

The Cross

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Salt and Light Ministries

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Foreword

“What is hidden in the roots will be revealed in the shoots.”

This has been one of the lifelong principles by which I have sought to live and build. Experience tells us that what the roots of the plant are like, and what they feed on, determines what sort of fruit grows; where the foundations of a building are shaky, time and disaster will reveal it; where the most simple flaws are not spotted, dreadful disasters can follow – as when a basic defect in the fuel system of the Challenger space craft cost the lives of seven brave astronauts.

So it is with people. What we believe in our hearts will eventually determine how we live, how we build and what we end up with.

This “Roots and Shoots” series is not so much an attempt to define the distinctives of our family of churches, but rather to ensure that all our beliefs and practices are firmly rooted in the Scriptures.

Many people have asked us over the years: “Who are you and what do you believe?” While our structure may appear to be somewhat nebulous, nevertheless the understanding of our common beliefs needs to be clear and unambiguous.

We are a family of churches that believe we are to be “sons of the kingdom” sown into God’s earth. The key that transforms “the word of the kingdom” into “sons of the kingdom” is *understanding* (Matthew 13:23). In the Lord’s first parable of the kingdom (the Sower), the ‘word’ of the kingdom – the seed – when properly received and understood produces fruit. In the second parable of the kingdom (the Weeds), we discover that the fruit has become the seed, and that the seed is “the sons of the kingdom”. The word, bearing fruit, producing seed as sons of the kingdom, planted in the world! That is our prayer for this series of books.

Barney Coombs

Introduction

Known and Unknown

Known and unknown. Those two words pretty much describe the world's grasp of the death of Christ.

The death of Christ is very well *known*. It is possibly the most familiar single event in history. Millions of people wear symbols of it around their necks. Images of the cross appear on church buildings and hospitals. People say, "We got crucified" to describe total defeat in sports or in business. Images of Jesus on the cross are so familiar that people do not even wince at the brutality of it – of a man nailed to two pieces of wood and left to die. The cross is, I would suggest, the most written about, sung about, painted, sculpted, discussed, debated and investigated event in the history of the world. The cross of Christ is very well known.

But it is also *unknown*. Very few people really grasp the significance of this event. Scholars debate its meaning. Ask twenty people what the meaning of the death of Christ was and you will likely get ten different answers and ten blank stares. Many people would have a vague notion that 'He died for us.' But why? In what sense? How does that death connect with us today? Clear answers to these questions will be slow in coming, because in terms of its meaning and relevance to people today, the death of Jesus is really unknown.

The aim of this book is to examine some of what the Bible says about the meaning of the cross. It will concentrate, not on the historical details of Jesus' death (his arrest, his trial, who was really responsible for it), but on its *meaning*. I will try to survey the impact of this great 'known but unknown'

event, to understand what the Bible says about its place in God's relationship to his world.

I use the word 'survey' deliberately. I take it from the old hymn, "When I Survey ..." whose opening lines go like this:

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

The message of the cross is life-changing. That is why I want to write about it. As much as the death of Christ means to me, I realise that no book (especially one this short) can fully touch the depths of its meaning. But while we cannot reach all that lies beneath the surface, we can still survey the ground. Why did Jesus Christ die on the cross? That is what this book is about.

Chapter 1

The Great Reversal

Noah's Ark

Everyone knows the story of Noah's ark – about how the Lord warned Noah that he was going to send a great flood, and how Noah built an ark to save himself and his family and a boatload of animals. We all know how the story ends: with the world's first rainbow, and with God's pledge to never flood the world again. All this is familiar. There are, however, two important points in the story that often get missed. The first is why God sent the flood in the first place. The second is why he promised never to flood the earth again.

The Judgement of God

The Bible is a book that challenges the way we think. And one of the ways it challenges us today is with what it says about the judgement of God. We think today that we have advanced beyond this 'primitive' idea. We associate any idea of judgement with an arbitrary, moody god unworthy of our consideration – let alone our worship. But if we are going to listen to the Bible at all, we will soon face the fact that it teaches – without apology – that there is such a thing as the judgement of God. That is why he sent the flood.

Is there Real Peace without Justice?

Let me shift for a moment to the present day. As I write this book, the United Nations is seeking to bring peace to the nation of Bosnia. Each side in the conflict there accuses the other of horrible atrocities. The cry of many is not, immediately, for peace and reconciliation, but for *justice*. There are thousands of women whose husbands and sons were exterminated. They want the murderers to give account for what they have done. And few disagree with them. We all have a sense that something important, something *vital* is lost when justice is not done. Peace that lets mass murderers get away with it is not what we think of as true peace.

The God of *Shalom*

The Bible calls God “the God of peace” (Romans 15:33). He is the God of *shalom* – the Hebrew word for peace. *Shalom* means everything being right, and in place, and ‘OK’. God’s peace is based on things being right – not on justice being compromised, or right standards being ignored.

This is why God judges sin. He is committed to a *shalom* for his world that is real, not one that papers over people’s violence and rebellion. His absolutely right reaction to our sin is *wrath*. An unfashionable idea today? Definitely. But no less true because of that.

Why God Flooded the Earth

So, back to the flood. The Bible tells us that God looked at his once-perfect world and saw that things had changed dramatically – and not for the better. “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, “I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth – men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air – for I am grieved that I have made them.” (Genesis 6:5-7)

Notice the connection: *the consequence of sin is judgement*. Man’s wickedness became great on the earth, so God resolved to flood the earth,

not because he was in a bad mood, but because his holy integrity required it. He is the judge of all the earth. This is the first thing that people do not always think of when they think of the story of Noah's ark.

Why God Promised Never to Flood the World Again

The other thing people often don't know about this story is why God made the 'rainbow' pledge that he would never again destroy his creation in a flood. It was not because he looked at the post-flood world and thought, "Now they'll behave themselves!" No. That is not the reason. Look at what happened after the floodwaters receded from the earth:

"Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: 'Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.' " (Genesis 8:20-21)

Notice what God says here. He knows that while the flood eliminated many sinners, it did not eliminate sin! The post-flood human race would not be really any more righteous than their pre-flood ancestors: "Every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood". God was under no illusions.

Which takes us back to the question: Why the rainbow promise? The answer is in the passage we just read. God made his pledge in response to Noah's offering! "The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart, 'Never again will I curse the ground because of man ... And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.' " That was the reason. The *promise* came in response to the *sacrifice*. Here, in the opening chapters of the Bible, we find this fundamental truth about God and his ways: *sacrifice alters God's response to mankind*.

The Message of a Bewildering Book

Remember: all of what I am saying here is to explain the meaning of the death of Christ. His death (as the New Testament will show us) was a sacrifice. But before we look more closely at that death, we need to look at one more important Old Testament truth about the meaning of sacrifices and offerings.

The book of Leviticus can seem bewildering to modern readers with its detailed laws about clean and unclean foods, sexual morality, the ordination of priests, and many other subjects. But underneath these seemingly complicated laws and teachings, this book has one essential message. It was how the chosen people Israel could, in spite of their sin, maintain a right relationship with God. The answer was through sacrifices and offerings. If an Israelite realised he had sinned against the Lord, he would come with the prescribed animal, would kill it, and offer it up to God as a ‘burnt offering’. Leviticus 1:4 says this: “He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him.”

This is a very important verse about the meaning of sacrifice, so let me try to unpack it a bit.

“I’m Here because of my Sin”

First, the person bringing the offering laid his hand on the animal’s head. By doing this he was saying, “This animal is being sacrificed for *my* sin. It is dying as a substitute for me.” There was no denial of sin, no blame-shifting, no excuses. When they laid their hands on that animal’s head, they were saying, “I’m here because of *my sin*.”

Deflecting the Wrath of God

Second, the sacrifice would “make atonement for him.” This takes us back to the reason sacrifice was needed in the first place: God’s holy anger against our sin. The burnt offering in Leviticus made ‘atonement’ for the person bringing it. This meant that the sacrifice *turned away God’s wrath*, deflecting God’s judgement from the person and onto the sacrifice. The result of the sacrifice was renewed relationship between the person and God. It brought ‘at-one-ment’ between him and the Lord. Even though he had sinned, he could be at one with God. Rather than living under the clouds of separation from God, he could live ‘under the rainbow’.

The Great Reversal

I have explained the burnt offering to reinforce what I said earlier about Noah's sacrifice after the flood: sacrifice alters God's response to man. But the Leviticus verse actually goes further. It shows that the sacrificial animal dies *in our place*, and reveals how sacrifice brings us out of separation and into renewed relationship – through the deflection of God's judgement. So what we see in Leviticus is this: sacrifice reverses the consequences of sin. Sin makes us 'unclean' in the sight of God; sacrifice makes us clean. Sin causes estrangement; sacrifice brings 'at-one-ment'. Sin results in wrath; sacrifice results in relationship. It is the great reversal.

The Ultimate Sacrifice

The New Testament tells us that Jesus' death on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice for sin. He "gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" Paul writes in Ephesians 5:2. His death provided "for all time one sacrifice for sins" says the writer of Hebrews (10:12). This is why I do not have to offer God a lamb every time I sin. The ultimate Lamb has already died for my sin! Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"(John 1:29) His death was more than an offering for a particular person's sin; it was a sacrifice "for all time", and for "the sin of the world". This means that whoever you are, wherever you are, whatever you have done, the death of Jesus has the power to reverse the consequences of your sin. It can restore you to a right relationship with God. It can make you clean.

But why does this one sacrifice have such vast impact?

Who Jesus Was

The first reason why Christ's death is so vast in its effects is because of who Jesus was. He was God's own and only Son. Therefore all the qualities of God himself were in him: deity, righteousness, power – everything! Paul writes in Colossians 1:19-20, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Jesus], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." Jesus was a man, but he was not just a man. He

was the fullness of God revealed in the form of man. This meant that his death was vastly more significant than that of a goat or a lamb, or even of an ordinary human being. Jesus was God's own Son. Therefore his sacrifice had the worth and power of God's own Son in it. This is the first reason why it can deal "for all time" with "the sins of the world".

Who Brought this Sacrifice?

There is another reason why this sacrifice has such a vast impact. The Old Testament offerings were brought by people – people who realised they had sinned, who came to God with their offerings. The sacrifice of Jesus is quite different, however. Paul says, "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood." (Romans 3:25) When we think about this, it is staggering. Paul is saying that *God himself* presented the sacrifice for our sin! This sacrificial death was not an offering that *we* made; it was one that *God* made. God put forward his own Son "as a sacrifice of atonement" to turn aside his own wrath against our sin, to reverse the consequences of our sin, to replace estrangement with 'at-one-ment', to make unclean people clean, to bring us shalom. However many sinners might come to God through Jesus, and however serious their sin, the death of Jesus can reverse the consequences of that sin. Why? Because it has the power and perfection of God himself in it. It was not an offering put forward by sinners needing forgiveness. It was an offering put forward by God granting forgiveness. It was God's sacrifice for our sin. For all time. For all the world.

Where To from Here?

This chapter has looked at the death of Jesus as a sacrifice. This is the core of the meaning of the cross. But it is not the whole story. We need to grasp the impact of this sacrifice on God's relationship with the human race. In the next chapter we will begin to explore that impact by looking at the problem that it solves: the problem of sin. And to do that we will start with one of the Bible's most sobering pictures of the spiritual lostness of mankind: the prisoner in the dock.

Chapter 2

Made Right

The Courtroom of God

The Bible has a number of ways of portraying people in their separation from God. One of them takes us to the courtroom. The judge is God; the prisoner in the dock is the whole human race. The verdict: guilty as charged. It is not a pretty picture. But the message of the gospel is that this verdict can be changed! The judge himself has provided a way – without the least compromise of his justice – of declaring the defendant ‘not guilty’. This verdict of total acquittal on people like you and me is one of the great miracles and mysteries of the gospel. It is what the Bible calls *justification*. It means being ‘made right’ with God, being declared righteous in his sight, on the basis of the death of Jesus Christ.

Before we can grasp what it means to be ‘made right’, we need to understand what it means to be ‘made wrong’, why we are ‘guilty as charged’.

Another Unpopular Notion

The idea of guilt is another concept that has fallen upon hard times. It is unfashionable. “Guilt feelings mess people up,” it is often said. “People need to be freed up, not put down.” “People need to know they’re accepted, not to hear that they’re guilty.” The objections go on. This negative view of the concept of guilt is very much in vogue; but there are serious problems with it.

First, we all know what it is to realise that we have done something wrong. Conscience is a powerful force. When we have hurt someone we love, we experience profound sadness and regret. That sadness and regret are not our imagination; they are the results of knowing we have violated someone, and violated God's command to love. What we experience in these moments is guilt. When we ask the person we have hurt to forgive us, and when they do and the relationship is restored, it feels like a new day. Why do we feel so much better? Because something has been removed – and that something is guilt. Guilt may be unfashionable, but it is very real.

Why Guilt can be Good News

Recovering a true understanding of guilt is actually a very healing thing. It enables us to have clarity about where we stand, to take responsibility for what we have done. It rescues us from the “I am a victim” attitude of our day, where people blame all their problems on others. It restores us to a sense of being morally-responsible human beings before God and one another. When we have clarity about true moral guilt (as opposed to false or compulsive guilt feelings), it helps us have clarity about forgiveness and reconciliation.

But guilt does have its down side – especially when it comes to being able to approach a holy God! That is why the death of Christ is such good news. But (at the risk of labouring the bad news!) I need to return to the courtroom scene. Courtrooms imply charges. And in the courtroom of God, the charges against the prisoner are very serious.

What are the Charges?

The real charge against us is not actually a matter of particular wrong things we have done, instances of sin along the way; the real issue is the root of all those things. There are three main roots, and the charges against us have to do with these roots, with the core of who we are, and how we live – rebellion, independence, and pride.

Rebellion

First, there is the charge of rebellion. We see this in Adam and Eve's eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:1-7).

What was their motive? It was to take what belonged to God alone: the right to determine what is good and what is evil. To reach for what belonged to God was rebellion. It was a choice to set their own will above God's will. Later, the chosen nation Israel proved many times that they had inherited the 'rebellion virus' from their original parents in the garden (Psalm 106:43).

Independence

The second charge is independence. This is what Isaiah talked about when he said, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way ..." (Isaiah 53:6). Independence means (to use a modern cliché) 'doing our own thing'. It means refusing to be led by God (as sheep with their shepherd), and stubbornly forging our own path (like goats butting their way along).

Pride

The third charge is very much interwoven with the first two, and in one sense is the root of the others. It is pride. Pride means resisting God. It means wanting things on our own terms. It means trying to create our own platform of identity and significance, rather than discovering God as our security and identity. It means (as ludicrous as it sounds) challenging God himself. Isaiah said that this was the foolish arrogance of the king of Babylon: "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God ... I will make myself like the Most High.' " (Isaiah 14:13-14) Pride is the root of all our independence and rebellion. Pride confuses us; it distorts our view of ourselves, other people, and God. The prophet Obadiah said: "The pride of your heart has deceived you ..." (Obadiah v3).

R.I.P. – “Rest In Peace”?

Rebellion, independence, pride. The initials of these three words are R.I.P. But they do not stand for 'rest in peace'. Quite the opposite! Rebellion, independence and pride are the roots of every war, every divorce, every instance of child abuse, economic exploitation, family breakdown, and all the heartache that fill our world and our homes. God will not wink at it or sweep it under the rug. And all of us are accessories to it! Paul sums up the case for the prosecution like this:

“We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: ‘There is no-one righteous, not even one; there is no-one who understands, no-one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no-one who does good, not even one.’” (Romans 3:9-12)

Notice the legal terminology he uses. Paul the prosecutor has “made the charge”. We are the defendants in the courtroom. God is the judge. The verdict is guilty. No high-priced lawyer can get us off the hook. Our only hope is with the judge himself.

Which leads us to the good news!

A Verdict Reversed

The good news of being made right with God through the death of Christ is this: when we put our faith in Jesus and in what he accomplished on the cross, God reverses his verdict from ‘guilty’ to ‘not guilty’. And he doesn’t stop there. If a human judge declares a defendant not guilty, it means just that – not guilty. It does not mean ‘righteous’ – made as if the crime had not been committed. But when we trust in Christ and his sacrificial death, God declares that we are now right with him. We have right standing before him. He sees us not just as ‘off the hook’ from the former charges, but as dressed in the actual righteousness of Jesus Christ himself. This is the core of the Christian gospel. It is called justification: being made right with God through Jesus.

Listen to what Paul says: “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood.” (Romans 3:21-25)

This is one of the richest passages in the New Testament. Let me try to open it up by asking a series of questions.

1. Does getting right with God mean I have to be perfect?

Well, God's goal is to make you perfect; but his gift to us of right standing with himself comes to us at the beginning of the process – while we are still very imperfect! This means that we receive right standing with God before we have learned to fully obey him. Paul speaks about “a righteousness from God, apart from law” (v21). This means right standing before God without the requirement of total obedience. The Old Testament (for example) has some 613 commandments. Imagine your relationship with God hanging on your having to obey all of them – perfectly! But Paul says that God has offered us righteousness “apart from law”. He has made another way.

2. Well, then, if my right standing with God isn't based on my obeying his commands, what is it based on?

Good question! It comes “through faith in Christ Jesus to all who believe” (v22). Not by trying to impress God. Not by earning merit points, over the course of time. No. It is by total confidence in God's Son: “through faith in Christ Jesus”. And (as we will see) through “faith in his blood” (v25) – that is, through confidence in the power of his sacrifice on the cross. And who needs this? The entire human race, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v23).

3. What's the result?

Paul says that all who believe “are justified freely by his grace ...” (v24). This means that the judge brings down his gavel in the courtroom and declares that the prisoner in the dock is righteous. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ...” (Rom 5:1). The person who believes in Christ receives all the benefits that go with righteousness: peace with God, acceptance, relationship, forgiveness, blessing ... the list is endless.

4. Wait a minute! If God is perfect, how can he knowingly declare guilty people 'righteous'?

He can do this because of the mystery of sacrifice. Sacrifice (as we saw in Chapter 1) reverses the consequences of sin. Paul says: “God presented him (Jesus) as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood” (v25).

The words “through his blood” refer, of course, to Jesus’ death. In the gruesome death of crucifixion, he took the death penalty for us. As Isaiah prophesied: “... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed ... the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:5-6) So the penalty has been paid in full – by Jesus Christ. Of course God knows that Jesus was innocent and that we are guilty. But notice what he has done: he has placed our sin on Jesus, and Jesus’ righteousness on us! He has swapped our guilt for Christ’s innocence! This is the mystery and miracle of the gospel: Jesus was declared guilty with our sin, that we might be declared innocent with his righteousness.

5. How can we receive this right standing with God?

The answer is as simple as it is wonderful: through faith. Paul says, “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (v22). It is for all who believe in his sacrifice, who have “faith in his blood” (v25). God “justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”(v26) This right standing with God is not by merit or effort or anything else. It is by faith. But notice as well: it is not automatic. It does not come through living in a (supposedly) Christian country, or going to church each week, or being ‘good people’. It comes through faith in Christ and in his death – and this faith is a personal decision. It is a choice that places its confidence in something: in this case, Christ and his death on the cross.

Therefore, Having Been Made Right ...

When we are not right with God, we are not right with anything. But when we are right with God, the way is opened for life to change. In Romans 5, Paul catalogues the spin-off effects of being made right with God through Jesus. Here is his list. And remember: these are things that are given to ‘prisoners in the dock’ when they trust in his Son.

1. Peace with God

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ...” (Rom 5:1). As we saw in Chapter 1, peace has to do with things being right. It means things being in place –

everything being ‘OK’ in the truest and most ultimate sense. There is no greater gift that anyone can receive than peace with God.

2. Access to God

We have “access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.” (v2) Imagine having access to your monarch or president – being allowed to walk into their presence any time you wished. It would be an immense privilege. Now imagine having access to God! That is what Paul says we have because we have been “made right”. We can enter his presence.

3. Hope in God

“And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.” (v2) One day the glory of God is going to fill the earth. The ultimate ‘happy ending’ will come. How can we know that this is true – and that we will be a part of it? By being made right with God. “Therefore, since we have been justified ... we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.”

4. Joy in suffering

“Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings ...” (v3). When we have been made right through the death of Christ, it transforms our pain into purpose. We start to see that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Rom 8:28) God takes our pain and works it into that purpose: to make us like Christ.

Something Worth Looking At

The last item in Paul’s list of the spin-offs of justification is what he calls reconciliation (Rom 5:11). Reconciliation means more than a not guilty verdict. It means more even than being counted righteous with the righteousness of Christ himself. Reconciliation has to do with relationship. It has to do with knowing God in a personal way. To use our courtroom imagery, it means the judge inviting the prisoner home to be his son. Reconciliation really is an awesome thing. As such, it deserves a chapter of its own.

Chapter 3

“Welcome Back!”

“I Dread It!”

Have you ever experienced dread? Dread is an intense fear of some impending event. It is a mixture of uncertainty and terror. “I have a hospital appointment tomorrow; I’m dreading it.” Or, “I have a performance review coming up at work; I’m dreading it.” Dread is anxiety in overdrive.

There are two stories in the Bible that portray people experiencing dread. The first one is about Jacob meeting his brother Esau; the other is Jesus’ parable about the wayward son (the ‘Prodigal’) returning to his father. Both stories (if we read between the emotional lines) suggest dread.

“What Will My Brother Do?”

Jacob was the schemer who cheated his brother Esau out of the special privileges and blessings that belonged to him as the firstborn. Esau was furious and vowed to get revenge and kill him. Jacob fled for his life to Padan Aram, hundreds of miles away. He lived there for twenty years, becoming wealthy and acquiring a large family and many servants. Then, one day God spoke to him and told him to return home. He obeyed and set off. But on his way back, the dread set in, as he began to wonder what Esau would do when he saw him. As he entered the land where Esau lived, he sent servants ahead of him with gifts for his brother. “I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me.” (Genesis 32:20) What was going on in Jacob’s mind? Dread. Anxiety in overdrive.

Finally, the moment arrived. After twenty years apart, the two brothers saw each other on the road, and Jacob “bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.” (Gen 33:3) But then, to the surprise of both Jacob and the reader, we read: “But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.”(v4)

He Hugged Him?

What? Esau ran to him? And hugged and kissed him? Yes! That is what he did. Jacob’s dread was swallowed up in Esau’s embrace. And if you know Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, then Esau’s embrace will sound familiar. Jesus told the story of a wayward son who left home, spent all his money on immoral living – and then sheepishly returned. He hoped that his father would, perhaps, hire him as a servant. He rehearsed his little speech as he made the journey home. “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men.” (Luke 15:18-19) What lay behind his rehearsing? Dread. The dread of rejection. But what happened when he got back? “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him.” (v20) Jesus was, in my view, echoing the Jacob story, and was doing so to make a point. The point is *the surprise of grace*. It is the dread of rejection being swallowed up in the wonder of acceptance. It is reconciliation. And reconciliation between God and sinners is what Jesus died on the cross to bring.

Banished!

Mankind’s need for reconciliation with God goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve chose to eat from the tree of knowledge. As we saw in Chapter 2, this was a deliberate decision to replace God’s will with their own. It was an act of rebellion.

The penalty for this rebellion was death (Genesis 2:17). There is no evidence that death was part of God’s original plan for the human race. Death came on the scene as the consequence of sin. That is why, eventually, Adam and Eve died. To this day, every time someone dies, it is proof of God’s penalty on mankind’s rebellion. And that is why Jesus had to die. He took

the death sentence on himself so that we could experience eternal life. But notice this: according to Genesis, the death sentence was not the whole story. There was also banishment from the presence of God. “So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden ... ” (Gen 3:23).

If we are going to understand ourselves and our human history, we need to understand this banishing. If we are going to have hope, we need to see how Christ’s death is the solution to it. The cross is God’s answer to our exile from Eden.

The Guardians at the Gate

If Adam and Eve ever thought of trying to force their way back into the Garden, they would have changed their minds as soon as they got to the front gate. The Bible says, “After he drove the man out, [God] placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Gen 3:24) The presence of these angelic guardians at the gate with their fiery swords said (in a very vivid way), “You can’t come in!” It said, in effect, “You are not welcome here.” Between God and man there stood a fearsome barrier.

Pictures of the Guardians

Later in the Old Testament, we meet these guardians again. The book of Exodus describes how Moses, following detailed instructions from the Lord, set up a great tent called the tabernacle. It was the dwelling place of God himself, in the midst of his people Israel. (See Exodus 25:8 and 40:34-38.) It had an outer court, and an inner sanctuary, called the Holy of Holies, where God manifested his presence in a unique and special way. Only one person – the High Priest – was allowed into the Holy of Holies, and only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). When he passed through the curtains into the Holy of Holies, he entered the presence of God.

And as he passed through, he would see a picture embroidered into the fabric of those curtains; a picture of two angels – two ‘cherubim’. Why was this picture there? To remind Israel of the guardians at the gate in the Garden of Eden. The tabernacle spoke of God dwelling in their midst. But the picture of the cherubim spoke of how they could not fully come into God’s presence;

the guardians at the gate blocked the way. It reminded them of Adam and Eve’s banishment from the Garden. And it showed them that, even for God’s chosen people, the time for full welcome into the presence of God had not yet come.

Despised and Rejected

When I was in junior high school, there was a boy who was the ‘class reject’. He only had to walk down the hall to get kids mocking him. In some ways, he brought the rejection on himself by his frequently weird behaviour. But daily rejection was more than he deserved. I sometimes wonder how he feels today, and what those days in junior high meant to him.

Jesus of Nazareth was never a ‘reject’ in that sense. He seems to have been well-liked by many people. The so-called ‘sinners’ of his day – tax collectors, prostitutes, and so on – loved to spend time with him. And yet, no one ever knew more rejection than Jesus. From his birth to his death, he was pushed away and despised. Just look at some examples:

- He had no proper place to be born. The census meant there was not a room to spare, so he had to be born in a barn. (Luke 2:1-7)
- While he was still a baby, Joseph and Mary had to flee to Egypt to save Jesus from Herod’s death squads. (Matt 2:13-15)
- His own family thought he was insane. (Mark 3:20-21)
- His home town rejected him. (Lk 4:16-30; Mk 6:1-6)
- One of his close disciples betrayed him to his enemies. (Mark 14:10-11)
- At his arrest, his disciples “deserted him and fled.” (Mark 14:50)
- He was falsely accused before Israel’s supreme court of speaking against the temple. (Mark 14:55-59)
- His close friend Peter denied him. (Mark 14:66-71)
- He was falsely charged with treason against Rome. (Luke 23:1-2)
- He was beaten, mocked, spat on, slapped, and had a crown of thorns jabbed into his scalp. (Mark 15:16-20)
- He was crucified with common thieves. (Matt 27:32-44)

- As he hung on the cross dying, he cried out to God, “Why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Thus, in the end, he knew not only the rejection of men, but of God as well.

The point, I hope, is clear. Jesus was indeed, as Isaiah prophesied, “despised and rejected” (Is 53:3). What I want to touch on here is *why*.

Why Jesus had to be Rejected – And Why it is Good News

The reason Jesus was rejected is because he came to take our place. We are the children of Adam. Like him, we stand outside the Garden, facing the guardians at the gate. We have been banished – rejected – by God’s judgement on our sin. But here is the good news. Do you remember what I said in Chapter 1 about the meaning of sacrifice? A sacrifice takes the place of someone else. The lamb or the goat took the place of the Israelite who had sinned against the Lord. And sacrifice has the power to reverse the consequences of sin. Sin brings judgement, but sacrifice brings mercy.

Listen to what happened the moment Jesus died: “And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” (Matt 27:50-51) What was embroidered into that curtain? The cherubim – the guardians of the presence of God. Now the curtain was ripped open. The guardians at the gate had been retired!

Awesome!

Let me use an overworked word to describe the significance of this moment in Biblical history. It is the word *awesome*. When Christ died, God himself ripped open the barrier into his presence. That is the significance of the curtain being torn “from top to bottom”. What prompted God to do this? The sacrifice of Christ. Noah’s sacrifice prompted him to set the rainbow in the heavens as a sign of mercy. And Jesus’ sacrifice prompted him to tear open the barrier into his presence. Jesus was rejected so we could be accepted. Now and forever, the way to God is open. This means that people who trust in Jesus Christ can know what Jacob knew when Esau ran to him and hugged him; what the prodigal son knew when his father ran to him and hugged him. They can know the wonder of acceptance. As the book of Hebrews

says, “... we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus ...” (Hebrews 10:19). Christ’s death brings about the tearing of the curtain. And the tearing of the curtain says, “Come on in! Welcome back!”

Christ’s Death and God’s Embrace

Have you ever dreaded the thought of facing God? If you are a sinner, you have reason to dread him. He is holy. And you are a sinner. You stand where Jacob stood, terrified to meet Esau. You stand where the prodigal son stood, wondering what his father would say. But the good news is this: if we trust in Christ and in his death on the cross, everything changes. The great sacrifice brings the great reversal. As we stumble back to God we need not dread his reaction. He will run and embrace us, and welcome us home.

That is reconciliation. It is relationship restored. And it is ours because of the death of Jesus Christ.

These Sons of Mine

On his way home, the prodigal rehearsed his little speech: “I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Take me as one of your hired servants.” But notice what the father said when his son came back: “This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” (Luke 15:24) The father made a point of referring to the young man as his son. The boy expected rejection; but what he received was sonship.

Let’s go back to the courtroom analogy of the previous chapter. When we left that scene, the judge had declared the defendant not guilty. We can imagine the prisoner’s accusers in the audience gasping. “The judge let him off!” Even the defendant himself is staggered.

But the story does not end there. Imagine this: the judge now turns to the prisoner and says, “Come.” The prisoner can scarcely believe his ears. But he obeys. He leaves the prisoner’s box and approaches the judge. Then (to the amazement of all, but especially the prisoner), the judge stands up, and comes down from his bench, and embraces the prisoner. He hugs him.

“How would you like to come and join my family?” he asks. “I’ll adopt you.”

“You’ll adopt me?”

“Yes. I would like you to belong to me. I’ll be your father.”

In wonder and in joy, the prisoner follows the judge – now his father – out of the courtroom. He has received more than right standing. He has received sonship.

This little fantasy is really what we see in the Bible. The justification we read about in Chapter 2 results in the reconciliation we are talking about here in Chapter 3. And this reconciliation leads to adoption. We become God’s own children. “To all who received him [Jesus Christ], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God ...” (John 1:12). “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus ...” (Galatians 3:26). And notice how this adoption takes place. It all traces back to the death of Jesus on the cross. God sent his son “to be a sin offering” (Rom 8:3). Why? So that we might live no longer “according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:4). And who is this Spirit? He is “the Spirit of sonship” (Rom 8:15). When we are living by the Spirit, we cry out “Abba, Father! The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” (Rom 8:16)

His Rejection is our Reconciliation

When Christ died on the cross, he called out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Now we can cry out, “Abba, Father!” Because he was, in those awful moments, cut off from his Father, we can now know God as Father. He was “despised and rejected” so that we can be loved and accepted.

What all this means is this: dread is replaced by God’s embrace. Banishment from Eden is replaced by belonging to God’s own family. The cherubim with their sword are replaced with the Holy Spirit, who whispers into our spirit, “You are God’s own child.”

This is reconciliation. It is the heart of the gospel. If you sat down and read every book that has ever been written, you would never read anything more awesome than this. In the next few chapters we will explore some more of the riches that God has released through the death of his Son.

Chapter 4

Living in Graceland

Will I Never Change?

Let me begin this chapter with two stories. One is about a man; the other is about elephants. Both are true.

We'll call the man Ralph. A Christian for many years, Ralph loves God, tithes, reads the Bible, and (most of the time) gets along well with people. But he struggles with a deep-seated anger. Usually he keeps it inside, and no one else knows. But now and again, his anger shows through – as irritability, sullen silence, or sometimes in outbursts of bad language. When it happens, Ralph feels convicted of his sin. As best he can, he brings it to the Lord, and finds forgiveness. He is confident of God's mercy, but he remains frustrated. He feels no nearer to a real answer than he did five or even ten years ago.

We'll come back to Ralph in a moment; but first, my second story – about elephants.

The Elephant Circle

I remember hearing once about the commercial use of elephants in South Asia. These great beasts are sometimes used in mills to turn grindstones, often harnessed to one for years. It will have a chain, some thirty feet long, around one of its feet, connecting it to a large cement block in the centre of the mill. For much of its life, the animal's whole world is inside that thirty

foot radius. It cannot leave, because it is chained. It will walk in circles around that cement block – round and round and round. A well-worn path forms where the elephant walks, day after day, year after year.

Most of us can identify with those elephants! We know what it is like to plod on, year after year, in the same old well-worn cycles. We fall into the same moral or emotional traps again and again. We repeat the same sins this week that we remember committing ten years ago. Impurity, unkindness, unbelief – they resurface over and over again. These wrong reaction patterns seem to have a perverse power all of their own. It seems like they rule us. Yet we realise that our own choices are part of the picture, too. So we feel chained, and yet responsible for that chain.

This elephant-in-the-mill scenario is exactly what Scripture teaches about people in the grip of their sin. We are trapped, and yet responsible. Until God rescues us, we are chained in an endless circle – not by a literal chain, but by bondage: bondage to a master we have all chosen to serve, and who now refuses to let us go: our own sin.

It Doesn't Let Go

Jesus and Paul both spoke about the enslaving power of sin. Jesus once said, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.” (John 8:34) Paul echoes this truth in Romans 6:16: “Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?”

And Paul knew first hand what the grip of sin was like. Listen to what he says in Romans 7:15-25: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do ... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out ... [I am] a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Paul's words are those of a man who knew frustration with himself because of his own sin. But note that these verses end on a positive note: “Thanks be to God!” Paul knew that while sin is powerful, Jesus Christ is more powerful. He is able to rescue us (as we saw in Chapters 1 to 3) from

the *penalty* of sin. But he is also able to rescue us from the *power* of sin. Through him, people can change. Angry people can become patient, lustful people can become clean-minded, and fearful people can become confident. In this chapter I want to unfold how Jesus' death rescues us not only from sin's penalty but also from its power. But first, we need to see why sin has such control over us in the first place.

Why Our Sin has Such Power

In Chapter 1 I talked about the judgement of God – an idea that is unfashionable but true. I wrote about the great flood in Genesis, when God wiped out all but Noah and his family. That flood is a picture of judgement – and a sign of how seriously God responds to mankind's rebellion.

I want to look here at another kind of judgement. It is what happens when we choose to obey 'sin' rather than God. What does God do? He turns us over to the one we choose to obey. So what happens? It is just what Jesus said: "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin." (John 8:34) Sin becomes our master. We become "slaves to the one [we] obey" (Rom 6:16). Behind this slavery is the righteous judgement of God. Once, he gave mankind over to the waters of the flood. Now, he gives them over to something worse: themselves. "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts ..." (Rom 1:24); "... God gave them over to shameful lusts." (Rom 1:26); "God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done." (Rom 1:28) In his holy integrity as the Judge of all the earth, God turned us over to the one we chose to obey. And we chose to obey sin. So now, sin has us; we are like that elephant. But our slavery is not a matter of a chain on our ankle. It is a matter of the condition of our hearts. "What I hate, I do ... What a wretched man I am!" Paul says. That is slavery.

These are sobering, perhaps even bewildering truths. But they are Biblical truths. In rebellion, we chose sin. In judgement, God turned us over to sin's inescapable grip. So how does the cross free us from that inescapable grip? To understand that, we need to look at something very surprising that Paul says about that cross.

Off the Hook

Imagine sitting in your house one day and hearing a knock on the door. You answer to find a police officer standing there.

“Yes?” you say.

“I’m looking for your Uncle George. He has a one hundred dollar speeding ticket.” He holds up the ticket.

You gulp. You didn’t know this. And anyway, Uncle George died recently!

“I’m sorry, but my Uncle George is dead. He died several weeks ago.”

The policeman seems surprised. “Oh! Well I’m very sorry to hear that. I’m sorry to have bothered you.” And with that, he takes the ticket, tears it up, and walks away. As far as that ticket goes, Uncle George (may he rest in peace) is ‘off the hook’.

Why was Uncle George off the hook? Because he had died! His death released him from the legal consequences of his own bad driving.

Why We are Like Uncle George

Now we come to the good news – God’s surprise solution to this whole dilemma. And the surprise solution is this: all of us who have put our faith in Christ are like Uncle George – we have died!

“We died to sin ...” (Rom 6:2); “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death ...” (Rom 6:4); “For we know that our old self was crucified with him ...” (Rom 6:6); “I have been crucified with Christ ...” (Galatians 2:20).

Power of Attorney

What exactly does this ‘dying with Christ’ mean? Obviously it is not a literal dying. I as a Christian know that I have died with Christ, yet I am sitting at a computer writing this book. So I assume that I am still alive! No, the dying Paul is talking about is not a literal death; but it is still very real. It is a legal death.

Here is what I mean. Suppose I am called away overseas and during that time I need to sell my house. What will I do? I will appoint some reliable person in the role of power of attorney to represent me. He will be authorised to negotiate with buyers, sign a sale agreement, hire a moving company, and even pay the movers – from my own bank account! Because he has power of attorney, my friend is my legal representative. When he does something, it is – from the law’s point of view – me doing it.

This is what Paul is saying in Romans 6 about Christ’s death on the cross. Jesus had ‘power of attorney’ to represent us. So when “he died to sin” (Rom 6:10), “we died to sin” (Rom 6:2)! He was our legal representative. “We are convinced,” Paul says in another letter, “that one died for all, and therefore all died.” (2 Corinthians 5:14) John Stott summarises the point this way: “The New Testament tells us not only that Christ died instead of us, as our substitute . . . but also that he died for us, as our representative, so that we may be said to have died in and through him.”

Ripping Up the Ticket

So we have all died! This is the surprise solution to the problem of the control of sin. And, just like Uncle George, our death releases us from the legal consequences of that sin. So what does God do? He rips up the ticket. “[He] cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and he has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:14, NASB) The term ‘certificate of debt’ here referred to a list of crimes and the penalties that those crimes incurred. It was like Uncle George’s ticket. And what, for us, is that ‘ticket’? It is God’s judgement on our choosing sin (rather than him) to be our master. It is being ‘given over’ to the control of sin. Our ticket doesn’t say, “SPEEDING VIOLATION: \$100”. It says, “REBELLION AGAINST GOD: TO BE GIVEN OVER TO THE CONTROL OF SIN AND LOCKED INTO OLD RESPONSE PATTERNS UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.”

That is why sin has such a vice-like grip on us. But when we put our trust in Christ, God decrees us to have died with him. And when we die with Christ, God cancels the ‘certificate of debt’. He rips up the ticket. Because Uncle George had died, he was off the hook from having to pay his fine.

Because we have died with Christ, we are off the hook from being given over to the control of sin. As Paul says, “Anyone who has died has been freed from sin.” (Rom 6:7) – that is, from sin’s controlling power. In short, we do not have to sin. We are no longer locked into those old response patterns that trip us up and make us say, “What I hate, I do!”

Unhooking the Chain

Let’s go back to the elephants in the mill, and how we are like them. My point earlier was that until God rescues us, we are like those great, plodding creatures. Our sin – backed up by God’s judgement (the chain) – keeps us going round and round and round.

But if we come to Christ, the scene changes. Legally, we are seen as having died. And death means the cancellation of all tickets and all judgement. God’s judgement was a chain tying us to our old master, sin, and to that old, endless circle. So what happens? God comes and unhooks the chain. Now, through faith in Jesus and by relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, we can change. We can escape the circle.

Listen to what Paul says in the following statements. They show how our dying with Christ opens the way for freedom from slavery to sin – and from our old patterns and cycles.

“We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” (Rom 6:4)

“For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin ...” (Rom 6:6)

“Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.” (Rom 6:8)

Living in Graceland

In Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the New Testament, ‘*The Message*’, he expresses Paul’s teaching in Romans 6 in this way:

“If we’ve left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn’t you realise we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace – a new life in a new land!

“That’s what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we’re going in our new grace-sovereign country.” (Rom 6:1-7, *The Message*)

What Paul is saying in these verses (which this paraphrase brings out so clearly) is that in Christ we have moved. In cancelling our judgement and unhooking our chain, God has brought us to a new place. We have left the country where sin is sovereign (the old mill!) and moved to “our new grace-sovereign country”. Now we live in Graceland! Not Elvis Presley’s old estate of that name in the United States, but a realm where the love and acceptance of Jesus Christ reign supreme. His love and acceptance empower us to say ‘No’ to sin and ‘Yes’ to God. In Graceland, there is no chain to keep us in the old circles. Instead, there is freedom to respond to life in new ways.

“That Sounds Great, But ...”

Now I can already hear what some readers will be saying. “Fine. This all sounds thrilling, but is it real? I’ve been a Christian for years, and I feel like I’m still going round in my old circles and with my old reactions. Why don’t I change? Do I have to wait for heaven for God to break that chain?”

The answer is ‘No!’, you don’t have to wait for heaven. In fact, the Bible anticipates your question, and the struggle behind it, and gives us the answer. Let’s look back to Romans chapter 6. Notice that Paul says that all Christians have legally “died” with Christ (verse 2). Not just an elite few, but all. So why the struggle, if God has really unhooked the chain, and moved us to Graceland? Let me try to explain the reason for the problem, and then Paul’s answer.

What Sometimes Happens When the Chains are Removed

The story I heard about elephants in Asia had another detail that surprised me. Apparently, some elephants will continue going round and round that old circular path even if their chain is removed. They are so accustomed to their plodding existence that it never occurs to them to break out of the circle, even if their chain is taken away.

Sometimes, we are like those elephants. When we have plodded that path long enough, it becomes part of us. It is as though the path gets inside us. Like a spinning gyroscope, we have an internal spiritual momentum that keeps us going round and round, repeating our old choices.

Paul's Answer

But Paul has an answer. And his answer is not, “Smarten up!” or “Be more holy!” His answer is (as unbelievably simple as it may sound) to *believe* something. He calls us to believe in what God has done: that God has crucified our old life with Jesus. “In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (Rom 6:11) In other words, agree with what God has decreed: that in Jesus, we died; and that “anyone who has died has been freed from sin.” (Rom 6:7) That is, that God comes and removes the old penalty on that sin, namely, the chain on their ankle! So to “count [ourselves] dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” means to stand in faith on what God says he has done. It means to believe what may not seem tangible or real at the moment, but which nonetheless stands before us as a promise of God: that we have been “set free from sin” (Rom 6:18).

Conquering the Walled City

Do you remember the story of Joshua and the conquest of Jericho? Joshua stood on the plains of Canaan, looking up at that massive walled city. God had called him to conquer it. But how could he? Its walls were huge and impregnable. So how did Joshua move to take that city? By believing what God said. “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men.” (Joshua 6:2) On the basis of God’s promise, Joshua mobilised the people and (with God’s miraculous help!) conquered the city.

But notice what it was that empowered Joshua to move: it was faith in what God had said – that he had “given” Joshua the city. His confidence in what God had decreed enabled him to take up his sword, fight, and win.

God says that “our old self was crucified with [Christ]” (Rom 6:6). Sometimes our old patterns rise up before us as intimidating and as impregnable as Jericho. So what do we do? We do what Joshua did: believe in what God says – and take up the sword of God’s word, and fight. Fight those old patterns and cycles that are still embedded in our personalities. And as we fight, claim the promise that God has ‘given us the city’. We must believe the promise, and fight on the basis of it. As we do, Paul’s prescription for breaking free of the old circles will begin to become real in our experience. Listen to what he says (with some comments of my own woven in):

“In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus [That is, agree with God. Believe in what he says he has done.] Therefore [on the basis of what God has done – that is, putting us to death in Jesus and unhooking the old chain] do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies so that you obey its evil desires. [Fight those old reactions! You’re living in Graceland – you can step out of the circle!] Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; [See? All this is based on what God has done!] and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. ” (Rom 6:11-13)

Back to Ralph

Now, do you remember Ralph – the Christian with the long-term problem of anger? Let me close this chapter by looking at how what I have said here would apply to Ralph.

First, Ralph needs to believe God loves him. No matter how slow or halting his progress, he is the object of the everlasting love of the Father. His Father in heaven is cheering him on in his journey, and washing him clean when he falls down.

Second, Ralph needs to believe the good news of Romans 6. He needs to stand on the truth of what God says he has done – put Ralph ‘to death’ in the death of Jesus. Being ‘legally dead’, Ralph is off the hook from having to

continue under the control of his sin. This is what it means to “count yourselves dead to sin.” It means realising that we have moved – that Ralph has moved – to Graceland. There is no need to keep acting out the old cycles that we lived in back in “the country where sin is sovereign”.

Strategies and Hope

Ralph may need special strategies to deal with his personal stronghold of anger. He may need to talk through his issues with an understanding pastor or counsellor. He may need to fast and pray. He may need to meditate on appropriate passages of Scripture. He may need deliverance from unclean spirits. He may need to find a new depth of repentance. (Angry people often need to stop being so demanding of others, and learn to show mercy – just as they have received it.) These sorts of strategy are all swords for the battle. But they are not Ralph’s hope. His hope – which is what will give his strategies power – is in what God has done at the cross. He has crucified Ralph with Jesus, cancelled Ralph’s tickets, and forever unhooked his chain.

So, what should he do the next time the old surge of anger comes? The answer is always the same: believe the gospel – in particular, the gospel according to Romans 6. And since faith comes by hearing, Ralph needs to ‘preach the gospel to himself’ with words like these:

- In Christ as my representative, I have died. That means I am ‘off the hook’ from all judgement.
- Being released from God’s judgement means I am forever freed from the controlling power of sin, from my old ‘chain’.
- While temptation may be very real, the control of sin is broken.
- Anger? Irritability? I am free to step out of the old circle.
- By God’s grace, I can say ‘No’ to the urge to get angry.

Changing the Direction of our Souls

When I was a boy I had an electric train set. The control box had three switches: the on/off button, the speed dial, and the direction switch. With a flick of that third control, I could make the train instantly reverse direction. It would be speeding around its oval track and then (at an electrical command

from its seven year old ‘engineer’) it would stop for a fraction of a second and start zooming back the other way.

I wish that it were that simple to change my behaviour. It isn’t! There is too much ‘momentum’ in me to reverse direction like my old train set. But while I can’t change with the flick of a switch, I do know that the gospel is about changed hearts. It is about God changing the ‘direction of our souls’. Let me close this chapter with two final scriptures. They both speak of the cross of Christ and change.

The first is 2 Corinthians 5:15, which says: “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” In other words, part of God’s purpose in the death of Jesus was to turn us around, so that we would live “no longer for [ourselves], but for him”. Embracing the cross will change the direction of our souls.

The other scripture is longer; but please read it slowly and reflectively – even if you know it well and have read it many times before. It is Titus 2:11-14. Once again, I have woven my own comments into the text.

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. [How? Through the cross!] It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us [How? On the cross! And why? Keep reading!] to redeem us from all wickedness [even Ralph’s] and to purify for himself a people [Does that mean Ralph can be pure? Yes!] that are his very own [Like Israel – God’s “treasured possession”], eager to do what is good.”

“Eager to do what is good.” That means a change in the direction of our souls. And that is what happens to people who lay hold of the cross.

Chapter 5

The Cross and the Devil

Lightning Bolts and Laser Blasts

Here is a question to pose to the class if ever you are asked to teach in children's church. Ask the youngsters this: "If you were God, what would you do to the devil?" Depending on the age of the class, you will likely get answers like:

"I'd shoot a lightning bolt at him, and roast him."

"No. Not lightning. A laser blast!"

"I'd send a bunch of angels to beat him up."

"I'd throw him into the lake of fire, like the Bible says is going to happen. But I wouldn't wait for the end of the world. I'd do it now."

We would chuckle at these young theologians' suggestions for dealing with the devil. But joking aside, if it were up to us, how would we do it? And more importantly, how (according to Scripture) has God dealt with him?

The answer may surprise us. God will indeed, one day, cast Satan into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10). But the lake of fire is only the final chapter in God's great victory over the devil. He has, in fact, already dealt Satan the knock-out punch. He did it through Jesus. And here's the surprise: that knock-out punch came not when Christ was born in Bethlehem, or when he resisted the devil's temptations in the desert, or even when he cast out evil spirits. No. God knocked the devil to the mat at the moment of Jesus' greatest apparent weakness. He defeated Satan when Christ died on the cross.

Evicting the Evil Prince

The New Testament is very clear that the cross was the ‘laser blast’ that defeated the devil. Let’s look at three texts that show this.

The first is John 12:31-33: “Jesus said, ‘Now is the time for judgement on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.’ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.” Jesus spoke these words the evening before he died on the cross. And his death, he said, would do two things. It would drive out “the prince of this world”; and it would enable him to “draw all men” to himself.

Let’s explore these ideas a little. Jesus says that the prince of this world was about to be driven out. The prince, of course, is Satan. Because the world is in rebellion against God, Satan has power over it; he is its ‘prince’. But that is about to change, because God is going to drive out (literally, ‘throw out’) this prince. But what exactly did Jesus mean by that?

This eviction certainly does not mean that the devil would be eliminated. Long after the crucifixion, Satan was still prowling around like a lion, “looking for someone to devour.” (1Peter 5:8) What Jesus meant was this: as he died on the cross, the devil would be evicted from his place of control over the world. His power would be greatly cut back. He would still be around; but his lock-grip on mankind would be broken. He would not be able to stop people from being drawn to Jesus and, through him, to salvation, to eternal life, to a right relationship with God. All of this is the undoing of the devil’s kingdom. It shatters his destructive hold on men and women. The last thing the devil wants is for people to be drawn to Jesus. But that is just what is going to happen, Jesus says. And how? Through the cross! Satan is still on the prowl; but he has been driven from his position of control – through the death of Jesus.

Why all this is Good News

Are you a Christian? If you are, then Jesus Christ has drawn you to himself. If the devil could have stopped it, he would have done. But he didn’t, because he couldn’t. Something happened that took away his power to stop

you from coming to Christ. What was it? It was the cross. That old ‘prince’ lost his power to stop you from finding God.

If you are not a Christian, then I have good news for you. As powerful as the devil is, he is powerless to stop you from coming to Christ. Why? Because Jesus was “lifted up from the earth” onto the cross. He was lifted up so that Satan might be driven out, and that Jesus might draw you to himself.

A List of our Crimes

We now want to look at the second passage about the impact of the cross on Satan. It is Colossians 2:13-15, where Paul writes:

“And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh [or, ‘sinful nature’ (NIV)] He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, having triumphed over them through Him.” (NASB)

To interpret this text, we must understand what Paul meant by “the certificate of debt” and “rulers and authorities”. If someone had committed a series of offences, a certificate of debt would be drawn up, listing his crimes, his debts, and so forth. Whatever he wanted to do (buy a house, start a business, borrow money), this certificate would stand in his way. As Paul says, “[This certificate] was against us and was hostile to us.”

The Devil’s Generals

In speaking of “rulers and authorities” Paul was referring to spiritual forces – to Satan and the powers of darkness. Paul describes them in Ephesians as “the rulers ... the authorities ... the powers of this dark world ... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). These forces are like the demons that Jesus drove out of people, only they are more powerful. Demons might be Satan’s ground troops, but the ‘powers’ are his generals. They can influence individuals, families, cities, and even nations.

Their Favourite Weapon

Now, back to the cross and the devil. Paul says in this passage in Colossians that God has cancelled our certificate of debt. He has nailed it to the cross. This is a vivid and forceful way of saying that God has forgiven us. But notice what Paul says this cancellation leads to: the ‘disarming’ of the powers. Our forgiveness somehow takes away the weapons of Satan’s generals. How does this work?

Imagine the certificate of debt that you had incurred before you found forgiveness in Christ. Every sin you ever committed – in word, action or attitude – is listed on it. That certificate is against you. It stands opposed to you. And worse than that, the powers and authorities are able to use it against you! Picture it like this: your sins are written out on a huge certificate, on paper almost like poster-board so it will not wear out. Now, the demonic powers that are around your life see this document and get hold of it. They roll it up into a long tube and start clubbing you with it.

Wham! Wham! Wham! “What a lousy Christian you are! Thinking thoughts like that! Shame on you!” Wham! Wham! Wham! “You’ll never amount to anything! Just look at this long list!” Wham! Wham! Wham!

Do you remember what the book of Revelation calls the devil? It calls him “the accuser of our brothers” (Revelation 12:10). So it is no surprise that his ‘generals’ use accusation as their main strategy of bringing discouragement and defeat. And ironically, we all help them do it, by supplying them with a powerful weapon: that long list of our sins!

Disarming the Powers

Now, for the good news. When people put their faith in Jesus Christ, God steps into the picture to deal with that old certificate. He deals with it once and for all. Listen to Paul’s actual words again, all from Colossians 2:14: “... he cancelled it ... took it away ... nailing it to the cross.”

That is what he did with our sins. But notice now what he does to those demonic forces who love to beat us over the head with our own guilt: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” (Col 2:15) What has God done?

He has grabbed that old ‘club’ out of the hands of Satan’s generals. He has taken away their favourite weapon. He has disarmed them.

And that is not all. Paul says, “... he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” The ‘public spectacle’ Paul is thinking of here was the great victory parade that conquering Roman generals would stage on returning home after winning a battle. Their defeated enemies (the generals from the opposing armies) would be marched along ahead of them – in disgrace and defeat. So notice what Paul says God has done to the powers and authorities. In Colossians 2:15, he describes God’s victory in three vivid phrases: He “disarmed them ... made a public spectacle of them ... triumphed over them by the cross.”

How did all this happen? By the cross. Jesus disarmed, disgraced and defeated the powers – by dying for our sins.

‘Destroying’ the Devil

Another passage which speaks about the cross and the devil is Hebrews 2:14-15, where the writer says: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”

These verses make it crystal clear: the cross was the laser blast of God that defeated Satan. It rendered him powerless. In one sense, the devil is already ‘destroyed’. And it was the death of Christ that did him in. Once again, this destruction does not mean that the devil has been blown away into non-existence. It means that by dying on the cross Jesus has taken away the devil’s ability to keep people in fear of death. Satan’s “power of death” means his ability to use death to his evil advantage – to enslave men and women in fear of it. But when Jesus died, he “destroyed” the devil’s power to do this. And he set free all those who formerly were afraid of dying.

A Victory Song in the Jaws of Death

How exactly did Jesus accomplish this? Look at what he said when he died: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” (Luke 23:46) In the jaws of death, in his last moments, Jesus held on to God. He walked into death in

total trust. The book of Acts expands on this great truth. It applies some words of David's from the Psalms to Jesus' experience in dying, turning the words into Christ's victory song as he took on mankind's great enemy, death. The words are full of trust and hope, focusing not on death, but on God:

“I saw the Lord [i.e., the Father] always before me.
Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will live in hope,
because you will not abandon me to the grave,
nor will you let your Holy One see decay.
You have made known to me the paths of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence.” (Acts 2:25-28)

Jesus embraced death and clung to God – at the same time. By doing this he carried the blazing torch of God's grace into the dark realm of the grave. He opened the way for all who will follow him in faith. They do not have to be afraid. They can face death (as countless Christians have done) rejoicing. Why? Because the one who sought to fill death with fear has been ‘rendered powerless’. The cross has defeated him. It transforms death from a descent into fear into a gate to life, where those who believe can “depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.” (Philippians 1:23) For the moment, to be sure, death remains a serious thing. Paul calls it “the last enemy” (1 Cor 15:26). One day, when Christ returns, this last enemy will be no more. For now, we still face it. But we need not fear it. Jesus, not the devil, is the Lord of the grave. He has gone there to conquer it, to drive out its fear, and to transform its meaning for those who follow him.

The Powerful is Rendered Powerless

There is a popular (and rather cynical) car bumper sticker that says, “Life is hard, then you die”. As cynical as it may be, this blunt message holds some truth. Life is hard. And one reason it is hard is that behind many of our struggles stands someone far stronger than us: the devil.

Listen to these words of Peter (which we have already quoted): “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to

devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” (1 Peter 5:8-9)

How can ordinary people like you and I resist someone so powerful as Satan? By keeping our eyes on the cross. It was the cross that took away his control of the world. It was the cross that disarmed him. It was the cross that rendered him powerless.

There really is a mystery here. Satan is powerful – but he is also ‘rendered powerless’. To those who try to face him in their own strength, he is an overwhelming foe. But for those who understand the triumph of Christ through the cross, Satan is already defeated. We can do what Peter calls us to do. We can resist the devil. We can resist him through the power of the cross. And when we do, the power of the cross will back us up, and the Scripture will be fulfilled: “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” (James 4:7)

Chapter 6

The Cross on Monday Morning

It may be Sunday, but Monday's Coming!

Imagine going to church and listening to the most inspiring sermon you have ever heard about the cross of Jesus. You go home feeling awed and thankful. That night, you go to bed feeling at peace with God, and zealous to live for him. God has spoken to you. It has been a good day.

At 6:00 am the next morning, your alarm rings. You groan and roll over (not being a morning person) and notice that it is raining outside. You want desperately to stay in bed; not least, because you have a job-performance review this morning! Your boss (who intimidates you) is coming in to evaluate you. Pulling the pillow over your head, you mutter a not very holy prayer: "Lord, can't we just skip today?"

Well, no, we can't. We can never skip Monday – or any other day! But yesterday that message touched you. So as you contemplate getting out of bed, you ask yourself, "What does the cross mean on Monday morning?"

That is what this final chapter is about. The first five chapters majored on theology. Now for some application. How does the cross of Christ touch us where we live? How does it meet our insecurities? How does it impact our character? How does it touch our relationships? And how does it keep us moving towards the Lord when our hearts want to go the other way?

What does the cross mean on a drizzly Monday morning? Here is the answer: the cross is about Confidence, Character, and Commitment. The Three Cs. Let's start with *Confidence*.

The Cross is about Confidence

The Confidence to Come In

If there is any situation that takes confidence, it is coming into the presence of God – especially if we have a biblical view of God. God is holy, a consuming fire, who came down on Sinai in smoke, earthquake and thunder. The sin-riddled Israelites saw these signs of his holiness, and trembled in fear (Exodus 19:16). Such is the God of the Bible. Coming into his presence is no small matter.

So how can sin-riddled people like you and me approach God? Where does the confidence to do so come from? It comes from what God's Son did at the cross. The writer to the Hebrews says: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus ... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us ... " (Hebrews 10:19-22). The blood of Christ gives us confidence to enter the Most Holy Place, the presence of God. Our access to God, our confidence to come to him, does not depend on anything that *we* do. It does not depend on us maintaining a perfect devotional life (what if you sleep in on that drizzly Monday morning?), or witnessing to three people a day, or any other performance or effort on our part. It depends on our faith in the shed blood of God's Son. God's presence is ours, when we come to the cross. Remember this fact when the devil needles you and accuses you. Tell him he is arguing against the power of the blood of Christ! And go on enjoying God. When we embrace the cross, God embraces us. He is ours – and we are his – through the death of his Son.

The Confidence to Go Out

Now, about that job-performance review. Facing that means facing your intimidating boss, and facing your own fears and doubts about yourself. This too is no small matter! It may be that you – born again, Spirit-filled Christian though you may be – are full of fears. You might be scared to go to work. You might be scared to get out of bed. What to do? Lay hold of the magnitude of God's commitment to you that he showed at the cross. *Knowing that he is committed to you is the real answer to all your fears.* As Paul says, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son,

but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”(Romans 8:31-32) For Monday morning, this verse translates as: “If God is committed to me to the point of letting his Son die for me, then he will certainly be there for me in this performance review. I can count on that.” Because of the cross of Christ, we have confidence to come to God and *confidence to face life*, knowing that God is *for* us. We can get up in the morning and go to work, come what may. Why? Because of the cross.

The Cross is about Character

Eager to Do What is Good

Hopefully, you manage to get out of bed and make your way through the drizzle to work, trusting God to help you with those fears. But here is the next question: Now that you’re there at the office, what sort of person are you? Is there integrity in your life? Is there decency and humility and the ability to show grace to other people? Remember: You and I, on our own, are sin-riddled Israelites. Where are we going to find integrity, decency and grace for other people (the boss included)? By now you know the answer I am looking for. We find these qualities at the cross. The cross is where Jesus “gave himself for us ... to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” (Titus 2:14). Notice those last six words: *eager to do what is good*. We saw them before, at the end of Chapter 4. They tell us that the cross is about a change in the way we live. It is about character.

Bitter Water Sweet

During their desert wanderings, the Israelites once came to a body of undrinkable, bitter water. They were desperately thirsty. So Moses cried out to the Lord, who told him to throw a piece of wood into the bitter water, “and the water became sweet” (Exodus 15:25). The cross itself was nothing more than two pieces of wood. But like that stick in the wilderness, it became the channel for the grace of God, changing people. It makes angry people kind, lustful people pure, and bitter people sweet.

Look to the Bible’s exhortations about Christian character, and again and again you will find references to the cross. For example, how do we deal with church controversies? Listen to Paul’s counsel to the Romans (in the

midst of their “meat offered to idols” debate): “Do not by your eating destroy your brother *for whom Christ died.*” (Romans 14:15) There is the answer: to see each other in the light of the cross! How can we avoid friction between the saints? Look at what Paul says to the Philippians (who had their share of strife): “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus ... who humbled himself and became obedient to death – *even death on a cross!*” (Philippians 2:5-8) With that kind of humility, friction would simply evaporate. How can Christian men be godly husbands? “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and *gave himself up for her.*” (Ephesians 5:25) There it is again: even in marriage, the cross is our model of Christian character! In all these examples, the Bible deals with character issues the same way: by pointing people to the cross of Christ, where bitter waters are made sweet. That is what the cross is about on Monday morning.

The Cross is about Commitment

The Hen and the Pig

There is no greater commitment than dying for someone. You may have heard the story about the hen and the pig arguing over who was more important to the family farm. The hen boasted that she laid eggs for the farmer (who enjoyed eggs and bacon every morning). “So what!” the pig snorted. “For you chickens, that breakfast is a donation. For us pigs, it’s a commitment!” And that is the truth. There is no greater commitment than dying! Even Jesus said so: “Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13) The cross is the grand demonstration of God’s commitment to us; but it is also the standard of our commitment to him.

The Cost of Commitment

What does it mean to be committed to Jesus? Listen to his own words: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34) Following Jesus means holding nothing back. It means yielding everything to him and to the advancement of the gospel. For some (like Paul), this will mean literal martyrdom. But for everyone it means abandoning ourselves to God each new day – each drizzly Monday! Paul himself says: “I die every day – I mean that, brothers – just as surely as

I glory over you in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (1 Corinthians 15:31) For him, ‘dying for Christ’ was a daily reality. It happened every time he followed Christ into danger. It happened every time he chose God’s will over his own. It may happen to us in a conversation at work, when we speak up for the truth of the gospel or the moral standards of the Kingdom. ‘What will they think?’ we wonder. What they think doesn’t matter. Jesus called us to follow him and die. That is what matters. “I bear on my body the marks of Jesus,” Paul said (Galatians 6:17). The scars from beatings for the name of Christ were Christ’s cross touching Paul’s own flesh. Whether we experience that cross in the form of stoning or simple verbal ridicule, it is all part of following Jesus and dying. That is what commitment to him means.

The Cross Across All of Life

This “obedience unto death – even death on a cross” applies in all of life. It applies to marriage, for the Bible calls husbands to lay down their lives for their wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25). It applies to high-pressure situations where God brings us to the end of our own strength, and the beginning of his. Paul describes such a time: “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts, we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.” (2 Corinthians 1:8-9). It applies to relationships in the church. “This is how we know what love is,” John says. “Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” (1 John 3:16) This laying down of our lives is not limited to physical death. It includes giving up our rights, our preferences, our possessions, and so on. That is all part of dying. In a different sense, dying every day will apply to the costly inner choices that come with dealing with our sin: “... if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live ...” (Romans 8:13). It is all part of the impact of the death of Jesus, and of our commitment to him. As we survey these aspects of the wondrous cross, we see that it is vastly more than an event in history. It is a moment by moment reality for every one who follows Christ.

Getting Dressed

After he rose from the dead, Jesus spoke to Simon Peter about how he too would one day die. John remembered it like this:

“Jesus said, ‘ ... I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.’ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, ‘Follow me!’ ” (John 21:18-19)

In these words, Jesus prophesied that Peter would, in the end, pay the ultimate cost of commitment: he would give his own life. But notice the way the Lord describes it. Peter would have to let someone else dress him. He would have to let someone else lead him. He would have to go where he did not want to go. The point here is: total yieldedness, total surrender, total relinquishment of his rights. Church tradition tells us that Peter died a gruesome death, crucified upside down. By that death, and the yieldedness that preceded it, Peter glorified God. That is commitment.

Where We Don't Want to Go – And Yet ...

“Where we do not want to go” – that is where the way of the cross will take us. And yet, in a miraculous and paradoxical way, that cross will take us where we *do* want to go: to true commitment, to transformed character, to confidence in approaching God and in facing life. It will take us to the forgiveness of sins, to the hope of heaven, and to joy in the midst of suffering. These good gifts, and a thousand more, are ours because God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all.

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