

The Triumph of the Cross

Our Epistle lesson sets forth the triumph of the cross that secures our freedom.

Colossians 2:13-15

13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,

14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.

This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Introduction

1. The “common sense” view of the cross is that Jesus was defeated and destroyed by His enemies. The cross is a sign of weakness and a sign of a criminal receiving his just judgment. For most, that the Messiah would die such an ignoble death is an impossible article of belief. From a common sense view, this appears all too true.
2. Listen to what the Jewish Encyclopedia writes: It starts by referencing Psalm 22, which serves as Jesus’s fourth statement from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” “This final utterance was in all its implications itself a disproof of the exaggerated claims made for Jesus after His death by His disciples. No real messiah could suffer such a death. It is an impossible article of belief which detracts from God’s sovereignty and absolute otherness.” This is common sense.
3. But something happened to people like the Apostle Paul that overcame their common sense. It changed the cross from a proof of defeat into a badge of honor, from a sign of shame to a bottomless source of joy, peace and comfort.
4. What was it that changed? They discovered why Jesus died. Why did He die? There are many ways to answer this question. Our passage instructs us that Jesus died to secure our freedom. The triumph of the cross is seen in the freedom it secures for us. The triumph of the cross frees us from four things...

I. Frees us from the consequences of sin (v.13a)

- A. What does the text say? The consequence of sin is two-fold — spiritual death and alienation from God.
- B. What did God say to Adam in the Garden? Genesis 2:17 — for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.
- C. How are we freed? Jesus pays the consequences of our disobedience.
- D. The spiritually dead are made alive. The alienated are welcomed into friendship with God.
- E. What are the implications? What difference should this make in our daily lives?
 1. Be thankful. See Colossians 1:12, 2:7; 3:15-17. The miracle of our salvation should motivate us for a life of thanksgiving.
 2. Bold humility. How did I become a Christian? Miracle of our salvation should motivate us for extravagant worship and devoted service.

II. Frees us from the guilt of sin (v. 13b)

- A. The text: “having forgiven us all our trespasses” (13b)

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- B. Some of you here are plagued by a nagging sense of guilt for all the ways that you have “crossed the line” in thought, word, or attitude. A trespass is a violation of God’s moral standards. We “trespass” when we step out of God’s moral pathways.
 - C. This passage teaches us four things about God’s forgiveness:
 1. God’s forgiveness is gracious. The nature of God’s forgiveness is seen in the word used for forgiveness here. It signifies that forgiveness is a free gift. It is not something we earn.
 2. God’s forgiveness is costly. A cross is raised to prove that forgiveness is not cheap and easy business. “He was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12).
 3. God’s forgiveness is complete. How many trespasses has God forgiven? ALL. The only sin that God cannot forgive is the final rejection of the Holy Spirit’s drawing us to repentance. Corollary passage: 1 Peter 2:24
 4. God’s forgiveness is motivating — look ahead to Colossians 3:13-14. Being a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable in others because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.
 - E. What comfort this must have given the Apostle Paul. Guilt can be a stubborn, nagging problem even for the best of believers.
 1. As Paul wrote these verses, he may have been remembering the cries of the believers whom he had dragged out of their homes and threw into prison when he was persecuting the Church.
 2. Perhaps he could still see Stephen’s face just before he died. His head bloodied from the stones, Stephen cried out (Acts 7:60), “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Whether Paul was thinking of those shameful events from his past or not, he knew that even those who have trusted in Christ for salvation often have to wrestle with guilt, whether from distant or recent sins.

III. Frees us from the debt of sin (v. 14)

- A. We owe God an immense debt for violating His law and are under a just sentence of death.
- B. What is the record of debt? It is a certificate of debt in the handwriting of the debtor by which we acknowledge our indebtedness to God.
- C. God nails our IOU to the cross of Jesus. For all who place their faith in Jesus, God mercifully takes this note and nails it to the cross, where Jesus paid the debt. Another way of putting it is: Jesus paid a debt He did not owe. I owed a debt I could not pay. I needed someone to wash my sin away.
- D. This image comes from the notice fastened to a cross by the Roman authorities, declaring the crime for which the criminal was being executed (see John 19:19–22 to see what was written on Jesus’s cross).
- E. Through Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross, God has totally erased our certificate of indebtedness and our forgiveness is complete.
- F. Do you know the liberating force of this gospel truth? “It is finished” Jesus said. Our debt is paid in full. This is why Horatio Spafford declared: “My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! O my soul.”
- G. Do you know the motivating force of this gospel truth? If Jesus paid it all, why do we continue to insist on making others pay for their sins?

If we truly believed this, we would...

- a) Spend less time regretting the past and more time seizing the present
- b) Be less concerned about keeping people at "arms distance" (for fear they discover the "real you") and be more willing to open up to those around you
- c) Justify less and confess more
- d) Spend less time licking our wounds and more time counting our blessings
- e) Find it easier to forgive others.

- List adapted from Bruce Goettsche

IV. Frees us from the brute of sin (v. 15)

- A. The Apostle Paul has already taught us in 1:13 that we have been delivered from the domain of darkness.
- B. At the cross, the devil and his demons are stripped of their power to accuse us before God. Nevertheless, these demons continue to exist and to exercise power to incite evil, so we must continue to struggle against them, but we do so knowing that they are defeated at the cross of our Lord.
- C. Illustration: The triumphal procession of a victorious Roman general — the defeated king with all of his surviving warriors and the spoils of war were paraded through the streets of Rome as a public spectacle for all to see.
- D. The “rulers and authorities” (principalities and powers) are the demonic powers arrayed against Christ and His Church.

Conclusion

If I care to listen,
 I hear a loud whisper from the gospel
 that I did not get what I deserved.
 I deserved punishment and got forgiveness.
 I deserved wrath and got love.
 I deserved debtor’s prison
 and got instead a clean credit history.
 I deserved stern lectures and crawl-on-your-knees repentance.
 Instead, I got a banquet spread for me.
 - Philip Yancey, What’s So Amazing About Grace

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think it is important to cherish and guard our freedom as a nation? How about the spiritual freedom that we have in Christ?
2. Why do you think that the Apostle Paul viewed embracing false teaching as being taken captive (v.8)?
3. Read Colossians 2:6-23. What do you think the church at Colossae was being tempted to add to the gospel in order to experience fullness of life? How might we be led astray from the gospel in our own day?

4. If you had to answer the question “Why did Jesus die?”, how would you justify your answer with Scripture? What does Colossians 2:13-15 say to this question? How does the prophet Isaiah answer this question? See Isaiah 53:4-6.
5. Of the four aspects of freedom that the cross secures, which one is most precious to you and why? (freedom from the consequences of sin, the guilt of sin, the debt of sin, or the brute of sin)
6. Of the four descriptions of God’s grace from verse 13b, which one is most challenging for you to believe right now: gracious, costly, complete, or motivating?
7. How should the fact that God nailed your sins to the cross motivate you? Is there anyone in your life whom you need to release from their sin debt against you? Who do you need to forgive for the ways that they have hurt or sinned against you?

Going Deeper

1. From Colossians 2:13-15, what do we learn about the cross? Who is the subject of the verbs in this passage? What is the significance of this?
2. How do you plan to use the truths in this passage the next time the devil comes to accuse you for your past or present sin? How do you practically resist him? See Zechariah 3:1-6, Revelation 12:11, and James 4:7-8.