

The Power of the Cross

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] In Mark's Gospel, chapter 8, verse 31, we read this, And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

And he said this plainly. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, but turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, Get behind me, Satan, for you're not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.

Yes, the Christ must suffer. And they went out to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, Sit here while I pray.

And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.

Remain here and watch. Going a little further, he fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.

[1 : 19] And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me, yet not what I will, but what you will.

And he came and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.

The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. And again, he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again, he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy.

And they did not know what to answer him. And he came the third time and said to them, Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough.

The hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise. Let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.

[2 : 22] And immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve. And with him a crowd with swords and clubs from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders.

Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, The one I will kiss is the man. Seize him and lead him away under guard. When he came, he went up to him at once and said, Rabbi, and he kissed him.

And they laid hands on him and seized him. But one of those who stood by drew up his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. But the other gospel writers tell us that was Peter.

And Jesus said to them, Have you come out against a robber with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching you and you did not seize me.

But let the scriptures be fulfilled. And the disciples all left him and fled.

[3 : 30] And as Peter was below in the courtyard one of the servant girls of the high priest came and seeing Peter warming himself she looked at him and said, You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus.

But he denied it saying, I neither know nor understand what you mean. And he went out to the gateway and the cock crowed.

And the servant girls saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, This man is one of them. But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, Certainly you are one of them for you are a Galilean.

But he began to invoke a curse and to swear, I do not know this man of whom you speak. And immediately the cock crowed a second time.

And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times. And he broke down and wept.

[4 : 50] It took a long time and much bitter sorrow before Simon Peter was truly taught the meaning of the cross uplifted high.

And certainly that first Good Friday, the thought of Jesus' blood was painful, repugnant to him. And it had always been so. We read it in Mark's Gospel.

Mark's Gospel has always been known as the Gospel most closely associated with Peter. His memoirs through his protégé Mark. We read that he was hostile to any talk of Jesus' death.

Then, of course, he was full of bravado and loyalty to Jesus, only then to fall so shamefully, exactly as Jesus had predicted, so dreadfully, humiliated, the leader of the disciples' band.

And notice, by the way, it's not expunged from Peter's memoirs to try and airbrush his reputation. It's all there in its terrible truthfulness.

[6 : 05] Because, of course, things change dramatically for Peter. We read, if you read on in Mark's Gospel in chapter 16 at the end, you read the wonderful, wonderful words of the angels at the empty tomb to the women who came and found that he is not here, that he is risen.

Do you remember what they said? Go, tell his disciples and Peter, that he is going before you to Galilee and there you will see him just as he told you and Peter.

Even Peter, the great denier of Jesus, is to be restored and he was, he was anointed as an apostle, as a preacher of Christ, no longer afraid of the shame of the cross, but rejoicing now and forever in the power of the cross, rejoicing in the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And many years later, as you know, Peter wrote letters, his first letter was to suffering Christians all around the edges of the Roman Empire and he was writing to encourage them that there are people chosen, he says, for obedience to Jesus and sprinkling with his blood.

A people redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus, as he so memorably puts it. You see, because Peter had witnessed the resurrection of Jesus Christ firsthand, he now understood the meaning of the cross uplifted high and he knew that as the old hymn says, there is power, wonder-working power in the precious blood of the Lamb.

[7 : 55] So this Good Friday, I want us to listen to Peter as he teaches us the power of the cross. In his first letter, there are three great references to the cross of Jesus that teach us, if you like, the three R's, the essential heart of what that first Good Friday was all about.

It's there on your sheets, the cross of Jesus has power to rescue and to restore and to reconcile man to God. Let's look at that first verse there on your sheet.

First Peter, chapter 1, verse 18. And Peter tells us there that the blood of Jesus has power to rescue. That is, on Good Friday, Jesus himself became the precious sacrifice that alone can bring ultimate rescue to man.

It's right there on your sheets. You were ransomed, he said, from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

Peter's language there, of course, would be familiar to anybody who knew the Old Testament. It's the language of the Exodus. Well, you remember, under Moses, God's people were ransomed, redeemed, out of the bondage of Egypt through a great act of God's judgment and his salvation and mercy.

[9 : 28] Remember the story, the tenth, the most awful of those dreadful plagues upon Egypt, where every household in Egypt was touched by the destroying angel of God and the firstborn perished in every single house except house.

The houses where people had taken shelter under the blood of the Passover lamb, a lamb without blemish or spot, a lamb whose blood was daubed in the lintels and upon the doorposts, to turn away the wrath of God and to instead open the door for those ones to rescue, out of bondage and into the promised land of God.

So you see, Peter's message here is absolutely clear. Jesus himself, the precious sacrifice, brings rescue into true freedom from the total futility, he says, of life without Christ.

Only Jesus' blood, only Jesus' death on the cross can liberate us from the futile ways inherited from our forefathers, he says. There's something rather ironic in Peter's words there, isn't there?

Because to many people in Glasgow today, I suspect liberation means liberation from God. The futile ways of our forefathers are the ways of religion, the ways of the church, the ways of God, and we're liberated from that in our modern generation.

[11 : 04] That's all part of the bad old days. Now we're modern, we're contemporary people, we liberated ourselves from all of that bondage, all of those commands of God, all of that restrictiveness.

We are free today. Well, friends, let me just tell you, there's nothing modern, nothing contemporary in that kind of idea at all.

The Bible tells us that from the very beginning humanity has had that attitude. Go back to the beginning of your Bible, read about it in Genesis chapter 3 in the Garden of Eden. Not a 21st century invention to want to throw off the yoke of God.

But when you do read it, read on into Genesis 4 and 5 and write on in the rest of the story and see what that so-called liberation led to. Not to happiness, not to liberty, but to bondage, to disillusion, to despair, to decay, to death.

That's the story of humanity. We all want freedom, of course, but according to the Bible, at least, when you reject the God who made you, you don't find freedom, you find futility, Peter says.

[12 : 21] Life is not magically beautiful and bountiful. No, in that way, according to the Bible, lies bitterness and brokenness and bondage.

Think about a football field. I think probably most football players really wish most of the time the referee would disappear because he's a pain in the neck with a whistle.

He just damps down the whole game. I don't know what referees are paid, but it can't be enough, can it? The abuse that they get from the terracing, from the pitch, from the managers. But just imagine if the referee did disappear.

Especially if it was an old firm game in Glasgow. How beautiful do you think that game would be? Or maybe you're more of a culture vulture than a football terracing person.

Perhaps you love to go to the concert hall and listen to the RSNO. I guess those who play in the orchestra must also at times get a bit fed up with a conductor, don't you think? That prima donna up there waving his baton around telling us to do this and that.

[13 : 26] I wish you would disappear. Let us artists express ourselves fully and freely. Well, what would be a result of that, do you think? I think we would find that the magnificent music of Beethoven or Bach or any of these other greats, well, it would soon sound just like a dreadful cacophony of noise.

Unrecognizable, unbearable. Like the sort of things that comes out of the earphones of teenagers' iPods. At least in my house. But isn't that so?

Without the referee, without the conductor in his proper place, there can't be order, can't there? Just chaos. There can't be beauty. Only brokenness.

Only discord and disaster. Well, let me ask you this. What does our world more closely resemble? The joy of music played in harmony, artists working together in synergy for a common goal of something beautiful and wonderful?

Or does our world rather more resemble a cacophony of discordant noise? Everybody playing their own tune, their own way, and thinking that's freedom.

[14 : 47] But actually just demonstrating the utter futility of the human condition, which describes our world. Well, Peter, the apostle of Christ, is pretty clear.

Every human being, he says, has inherited futility by nature. Vain, pointless, empty lives. We don't want to believe that, of course.

How could we? It's a pretty devastating outlook on life. We try and pretend it away, a lot of the time. We like to think that we are free. But Peter's message and Jesus' own message is that we are not free.

We are slaves to futility. Or as Jesus puts it, slaves to sin. When he says sin there, he doesn't mean to minor peccadilloes, little wrong things that we do.

He means sin as a mighty power that grips every human being deep in their personality. The things that explain the deep rooted behavior that bubble up at times and make us so ashamed.

[15 : 57] We don't like that kind of talk. But we do recognize it, don't we? We use euphemisms, of course. We say it's human nature.

Human nature. We want to explain away dreadful things sometimes that people have done.

Sometimes we use it as an excuse for ourselves.

It's human nature. It's natural. We want to excuse ourselves. Yes, I have been unfaithful to my wife. I've had an affair, but I'm only human. It's human nature, isn't it, for a bloke to want to sleep around.

That's what people say, isn't it? It's not my fault. It's natural. Is that freedom? To celebrate? Or is it futility? Is it natural? Of course, in a sense, sewage is natural, isn't it? But it certainly makes the world stink.

[17 : 06] And human nature is only natural in that sort of way. It is a fact of human life, but it makes the world stink. Because the truth is that we are in bondage to the power of sin.

And that's why human society is marked not by the beauty of true freedom, but by the bitterness of total futility. We are not free.

We're in bondage. And that's the irony, of course, having rejected God, we've actually filled our world with multiple gods, idols of our own making, that we now devote our lives to, seeking from them the freedom that we crave, and yet serving them slavishly as masters, bowing down to the altars of fashion, to the altars of fitness, or learning, or earning, or pursuing health, or wealth, or our work, or relationships, or whatever else it is.

But do these things really liberate us, do they? they certainly do not liberate us from the great tyrannical master death, do they?

It has an iron grip upon our lives. The filmmaker Woody Allen at least admits that. The constant struggle against annihilation and death is absolutely stupefying in its terror, he says.

[18 : 37] It renders everyone's accomplishments meaningless. futile. That's the human condition that we inherit from our race.

But you see, the message of Good Friday is that the cross of Jesus has power to rescue us from futility because Jesus himself became the precious sacrifice that alone can bring ultimate rescue from total futility into true freedom forever.

And that is because secondly, in 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 24, do you see, Peter tells us that the precious blood of Jesus has power to bring restoration. That is, on Good Friday, Jesus himself became the permanent sin bearer who alone can bring restoration to man.

he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds, you have been healed.

You see, Jesus, the permanent sin bearer, brings the restoration of complete healing from the cursed hopelessness of sin. He takes all that is wrong, sin, and he makes it righteousness, righteousness, says Peter.

[20 : 07] Right. He makes it right. He's clearly not talking about physical healing here. It's not medical matters Peter's concerned with, but spiritual sickness and disease.

He's quoting again from the Old Testament prophets, from Isaiah, who foretold that the servant of the Lord, the Christ, would come and suffer and bear himself the sins of his people.

I'm sure you know the words very well from Handel's Messiah from nowhere else. He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions, our rebellion against God's rightful rule.

He was crushed for our iniquities, our unfaithfulness that utterly ruins our relationship with God. And with his stripes, his wounds, we are healed.

Now let me ask you, does our world need healing? deep and real and radical and lasting healing, way beyond what governments and United Nations and IMFs and everybody else can do.

[21 : 20] Not just look at the news this Easter. We've got war in Syria, perhaps imminent war, certainly turmoil in Ukraine and Russia, disharmony in so many places, distrust and disillusion in public life in so many ways.

But that's not new either, by the way. These things are just evidences, symptoms of the same disease that is eaten away at the heart of humanity like a vicious cancer right from the very beginning of human history.

Isaiah the prophet knew all of these same things in his day 3,000 years ago. Violence, exploitation of the innocents, corruption in public life, loss of trust in law enforcement.

No one goes to law honestly, he says. They rely on empty pleas, they speak lies, they conceive mischief, they give birth to inequity. That's not a report on the phone hacking inquiry.

Well, it might be. That's Israel, 800 BC. But it could be Britain in 2014, couldn't it? Because the fundamental problem of human beings is still exactly the same.

[22 : 34] Our nature is damaged. It's all wrong. It's diseased. It needs healing, radical healing. And the Bible tells us why.

Isaiah says this, listen, your iniquities have made a separation between you and God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

That's pretty categorical, isn't it? That's the root problem that has made everything wrong in our world and in our lives. That's the fundamental rupture between humankind and God, our creator. And that is at the heart of what the Bible means by that little word, S-I-N, sin. sin. It's a rupture. And inevitably, when the most precious, most basic, most fundamental relationship in our human life ruptures, there's going to be a trail of great tragedy.

That's what happens, isn't it, in a family, when the fundamental relationship of a marriage partnership is ruptured. Can't but lead to agonizing pain, can it, for the whole family, for the extended family, even for the community.

[23 : 58] Relationship rupture always leads to misery upon misery. And that is the primary disease of all humanity, according to the Bible.

And all that we see that is wrong in the world, in our own personal lives, in our personal world, are just symptoms of that pathology that lies deep in the human condition.

everything is wrong and not right about our human hearts. And nobody on earth has got the power to do anything about that.

Isaiah says, God saw, and there was no man. No one to intercede for humanity's sickness. No one to bring healing.

salvation. And then the prophet says, God's own arm brought salvation. He put on rightness as a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head.

[25 : 00] God himself came to bring healing himself in the person of Jesus Christ, his son. Not to treat the symptoms alone, but to deal with the cancer itself at its primary source, to permanently bear away the sin of helpless human beings.

He himself bore our sins, says Peter, in his body on the tree. He was cursed for us, so that our sin might be taken away forever.

So that he might make all things right, do you see? That we might die to sin, that we might depart from that whole world gone wrong forever, and instead live to righteousness.

All things made right again in humanity and in the world permanently, forever. By his wounds you have been healed. The precious blood of Jesus shed on the cross has power to bring restoration from the cursed hopelessness of sin to the complete healing of God's righteousness.

A world renewed and put right forever. That's the world that Isaiah the prophet foresaw, where the desert will bloom and rejoice with joy.

[26 : 26] The ears of the deaf will be unstopped, the eyes of the blind opened, and sorrowing and sighing will flee away forever. Then John, all those centuries later saw it in his vision on Patmos, the final end where every tear will be wiped away and death itself shall be no more.

Now that day hasn't yet fully dawned. Peter's very clear on that. It awaits the revelation of Jesus, he says, at his coming. He's no false gospel in Peter, no spurious claims for what we can have right now, no.

But he says we have a living hope, a certain hope, of that complete healing of body and soul and society, the whole human world, because the cross of Jesus has power to bring that ultimate restoration to the world of men.

And we can know that, friends, because thirdly, Peter also tells us that the blood of Jesus has power to bring reconciliation. He's saying that on Good Friday, Jesus himself became the personal substitute who alone could bring reconciliation between man and God himself.

Christ suffered, 1 Peter 3 verse 18, Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

[28 : 01] Jesus is the personal substitute who brings reconciliation to the wonderful relationship with God the Father that we were created for, in the place of the woeful rupture to that relationship that we have brought upon ourselves because of sin.

See, the power of the cross is not just in what we're rescued from an end to futility in our lives and the hopelessness of sin. It's not even just what we're restored to, human freedom and real healing. It's about who it's all for. It's about to whom we are restored. To God our Father himself. Jesus came that he might bring us to God to bring about the great reconciliation, to heal the personal rupture, which is at the heart of all the wrong in our created order.

You see, at the heart of our whole universe is a tragedy of a great rupture, a rupture in man's proper relationship with God, where God is at the center of all things as the creator, as the ruler of all, and man is in his proper place as God's servant under his rule, made in his image, to find blessing in being a true image, by obeying God, by rejoicing in God's rule, by living under his gracious commands.

But all that is wrong in this whole universe stems from the fact of a terrible substitution. Man has willfully reached up to usurp God's throne, to try to steal God's place as the ruler of all things.

[29 : 49] That's what we've done. A terrible substitution, a tragic exchange. It's led to total disaster, a complete estrangement from God because he cannot allow his majesty to be assailed in that way, cannot allow man the unfitted immortality and power that he seeks.

If he did, we would have utterly destroyed ourselves long ago. This world would be far, far worse even than it is if God hadn't cursed mankind with futility and with mortality.

Just imagine how much more terrible the world would be if the great tyrants of history had been immortal and hadn't eventually died. Think of it. At the heart of the universe is a terrible, terrible substitution of man reaching up and grasping for God's throne.

But at the heart of the Christian gospel is a glorious substitution where God himself willingly stooped down, not clinging onto his throne, but instead himself becoming a servant, taking the place of man, and bearing the punishment of that rebellion in that wonderful exchange that brings reconciliation to sinful human beings.

And only through that glorious substitution, only through that great exchange can sinners be brought back to God, says Peter. That's the heart of Christ's reconciling work in this penal substitution of atonement.

[31 : 43] It's extraordinary to me that some people talk of a theory of penal substitutionary atonement as if it was just one idea made up by some clever theologians of what Jesus' death was about.

Friends, you don't have to be a clever theologian propounding theories to grasp this. You just have to have two eyes to be able to read Peter's words. Just look at this verse. Jesus' death is penal. He suffered once for sins. That is, he suffered our just punishment for sin against God. And Jesus' death was substitutionary.

He suffered for sins the righteous for the unrighteous. A great exchange took place. And that is why it was a death that was atoning, putting away the barrier of sin between man and God and bringing instead peace and reconciliation.

Peter says he suffered in this way for this purpose that he might really and truly bring us to God. There wasn't any other way that we could be reconciled to God according to the New Testament and according to the Old Testament God is holy.

[33 : 03] Unrighteous sinners can't come near him. Who can ascend the hill of the Lord says the psalmist? He who has clean hands and a pure heart who doesn't ever lift up his soul to what is false.

That describes no one on this earth by nature. None is righteous. No, not one. The Bible is absolutely clear. All are separated from God's presence by sin.

But because in Jesus God the Son himself became the permanent sin bearer to atone forever for sin it means we can come home to God.

He brings us to the Father. Jesus became our personal substitute dying for our sins. God is like the twin sacrifice on the day of atonement when the blood of one animal was shed for the sins of the people on the altar and the other animal the scapegoat had all the sins of the people confessed upon its head.

It was sent out to wander away forever in the wilderness bearing that sin far far away. That's what happened on that first good Friday when Jesus died on the cross.

[34 : 28] His people's sin were carried far far away never to return. And because our sin is gone permanently we can come home to the Father permanently.

He suffered once for sins the righteous for the unrighteous to bring us to God. So that in Paul's words we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is power wonder working power in the precious blood of the Lamb as Peter calls it.

Power to rescue power to restore reconcile even even the most desperate failures and deniers and betrayers of Jesus as Peter himself was.

That's why for those who love Christ and who trust Christ today is not tragic Friday terrible Friday but good Friday because at the cross of Jesus there is power even though I be chief of all the sinners there is hope for me judged condemned and guilty I am lost indeed but the cross of Jesus meets my deepest need for rescue true freedom for restoration to true humanity forever and for reconciliation with my true father in heaven and yours if you also trust Jesus so well might we rejoice and sing today of the power of the cross let's pray heavenly father how we thank you for sending your son the lord

[36 : 43] Jesus Christ to shed his precious blood that we might be ransomed and restored and reconciled with you forever may the message of the cross of Jesus Christ never leave our hearts until our dying day we pray for Jesus sake amen Sod stop whatever matter samehoday I we will save sir to