

The cross, Paul says, is the demonstration of the depth and power and invincibility of God's love for his people.

“The Cross: The Pulpit of God's Love”

Romans 8:28-34

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This is my third and last sermon on these seven verses. I have attempted not to do this: descend to the details of a particular paragraph of Paul's dense argument in his great letter for fear that this series would swallow us up and never spit us out again. But I confess that I have been defeated by Romans 8:28-34, which Martyn Lloyd Jones said is a statement “probably more packed with doctrine and comfort than any other in the whole realm of Scripture.” [195] He himself preached 36 sermons on Romans 8:17-39 and of those, 23 were devoted to vv. 28-34!

We have so far considered these verses for their teaching that all that happens in our lives, all the trials through which we must pass – and remember that is Paul's theme and has been since v. 17 – the suffering that is the experience of Christian people in this world, all is subject to the plan and purpose that God has for the eternal welfare of his people. Also we have considered the teaching of these verses that our salvation, rooted as it is in the sovereign love and good pleasure of God, is and must be secure from all possible failure. But I did not think we could move on without having given some attention to Paul's assertion that the proof of God's love and good pleasure toward his people, the proof that God has nothing but the best and most eternally happy intentions for his sons and daughters – even when they find themselves caught in the maw of this suffering and dying world – is that he “did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all.” The inference is truly irresistible: if God gave up his most precious possession for us, his own Son; if he was willing for his Son to suffer so terribly for us, if he was willing to have his heart broken for us, then surely it must be a mighty love that has been pitched upon us and surely God will not fail now to give us what else we need to secure our everlasting life. If he has already given the most that could be given, he will surely not fail to give the lesser things of which we still stand in need.

In other words, Paul says, in the midst of the trials and sorrows and difficulties of life, when we are tempted to doubt God's love and concern, we are to remember the great sacrifice God has already made for us. That is the proof that his mighty love is invincible and that no matter what appearances may be he is for us and will take us safely through. The cross is the proof of that: the proof of the greatness of God's love, the proof that God is for us. That is all that we need to know isn't it – God remains *for us* – and the cross all the proof we shall ever need. And, then, to double the proof, Paul goes on to remind us that Christ rose from the dead, is at God's right hand, and is now interceding for us. These great facts must utterly determine the view we take of the circumstances of our lives. God has already proved his mighty love for us beyond any possible diminishment; beyond any possible alteration.

The cross of Jesus Christ is fundamental to our faith for many reasons. Paul adds another here. It is the proof of God's loving heart toward us who love God and have been called to faith in his Son, Jesus Christ. It furnishes an argument we are to deploy against our own doubts and fears

and those of others. The title I gave to this sermon is taken from a remark of Augustine: “The cross was a pulpit in which Christ preached his love...” True indeed. But it is also a pulpit on which God the Father preached his love; for Christ hung on the cross for no other reason than that his Father sent him into the world to die for the sins of his people. “For *God* so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” Love is as great as the price one is willing to pay for it and God paid a price beyond our power to conceive. Not a one of us has the ghost of an idea what an infinite love is like, such a love as exists between the persons of the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is the love that God, as it were, forsook for our sakes so that we who did not deserve any such love might live forever in loving communion with God. God the Father loved us so much he was willing to abandon his beloved Son to the cruelest death for us. That price God paid, Paul says, places beyond doubt that God is for his people and will not fail to see them safely through this world to the next. The cross, Paul says, proves the power of God’s love for his people. This is not all it does, of course.

You are aware, I’m sure, that there is a longstanding argument in Christian theology as to how to explain how the cross accomplishes our salvation. There are a great many variations, of course, but they reduce to three general theories or explanations. There are theories that view the cross as having its primary effect on the hostile spiritual forces ranged against mankind, the Devil at their head. We are in bondage to those forces and on the cross the Lord Jesus went to battle to deliver us from them. On the cross and by the resurrection the Devil and his legions were overcome and those who believe in Jesus share in that triumph. How they are overcome is variously explained, but this understanding of the atonement, of the cross – often termed *Christus Victor* – has been held by many throughout Christian history.

Then, there are a variety of theories according to which the principal impact or effect of the death of Christ and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead is that impact which it has on men: by revealing God’s love to us (the “moral influence” view of the atonement), or by bringing home to us how much God hates sin (the “moral government” view), or by setting for us an example of total consecration to God, an example that we may then follow. In these views it is assumed that what men lack is proper motivation to love and serve God and the cross is designed to move us and inspire us and convince us.

Our view of the atonement, the third, as you know is that the primary effect of the cross falls not on the Devil nor on men, but on God himself. It is based on the Bible’s teaching that sinners are guilty before God, liable to be punished for their sins; that sinners stand under God’s righteous condemnation, often called his wrath in the Bible. Christ on the cross, then, bore that judgment, suffered that punishment on behalf of his people and so propitiated God – turned his righteous anger away from his people. In this view Christ on the cross offered *satisfaction* for his people’s sins, a satisfaction that God’s own character dictated as the only means by which God’s “no” toward us could be turned into a “yes.” [Packer, *What Did the Cross Achieve*, 19-21] Our view of the cross, of Christ’s atonement, is called *penal substitutionary atonement*: penal because it involves punishment and substitutionary because the punishment we deserved was borne by another in our place.

I won't take time to prove to you again that this last is the Bible's primary explanation of the cross. You know how often and in how many different ways this explanation of Christ's suffering is given us in Holy Scripture.

“...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” [Isa. 53:5-6]

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’”

But there have always been many in the church who have been offended by the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement, however plainly it seems to be taught in the Bible. There are various reasons for this. Some object to the very notion of God's holy wrath, others to the place of God's law in this understanding of the relations between God and human beings. Perhaps most have objected to the inevitable particularism of this view of the atonement. If Christ suffered in the place of his people and bore on their behalf the punishment due them for their sins, it is impossible, it would seem, to avoid the logic of Augustus Toplady's lines:

If thou my pardon hast secured,
And freely in my [place] endured,
The whole of wrath divine,
Payment God cannot twice demand,
First from my bleeding surety's hand,
And then again from mine.

Christ died for his people's sins. Christ gave his life, he says “for his sheep” and then turned to the Pharisees and told them that they were not his sheep. Christ, Paul says, gave himself for his church. At one point he makes it more personally particular still: He loved *me* and gave himself *for me*. Should we not then think of Christ's substitution for us on the cross as a definite, one-to-one relationship between substitute and sinner? Christ did not die hypothetically. He died actually and if in dying he paid the price of your sins, then you can no longer be subject to punishment for those same sins yourselves. God's justice has been satisfied on your behalf by your substitute. But that must mean, it can only mean, that Christ did not die for everyone's sins or everyone would be saved. That is the logic of penal substitution and it is perhaps the primary reason why many Christian thinkers have been unwilling to accept it as the Bible's own explanation for what the cross of Jesus Christ achieved.

John and Charles Wesley, for example, loved the historic Reformation doctrine of Christ's atonement, the penal satisfaction understanding. They saw it everywhere they looked in the Bible and they preached it as the Word of God. But they were also universalists, holding that Christ died for everyone with a view to securing the salvation of everyone. They attempted to join together two incompatible ideas, universal atonement and penal substitutionary atonement, but it didn't last. Methodism held to the penal satisfaction theory of the cross only as long as the Wesleys were alive. Afterward Methodist theologians abandoned penal satisfaction for other

views. A universal atonement was more important to them than a penal substitutionary atonement. Many Baptist and Methodist and Bible church people nowadays believe that when Jesus hung on the cross he was paying for their sins, suffering their punishment in their stead. They think that because they read that in their Bibles and because they sing that in their hymns. But their theologians don't think that was what Christ was doing on the cross. They think he was either besting the powers of darkness or demonstrating the love of God.

Now what is interesting about all of this, in regard to our text this morning, is that we champions of penal substitutionary atonement can very gladly affirm and always have very gladly affirmed the truth of the other theories. They must deny the truth of our theory, but we are not obliged to deny the truth of theirs. All we deny is that they are complete or sufficient explanations of the cross and the atonement. First and foremost Christ died in our place suffering our punishment in our stead. But in doing so we are very ready to say that on the cross the Lord Jesus conquered the demonic kingdom and delivered us from bondage to it: he bound the strong man who had us in his grasp. We are also very ready to say that on the cross the Lord Jesus demonstrated God's great love for us and that demonstration absolutely should move, persuade and inspire us to love the Lord in return. Penal substitution takes up the other views into itself and completes them, for surely by suffering our judgment in our place the Lord demonstrated both the great evil of sin and his great love for us.

In other words, the cross and the empty tomb do many things for us and teach us many things. Events as great, as epoch-changing as these, have many implications. Here in Romans 8:32 and 34 Paul is spinning out one of those implications. He is not talking about how the cross takes our guilt away. He is saying rather that the cross proves the power and greatness of God's love for us and the Lord's intercession for us at the right hand demonstrates that his commitment to us and our welfare remains as strong as it was when he gave up his life to pay the debt we owed to the righteousness of God.

Now what makes this argument so important is that life itself does not demonstrate God's great love for his people in nearly so unmistakable and undeniable a way. To be honest, it is often much harder to tell from the circumstances of your lives that God loves you, that he is for you, and that he will let nothing happen to you but what is for your everlasting happiness. It is not simply that life can be difficult or that we can be from time to time overcome with sorrow. More to the point, Christian people, people who love God and have committed themselves unreservedly to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, have the same trials and tribulations that unbelievers do. In some cases, as the Bible does not hesitate to admit, the unbeliever can seem to be doing better and enjoying an easier life than the Christian! How can this be if God loves his people with a mighty love, a love so great it did not scruple to offer up his own infinitely beloved Son to ignominy, suffering and death for our sakes?

As you know, Florence and I recently returned from India where we were among Christian people both in the Northeast and the Northwest of that great nation. As we were about to leave India I picked up a history of the Indian mutiny of 1857. Whatever else one may think about the rebellion of the Indian army against its colonial masters, the book included some moving accounts of the deaths by violence or disease of earnest Christians during the mutiny, or of the deaths of their little children, or their wives or husbands. It was a savage, bestial, utterly cruel

time and in the rage of bloodletting and the hacking and hewing of human beings, the devout died just like the unbelieving. Death seemed to make no distinction whatsoever between those who loved God and were beloved of God and those who did not and were not. Why are Christians not spared such tragedy in life if God loves them so? It will not surprise you to learn that life is more difficult in many ways for modern Indian believers than it is for us. They are poorer, in the Northeast of India very much poorer, have much less in the way of the advantages we take for granted in the modern West. You would have been both inspired and heartbroken to see the circumstances for example in which Christian young women seek to find their way in life after escaping an abusive husband or overwhelming poverty. Why does God not lift them all up above those around them so that it is perfectly clear to everyone that God is for *them* in a way he is not for everyone else? They are *his* daughters. And, even comfortable and well-cared for as we are in the Western world, Christians here have the same questions. We can't help asking because the question is so perfectly obvious: if God loves me so greatly why has he broken my heart? If God is for me with all of his infinite power and love, then why have my hopes been blasted as they have been?

We have God's promise to provide for his own and that he will be with us in our struggles. But beyond this,

“God's people have no assurances that the dark experiences of life will be held at bay.... Quite the contrary. The church is warned repeatedly that despite [God's] providence, suffering and evil will befall all those who follow Christ.” [D. Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 169]

You know, very well of course, that there are reasons for the trials and sorrows of life. They may be the same trials and sorrows, but the reasons for them in a Christian's life are completely different. They have a completely different purpose. The Bible tells us often enough that God has a purpose to fulfill in the afflictions of his people. It is the means by which God subdues and purifies our hearts, by which he humbles us, by which he breaks the grip of this world upon our affections, by which he makes us truly useful to others, by which he teaches us every deep and profound lesson of faith and life. He shows us by them what it means to follow the Lord Jesus Christ and what his life was like. This is so much the case that A.W. Tozer once remarked that he did not believe God could ordinarily use a person greatly unless he has hurt him or her deeply. But, all of that notwithstanding, it remains the case that we cannot learn of the mighty love of God for us *from* our troubles and trials. We may, by the grace of God and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, learn of his love *in and through* our trials, but we cannot tell the greatness of God's love when our afflictions seem to be very like those of people who neither love God nor trust Jesus Christ. You cannot prove by sight, by observation, that God is for his people and that he will surely give them all things.

I believe that there are many observable benefits to being a Christian. I have told you before that in my experience the marriages of serious, committed Christians hardly ever fail. They are regularly happier, more stable, more fulfilling. I could say the same thing about the families of devout Christian people. They are happier and healthier. Christians also handle their money more wisely by and large. I could go on. But, all of that notwithstanding, the difference is not so obvious that most people notice it nor is it so dramatic that thoughtful Christians could say that

they know that God is for them because their lives are happier, more fruitful, and more successful than the lives of their unbelieving neighbors. The Bible admits as much many times. Christians may have troubles for different reasons than unbelievers but they have plenty of troubles.

This is why Paul turns to the cross itself and to the intercession of the risen and glorified Son of God to prove to us that God is for us and cannot possibly be anything other than for us in all things and at all times no matter our circumstances, even in the moment of death when the sword is swinging toward our neck. These mighty considerations, these facts of history, are alone sufficient to prove God's immutable love for his people.

Christmas afternoon, we were talking at the dinner table about the phenomenon of unbelievers singing Christmas hymns and sacred songs. We had wondered how many different versions of "O Holy Night" by how many different artists one could find on You Tube. And sure enough, they were all there: Celine Dion, Carrie Underwood, Josh Groban, Placido Domingo, Luciano Pavarotti, even Jessica Simpson who I didn't even know was a singer.

We wondered what did these people think when they sang those words?

"Long lay the world in sin and error pining, till he appeared and the soul felt its worth."

Really? Do they think that the world must lie in sin and error unless and until it confesses Jesus Christ as the Savior and do they really feel the worth of their own soul is wholly bound up with the work of the Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God?

"Fall on your knees! Oh, hear the angel voices, O night divine, O night when Christ was born."

Have they any intention of falling to their knees? Do they have any awareness of what it means to say that

"The King of Kings lay thus in lowly manger, in all our trials born to be our friend"?

Do they turn to him in their troubles? In most cases, alas, these are just words to them. Elder Skrivan was telling me after the first service this morning that he had this experience as well when he became a Christian as a teenager. The first Christmas of his Christian life he heard those songs and immediately realized what their message was. He had been utterly deaf to it though he knew those songs by heart and could have sung them if he had been able to sing. Elder Skrivan has much in common with Jessica Simpson! They want to sing these hymns because they have a powerful text and one that is set to thrilling music and because, like it or not, this is the music of Christmas, without which there can be no Christmas. People like to hear these songs and so performers sing them: from *Silent Night* to *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* to *O Come All Ye Faithful*. Explicitly Christian hymns sung by people who have no interest in the Christian faith at all.

But what such a situation as this – a great theological statement sung feelingly or emotionally by an unbeliever – what this does for a thoughtful person is heighten the sense of how improper, hypocritical, and unfitting it all is. For people who have no sympathy for the implications of the incarnation of the Son of God to sing *O Holy Night* or *O Come All Ye Faithful* is to make a mockery of these grand hymns and songs. It is one thing for someone who has made life difficult for those around him and has betrayed those who have loved him, as many professional singers have, nevertheless to sing about the power of human love, because anyone can say that he or she longs for such love and that such love is unquestionably a good thing. But to sing – and to sing with great feeling and emotion – of the King of Kings when one has no intention of bowing before him; to sing of the coming of the Savior when one has no interest in the salvation he came to bring; to sing of events in history that one does not even believe occurred; that is something very different. To do that takes a special kind of intellectual and spiritual callousness and indifference. It is to treat these great hymns, these Christian manifestoes as if they were equivalent to Jingle Bells or to Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

Well, we Christians understand that. We are used to that. We can't help but wonder if the singers ever pause to reflect on what they are actually saying. Do they have any notion of the tremendous implications of the words they are singing? We certainly understand how wrong it is for a drug and sex besotted Elvis Presley to sing "O Holy Night." We get it: it is the problem of unbelief. It deadens the mind and heart and renders them insensible to the mighty history that is contained in these songs and the tremendous implications of that history.

But then here comes Paul to challenge *us* not to do the same thing; sing words, confess a faith we then do not practice in our lives, to confess Jesus Christ on the cross as the supreme, irrefutable demonstration of God's mighty love for his people, to confess the continuing intercession of the Son of God on our behalf at the Right Hand of God, and *then*, to go on with our lives and to face our circumstances as if God did not love us and as if we did not have the very best friend championing our cause where it matters most. If we believe, really believe, that God sent his Son into the world to suffer our justly deserved punishment in our place for our sins, if we really believe that, then we cannot possibly look at the circumstances of our lives in the same way again.

Our troubles, our trials, our sorrows – remember this is all an argument about a Christian and his troubles, a believer and her trials and has been since v. 17 of this chapter and is to the end of the chapter – I say our troubles and sorrows now must be the will, the considered purpose of someone who loves us with a deathless and omnipotent love. If we believe, really believe that at this moment Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, is interceding for us at the Right Hand, then we cannot possibly see ourselves in this vale of tears as those who have no friend to help them or no champion to take up their cause.

“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

The cross, the empty tomb, the Lord Jesus interceding for us at the Right Hand, these are mighty facts in the face of which all doubt and all fear and all sense of the pointlessness and meaninglessness of life must give way.

We have just completed our annual celebration of the history of the incarnation of the Son of God. We could make the same argument from that history as Paul does from the history of the cross and the resurrection. These are hard facts and they have inescapable implications. And Paul is expecting us to draw out those implications and to stand fast in the strength of them. Can we doubt God's love? Can we succumb to the temptation to think that the troubles of life have somehow separated us from God's love and care? Not if we have grasped the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ and the empty tomb. No one who grasps those things could ever imagine that so great a love might be defeated, that it might fail, that it might grow weary or lose heart.

The cross is the demonstration of an infinite, immutable love. Those who have embraced that cross and the Lord Jesus upon it know and should always remember that they are greatly loved, that a mighty love has been pitched upon them and that nothing and no one can separate them from that love. It came from heaven, it went to the cross, and conquered death and all of this it did for you and for me when we were long past deserving the very *least* of God's favors. The Almighty is *for* us; and all the words in all possible worlds cannot describe how surpassingly wonderful it is to know *that one fact!*