

1. The Certainty the Cross Provides

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- [0 : 0 0] The first reading on our sheets is from Matthew chapter 26. Now on the first day of unleavened bread, the disciples came to Jesus saying, Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?
- He said, Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, The teacher says my time is at hand. I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples. And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and they prepared the Passover.
- Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, Take, eat, this is my body.
- And he took a cup and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them saying, Drink of it, all of you. For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.
- We read again in Paul's letter to the Romans, some verses from chapter 3 and chapter 5. We'll look at again in a few moments.
- [1 : 0 4] All, says the apostle, all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin. As it is written, none is righteous, no, not one.
- For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.
- Although the law and the prophets bear witness to it. The righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who have faith. For there is no distinction for all sinned and lack the glory of God.
- Being justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.
- This was to show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time so that he might be just and the justifier of one who has faith in Jesus.
- [2 : 2 1] Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him also we have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand.
- And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.
- God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.
- Amen. May God bless to us this, his word. Well, if you'd open your sheets, then you'll have the passage of scripture in that second reading before you.
- And I want to direct our thoughts for a little while to that this Good Friday. Security.
- [3 : 2 8] Security. The security of knowing that we'll be accepted. It's very important, isn't it, in all sorts of ways. Kids, children want to be accepted by their friends, not rejected.

And so they get nervous, don't they, when there's a change in their class at school from one year to the next. Well, will I have friends in the new class? A natural question. And teenagers also are even more desperate for acceptance from their peers.

Often that's what makes them such a slave to fashion, isn't it? Do I look okay in this dress? By the way, whatever you answer to that question, the answer is wrong.

Because I've discovered if you say, no, you look awful, you get a scowl. And if you say, yes, you look great, you then get the answer, no, I don't, it's no good. So, why ask?

But that's a man speaking. A father. But actually, fathers are really quite important, aren't they? Because at a deeper level, all of us crave acceptance and love in life.

[4 : 33] And if we lack the assurance of that, if we lack the assurance of love and acceptance, especially from our parents, perhaps especially from our father, then that can lead to great, great psychological insecurity in life, can't it?

That was part of the pathos and the power of the Oscar-winning film, *The King's Speech*, wasn't it? I'm sure you thought that when you watched it. The king's second son, Bertie, who never had the approval of his father, spent his whole life trying.

And that speech defect was such a big part of that. Well, some people very sadly learn that they have lacked love and acceptance when they're young.

And it can be something that blights their whole life. They can live under a burden, can't they, of seeking desperately to prove themselves. Seeking desperately to win that love and acceptance that has always proved elusive from the very people that they most craved it from.

What a huge difference there is, isn't there? With somebody who can say, yes, I know my father loves me. I know my parents love me. I know that they're proud of me. I know they always will.

[5 : 50] I know that they'll always be my rock of strength. What a vast gulf between those two people. It's just a fact, isn't it? Certainty about parental approval, especially a father's approval, is a vital thing for health, for wellness, and for peace in life.

And so in a far greater way, certainty and security about our acceptance with God is of vital importance in life.

From time immemorial and still all over the world today, there are people who are not secure, who don't have any assurance about their acceptance with God, who fear very deeply rejection by God, and who are spending their life seeking that acceptance, driven to devote their whole lives to doing more and to doing better in the hopes that, like the father who never really acknowledged his child, that at last they'll be able to do enough and be enough to win that acceptance and that affection and that favor from God.

Now that is what defines human religion. Whether it's the overtly religious type, or in fact whether it's quite secular and even apparently atheistic in its variety, it's all about reaching out and reaching up to seek approval from a God that you can never be sure you have ever really done enough for to win that approval.

Whether it's a religious God, whether it's your religion, your idea of God, or whether it's a material God, whether it's an approval you're seeking from society, from your friends, from the world, whoever it might be.

[7 : 38] Seeking that approval by reaching out and reaching up. But you know, the Christian faith is the very opposite of that.

Because the Christian faith is not about that kind of religion at all. The Christian faith is all about grace. C.S. Lewis, the famous author, was once asked, what is it that distinguishes Christianity from every other religion?

And he said in a flash, well that's easy, just one word. Grace. Religion, you see, of whatever flavor it is, is about reaching up to find God, and to please God, and to seek acceptance from God.

But the grace of Christian faith is about God reaching down in grace, in unqualified love, to give us that favor and that acceptance that we so crave.

And so only grace can guarantee acceptance with God, because it gives that acceptance and that love and that security, and it gives it freely and abundantly.

[8 : 51] And Paul's letter to the Romans that we have a portion of in front of us here in chapter 5 is full of the great guarantees, of the great certainty that flows from grace in Jesus Christ.

Where religion puts lifelong burdens onto people's backs, the grace of God, through Jesus Christ, puts a song into their heart. A song of rejoicing is what he says here.

Because we stand in God's grace by faith, says Romans chapter 5, verse 1. Do you see? Because we stand by grace, he says, we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

Because of God's grace, through Jesus Christ, we can be assured that our salvation is certain, and that our salvation is absolutely complete.

And so in this Easter weekend, we're going to dwell on these two things, the certainty that the cross provides, and then again on Easter Sunday morning, the completeness that the resurrection promises to us.

[9 : 54] I want to focus today on the guarantee that there is in the cross of Christ, that it gives us now a guarantee that we have a certain status of acceptance with God, a status of peace with God, who is our creator and our judge.

Look at Romans 5, verse 1, beginning there, the second last paragraph, 5, 1. Therefore, since we've been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus' death means our salvation is certain. You see, the verse begins with a therefore. And Paul is summing up the whole argument since chapter 3, verse 21, which you'll see just above is all about justification, that is, about God declaring somebody to be in the right with him.

And he does it by grace alone. And it's received through faith alone. The righteousness of God, says chapter 3, verse 23, is through Jesus Christ, do you see, for all who have faith.

And therefore, chapter 5, verse 1, since we've been justified, since we've been declared right with God by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

[11 : 17] It just sums it all up and gives us the unequivocal result of it all. Because, because God's saving way of making us right with him, of making us acceptable to him, is by grace and through faith, and only because it is, we can be sure that we actually have that peace with God now.

We have certainty about absolute security, no doubts at all, because it has all come down from God himself through our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's not come from our side at all. It's not about anything that we've done, but what he's done. I want us to look briefly at three certainties, three certainties that are so important for us to understand and be clear about, so that we know that we can say as believers in Jesus Christ that we know we have a certain status with God and that we know we will be vindicated on that great day of judgment.

Some people think that's a terribly arrogant claim, by the way. Some people think that it's a presumptuous thing. How can you possibly dare to say that God will accept you on the day of judgment? I had that conversation with somebody not that long ago.

He said to me, surely it's a much humbler thing to say that maybe God will accept me if I can live a life that's worthy enough for God to do so. It might sound like that, but you see, in fact, that is actually far, far more arrogant and presumptuous to say that.

[12 : 55] Because it assumes, doesn't it, that well, perhaps what I can offer will be good enough and worthy enough that God will somehow feel indebted to me and have to accept me. But you see, by contrast, to be certain of acceptance with God, that's the thing that actually requires great humility.

Because it's a self-humbling realization that in fact we all lack the glory of God, lack it completely. No one is righteous, says the Bible there, not one, not even me at my very best.

And therefore, if there is going to be acceptance of me to God, then it's all going to be God's doing and none of my doing. It's all got to be His grace through the Lord Jesus Christ.

And real humility, you see, is to recognize that only the cross of Jesus can give us certainty about salvation. and yet to rejoice that the death of Jesus does, does give us that certainty.

So here's the first certainty. Peace with God. Peace with God is real and certain through Jesus' death. And it is so because real righteousness comes from God.

[14 : 13] The putting right is something that God must do and God has done because it's God who has the chief problem and not us. Now that might sound odd but that's what this portion of the Bible tells us.

We need peace with God primarily not because we've been at war with God, although we have, but because the Bible tells us God has been at war with us.

In any broken relationship there are two sides, aren't there? And both partners are estranged and there can only be reconciliation if both of those sides are dealt with.

And in this relationship between us and God, you see, we humans are the ones who have caused the breakdown. We are the ones who have broken faith. We are the ones who are the adulterers, if you like, in this exclusive relationship and therefore God is rightly angry.

Look at chapter 3, verse 23, right in the middle there. All sinned and lack the glory of God. That is, as Paul put it right back in chapter 1 of his letter to Romans, we exchange the glory of God for idols, for other gods.

[15 : 33] Ultimately, of course, what we've done is exchange God's rule for our own rule. We've made our own selves God. We've said, I'll do it my way, just like Frank Sinatra. That's the song, isn't it, of the human heart.

It's no accident that that is the number one song that's requested in crematoria to be played at funerals. The number one song, I did it my way. Because that's the song that sums up our human lives.

That's the heart of what sin is. Now, you can scorn God's glory in a pagan way. Paul talks about that in Romans chapter 1, chasing debased behavior and a prodigal life.

But you can equally do it in a very pious and religious way. That's what he talks about in Romans chapter 2, like the Jews did. Very religious, very morally superior, but hypocritical.

Just as twisted in the heart as the other. And you see, with all of that, whatever the form, God is not at peace. God is at war. God's wrath, says Romans chapter 1, is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness, whether pagan or religious.

[16 : 42] And there's no way out. Absolutely none. Look at the first reading there, Romans 3, verse 9. No one is righteous. Not one. Jews and Greeks alike are all under sin.

So can we then somehow work our way out of this into God's favor? Well, absolutely not, says verse 20 there. By the works of the law, no human being will ever be justified in his sight.

No one. Not many people try and go on trying all through their lives. That's why there are so many religions in the world. And many people think, in fact, that that's really what Christianity is all about.

But that's not Christianity at all. It's just other pagan religion with a vaguely Christian vocabulary around it. And it gives no certainty. Absolutely none.

It gives only fear because if we're honest, in our honest moments about our own hearts, we know our own lack of holiness. We know our own lack of goodness. So we despair.

[17 : 43] That's the tragedy, you know, that's experienced by so many in supposedly Christian churches today. I see it all the time in people who come from a background in the Church of Rome, for example.

They have no assurance, no certainty at all. Just a great guilt and fear upon their life. But it's just as common in many so-called reformed churches. People fear.

They don't know. Can I really be sure that God will ever accept me in the end? But look again at Romans 5, verse 1 there at the bottom. This text tells us that we can and we do have peace.

We have it certainly. Because, look at chapter 3, verse 24 above it, though we have all sinned and lacked God's glory, we are justified.

We are put right with God by His grace as a gift. Not by our good works, not by our prayers, not by our piety, not by our fruitfulness, not by anything else, but just God's gift alone.

[18 : 51] That's very, very humbling, isn't it? We find that very hard, that we contribute nothing, not one iota, to our standing with God. It's all His gift.

And yet, that is precisely why it can be a certain peace with God. It's like a desperate journalist or expatriate caught up in a civil war in a country that's erupting and the very last flight is about to leave back to home and every affordable seat has been bought up and taken.

And he sees his last hope ebbing away and then somebody comes along and puts into his hands a priceless, first-class ticket for a seat on that last plane.

That's very humbling, isn't it? But very, very wonderful. It's the guarantee of safety and of salvation. And that is the gift of God's grace.

Only His gift of righteousness can ever guarantee us that peace with God. Because real reconciliation can't possibly be bought. It can't be bargained.

[19 : 58] It can only be received from God in the empty hands of faith through Jesus Christ, says Romans 5.11. We have received reconciliation.

But hang on, you say, how can that be? How can that be a free gift? How can that be just and right if you're telling me that God takes sin so seriously? Surely it would be sinful.

Surely it would be wrong of God not to punish sin. Look at Romans 5.6, the last paragraph. How can that be right? God justifying, God accepting, God not condemning the ungodly, the sinful.

Imagine a judge who did that with a rapist. Somebody who'd been in the dock and all the evidence was absolutely compelling, but the judge said, my verdict is justified, not condemned.

And so you can walk free. And we would be outraged at that, wouldn't we? Rightly so. We'd say there must be justice, there must be punishment. But we all have a sense of justice deep within us.

[21 : 05] Because that image is the justice in the heart of God. And we're rightly scandalized when justice is not done. So surely God must punish sin. Oh yes, he must.

And that is God's great problem, if I can put it that way. Can he be just in punishing sin? And yet, can he be merciful in justifying sinners and making peace with them?

Well yes, he can, says the Bible, and that is the second great certainty. Not only is peace with God real and certain through Jesus' death, but the punishment of God is also real and certain through Jesus' death.

There can be real righteousness from God himself because there is a real redemption by God himself from sin. How can God both punish man's sin and pardon man's sin at the same time?

So as to declare sinful, ungodly people as righteous, as justified, as not guilty, and do it as a free gift. How can God do that? Well the answer is right there in the middle of that passage in Romans, verse 24 and 25 of chapter 3.

[22 : 23] Can you see? This gift comes only, says the apostle, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Now that language, redemption, comes from the Old Testament, comes from the book of Exodus, which was the great redemption, the great rescue.

God's people rescued from the powers of Egypt, from their slavery, to become God's chosen people by his grace. Do you remember that story? The prince of Egypt?

It was a great rescue, wasn't it? But it was a great rescue through a great, great judgment. God said to his people, I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with a mighty act of judgment.

And it was a great judgment. God judged every single house in the land of Egypt. In every house in Egypt, the firstborn was slain by God's avenging angel.

Do you remember? I know you've got it wrong, you're going to say. It wasn't every house, was it? The Israelites were spared, that's the whole point. So not every house was judged. But yes, every house was judged by God.

[23 : 32] Every house faced a death penalty, every single one. But in the houses of those people who heeded God's way of salvation, the bloodshed was not their own, but it was the blood of the Passover lamb.

When the destroying angel saw the blood on the doorposts and on the lintels of the house, he passed by and God's wrath turned away from that home. Not because judgment was averted from that house, but because judgment had already fallen on that house.

Because God's wrath was already spent in the death of the lamb that God had provided as a substitute for the blood of his own people. The blood of the lamb that propitiated, that turned away the wrath of God's judgment and saved his people.

And Paul says here in Romans 3, verse 25, that in just this way there is redemption for all who are in Christ Jesus, whom God put forth as a propitiation by his blood, he says.

God cannot be just unless he does punish sin, that is true. But in order to be wonderfully merciful, he himself bears that punishment for us in his own person on the cross at Calvary, that he might be, as Romans 3, verse 26 says, that he might be just, the one who punishes sin, and also the justifier of sinners.

[25 : 16] Through Jesus Christ there can be and there is real punishment of sin and real pardon for sin. It's impossible for us to fully comprehend that and every illustration is necessarily inadequate, it's feeble, it's lacking, but just think of this.

A famous football club is faced with a disaster because the fans riot at the cup final. It's all over the news, there's terrible damage to the city, everyone is up in arms, and the football association meets to pass judgment on the club.

And the punishment is to be a huge fine and to be the docking of ten points from the league. So the president of the football association is dispatched to speak to the manager of the club and he tells him this drastic news.

Well that's a catastrophe he says, we'll be finished this year in the league, we'll be out of Europe next year, we'll lose millions and millions in the gate receipts and in the TV money.

Yes you will, says the president, but this behaviour must be punished. But sir, he says, this club's going to be bankrupted, it's history gone, we'll never be able to pay our debts, we'll be ruined.

[26 : 41] Yes, alas, that is so, but justice must be done, and it must be seen to be done, I cannot not insist on this punishment. but sir, says the manager, you're not just the president of the football association, you yourself are the owner of this football club.

Yes I am, he says, and so this will cost me everything. I'll have to sell all that I have and every other business that I have in order to pay this club's debts so that it can be saved, but the club must be punished, justice demands it, and yet so that it can also be saved, I'll pay the price myself, although it costs me absolutely everything.

And just so you see God himself in the person of his son paid it all that we might be saved. Peace with God is real and certain because there is a real righteousness from God as a gift.

And that can be because the punishment of God was also real and certain. There is real redemption by God at great, great cost. That's why, thirdly, our pardon from God is real and certain through Jesus Christ.

Simply to be received by God in the empty hands of faith. faith. Look again at these wonderful words in verse 24 and 25 of Romans 3.

[28 : 22] Somebody said these are the most important words that have ever been written. Our justification, our standing with God at peace is a gift of his grace, says verse 24.

It's a gift, says verse 25, to be received by faith. It's a royal pardon to be received and that is why it's certain. And look down again to chapter 5, verse 2.

Through Jesus Christ we have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand. Do you see? What is faith?

Faith is simply the empty hands that receive this extraordinary gift of God's grace. It's the hands that receive from Jesus the gift of himself as the Passover lamb.

his broken body and his shed blood shed for many for the forgiveness of sins. Take it, said Jesus to his disciples as he acted it out before them. Trust me, he says.

[29 : 23] Trust in my sacrifice that makes your pardon certain. Take it. Faith isn't some quality of suspending reality of believing things that aren't true.

It's quite the opposite. Faith simply means trusting Jesus' words, the words of the Son of God, that he himself is the door into the peace and pardon of the Heavenly Father's house, into the home of his marvelous grace and mercy.

That's what faith is. I am the door, says Jesus. If anyone enters by me, he'll be saved. It's certain. Through him also we have obtained access by faith into this grace.

it's certain. It's desperately humbling. There's no other way into that grace except through Jesus Christ.

He is the door. Except holding out empty hands and saying, I receive from you what I can never otherwise have. It's humbling, but it is utterly certain.

[30 : 36] just because it is through faith alone and by God's grace alone. Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The grace of God, and only the grace of God poured out through the cross of our Lord Jesus can guarantee our pardon and guarantee our continuing peace with God forever.

forever. Because through the cross, our sin is completely punished forever. And that's the great certainty that the cross provides.

And that's why Good Friday really is good news for everyone who will have faith, no matter who you are, no matter what your sin, your guilt, your shame, everyone who has faith in Jesus Christ can know that certainty that only his cross provides.

Let's pray. at the cross of Jesus, even though I be chief of all the sinners, there is hope for me, judged, condemned, and guilty.

[32 : 00] I am lost indeed, but the cross of Jesus meets my deepest need. At the cross of Jesus, pardon is complete, love and justice mingled, truth and mercy meets, though my sins condemn me, Jesus died instead.

There is full forgiveness in the blood he shed. And so, Lord Jesus Christ, this Easter time, would you open our eyes and open our hearts to understand these things and open our hands to receive by faith this great gift of your grace through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.