

The Cross (Part One)

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself”

Reflection 24 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

I begin by simply reflecting on what the death of Jesus has come to mean to me. I learned about it early on. It was part of my childhood. I was intrigued by the story of Jesus being arrested in the garden, the night trials, appearing before Pilate, being scourged, a crown of thorns twisted and pressed down on his head, his staggering through the streets of Jerusalem, and his being crucified. I don’t remember how early on I knew the details of it all. In truth I still don’t. But I don’t remember how I understood it all back then as a child, except for this – that I knew that in some sense Jesus did it “for me.” And it always seemed very heroic.

Later I learned that Jesus is “the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 2:2), that “Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28), that Jesus died the death it was ours to die. We were supposed to hang on that cross. Our sins outrage God. They dishonor God. They are a shameful offense against his perfect holiness. And now God’s anger must somehow be appeased. And there’s no way we could do this. We’re not good enough. And so God to assuage his anger against us sends his Son – his perfect Son – to die in our place. That is how I came to understand it. That’s how I was told it was. It’s how many Christians still understand it.

But many, many others can’t follow this. It makes no sense to them – this rage, this violence, at the very heart of God. This notion of a God so outraged and angry at us that he could only be satisfied by the death of his son scandalizes them. And so behind the increasing secularization of our age, behind the declining church attendance in our time, are doctrines like this that for many people don’t make sense.

For the record I am still very much in the series “New World in the Morning” and trying to get us all back to the great good news of God’s love. And so I kept thinking. I found other verses that seemed to be saying something else. What might happen, for instance, if we took seriously what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:19 – that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting people’s sins against them? What might happen if we took this brilliant off-the-scale notion of God being in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting people’s sins against them, and planted it firmly in our minds, memorized it, reflected on it, and began to see the world in this light?

So I started wondering what had really happened at the Cross. I went back to my childhood. Yes, Jesus “died for me.” That’s true. That’s undeniably true. The power in the cross is just that – that Jesus died for you. He died for me. Yes, he was our ransom. His death was the price paid to secure our freedom, our salvation.

But then the question is to whom is the ransom paid? Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many. But to whom? Well, to God of course. That’s what the great eleventh-century churchman Anselm thought, and it made perfect sense back then in the Middle Ages,

dishonoring one's liege lord and all. You sin against the king. The king is furious. A ransom must be paid. So to God! And so for a thousand years that view carried the day.

But maybe not so fast. Believing the ransom to be paid to God has led us far too often to depict atonement in ways that undermine the love of God. Now for a thousand years before Anselm many had understood the ransom to be paid to Satan. It was widely understood that the ransom Jesus paid at the cross was to Satan, not to God but to Satan, thereby, however, achieving a great victory over Satan, redeeming humanity from servitude to him.

So what do we think of that? Maybe it seems on literalistic reading to be macabre, gruesome. But perhaps there was deep spiritual, psychological truth to this after all.

Consider this. Inside us all is a sense that we are morally wrong. We have done things we should have never done, and there's nothing now to be done about it. We have failed to do things we should have, and those moments are passed. There is a darkness in us that tells us we are morally wrong and it leaves us either depressed and demoralized or it drives us to numb ourselves in sex and drink and ambition. This happens to us all. We're all wired this way. Should church and Scripture disappear, all this would still be true. We all feel morally unclean, unworthy, guilty, shamed.

So God canceled what stood against us, nailing it to the cross (just as Paul wrote in Colossians 2:13-15). Jesus would be the final sacrifice, and the last scapegoat, but that's another matter. The truth that must be seen is this: The darkness inside us – Satan in us – is paid off (satisfied) by our God who is fabulously joyful and ever loving.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week