

## The Abiding Power of the cross, Part 1

### Selected Scriptures

I realize that there are people here who may not be Christians, and I hope that in our time of reflection and meditation on the cross and the Gospel that you will hear a clear presentation of the Gospel and, who knows, maybe you find salvation in Jesus Christ and forgiveness of your sins.

As I think about the cross, as I want to lead us in some reflection, this is less of a, a formal exposition of a particular passage of Scripture, and it's more like a meditation on a vitally important theme of the Gospel. And I hope for you, believers, that this is something that will increase your sense of freedom in the Gospel, a sense of joy in the Gospel as you think about your Christian life lived post-cross, post-you coming to Christ, post-conversion.

I want to start by reading a text that our time of reflection will kind of unpack the themes in this text, and it's Romans 8, verses 1-4. So if you would turn there in your Bibles

to Romans chapter 8, we'll begin reading verses 1-4. Paul says in this glorious affirmation, confirmation, deep conviction about the Gospel, he says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the spirit."

God, hates sin. God hates sin. I hope that's clear enough from this text. He no longer condemns his believing children because of the cross of Jesus Christ. But God does condemn their sin, noted here, as sin in the flesh. And what he wants for us, for each one of us, what he has designed the cross to accomplish for us, is freedom from sin, life and liberty and joy in the spirit that is lived in freedom from sin.

The cross punishes our sinful condition. We've been hearing the scriptures read to us out of Matthew 26, 27. We can see very

clearly in the narrative text of the Gospel that in the cross we are witnessing the very public humiliation, the public execution of the only perfectly righteous man.

Why did he have to die? Isaiah 53:5 answers that question for us. It says that "he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities." That's why that perfect, innocent, spotless Lamb of God had to die, because "the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all."

So this cruel, merciless killing of the perfect, only innocent man, the Son of Man, God's beloved Son, that's exactly what God thinks about our sin. That's what he thinks about our sinful condition. In Christ and in the cross of Christ in particular, God condemned sin. We understand that, as fallen sinners, if we were standing alone at the bar of divine justice, we are justly condemned, aren't we? Justly condemned for our sin because each one of us has transgressed the perfect, holy law of God. Paul says in Romans 3:10 that "there is none righteous, not even one. There is no one who seeks after God." That is a problem, isn't it? Because as Romans 6:23 says, "The wages of

sin is death." You commit sin, you've done a work, and for that work you get a paycheck. What's the paycheck? Death.

We live our lives, born into this world, really into the consequences of one man's sin, don't we? We are born into the guilt of original sin, which is the transgression of Adam eating fruit from a forbidden tree, born into this condition, just as God promised in the very beginning, Genesis 2:17: "In the day you eat of it, you shall surely die." That's exactly what happened. Paul outlines in Romans 5:12, "Sin came into the world through one man, death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sin."

That is our daily reality, isn't it? That's the world that we live in, is one that is saturated with sin. We sin because we're sinners. We're not "making mistakes." That's not just a "oops." It's a moral transgression against God and his law. We're born into this world as sinners. We're born into a state of condemnation because we all share in Adam's original sin, the guilt of his sin. David says in Psalm 51:5, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."

We are born into this world as sinners. We grow up sinning because we're sinners. Sin is easy for us. It is natural to us because we're children of our father Adam. Genesis 5:3 says all of us being fathered in his own likeness, we're born after his image and born in his sin. It is easy for us to sin. It is natural for a child to sin. Ask any parent, "Did you have to teach your children to sin?" No, they do it naturally. They do it easily, by instinct.

One passage makes this reality abundantly clear, and it's Ephesians 2:1-3. In fact, I'd like you to turn there so you can see this for yourself. Ephesians chapter 2, Ephesians chapter 2:1-3. Paul starts there in verse 1, Ephesians 2:1, and he puts his finger on the true problem of the human race. "You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked." That's the issue. "Dead in trespasses and sins." Every single one of us belong to this fallen human race. Spiritually speaking, we are a race of stillborn children, born dead.

I often hear people say, "Human beings are essentially good. I mean, deep down inside, human beings are basically good

people." You hear all this by the pundits on the news media, especially after some horrific shooting, some mass shooting, some terrible murder, some tragedy like that, and people are always wringing their hands saying, "I know that human beings are basically good, so what drove this individual to do such a horrific crime?"

They're going to find out some psychology in the matter, some cultural issue, some suppression of what they really are, and they're just breaking out of, because, of course, they're good deep down inside. So what would drive a truly good person to do such horrendous things? Well, it's because they're in pain, it's because they're sad. It's because their mom didn't rock them enough, or society didn't affirm them enough, or they didn't get the stage they wanted, whatever it is.

No, the truth is, the Bible says we are all born in sin. We are all inherently evil, not inherently good. Every single one of us belong to a fallen race. Experience alone is sufficient enough to prove this worn-out lie, this liberal lie about the innate goodness of mankind. If we are innately good, then why

all the wars? Why the high crime rates? Why the high murder rates?

Listen, the Bible, when it speaks, it talks about reality. It talks about a reality that we all know, we all live with all the time: that we are sinful. We are the walking dead. We're a race of beings slain at conception, being injected with the poison of sin. And born into sin, we emerge from the womb as the walking dead, like spiritual zombies, walking around thoughtlessly, mindlessly following our native instinct to commit all manner of sins.

It is instinctive. It is most natural for us, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:2, to "follow after the course of this world, to follow after the prince of the power of the air." Let me explain who that is. That is the devil. We are born with him at our head. We are born with him as our leader, and we grow up liking that. The devil, he is "the satanic spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience."

"We know," says the Apostle John, 1 John 5:19, that "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one." He's using

imagery. The whole world lies there. It's lying in the lap of, as if he is the parent of the fallen world. Pretty disturbing, isn't it? Pretty disturbing to think, if we really reckon what the Bible says about us, that the father of us all as we're born into this world is none other than the Prince of Darkness, the devil himself. Satan is the father of all who do not believe because he is the original unbeliever. So anybody who follows in the pattern of unbelief is his child. Satan's job is really, really simple with regard to his own.

Parenting is hard, right? Parenting's difficult. We have to teach our children away from the things that they instinctively, easily like to do, which is to sin, which is to defy authority, to do what they want, to be self-centered, to be prideful, all the rest. That's what we have to do as parents, is to work against that.

You know what Satan's job is as a parent to his fallen children? All he has to do to keep his subject under power is feed them what they already want. He's like the ultimate bad parent, and all his bad children follow him. He's like a drug pusher who just basically keeps giving deadly crack to crack



heads. He keeps injecting heroin into the veins of drug addicts who always crave another fix, and he holds on to them that way.

So Paul describes in verse 3 that "We, along with all the sons and daughters of disobedience, among them, we all also once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and we were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind."

Paul gets even more explicit about the futility and degradation of this condition. If you'll turn a couple pages over to Ephesians 4:18-19, take a look there. He says "to live." Here's what he means by "living in the passions of our flesh." Here's what he means by "carrying out the desires of the body and the mind." It's not a pretty picture. It is a life of utter futility; spiritual, psychological bondage.

In your mind's eye as you read this, picture a dirty, degraded crack addict living on the street in a alley. "They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to their hardness

of heart. They've become callous, and they've given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity."

That is the human race, fallen in sin. And the devil keeps on feeding the world of fallen, unbelieving sinners exactly what they crave. They become more and more callous, hardened, stubborn, fixed in their sin, and they are greedy for more of what enslaves them and more of what kills them. This is why Jesus calls the devil "a murderer." That's exactly the right term for him. He is the greatest mass murderer of all time. John 8:44: "The devil was a murderer from the beginning. Does not stand in the truth, because there's no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

He murders with his lies. He has murdered from the beginning. He continues murdering the human race with his lies. He feeds the children of wrath the lies that they crave. Relishing in the fading image of God, which he hates, he continues to destroy it. He continues to, to degrade it. He delights to see human beings mired in sin and marred with corruption and enslaved like addicts.

Thanks be to God, though, that that is not the end of the story. It might seem to be a hopeless predicament, especially considering the complicity of fallen humanity with the devil in their own degradation and destruction. The devil loads the gun, whispers ridiculous lies to the foolish, infantile sinner. Intoxicated with his lies, the sinner is eager to grab that gun, point it at his own head, and he hastens to pull the trigger.

That is a picture of our desperate condition as fallen sinners. And again, this is why the cross of Jesus Christ, and only the cross of Jesus Christ, can address and confront our sinful condition. The cross both satisfies the wrath of God, and it also illustrates the wrath of God because it shows the world what God thinks about sin. God sees the sin clearly. He sees our condition very clearly. The sin of the human race offends him daily, hourly, moment by moment, continually.

The sin of believers offends him as well, but the cross satisfies his wrath against sin. The most horrific punishment ever distributed to any one human being is poured out on Christ

on the cross. He endured the greatest wrath, and it shows, that cross shows what God thinks about sin.

The cross confronts the sin head on, we sang this together: "Ye who think of sin but lightly." And that line is to warn us not to think of sin lightly, but "ye who think of sin but lightly, nor suppose the evil great." Isn't that true of us? We tend to minimize our sin, not to see it for what it is, not to see it from God's perspective. "Will ye who think of sin but lightly, ye who do not suppose the evil great, here in the cross may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate. Mark the sacrifice appointed, see who bears the awful load. 'Tis the Word, the Lord's anointed, the Son of Man, the Son of God."

Sin is horrible. And if God would take his beloved Son and place him on a Roman cross 2,000 years ago to experience that public humiliation and a public execution in such a degrading display of human cruelty, pour that out on his Son and his own wrath for every single sin of all who would ever believe, and pour out his wrath on his Son, that demonstrates how our condition in sin is so severe, so dreadful, so far gone, so fully beyond any human remedy, the only sacrifice that counts is

the sacrifice of God's perfect Son. That is how sin is atoned for, covered for, satisfy, satisfying his wrath. Our situation would be utterly hopeless but for God, but for his mercy.

The cross purchases our full salvation. The cross not only punishes our sinful condition, it purchases our full salvation. Whenever we do take the time mentally in prayer to mark the sacrifice appointed, when we do stop to see who it is who bears the awful load for us, we become mindful, don't we, of what it cost to purchase our full salvation.

We go to Isaiah 53:4-5: "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, and yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and by his wounds we are healed."

In verses 7-10 of Isaiah 53, we're sobered, we're humbled to the floor when we realized that it was not man who did this to the Son, but it was God himself. He did this to his own beloved Son. It says, "He was oppressed, he was afflicted, and yet he opened not his mouth, like a lamb that's led to the

slaughter, like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment, he was taken away. He was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. They made his grave with the wicked. Although he had done no violence and there was no deceit in his mouth, yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief."

Why did God do this? Why would he choose to crush his Son? Look back at Ephesians chapter 2 and verse 4. As we read there, it was for the sake of his mercy. It was for the sake of his love. It was for the sake of his kindness. And get this, folks, he crushed his Son to show mercy to you. He killed his Son because of his love for you. He showed kindness to us by hurting his Son.

Look at verse 4 of chapter 2, Ephesians: "But God, being rich and mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, he made us alive together with Christ. By grace you've been saved. And he raised us up with him, and he seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the

immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you've been saved through faith. This is not your own doing. It's the gift of God. It's not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Beloved, he did not save us when we were lovely before him. He did not save us because our behavior was particularly attractive to him. He intervened for us, he saved us, he showed us mercy, he showed us love and kindness when we were absolutely unlovable, when our thoughts and our words and our actions called for judgment. Paul writes about this in Romans 5:6 and following, that it was when we were at our very weakest in sins; it was when we were ungodly in our disposition; it was when we were sinners by nature, by nurture, by choice; it was when we were enemies of God; when we were, listen, we were allied with the devil, we were partners with demons in rebellion against God. We hated God. We hated all that is holy.

That is the time when God interposed the blood of Christ for us, and that's worth rejoicing over. Amen? It is the most glorious liberating message of freedom, the salvation we received from God, saved by grace through faith, rescued from

the wrath of God, delivered from the penalty of sin, raised up, seated with Christ in the heavenly places. That is a glorious message of the Gospel.

And at this point, I want to say, I often find that at this point, as glorious as this message is, this is where many Christians stop thinking, when they estimate the power of the cross. This is where many Christians stop thinking about the cross's power to save and to set free. Maybe you can consider it from this perspective. One of the songs that we love to sing together is called "The Power of the Cross." Good song. I love this hymn. You know the chorus: "This the power of the cross, Christ became sin for us, took the blame, bore the wrath, we stand," what, "forgiven at the cross." That, the song says, is the power of the cross, our reason for rejoicing. Why? Because for at the cross of Christ the curtain was torn in two. The dead are raised to life, "'Finished!' the victory cry," right?

For many who hear the word "finished," they think that it signals the end. Full stop. But that word "finished," as Jesus used it, "It is finished," *tetelestai*. It's from the verb *teleo*, "to complete, to fulfill," and the idea of completion and



fulfillment there in that context, it points to an underlying goal and purpose of the cross. What's God's goal in it all? What's his purpose in the cross?

Listen, the way we need to think about the cross as we consider what our Lord came to accomplish is that his death signals not just an end, "It is finished," but a brand new beginning for us. We ought to realize, and we need to think about this. Christian, you need to think about this every single day of your Christian life. We need to realize that the end of Christ's finished work on the cross, the *telos*, the purpose for which it was fulfilled, is the very beginning of our life in him.

So many of the songs we sing, we sing about the power of the cross. It's finished. The penalty is paid. We're going to heaven. In the very next verse, it's all about heaven. What about the rest of this life that we live on earth? What's that to be about? The culmination of the cross-work of Christ is the commencement of true life, of real living, of walking in newness of life.

This is a time of year when many students, whether it's at the high school, college level, graduate level, they're facing, what, the end of their training, right? They come to the end of their high school or their college or their graduate training, and they're looking toward graduation. What is that graduation ceremony usually called? "Commencement." They just finished their training. It's not the end. It's the beginning. It points to them commencing how they will use everything that has been invested to them over the past three, four, or five years. That's how you and I ought to think about the cross. It is finished, yes, but it is a commencement on our life now of real living, of walking in newness of life.

If you're in Ephesians 2, go back to that text and notice how Paul ends the section that we started in verse 1. It ends in verse 10. What does he say? "For we are his workmanship." The other word is *poiema* in the Greek. You know what that? "Poem." We get the word "poem" from that word. We are God's poem. We are God's, think of it this, this way, some translations put this his "handiwork." We are his work of art. Think of a painter, that last stroke of the brush, putting it down and look, looking back and saying "Ahhh." I love it. The sculptor, the painter,

the musician, composing, putting together a work of art. This is what we are to be.

What does it say? "Created in Christ Jesus for good works, which," who, "God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." Our life is to be a life of good works, of putting God's glory and his majestic workmanship, his handiwork, on display in the way we live, the way we speak, the way we think, the priorities we set. It's an active walking and living of our life.

That's the power of the cross, too, isn't it? It's the abiding power of the cross to remind us about the end of sin and the beginning of righteousness. It is true, and praise God it is true, that we do indeed stand forgiven at the cross, but having been forgiven, we're not meant to stand still at the cross. For every Christian the cross marks an end and also a new beginning. The cross marks an end and also marks a glorious new beginning for every true believer.

It's where we started, isn't it? Romans chapter 8:3-4: "By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin,

he condemns sin in the flesh." Gone sin, banished out of this person's life "in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit."

Let me give you several thoughts to reflect upon. Think about how the cross signals the end, but also how it promises and empowers a new beginning. First, the cross means the end of our alienation and the beginning of our adoption. The end of our alienation, the beginning of our adoption. You're in Ephesians 2, so let's continue reading in verse 12, or just, we'll look at verse 11. "Therefore, remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, made in the flesh by hands, remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."

How near? Just flip back a page and look at chapter 1 verse 4. This beautiful language of reconciliation and being brought

near, it has a filial sense, a family sense. Ephesians 1, let's start in verse 3. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who's blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love, he predestined us for," what, "adoption as sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace with which he has blessed us in the beloved."

Paul says the same thing in Galatians, chapter 4:6 and 7: "God sent forth his Son to redeem us, that we might receive adoption as sons." And Paul says, "Because you're sons, God sent the Spirit of his son into our hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father.' You're no longer a slave, but a son. And if you're a son, you're an heir through God." I mean, it is one level of grace for a holy God to forgive and then reconcile to himself those who were nothing but ungodly sinful enemies of God. But to adopt us into his family, to give us his name, to give us the full rights and privileges as sons and daughters of the king? We deserve the exact opposite. So to treat us on par with his own beloved Son, his perfect Son, Jesus Christ, that is magnanimous

grace. The cross marks the end of our alienation, the beginning of our adoption as sons.

Number two: This cross means the end of death and the beginning of life; end of death, beginning of eternal life. Remember in the wilderness, Numbers, the book of Numbers, Israel is in the wilderness once again, suffering the consequences of sin because it's been complaining, grumbling against God, against Moses. And Israel is there, writhing in pain, bitten by venomous snakes. It was such a fitting picture of judgment for the sin of their bitter complaint that they were suffering the pain of bitter bites of serpents and bitter poison, all of it coming from a heart of unbelief. Bitterness flows from a heart of unbelief. They'd received the death sentence, a deadly injection. Life is fading away, ebbing away, and that is when God stepped in and provided a remedy.

When death is at the door, God provided life. What did he do? He told Moses, "Make a bronze serpent. Lift that serpent high up on a pole," Numbers 21:9. "Anyone who believes and looks upon that bronze servant," the very image of their judgment, that serpent, "in looking at that, he would live."

So also for us. John 3:14: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. Why? Because "God so loved the world," "he loved the world in this way," "that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you," John 5:24, "whoever hears my word, believes in him who sent me, he has eternal life. He doesn't come into judgment. He's passed from death to life."

That's the power of the cross: the end of death. And if it's the end of death, you know what it's the end of also in our life? Sin. Why? Because sin brings death. So it's the end of death, the end of sin for us, the beginning of life, which is righteousness.

Third thing, the cross means the end of our enslavement and the beginning of our freedom; the end of enslavement, the beginning of freedom. The design of God, and the incarnation of the Son of God, his death on the cross, was this, Hebrews 2:14: "Through death he might destroy the one who has the power of

death, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery." He wants us set free. This is the ultimate abolitionist movement, is in God.

It's the reality that, that informs Paul's magnificent treatise on the freedom from sin. Go back to Romans chapter 6, if you will. Romans chapter 6, starting in verse 6. Make sure this text is firmly in your mind every time you come to the Lord's Table. Romans 6:6: "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so we would no longer be enslaved to sin, for the one who has died has been set free from sin.

"Now if we've died with Christ, we believe we'll also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, he'll never die again. Death no longer has dominion over him. The death that he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

God points us to Christ. He points us to the victory of Christ and the cross. Death no longer has dominion over Christ



because he conquered death. That means sin has no dominion over Christ, either, no ability whatsoever to exert any influence on him at all. Because of Christ's victory in him by the abiding power of the cross, listen, death and sin no longer have dominion over us, either. No more penalty of sin, but the power of sin is broken. We no longer have to live in it. That is good news.

Our duty, what's our duty knowing that? To retake the lost ground. Look at verse 12, Romans 6: "Therefore, let not sin reign in your mortal body to make you obey its passions. Don't present the members of your body as, to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who've been brought from death to life, your members, members of your body to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you. You're not slaves anymore. You're not under law. You're under grace."

Paul told the Galatians, Galatians 5:1, "It's for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore; don't submit again to a yoke of slavery." Peter said the same thing in 1 Peter 2:16: "Live as people who are free, not using your freedom

as a cover-up for evil." Doing that is like to put the yoke of slavery back on yourself, to go ahead and shackle yourself again, to get back in your cage, act like a slave. Peter says, "No! Live as people who are free, live as servants of God," he says.

Listen, Jesus came to seek and save the lost. He came for you. He came to make you holy. He came to bear your sins in his body, on the cross, that you might enjoy the life of God in him. And what he set out to do, he most certainly will accomplish. So expect that, beloved. Pray for that. Work for that. Take heart because he will certainly do what he set out to do. His cross punishes our sinful condition. It purchases our full salvation. And his cross produces our total sanctification.