a strong case that every human being is unworthy of a relationship with God – really bad people and even really good people. Nobody is good enough, moral enough, or upright enough to stand before an absolutely holy God on the basis of his or her own merits. So, the obvious question has to be asked, “How can anyone have a relationship with God?” That’s exactly the question Paul answers in the passage we want to read and think about today. Here is where we discover what the cross does for you and me. Three simple statements help me understand the force, the impact, and the eternal truth of God found in this passage.

BECAUSE OF THE CROSS, I AM DELIVERED.

Paul says right here, “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement....” (Rom 3:25 NIV) What is “a sacrifice of atonement”? Your translation of the Bible might use a different word or phrase. If you prefer the old KJV, the word is “propitiation” which isn’t used much today at all. What’s the meaning of the original Greek word used there? Literally, it means to pacify or appease the wrath of a god by presenting to it a sacrifice of some kind. In primitive cultures – and this is true even today – people see the world being filled with gods and goddesses who get angry and upset sometimes over the most trivial of things. And so pagan religion is often about presenting little gifts or sacrifices to make some irritated god or goddess feel better about you.

Now is the real God – the God of the Bible – the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ like that? Many people are uncomfortable – even offended – when you described God as angry or full of wrath. They think it insults God by thinking of Him in the same terms as pagan gods and goddesses. Others believe it demeans God’s dignity or majesty to

suggest He has to be pacified in some way. Much of the problem is because we find it difficult to apply the Bible's definition of who we are to ourselves personally. The Bible says each of us and all of us are sinners and ungodly. Do you honestly believe that about yourself? Someone was once speaking to a rich English lady about the fact every human being is a sinner. She was probably someone like the lords and ladies that you see depicted on the TV show "Downton Abbey." In any case, this particular lady of noble birth replied, "But ladies are not sinners!" The person asked her, "Well, then, who are sinners?" Her reply was, "Just young men in their foolish days." When the person she was speaking with went on to explain what the Bible teaches insisting that if she was to be saved she had to come to Jesus in just the same way as any employee, in your household, she said, "Well, then, I will not be saved."

To be ungodly means that you're unlike God. It's somewhat like calling someone "un-American." You don't mean that such a person is German, Russian, or Australian. Instead, you mean he or she is opposed to the ideology and beliefs of our country. To "We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are." (Rom 3:22 NIV) be un-American means you hate our country and you're hostile to America. By the same token, when you admit that you're ungodly, you admit that there's something inside of you that is opposed to God. There's an attitude and a spirit from which you need deliverance. You acknowledge that you're just wrong with God and you're at a loss to make it right in your own strength. In addition, you understand you deserve God's anger and judgment. You see, it's only people who fully recognize how much they need to be delivered from God that ever get delivered by God. If you ever want to be right with God, it begins by recognizing, first of all, how incredibly wrong you are with Him. And that depends on seeing God's holiness for what it is.

Let's suppose you compare God and His holiness to climbing a 20,000 foot mountain. One person climbs only 50 feet and gives up. Another climbs 500 feet and calls it quits. One really ambitious, great climber actually makes it 5,000 feet. But even he fails to make it anywhere near the summit. Sure, some human beings are indeed more moral and upright than others. You might be one of them. Good for you! The problem is that each of us fall incredibly short of God's goodness. We all fall terribly short of God's standard. That's why Paul says here, "For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard." (Rom 3:23 NLT)

Does a God who judges with righteous anger contradict a God of love and compassion? Many people struggle with how God can be both loving and absolutely holy. The Bible has no problem combining both truths. For instance, it says, "Everything GOD does is right - the trademark on all his works is love." (Ps 145:17 NLT) Because He is holy, God only gets angry for the right reasons. We usually get angry for all the wrong reasons. Our anger is usually selfish, irrational, malicious, spiteful, and causes us to do or say things we regret later. But when God gets angry it's always justified; it's never selfish; and it never acts out inappropriately. God's anger is His steady, unrelenting, uncompromising hatred of any and all evil however it's demonstrated. The only thing that ever makes God angry is evil. Because He's the one and only Judge of the entire

Universe – He made it and He made all the rules that govern it both physically and spiritually – He can't just overlook or excuse evil. If He did that, He wouldn't be a good judge. He would fail to uphold what is right and good in the universe He Himself created.

Here's a sobering thought. There's nothing you have done, there's nothing you will ever do, there's nothing you can ever do to remove God's anger against your own personal sin. But here's some really good news! You don't have to deliver yourself from God. God did that Himself at the cross. He allowed His Son, Jesus, to pay the penalty for your sin and mine when He died on the cross. This was something God decided to do even before the world was created. Because of the cross, you and I are delivered. On the one hand, God's holiness is preserved because your sin and mine is punished in Jesus. God's role as the righteous Judge of the universe is upheld. On the other hand, God's love finds a way to deliver us and bring us into an eternal and right relationship with Himself. Here's a wonderful thought! God doesn't love you now and today because Jesus died for you on the cross. Because God always loved you, Jesus died for you on the cross. God's attitude toward you never needed changing, but what He was going to do with you sure needed to be changed! The Bible says, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 Jo 4:10 NLT) There's that word or phrase again – sacrifice of atonement or atoning sacrifice. It simply means that because of the cross, you and I are delivered. Here's a second great truth about what the cross does for us.

BECAUSE OF THE CROSS, I AM PURCHASED.

Paul says in the passage we read, "And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." (Rom 3:24 NIV) That word "redemption" was originally from the world of business and commerce. In the ancient world, slavery was commonplace. People shopped for male or female slaves at a slave market. Once people found a slave that they thought would meet the needs of their household, they purchased him or her with money. That kind of transaction was called a "redemption." They gave something of value (money) for something they deemed of greater value at that point in time. How many of you remember savings stamps? I remember when I was a boy collecting and putting S & H Green Stamps into stamp books. Then I'd look in a catalog to see how many stamp books were needed to purchase something offered in the catalog. When I had enough stamps, I would go to a place that was actually called "a redemption center." I'd go in there and trade my stamp books for something of greater value.

By using that word "redemption", some important truths are implied about you and me. First, it means God considers you and me to be slaves without Jesus. Slaves of what or of whom? Slaves to sin. You hear a lot today about addictions - compulsive patterns of behavior over which people have little or no control. People can get addicted to nicotine, alcohol, all kinds of drugs, gambling, or pornography. I've even heard that it's possible to get addicted to shopping and social media! But the truth is that every person starts out in life having one very basic form of addiction. Each of us is a slave to

sin. We want to live life our own way. We don't want God telling us what to do. We discover how easy it is to do what we don't want to do. We fail to do the things that we know we should do. Once and awhile we might rattle our chains, but the chains are very much still there the next day. True, we might be unaware of our addiction to sin, but that doesn't make it any less real. We might deny any addiction to sin, but that doesn't make it any less a fact. And not one of us can just stop committing sins in our own strength. It's bigger and more powerful than any of us. It's more in control of us that we care to admit. Sin is an incredible and very real master. It enslaves everyone.

The Bible says God came in the person of Jesus to buy us out of that slavery to sin. But a price had to be paid. There is a price to salvation. True enough, it cost you and me nothing. But it cost God the life of His own Son, Jesus. That also means that, secondly, you've been bought and paid for by God Himself. It follows (doesn't it?) that you don't belong to yourself once you start to follow Jesus. Now you belong to God lock, stock, and barrel. That's why the Bible says, "Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price...." (1 Cor 6:19-20 NLT) Redemption means that you've been purchased at a great price. You now belong to God and God alone. He paid a lot for you! Just consider the purchase price – the life of Jesus Himself given for you at the cross.

When you begin to understand this truth, it will change your life and how you live your life. Thirdly, you see how tremendously valuable you are to God. Nothing will give you a greater or more genuine sense of your intrinsic worth than realizing what God did to make you His possession forever. You will live every day of your life with a new and profound gratitude. "Wow, God, you loved me that much!" You will live every day of your life with a new and profound sense of purpose. "Why, God, did you love me that much? Is there something I can do and be for You?" And, of course, there is something you can do and be for Jesus. You can become more and more like Jesus. You can share the message and love of Jesus with others. Not because you have to. Not because you're trying to impress God in some way. But simply because you are eternally thankful that you've been bought and paid for by God Himself. Because of the cross, you and I are purchased. But I see at least one more key truth from this passage concerning what the cross does for you and me.

BECAUSE OF THE CROSS, I AM ACCEPTED.

The Bible says here, "All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.... He did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." (Rom 3:24, 26 NIV) Many of us have heard the word "justification" that comes from this and other passages in the Bible. If the word "redemption" comes to us from the world of business and commerce, the word "justification" is a legal word. It comes from the world of courts and the practice of law. When you are justified before God, it means that you have been declared "not guilty" in the Supreme Court of the Universe by the one and only Supreme Judge of the Universe. Here's a homey but helpful way to remember the

essence of justification. Because of what Jesus did at the cross for you and me, justification means “just as if I never sinned.”

Let me share four important truths about justification briefly. First, justification has a source. It's the grace of God. Remember, Paul mentioned that fact, “All are justified freely by his grace....” (Rom 3:24 NIV) God doesn't have to rescue anybody. God doesn't owe you, me, or anyone else a restored relationship with Him. No one can ever say they've earned or deserve to spend eternity with Him in Heaven. A relationship with God comes to you and me only and forever as a gift. It's freely given and freely received. Grace is the gift of God. God accepts His as His child at the beginning of your relationship with Him not at the end. You're accepted by God not because you did enough good things or acted spiritual enough. You're accepted because God granted acceptance to you as His gift. That's grace!

We all struggle to understand that great truth. Why? Because we live in a world where you're rewarded on the basis of what you do. When you do good work at school, your teacher gives you a star on your paper or an A on your report card. When you excel at a sport, you get a trophy. When you work hard at your job, you get a bonus. From birth you're taught that you receive rewards on the basis of your performance. I doubt anyone here today has thrown his or her arms around your boss on payday and thanked him or her for your paycheck. It's a wage, not a gift. You earned it. You worked hard for it. You deserve it. You're owed it. But God will not owe you or anyone else an eternal relationship with Him. You must receive it as a gift or not receive it at all.

Second, justification has a foundation. It's Jesus' death on the cross. Grace is one thing; justice is another. Justification is about justice. Justification has to have content and substance to it. Justification has to have a foundation. Justification is not like granting you or me a pardon. You probably know that the President of the United States can pardon anyone of any crime that he wishes. Maybe the most famous presidential pardon was the one Gerald Ford granted to Richard Nixon after his resignation as President. President Ford pardoned Nixon of any and all crimes he may have committed in the Watergate scandal. It was an official act to overlook or excuse any crimes Nixon may have committed. That's not justification. God didn't overlook your sin, excuse your sin, or rationalize your sin. Instead, He paid the penalty for your sin and mine Himself through His Son, Jesus, at the cross. Jesus died in your place and mine. Because of Jesus, then, the case against you has been dismissed. You're declared “not guilty.” You're innocent. You're free to have a relationship with God.

Third, justification has a means. It's faith. The Bible says, “We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.” (Rom 3:22 NIV) What is faith? It's all about trusting someone else. Let's say you get sick and you go to the doctor. He writes you out a prescription that you can't read, but fortunately your pharmacist can. You take the bottle home, but you don't leave it on the kitchen counter. Because you trust your doctor, you take the medicine. You receive it into your body and you get better eventually. Or, let's say you're accused of a serious crime. You're scared and you call the best attorney in town. He conducts an investigation and when you go to court to stand trial, you simply sit back

and allow him to plead your case. He does his job well and you're acquitted. You put your trust in that attorney, and as a result, you walk out of that court room a free person. Every person makes a decision to put his or faith in Jesus or not. Faith isn't knowing all the important facts about Jesus. Faith isn't admiring Jesus for being a great Person. Faith is when you stop trusting in yourself to get on the right side of God and, instead, you put all of your trust in Jesus and what He's done for you. When you do that, you're declared right with God and your sins are forgiven. When you do that, you're accepted. When you do that, you're delivered. When you do that, you're purchased. When you do that, your eternal relationship with God begins and it will never end.

Fourth, justification has wonderful results – a whole bunch of them! All of your sins are forgiven. You receive the power and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit forever. You receive both peace with God and the peace of God. You're invited to participate in God's mission of bringing lost people to Him. You receive eternal life at that very moment and it continues on even after your physical death. Perhaps most wonderful of all, you receive the certain assurance that you're forever accepted by God and nothing can ever change that incredibly marvelous fact. Shout it from the rooftops, "I am accepted! I am accepted! I am accepted!" Because of the cross, you are delivered. Because of the cross, you are purchased. Because of the cross, you are accepted. That's what the cross does for you. Thanks be to God!

A woman by the name of Charlotte Elliott was born back in 1789. She was raised in a Christian home in England by godly parents. Everything was wonderful in Charlotte's life for the first thirty years. She was known for her fun-loving spirit. She was even a comedy writer for a period of time in those years. But around her thirtieth birthday, her life changed dramatically. Her health deteriorated. Every day she had terrible pain, weakness, and overwhelming exhaustion. The doctors were never able to diagnose her mysterious illness or provide relief. She became an invalid for the next 50 years – pretty much confined to her home and her bed.

Those early years were a miserable time in Charlotte's life. She became bitter and angry over her situation. She blamed and cursed God for her condition. Now, her father often hosted visiting pastors and preachers at their home. One evening, when Charlotte was now 46 years of age, a visiting preacher named Dr. Cesar Malan was staying at the Elliott home. One evening, as they were all sitting and visiting, Dr. Malan turned the subject to our personal relationship with God. He asked Charlotte if she was a follower of Jesus. Charlotte's poor health and often severe pain tended to make her an irritable person. She resented the question. She answered that religion was a matter she didn't wish to discuss. Dr. Malan graciously deferred. But, it seems that the Holy Spirit used her abrupt and rude conduct to show Charlotte the depths of her own pride and alienation from God. She was miserable for several days and finally apologized to Dr. Malan. She went on to confess, "I am miserable. I want to be saved. I want to come to Jesus; but I don't know how." Dr. Malan answered, "Charlotte, why not come just as you are? You have only to come to Him just as you are."

That's exactly what Charlotte did. She came just as she was. Jesus transformed her life. She never did recover her health. But she wrote over 150 songs of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord. Later, remembering that pivotal event in her life, she wrote a hymn that's become one of the great anthems in all of Christendom. Billy Graham went on to use it at the end of all of his evangelistic services to call millions to saving faith in Jesus. Charlotte referred to it as her spiritual autobiography. "Just as I am without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bidd'st me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come! I come!"

How do you come to Jesus? Just as you are. No excuses. No defenses. No trying to appear better than you are. Just you – just the way you are right now today. Because, you see, you're not delivered because of who you are, but because of who He is. You're not purchased because of who you are, but because of who He is. And you're not accepted because of who you are, but because of who He is. That's what the cross does for you and for me.