

The Achievement of the Cross

I promised you spectacularly good news today after spending the past two weeks talking about God's broken heart and our guilt before Him. It's not fun to talk about our guilt, to describe again how utterly hopeless we as human beings are without the cross, but it's entirely necessary. Once we know how bad the bad news is, the good news becomes incredibly good.

So, let's go right to some Scriptures that talk about the cross, and I want to begin in a strange place, in Hebrews 12:2:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The first thing that we notice is that something has taken place which is very good news for Jesus. He received the promised joy that was waiting for Him when He completed His life-saving mission on the cross of Calvary. He had the expectation that He would now have brothers and sisters from the farthest reaches of the globe who would share this joy with Him. He was seated at the right hand of the throne of God, restored to the place that He had left behind in order to pursue His mission. The agony of crucifixion, the separation from the Father and the weight of the sins of the whole world were now in the past. Death had been defeated. Life for all who would come to be friends of God had been made possible.

Was it worth it all for Jesus? Were we worth it all? This was the goal. You see, God had lost the human race, the people He had made in His image and made for relationship with Him. We had abandoned His Kingdom in order to serve a different kind of king, the ruler of this world, the enemy of God and deceiver of our race. We were under his authority, as Colossians 1:13,14 makes clear:

For He (the Father) has rescued us from the one who rules in the kingdom of darkness, and He has brought us into the Kingdom of His dear Son. God has purchased our freedom with His blood and has forgiven all our sins.

We were in need of a rescue. We were under the control, under the authority, under the dominion of the ruler of the kingdom of darkness. That's a terrible state to be in, one which we should never take lightly, especially when we are thinking about our friends, our family members, who haven't yet been willing to accept Jesus' offer of forgiveness and new life. There is a ruler whose intention is our destruction and we were under his rule until we received forgiveness. Through the cross, God has brought us into the kingdom of His dear Son. Through the cross, we have been set free from the law of sin and death. Through the cross, our sins, which are many, have been forgiven. Through the cross, we are a new people, and we have an entirely different destiny than we had before we came to trust in Jesus' sacrifice for us. Through the cross we were transferred from being under the authority of the ruler of this dark world and into the Kingdom of God's dear Son. Again, the cost of our freedom is mentioned and it is a high price - the blood of Jesus. But He found it

worthwhile. He was the one who decided that mercy would triumph over judgment and because of His choice, we are forgiven and free.

Let's carry on with Paul's teaching here in Colossians, reading from 1:19

For God in all His fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and by Him God reconciled everything to Himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of His blood on the cross. This includes you who were once so far away from God. You were His enemies, separated from Him by your evil thoughts and actions, yet now He has brought you back as His friends. He has done this through His death on the cross in His own human body. As a result, He has brought you into the very presence of God, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before Him without a single fault. But you must continue to believe this truth and stand in it firmly.

(Col. 1:19-23)

From the first part of the passage we see that all creation was at odds with the Creator. It was all out of whack from the time Adam and Eve stepped outside of obedience and into rebellion in the Garden. Because it is through Christ, and through the offering of His blood on the cross, that God reconciled everything to Himself. He made peace with everything, in heaven and on earth, according to v. 20.

But then Paul makes it very specific: "This includes you who were once so far away from God." Add that to the list of bad news items -- not only were we under the dominion of the evil ruler of this world, but we were 'far from God'. Paul continues by saying that we were God's *enemies* and were *separated* from Him by our evil thoughts and actions. What we did, our responsibility, kept Him at a distance from us.

But once more we come to the greatest turning point in human history, the most revolutionary change to our human condition that has ever taken place. More important than the discovery of fire or the internal combustion engine, the greatest most radical change is at the cross.

Jesus has brought you back as His friends through His death on the cross in His own human body.

Under the Old Covenant, there was a sacrifice to pay for sin, the shed blood of a perfect lamb. Under the New Covenant that sacrifice has been given once and for all time, the perfect Lamb of God, Jesus, pays the price for sin. And the result: we are now the friends of God. We who were just described as having been His enemies, who were separated from God by our evil thoughts and actions are now considered His friends . . . through the cross!

And now comes perhaps the hardest part for us to grasp in this whole work of redemption. Paul says that we have been brought into the presence of God and are standing before Him. This is the position we now have, through our faith in Christ. We stand in God's presence. But how do we stand there, knowing that we have failed Him and knowing that we have been enemies of the Creator, the Holy One, the author of all that is good and beautiful and loving? How do we stand, knowing that He knows

not only our sinful actions, but our selfish and sinful thoughts? How do we stand, when He is surrounded by angels crying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty", and when worship is going up from millions of believers who all acknowledge together that He alone is worthy of all honor and glory and praise? And here's what Paul tells us about how we stand: "You are holy and blameless as you stand before Him without a single fault."

Guilt affects us. When we are aware that we have done wrong and suspect that we are about to give an account for what we've done wrong, we get nervous. Our palms get moist and we act in unusual ways because we don't know how this is going to go down. We don't know how angry or vengeful or punitive the person we've wronged is going to be and so, quite justifiably, we feel anxious. How much more will we feel nervous in facing a holy God who demands that we be holy, too? How much more will we feel afraid because we know that we haven't . . . and can't . . . earn forgiveness from the punishment we deserve? How much more will our limbs drop in weakness and our bodies shake in fear when we stand before the Lord in the hour of His judgment?

And this is the amazing thing -- not only because we want it so badly, but that God wants it so badly -- that we stand before Him, not as quaking , fearful strangers . . . but as His friends. Isn't that absolutely amazing. *"You are holy and blameless as you stand before Him without a single fault."* *"You were His enemies, separated from Him by your evil thoughts and actions, yet now He has brought you back as His friends."*

And the only proviso Paul attaches to this wonderful good news, this gracious promise, is this: *"But you must continue to believe this truth and stand in it firmly."* That's where your confidence for living will come from, as well as your confidence to come boldly before the throne of grace, as the writer of Hebrews teaches us. As we position ourselves in faith, in confidence in God's promises, then we will receive what He has promised to give us. Once again we hear the call to believe, to trust the Lord, for all that we long for and all that we need.

Let's look at one more passage in Colossians, this time from chapter 2, starting with verse 13:

You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's cross. In this way, God disarmed the evil rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by His victory over them on the cross of Christ.

Here we see yet another description of our sorry state prior to the cross. We were dead. We were dead while we still breathed the air and moved around and spoke ... because we were dead inside. Paul says we were dead because of our sins and because our sinful nature was not yet cut away. In other words, because of our deeds (the externals) and because of our nature (what's on the inside).

And then, in this remarkable irony, the cross became an instrument of life for us. The cross that Jesus was killed on, that brought death to the Son of God, brings life to those who believe.

Then God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's cross.

The charges against us would have resulted in our death. They were the records of our sin, our pride, our rebellion against God and we had no defense against those charges. No lawyer in the world could have gotten us off the hook from the consequences of our sin. But God did. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us, destroying that record by nailing it to the cross. The news just gets better and better for the believer.

But there was still another effect that was caused by God destroying the record of the charges against us: the evil powers, the rulers and authorities that Paul talks about in Ephesians 6, were disarmed. They lost their power over us when they lost the right to accuse. Without any standing charges against the person who believes in Jesus, who trusts in the finished work of the cross, there is no ground for the enemy to accuse us. This is exactly what Paul was saying at the beginning of Romans 8 when he wrote, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus." And here in his letter to the Colossians, Paul says that God shamed these powers of darkness through His victory over them on the cross of Christ. The cross is not a symbol of defeat. It is the stunning statement of the great reversal; God turning what looked like defeat into total victory, even to the point of shaming His enemies in the eyes of the whole world. Through the cross, He wins back all those who were once held captive, outside His Kingdom of love.

Now, I want to summarize the lessons we learn from these three passages in Colossians and we'll do this in the form of a chart that shows where we were and where we now stand because of the cross.

Passage: Colossians 1:13,14

Where we were: under the authority of the ruler of the kingdom of darkness

Where we are because of the cross: in the Kingdom of His dear Son

Other blessings: our freedom has been purchased by the blood of Christ and God has forgiven all our sins.

Passage #2: Colossians 1:19-23

Where we were: enemies of God, separated from Him by our own evil thoughts and actions

Where we are because of the cross: brought back to God as His friends, able to stand in God's presence, holy and blameless, without a single fault.

Passage #3: Colossians 2:13-15

Where we were: dead

Where we are because of the cross: alive with Christ

Other blessings: He forgave all our sins, canceled the record containing the charges against us (nailed to the cross) and disarmed the evil rulers and authorities who had functioned in an accusatory role against us.

We were servants of the kingdom of darkness, enemies of God and dead in our sins. We have been transferred to the Kingdom of God's dear Son, brought back to God as His friends and alive with Christ. Our sins have been forgiven, we're able to stand in God's presence without a single fault and our accusers have been silenced. This is the most important, dramatic event in human history, the one with the greatest power to change lives, to bring peace and to give hope that can be found in this world.

How do we know for sure that we're in, that all this is truly ours? We don't assume that because we've been going to church for awhile that we're part of the 'good guys' and we are assured of God's forgiveness. No, that doesn't come in any other way than by faith, by trusting in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as the sole means of our salvation. It means we humble ourselves and admit to God that we are sinners, that we have fallen short of the glory of God, that we have missed His standards for our lives and that we are guilty before Him. In that simple act of humility, we open the doors to His forgiveness, to all the results of the cross that we have just talked about. Without that humility, we remain outside of God's grace, stuck with our pride and nothing else of lasting value. With that gift of humility, we can make the appropriate response to the love of God and that is to acknowledge Him as both Savior and Lord! I urge you, if you haven't made the decision to follow Jesus, to receive His life in you, through the power of the cross, then do it today. You've got everything to gain -- and only you can decide what, if anything, you have to lose.

As we've gone through this series, we've followed the lyrics of a song called "How Deep the Father's Love" and today we'll look at the final stanza:

*I will not boast in anything
No gifts, no power, no wisdom
But I will boast in Jesus Christ
His death and resurrection
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer
But this I know with all my heart
His wounds have paid my ransom*

In this stanza the author takes that stance of humility that I've just talked about. "I will not boast in anything that is about me, that I've done, that I can do . . . but I will boast in what Jesus has done for me." And then this admission of ignorance on what, for some, is such an important question, "Why me? Why should I gain from His reward?" Why should I be blessed because Jesus is blessed? And the humble answer is, "I don't know why it's me. I'm sure there's nothing I've done to deserve this grace, but I know He paid my debt, He covered my sin, He bought my life with the highest price."

There really is only one answer to the question, "Why me?" and that is because you responded to the One who loved you first. You decided at some point that if God loved you enough to die for you, that you wanted to know Him and to love Him and to serve Him. And that's the journey that we're on now, the journey that started at the cross, but that never leaves the cross behind. The cross gives meaning to the journey itself, and we'll look at that next week. For now, let's stand amazed at the grace of God that forgives our sin and that offers us such incredible blessings as those we've looked at today.