

The Centrality of the Cross, Pt. 3—The Resurrection
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Resurrection Sunday...it's my favorite Sunday of the year! We're gonna begin it here, though, with the crucifixion. The Scripture I'm gonna read here to begin with is found in Matthew 27 near the end of the chapter. I'll begin the reading at verse 45. It says

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, "This man is calling Elijah." And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up His spirit.

Matthew 27:45-50

We Christians claim that at that moment, at that cross, the righteousness of God and the love of God came together in one person, Jesus, so that the grace of God could be extended, unending, unlimited, for all those who believe. See, we look at that moment in history, and in the great scheme of things we see that as the pivotal moment. That was the point in time when what took place right then determined the final outcomes. In a world that had been created good, but had gone bad through human sin and rebellion, God had answered at that moment with greater grace than all the sin, with a promise that in the end there will be a new creation forever good. You see, for us, we look at that event and it is like...if you want to put it in military terms...D-day for us. And the great war between good and evil, on the cosmic level, that was the point, that was the battle, where the final outcome is determined. There are other battles to be fought, but that was the point when the outcome was determined.

It didn't look like that. It didn't look like that at all. The soldiers that were there...they looked at it, and what they saw was a fool's folly, a delusional man claiming to be the Messiah, the type of person that you ridiculed, you mocked. And so that's exactly what they did. They stripped Him, they put a purple robe on Him, and they mocked Him. They pretended He was a king, and they called Him a king in mockery. And they were Roman soldiers, so making a joke was not a light thing; it was a brutal thing. And so they beat Him when they did that. To those who were there, it did not look like the pivotal moment.

For the religious leaders, when they looked at it they saw a pretender, a pretender meeting His end. It's interesting; as He hung on the cross they challenged Him, and they said, 'If You would come down, if You would come down right now, then we would believe You.' And they added to that. They said, 'You know, You say that You're God's Son. If He wants You, let Him come and get You.' It was a hard-headed logic. 'If You really are God's Son, and He really loves You, then He'll show up for You.'

To passerbys it looked like a pathetic curiosity. They were used to Romans crucifying Jews. They were used to that. This one, as they walked by, they would wag their heads like they did for others; but in this case they would slow down and they would actually sit down to watch. We're told that some of the onlookers said, 'Let's wait and see if anything really does happen.'

To His followers, to His disciples, it was a shattering, disillusioning defeat...the type of thing where Peter is asked three times 'You're one of His, aren't you?' He says, 'No way! I will not claim Him.'

One of my favorite writers, walking through Matthew 27 in commentary style...as he looks through these different eyes of people at that moment, and what they were seeing, he repeats a statement over and over in his book. And he says, 'But Matthew knows, and we know, and God knows...it's different. The king that was mocked is the King. The One who did not come down on the cross, did not in order that He could save us. Matthew knows, we know.

That raises a question in my mind. How do we really know? How do we really know that at that moment...that did not look at all like the pivotal moment in history...how can we know that at that moment the righteousness of God and the love of God came together in that person to release grace for all who would believe? How do we know that?

That's the number one question I have for you today. I want you to understand that theological explanation doesn't answer that question. (And we're gonna need the lights down just a bit here, guys, so we can...now we're losing the PowerPoint a bit...) Theological explanation is not gonna prove it. Our tendency when we come to the events of the cross, and we wanna convince people that this is really something, this is really pivotal, our tendency is to start explaining it. And we do so with definitions...definitions of profound concepts leap to the cross, atonement, redemption. The word we talked about a couple weeks ago...propitiation. Fantastic term. Never use it in our vocabulary, but amazing concept of a sacrifice that would turn wrath into favor. We look at those terms and we explain them and we're excited about 'em.

We go on and we provide linkages to the Old Testament. We can say, 'Listen, it's described here in the New Testament. If you go back in the Old Testament you're gonna see that it links up to things that really make sense. This is true! This is real! I mean, there's prophecies of a Messiah who would be sacrificed. There's the whole Old Testament sacrificial system that teaches us that sin must be atoned for. And it makes sense then when we come to the cross and see that a sacrifice had to be made.' And we use the Old Testament linkage to help us see the cross better, and convince ourselves that yes, it is a pivotal moment.

And then we use common analogies that make it clearer to us as we try to make it understandable, its importance, and its value, and its centrality in history. And we use analogies like it's a fine being paid to the justice, to the court system, to release the prisoner; and he doesn't pay the fine. Someone else does. It's like a debt paid to the bank that you could never pay back on your own, and suddenly Jesus puts His goodness, His righteousness, and His faith in your account, and you can pay for your sins. And we use the example of the sinking ship where the ship goes down and you're given a space on the lifeboat as Jesus goes down in your place. Or there's the ransom, where there's a prisoner exchange and you're granted freedom from the kidnappers as Jesus takes your place.

We go through these explanations, but you know what? They don't prove anything. They don't verify what we're saying. It's as if you've got all kinds of pieces and parts out of your house...everything you could imagine; you took your bed apart, and took the springs out of it, and everything else, and you went in your garage and you built an airplane...your idea of an airplane. And you could bring your friends in there and people that are skeptical, and they say, 'Oh, that's not gonna fly'. And you could bring them in there, and you could explain in detail how all the pieces link up, and how they all fit together, and that by all the principals you know this thing will fly. And not only that, you can bring out models, and designs, and graphs, and charts, and blueprints of other airplanes that have been built in the past. And you could say that 'This is like those, only better!' And then you could give analogies, and you could say, 'This is like a bird.' So when you're all done with your explanations...I would not get in that plane and fly with you. And no matter how plausible your explanations are, you haven't proved to me that it'll fly. Explanation is not verification. Neither is spiritual experience. Spiritual experience does not prove anything. It collaborates; it supports; it doesn't prove.

This past week we put in front of the congregation...Joel did an exercise in...he called up to repentance and confession, with the promise of renewal, of God's grace touching our lives because of the forgiveness and the grace we find at the cross. It's the invitation we find throughout Scripture...that when we turn to Jesus, the One who died on the cross, and we confess our sins and we repent, that He responds with times of refreshing and renewal. And our goal this past week is that people would do that. They would slow down in their lives, they would examine their lives, and all of us together, individually...we would take time to process our busy lives and note those things that are out of sorts, and we would go to God the Father, and we would say, "LORD, I've sinned," and "Forgive me," and experience the refreshing renewal that comes with that. It was a vital part of my week. I'm so thankful that Joel lined that out for us. It was refreshing, it was renewing.

But here's the question...but before we get the question, let's just put this thought in your mind. It's a proven fact that confession provides emotional release whether or not it's linked to the cross at all. Interrogators know this when they question people in interrogation rooms. And when people have done something wrong, there's something inside them that eventually just wants to be able to talk about it. They can't keep it bottled up that long. And interrogators are skilled at bringing 'em to the point where they finally...the buildup is so strong they just wanna confess it, and they'll confess it. And it's amazing that once, when they confess, it's like a weight is off their back. Addiction programs...almost every good addiction program I'm aware of will have this as part of their process. They will call people to finally stop excusing, to finally stop blaming, and stop denying, and finally admit they're an addict, and confess the wrong in their life. And the cathartic release and renewal of that is powerful. I've worked with some of these programs, and I've been around it, and they've actually...as a person has come to that point they've actually told us to be close by because they will be so emotional you can't even trust 'em to drive home. How do we know that we go to God the Father in repentance, and we confess our sins...how do we know that the renewal we feel and respond to is nothing more than the psychology of catharsis? How do we know?

It really goes back and touches the grace released at the cross. I press that, 'cause our culture...and it infects us, and I use the word 'infects'...the Christian community...our culture is such that in our view and in our approach to life and the way we handle situations, is that faith follows feelings. And what we experience and what we feel in the moment is what we have confidence in, and what we trust. And the result being that feelings, bolstered by our faith, become our view of reality. They are the things we trust. They are the things that are really true. And that's why, in our culture, when you get into debate someone, and you come to a point and you say, 'I really feel this is true,' and they come to a point and they say, 'I feel this is really true', then you just kind of look at each other and say, 'Well that's ok, that's the way you feel.' My question is what is the truth?!

See, the Christian sequence, and I wanna be emphatic on this...by the way, I had to throw this in, a little piece of artwork. It's a little train, alright? And it's the way it is in our culture, really. Feelings are pulling the train. Faith latches onto it, and facts...they come along as a little caboose. The real action is up there in the engine. The Christian sequence is diametrically opposed to that. In the Christian sequence, facts are what faith clings to. We do not ask people to make a blind leap of faith. We are not like probably one of the largest cults in America, that simply says when logic runs out just see if you sense the truth. *Faith must grip facts.* And feelings will come when they come.

So that raises a question—what's the fact that allows us to look at the cross and say in reality, in that moment, that pivotal moment, the righteousness of God and the love of God came together in one person, giving grace to all who believe. What's our evidence?

I encourage you to turn in your Bibles to Matthew 27, if you have your Bible with you here today. Excuse me, Matthew 28...Matthew 28. This is following the crucifixion. It's been three days, and the text reads like this.

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the LORD descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He's not here, for He has risen, as He said. Come and see the place where He lay. Then go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead, and behold, He's going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him. See, I have told you." So they [the women] departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and they ran to tell His disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said [I love this], "Greetings!" And they came up, and they took hold of His feet, and they worshipped Him.

Matthew 28:1-9

What is this? What is this? This is an eyewitness account, one of a number of them. They're hard to put together in sequence 'cause they're like eyewitness accounts...they come in a flurry of activity. But this is an eyewitness account handed down through the centuries. This is what proves the cross. That's why this document is a crucial point of defense in the Gospel. The most important issue facing the church at any time in history, including our own, is 'are these reliable records?' It's not an easy argument to enter into, but it's a very defensible one. These are reliable records. These are eyewitness accounts. And you will struggle to find an alternative explanation. I challenge you on that. If you do not think they're eyewitness accounts, then come to another conclusion and defend it. For the Scriptures, for the Christian, resurrection is verification. The fact that Jesus rose from the dead, as accounted for by the eyewitnesses...that is our verification that what He said about the cross was true, and what He did at the cross was effective. The resurrection verified His message and His work with respect to the cross. And it was verification...that means there is more meaning to it than simply 'He's alive!'

Imagine that you have a close friend, a companion, someone you have loyally followed and believed in for a long time. And you're approaching a great arena, one of those fight-to-the-death arenas. And you know that he's going to go in there and he's going to fight to the death. Either he or the other will come out alive. And you come to the arena's door, and you're not gonna go in. And you're beginning to have doubts, because he doesn't look that strong, especially when you see the other person going into the battle. And you hear the crowd jeering him. And he goes into the conflict, and he goes into the battle. And you sit there and you can hear the jeers. You can hear the cheers. And then you can suddenly hear one, loud cry! And then you hear another one. And then you wait. And you wait. And you wait. And suddenly your friend comes out of the door, and he looks at you, and says "Greetings!" Listen, you know he's alive. You also know he won the fight. He's the victor.

That's what happened in those hours of darkness. Jesus, in the darkness, went face-to-face with death. And there was a shout, and there was a final cry. And then He was gone. And they waited, and they waited, and they waited. And then...then He was standing in front of them, saying, "Greetings!" And they knew not only is He alive, they knew that what He said about the cross is true, and what He did at the cross was effective, and the love of God and the righteousness of God did, in fact, come together in Him to provide grace to all those who would believe. And not only is He alive but we can enjoy Him forever, sinners that we are, because of the cross. Verified by the resurrection. Simple logic that Christians work with is this...Jesus claimed to be the Christ. Men crucified Him in rejection, and God raised Him in affirmation; testified to by the eyewitnesses. That is how we confirm our message of the cross.

I love Easter. I think it's my favorite week of the year, absolutely. And this year was similar. I mean, Joel's little devotional guide that took us through readings on repentance, and guided us through in terms of repentance and confession, and sensing the renewal of that...it was just one of the highlights of the week for me. It's just kinda clearing the air in areas with God, and just enjoying His grace.

And then there's Good Friday service. That's one of my favorite nights of the year. We have just great music, and we're all gathered together. And there's somethin' about when we sing in the round, and the voices just echo off each other. And at the very center of everything is the cross, and the message of Christ dying for us, and the life that He's made possible in that. It's just one of those nights I don't even wanna leave. I just sit here and soak it up and absorb it, and I just value it.

And then Saturday morning it's those...the Mother-Daughter tea. And I'm not really part of that, ok? But you know what? I come here every Saturday before Easter to watch that cross-generational expression of faith. Moms and daughters coming in, moms and daughters of shared faith...it is so precious. I had this one little girl come up to me, and she just grabs onto me, and she says, "You're gonna baptize me on Sunday!" And I just wanted to shout, "YES!" I'm watching this little girl grow up as a young girl of faith. And I see her mom as this mother of faith that has been so faithful to the LORD. I just see another generation coming up, and I just... "Yes!"

And then there's the Sunrise Service. You know, you're kinda making your way through the semi-darkness. And I start way out on Knik road. I get off at Fairview Loop, I get on Knik Road, and I start driving up and "Ah, there's a car. I wonder if they're gonna head up to Hatcher's Pass." And then we get past the Parks, and we're headed up Main Street and "Ah, there's another car." And then as we make our way up Fishhook we start recognizing "You know, we've got a little convoy going up there." And there's headlights, and I just...I just love it! We get up there, and you get out and there's a big group of people, and they've got hats on and they've got gloves on, and they just...one guy had a snowsuit that looked like a two-year-old's "onesie". And you know, it just...we're all there. He knows who he is. And that's what he called it. Ok. So we're all up there, got a guy on a motorcycle! And it's just great. And what I love is it's a church service that's over in three minutes! I mean, it's just 'fwoom!' And then we've got Donut King® doughnuts. It's just this...it's just a great time. But the thing I love most about it is standing with a group of people and saying, "I pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ, LORD of all, crucified by men and raised by God, with life, liberty, and grace for all those who believe." I just love that moment. Had one couple, they moved out of state, they've been gone for ten years. And when I told 'em we're having this service again she started to cry. She goes, "Ten years since I've been at that."

And then this... I mean, we've got a real choir! We got the bongos! I just...what I love is we've got bongos on that side, and the cello on this side. A little eclectic...I kinda like that, you know? But it's special, and the songs just lift you. It's one of my favorite times of singing as a congregation.

I love Easter. But I know, as a pastor, it will not last. Tomorrow I will be totally, emotionally flat. I won't even want to get out of bed. Knowing from my past history, there'll be moments tomorrow when I'll feel like an utter, absolute failure. 'Oh, I shoulda said this. I could have had that. That guy fell asleep on me!' Next Saturday it's a business meeting. No singing, no celebration...a vote—do we change this constitution or not. Next Sunday no choir.

If you go outta here trying to cling to the feelings of Easter your faith won't last. Your faith will not last, because your feelings are gonna change. If you're gonna walk outta here today and in every circumstance, and in every condition, with confidence choose faith, live hope, and really care about the people around you, then you need to leave here today not with the feelings of Easter, but the meaning of it. The verification as Jesus stood before those people, that not only is He alive, but everything He said about the cross is true, and everything He did on the cross is effective, and yes, in fact, the righteousness of God and the love of God did come together in that one person at that moment to release grace for all those who believe. Cling to that.

I'll ask you to stand with me.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in the full truth and the full grace of that cross, verified at the resurrection. Amen.