

A New Passover - Paul's Understanding of the Cross
Romans 8 **Tim Dickau** **March 19th, 2017**

(CBC Students) Here's a quote from the book some of us are reading for this Saturday by Tom Wright. "*Jesus died not in order to make us disembodied beings in heaven but restored human beings with a vocation to play a vital part in God's purpose for the world.*"

Today I want to focus on the last half of that statement: Jesus died to make us restored human beings with a vocation to play a vital part in God's purpose for the world. I don't think that this understanding or perception of what Jesus' death is about is common in either our culture or even the church. I certainly didn't grow up with this understanding of Jesus' death. The preaching I grew up started and stopped with the notion that Jesus did for my sin so I could go to heaven and tell others how to get there. Some of you have gotten started in faith on that too. I think that teaching was narrow at best and skewed at worst. The Reframe videos many of you watched these past months try to correct and widen this type of thinking, to help us rediscover our holistic vocation in the world. In fact, I hope to link or tie together the sermon series we just finished about work or vocation with the one we are in right now, showing how our vocation is transformed by Jesus' death.

If you are new here today, this Lenten season we are exploring the meaning of Jesus' death. Let me summarize where we have come thus far.

Summary of Where We've Come Thus Far

The first week I focused on the claim that Christ died for our sins *according to the scriptures*. This claim is not based on a few proof texts the New Testament writers pull out of the Old Testament like Rabbits from a hat but rather that Christ's death comes us as the culmination and fulfillment of the overall Old Testament narrative - a story about God's plan to deal with evil and bless all the nations of the earth through the people of Israel. We are going to pick up this story again today. One thing this amplifies is that you won't understand Jesus well without reading the Old Testament. That's not the only reason to read it but it is true nonetheless. If you find you have some Old Testament allergies, take's Kurtis' class this Easter season.

Last week Mark focused on Luke's gospel and took us from the personal reality that Jesus died for our sins to the corporate, societal, and cosmic transformation that Jesus' death enacted. The gospels hold all these dimensions of Jesus' death together. Which is why we seek to hold them together too as a church. Confession of sins, healing and intercessory prayer, reconciliation within our relationships, AND release from oppression and injustice in economics, politics and creation itself -- these are all part of our mission and the wider mission of the Church in the world. This mission arises from the upside down victory through Jesus' death.

That's where we've come so far. Today I want to focus on this claim we started with from Tom Wright, a claim that Paul articulates most clearly in his letter to the Romans, particularly in chapter 8 where we are going to touch down today. There are more references to the death of Jesus in these middle chapters of Romans than any other of Paul's letters. Here Paul argues that Jesus died to liberate us from that which holds us back from taking up God's vocation and calling as God's image bearers and stewards of this good world. If you leave today with a renewed sense that Jesus' death confirms this calling on *your life*, then I've done my job.

The Background Story: A New Passover

Paul's letter to the Romans is one that some people avoid because they think it is too complicated or theoretical. But is that true? The key to understanding Paul well, I think, is to know the underlying story that he has in mind as he writes to folks about how their world has

changed because of Jesus. Once you get the larger narrative in place, a lot of pieces fall into place rather nicely. It's like reading an article about an unusual "wardrobe" that you can walk right through and scratching your head in confusion because it makes no sense. This isn't like any wardrobe you've heard about before. What's he talking about? But then you read the Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe, and all of sudden the article makes a whole lot of sense.

The background story for chapters 7-8, indeed for much of this letter, is the story of the Passover and the Exodus from Egypt told in the books of the Torah. If you know that story and see how Paul is *retelling that story*, the pieces fall into place nicely and these chapters too make a whole lot of sense.

Let's take a look at the plot of this New Passover story. All the elements of that story are here -- the slavery in Egypt the Exodus, the passing through the Red Sea, the entrance into the promised land -- but it's has a new plot twist because of Jesus.

I've put a diagram on your outline there outlining the plot, a sort of story map comparing the first exodus story and the New exodus story Paul is telling:

Antagonist	Problem	Protagonist	Resolution
Egyptians	Slavery to Empire	Israel/Yahweh	Deliverance from slavery / promised land
Sin	Slavery to Sin	Jesus /Israel's King	Liberation from Sin's power/ recovery of vocation to be God's image bearers and inheritance of God's renewed world

In the first Exodus story, the antagonists are the Egyptians, the problem is slavery to the empire, the protagonist is Israel and the resolution comes from the God who liberates them. In this new Exodus story Paul tells the antagonist is Sin with a capital S. One way to define sin is all that keeps us from being fully functioning God imaged human beings, pas persons, as groups and as a society. And the thing with the way of life laid in the Torah, the Old Testament Law was that though it was itself good, it exposed all that was out of joint with the people. At the end of chapter 7, Paul names the conundrum. "So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me." Paul sums it up in verse 24. "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" Here's the problem. Israel was meant to be the light of the world, the nation by whom God would liberate the world, and now they are back in slavery, back in Egypt so to speak, imprisoned by Sin. Who will liberate them?

And here the answer that kids often give to questions during the children's prayer is the right answer: Jesus. According to Paul, Jesus initiates this liberation, this new Passover through his death. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death."

No condemnation. That is quite the assurance, isn't it? This assurance only carries its force when you realize how serious God had been throughout Israel's history about overcoming that which oppresses, pushes down, or distorts God's beloved. God loves fiercely. If you don't get that, you may shrug your shoulders at this assurance. But if you do that, it suggests to me that you haven't grappled too deeply with your own brokenness or the oppression of the world. I think of Psychiatrist and writer Scott Peck who came to believe in Jesus and then came to believe in the seriousness of Sin in a new way.

And why is there no condemnation? How has this new Passover occurred? How is the problem of this plot resolved? Verse 3. "For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh,⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

This is as condensed statement of Paul's theology as you can get. How does Jesus' death work to liberate us? A number of points. First, Jesus' death "works" to deal with all that disjoins us because he is Israel's representative, bringing their story, this entire OT story, to its climactic moment. In chapter 7, Paul has argued that the Jewish Law had ironically had the effect of piling up the Sin of the world on one nation and now that huge weight had fallen upon one single person, upon Israel's representative king so it could be dealt with. Jesus would be the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Second, this works because in Jesus, sin is condemned. Note that it is not Jesus but sin that is condemned. That's an important distinction. Jesus takes the punishment that sin deserves. And also key here is that Jesus' death works to liberate us because God sends his own son. Paul uses this language to describe this unique relationship between Jesus and God. So Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, God was *in Christ* reconciling the world to himself. This is not a God taking out his wrath on Jesus instead of us; this is a God coming in Christ to condemn that which harms God's beloved. Finally, Jesus' death works because the power of sin is broken. The sign of this victory is that Jesus rises from the dead, and as the Risen Lord is able to give life where the Law could not.

That's the goal and achievement of the cross. That's why it is so revolutionary. There is a shift in the power dynamics within creation. In the remainder of this chapter, Paul explains how this liberation works out as he extends this new exodus story further. The liberation extends to us, restoring us as God's image bearers. What the Law was incapable of doing, the Spirit whom the risen Jesus sent among us empowers us to take up our true vocation as God's image bearers. Yes, it requires daily choices not to go back to Egypt. If we get caught up in slavery to Sin again, we find ourselves headed down a road that leads to death. But if we take up the life of the Spirit, we get back on the road that leads to life. Paul wants to know that they don't need to live in fear anymore about all this; they are God's children. The Spirit leads us to God as a *ABBA*, that relationship of intimacy.

And this liberation extends to the creation itself. In verse 17, Paul tells the Romans that a great inheritance awaits them. But this promised inheritance is no longer a small plot of earth in the middle East but the entire creation made new. In fact, Paul writes in verse 17 that Creation has been waiting on tip toe for humans to get their act together to be stewards and caretakers of the world. And though we suffer now as we go through the labour pains of this new world that is being birthed, even there, the Spirit is right beside us, sharing our groans. The new world comes as we share in the suffering of the world.

This is the new Exodus, the new liberation that Jesus has brought about through his death. Here we see the hope and potential of the gospel to transform us and the world. It's worth noting here how this understanding of Jesus' death as the great act of liberation, new exodus, is clearly at the heart of Jesus' own understanding. This new exodus story is one told in the narrative of the four gospels, in which, evil of every sort built up like a thunderstorm as Jesus went about announcing the kingdom until the day he inaugurated a new Passover meal and went willingly with the soldiers when arrested. Jesus inaugurated a new Passover so that his followers would know that his death is a work of liberation, freeing us to become Jesus' disciples God's image bearers, more fully ourselves.

All the Difference in the World

If then the primary work of God on the cross is liberation from the power of Sin, from all that stops us from becoming fully human, what impact does this understanding of the cross have upon us today?

I want to name two different categories in which this meaning of Jesus' death impacts us. The first to do with humans -- our understanding of ourselves and our work in society -- and the second has to do with our understanding and experience of God.

1. *This meaning of the cross reframes how the cross impacts humanity.* Got that word Reframe in their again, eh! In the next three weeks, we are going to explore three aspects of this impact when we talk about healing; the overcoming of powers more broadly in how we live personally, corporately and what kind of society we pursue; and finally we will explore the power to pursue reconciliation, even with those who have become enemies.

Let me offer some other impacts of Jesus' death understood this way:

A. *Becoming a follower of Christ is only a beginning.* There is a funny story of a theologian who was approached on a London Street by someone asking him if he was saved. And he responded whether the person was asking him if he was being saved in the past, in the ongoing present or in the future, as the Bible speaks of all three of these. His point was that becoming a follower of Jesus, being baptized, these are important beginnings that you need to take to get started, but they are beginnings. We are saved *for* something and continue to be rescued: the power of Sin is broken so that we might participate in God's renewing work in the world. The cross gives us a new job description.

B. *Sin and Brokenness are not the end of the story: the cross opens up the door to personal healing and wholeness.* Next week Joy is going to explore the broad work of healing, not just personal healing. The cross does offer hope of moving towards wholeness and healing; this is important if we are going to take up our vocation. Indeed, for most of us, it is as we have sought to live with, work with and love others or work towards the vision of God's kingdom that we have come up against what Paul here calls "the flesh". The flesh is a technical term referring to that resistance to God's image-bearing call. The contrast between flesh and spirit is not between our physical desires and some other worldly desires but between desires directed towards God's restored world and desires towards more greed, lustful exploitation, rage, etc., desires that ultimately lead to ruin. We continue to need God's restoring work as we take up this new way of life. So don't be surprised if becoming a committed follower of Jesus makes you worse before it makes you better. Or that it reveals your need for God's healing. All of us who have gone down this road of discipleship know that this is true. It will be true for you too.

c. *Related to this is another way this reality of Jesus' death impacts our lives: the way of confession and repentance is the path towards becoming whole.* We don't take up these practices of confession and repentance to get a grumpy God off of our back. We take up these practices of confession and repentance in order to walk through the door to Life, to restoration, that Christ has opened up for us through his death. There's no shame here. Rather, there is Hope.

I love what someone said about confession for one of the interviews I did for my book: "I think the whole matter of confession and repentance has been flipped upside down or inside out.

Whereas before it meant exposing or becoming vulnerable, with the chance of being hurt, repentance has changed to becoming a tool of faith which enables me to live here in this place and in this time and with this people. So confession has become a tool I can use in order to receive the love of God and the fellowship of God's Spirit with me in ways that I haven't been able to experience before. It has become the way to being strengthened."

d. Seeing this truth makes Christian discipleship so much more relevant to our hopes for a transformed society. If you fail to see what's going on here, Christianity becomes pretty irrelevant. I think it is one of the reasons that so many people have tossed it aside. I don't know if you had a chance to read the Vancouver Sun and Province article about Justwork a few weeks back. The writer told the stories of Todd and Danielle, two employees of justwork. Todd describes how he lived near the street, how finding a home and entering rehab helped him overcome his addiction to drugs. And then he says this: "But employment is the big one, it brings your self-worth back, it makes you feel like you are contributing to society. I used to sleep here in the church hall and now I'm working here." He described how he gets excited when his alarm goes off as he thinks about his work in the pottery studio. "When I get out of bed in the morning, I think, 'I have a purpose today.'"

That's a picture of what God intends for all of us. To be able to say when we get out of bed, "I have a purpose today". God created us for meaningful work. Jesus died so that we might get back on the job and find good, meaningful work. All of us. When you get this, it's like our whole lives take on new significance.

Now, there are challenges here which we explored in our series on work. Hard in our specialized jobs that sometimes take 90% of our energy to live to see how the kingdom of God connects sometimes. That's why although we want to think about doing our paid work or the work we do most of the time, say as parents, we also want to bring this vision into our pursuit of justice and shalom, to our call to create beauty in the world.

One way of talking about this is that taking up this vocation is about becoming part of a community of people who become salt and light in our culture by the way we live out this vocation both personally and corporately. It's why to follow Jesus inevitably takes us to these practices we've named as seeds of the kingdom, such as opening up our lives to one another, the good and the bad, our money and homes. or seeking justice for those shut out. Or living creatively since we need imagination to bring God's peace and compassion. Or why people care about what they buy and eat, or the transportation we use; or about why we care about the beauty and city. This week I had coffee with two folks in our community who want to start a publishing company that focuses on sharing practices that arise from a vision of God's renewed world. It's the sort of creativity and imagination that the yeast of this new vocation grows among us. It's what gives churches potential to become communities of transformation in culture.

Lastly, Paul makes it very clear that the birthing of this renewed world won't be a walk in the park. It involves suffering.

2. Jesus' death reframes our vocation. Jesus' death also reframes our image and experience of God.

I've mentioned before but I name it again because I experience it often. When people tell me that they don't believe in God or are struggling to believe in God, I ask them to tell me about the God they don't believe in. And so often what I find is that the God they don't believe in bears little resemblance to the God whom we meet in Jesus.

The story Paul tells us helps us see what God is NOT. This is not the God who is slow to forgive or who stares at us with disapproval when we come to him in repentance. This is not the God who is unmoved or absent in the world's suffering or yours. This is not the God who the Academy by and large doesn't take seriously because they think God has no involvement in history. This is not the God of the New Atheists. This is not the God most people have rejected;

Near the end of chapter 8, Paul says this: If God is for us, who can be against us? That is what is so clear in this New exodus story Paul tells. God is for us. God does whatever it takes to defeat the enemies that hold us back from living dignified, fruitful, meaningful lives.

God is all in for the world, for YOU. Are you getting that today? God is all in for YOU. Are you in the middle of depression? God is all in for you. Have you been rejected by family or friends? God is all in for you. Are you struggling to find good paid work or a good home? God is all in for you.

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,¹ neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God is for you, for us, for the world. If you have ears to hear, listen. if you have a heart that longs for faithful love, come to the cross today.