

TRINITY LECTURE 3 - Bible Study

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, let me begin tonight by simply posing the question to you, how do we make sense of the cross?

You see, the postmodern society in which we live in is so focused on the internal life of the individual that it makes the significance of the cross a pretty difficult concept to grasp.

The gospel, increasingly the church, and unfortunately this also characterises some evangelical circles. In the church and in those evangelical circles, the gospel is being diluted and also domesticated.

The thrust is often that the gospel is primarily to meet our felt needs. So, for example, for the person who feels lonely, then Jesus loves you.

For the person feeling excluded, Jesus gives you integration. Of course, it's not as if these statements are untrue, but they miss the universal problem of the nature of sin.

[1 : 07] There are profound individual and social consequences of sin. But the central issue is how can we rebellious human beings living in a state of war with our maker, how can we then be reconciled to our creator?

If we're going to make sense of the cross, then we must clearly face what's wrong with us as human beings. And that world-changing movement, the Reformation, began in the early 16th century, can be characterised in lots of different ways.

And through this series, we're looking at three of the great leaders of the Reformation movement. And amidst all of the characteristics of the Reformation, one thing stands out in my own reading of it.

Names such as Martin Luther and John Calvin had a lot to say about the doctrine of sin. Luther held the strong view that because of the fall, man was totally depraved, that is, incapable of doing any spiritual good.

To Luther, sin is so great that no man can comprehend his wickedness. From the root of sin, nothing good before God can come. We're nothing but sin, he said.

[2 : 25] No one can know all his sins or her sins, especially given the magnitude of original sin. And the malice of the flesh is very deep. Well, Calvin considered sin to be a total corruption of man's being.

And the root of this corruption he saw as disobedience, inspired by pride. The theology of the Reformers, Luther, Calvin, was theocentric.

That is, it was God-centered rather than anthropocentric, man-centered. But it's interesting that this God-centeredness did not and does not denigrate the value of human beings.

Rather, in fact, it establishes their value. The Reformers simply took sin seriously because the Reformers took God seriously.

Sin offends God and it violates human beings. And the Reformers' recognition of the critical problem with all people, sin, simply mirrored what Paul reminded the Roman Christians of back in the sixth decade of the first century.

[3 : 42] Remember the context, as we've looked at in the last couple of nights. Paul is writing to Roman Christians and they're made up of both Jews and Gentiles. And the church needs to hear the gospel, even a church which, according to verse 8 of chapter 1, whose faith is proclaimed throughout the world.

And the Romans, just like us, still need the gospel. You see, we can't remain faithful to the biblical gospel if we gloss over the biblical analysis of what's wrong with human beings.

And so Paul spells out, if you turn with me, just into those first couple of chapters of Romans. He spells out in great detail in the section that Paul started last night, 118, all the way through to 320, just prior to the verse that Doug began the readings tonight, 118 to 320.

He spells out that God's wrath is against the whole human race, Jews and Gentiles alike. Because of our sin. In the section last night, in 118 and through to the end of that chapter, we see that God's wrath is active in the present.

And in Romans 2, which we haven't looked at, we see that God's wrath is active in the future, on the last day. And so as we come to chapter 3, Paul writes in verse 10 of chapter 3, quoting the Psalms, As it is written, there is no one who is righteous, not even one.

[5 : 14] There's no one who has any understanding. There's no one who seeks God. The language sounds pretty strong, doesn't it, to our 21st century ears.

And as Paul concludes the section, started all the way back at chapter 1, verse 18, he writes this in verse 19. Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

Notice there, just in verse 19, that the first part of that verse addresses only the Jewish people. While the second half of it actually expands to include everyone.

The Old Testament simply teaches that everyone comes under the judgment of God, and thus the whole world, Jews as well as Gentiles, are held accountable to God.

See, friends, when we neglect the doctrine of sin, we lose the doctrine of the atonement. And in our day, some Christians, in a sense, seeking to find alternative ways of explaining the gospel to the world, have abandoned the concept of atonement.

[6 : 35] But Paul grounds the work of Christ on the cross, which is summarized in the passage that was read tonight from verse 21 on. He grounds it in the universal sinfulness of mankind.

And he grounds it in a holy God's just judgment against such rebellion. So, is there any hope?

But now, a righteousness of God has been disclosed. Verses 21 to 26 are like the core of the book of Romans.

What we couldn't do for ourselves, God in Christ has done. In his lavish grace. But now, look with me at verse 21.

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the law and the prophets. I mean, after so much bad news all the way from 118.

[7 : 38] It's a relief, isn't it, just to get to those two little words. But now. See, Paul's actually returning to the topic all the way back in chapter 1, verse 17.

The righteousness of God. That is, the act of God justifying sinners and making them right in his eyes. So, the good news announced back in chapter 1, verse 17, that God's righteousness is in fact available to all who respond in faith.

This good news is then elaborated in our section beginning at verse 21. So, how should we understand these two little words, but now?

I mean, after all this talk of wrath from 118 to 320, we might be tempted to think that, well, perhaps the era of wrath has been replaced with an era of grace.

That would be kind of an easy way to read it, wouldn't it? But it might be easy, but it would be a misreading of scripture. Because as we move from the old covenant to the new covenant, in fact, both God's wrath and his grace are ratcheted up.

[8 : 48] What I mean by that is, the beauty of God's grace is climaxed in the cross. And the teaching of hell comes into full view through the teaching of Jesus and the apostles.

So, we shouldn't, if you like, have a disjunction between the old and the new with respect to wrath and grace. Rather, but now, those two little words signify that the righteousness of God has been disclosed, if you like, apart from the Mosaic covenant.

Apart from that law covenant at Mount Sinai. It's come in a new covenant. But note in that verse that this righteousness of God was, quote, attested by the law and the prophets.

That is, by the Old Testament. That's simply what that means. So, this move in salvation history from the old to the new was prophesied in the Old Testament.

The new covenant sealed with Jesus' blood. It was prefigured. It was predicted in temple sacrifices, in the Old Testament priesthood, in the temple.

[10 : 06] And their fulfillment was in the ultimate temple, the ultimate priest, and the ultimate sacrifice. Well, this righteousness of God, this divine gift, is received by the repentant sinner by faith.

Look at verse 22. The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. Now, we know from that preceding section that all Jews and Gentiles alike are guilty before God.

And the point is stressed again in verse 23. Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. But the fantastic news of the gospel, and it is fantastic, is that God's righteousness is available to all.

To all without distinction. If you were here with us on Tuesday night, and I know looking out, many of you were, you might recall that Paul commented that the gospel is both inclusive and exclusive.

Remember that for those who are here? Inclusive and exclusive. Well, look again at verse 22. It's inclusive. That is, it's for all people, not just one ethnic group.

[11 : 24] But the gospel is exclusive. It's received only through faith in the one and only Savior, Jesus Christ.

There is much ink that's spilled on pages debating that little expression that we read in the NRSV translation there, faith in Jesus Christ.

You can turn to commentaries and just go page after page, and you'll see sometimes that it might be translated as the faithfulness of Christ. The focus of the context in this section is on belief in the Lord Jesus, not on his character.

So Paul tells these Roman Christians that this divine gift, this righteousness from God, is received by the repentant sinner through faith in the Lord Jesus.

That's how he opens the section. And it's such a jam-packed, condensed section, isn't it? And I'll try as best as I can with the Lord's help just to unpack this a little bit for us.

[12 : 31] So let's look at verses 24 and the first part of 25. Because just in this sort of one and a half verses, Paul uses three word pictures to tell the story of the atonement.

It's important to realize these aren't, if you like, parallel ideas. Each of them need to be understood if we're to understand the significance of the cross. So, verse 24, Notice the first word picture is justification.

And it's grounded in the imagery of the law court. You see, again, in that section 118 to 320, we know that all human beings stand under God's judicial condemnation.

All are guilty. We're all guilty. We all deserve God's wrath. But on the basis of Jesus' atoning sacrifice, God has now legally declared the repentant sinner righteous.

He's acquitted us from guilt and the penalty of our sins. I wonder if you note just the beginning there of 24, the little word that's translated gift.

[13 : 52] Well, in the original language, in secular literature, the idea was of a gift that was given of which there was no payment that was expected in return. So, notice with that thought in mind, the threefold stress on justification.

It's free, it's a gift, and it's by grace. This word picture should raise our hearts in praise.

But if you think about it, it actually doesn't tell us much about how we were set free or how we were cleansed from our sin. So, let's look at the second word picture.

And that's the word picture of redemption or liberation from slavery. You see, God's gracious, judicial verdict of rightness, of rightness before him, is achieved, Paul writes, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Now, if we were first century readers, we would just that quickly see the imagery in that Greco-Roman world of a slave market where money was paid for the liberation, for the buying out of slaves.

[15 : 14] But the biblical roots, in fact, go much deeper. We can go all the way back to God liberating his people from slavery, can't we, in Egypt and taking the nation out of exile in Babylon.

So, see the picture here? Sin has not only made us guilty before God, but it's actually enslaved us. And God has paid a high price for our redemption because the sacrificial death of Christ is, in fact, the payment.

Be careful, though, with these metaphors not to stretch them too far because Scripture doesn't speak of the recipient of Christ's ransom payment. So, the key picture which is being conveyed is that Jesus' death is a ransom payment made to receive the repentant sinner, the one that comes to the Lord Jesus in repentance and faith made to free such a one from the slavery of sin.

So, they're the first two word pictures, justification, redemption. Now, the third one. The third picture is presented identifying the means inherent in this redemption.

redemption, the means inherent in this redemption. Because, you see, this redemption comes about by the will of God, the Father, who put forward Jesus, that is, publicly displayed him as a sacrifice of atonement.

[16 : 46] this third word picture is the most shocking of all. It ought to arrest us for at least two reasons.

The saving death of Jesus Christ on the cross was God's work. and his death, the death of the Lord Jesus, was a propitiation.

Now, the word in the original and it's simply translated both in the NIV and the NRSV sacrifice of atonement, that word in the original is firmly grounded in the Old Testament.

The word was in fact used to designate the golden mercy seat, the cover over the Ark of the Covenant and it was over which Yahweh appeared between the cherubins on the Day of Atonement.

And on this cover, sacrificial blood was poured to offer up a sacrifice for the sins of the people and nation and for the sins of the High Priest.

[17 : 59] To offer it up to set aside the wrath of God. You see, friends, Paul is presenting Jesus as the ultimate mercy seat.

That is, the ultimate place of atonement and, in fact, the ultimate sacrifice. You'll know from Leviticus 16 that under the Old Covenant the entry of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies with sacrificial blood to be poured on the mercy seat in fact, happened quite removed from the public gaze, didn't it?

No one but the High Priest could enter in. He could only do it once a year and there was just this huge thick curtain that meant that the world outside, if you like, could not see in.

The yearly ritual was hidden from the nation. but with the death of Jesus, a human sacrifice has been made in public once for all and as one commentator has rightly stated, placarded by God himself.

Now, views on the nature of Christ's death vary considerably. In recent years, some so-called evangelical scholars have dismissed the idea of God's wrath being averted.

[19 : 28] They've dismissed any suggestion of a penal connotation in Christ's death. But Christ's death is punitive in that he bore the act of divine condemnation of sin in his own death and it's shown by at least two facts.

Firstly, death is by definition a penalty and God's means of accomplishing atonement was Christ's death. And secondly, God's wrath was satisfied in Christ's death.

See, if you just look down to verse 25 and 26, God displayed Christ publicly as the ultimate mercy seat as evidence of his righteousness because of the passing over of sins previously committed under the forbearance or the patience of God.

Remember again, the context of 118 to 320 is God's wrath. And in Christ, God has at last executed that judgment upon sin.

And Christ's death accomplished two things. The wrath of God was appeased and sins were forgiven. Perhaps the most distinguishing and common characteristic of those who oppose substitutionary atonement, Christ dying in our place, the most distinguishing and common characteristic I think is their rejection or in some cases their redefinition of God's wrath.

[21 : 04] You see, the contention of the second century Christian heretic Marconian that if God is truly love then he can't be angry, that contention is alive and well today in the church.

But the same scriptures that teach that God is love insist no less strongly that God is holy. And in scripture God's wrath is nothing less, nothing other than his holiness when it confronts the rebellion of his creatures.

But maybe just another comment on wrath. Wrath, unlike love, is not one of the intrinsic perfections of God. What I mean by that is simply this.

Where there is no sin, there is no wrath. But there will always be love in God.

And as we think about, if you like, the penal substitutionary death of Christ, it's absolutely vital that we uphold the unity of purpose in the triune Godhead.

[22 : 24] You see, undoubtedly over the years some Christians have erred in their presentation of the work of Christ on the cross, suggesting or implying some different attitudes between the father and the son towards sinners.

This is unfortunate and it's also wrong. Because if you look at verse 25 of chapter 3, God is both the subject, that is, he is the sacrifice, and he's the object of the action.

He himself is propitiated. He is the one who has acted to turn away the wrath that all stand under. So the one who died on the cross as our substitute was God in Christ, truly and fully both God and man, and who was thus uniquely qualified to be the one and only mediator.

Jesus Christ did bear the penalty of our sins, but God was active in and through Christ doing it, and Christ was freely playing his part.

There is absolutely no scriptural support for seeing the persons of the Trinity at loggerheads with one another in the cross.

[23 : 44] In fact, the ultimate ground of the atonement is the triune God himself. It's because God himself exhausts his own wrath and bears the consequences of our sinfulness in himself, in Christ.

It's because of that that the atonement is effective. You see, in the cross, the self-substitution of God is revealed. world.

And so the NRSV translation, sacrifice of atonement, is quite apt, providing that we see in those words that includes expiation, the removal of sin, that we see in those words propitiation, the turning away of wrath, and we see in it satisfaction.

Well, as we come then to the second half of 25 and into verse 26, let us consider just three questions. Firstly, how do we appropriate this sacrifice of atonement?

The answer is at the end of verse 25, simply through faith. Secondly, what is God's means of accomplishing the sacrifice of atonement? Again, by his blood, by Christ's blood, that is by his death.

[25 : 07] And thirdly, why did God need to show his righteousness by the public crucifixion of Jesus? Why did he need to do that?

He did this to show his righteousness because in his divine forbearance he'd passed over the sins previously committed. It was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

You see, God needed to demonstrate that he was just, needed to demonstrate that he was righteous because in the past sins had been forgiven but they hadn't been paid for.

Christ had not died. You see, it's not as if God did not forgive sins under the old covenant. He did. But God postponed the full penalty due sins in the old covenant allowing sinners in fact to stand before him without their having provided an adequate satisfaction of the demands of holy justice.

And in doing this, God could have been accused of simply not being just. But now Christ has died as the once for all perfect sacrifice.

[26 : 27] Christ's propitiating sacrifice was required in terms of the just requirements of God's holy character. You see, friends, think of it this way, perhaps more simply.

In the cross, the legitimacy of God's forgiveness was demonstrated. And the public revelation of the cross secondly proved, as we read in the verse, at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus, God's justice, a divine attribute, and justification, the divine activity, would be impossible without the cross.

So let's go back to the question that we started with then. How do we make sense of the cross? God has redeemed his people, he's propitiated his wrath, and he's demonstrated his justice.

You see, Jesus' death deals with the problem of human sin and it deals with divine wrath. And so it effects justification.

Insofar as justification is the divine verdict of acceptance and blessing, whereby God doesn't reckon the sins to us, it is in fact the polar opposite of divine wrath.

[27 : 59] God's righteousness has to be revealed in the gospel for faith, because apart from the gospel, when God's righteousness meets human unrighteousness, his righteous judgment is revealed not as salvation, but revealed as wrath.

then what becomes of boasting? Is it excluded by what law? By what of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith, and the uncircumcised through that same faith.

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means. On the contrary, what do we do? We uphold the law. You see, when we came to verse 20 of chapter 3, we realise we realise we are all under judgment, doomed to face God's wrath.

But just in that section, verses 27 to 31, Paul's referring to people being justified through faith. So how then have sin and wrath been dealt with?

[29 : 26] Because Christ died as our substitute, bearing our punishment. punishment. So Jesus not only bears our sins, but also the divine punishment which follows them.

Friends, if we lose this truth, we lose the heart of the atonement. So, as I conclude, let me just make a couple of brief observations.

Look at verse 28. Right standing before God must be, in fact, as it has always needed to be, by faith.

We can never overstate the importance of faith as the only basis of knowing God. If Scott wasn't on tonight, and I could borrow another five minutes, I could bore you with sort of five running illustrations, just in the last couple of weeks, of people who've got all sorts of messy ideas about how do we enter into relationship with God.

And Paul just keeps repeating it. It is only by faith. Verse 29 and 30. Simply, there is one and only one way of salvation.

[30 : 45] There is one and only one God. And verse 31, in Christ the whole law has not been nullified, but in fact it's been fulfilled.

hence, when we turn to Christ in faith, we actually keep the law in its entirety. So how do we make sense of the cross?

Do we just come to God however we like? Well, the Holy Spirit, through the Apostle Paul, proclaims this. The righteousness of God has been disclosed in Christ's death and resurrection.

This righteousness of God was attested in the Old Testament scriptures. scriptures. This righteousness of God, a divine gracious gift, is received by the repentant sinner by faith.

The gospel is for all and received by faith in the only Savior, Jesus Christ. And in the cross, God has redeemed his people, he has propitiated his wrath, and he's demonstrated his justice.

[31 : 59] Father, we thank you for the great truths of the gospel. We pray that you would continue to help us and teach us to understand just this very condensed and packed section in Romans 3.

Lord, may our hearts just simply be overfull with praise for your gracious gift of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Lord, as our hearts are overfull with praise, indeed, may our service to you simply flow out of our hearts of worship.

We ask this for Christ's sake. Amen.