

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE CROSS

Part I

Some Images of Salvation

Reading Romans 3:19-28

In my last sermon, we looked at the necessity for the cross. We saw that we all, each and every one of us, deserved to die for our sins, that we couldn't just be let off or forgiven by God and that only a man who was without sin could pay the price that our sins deserved in our place. We learnt that only Jesus, a unique figure, who was wholly God and wholly without sin, BUT also wholly man and thus wholly identified with us could pay the price for these sins. We also learnt that God sent him, and he willingly went, to pay that price on the cross. God in Christ has borne our sins and died our death to set us free from sin and death.

Moved by the perfection of his holy love, God in Christ substituted himself in one perfect eternally effective sacrifice for us sinners. This is the heart of the cross. The cross is absolutely central to our Christian faith. A matter of fundamental interest and importance to all Christians. Against that background I want to start to look today at precisely what happened on the cross and what Jesus achieved for us on the cross in a little more detail.

It would be hard to exaggerate the magnitude of the changes which have taken place in us and in our relations with God as a result of the cross. The blessings of what Hebrews Chapter 2 and verse 3 calls "such a great salvation" are so many and so diverse that they cannot be easily or neatly defined.

The New Testament has three main themes in relation to the achievement of the cross, salvation, revelation and conquest. Because of the constraints of time I'm only going to deal with the first of these – that is salvation – today, but I hope to address the others on some later occasion.

In looking at salvation, I think there are four main biblical themes, that is images or illustrations, for us to consider – propitiation, redemption, justification and reconciliation, many of which are introduced by our reading this morning. I am going to briefly cover each of these themes. They are not alternative images, providing us with a selection to choose from, but complementary images, each contributing a part to the whole. However, we must not imagine that a few images exhaust the meaning of the doctrine, for beyond these images lies the wonder and mystery of the atonement the fullness of which lies beyond human understanding.

Let's start by considering Propitiation

That sounds like a difficult theological term, but actually its quite simple. To “propitiate” somebody means to appease or pacify his anger. Can we then say that God gets angry and if so are we really to believe that Jesus by his death induced him to turn from it and look upon us with favour instead? This sounds like primitive superstition and crude concepts of anger and propitiation are indeed to be rejected. They do not belong to Christianity. However, that does not mean that there is no biblical concept of these things at all. What is revealed to us in scripture is a pure doctrine of God's holy wrath and his loving self sacrifice in Christ to avert that wrath. Wrath and propitiation go together and when the wrath is purged of unworthy ideas then so is the propitiation. Nevertheless, many theologians have sought to eliminate the notion of propitiation and replace it with the idea of expiation or removal of our sin and guilt. However, when the words used in the original Greek and Hebrew texts are carefully considered there is no doubt that they refer to propitiation and not expiation. As we shall see in a moment there IS expiation of sin in Christ's death, BUT there is also propitiation.

Propitiation is necessary because sin arouses the wrath of God. That does not mean that God is likely to loose his temper at some trivial provocation. There is nothing capricious or arbitrary about our God. Nor is he ever spiteful or vindictive. His anger is always predictable

and measured because it is provoked by evil and by evil alone. God's anger is totally unlike our human anger.

The propitiation of the cross has none of the pagan concepts of bribing or cajoling. We cannot of ourselves persuade God to forgive us because we deserve nothing from him but judgement. No, the initiative has been taken by God himself in his sheer mercy and grace. As it says in verse 25 of our reading "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement". God's love is the source not the result of Christ's atonement. As it says in 1 John 4:10 "This is love: not that we loved God, but he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins". God does not love us because Christ died for us; Christ died for us because God loved us.

God's wrath needed to be propitiated and it was God's love which did that. God's love for us never needed to be changed, but God's relations with us, his judgement of our sins, that had to change. That was achieved through Christ's atoning sacrifice. As Karl Barth said "because it was the son of God, that is God himself, who took our place on Good Friday, the substitution could be effective and procure our reconciliation with a righteous God.."

Thus, we see that all elements of propitiation were within God. God himself in his holy wrath needed to be propitiated, God in his holy love undertook to do the propitiating and God himself in the person of the son died for the propitiation of our sins. Although we should resist the characterisation of this propitiation as expiation, the two do come together at the cross. They belong together in salvation, sin is expiated and God is propitiated.

Lets now turn to Redemption

Here the image changes from the temple to the market place. To redeem something is to buy it back. Redemption focuses on the plight of sinners from which we were ransomed by the cross. Indeed ransomed is the correct word to use here as in the ancient world this referred to the price to be paid for the release of a slave – often very

costly. In this case it was very costly indeed – Christ ransomed us with his life blood by his atoning death. As it says in Mark 10:45 “The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”. Thus, Jesus took our place. What happened to him would otherwise have happened to many. Again as it says in 1 Timothy 2:5-6 “Christ Jesus gave himself as a ransom for all men”.

Its rather like what happened when the Roman General Crassus visited the Temple in Jerusalem in 54BC in order to plunder it. The chief priest Eleazar gave him a large bar of gold worth 10,000 shekels as a ransom for all the treasures of the Temple. The gold bar served as a substitute for those treasures.

Christ redeemed us not from physical but from moral bondage. But there is more. He redeemed us from all wickedness, from all the ravages of the Fall. However, this latter we have not yet experienced, we are already redeemed from guilt and judgement, yet we wait for the day of redemption when we shall be made perfect. Meanwhile as it says in Ephesians 1:14 the Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our final redemption.

Now Christ as our redeemer has proprietary rights over what he has purchased. This Jesus’ Lordship over both the Christian church and individual Christians is directly attributable to his having bought us with his own blood. Remembrance of this should motivate each of us to holiness just as it motivates the heavenly host to worship. As it says in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 “You are not your own; you were bought at a price”.

Once we were slaves of sin, but bought by Christ we are now slaves of Christ and in his service is true freedom.

Let’s move on to consider Justification

Having left the temple and the market place, we move into the law court, for justification is the opposite of condemnation and both are

verdicts of the judge over the accused. Some scholars assert that justification is merely forgiveness. In fact, the concepts are similar, even complementary, but not identical. Forgiveness cancels our liability to punishment, but justification bestows on us an unblemished righteous standing before God.

Most of those who object to the use of the word justification do so on the grounds that it casts God in the role of judge and King rather than as Father. This might be valid if justification were the only image of salvation, but is balanced by our final image of reconciliation. In any event, Jesus himself used the term. Luke reports in 18:14 that Jesus said that the tax collector in his parable “went home justified before God”. Further Isaiah in 53:11 said of Jesus that he “will justify many, because he will bear their iniquities”.

Here we come to the necessity to accept Christ’s sacrificial death and appropriate it to ourselves. As I said when I preached on the necessity for the Cross - The world was not automatically put right because Christ died for us, nor have we automatically been forgiven. We need to appropriate his death to ourselves in order for it to be effective. We appropriate his death to ourselves through faith – faith that Christ died for each one of us on the Cross and faith that he conquered death and rose again to eternal life. Christ’s death plus this faith, this belief, justifies us before God. We become completely forgiven by him and wholly righteous before him.

But what is this justification? It is our acquittal before the court of heaven without any liability for our sins. However, when God justifies sinners, he is not declaring bad people to be good, he is pronouncing them free of any liability for the broken laws, because he himself in his son has borne the penalty of their law breaking. By sending his Son in the likeness of our sinful nature to be a sin offering, he actually condemned our sin in the human Jesus. It is only because he was condemned that we are justified.

Once we are justified, the Holy Spirit is able to enter into us and commence his work of sanctification, or making us grow in holiness. Justification happens instantaneously when we by faith appropriate

Christ's death to ourselves. Sanctification is a gradual process that will not be completed in this life. It is a regeneration, or new birth, by the inner work of the holy spirit within us.

I do want to emphasise once again here that our justification and consequent salvation are totally and utterly the result of God's grace and Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and not of any effort or work of our own. As the bible says in Titus 3:5 "he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy". I also want to emphasise that our faith is not a 'work' in this regard. Our faith has no value in itself, its value lies in its object – Christ's sacrifice.

Now, and most importantly, this justification by faith is not to be taken as a licence to go on sinning. As the apostle Paul said in Romans 6:1-3 "What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"

Justification, as we have said, is only one of the images of salvation and although indubitably necessary before other aspects such as regeneration or sanctification by the holy spirit can come into play, it is by no means the whole story of salvation. We need to look at the other images discussed this morning and indeed many other things to appreciate its fullness.

Let's move on then to Reconciliation

We are now in the home with family and friends. Certainly there has been an enmity, but to reconcile means to restore a relationship. Our original relationship with God, which was broken, has been recovered through Christ and we are reconciled to God. This is the meaning of atonement. We are made "at one" again with God. Indeed in the modern NIV translation of Romans 5:11 the word 'reconciliation' is used in place of the original KJV translation 'atonement'.

Direct access to God and adoption as his sons and heirs are amongst the benefits of reconciliation.

Having then begun by being reconciled to God, we must continue with a reconciled community in Christ – the Church. Ephesians 2:11-22 focuses on this. Here Paul reminded his gentile readers that they had formerly been excluded from citizenship of Israel and fellowship with God and focussed on a healing of the breach between Jew and Gentile, the creation of a new community of equality.

Indeed in Colossians 1:20 Paul goes even further and states that Christ has reconciled all things to God.

But let us be absolutely clear that this reconciliation is God's initiative, not ours. Wherever the verb 'to reconcile' occurs in the New Testament, God is the subject (he reconciled us to him) – or alternatively the verb is passive. God is never the object. However, the enmity for which reconciliation was needed was on both sides, in or near each major reconciliation passage of Romans 5 there is a reference to God's wrath. God is the author of our reconciliation and Christ is his instrument.

This reconciliation is now finished for all time by Christ's death. To paraphrase Luther, 'Christ became what he was not in order that we might become what we were not', or as Emil Brunner said, 'Christ takes our place and we take his'

Let's sum up then what we've covered this morning. We have looked at the four main New Testament images of salvation; from the temple - Propitiation; from the marketplace – Redemption; from the lawcourt – Justification and from the home – Reconciliation. Each highlights a different aspect of our human need and taken together they certainly expose the vastness of that need. Finally, we see that they all clearly teach that salvation was achieved through Christ's death on the cross. The death of Jesus was the atoning sacrifice because of which God averted his wrath from us, Jesus was the ransom price by which we have been redeemed, the condemnation of the innocent in order that the guilty might be justified as the sinless one was made sin for us.

Some aspects of the mystery of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross will for ever remain beyond our human understanding, but let us understand it to the fullest extent we are able, for the better we understand the glory of the divine substitution the easier it will be for us to trust the substitute – Jesus.

Let's bow our heads for a word of prayer.

Jesus we praise you and thank you that you laid down your glory and, taking our place, sacrificed yourself and became sin for us. Help us to understand the fullness of the glory of that sacrifice in order that we may completely trust in it and in you

Through Jesus Christ Our Lord