

Colossians 2:13-14

“The Power of Sin & the Death of Jesus”

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Pr. Josh Anderson

Palm Sunday

For some years now, I have made it a practice to preach on the crucifixion and death of Jesus each Palm Sunday. Of course, we meditate on the death of Jesus in some manner each Lord’s Day, just as we meditate on his resurrection, but today, this Palm Sunday in the year of our Lord 2021 we will especially focus again on the good news of the death of Jesus Christ.

The cross of Jesus Christ is a rich and multi-faceted story, for it is, along with the resurrection, the central event in all of the Scriptures.

There are many things that we might discuss when we come to the cross.

We might discuss, for example, the reality that the cross is the place where the truth of Jesus’ identity as the Son of God - his divine nature - is most clearly revealed.

We might discuss the fact that it is at the cross where the horror of human rebellion against God is most singularly expressed.

We might discuss how, at the cross, Jesus creates a new path toward the possibility of the establishment of human communities of peace as he dies as the innocent victim, scapegoated by those who hated him, who then breaks the cycle of human violence and revenge by forgiving his murderers with his last breath.

We might discuss how at the cross Jesus demonstrates, for the first time in all of human history, what it means to have a truly mature and perfect faith, as he entrusts himself into his Father’s hands even when he seems to have been completely abandoned by God.

All of these themes, and many more like them, are perfectly suitable to discuss when we come to the death of Jesus, the Son of God.

The cross is truly inexhaustible in its meaning.

And yet, as you read the writings of the apostles, those men who spent all of the rest of their lives meditating on the death of Jesus under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, one theme from the cross rises above all the others.

And that is the connection between the death of Jesus and the forgiveness of our sins.

Again and again, throughout the epistles, the Apostles come back to this theme - that is in the death of Jesus that our sins are forgiven and we are restored to communion with God.

And it is just that theme that the Apostle Paul meditates upon in that passage from Colossians 2:13-14 which is our Scripture text this morning.

I'm sure you have probably heard before many sermons on the death of Jesus and the forgiveness of your sin. But that's ok. Sometimes we need to hear the good story of our salvation again.

Let's do so now by turning to God's word in Colossians 2:13-14, which is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you'd like to read along.

*"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him [that is, with Christ], having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."*

Prayer...

In this passage, Paul focus on two themes.

First, he speaks of the insidious power of sin and the way in which sin, unchecked by God's grace, dominates our lives.

Second, Paul describes way in which the power of sin is swallowed up and overcome by the death of Jesus, the Son of God, at the cross.

So we'll talk first about the power of sin this morning, and then the victory over our sin that God has won over our sin in the death of Jesus.

The first thing that Paul says about sin is brings death.

*"You were dead in your trespasses,"* Paul says.

Now, by calling us dead in our trespasses (that is, our sins), Paul means first of all that we were cut off from communion with God, the source of all life.

And in fact, this is just what we see in the beginning, in the sin of Adam and Eve. In the day that you eat of the forbidden tree, God promises Adam, you will surely die.

And yet, as we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning, when that day comes Adam and Eve do not die - not literally at least.

Their hearts continue to pump blood, their lungs continue to function even as they digest the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in their stomachs, but they are exiled from the garden, the place of God's presence, and prevented explicitly by God from eating of the tree of life.

And God does not forbid Adam and Eve from eating of the tree of life - he makes sure it will not happen, for he drives them out of the garden and places a cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the way to the tree of life.

But to be dead in our sins does not only mean that we are cut off from communion with God. It also means that we are unable to do anything about it. To be dead in our sins means we are helpless, trapped, enslaved. To be dead in our trespasses, as Paul puts it, means that we can't free ourselves from sin's power.

In Romans 5, Paul writes that in the human experience after the fall in the Garden, "*Sin reigned in death,*" and surely that's a good way to put it - and surely that's exactly how it felt for Adam and Eve when they cradled their son Abel's dead body in their arms and knew that his brother Cain had done it.

They could not get back into the garden, they could not get past that flaming sword, and so they were left outside, enthralled by sin and the death it brought.

You see, in the Scripture's conception of sin, sin is not just a thing we do as individuals when we fail to keep God's law, it's a thing that has power over us - sin is almost a living creature, a power that enslaves us under its will.

And who among us hasn't experienced life under the power and reign of sin in this way?

The particular manifestation of sin's power in our lives varies from person to person, of course, but all of us know it, all of us know what it is like to be enslaved to sin.

Perhaps sin's enslavement in your life has taken the form of sexual lust, and that has taken you to dark places on the internet.

Perhaps sin's enslavement in your life has taken the form of anger, and that has caused you to treat those around you with contempt.

Perhaps sin's enslavement in your life has taken the form of greed, and that has driven you to hoard your money and to refuse to be generous with what God has given you.

There are many other examples of course. But the point is that all of us know what it is like to be dead in our trespasses because we know what it is like to be trapped in our sins and enslaved by sin's power, doing, as Paul puts it in Romans 7, not what we want, but the very thing we hate.

But sin's power over us, according to Paul, is not simply that we are dead in our trespasses. We are also held under sin's accusatory power.

In verse 14 of our passage, Paul describes sin as *"a record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands."*

And surely, this is part of the power of sin in our lives as well.

Sin not only entraps us, it also accuses with its record of our debts, and in this way it enslaves us with guilt.

I remember to this day a lie I told my father when I was a boy. It was a stupid lie, pointless really (as all sin is when you think about it), but it felt like a weight that I carried unconfessed in my stomach for days and days afterwards.

It might have been the first time I felt the visceral power of guilt, and the horrible enslavement of shame. I had done this thing that I felt guilty for, and the longer I carried it around with me, the more powerful the feeling of guilt became.

And that's just one little petty sin. if I look back on my life and try to count up all my sins it's almost unimaginable - the record of my debt is long and terrible.

The ways I mistreated my younger siblings as a child. The contempt I too often held toward my parents in my teenage years. The sins I've committed against my wife. The ways I've failed my own children.

It's too much to think about, too much to comprehend.

And all of us, apart from the work of Christ, have this record of debt that trails along after us as we try and make our way in this world.

As one confession of sin puts it:

"Forgive me, O Lord, my sins: the sins which are manifest to all the world, as well the sins I have labored to hide from those who know me, to hide from my own heart and even from my memory; my ignorant sins and willful; sins against those in authority over me, as well as those under my authority; sins against my loved ones, as well as strangers; sins against myself, my own body, and even my own soul; all of which are sins against you, my God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

Yep. That about covers it. And each one of us, we have this record of debt that stands accusing against us.

And this too, is part of sin's insidious power.

It's not a pretty picture when we consider the way sin reigns over us, the way it enslaves us in cycles of death, haunting us with guilt and shame.

And, make no mistake, all of us, every single one of us, would still be trapped and enslaved by sin's power if it were not for one thing.

There is only one thing in all the world that can deliver us, that can set us free, that unleash us from the horror of our sin.

And that one thing, beloved, is the death of Jesus Christ.

In verse 13, Paul writes these words, describe how God has set us free from the reign of sin through the cross of Jesus: *“And you, who were dead in your trespasses, God made alive together with him [that is, with Christ Jesus], having forgiven us all our trespasses.”*

The picture that Paul paints here of the cross is that the cross is where Jesus unites himself to sinful humanity so comprehensively that he actually submits himself to sin’s power in death so that when God makes Jesus alive on third day, we are actually raised from the death of our sin with him.

In other words, what Paul is saying here is that at the cross Jesus united himself to us in our sin and death so that we might be united to him in his resurrection life.

At the cross, Jesus embraced our deadness, all the deadness in which we were enslaved by our trespasses so that, having united himself to us in our sin, we who were once dead under sin’s reign might become alive with him in his glorious resurrection.

As Paul puts it in another place: *“For our sake, God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

The reality of this life-giving aspect of Jesus is death is shown forth in the gospel accounts themselves.

In our gospel reading this morning, we heard Matthew tells us how, when Jesus died, two miraculous things happened.

First, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

This curtain, of course, was what prevented the Israelites from entering into God's presence in the most holy place in the temple, and its being miraculously torn at the exact moment that Jesus died is a visual representation of how the flaming sword at the garden of Eden was quenched in the death of Jesus.

No more would sin mean the estrangement of humanity from the presence of God. No more would the exile of sin continue.

But that wasn't the only miraculous thing that happened when Jesus died, according to Matthew. He also tells us that there was a great earthquake, and rocks were split, and tombs were opened, and many bodies of saints were raised from the dead.

Now, for my money, this is one of the most wonderful and also the most mysterious passages in all of the Scriptures. Why, when Jesus died, did saints immediately rise from the dead?

Beloved, this too was a picture, given for our learning - that we might know that Jesus' death on the cross meant life for us.

Those saints rose from the dead the moment when Jesus died so that we would know that at the cross, sin's power over us was broken completely -- the curtain was torn, the flaming sword was quenched, and the saints who had once been dead in their sins came freely to eat of the tree of life.

Those saints rose from the dead that we might know in the death of Jesus we were made alive again, because God, as Paul puts it, "forgave us all our trespasses" through the death of his Son.

But what about that record of debt that our sins incurred? What about that record of our sin that we carry with us all our lives, dragging behind us with the weight of guilt and shame?

Yes, we're alive in Christ because of his death, but what about the record of our particular sins? What did God do with that? Isn't that still around somewhere?

Here is what Paul tells us God did with that record of our sins in verse 14. He says: *"This [that is, the record of our debt] he set aside, nailing it to the cross."*

It's a profoundly visceral image that Paul gives us here.

In the death of Jesus, Paul says, our record of debt - the written record of all our sins - all the sins we can remember, and all the sins we have forgotten - was actually nailed to the cross along with Jesus. The power and even the record of our sin died at the cross when Jesus died.

It is, as Paul says, canceled by God. It is no more.

Beloved, this is the remarkable power of the forgiveness of your sins that has been brought about by the death of Jesus.

Your sin has been cancelled, it has been set aside, because it was nailed to the cross along with Jesus. At the cross, the record of your sin, that catalog of all the shameful things you have ever done, was destroyed, obliterated, wiped off the face of the earth.

And that means that God has triumphed over the power of your sin. In Jesus, the victory over your sin has been won—not sort of won, not mostly won, but completely, decisively won.

Do you know why your sin is forgiven?

Your sin is not forgiven because you are sufficiently sorry for it, because you aren't.

Your sin is not forgiven because you have adequately repented of it, because you haven't.

Your sin is most certainly not forgiven because you will never sin in that same way again, because it's very likely that you will.

No, your sin is forgiven for this reason and this reason only — because in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ God has destroyed your sin and all its power.

Your sin has been wiped out, it has been cancelled, it has been set aside and its power, its debt, is never coming back — because it is not you who have done it, but God through Jesus Christ has won the victory even over your sin.

And if God has forgotten your sin, if he has canceled your debt, if he has nailed the record of your transgressions to the cross, then who are you to remember it?

Beloved, today, I invite you to be impressed not by the power of your sin, but only by the overwhelming, absolutely comprehensive power of the death of Jesus for your sake.

For at the cross, in the death of Jesus, you have been made alive.

And at the cross, in the death of Jesus, your sins have been forgiven.

And at the cross, in the death of Jesus, the record of your sin has been destroyed.

This is the power of the death of Jesus over your sin.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.