

Rediscovering the Cross - Part 6

“Reunited”

Text: 1 Peter 3:13-18a

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on April 14, 2019 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** When Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of the Christ* was released a *Time* magazine cover asked, **(SHOW SLIDE 2) “Why did Jesus have to die?”** In other words, what does it all mean? Why do Christians make such a big deal about the brutal and bloody crucifixion of Jesus?
 - It is a very good question because literally thousands of men, even Jewish men like Jesus, were crucified in those days. What makes his death so unique?
- This question becomes even more pointed when you read that the biblical writers refer to Jesus’ death as gospel, as good news. Gospel was a common word in ancient times to describe a message of victory especially from the emperor. A messenger would be sent to deliver the good news in person.
 - Perhaps he might say, **“hear ye, hear ye, the emperor has repelled the invaders from the north. Rejoice and live out the freedom he has won for you.”** The biblical writers say that God has declared good news to the whole world. But what is so odd is that the biblical writers say this good news has everything to do with Jesus’ death on the cross.
 - So what is so special about this one Jewish man’s crucifixion that it is the joyful news for every person on the planet? What does it all mean?
- This single verse in 1 Peter 3:18 answers all of these questions in one concise sentence.
 - I want to show you two things: first I want to look at *the meaning of Jesus’ death*. This will really be a recap of our whole series. Second, I want to look at *the goal of Jesus’ death*. This will be the high point of the whole series.

THE MEANING OF JESUS’ DEATH

- **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** First then let us look at **the meaning of Jesus’ death**.
 - What I want to show you is that the cross, at its heart, is a legal transaction. Or, a legal exchange.
- Notice that Peter is using legal terminology. We see this in that Jesus died **“the righteous for the unrighteous.”** When we think of the term “righteous” we think of a person who is holier than thou, a self-righteous snob. I also think of a surfer saying, ‘righteous dude.’
 - Biblically speaking, righteousness means to be rightly related to the law. If you are right with the laws of your country then there is no threat of punishment from the government. You are free and do not owe anything.
 - But if you are not right with the law, if you are unrighteous, then there is a threat. You do owe something. Like when Heather and I, over two days, both got a speeding ticket on summer holidays in Oregon. This made us unrighteous in the eyes of the law. We owed fines. If we did not pay those fines then the tickets threatened us with jail time (Americans are pretty serious about this stuff).
- So, biblically speaking, to be righteous is to be right with God because you have kept God’s law. But as the Bible declares, **“there is no one righteous, no not one.”** Why is there no one who is righteous? Because all of have sinned. Our unrighteousness puts us in an awful position. From Genesis 3 on we see that our unrighteousness creates a great separation between God and us.
 - On the one hand, like Adam and Eve, we run from God, avoid God, and live for ourselves. But that is only half the story. On the other hand, because of our unrighteousness, God excludes us from His presence. As Michael Lawrence reminds us, **“Adam and Eve didn’t voluntarily leave the garden of Eden. They were expelled.”**¹ Or think of the curtain in the temple that separated God’s presence

¹ Mark Dever and Michael Lawrence, *It is Well*, 214.

from people. That was not Moses' idea. It was God's. For God said to Moses, "**You cannot see my face, for no one man can see me and live.**"

- After God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden he placed a cherubim and a flaming sword at the entrance. Lawrence writes, "**Whether they wanted to or not, Adam and Eve could not bring themselves back to God. To attempt to enter the garden was to face the sword of God's wrath.**"² Because of our sin we are all unrighteous and are therefore all separated from God's presence. Eternal separation from God is the ultimate penalty for sin. II Thessalonians declares that a day is coming when all who reject Jesus "**will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord.**"
- Now you will be prepared to see why this verse is such good news. We have seen the legal language. Now I want you to notice the language of exchange or we could say the language "substitution."
 - It says that "**Christ suffered once for sins.**" What does that mean? Look at the next phrase: "**the righteous for the unrighteous.**" When Jesus died he was dying for sin in the place of unrighteous people.
 - To paraphrase Tim Keller, on the central day of history in the central moment of that day there was a great transfer. At that one time in history God treated someone who was righteous as though he was unrighteous.
 - Jesus was a righteous man. He committed no sin and was therefore legally right with God. But on that one day God treated Jesus as if he was unrighteous. So the million-dollar question then is, "**why was God treating him as if he was unrighteous? Why was he being punished?**" The answer of the text is that he was dying *for* sins. He, the righteous one, was exchanging places with us, the unrighteous ones. This was a once and for all exchange. What happened in that exchange?
 - God took our sins and charged them to Jesus' account. This made Jesus' legally unrighteous before God. II Corinthians 5:21 says the same thing, "**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.**" As Jerry Bridges writes, "**It was the innocent for the guilty, the pure for the impure, the holy for the unholy.**"³ Having exchanged places with us he then bore the full punishment that is due to the unrighteous.
 - We call this Great Exchange "penal substitutionary atonement." Penal = Jesus paid a penalty. Substitutionary = Jesus paid the penalty on our behalf. Atonement = justice has been satisfied so that nothing more is owing.

THE GOAL OF JESUS' DEATH

- Alright, that is the meaning of Jesus' death. If you have been with us the last few weeks then that should all be review. (SHOW SLIDE 4) But now we are going to look at **the goal of Jesus' death**. Without this section the whole series would be incomplete.
 - So let me ask you, "**what was the goal of Jesus' death?**" Why did he do all of this? We call it good news that Jesus died. So what is it about Jesus' death that is such good news for us?
 - No one has helped me to understand more than John Piper, particularly in his book *God is the Gospel*. So I will use some of his thoughts and add a bunch of my own. Think this through with me. What is the end goal of this good news that Jesus died for sins?

GOOD NEWS BECAUSE OF WHAT IS REMOVED AND WHAT IS ADDED

- We could answer in the first place that (SHOW SLIDE 5) **since Jesus died and rose again certain things are removed from us**. This is good news and to say this would be very true.
 - God's wrath, for instance, is removed because it was poured out on Jesus instead of us.
 - The stain of our guilt is also removed. Since Jesus bore our guilt we can be freed from the condemnation we feel over past sins.

² Ibid., 215.

³ Jerry Bridges, *The Great Exchange*, 259.

- The punishment of hell has also been removed. Since Jesus was forsaken of God we need never fear being forsaken by God in hell.
- We could go on and on. The power of Satan is removed, the fear of death is removed, the old heart is removed...etc.
 - So you see the gospel message of what Jesus has done is good news because of what has been removed from us. But that is not what ultimately makes it good news. That is not the end goal. These are not the highest privileges that Jesus' death won for us. It is not nearly enough to just speak about what has been removed.
- Well we could go on and say that **(SHOW SLIDE 6) Since Jesus died and rose again certain things are added to us.** This is good news. Through his death, Jesus won many gifts for us. This also would be very true.
 - For instance, we are reconciled to God. We are granted the Holy Spirit. We are given gifts to serve him. We are given hope when we suffer.
 - Because Jesus died and rose again we are given comfort when believing friends and relatives die. We are given a new heart. We are adopted into his family. We are made co-heirs with Christ. We are given the gift of eternal life in a new heavens and new earth.
 - Oh what a precious gift that is – to dwell eternally in a place where it is said, **“There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.”** Because Jesus bore the curse we get the amazing gift of living in a future world where it is said, **“There will be no more curse.”**
 - The gospel is good news because of all the gifts Jesus purchased for us with his death. But this too is not the end goal of Jesus' death. All these removals and additions are good but they are still not the highest privileges we receive. They are not the ultimate reason why the gospel is such good news. So what is it?

WHAT MAKES ALL THESE THINGS GOOD NEWS?

- This may seem like an odd question but follow me closely: why are all these things that we just talked about good? Why is it good news that your sins are forgiven? Why is it good news that you get eternal life? That is an odd question because the answer is so self-evident. The gospel is good news because all of these things bring us everlasting happiness.
 - It is good that my sins are forgiven so that I am free from guilt. It is good that I get eternal life because no one wants to go to hell. It is good that I get eternal life because I want to see my Christian friends and relatives who have already died.
 - But are you sensing what is wrong with these answers? It is not so much that they are wrong. It is that they are incomplete. What is missing from everything I have just said? God himself. None of these answers mentioned God. They talked about God's gifts but they did not talk about God.
- The highest good of the gospel, the highest privilege the gospel offers is God Himself. Jesus died to remove those awful things from us that keep us from God. Jesus died to give us many gifts but there is one gift that makes all the other gifts worthwhile.
 - So, what was the goal of Jesus' death. What does the text say? **READ 18 - For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.**
 - Let's summarize it like this: **(SHOW SLIDE 7) All of the removals and additions are good news but they are not the highest good of the gospel. The ultimate goal of Jesus' death was to bring us back to God. This is what makes the gospel such good news.**

THE END GOAL FOR WHY I APOLOGIZE TO MY WIFE

- Think about it this way. I love my wife. We have a wonderful relationship. But every once in a while, I say something with the wrong tone or I am just insensitive to her. I can see the hurt on her face as she turns away. The Holy Spirit begins to convict me and so I go to find her in order to apologize. So there we are, in the kitchen for instance, and her back is to me. I can sense there is a barrier between us.

- Now let me ask you, “**what needs to happen here?**” It is obvious isn’t it? I need to apologize and ask for forgiveness. But why do I want her forgiveness? Is the goal of forgiveness just to remove my guilty feelings? Is it so she will cook supper that night? Is it so that the kids won’t see us disagreeing? Is it to enjoy a romantic evening together?
 - Everyone one of those things may come true. But if that is the chief motive for seeking forgiveness then I am missing the main point, aren’t I? None of these are the end goal for asking forgiveness. What is the end goal of asking forgiveness? Answer: *I want forgiveness because I want her.* Her forgiveness is wonderful because it removes the barrier between us but forgiveness is not an end in and of itself. The end goal of forgiveness is enjoying her.

JESUS DIED TO BRING US TO GOD

- This is my big point: all the things Jesus removed from us, like God’s wrath, are obstacles that kept us from God himself. All the gifts he gives us, like eternal life, are given so that we can enjoy God Himself. The only reason all these removals and gifts are good news is that they bring us to God.
 - This is where so many modern conceptions of heaven are in grave error. People like to talk about all the pleasures and the things we will enjoy. These things are good but the central enjoyment of heaven is the fact that God will be there.
 - Think of it this way. On her wedding day what gives a bride her greatest joy? Is it the flowers? Is it guests from out of town? Is it her dress? All of these bring her joy but as one who has officiated and attended more weddings than I can possibly count, let me say dogmatically that a bride’s greatest joy is not in these things. What gives a bride her greatest joy? Being with her groom.
- Revelation 21: “**Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.”**
 - What has happened that God can now dwell with people when it was impossible before? Jesus happened. **READ 18 - For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.** Through his death Jesus removed all the obstacles, all the barriers that kept us from God so that we could be reunited with God.
 - Is this not what excites the worship of heaven? They praise Jesus singing, “**You are worthy...**” Why is Jesus worthy? “**because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.**”
- The flaming sword of God’s wrath kept us from dwelling with God. Jesus, the righteous one could walk straight past the sword into the presence of God. But on that hill 2000 years ago Jesus took our sins upon himself. The righteous one became unrighteous. He who had no sin became sin. So this time when he tried to walk into God’s presence, the flaming sword of God’s wrath struck him with full force. It killed him. He fell to the ground. He faced the death that we were all destined to face on judgment day. And as all of humanity stood by watching it appeared as though we would never be able to return to God. Jesus was dead.
 - Oh but God looked upon Jesus and was satisfied with his sacrifice. The righteous one had fully paid for the penalty that the unrighteous ones owed. On the third day God raised him from the dead. Jesus stood up. Jesus kept walking toward God. But this time he did not walk alone. He brought with him millions and millions of men, women, and children. Every one of his people were able to walk past the sword because Jesus paid it all.
 - In Revelation 21 the separation between heaven, where God dwells, and earth is obliterated. Heaven merges with earth and they are one. God’s plan is complete. He has redeemed a people to himself and will dwell with them forever. God is the centre of heaven. God is the chief delight of heaven and the thing that we long for. This is why Jesus died – to bring us to God.

- This is why Augustine said, **(SHOW SLIDE 8) “He shall be the end of our desires Who shall be contemplated without ceasing, loved without [ending], and praised without weariness.”**⁴
 - Samuel Rutherford wrote, **(SHOW SLIDE 9) “O my Lord Jesus Christ, if I could be in heaven without thee, it would be a hell; and if I could be in hell, and have thee still, it would be a heaven to me, for thou art all the heaven I want.”**⁵
 - John Milton wrote, **(SHOW SLIDE 10) “Thy presence makes paradise, and where Thou are is Heaven.”**⁶

WANTING GOD IS THE SIGN OF A TRUE CHRISTIAN

- Do you see then why this message is so critical? It is critical because it shows you if you are truly a Christian. Think about it: many people want the gifts that the gospel offers but they don’t want God himself.
 - Just because you want to escape hell does not mean you are a Christian. Any wise person would want to escape that.
 - Just because you want freedom from your guilty conscience, and you want an eternity of happiness does not mean you are a Christian. Any right-thinking person would want that.
 - It is of course not wrong to want these things. In fact, you would be foolish not to want them. However, the evidence that you are truly born again, that you are truly a Christian is that you want these things because they bring you to God.
- John Piper puts it so perfectly, **(SHOW SLIDE 11) “The critical question for our generation—and for every generation— is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ were not there?”**⁷
 - If an eternity without God does not bother you then chances are you are not truly a believer.
- But you know you are a true Christian if your heart yearns for God. Oh yes, it may not yearn enough but you know what it means deep in your soul to want God.
 - You know what it means when David prayed, **“One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.”**
 - Your heart can resonate with the great theologian and pastor John Owen. On his death bed in 1683 he said to his friend William Payne, **(SHOW SLIDE 12) “O, brother Payne, the long-wished for day is come at last, in which I shall see the glory [of Jesus] in another manner than I have ever done or was capable of doing in this world.”**⁸
 - Friends, the highest good of the gospel is that we get God.
 - The greatest privilege of the gospel is that we get God.
 - The good news is so good because for all eternity we get God.
 - **“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.”**

⁴ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 489.

⁵ Samuel Rutherford, cited in Charles Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, January 17, morning reading.

⁶ John Milton, cited in James M. Campbell, *Heaven opened: a book of comfort and hope*, 75.

⁷ John Piper, *God is the Gospel*, 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.