



CHRIST CRUCIFIED

*Reflections on the Glory
of the Cross*

A 30 DAY DEVOTIONAL STUDY
ON THE ATONEMENT

VOLUME 1

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK



COMMIT TO A DAILY TIME AND PLACE.

Set aside at least 10 minutes, but spend more time if you can. Be alert, the devil doesn't want you to do this, so make this time a commitment to yourself, in dependence on the Spirit's power.



COME WITH EXPECTATION AND OPENNESS.

Pray before reading: *Open my eyes so I can see the wonderful things in your word' (Ps 119:18).*



TAKE YOUR TIME.

If it's too much to take in, do a 'day' over 2 or 3 days.



READ WITH A PEN OR PENCIL IN HAND AND JOURNAL YOUR JOURNEY.

While you read, mark any sections or points that impact you most. At the end of each day, write down any personal reflections in the space provided.



PRAY ABOUT WHAT YOU WROTE DOWN.

God has spoken to you through his Word, now speak to him in response. He doesn't only want to speak to you. He wants to hear from you.



MAKE IT A COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE.

Perhaps WhatsApp what you noted down to others. You may wish to form a WhatsApp group with one or more people and journey through this devotion together. This creates mutual accountability, support and depth to the journey.



INTRODUCTION

The event of Jesus' death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection has astonished and aggravated countless people in equal measure. At a high level, even someone who doesn't claim to be a Christ-follower might have some vague idea that Jesus died to forgive people, but that hardly scratches the surface. As Christians it is fitting that we spend time exploring the depth and breadth of the *atonement* - by which we mean the work of Christ on the cross to reconcile people to God. If you don't consider yourself a Christian or a disciple of Jesus, you are warmly invited to join in on this exploration.

The atonement is the great jewel of the Christian faith and like a magnificent diamond when one holds it up to examine its various angles we are treated to reflections that give us a richer appreciation of its value. That is what this devotional book is - reflections and meditations on the glorious achievements of the cross of Christ.

This is not intended as a systematic theology covering every detail and nuance of the gospel, but these reflections do intend to help conform our minds to rich doctrine, stir our emotions with gratitude and wonder, ultimately leading to transformational living as a result. It's one thing to have a thin view of yourself and simply repeat the rote phrase "*my identity is in Christ*". It is another thing entirely to grapple with the depths of how each achievement of Jesus' death affects your entire being and life.



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In this first volume we will explore the following aspects of the atonement:

WEEK 1 - Penal Substitutionary Atonement

WEEK 2 - Justification

WEEK 3 - Adoption

WEEK 4 - Redemption

WEEK 5 - Expiation



PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

To deepen the impact of this book on your life and to track what you are learning, flip back here after reading each day for a time of personal reflection

DAY 1: FIRST THINGS FIRST - THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS

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DAY 2: WHAT WE LOST - THE NEED FOR THE CROSS

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DAY 3: HOLY LOVE - THE MOTIVATION OF THE CROSS

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DAY 4: NOTHING NEW - THE HISTORY OF THE CROSS

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DAY 5: PROPITIATION - THE LOGIC OF THE CROSS

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DAY 6: THE LAMB OF GOD - THE HERO OF THE CROSS

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DAY 7: COURTROOM DRAMA - RIGHTEOUS GOD / UNRIGHTEOUS PEOPLE

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DAY 8: BY GRACE, THROUGH FAITH - GOOD WORKS DON'T WORK

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DAY 9: THE GREAT EXCHANGE - CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS BECOMES OURS

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DAY 10: HUMILITY AT THE HEART - THE GENIUS OF FAITH

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DAY 11: NO CONDEMNATION - OUR UNTOUCHABLE IDENTITY

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DAY 12: NOT BY WORKS, BUT FOR WORKS - THE IMPACT OF JUSTIFICATION

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DAY 13: FATHER WOUNDS - A MULTI-LAYERED CRISIS

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DAY 14: PRODIGAL GOD - THE FATHER'S HEART / THE SON'S WORK

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DAY 16: NOT LEFT AS ORPHANS - THE SPIRIT OF ADOPTION

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DAY 17: THE CHURCH - ADOPTED INTO A FAMILY

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DAY 18: KINGDOM COME - A PRAYER TO THE FATHER

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DAY 19: SLAVERY TO SATAN, SIN AND DEATH - OUR DESPERATE PLIGHT

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DAY 21: BROTHER JESUS - OUR KINSMAN REDEEMER

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DAY 22: FREE TO WORSHIP - LIBERATION FROM SATAN AND SIN

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DAY 26: SHAME - AN EFFECT OF BEING SINNED AGAINST

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DAY 27: THE WASHING AND THE GOAT - UNDERSTANDING THOSE OLD LAWS

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DAY 28: BAPTISM - A SYMBOL OF CLEANSING

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DAY 29: LIVING IN THE LIGHT - EXPERIENCING EXPIATION

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DAY 30: A BRIDE IN WHITE - THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

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CONFESSION:

In accordance with the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God was punished on the cross, in our place, for our sin, in order for the holy love of God to be satisfied and for sinners to be reconciled to Him.

A decorative graphic featuring the text "WEEK ONE" in a white, sans-serif font. The text is centered within a horizontal, double-headed arrow shape outlined in gold. The arrow's ends are filled with a series of radiating lines. Above and below the arrow are two identical sets of radiating dashed gold lines, creating a sunburst effect.

WEEK ONE

Reflections on Penal Substitutionary Atonement

First Things First - The Centrality of the Cross



1 CORINTHIANS 15V3-4

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

1 CORINTHIANS 2V2

I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Have you ever considered how bizarre the cross of Jesus is? To some of us, we have become so familiar with the crucifixion of Christ it has lost its shock (and worship) value. To others of us, it is such a brutal, archaic and confusing image, it is the very reason you are not someone who considers yourself a Christian or a follower of Jesus. To others still, you may be so unfamiliar with the Bible and its claims that the cross is something you consider to simply be irrelevant to your life. However you have arrived at reading these words today, this is an opportunity to discover or rediscover the beauty and brutality of the cross of Jesus as we reflect on its historicity, its necessity, its meaning and power.

What was crucifixion? Crucifixion was an ancient form of torture and execution, practiced by the Persians and Greeks and perfected by the Romans. A cross was formed out of wood and the condemned person was nailed to it and left for dead. It was (is) one of the most painful ways to die as the victim slowly suffocates, struggling to breathe under the weight of their body, often after severe levels of bodily trauma from beatings and lashings. Death would take hours or even days to arrive, and in that time, the person would also be exposed to the harsh elements, the shame of nakedness and the mockery of the crowds. Josephus, the first century Jewish historian called it “*the most wretched of deaths*”¹, whilst Cicero said it was “*the most cruel and disgusting penalty*”². Even the Jewish scriptures stated that a man hanged on a tree was “*cursed by God*”³.

In the early years of the Jesus movement, believers would make the sign of the cross over their bodies and heads in remembrance of the person and act of their Lord. In the coming centuries, through to the modern day, the cross or crucifix is perhaps the best known and well recognized symbol for Christianity. It has become so unanimous with religion and history that we don't always see the irony or paradox of the imagery - a symbol of criminality and death has become for many the symbol of faith, hope and love. This is as wild as wearing a small electric chair around your neck, or hanging a noose from your rearview mirror, or installing a stained glass window of a lethal injection for all to marvel at.

For all its horror, God in his wisdom has made this barbarous act the focal point of what Christians call the gospel, or their good news. The intersection of the cross and the person of Jesus of Nazareth is right at the heart of what Christians believe. If you were to fly

1. Josephus, Jewish War 7.203

2. Cicero, Pro Rabirio Perduellionis Reo 5.16

3. Deuteronomy 21v23

through the Bible, which is ultimately one unified story that leads to Jesus, you will notice a focus on the cross of Christ merely by noticing the amount of pages that are dedicated to it. The Old Testament flies through centuries of history including stories of God and his people, legislation and prophecies of the future, but when we arrive at the New Testament the narrative dramatically slows down. Instead of one biography of the person of Jesus, we get four books (gospels) retelling the same story from different vantage points. This should tell us something about Jesus, he is the person that all the previous stories have been leading up to. He is the image that all the pieces of the mosaic have been building towards. But even the story of Jesus is not structured like any other biography. We fly through his birth (that only two gospels recount), spend next to no time in his childhood or his first thirty years of life including the death of his father, but we then slow down again when it comes to the last three years of his life, as he carried out his teaching and miraculous ministry. If Jesus was simply a good man, or a great moral teacher, this makes sense, but instead we slow down even more for the last week of his life, leading up to his crucifixion where we dramatically almost stop over the twenty four hours surrounding his death. Almost half of John's Gospel takes place over that weekend from Jesus' last supper on Thursday night, to his resurrection on Sunday morning. The authors of scripture are deliberately drawing our attention to what they would often call "*the hour*".

At his last supper, instead of looking back on his mission and accomplishments, or mourning a life that was going to be cut short and fail, Jesus is still looking forward. His ultimate work was still to come. It is worth noting that the communion meal itself, the only commemorative act instituted by him for his followers, dramatises not his birth, nor words, nor works, not even his resurrection, but his death!

As we shall see, the Apostles and writers of the New Testament look back on the cross of Christ as the defining moment of his life (and of history for that matter), and in many ways spend the majority of their writings reflecting on the meanings and implications of his death for every human being who has ever lived.

The cross is so central to the Bible and the Christian faith that the Apostle Paul states it is "*of first importance*". There are many important things we need to know and respond to, but the death and resurrection of Jesus is at the forefront. Paul would even go so far as to say that he essentially preached nothing but "Christ and him crucified". None of this to say that Jesus' birth, words, works and resurrection are not important, but they all lead up to and find their ultimate meaning in his death on the cross.

Christ was crucified - it's a historical fact. It's a big deal - this is clear. But why? That is the question we are seeking to answer over the next five days.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *What has been your reaction and response to the cross of Jesus in your life?*
2. *What are your initial thoughts on its potential relevance for you?*
3. *If you've been following Jesus for a while, has the image of the cross become a bit dull?*

What We Lost - The Need for the Cross



1 PETER 3V18

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

Why is the cross relevant to your life? Because it claims to be nothing less than the solution to all the world's problems.

We can probably all agree that the world isn't how it should be - pain, heartbreak, corruption, oppression, famine, earthquakes, war, strife, theft, murder, chaos and death. These few words paint a portrait of a broken world and something deep within us tells us it's wrong and shouldn't be this way. Worldviews and religions the world over have offered explanations to why this is the case, and what we can do in order to fix it or make peace with it.

The God of the bible, revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth tells us that the root cause of every ill in the world is something called sin. All the problems we see around us are merely symptoms. What is sin? It is human beings missing the mark or transgressing the proper boundaries in relation to God. It is a pervasive force in our world and at its heart is a rejection of and a rebellion against God himself. Since the first rebellion of Adam and Eve, all human beings are sinners by nature and choice. Sin is humanity substituting themselves in the place of God and becoming a law unto themselves. We have become what the bible calls idolaters, those who effectively worship other things other than God, and make disordered decisions as a result. We have lost, in large part, our identity as those created by God to worship and enjoy him and live in the world he created for us according to his ways that lead to human flourishing.

If sin is the problem, then education, anger management, politics and systemic change will never be the ultimate solution. They can mitigate the problem but can never solve it because they don't go to the root cause of human chaos and depravity. Sin itself needs to be dealt with because sin has separated us from God and cursed creation. Sin is a tool of very real spiritual beings who influence humanity away from God and towards chaos.

When the Apostle Paul summarises the consequences of sin he states that "*the wages of sin is death*". He is not merely talking about physical death, although that is included, but very real spiritual death, a separation from God that cashes out in the destruction we see around us. Human beings have cut themselves off from the life blood of their creator and although they are still his image bearers and capable of much good, there is a fundamental flaw in our collective nature.

4. A paraphrase of John Stott in *The Cross of Christ*.
5. Galatians 3v13

Although sin is explanatory, it also involves responsibility. It tells us that the world's problems are not out there in the world, but here in our hearts, personally and individually. We are complicit in the world's evil in a pervasive way. We need to be made right in God's eyes. We need to be freed from sin and restored to a relationship with our creator. We need to be cleansed of our guilt and forgiven of wrongdoing.

The problem of the human race is that sin has separated us from God, and this is precisely why the cross of Jesus is of first importance to Christians. *"Christ died for sins"* Paul tells us. The Apostle Peter, the main ringleader of Jesus' disciples during his earthly ministry said that *"Christ also suffered once for sins... that he might bring us to God."* This is what is called atonement. It is the making of amends. It is the action of reconciling enemies.

In one sense, sin put Jesus on the cross. He went to the cross to deal with human sin, and the actual unjust and physical act of human beings putting him on the cross was itself a sin. We need to see the cross as both something done by us (leading to repentance), then as something done for us (leading to faith and worship).⁴

Atonement is made possible by Jesus dying for our sins, but the key point to not miss is that he dies in our place. The wages of sin is death, but Jesus is the one who died, not us, and he died for our sins not his. He substituted himself for us which is why the cross is rightly understood as an act of substitutionary atonement. As Paul writes, *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law (the consequences of breaking it) by becoming a curse for us."*⁵

The cross is personally relevant to you because you need atonement for your sin in order to be reconnected and restored to God. The world is a mess because you and I lost God. It is pride that makes everything and everyone else the problem with the world. It is humbling to admit to ourselves and to God that we are part of what is wrong with the world and ultimately unable to be the solution. We need help from outside of ourselves. We need Christ and him crucified!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Have you recognised your complicity in the world's issues and the death of Jesus?*
2. *How might human responsibility and guilt actually enhance human dignity rather than diminish it?*
3. *How seriously do you take sin in your own life?*

Holy Love - The Motivation of the Cross



ROMANS 5V8

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

ROMANS 3V25

[Christ was an atoning sacrifice] to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

It is true that we need the cross of Christ if we are to be restored to God and set back onto the path he has for us, but did God himself need the cross? Have you ever thought about that? What motivated or caused the atonement from God's perspective? As we continue to make sense of the death of Jesus, this is a vital question to answer.

As strange as it may sound to some readers, we must firstly comment on what did not motivate it. There are two reasons that sometimes get thrown around church circles, conversations and even theological books. The first is that human beings were so worthy of love and redemption that Jesus had no choice. This view essentially states that we are so glorious that God could not abandon us. It is true that humans are remarkable creatures, capable of much good, but this reason is never one given in the scriptures. God would be perfectly just, right and loving to not save anyone from the consequences of sin. God does not need to forgive anyone.

The second false understanding of the cause of Jesus' death is that God needed to satisfy Satan or the devil. The view is that humanity has been in captivity to Satan since the original fall and that a ransom price was needed to be paid to him in order for us to be granted freedom. This idea is not found in the Bible and grants Satan too much power. A deal is never done with Satan, although there is truth to the fact that Satan and demons have been dealt a decisive blow at the crucifixion (more on that in a future volume). Satan did not need to be satisfied, but someone did, and that person is God himself.

It would not be entirely wrong to say that humans have fallen short and transgressed the law of God and this is the reason that sin needs to be dealt with. God, as judge of the world, judges us according to his law but his law is not something that is apart from him. His law only exists because of him, and his law is a manifestation of who he is. The ways in which God has called us to love him and live in his world reveal the character of God himself and so God's response to human sin is always in line with who he is.

In Exodus 34v6-7, God reveals himself to Moses as *"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear*

the guilty.” Some have called this the riddle of the Old Testament. It’s a revelation of God’s nature that begs the question: how can a God of love and justice forgive sinners whilst not clearing the guilty and turning a blind eye to sin?

The cross is the answer to that riddle. In the death of Jesus, God’s love is put on display. While we were still sinners and dead in our transgressions against him, Christ died for us in a radical act of love. The Apostle Paul also claims that the crucifixion shows God’s righteousness, or his justice, because up until that point in history God had been passing over people’s sins for thousands of years and not entirely dealing with it, otherwise no one from before the arrival of Christ could ever be forgiven and reconciled to God. To borrow a phrase from theologian John Stott, the cross is God satisfying his “holy love”⁶. By doing so, his law, justice, character and honour are all upheld. God is justified and pleased.

Paul wrote that “*Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*”⁷ Satisfaction is God acting in line with who he is, and satisfaction is achieved through substitution. The cross is necessary for us to find forgiveness, but the cross is necessary for God to allow forgiveness to even be possible. Jesus’ death achieved forgiveness of sins, that leads to every spiritual blessing for anyone to receive. But how did his death achieve this forgiveness of sins? How exactly does Jesus dying in our place solve the riddle of the Old Testament? That is the question that Penal Substitutionary Atonement answers, but before we get to the crux and logic of the cross, it is worth taking a step back into the Old Testament to look at the history of substitution as a build up to the arrival of Jesus.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *If the ultimate cause of the Atonement is found in the love and justice of God, is there anything in your life that required Jesus to die?*
2. *Does your answer help you appreciate God’s love for you in Jesus and how does this realisation make you feel in your relationship to God?*
3. *What distortions occur when we minimise one of these attributes of God or play them off against each other, and how might that affect our lives?*

Nothing New - The History of The Cross



LEVITICUS 17V11

For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.

Was the concept of substitution as an atonement for sin something new to the people of God when Jesus died on our behalf? Not at all, it is something God had been preparing in symbols and shadows for centuries before the ultimate atoning sacrifice was made by Christ.

Dating back to first book of the Bible, animals died in order for God to provide Adam and Eve covering for their shame,⁸ and God provided a ram in the thicket to substitute for the sacrifice of Isaac.⁹ Sacrificing animals was a legitimate form of worship and of making payment for sin throughout the Old Testament. As seen in Leviticus 17, blood sacrifice, as primitive as it seems, can make atonement as it represents the giving of life and is said to be given by God himself, not humanity.

For our purposes let's briefly reflect on three parts of the ancient scriptures to help us more fully appreciate the death of Jesus.

The Passover - Exodus 12

The event is essentially the birth of Israel as God's special covenant people and takes place during the Exodus, the moment God freed them from slavery in Egypt. The climactic act of God's judgement upon their oppressors was to be the death of all the first born of the land as the angel of God would pass through the land and strike them down. This would cause Pharaoh to let God's people go from captivity and be released to serve God as his people. The angel however was to strike down every firstborn, both human and animal, and there would only be one way of escape that God would provide. One had to trust God and slaughter a lamb, paint its blood over the door post and consume it in a meal that night, as every house that was covered by the blood of the lamb would be passed over and released from death.

Paul identifies Jesus specifically as our Passover lamb,¹⁰ the one who's blood rescues us from death and the consequences of sin. It is during the celebration of the Passover that Jesus applies the elements of the meal to himself, and claims his death as one that creates a new covenant - a pact, or agreement by which we relate to God.

The Day of Atonement - Leviticus 16

Although there are other sacrifices for sin in the ancient Israelite worship system, the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur was the most central. It happened once a year in the Jewish calendar and was intended specifically to make sinful people right with their sinless God.

8. Genesis 3v21

9. Genesis 22v12-14

10. 1 Corinthians 5v7-8

Two healthy male goats were selected and the high priest would kill one on behalf of the people as their substitute and its blood would be sprinkled in the Most Holy Place of the temple. The priest would then lay his hands on the second goat, confess the sins of the people and chase it out into the wilderness. It is known as the scapegoat.

This entire act is said to be a singular offering for sin - one goat embodying the means and the other the results of the atonement - and the entire ceremony, including the priest himself are all shown to be merely pointers to the ultimate work of Jesus. As the author of Hebrews rightly asks, "*[if these sacrifices could entirely atone for sin], would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*"¹²

The Suffering Servant - Isaiah 52v13-53v12

700 years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah predicted and described a person who would bear the sins of people, suffer and die. Sin-bearing is not simply to take one's sins upon one's self but to actually suffer the penalty for sin.¹³ The servant would be marred and disfigured, despised by people, had our sins laid upon him and willingly accepted his substitutionary death. Jesus claimed to be this servant and made reference to it on multiple occasions.

These few examples reveal to us a few things. Firstly, they tell us that God is intentional. He planned salvation and Jesus was no last ditch effort or scramble on God's behalf. Second we see that God chose to slowly reveal himself progressively in human history with Jesus being our final revelation of God, given to us in these last days. Lastly, they give explanatory power to the death of Jesus. We can make sense of Christ's death by seeing that "*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.*"¹⁴

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Reflecting on the Passover and the Day of Atonement, what do these two events tell us about the person of God and his way of dealing with sin?*
2. *Why do you think the blood of bulls and goats is insufficient to deal with sin entirely?*
3. *Can you think of other examples or parallels in the Old Testament that point towards the substitutionary death of Jesus?*

11. Hebrews 2 and 9

12. Hebrews 10v2-3

13. Stott, J. Cross of Christ pg 143

14. Hebrews 9v22

Propitiation - The Logic of the Cross



1 JOHN 4V10

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

How exactly does Jesus dying on the cross, in our place, satisfy the love and justice of God and make atonement for us so that we might have an opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation? The answer is that on the cross Jesus received the full penalty of our sin, namely the wrath of God.

The word propitiation used here by John and other New Testament authors describes a sacrifice that pacifies or appeases wrath. At the crux of the cross is the truth that God sent His own son to absorb his wrath and bear the curse of sin. John Piper says that *"the substitute, Jesus Christ, does not just cancel the wrath; he absorbs it and diverts it from us to himself"*.¹⁵ Some have tried to argue that the word translated propitiate, should be understood to simply mean expiate (the removal of sin). No doubt the death of Jesus does remove sin, but the only way it is removed is because the penalty for it has been paid. In the words of the Welsh preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *"propitiation procures expiation"*.

Part of the kick back towards this teaching is that it presents a God of love who also gets angry, but this is not a contradiction. On the contrary a God who never gets angry at injustice and evil would cease to be a just God, and a God who didn't act in response to the harm that sin causes to his creations would cease to be a loving God. Wrath is the appropriate response and manifestation of God's Holy Love when provoked by sin.

His wrath is both passive and active. His passive wrath is often not thought of, and is essentially the natural outworking and consequence of sin, and it involved God handing us over to our sin. We do whatever we want and continue to reap the negative consequences, including physical death. The chaos sin unleashes in our lives is God's passive wrath that we often neglect. His active wrath is when God directly intervenes and manifests his anger. It is measured and only poured out after much patience and long suffering. God does not fly off the handle in uncontrolled rage, but rather rightly and consciously deals with evil. Too often we picture God's anger like our anger and then perceive it to be unattractive, but as John Stott rightly observes, *"God's anger is poles apart from ours. What provokes our anger (injured vanity) never provokes his; what provokes his anger (evil) seldom provokes ours", particularly when we see it in ourselves.*¹⁶

Wrath is right. What should actually bother us is that Jesus received it instead of us and that *"he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree."*¹⁷ Consider for a moment the fact that the sins of the world were placed on Jesus and that he was treated as such. Murder, rape, incest,

15. Piper, J. Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die pg 21

16. Stott, J. The Cross of Christ pg 173

17. 1 Peter 2v24

paedophilia, genocide. Jesus was treated as the perpetrator of such things, though he had never sinned once in his life. *"For our sake [God] made [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*¹⁸

Jesus' whole life was one characterised by pain, he was a man of sorrows. He was inflicted with the physical pain and agony of crucifixion, but more so felt the reality of sin in himself and faced the abandonment of his father when he echoed Psalm 22 and cried out *"my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*. Jesus felt not only physical, but spiritual death - the experience of separation from God and punishment for sin. Even physical death itself is not a natural event, but a penal event. Death exists because of sin. Where there is no sin, there is no death, which is why Jesus could rise from the dead three days later, never to die again. The resurrection proved that sin was paid for when Jesus substituted himself for us on the cross. The deed was done, which was why shortly before he gave up his spirit Jesus could confidently say *"it is finished!"*.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Do you think it was fair for Christ to be your substitute and to pay your penalty?*
2. *When you think about him doing this, what attitude and emotion is called forth in your heart?*

The Lamb of God - The Hero of the Cross



JOHN 1V29

The next day [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

Isn't God punishing his son a form of cosmic child abuse? Isn't the notion of making a sacrifice to appease an angry god an ancient pagan ritual? These are fair questions, and real questions that have been levelled at those who believe that Christ on the cross was an act of penal substitutionary atonement. As a way to respond to them briefly as well as to more fully appreciate his sacrifice, let us turn our attention now to the person of Jesus himself.

Firstly, consider the divine nature of Jesus. Jesus Christ was God himself in human flesh. For all eternity God has existed as three persons; Father, Son and Spirit and in order for the atonement to be accomplished the Son came to earth in the likeness of human flesh. Jesus was both fully God and fully man. Sin has separated humanity from God, but Jesus is not an innocent third party whom God punishes. On the cross, Jesus is God paying the debt himself. Jesus isn't saving us from the Father, God is saving us from himself, just like at the Passover event. If sin is man substituting himself for God then salvation is God substituting himself for man.¹⁹ *"In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself".*²⁰ Indeed *"it was the will of God to crush him";*²¹ but Christ willingly received our punishment which is why we can say along with Paul that Jesus *"loved me and gave himself for me".*²² The Father and the Son are one, so Jesus told us, and this sacrifice is not a sacrifice that sinful humans present to appease a wild angry God, but one that a Holy Loving God presents to reconcile undeserving sinners to himself.

Second, consider the human nature of Jesus. To be a satisfactory substitute, Jesus needed to be without sin. He was the spotless lamb. He lived his life in perfect obedience to the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit so that *"as by the one man's disobedience [Adam] the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience [Jesus] the many will be made righteous."*²³ Additionally in order to truly represent humanity before God, Jesus needed to be fully man, to live the life we couldn't live and die the death we should have died. Paul tells us emphatically that *"by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us".*²⁴

Where does all of this leave us? How might we respond?

The first thing is to take Jesus at his word and recognize his return and his invitation. Jesus came 2000 years ago to bear sin on behalf of people, but he is returning to judge sin and usher in a world without Satan, sin and death. The atonement isn't automatically applied to everyone. Forgiveness is not forced upon us. It needs to be received by repentance (turning

away from our old ways and beliefs) and faith (believing Jesus). Probably the most quoted verse in the Bible sums this up well: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*²⁵ Jesus came as a sacrificial lamb to take away our sin, but the book of Revelation portrays Jesus returning as a wrathful lamb coming to purge the world of evil. Sin has to be paid for. Will you trust Jesus and let him pay it for you, or will you pay for it yourself on the day of judgement?

Secondly, we respond to the magnificent work of Christ in worship. We devote our affections, our minds and our physical lives to the person of Jesus. This first week has only explored the basis of our salvation, but we shall now turn our attention to all its benefits. The multifaceted glory of the gospel is transformative. It reshapes our identity as we believe it, meditate upon it and marvel in it, and it leads to a life that is radically reoriented around our creator and redeemer!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *What are your initial thoughts regarding the divine-human nature of Jesus?*
2. *Do you have a tendency to elevate one aspect over the other?*
3. *How are your levels of awe when considering the plan of God to take on flesh and pay the penalty for sin himself?*



CONFESSION:

By the grace of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, I am declared not guilty before the judgement seat of God. No good works of morality or religion would ever suffice. My sins - past, present and future - are not held against me because Christ was condemned on my behalf. God also sees me as blameless in his sight because Christ's righteousness has been gifted to me, and therefore all glory belongs to him.

A decorative graphic featuring the text "WEEK TWO" in a white, sans-serif font, centered within a horizontal, double-headed arrow shape. The arrow is outlined in gold and has a series of gold lines radiating from its ends, creating a sunburst effect. The entire graphic is set against a dark gray background.

WEEK TWO

Reflections on Justification

Courtroom Drama - Righteous God / Unrighteous People



DEUTERONOMY 32V4

The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.

There are many images, metaphors or descriptions of God in the Bible and corresponding to these, there are a diverse array of pictures regarding our salvation and what Christ has achieved for us on the cross. Despite unpopularity in some circles, it is inescapable that one of the dominant pictures of Yahweh, the God of the Bible, is that of a just lawgiver and judge, and this is what we will explore this week.

Our scene is set in the courtroom of God so to speak and the language of our discussion is appropriately judicial. God is the creator of all things, and in his wisdom has set up this world to work in such a way that human beings can flourish. Much like a country's laws exist for the protection and flourishing of it's citizens (ie speeding laws), God's transcendent law, the standard by which we should conform to in order to not truly harm each other is a good thing.

God's law emanates from his character. God himself is perfect and everything he does is just. He himself is *righteous* which essentially means just and correct. There is no evil or wrongdoing in God. True justice can only be found in God's decrees because he himself is the universal standard. He reveals himself as the one who defines what is right and wrong and invites us in his infinite wisdom to trust him and live accordingly.

As we have seen, one of the very definitions of sin is that of transgression. Humanity are those who have broken God's law. Breaking one part of the law still means you have broken the law, and if we are honest with ourselves and consider the ways of the God of the Bible, we have all broken multiple laws in our thoughts and deeds, likely on a daily basis. God is righteous but we are unrighteous, and before God, the judge, we therefore stand condemned.

The cry for justice in our hearts when we have been done wrong by others, or when we have witnessed injustice in the world around us reveals to us the essential goodness of justice and therefore of judgement. As we mentioned last week, God would not be a good and just God if he were to let people get away with evil in this world. A day is coming that God has appointed when justice will finally be appropriately administered and although we have all transgressed God's law in different ways and to different degrees, when the evidence of our lives is put on display and read out before the judgement seat of Christ, the verdict will be that of guilty and the sentence will be condemnation in hell.

You and I are unable to remove all the unrighteous things we have already thought, said and done, and must also surely recognize that there will be further unrighteous thoughts, words and deeds to come. JI Packer writes, *“the sinner’s first problem, therefore, is to get right with God’s law, for until he is right with the law he cannot be right with the God whose law it is. As long as the law condemns him, true worship and fellowship with God are impossible for him”*.¹

The word justification, in its most common use in scripture, simply means to be declared righteous or in the right. It is a declaration that people make of God in Luke 7v29 where it’s written *“...when all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just (they justified God)”*. The people did not transform God from a person who was unjust and unrighteous into someone who was, they simply made a [true] declaration about him.

We need God as the judge to declare us righteous in his sight. If God wants to enable us to be right with him however, he too faces a problem. People who do not administer justice are themselves lawbreakers in this regard and God himself states that *“He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord.”*²

The correct question to be asking is not *“how can a good God condemn people to hell?”*, but rather *“how can a good and just God allow sinners to not be condemned?”*

This is a conundrum: How can God both justify us and yet himself remain just?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Have you ever had a moment where you realised you had done something wrong and could do nothing to undo your actions?*
2. *Do you believe that all God’s ways are good and right and that his judgements are also just and true?*
3. *Where and why might you struggle with this and if there are discrepancies between your view and God, what are you going to do about it?*

By Grace, Through Faith - Good Works Don't Work



ROMANS 3V23-28

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.... For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

If you had to ask the average person in the western world how one can get to heaven, or get right with a holy God, you'd probably hear two things: morality and religion. If there truly is a God who requires us to do right things, then we need to get about doing these good works and hope at the end of the day the good ones outweigh the bad ones on the scale of justice. Some might call this morality or moral works. Closely linked to this are works of religion, where if you do certain practices, say certain things, pay certain amounts of money to priests etc... you can have your sins forgiven and can be made right with God. Both morality and religion tell us that we must do the work that can reconnect us to God.

In our modern secular world where God is sidelined or out of the picture entirely we still recognize that the world is messed up and human beings need fixing and we have essentially created a new list of moral acts and new secular practices that are no less religious in their intent to justify us. This justification however is before ourselves and others as opposed to God. We are to do the work of justice and give ourselves to self-love, self-esteem, self-care, self-help and self-actualization.

The danger with all of this is that they are essentially *self-centred* attempts at *self-justification* which more often than not play out in *self-righteousness* in our conversations and our social media feeds.

The Bible's teaching however is that no one can be justified (seen as and declared righteous) before God by works, whether by the Mosaic law as in Paul's day, or by moral acts in general. If we stop to think about it, we know that when someone stands trial for murder, they can't point to all their other good deeds and ask the judge to remember those as a way of being declared not guilty before the court. It will be the same on the great day of judgement. God went so far as to say presenting him our good deeds as a basis for our justification is like us bringing bloodied menstrual rags before him and saying "*justify us based on these*".³ No matter who you are, that's a stark image.

3. Isaiah 64v4 - Most English translations soften this

How then are we justified? The short answer is through faith. This issue of justification was one of the main reasons for the reformation of the church 500 years ago and the break away of the Protestant Church from the Roman Catholic Church. The German Monk Martin Luther rediscovered this great doctrine that had been lost, and he challenged the church of his day on their views of penance and indulgences, which were essentially avenues of working your way (and in some cases buying your way) into the presence of God.

Let's tease this out. Instead of earning God's favour and achieving our own justification (which is impossible), we are justified by God by grace alone, through faith alone. Grace is the *source*. Grace is God's unmerited favour towards us by which he initiated the plan of salvation to send Jesus in our place. It is a free gift from God, the apostle Paul tells us many times. Christ, and specifically his blood shed on our behalf is the basis of our justification. "*We have now been justified by his blood*"⁴ Paul tells Christians, and this is because Jesus' blood has satisfied God's holy love, expressed in wrath against sin. *Faith* then is the means by which we access the achievement of Christ. Why faith? That is something we will deal with another day when we consider the fact that us doing nothing means we cannot boast.

By faith, we don't mean some nebulous untouchable feeling, but a conscious trust and belief in Jesus Christ and him crucified. Faith is not the basis of justification, it only grants us access to justification based on the shed blood of Jesus. Because Christ has received the sentence of condemnation on our behalf and we have been joined to him in faith, it would be unjust for God to condemn us and declare us guilty for a crime that has been dealt with. In this way, God is able to be just in his declaration of us as righteous as well as the one who plans, achieves and makes known our justification.

This is good news! God justifies ungodly people and it costs us nothing. This means it is available and open to absolutely everyone because unlike education, money, moral perfection, political correctness, voting for a particular party or anything else, there is nothing required from us except faith!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Are you confident that God has declared you "not guilty" forever in his sight?*
2. *Do you know when that happened in your own life?*
3. *Did you do or think anything that resulted in God justifying you?*
4. *Did you do anything to deserve justification?*
5. *If you are not sure that God has justified you fully and for all time, is there something you need to do before that will happen?*
6. *What would persuade you that God has certainly justified you?*

The Great Exchange - Christ's Righteousness Becomes Ours



2 CORINTHIANS 5V21

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

At the heart of being justified by God is both the notion that he declares us to be righteous based on the fact of Christ's death on our behalf, as well as the idea that through faith we actually receive Christ's righteousness as ours. Martin Luther said that at the heart of justification was *"The Great Exchange"* as we see in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Christ the sinless one is made to be sin and you and I who have trusted in Christ are made *to be* the righteousness of God.

What is key for us here in this discussion of *justification* in particular is the language of *imputation*. Something that is *"imputed"* to us, means that something is credited to us to use financial language or reckoned to us. It is not that we actually *become* something, but rather that we are treated as *if* that thing is true about us. Romans 5v19 says *"For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."* The first man mentioned here is Adam, whose guilt has been credited or imputed to humanity. He was our representative as such and because he fell, we have all fallen. This has resulted in a very real sinful nature in all of us and consequently countless sinful decisions, but we are *"made sinners"* because we are counted as *"in Adam"*. At the cross, our sin was imputed to Christ as we have already seen.

The beauty of justification is not just that our sin was placed on Christ and punished there, but that Christ's perfect record of obedience that was gained throughout his sinless life is now imputed to us and said to be ours when we trust in Jesus by faith. Believing in Jesus we are united to Christ who *becomes* our righteousness.⁵

Jesus' death on the cross was the final act of obedience after a life of complete righteousness that we receive by faith. God now forgives us and looks upon us as perfect in his sight because our record is now Christ's record and we are covered in his righteousness. We are acquitted before the court, but also given the verdict of a perfect citizen.

Rather than standing before God with religious pedigree, our family name, our education or moral acts, it is appropriate to echo Paul's words to the Philippians when he writes: *"but whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."*⁶

5. 1 Corinthians 1v30
6. Philippians 3v7-9

We bring nothing to the table and God gives us everything. Paul would even go so far as to say that even our faith is a gift from God.⁷ The means of accessing Christ's righteousness that we desperately need is itself given to us and not generated by us.

Perhaps an analogy (adapted from John Piper⁸) would best bring this home. Imagine a father telling his son to clean his room before he goes to school because he cannot go and watch the Rugby game that night without a clean room. He plans poorly and leaves without getting it done, but while he is at school the father discovers the messy room and cleans it himself. When the son arrives home and realises what he's done he feels terrible, apologizes and humbly accepts the consequences - no Rugby tonight. But suppose then the father says to his son that on account of his son's apology and submission he is going to credit the clean room to his son's account. The father asked for the room to be clean in order for him to go to the game, and the room is now clean so the son can go to the game. It is not that the son *did* clean his room (the father did), or that because of his apology the room magically got cleaned, but rather his apology has *connected* him (in the father's grace) to the promise that a clean room means he gets to go to the game. The clean room is *his* clean room. Imagine now the son's response!

It is with joy that we can sing together with the songwriter Edward Mote who wrote the following:

*When he shall come with trumpet sound,
O may I then in him be found,
Dressed in his righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Have you considered why the perfect life of Jesus is integral to what Jesus achieved for us in his death?*
2. *How do you feel about approaching God as perfectly righteous?*
3. *Standing before God on the day of judgement, would you feel the need to only have your sins forgiven or would you also feel the need to have the righteousness of Christ reckoned to you?*

7. Ephesians 2v8

8. A paraphrase of his analogy in his book *Counted Righteous in Christ* pg 63

Humility at the Heart - The Genius of Faith



LUKE 18V9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Thesis: Christians should be the most humble people in the world. It could be said that at the heart of the first sin of Adam and Eve was pride - a desire to trust in ourselves, in our own wisdom and our own action. On the contrary, to accept that you have nothing to offer God but dirty rags when it comes to making yourself right in his eyes, and that you need to simply trust in him is an exercise of great humility.

The brilliance of God's design of humans being made right in God's sight by simple faith in the work of Jesus on the cross is that he, and not us, get the glory at the end of the day. Sin was us stealing the glory due to God and trying to elevate ourselves, but the way of salvation in Jesus is the exact opposite. We are justified by grace through faith, "*not a result of works, so that no one may boast*"⁹ writes the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians. He also writes to the Corinthians and says that "*Christ became to us... righteousness... so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'*"¹⁰

Besides pride being instrumental in the fall of humanity in the beginning, it continues to plague us and hinder us which is precisely why God wants to deal with it in our lives. It prevents us from growing other virtues and maturing in character because we refuse to see our problems and shortcomings. It prevents us from seeing opportunities in life, in relationships, and other good things that God may be wanting to give us because it creates in us a narrow tunnel vision that can only see things our way. It prevents us from being someone who others can trust and desire to relationally connect to and this can be fatal to long term intimacy in friendships, romantic relationships and even hinder our employment and career.

Justification by faith is a beautiful thing because by the humble act of faith we echo something of the humility of our God and saviour Jesus, who "*being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.*"¹¹ Humility is one of the virtues that the Holy Spirit begins working in our life after we come to faith in Jesus, but we can see that

9. Ephesians 2v9
10. 1 Corinthians 1v30
11. Phiippians 2v8

all of life is meant to be lived by faith in Jesus continually, thereby consistently producing humility in us. Everyday we are saying no to trusting ourselves in arrogance and saying yes to trusting Jesus and his ways and wisdom.

Theologian and Pastor RT Kendall used to talk about faith, or trust in someone being the highest compliment you could give them. Imagine how you'd feel if someone were to say to you that they will trust you on something simply because it's *you* who is saying it. You don't need to prove yourself, you don't need to explain yourself, you don't need to give all the details as to why they should follow your course of action. This is how God feels when we trust him for justification and as we live our lives in obedience to him, believing that he knows best and that "*his ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts higher than our thoughts*".¹²

We are to be people who boast, and boast vocally even, but we boast in the work of Jesus! What a winsome thing it can be to an unbelieving world when in humility, Christ-followers don't speak of their goodness but the greatness of God and what he has done.

The fact that we receive every spiritual blessing in Christ (including an ever increasing transformation of character), and are destined for eternal life and glory rather than condemnation is something we can never boast of. We should never look down on anyone for their moral choices or be frustrated with them out of some sense of superiority of our life in Christ because we did nothing to earn our justification. If not for the grace of God we would not be standing righteous before him. This is something we need to remind ourselves of as often as we can and be grateful for.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Who would be more grateful to have their debt written off - someone who owed little or someone who owed much?*
2. *How does the magnitude of your forgiveness make you feel about God?*
3. *Additionally, if gratitude further produces humility, how often do you thank God intentionally for providing you with a righteousness you did not and could not ever earn?*

No Condemnation - Our Untouchable Identity



ROMANS 8V33-34

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn?

If God, the ultimate and only truly just judge, has acquitted us of any wrongdoing and declares us to be perfectly righteous through our faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus then no one can condemn us (punish us and write us off). The ultimate sentence of judgement day has been brought forward and we are found to be not guilty thanks to Christ's righteousness being counted as ours and because of this, we must make sure we fall back on this reality in all situations in life.

Firstly, let's remember that other people cannot truly condemn us. That is the main point Paul is making in the Romans 8 passage above where he gives us a greater to lesser argument. If the only holy, wise, righteous judge sees us as right in his eyes, then essentially the opinion of unholy, foolish and unrighteous people means nothing. As Christ-followers we can expect pushback to our faith by others in our world. Many Christians have been condemned by authorities for their faith. There has been marginalisation and even martyrdom over the centuries, and many reading this will be familiar with accusations of intolerance, hatred, exclusivity and injustice based on our beliefs and lives. People may condemn us in various ways but it will never be successful. Charges will be brought, but on the great day of Jesus' return, none of them will stick. John Piper reminds us that *"the highest court has already ruled in our favour... If they reject us, he accepts us. If they hate us, he loves us. If they imprison us, he sets our spirits free. If they afflict us, he refines us by the fire. If they kill us, he makes it a passage to paradise. They cannot defeat us. Christ has died. Christ is risen. We are alive in him, and in him there is no condemnation"*.¹³ We are more than conquerors and therefore must not shrink back from what God calls us to.

Secondly, although it might not seem obvious at first, we must remind ourselves that God himself will not condemn us. We must remind ourselves of Paul's words that *"since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God."*¹⁴ Sometimes in the hardships of life we forget this and in our sufferings convince ourselves that God is against us, does not love us, and is condemning us for our sin or because he is an unloving God. All of this is untrue. Wayne Grudem reminds us that *"God will never make us pay the penalty for our sins that have been forgiven on Christ's merits... We may continue to suffer the ordinary consequences of our sins [and] God may discipline us if we continue to act in ways that are disobedient to him (see Heb 12v5-11)... this is out of love and for our own good."*¹⁵ If we do not remind ourselves of these great truths of being seen as righteous in our loving father's eyes, we run the risk of believing lies about him and about ourselves that will cause our hearts to harden and hope to disappear.

13. Piper, John. Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die pg 43

14. Romans 5v9

15. Grudem, Wayne. Systematic Theology pg 732

Thirdly, let us not condemn ourselves. Due to our personalities, some of us may be more prone to this than others, but when the reality of remaining sin in our lives gets us (or others) down we must preach to ourselves and to them the glorious reality of our justification based on Jesus! In 1 Corinthians Paul writes about the sobering reality that “*neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.*” But immediately after this he reminds his readers that “*such were some of you. But you were... justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*”¹⁶

He is saying that those of us who have trusted in Jesus are not what we once were. If God doesn't see us as the condemned sinner, neither should we. As scandalous as it sounds, we should reckon ourselves as righteous people (who no doubt sometimes commit unrighteous acts) rather than unrighteous people who might do righteous things. This is why justification is good news. It changes the very way we see ourselves and you and I need to constantly remind ourselves how God sees us because of Christ's righteousness! We need to be those who constantly tell ourselves and other followers of Jesus the truth about ourselves... that we are “*the righteousness of God!*”¹⁷ Right now, let us speak to our souls the words of the classic hymn:

*“When Satan tempts me to despair,
and tells me of the guilt within,
upward I look and see him there,
who made an end to all my sin.”¹⁸*

Lastly it is vital to recognize that because we did nothing to merit our justification, nothing can take it away. Because justification is not based on our actual righteousness or something internal to us we can be confident that our present sinful actions will not somehow “unjustify” us. We are safe and secure in his declaration because “*those whom he drew in by faith he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified (raised with Christ to immortality)*”.¹⁹ Our futures are so certain in this verse that Paul writes it in the past tense. Along with him then we too should be “*sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation (including us and our sin), will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”²⁰

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *How should we feel about our sin?*
2. *Do you feel being declared righteous belittles your sin?*
3. *Do you feel like God is still condemning you for sins committed in your past?*
4. *Do you live like there is no condemnation for your sin?*
5. *What would change in your life if you fully grasped the teaching of justification?*

16. 1 Corinthians 6:10-11

17. 2 Corinthians 5:9

18. Smith, Charitie Lees. Before the Throne of God Above.

19. Romans 8:30

20. Romans 8:28

Not By Works, But For Works - The Impact of Justification



ROMANS 6V1-2

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

JAMES 2V24

You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Two questions emerge at this point in our reflections on justification and the idea that God sees us and declares us to be righteous in his sight based on the obedience of Jesus and his atoning death on the cross. The first is that if we have been forgiven once and for all, and no matter what we do God sees us as righteous and will never change his verdict, then why don't we just keep sinning? The second is that isn't this teaching of free justification by faith and not by us actually doing any righteous acts at complete odds with what James, the half-brother of Jesus no less, wrote in his letter. How do we respond and what does this mean for the day to day living of our lives?

Firstly, the entire point of salvation as a whole is to free us from the power and penalty of sin in our lives, so that we can live in relationship with God and be restored to the ways of human flourishing he intends. It would be absolute madness for a person who was acquitted of a crime to head straight back into intentionally committing it again. It is true that we are certainly not saved by good works and are justified by faith alone, but we have been "*created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*"²¹ The fact that we are counted righteous is in fact a powerful motivator to actually fight sin and pursue righteous living, because we are free from the hopelessness and despair of never knowing if we're good enough. We live under the smile and approval of God which changes the entire framing of our pursuit of good deeds. The battle we fight against the sin that we still do see in our lives is not a battle for acceptance in God's eyes but rather a battle to become who we truly are. The aim is for you and I to live into the identity God has already given to us.

Secondly, we should not be worried that total forgiveness from God is a licence to sin or automatically results in lawless, unrighteous living. Imagine a scenario where a wife told a husband that because of her beliefs and love for him, should he one day have an affair with another woman, she would still take him back. What is stopping the husband from simply walking out the room and going to have an affair that night? The answer is simple: his love for her, and her love for him. The relationship we have with God is not one based on an attitude of "*what can I get away with?*" but one of deep love and affection. How can we intentionally act in such a way that would dishonour the one we love and break down the covenant relationship we have with him?

21. Ephesians 2v9

Thirdly, James and Paul are not at odds on this matter because James is using the word *justification* in a different sense to Paul. Instead of meaning “*declaring one righteous*”, it can also mean “*showing one’s righteousness*”. The context surrounding the word is key and in James’ usage he is actually making a similar case to what Paul is making in our Romans 6 passage, namely, that faith doesn’t give us licence to keep on sinning, but rather impacts us and leads to a life of obedience and good works.

Although both Paul and James link justification to the story of Abraham in their writings, when Paul says that “*Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness*”²² he is referring to a story in Genesis 15 when God declares him righteous in his sight based on simple faith. However when James asks the question “*was not Abraham our father justified by works?*”²³, he is referring to the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 21, where Abraham’s faith is demonstrated in a life of trust in and obedience to God. Paul is stressing the faith that issues in works whilst James is stressing the works that issue from faith. It has often been said that we are justified by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone.

Lastly, this concept of being acquitted of guilt and declared righteous should directly affect the way we treat others. Paul in Ephesians 4v32 tells us that we should forgive “*one another... as God in Christ forgave*” us. To use another marriage example, sometimes both partners feel so self-justified in the way they are seeing things and in their failed expectations of the other person. We tell the other how wrong they are and in turn are told that our expectations are baseless and that we ourselves have fallen short consistently. Everyone feels horrible and the reality of our sin and shortcomings makes things feel like a dead end with no hope. But we are to be those who apply God’s justification relationally to those who have also trusted in him. We are to regard our spouse (for example) the way that God regards me - perfectly righteous and accepted - and to be loved, helped, served even if there are very real failures and shortcomings.

The doctrine justification is transformative and practical. At the heart of the abolition of the slave trade through the life of William Wilberforce was the doctrine of justification that he articulated in his book “*A Practical View of Christianity*”. If the fate of millions of people was influenced by this teaching then it deserves our ongoing meditation so that it sinks deeper into our hearts and flows through our lives to impact the world around us.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Have there been any recent scenarios where you needed to apply the way God sees you to other Christ-followers?*
2. *Can you think of any more reasons why we should not be those who intentionally pursue sin after being justified by faith in Jesus?*
3. *What do you think of the phrase “cancelled sin is powerless sin”?*

22. Romans 4v3

23. James 2v21



CONFESSION:

Because of the love of God the Father, through the death of Jesus the Son, I have been adopted as a child of God and am now a member of God's household - the church. Through faith in Jesus I am no longer a child of wrath, but am a co-heir with Christ, in whom resides the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry "Abba Father".

A decorative graphic featuring the text "WEEK THREE" in a white, sans-serif font. The text is centered within a horizontal, elongated, double-headed arrow shape with a gold outline. The arrow's ends are filled with a series of parallel lines that converge towards the tips. Above and below the central arrow are two identical sets of radiating dashed gold lines, creating a sunburst or starburst effect. Small gold diamond shapes are positioned at the top and bottom center of the arrow's horizontal line.

WEEK THREE

Reflections on Adoption

Father Wounds - A Multi-Layered Crisis



EPHESIANS 2V1-3

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Let's shift our focus this week from the legal to the familial. If justification resulted in us not being guilty, adoption results in us not being lonely and fatherless. One of the tragedies of our age is that sadly many people are alone. Even those surrounded by people can feel a deep sense of isolation to the point that in the last few years the UK has even appointed a minister of loneliness. Apart from this recent phenomenon, one of the deepest causes of loneliness and rejection is caused by fatherlessness in homes as well as the very real orphan crisis that we face around the world (UNICEF estimates that there are over 100 million orphans globally).

Statistically in America, 1 in 4 children grow up without a father. In South Africa the number is far worse with 51% of children living without their fathers despite them being alive and a further 10% of children fatherless due to death. Those who have grown up without fathers (and parents) have spoken about the self-sufficiency that has shaped them as they often raised themselves, which in turn has bred a lack of trust in others. Sadly, children from fatherless homes are more likely to be poor, become involved in drug and alcohol abuse, drop out of school, and suffer from health and emotional problems. Boys are more likely to become involved in crime, and girls are more likely to become pregnant as teens¹.

Tragically, even in many homes where the father is physically present he is relationally and emotionally absent, or in some cases verbally abusive and even physically violent. On top of all of this, even those of us who lived in relatively stable homes and with good fathers who tried their best, experienced fathers who fell short in various ways. We hold things against our dads in terms of physical ability, lack of skill or lack of compassion - sometimes justifiably so and sometimes not.

This is all a manifestation of the deepest problem of the human race - that we are estranged from the creator God who has revealed himself as a father and through entanglement to sin are at the mercy of the ultimate bad dad, Satan, whom Jesus describes as "*the father of lies*".² We have believed this false father and have become enslaved to selfish desires that have caused some men to abdicate responsibility or in other cases have forced men away from their families through unjust policies and slavery. Sin has led people to have sexual relationships outside of the covenant of marriage designed by God and this has resulted

1. <https://fathers.com/the-consequences-of-fatherlessness/> <https://americafirstpolicy.com/latest/20220215-fatherlessness-and-its-effects-on-american-society>

2. John 8v44

in unwanted children through financial pressure or simple selfishness where children are hindrances to careers and fun experiences.

Before we start pointing fingers, the truth is that we are all complicit in sin, whether it results in other people's loneliness and rejection, or manifests in some other form. Our lack of relationship to God because of sin means that we are "*sons of disobedience*" and "*children of wrath*" as Paul aptly describes us. We are those who do not live according to God the Father's wishes and consequently are under his wrath.

In addition to this, there is another unfortunate side effect of sin's manifestation in father issues. Trevin Wax eloquently states that "*due to fickle fathers and distant dads, our culture's view of God has been massively affected by the failures of our fathers.*"³ If the God of the universe has revealed himself as a Father, we cannot help but project onto him all the shortcomings of earthly dads and this causes us to not want to reach out to him, treasure him or trust him. The very hope we need is often veiled in confusion which is caused by the very problem that we need solved - separation from a heavenly father due to sin.

As we look back on our lives and across the global landscape, it is worth considering the notion that all the pain is actually the deeper cry of a world who is longing for a good father whom they do not know. At the cross, Jesus made possible for us the benefit of adoption as children of God.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *What is/was your relationship with your earthly father like?*
2. *How has this affected your view of God as a father as well as your own self identity?*

3. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/fatherlessness-and-the-father-who-never-fails/>

Prodigal God - The Father's Heart / The Son's Work



LUKE 15V20

And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

Jesus' parable of the prodigal son is a fascinating story that reveals the pain we have caused God, the foolishness and trajectory of sin, as well as the hardening effect that religious pride can have on us. But for our purposes, it also wonderfully reminds us of the tender and compassionate heart of God.

In the story, a son prematurely asks his father for his inheritance. It's both a declaration of independence from the loving care of his father as well as an underhanded way of saying "I wish you were dead", as inheritances were only paid out upon the death of the father. The father agrees to his wishes and he heads off to live his life on his own terms. Tragically he blows the whole thing on a life of debauchery and reckless living and he ends up living in a pigsty. At this low point, he comes to his senses and decides to return to his father intending to beg him to hire him as a servant, but his father's love for him is more deep and wide than he could possibly imagine. Before he gets a word out, the father embraces him, clothes him in the finest items and kicks off a celebration.

The God of the Bible, revealed in Jesus, has compassion on sinners and sufferers. He is not disinterested and callous towards our plight. Sometimes we can incorrectly picture God relishing in the foolish decisions we make as he longingly waits for a gap to say to us "I told you so". Rather, he is a God who "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth".⁴

Throughout the Old Testament, the father-heart of God is revealed again and again. The Psalmist reminds us that just "as a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him".⁵ In Psalm 68v5 we are told that God is "a father to the fatherless", causing us to remember how he cares about the pain and suffering that sin causes in our world. He has a special place in his heart for the vulnerable in our midst.

As we have mentioned yesterday, sin has essentially orphaned us from God. It has separated us relationally and caused us to be self-sufficient people who do not honour God as father. Out of his compassion and love, God sent Jesus to deal with our sin so that we could not simply be called servants of God, but children of God. Paul tells us in Galatians 4v4-5 that "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."

4. 1 Timothy 2v4
5. Psalm 103v13

At the end of Mark's gospel, Jesus' final words on the cross were "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?".⁶ Poetically, Jesus was forsaken by the father so that you and I could be adopted by him.

At the beginning of John's biography of Jesus, he tells us that "all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God".⁷ Through faith in Christ we have a right to be God's children. God legally cannot help but adopt you and call you his own. Our adoption papers are signed the moment we believe in Jesus. Our status changes from orphan to son or daughter. It is an immense privilege to have our sins not counted against us and to be welcomed home by a God whom we have all rejected and run away from, and God is overjoyed to do it. Like John says in his letter, "see what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are".⁸

Through faith in Christ we become children of God and "if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him".⁹ This is scandalous - that rebels like us can become co-heirs with Christ in the kingdom of our father. We are destined to reign with Christ as princes and princesses and whatever belongs to God the Father and Jesus the son also belongs to us. Even suffering must be viewed through the lens of God's fatherly heart towards us. Everything we face in life is father-filtered. He is working all things, including trials, to shape us into children of stature and glory. We must heed the words of the Proverbs when they tell us to "not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproofs him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights."¹⁰

Let's end by reflecting on the lyrics from Stuart Townsend who wrote:

*"How deep the father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure,
that He should give his only Son to make a wretch his treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss, the Father turns his face away,
as wounds which mar the chosen one, bring many sons to glory".*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Look up the definition of the word *prodigal* and consider why it's an appropriate description of both the son and the father in Jesus' parable.
2. How should this affect the way you relate to God and how you approach God?

6. Mark 15v34
7. John 1v10-13
8. 1 John 3v1

9. Romans 8v17
10. Proverbs 3v11-12

Who's Your Daddy? - The Identity of Our Father



EXODUS 34V6-8

Yahweh passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped.

Identity is not simply about who we are, but about whose we are. We can identify ourselves as any number of things, true and false, but one crucial part of human identity is found beyond ourselves - in our social location. Sometimes these identities are embraced and other times they are rejected in pursuit of self-autonomy and a desire to define ourselves.

Our culture is dominated by talk of self-determination and self-identity where we put our energy and resources to achieve an identity and portray it to the world around us. We do this with clothing, surgery, social media etc... and over the course of a lifetime, or perhaps even just a few months, we might reinvent ourselves several times. One of the beautiful, freeing things about the gospel of Jesus is that in it, we do not need to consistently try to achieve an identity, but rather, through faith in Christ we get to receive an identity.

No matter who you are, part of your identity is determined by who your earthly father is. If you never knew your father and were raised by a single mother, that has shaped you in a certain way. If your father died, that will shape you in a way that is different than if he had cheated on your mom and abandoned you. If your father is a humble fisherman in a small town, your life at primary school might be very different to the kid whose father is the headmaster. If your father is a pastor in Mexico, you will perhaps carry yourself differently to the person whose father is the US President and is given permission to sit on his desk in the Oval Office.

No matter who our earthly father is or was, our identity as children of God completely supercedes that. It's hugely important therefore as children of God, for us know to the core of our being who our heavenly father is. This will change the way we see ourselves, how we carry ourselves in the world and how we relate to others. To do this, let's briefly reflect on a few of the names given to God in the Old Testament and let them colour in our sense of identity as children of this God.

YAHWEH

Translated in most English Bibles as "LORD" (all capitals), it is the only true proper name for God. The rest are all descriptions of him. The revelation of this name was given to Moses as "*I am who I am*", and speaks of the self-sustaining freedom of God. He will be who he will be. He decides right and wrong and everything finds it fit in relation to him.

EL SHADDAI

Translated in most English Bibles as “God Almighty” it calls us to recognize God’s ultimate power in the universe. Nothing is above him and nothing is stronger than him.

YAHWEH-JIREH

Translated in most English Bibles as “The Lord Will Provide” from Genesis 22v14. It reminds us that God is our ultimate provider in life and specifically he is the one who has provided Jesus to suffer and die in our place.

YAHWEH-SABAOTH

Translated in most English Bibles as “The Lord of Hosts” often referring to the hordes of angels who serve him. The name portrays God as the captain of the armies of heaven and expresses his majesty, power, and authority. He is able to accomplish what he determines to do and can call upon legions of supernatural beings to do his bidding.

EL-OLAM

Translated in most English Bibles as the “Everlasting God”. God is without beginning or end and contains within himself the very cause of time itself. The opening lyrics of Hillsong United’s album *Empires* capture this awe inspiring truth appropriately:

*“Skies spin their dance within Your breath.
Time runs its race within Your hand.
My mind runs wild to comprehend.
What no mind on earth could understand.”¹¹*

The God who calls us his children, is the creator and sustainer of the universe. He is sovereignly in charge and nothing can thwart his ultimate intentions. He does not change and is a stable person to turn to. He is all knowing and all powerful and is the wisest person to lean on. He is good, kind and compassionate and is always willing to listen. No matter what we face in life, nothing can change the fact that this is our Father who loves us infinitely.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Can you think of other names or attributes of God?*
2. *How should these shape the way we think about ourselves?*
3. *Which attribute of our Father do you most need to consider in your life right now?*

11. Hillsong United. Song: Here Now (Madness), 2015.

Not Left as Orphans - The Spirit of Adoption



GALATIANS 4V6-7

Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

Relating to God as our Father throughout the course of our life is one of the privileges of our adoption. Wayne Grudem reminds us that it *"is the foundation of many other blessings of the Christian life, and it becomes the primary way in which we relate to God. Certainly it is true that God is our Creator, our judge, our Lord and Master, our teacher, our provider and protector, and the one who by his providential care sustains our existence. But the role that is most intimate, and the role that conveys the highest privileges of fellowship with God for eternity, is his role as our heavenly Father."*¹²

We primarily relate to God through the third person of the Trinity, The Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of Christ. In John 14v16-18, Jesus was preparing his disciples for his earthly departure on the other side of his death and resurrection and we read the following: *"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."*

God takes up residence in our hearts by indwelling us with his Holy Spirit the moment we trust in Jesus. This is not merely intended to be a secret hideout for him that means nothing for our day to day living. Although there is an initial event, the Holy Spirit lives in us to foster our relationship to God. What we need to remind ourselves often is that because of this reality, you and I are never alone. God is always with us, closer than our own breath. He is available any time. He desires to draw alongside us and walk with us through the ups and down of life.

Additionally, God gives us an internal witness from the Holy Spirit that causes us to cry out to God as our father. Paul writes in Romans 8v15-17 that *"you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God"*.

It is hard to argue that this is anything other than an experience in the depths of our being where the Spirit testifies to our hearts the reality of our adoption. The Holy Spirit has been sent by the Father to assure us of his love and our status in his eyes, and although many times this will happen in his spontaneous timing and vary in intensity, we are invited to seek experiences of this Spirit of adoption. In Luke's gospel, Jesus asks his disciples *"What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for*

12. Grudem, W. Systematic Theology pg 739

an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"¹³ Jesus seems to be speaking of an active prayer, not to receive the indwelling of the Spirit for the first time, but for subsequent experiences of him.

God wants us to consciously know his love for us and be able to be so fully convinced of our identity as children that we never doubt who we are in him. This is intended to secure us, but also to propel us forward into the purposes of God in our generation. Listen to the experience of nineteenth century Chicago preacher DL Moody who describes what happened to him one day walking down the street in New York City. He writes, *"I cannot describe it, I seldom refer to it, it is almost too sacred an experience to name... I can only say God revealed Himself to me, and I had such an experience of His love that I had to ask Him to stay His hand. I went to preaching again. The sermons were not different; I did not present any new truths; and yet hundreds were converted. I would not now be placed back where I was before that blessed experience if you should give me all the world; it would be as small dust in the balance"*.¹⁴

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Do you sense the Holy Spirit within you bearing witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?*
2. *Can you describe what that sense is like?*
3. *How often do you seek experiences of God's Spirit asking him to fill you with his love and power?*

13. Luke 11v11-13

14. Willard, D. Hearing God pg 49.

The Church - Adopted into a Family



EPHESIANS 2V19

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

What is the church? How you answer this question may determine how you interact with the church. Biblically speaking the church is not a building on the corner of a street, nor a business that churns out goods and services, nor an event that you can attend. The church is a people, the people of God. The Greek word for church or congregation, *ekklēsia*, literally means “*the gathering of those summoned*”.

The Scriptures have many metaphors when it comes to describing the church and trying to convey something of its essence. It is spoken of as a body, with Christ as the head and the rest of us as functioning members.¹⁵ It is also spoken of as a bride, with Christ as the groom.¹⁶ It is spoken of as a building, a spiritual temple where each individual member is a living stone and Jesus Christ is the cornerstone.¹⁷

The predominant metaphor for the church across the New Testament however is surely that of a family or household. It is so pervasive and taken for granted that it is easy to miss. Those of us with faith in Jesus are predominantly called brothers and sisters.¹⁸ When we are adopted by God we are added to a family, so not only do we get God as our father but we also get siblings. What should we do with this?

Firstly, we should recognize that unlike friendships, we don’t get to choose all our family members. A local church (that the Bible assumes you’re a part of) is filled with all sorts of people, many of whom are not like you. Sometimes the reality is you may not like your spiritual brother, much like you may not always like your biological brother, but you are called to love him like Jesus loves him. This can be uncomfortable, but so was the cross for Jesus.

Secondly we should treat our spiritual family members in appropriate ways. Paul is getting at this when he charges Timothy to “*not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity*”.¹⁹

Thirdly we should prioritise them. Paul tells us that “*as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith*.”²⁰ We are certainly those who are called to care for and be charitable to those who do not know and love Jesus, but we are called to have a special priority on those who call us brothers and sisters.

15. Ephesians 1, Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 12,
16. Ephesians 5, Revelation 19
17. Ephesians 2, 1 Peter 2

18. 1 Corinthians 1v10, Romans 1v13, James 2v15
19. 1 Timothy 5v1
20. Galatians 6v10

There is meant to be an amazing sense of togetherness, where genuine brothers and sisters needs are met because the community is of one heart and mind and happy to share their possessions and take care of one another.

On that note, the phrase “*one another*” is again one of the most pervasive throughout the teachings of Jesus and the writings of the apostles. For example, Paul calls us to “*love one another with brotherly affection*”²¹ and the writer to the Hebrews asks us to “*consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*”.²² Like any well functioning family, prioritising each other looks like committing to spend time together. Controversially Jesus says our spiritual family is in some senses a priority over our biological family. When Jesus was told that his mother and brothers were looking for him he “[stretched] out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’”.²³ The blood of Jesus shed for us runs thick in our veins.

Being a member of a family is not simply about finding companionship but about being a functional member of a community. These are two very different things. We are to be those who are known, loved and served, but are also called to be those who know others, love others and serve others. It is important to remember that in our day and in our culture there are plenty of church communities you could elect to be a part of. Sadly, because of this abundance, lots of Christians never land in one and don’t participate in God’s vision.

We would do well to remember those in times gone by and those in places around the world today, who because of persecution have had to flee their biological family and even their homelands when they place their faith in Jesus. They don’t get the privilege of selecting a church for its size, its songs or its services, but they do get the privilege of God’s compensating grace when they are with the people of God in community and experience the promises of Jesus who said “*Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life*”.²⁴

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Are you a committed member of a local church community? If not, what has been stopping you?*
2. *If you are, think of the people who are members of your church. Has today helped you think of them more as your brothers and sisters (or fathers and mothers)?*

21. Romans 12v10

22. Hebrews 10v24-25

23. Matthew 12v49-50

24. Mark 10v29-31

Kingdom Come - A Prayer to the Father

**MATTHEW 6V9-13**

Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Jesus taught us how to pray to our heavenly father in what has become known as "the Lord's Prayer". It is familiar to anyone with a vague understanding of Christianity due to our cultural heritage, but is often heard repeated like a magical incantation to ward off bad things. Rather, it is a model for the type of prayers one should be praying to God. No doubt one could pray it word-for-word with their heart engaged but more often than not it is advised to use it as a structure, a springboard and a script that can be expanded upon, fleshed out and communicated to the Father. Today, we will provide a rough example of this, pulling on the threads of this week's reflections. You are invited to read and pray along.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Father - it is a privilege to call you that. Thank you for your grace and kindness to rebels like us. Thank you that as Paul says in Ephesians 1, you predestined us for adoption to yourself through Jesus Christ. At the cost of your firstborn son we were able to be brought home. It's our heart's desire that you be made much of in our lives and in the world around us. The world needs to know and experience the glory of your name - the glory of a God who created everything, sustains everything and at great cost to himself has provided a way of reconciliation. You are a great God - a father to fatherless and a defender of orphans and widows.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus said he is building his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. As members of the church, the family of God, we ask you to continue spreading your kingdom over this earth. Let your rule and reign be made manifest through your people. James told us that religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. Remind us of these things. Remind us of all the ways you've called us to be conduits of your grace in this world. As we think of our adoption by you, remind us of the fact that Jesus our saviour was adopted by Joseph and should you so lead us, we too are open to playing our part in your kingdom coming in the lives of physical orphans. Let mercy and justice flow like a river and let every knee bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

You are “*Yahweh-Jireh*” - the God who provides. You did not withhold your only son to provide for our salvation and so today we ask you gracious father to provide for our needs. You are a good God and so we ask for our basic needs, not only material but also spiritual. Man does not live on bread alone but by every word that proceeds from your mouth. Fill us with your spirit anew, the spirit of adoption that causes us to cry out “*Abba Father*”. We long for a fresh touch of your love. We also ask you to forgive us for any sins we have committed. We do not ask this from a motivation to be accepted by you and brought into your family, but as your children we ask this of you because we want to please you and have untainted fellowship with you. Remind us right now of anyone we have not forgiven and help us to forgive them no matter what the transgression, because no matter what our transgressions were, you forgave them. Help us love the brothers and sisters you have given us with the warm affections they deserve.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Lastly, help us to be imitators of you as beloved children²⁵ and work in us to be obedient to our father, and not conformed to the passions of our former ignorance.²⁶ Steer us clear from the father of lies and draw us close to you, the Father of lights who gives us all good things from above.

We love you. We trust you. We need you.

We are grateful to be your children. Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Is it easy for you to address God as your father in prayer or do you default to some other word or title?*
2. *How does the notion of you being a deeply loved child affect the way you pray and the types of prayers that you pray?*
3. *Is there someone you need to forgive? Ask God to help you do this.*



CONFESSION:

I am no longer a slave to Satan, sin and death, nor am I a slave to fear such things. I have been ransomed by the precious blood of Jesus and have been redeemed so I may worship the Lord my God with all of my life as I wait in hope for the end of this age and the resurrection of the dead.

A decorative graphic featuring a central horizontal banner with a pointed left and right end. The banner is outlined in gold and contains the text "WEEK FOUR" in white, uppercase, sans-serif font. Above and below the banner are two sets of radiating lines, also in gold, consisting of several short, parallel lines of varying lengths that fan out from a central point. Small gold diamonds are positioned at the top and bottom center of the banner.

WEEK FOUR

Reflections on Redemption

Slavery to Satan, Sin and Death - Our Desperate Plight



JOHN 8V34

Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin

Moving on from the imagery of a judge in a courtroom making legal declarations over us and the imagery of orphans being adopted into a family, this week our imagery shifts to the market-place. We are now reflecting on the cross with business transaction language, specifically, more often than not, linked with the practice of slavery.

John Stott writes that *“at its most basic to ‘redeem’ is to buy or buy back whether as a purchase or a ransom. Inevitably, then, the emphasis of the redemption image is on our sorry state - indeed our captivity - in sin which made an act of divine rescue necessary”*.¹ Human beings are in a desperate plight apart from God. We are in bondage and slavery to sin, false gods and the problem of death in the age we find ourselves living in. Christ’s atoning death on the cross is portrayed as the redemption or ransom price that was paid by him, in order for people to be liberated from slavery and come into his possession.

Let’s briefly consider the human plight of captivity and its effect on our lives. Jesus and the Apostle Paul tell us that apart from being united to Christ by faith, humanity are slaves to sin and all its consequences. To be a slave to anything means to be submissive to that thing. The thing you are enslaved to is your master whom you serve.

The original sin in the garden of Eden brought about a holistic captivity of the human race. In Romans 5v12 Paul writes that *“just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned”*. Being a slave to sin, means you are also a slave to death. You cannot escape its clutches. The shadow of your ultimate bodily death hangs over your whole life. Sadly, even on the day when a husband and wife make promises to each other at a wedding ceremony, it is done with the realisation that at the end of the day, this marriage will end in death. One of them will go first and they will part ways. The writer to the Hebrews says that in our sinful state *“through the fear of death [we are] subject to lifelong slavery”*.² The avenues of death always surround us - accidents are around the corner and sickness is always lurking whether it’s simply a bad cold or the diagnosis of cancer. We are unable to escape. We are slaves who are captive in this corrupt creation and these decaying bodies are at the mercy of airborne viruses and earthquakes.

Apart from Christ, we are also captive to the forces of evil. We are all sinners because we have believed the same lies of Satan that Adam and Eve first believed - that God is not good. Instead of trusting God we then trust the lies of this very real spiritual enemy. Some may push back on the notion of the devil as something quite quaint but in fact he is highly sophisticated - he enslaves you and you don’t even know it. To quote Keyser Soze from the

1. Stott, J. The Cross of Christ pg. 175

2. Hebrews2v15

film *The Usual Suspects*, “*the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he doesn’t exist*”. In our sinful state, we are held “*captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ*”.³ All of us have inherited futile ways from our forefathers the Bible tells us.⁴ We may or may not be aware of them but these affect us daily and contribute to a sense of being unable to escape from past curses or wounds whether they are personal or cultural.

Our mental maps of meaning, and the foundational convictions that affect our emotions and guide our decisions are in fact masters that we serve unknowingly. We promote a worldview with every action we take, even if we are unconscious of the worldview we possess. In this state, without Jesus, a person cannot help but make unrighteous choices that do not honour God, and even seemingly good things are actually unrighteous because they are done in the service and love of someone or something other than God, which is why Paul can outrageously say that “*whatever does not proceed from faith is sin*”.⁵

We are under the influence of a real being named Satan, under the real power of sin, and it manifests in us making choices which further enslave us whether knowingly or unknowingly. “*The one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption*”, Paul writes, meaning that as we commit acts of sin according to our desires we receive further corrupting consequences and desires. The more we feed the dog of sin in our lives, the more it grows. This is why Jesus also said that “*everyone who sins is a slave to sin.*” This is how addiction happens and this makes sense of our experience of addiction - one of slavery. Human beings become mastered by their desires, and by things like sex or alcohol or lying, but it never stays on the same level as each practice reaps further corruption and we get entangled in a cycle of captivity which it gets harder and harder to get free from.

Fortunately, Jesus Christ, the one who served his heavenly father faithfully, gave his life on the cross as a ransom to free us from this vast captivity. Over the next few days we will reflect on various aspects of redemption, from the timeless story and pattern in the book of Exodus, to the lives we are called to live in light of our great liberation because by faith we are no longer slaves to sin, but slaves of Christ and slaves to righteousness.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Have you experienced the enslaving power of sin in your life? What was it like?*
2. *What are the current desires of your heart that are manifesting in sins or addictions?*
3. *Do you believe that the cross has the power to break these things?*

3. Colossians 2v8

4. 1 Peter 1v18

5. Romans 14v23

Echoes of Exodus - A Pattern of Redemption



EXODUS 6V6

Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.

If there is a prototypical, dominant picture or story of redemption in the Bible it would be that of the Exodus. The word exodus means “to be drawn out” and although patterns of exodus are found earlier in the book of Genesis, it is in the second book of the Bible which bears its name where we see it in its clearest portrayal. It is a foundational event in the history of God’s people that threads its way throughout the Bible. Alastair Roberts tells us that *“the exodus pattern appears with varying degrees of prominence on a great many occasions in Scripture. Like a recurring theme in a piece of music, sometimes its presence takes the form of subtle and tantalising hints, only perceived by the most alert listeners; on other occasions its presence is pronounced and highly developed.”*⁶

For those who may not be familiar, the Exodus narrative is the tale of the people of Israel in captivity in Egypt. They had gone there as an extended family and over a few centuries had grown into a nation of about two million, now living under the harsh rulership of Pharaoh as slaves. Yahweh, the God of the Bible who had promised them that their descendants would one day inhabit the far away land of Canaan and be a light to the world, reveals himself to Moses and then sends Moses to deliver a message to Pharaoh to let his people go. Ultimately Pharaoh refuses and God, through Moses, sends a series of horrific plagues upon Egypt and when Pharaoh still refuses, a final plague, the death of the firstborns is sent over the land. It would happen without partiality, but should anyone wish to escape this judgement they were to kill a lamb and paint its blood over their doorpost. Any household which had done this would then be *“passed over”* by the destroyer. Those who trusted God on this, including the Israelites and others were spared, but Pharaoh ignored God and suffered the consequence. This is ultimately what pushed him to free the Israelite slaves. This didn’t last long however and he soon changed his mind and decided to pursue them. In yet another miraculous event, the people of God (with their former slave masters on their tail) passed through the Red Sea on dry land as the waters were split in two. Once they were safely through, the pursuing forces of Pharaoh were drowned as the waters returned to their original state. Quite the story.

In this story, including the later parts where the people camp at Mount Sinai to receive the law from God, we are treated to a revelation of God’s identity like none before. God reveals himself as Yahweh (I am who I am), reveals his might and power through the miraculous events as well as his uniqueness and sovereignty over all other false gods (but real spiritual beings opposed to him). His character and nature are also revealed in the commands he

6. <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-the-exodus/>

gives to his people.

This story is then memorialised and institutionalised in Israel's calendar when they celebrate the Passover meal, remembering that they were freed from captivity by trusting God and sheltering under the blood of a lamb. Roberts also writes however, that *"the memorialisation of the exodus isn't merely backward-looking but anticipates a greater exodus yet to come. Prophets like Isaiah presented the exodus as the model for a deliverance that God would bring about for his people in the future. The exodus was a declaration of God's good purpose for his people—that they, being liberated from their enemies, might serve him without fear all the days of their lives—and each celebration of the exodus looked forward to the day when that purpose would be fully realised. The memory of the exodus was charged with hope and expectation."*

The fact that this theme occurs all throughout the scriptures reminds us of the essential unity of the Bible - that it is one story culminating in the person and work of Jesus Christ - and even the two sacraments of the Christian church given to us by Jesus, namely baptism and communion, find their origins in the exodus account.

The most important thing for our purposes today is to see how the exodus narrative and pattern provides us with a key framework in which to understand the atoning work of Christ. Jesus goes up onto a mountain and talks to Moses, back from the dead, about the exodus that he is about to achieve in Jerusalem for his future covenant people. Humanity is in slavery to powers larger than itself. Jesus is our Passover lamb whose blood is spilled so that while Satan, sin and death are being dealt a blow, we can escape to true freedom where we can worship our creator. Christ is the ultimate Moses, the ultimate lawgiver, and the day of Pentecost which commemorated the giving of the law on mount Sinai is now remembered by Christians as the day when God's Holy Spirit was given to his church. We are an exodus people whose grand narrative is one of redemption.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Have you considered how big a pattern the exodus is when it comes to describing salvation and the Christian life?*
2. *Does the (very real) imagery help you to more fully grasp the very real reality of sin and your salvation?*

Brother Jesus - Our Kinsman Redeemer

LEVITICUS 25V5

If one of your fellow Israelites becomes poor and sells some of their property, their nearest relative is to come and redeem what they have sold.



LEVITICUS 25V47-49

If a foreigner residing among you becomes rich and any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to the foreigner or to a member of the foreigner's clan, they retain the right of redemption after they have sold themselves. One of their relatives may redeem them: An uncle or a cousin or any blood relative in their clan may redeem them. Or if they prosper, they may redeem themselves.

In the genealogy of Jesus recorded in the book of Matthew we come across a man named "Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David".⁷ As written here, he was the great-grandfather of King David, an ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth and is best known for his story recorded in the Old Testament book of Ruth. In that story he is said to be Ruth's kinsman-redeemer, a term not many of us would be familiar with today.

As stipulated in several instances in the book of Leviticus, a kinsman-redeemer is a male relative who has the honour and responsibility to intervene on behalf of a relative who was in trouble or need. They are an individual who rescues their relative by paying a price themselves. This concept is related, though not identical to someone ransoming someone out of slavery, and adds an extra dimension into our reflection on the beautiful theme of redemption.

The story of Ruth is as follows. Ruth, a Moabite woman, returns with her mother-in-law Naomi to Bethlehem in Israel after having lived in Moab. Naomi's son, Ruth's husband, had passed away along with Naomi's husband and other son. So the two of them returned to Naomi's homeland in search of hope because they have been left destitute and without a male protector which was a necessity in that culture. Upon returning, Naomi sends Ruth to reap in the field of Boaz, a wealthy relative of Naomi. Through several interactions under God's providential hand, they appeal to Boaz in humility and poverty to act as their kinsman-redeemer. Boaz then willingly agrees to marry Ruth, and redeem their family situation. As mentioned, their line of descendants will eventually lead to the incarnate son of God and the ultimate kinsman-redeemer, Jesus of Nazareth, who was born in Bethlehem.

The God of the Bible, throughout the Old Testament is portrayed as Israel's great redeemer. He often speaks of the nation of Israel as his son, and thereby having a kinsman relationship with them, through which he acts as their deliverer and intervenes on behalf

7. Matthew 1v5-6

of the vulnerable and needy. Like Boaz, God is also portrayed as the great husband who pursues and redeems his bride, and all of this culminates in the New Testament revelation of Jesus, the ultimate Son of God.

The book of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus calls us brothers, as he is our redeemer who takes on our very humanity and comes to earth as one of us in order to identify with us and release us from the desperate situation we find ourselves in. Although Jesus is God in the flesh, he *“did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”*.⁸ As he said of himself *“the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”*.⁹

The price our kinsman-redeemer paid could not be higher. He wins our release from captivity and destitution at the hands of the slave master of sin by laying down his life and receiving the judgement for sin on our behalf. Far greater than any price Boaz would have paid, Jesus exchanged himself so that he could redeem the church as his bride and display his loving-kindness towards us forever. Much like in a temporary, earthly marriage where the husband and the wife belong to each other, those who have trusted in Jesus are not their own. We are his bride, the church which *“[God] obtained with his own blood”*.¹⁰

Praise Jesus who took on our frailty by becoming one of our brothers and then giving his blood in order to pay our debt before God and to release us from spiritual poverty and slavery! As the church, we can rejoice together in this truth as redeemed siblings.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Is this notion of a kinsman redeemer new to you?*
2. *In what way does it colour in your understanding of Jesus and what is your initial response to this?*

Free to Worship - Liberation from Satan and Sin



EXODUS 8V1

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord, "Let my people go, that they may serve me."

One of the biggest mistakes our modern culture can make is in its definition of freedom. More often than not, freedom is thought of and portrayed as the freedom to whatever I want, whenever I please without any restraints. Depending on the topic, it may come with a caveat that says "as long as it's not hurting anybody else", but this clause is applied inconsistently and still assumes true freedom is generally found by acting on your desires. In actual fact we are said to be enslaved to culture and other people's opinions and expectations if we do not act on our desires.

From a more Marxist perspective, one might believe they are not truly free until they have power in their society and until then, they are simply a slave to those who possess cultural and social power or are in power over them in some shape or form. Despite not being identical, both of these views still land with the ultimate measurement of true freedom being the autonomous individual having highest authority over their own lives.

The story of the exodus and ultimately the story of the Bible, is about a God who redeems his people from the powers that they were previously enslaved to, not for them to serve themselves but to serve, and by doing so, worship him. Rather than being captive to 'your truth', your will and your desires; true freedom is more about being free to live according to your true identity and purpose in relation to God. This is similar to what the Greek philosophers used to call *teleology*. What they meant by this was that, for example, a good hammer is one that hammers in nails effectively rather than successfully pouring water. Conversely a glass that should be holding water to drink does not align to its *telos* when you try to use it to hammer in a nail, and it can have disastrous consequences not only for the glass itself but also for your hand.

Some have articulated this sentiment by asking the question: when is a train freest? The answer is: when it's on the tracks. A train is completely botching its purpose and not flowing freely if it's trying to drive over rocky terrain or even on a sophisticated modern highway for cars. It will struggle and it will not, in a sense, live into everything it was created for. So it is with us. We are created to worship God and until we are able to do that, we are not truly free.

Let's now briefly reflect on the idea that through faith in Jesus, we are free from what has sometimes been called The Unholy Trinity - the world, the flesh and the devil - to worship God. There is real, personal, spiritual evil - the devil and his demons, in opposition to the true God. He is the father of lies. He tells lies that appeal to our flesh - the selfish, darker

11. 1 Peter 1v18
12. Ephesians 2v2

parts of all human hearts that are in resistance to God that we then act on. As humans collectively do this, it ultimately gets entrenched and codified in what the apostle John terms “The World”. This could be described as the norms of the earthly cultures, systems, structures that are at odds with God, and that human beings like you and I grow up in and then participate in, creating a cycle. Through blindly living in *“the futile ways we have inherited from our forefathers”*,¹¹ we have actually been *“following the prince of the power of the air”*,¹² namely Satan. Acting on sinful desires is in no way true freedom, but rather it is actually an expression of the bondage that The Unholy Trinity has on us.

The glorious truth of the gospel, once received, is that we realise with stark clarity the captivity that we had formerly lived in. No doubt, these are still very real realities around us, but we are firstly aware of them in ways that we perhaps previously were not. Secondly we are free to pursue our true purpose and become our true selves as slaves of Christ, who have the very real presence and power of God dwelling inside of us.

Going back to the exodus story briefly, when God sent the ten plagues upon the Egyptians each one was targeted at a specific Egyptian deity, showing God’s power and defeat of them (another whole topic). The Israelites were freed not simply from physical slave masters, but the entire spiritual bondage that manifested in a society opposed to God.

After the exodus story, how then did the Israelites serve and worship God? The answer is, predominantly through obedience to him according to his law, that included (but was not limited to) sacrificial offerings to him. In relationship to God, and through lovingly trusting him, the people were to align their lives to his ways which were designed by him for human flourishing and joy. Although the burnt offerings to atone for sin have ultimately been fulfilled in Jesus, the free will offerings that the people made, simply out of their love for God and their desire to please him are a pattern for us today who have been freed from the ultimate captivity. Animals were sacrificed on the altar and became a pleasing aroma to God.

Similarly, in our context, Paul the Apostle appeals to us *“to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship”*. Everything is spiritual and therefore everything can be an opportunity to worship God rather than ourselves, something else, or someone else. Everyday objects like beds, dating apps, plates and Google Calendar become altars on which we make living sacrifices, either to false gods like lust, romance, gluttony and busyness or to the true God who has freed us from being slaves to those things.

According to the Bible, everyone is a worshipper, the only question is: which Lord will you worship?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Towards what or who do you devote significant amounts of your time, energy and money?*
2. *Could this be an indicator of what things still have a grip on your heart?*
3. *How does the truth about Jesus and his death empower you to change and steer clear from worshipping these alternative gods?*

Free to Hope - Liberation from Death and the Present Age

ROMANS 8V22-25

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.



GALATIANS 1V4

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

The effects of sin and its captivity are not simply limited to 'spiritual' matters of the heart, but include the entire cosmos. Human beings themselves are corrupted by sin in our thoughts and deeds as well as in our bodies. In various ways, the entire creation is corrupted and not functioning like it should since that fateful day in Eden. The hope of the gospel as expounded by Paul in his many letters is that Jesus has dealt a deadly blow to the powers that hold the world in bondage and his bodily resurrection is a guarantee for us that he will one day renew the universe. These truths have an immense impact on how we think about ourselves, what we build our identities on and what we live for in the midst of a fallen and broken world. Namely, we wait and hope for the fullness of our redemption when Christ returns and redeems our physical bodies and the material world at large.

If we live long enough, all of us realise the fragility of our physical bodies and for some, that brokenness is far more evident. Some people are born with disabilities and impairments that severely impact the way they experience life. Others have these disabilities thrust upon them through tragic circumstances. Joni Eareckson Tada was just 17 when a diving accident left her paralysed from the neck down and confined to a wheelchair. It is not uncommon for many people to have body image issues (often linked to attractiveness and self-esteem) which hold them captive to negative thoughts and emotions. Linked to this is the idea of gender dysphoria where the specific body image issue is a sense of disconnect from the biological sex of your body. Some are born with debilitating chemical depression and other neurological disorders that prevent us being the people we feel or wish we could be. If you don't tick any of the above boxes you will certainly know the frailty of our physical forms through sickness, whether our own or others, and the ultimate enemy death which will claim those you love and one day make a claim on your mortal life.

Sam Allberry helpfully reminds us that *"because we live in a created world, our bodies are a gift. But because we live in a fallen world, they might not be the gift we would have wanted."*¹³ What is hugely important for us to recognise is that in their original design and intent, our physical bodies and this material universe are good. They do form part of our identity, but are not the totality of our identity. They are part of God's eternal plan and so rather than being people who despise our bodies, treat them harshly or long to be free of them forever, we are to live physical lives in relationship with God in the hope of glorified physical resurrected bodies. God is on a journey to refine our faith through physical trials so that we would be those who persevere to the end and receive what we long for - the redemption of our bodies.

We wait in hope for that great day but also need to recognise the sovereign hand of God who is at work in all things, including physical issues. God cares about us holistically. He will restore our bodies to complete fullness but in the meantime he is training our souls and conforming our characters into the image of Christ. Joni Eareckson Tada powerfully reminds us that *"if you had never known physical pain in your life, how could you appreciate the nail scarred hands with which Jesus Christ will meet you?"*

Besides our personal bodies, we live in and experience a world that sometimes brings us to tears. This age of evil is full of events and narratives that make us long for a new world. If we take the time to consider, we will acknowledge the painful levels of lies, injustice, corruption, terrorism and slavery that surround us and when human evil seems to dissipate from time to time we are not far from an earthquake or a tsunami that provokes in us a sense of wrongness. Christians themselves throughout the ages have also faced intense persecution for their faith.

Because of Christ, we can be confident that this world does not have the final say and that despite the darkness around us and in us we have genuine hope in an age to come. We have been redeemed from this evil age and will fully experience that freedom when Jesus returns to usher in a new earth and a new age and we experience what the Hebrew scriptures call *shalom* - holistic peace and harmony in all spheres or life.

Right now we live as exiles in this world, away from our true homeland, already tasting and experiencing the freedom from evil that we once blindly indulged. But beyond that we also have a God who makes good on his promises to never leave nor forsake us and we have a saviour who has defeated Satan, sin and death in whose footsteps we will follow, through the valley of death to the mountaintop of glorious life to the full.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Have you ever considered the cosmic scale of Christ's achievement on the cross?*
2. *In what ways are you longing for this end of this present age?*
3. *How does the hope of resurrected bodies and a redeemed creation affect the way you see yourself and your life?*

Bought by Blood - Don't Waste Your Life



1 CORINTHIANS 6V20

You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

In the final moments of Steven Spielberg's classic war movie *Saving Private Ryan*, an elderly man, surrounded by his family, is standing in a military graveyard full of tombstones. After staring at a particular one, lost in thought for an extended time, he turns to his wife and in tears asks her to tell him that he has led a good life. The elderly man is James Ryan, and the grave is that of Captain John Miller, who had led a team of men to rescue Ryan when he was a young private in the Second World War. The men had been ordered to travel through the frontlines of war-torn France to free him from the horrors of the combat, and deliver him home to his mother (who in one moment had already received the notification that her three other boys had been killed). Along the way, the majority of the men sent to save Ryan lose their lives in order for him to come home. Since then, Ryan has lived his life inspired and haunted by the final words of Captain Miller to him which were "earn this", and it is this memory that prompts him to ask his wife to tell him that he had in fact lived a good life and had not squandered the life he had been given at the cost of others.

Although not a perfect analogy to a Christian's life in response to the gospel, it captures something of its essence, particularly the *cost* of our freedom - namely "*the precious blood of Christ*"¹⁴ and the motivation that gives us towards living a certain kind of life. God himself, in the flesh, the one who had never sinned - never hurt anyone, betrayed anyone or let anyone down - laid down his life so that you and I could go free. The lives we now live do not belong to us. We are not our own, because we were bought at the highest price imaginable by a new benevolent master. On one level there are very real proprietary rights that he has over us - we are his because of a transaction that has been made.

On another level though, there is a response that is birthed in us because of the character of the person who owns us and the nature of the ransom price he paid. The one who owns us is good and kind. Our master is one who is full of infinite wisdom and knows best in every circumstance. He is empathic to our frailties and patient with our shortcomings. Our owner lost his life so that we would find ours and so it is perfectly fitting and absolute right that we strive to not waste what we have been given.

Sometimes, the grace of God and the gift of new life is wrongfully taught in Christian circles as if any response and lifestyle is justified because "we are free". We incorrectly think that just because we have been redeemed from the Mosaic law we are freed from righteous living and morality in the sight of God, but this is not so. We have been freed from earning salvation by self-righteous attempts at keeping God's Old Covenant Law (the letter to the Galatians is all about this), but as previously mentioned we are not free to keep on sinning,

14. 1 Peter 1v19

but are rather free from sin in order to please God. Paul's summons to us to glorify God in our bodies is a plea to recognise the magnitude of what you have been given and at what cost it came. His reminder that we are bought with a price is in the context of him pleading with the first century Corinthian church to flee from sexual sin - an extremely practical example. This is the same sentiment that led him to write to Titus, reminding him that Jesus Christ *"gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works."*

The New Testament often reminds us that we are slaves of Christ and as we go about living as people free from Satan, sin and death, *"we make it our aim to please him"*¹⁵ in everything that we do because how can we neglect such a monumental redemption?

We are those who will one day join the song from Revelation 5 where they sing *"worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."*¹⁶

Fittingly, let us conclude these reflections on redemption with the doxology from the apostle John where he writes *"To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."*¹⁷

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Have you ever grappled with what should motivate your obedience towards Christ?*
2. *If you knew that someone you love had died in order to allow someone else to live, what would be your hopes and expectations for that person?*
3. *How does this make you reflect on your own life, in light of Christ's sacrificial death for you?*



CONFESSION:

By the blood of Christ, my sins have been washed away. I am not defiled, but am clean in the sight of God who has made me new. I am not defined by who I once was, or what I once did, and neither am I defined by what has been done to me. Like my saviour I can despise the shame that has been imposed on me as I look forward to the joyous union of Christ and his people on the great day of his return.

A decorative graphic centered on the page. It features a central horizontal banner with a gold outline and a white background. The banner has pointed ends and is flanked by two small gold diamonds. Above and below the banner are two sets of radiating lines, each consisting of a central vertical line and several shorter lines branching out at an angle, resembling a sunburst or starburst. The lines are gold in color.

WEEK FIVE

Reflections on Expiation

Shame and Shamelessness - An Effect of Sinning



GENESIS 3V10

And [Adam] said [to God], "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."

Expiation - our final big word. In summary, when we speak about expiation we are talking about the removal of guilt and shame, and a sense of being dirty. The picture language that is used in this metaphor for the work of Jesus in our lives is one of cleansing or being washed clean with water.

Human beings were made by God for unashamed joy in his presence. This is also the ultimate goal to which he is restoring those who have placed their faith in Jesus. God's intent is that his people would dwell in an intimate relationship with him where they are fully known and fully loved and feel no need to hide themselves in shame from the face of their creator.

Upon the entrance of sin into the world through Adam however, shame is a very real experience that we face. The first thing that Adam and Eve do is hide from God when they realise they are naked and feel ashamed for the first time. It is a picture of innocence that has been lost. Sin does this to us. Acts of sin stain our souls creating a sense of uncleanness or filthiness. Over and over again the scriptures speak of this idea¹, often using the word defilement.² This defilement produces feelings of shame.

Intuitively we understand this idea when we hear people speak of "*feeling dirty*" because of what they have done. This can even go so deep as to become a part of one's core identity when someone starts to talk of themselves as "*a dirty girl*" for example. Any and all sin makes us unclean in the sight of God, but it also seems that indulging in occult practices, acts of violence and sexual sin seem to have a particular subjective effect on the human spirit. In Leviticus 19v31 we read God saying, "*Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them: I am the Lord your God.*" Jesus said "*What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.*"³

At this point then, one might assume that any and all experiences of shame are bad, but this is not the case. The fact that we feel ashamed when we sin is actually natural and healthy because it is like a warning light alerting us to an issue. Shame is a complex package. It includes the fear of being found out or being rejected when someone knows who you really are, but all of this shows an awareness that we have participated in something that is morally wrong and defiling to our soul. It is a possible provocation to seek cleansing in some shape or form.

1. Psalm 106v39
2. Lamentations 4v14
3. Mark 7v20-23

If this provocation is not acted upon however, there is a reverse effect. Instead of our sense of shame leading us towards cleansing, it can lead us into further hiding and further indulgence of what made us dirty in the first place. Shame for our actions is replaced with shamelessness - a state of being where our consciences become numb and we feel no sense of remorse for what we are participating in. This hardens our hearts towards God and leads us to pursue more and more types of rebellion and defilement. This is true of both individuals and cultures.⁴ This is often expressed in excessive sensuality and lewdness⁵ as well as ever increasing sexual perversion.

Something of this is also seen in cases of demon possession, where no shame is expressed regarding ones nudity.⁶ The portrayal of the possessed man in Luke 8 gives us a sense of someone who had lost a piece of their humanity, including their dignity. He seems more like an animal than someone who is gloriously created in the image of God.⁷

The good news of Christ is that cleansing is available. Dirty sinners can be washed clean. The prophet Zechariah looks forward to Jesus' time when he writes, *"on that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness."* Jesus has died on our behalf in order to cleanse us from our sin. Through faith in Christ, you are no longer seen by God as one who is defiled by your sin. This is the idea that we will continue to explore over this final week in order for us to experience this washing, and be people who are defined by what he has done for us, rather than what we have done in the past. Tomorrow we will look at the crucial idea that it is not only our own sin that causes us to be defiled and experience shame, but also sins that others have committed against us.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Can you resonate with the ideas of defilement and shame that our own sin can cause us to feel?*
2. *What ways have you tried to remove your feelings of shame in the past?*

4. Romans 1v24-32

5. Mark 7v22, 1 Peter 4v3

6. Luke 8v27

7. The topic of Jesus' defeat of demons will be covered in a later volume

Shame - An Effect of Being Sinned Against



GENESIS 34V5

Now Jacob heard that [Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite] had defiled his daughter Dinah. But his sons were with his livestock in the field, so Jacob held his peace until they came.

The good news of Jesus is perhaps even better than at first sight. One of the glorious realities of Christ's work on the cross is that it not only deals with sins we have committed, but that it also deals with the sins that have been committed against us. Although we are held responsible for our own sins and are not victims of it, we can certainly be victims of other people's sinful actions.

Not only does our own sin have the effect of defiling us, but so too does the sin of others. Once again, the most glaring example of this is in the case of sexual abuse and rape. A person's body and soul are a sacred thing, created in the image of God. When a person is violated there is almost universally a sense of deep shame and defilement. Although the victim has committed no sin, they feel dirty and often guilty for no justifiable reason. This sense of being unclean is acutely apparent when many victims of rape and abuse have felt the need to take a shower afterwards.

Sadly, this loss of innocence is usually just the beginning of multiple repercussions. Just like our own sin impacts our own lives and the lives of those around us, so too can the effects of shame and defilement caused by others. One of the tragic consequences is that it forms false identities. These are not necessarily true reflections of who we are, but take on a sense of reality as they are internalised. They are lies that we then begin to live out, either consciously or unconsciously. There are many people who have lived extremely promiscuous or sexually perverted lives, and when questioned as to why they do it, they feel as if it is who they are. *"I am a dirty person and dirty people do dirty things"*, is not an uncommon phrase. Often the root cause of this identity is sexual abuse in their earlier years, perhaps even childhood. Sadly, many rapists and abusers themselves have been the victims of abuse when they were younger and this identity has led to the sins they now commit against others.

Another false identity that also emerges, particularly when Christians are trapped in the shame of abuse, is that they predominantly identify as a victim. This can then spill over into all areas of their lives and instead of living the free and victorious life that Christ has on offer, they begin to believe they are powerless in all spheres of life. This has extremely negative effects on their mental and emotional health, severely impacting their relationships and vocations.

The final tragic effect of being sinned against is the birth of bitterness in one's life. The writer to the Hebrews urges Christians to *"see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled."*⁸ Bitterness is an obvious and often inevitable response from those of us who have been victims of sin. Bitterness is essentially a hardening of the heart towards the person or group that we see as responsible for our situation. It is an effect of unforgiveness. The reason it is problematic is because once again it has profound effects on our emotional, mental and physical wellbeing. When unforgiveness leads to bitterness, it defiles others through relational tensions, a need to take vengeance and gives us negative tunnel vision that can make us unpleasant people to be around.

False identities and bitterness must be dealt with. They must be cut off at the root. This is why Jesus died for us. Through the tremendous act of the cross, we as Christ-followers have an identity far higher than that of victims. We are truly *"more than conquerors"*,⁹ in whom the power and penalty of sin has been broken. We are not who we once were. By the blood of Jesus, we are washed clean of our pasts and have been given a new beginning. Additionally, as hard as it is, we are called to forgive others, even those who have profoundly sinned against us.

Consider the following interaction between Peter and Jesus in Matthew 18v21-22: *"Then Peter came up and said to him, 'Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.'" This is a profoundly counter cultural thing to do, but it is necessary for the sake of our own souls. We are to remember the price at which Christ has forgiven us as sinners and let this grace extend to those who have sinned against us. This does not mean that victims who have forgiven their abusers need to have close and intimate relationships with them. Boundaries may still need to be put in place depending on the situation because the call to forgive is not a foolish call to forget and repeat the cycle of abuse.*

We will continue to explore how each of us can deal with our shame whether it be from our own sin or the sins of others, but let's end today's reflection with the wise words of Nelson Mandela who said, *"resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies. Forgiveness liberates the soul, it removes fear. That's why it's such a powerful weapon."*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Are you carrying any shame or sense of defilement due to other people's sins?*
2. *What have you been doing to try and remove it?*
3. *What false identities are you perhaps living out of?*
4. *Is there any unforgiveness in your heart towards someone that may cause bitterness to grow in your life?*

The Washing and the Goat - Understanding Those Old Laws



LEVITICUS 11V24

And by these you shall become unclean. Whoever touches their carcass shall be unclean until the evening.

LEVITICUS 15V18

If a man lies with a woman and has an emission of semen, both of them shall bathe themselves in water and be unclean until the evening.

What is a modern person meant to make of all these cleanliness laws in the Old Testament? To help us further understand Christ's atoning sacrifice as something that provides cleansing for sin and shame it's worth having a brief look.

The first thing to say is that the "purity laws" in the Torah were not about sin. They were about ritual uncleanness before Yahweh and were not moral issues as they were part of the Israelite ceremonial laws that have been fulfilled in Christ. The next logical questions are then: why were they there, what do they mean for us, and how were they fulfilled in Jesus?

The Mosaic Law was given to the people of Israel in their epoch in history as a sort of preschool teacher that would serve them during that time in their life and help guide them towards maturity and the arrival of Christ.¹⁰ Picture a toddler learning to write their letters using those giant guidelines. Those guidelines eventually fulfil their purpose, but are helpful at the time. Peter Leithart tells us that *"in particular, the purity laws of the Old Testament developed certain instincts in Israel toward life, God, and the world. In refraining from blood, the truth that life belongs to God and should be returned to him was worked into the bones of faithful Israelites. Purity laws were the protocols for both entering Yahweh's presence and also addressing him. Through Torah, Israel was being trained to receive the coming King."*¹¹ Although these are not moral laws they were to give the Israelites a tangible, experiential understanding of the purity and holiness of God.

People became unclean and defiled through contact with numerous things. Menstruation, semen, mould, skin diseases and dead bodies were all linked to death, or the fact that the ability to give life had gone. It was not sinful, but was a symbolic picture that you were marked by death and this could be transferred like an infection through touch. Being unclean excluded someone from participating in the corporate worship rhythms. One needed to wash and allow time to pass before being deemed clean again. This may all sound strange or antiquated to us, but even in our western world, behaviour is still shaped by a visceral fear of pollution. Consider the notion of taking your food to the bathroom and eating it in there. We recoil at the notion because we have been trained to do so. We believe it's gross and will infect us in some way, but it really is a mentality, because we have no problem sticking our toothbrush into our mouth and yet that lives in the same room permanently.

Additionally what we get from these images is that in some sense, both places and objects can be defiled,^{12,13} not just people. This explains why people have burnt their beds when they found out that their spouse had cheated on them between their own sheets.

As we've said, all these laws point us forward to Christ and our need for cleansing. This is particularly evident on the Day of Atonement where the first goat was slain for sin while the second "*shall be presented alive before the LORD to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel*".¹⁴ The sins of the people were symbolically taken by the goat away from the people into the wilderness, the territory of the dead and demonic where they belong. As God told them, "*you shall be clean before the Lord from all your sins*".¹⁵ The same is true when someone places their trust in Christ - our sinful defilement is removed and cast away along with our death. "*As far as the East is from the West, so far does he remove our transgressions from us*".¹⁶

Christ's death has fulfilled the ceremonial cleansing as well as the imagery of the scapegoat, but so too have Christ's life and teachings for us who follow him. When we consider the healing accounts of Jesus he often heals lepers. This is meant to make one think of these purity laws as opposed to simply recording a specific ailment. During these stories, Jesus does the unthinkable and touches them in order to heal them, but as the author of life and the one to whom the laws point, Jesus' actions result not in him being made unclean but in them being made clean. Again, these are signs of the greatest healing Jesus would achieve on the cross.

Lastly, consider the teaching of Jesus, when he told the Pharisees that it is not what goes into a person that defiles them (unclean food), but what comes out of a person that makes them unclean (adultery, hatred, slander). Experiences of defilement exist because sins are polluting acts. Let's end with another quote from Peter Leithart who pulls a lot of these threads together when he writes, "*someone defiled by murder, adultery, and slander spreads defilement, much as a menstruous woman communicated defilement under the law. Jesus wants us to react with revulsion to murder, slander, adultery, and lust, like a Pharisee around a person who had a flow of blood or skin disease. If you're defiled by what comes from your heart, you do need cleansing—not by washing your hands, but with confession and the blood of Jesus*".¹⁷

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Have these paragraphs helped you better understand and appreciate the Old Testament "Purity Laws"?*
2. *What are your standards of purity and defilement?*
3. *Does sin, or particular sins make you recoil in disgust?*
4. *How does Jesus' movement towards those who were impure make you move towards a culture that is impure according to God's moral law?*

12. Hebrews 13v4
13. 1 Chronicles 5v1
14. Leviticus 16v10

15. Leviticus 16v30
16. Psalm 103
17. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/purity-laws/>

Baptism - A Symbol of Cleansing



ACTS 22V16

And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.

Expiation - the removal of the defilement and filth of sin in our lives. So far we have explored the objective reality of the dirtiness of sin, as well as the subjective experience of shame that arises because of it. We have also seen that the Old Testament scriptures, in particular Leviticus, provide us with imagery designed to show us the polluted nature of sin and the perfection of God. Today we will explore the ultimate symbol of faith in Jesus, namely baptism.

Baptism (which means to engulf) in water is the public, external, visible symbol that expresses a person's faith in Jesus Christ. It is so closely associated with our first response to Christ, that often in the book of Acts it is portrayed as the way in which you place your faith in Jesus.¹⁸ Rather than raising a hand or praying a prayer, baptism is meant to be the first step of obedience as a Christ follower.

Baptism represents several things. Firstly, it represents our public allegiance to Christ. Although choosing to follow Christ is a deeply personal decision, it is not a private matter. Jesus instructed us to go public with our choice.¹⁹ Baptism reflects our allegiance to the King of the Kingdom of light that we have now been transferred into.²⁰ Secondly it represents the death of our old life. Romans 6v4 says that "*we were buried with Christ in baptism*". Baptism reflects an inward decision to die to 'the old you' that rejected and ignored Christ's leadership over your life. Baptism is a break from your sinful past. Thirdly, baptism also reflects how we were united with Christ in his resurrection. We have a new life. "*If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come*".²¹

For our purposes today however, possibly the most obvious representation of being drenched in water is that of cleansing from sin. When Paul recounts his conversion in Acts 22 he specifically links the symbolism of baptism with the washing away of sins. The blood of Jesus makes atonement for us and provides us a very real, very objective cleansing of our guilt as well as a promise of subjective cleansing of our shame as a result - provided we trust in Jesus. No one who has just been baptised in water after declaring faith in Jesus should rightfully experience any feelings of shame or condemnation. Typically, most people feel a strong sense of victory, of newness and often of power in the days and weeks following their baptism.

18. Acts 2v38

19. Mark 8v38

20. Mark 16v16

21. 2 Corinthians 5v17, Galatians 3v27

It is such a beautiful image of the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus, and also of the radical work the Holy Spirit does in our hearts. Paul writes to his young protégé Titus, and says, “when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour”.²² When a person trusts in Jesus by faith, their sins are blotted out in the courts of heaven, but also a very real spiritual work happens by which the Spirit of God cleanses our souls and makes our hearts new. We become inwardly renewed, fresh and full of vitality as new creations. No matter who we were, no matter what we had done, whether it be lies, murder, sexual sin, we are no longer those people - we have been washed clean.²³ Baptism provides us with a definitive moment and public declaration of the radical power of the gospel to purify defiled souls and consciences, and to give us a clean state before a pure and Holy God.

Let’s close out today’s reflection by meditating on some of the words of the great 1865 hymn written by Elvina M. Hall:

*I hear the saviour say
Thy strength indeed is small
Child of weakness watch and pray
Find in me thine all in all*

*Lord, now indeed I find
Thy power and thine alone
Came and changed the lepers’ spots
And it melt the heart of stone*

*Jesus paid it all
All to him I owe
Sin had left a crimson stain
He washed it white as snow*

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *Have you been baptised as a believer?*
2. *If so, what do you remember about the experience? If not, what is stopping you?*

22. Titus 3v4-6

23. 1 Corinthians 6v7

Living in the Light - Experiencing Expiation



1 JOHN 1V7-9

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The power of sin is often in its secrecy. Whether we are talking about sins that we have committed or sins that have been committed against us, they can have an adverse effect on our spiritual, emotional and even physical wellbeing. Many a person has had severe physical effects due to leading hidden lives that they had to suppress.

God desires his people to walk in an experience of cleanliness, openness and freedom. The point of the cross is not just to achieve something on our behalf, but to give us a very real power in which to go about living our lives in relationship to our creator. The teaching of expiation is to enable us to live life to the full, with joy and confidence in the presence of God. The most obvious step to avoid experiencing shame due to defilement and having a bad conscience, is to partner with God, by the power of the Spirit in pursuing holiness in our lives. The teaching of Leviticus as a whole could be summed up in the call from God which was to *"be holy as I am holy"*.²⁴ Motivated by the gospel, and out of love for God, fighting and conquering sin is a surefire way to a clean conscience. But unfortunately we still sin. The Apostle John recognises this which is why he provides us with exactly what we need - a way to experience expiation. John tells us that confession is a way to experience forgiveness and a clean conscience before our heavenly father.

There is an old saying that dates back to a Scottish Proverb, *"Confession is good for the soul"*. It is true and the writers of scripture knew this. Being people who walk in the light does not mean that we never sin, but rather means we don't hide our sin in darkness. God wants us to remember that he loved us and died for us while we were still sinners and in rebellion against him. How much more we should realise now that as his adopted children we are already fully known and fully loved. Confessing our sin to God then is a way of admitting to ourselves our need for God and a fresh experience of his grace. Confessing sin as Christ-followers is not about earning God's love, or about not going to hell, but about restoring an experience of unhindered intimacy with our father. Sin defiles us and puts up walls between us and God, just like sin against another person puts strain on that relationship.

We are to confess to God, and when needed, confess to others. Often we will need to come clean with someone and bring to light the sins we have committed against them. Other times we will simply need to confess to trusted brothers and sisters in the faith with whom we can be honest. What's needed to be able to walk freely and lightly in the faith, is other Christians who can hear you, love you and pray for you.

24. Leviticus 11v44

Lastly, much like we need to confess sins that we have committed, from time to time we also need to confess sins that have been committed against us. Many of us carry deep scars and levels of shame because of abuse, but because of the complexity of the experiences and feelings we keep it hidden. Sadly, as we have already explored, this is a breeding ground for bitterness and other unsavoury emotions and thought patterns to take hold and “defile many”.²⁵ We can die in loneliness due to the silence and secrecy, but if we simply share these things, we can break its power at the root. Bringing these things out can deepen the experience of our friendship with God and with others. No doubt it will be painful, but much like Jesus going through the cross, there is resurrection life on the other side.

Walking in the light is not about walking in sinless perfection but about seeing clearly enough to know sin, to see it, to hate it and to confess it. Through the blood of Jesus then we can experience ongoing cleansing and forgiveness. This goes for our own sin, as well as those sins that have happened to us.

We are not who we were and we are not what others have done to us. We are those who have been washed by the blood of the lamb and have an opportunity for freedom lying in front of us if we would walk in the light just as Christ is in the light.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *How have you often thought about living the Christian life?*
2. *Is it as one of walking in the light or of trying harder to be better?*
3. *Do you need to confess any sins of your own? Is there anything that is causing you shame from your past that you need to bring before God and others in order to experience freedom?*

A Bride in White - The Future of the Church



REVELATION 19V7-8

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

Let's end this week, as well as this volume on the work of Christ on the cross by glancing into the future and being inspired for our lives in the present. In Revelation 19, the Apostle John gives us a glimpse of the event of the millennium - the marriage of Jesus and his church. Instead of the church being pictured as Christ's body, in this metaphor the church is viewed as the bride to Jesus' bridegroom, and the wedding is the great, glorious, intimate, celebratory union that history has been waiting for.

The church is pictured as a bride in a spotless white dress symbolising purity and virginity before her soon to be husband. To use the biblical language that we have been discussing this week, she is not defiled from polluting acts with other suitors but instead is radiant in her white linen because she has saved herself for this wonderful occasion. For some of us, the image of a bride wearing white is hard to take for personal reasons - perhaps you don't feel as if you should wear white on your wedding day. For others of us, when we consider the fact that we are part of the bride of Christ, we shrink back because we look at our lives and recognise that we have surely tainted the bride due to our own sinful lives (particularly when the fine linen is said to be our righteous deeds). John was not unaware of the reality of these things and yet this prophetic picture is captured for us to look towards. It provides us with a vision for where things are headed and the ultimate goal which is rejoicing and exulting in the glory of God.

There are two things that are worth noting. The first is that the bride makes herself ready. The church is to be preparing herself for the day that we meet Jesus face to face. There is no escaping the reality that we are called to be those who fight for purity in our lives and communities. Hebrews 12v1-3 says that *"since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."* Each of us is to be waging war on sin and its defilement of our lives by fundamentally fixing our eyes on Jesus. We are to run light and free as we live lives of endurance in this age, taking our cue from Jesus who has set the example. What is particularly striking in this verse, is that Jesus is said to have despised or scorned the shame of the cross, before passing through that torment into the joy of being seated with God. He treated the shame that was imposed on him with contempt and condemnation and because of the cleansing work of his blood so can we.

The second and last thing we should observe from Revelation 19 however is not our work, but God's. If we pay close attention to the text, we will notice that the bride may have readied herself but she was granted to wear white by another. God sovereignly and graciously has initiated our salvation, and by his Spirit is working in our lives to increasingly purify us. The righteous deeds (represented by the white dress) do not merit our acceptance by God, but are a fitting and necessary response to God's grace in our lives and evidence that we really have experienced the cleansing of our sin. It is not as if we don't sin, but we are to be those whose trajectory is away from defilement and uncleanness and towards purity.

Christ is at work in beautifying his bride and this should give us hope for the future and confidence as we work out our faith in the present. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul motivates husbands to love their wives in the same way *"as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish"*²⁶ Jesus died to cleanse us from sin and to set us apart from the defilement of the world. We are those who have been and are being washed clean by the water of the word, the gospel of Jesus, so that one day we will meet Christ without shame, as a people who are holy in his sight and ready for our eternal union with him.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *How do you reconcile the picture of the church in Revelation with your current reality?*
2. *Are you preparing the bride of Christ for her marriage day?*
3. *Does the thought of Christ working in your life make you want to lay aside every sin and run the race he has marked out for you?*

CLOSING

This devotional was authored by Kyle Peters, one of the elders of Common Ground Church Sea Point. It was created in 2023 as part of a sermon series exploring the achievements of Christ's work on the cross. Feel free to use this as a discipling resource while giving due credit to the author and follow the QR code to find other resources from this sermon series.



Special thanks to the numerous individuals who double checked concepts and proofread the material and to Cath Junor for her graphic design.

The following books were major resources in the creation of this devotional and are recommended resources for anyone wanting to further explore the cross of Jesus Christ.

The Cross of Christ by John Stott

It Is Well: Reflections on Substitutionary Atonement by Mark Dever and Michael Lawrence

Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came To Die by John Piper

Counted Righteous in Christ by John Piper

Doctrine by Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears

Death By Love by Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears

In My Place Condemned He Stood by JI Packer and Mark Dever

18 Words by JI Packer

Systematic Theology by Wayne Grudem

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