

The Cross (Part Two)

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself”

Reflection 25 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Now in my understanding of the cross, I find that what Scripture was saying all along is that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting people’s sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:19). Notice now – who really needs to be reconciled to whom. Bear down and see. It’s God who does the reconciling. Far from needing a ransom paid to him, God pays the ransom. It’s all God. Earlier in our text, in fact, in the verse just before, verse 18, Paul declares, “All this is from God.” It is we who must be reconciled. And at the cross we are.

Paul states this even more clearly in Colossians 1:21: “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.” But the alienation, the “disconnect,” was all “in your mind.” You act like a spiritual jerk in ways you hate yourself for, in ways you know are wrong, in ways you know are irresponsible, and the darkness seeps into your soul, the guilt, the shame, the sense of unworthiness. But God, Paul says just a little later in Colossians (2:14), canceled all that and nailed it to the cross.

And then I remember how Scripture describes Satan as the Great Accuser. That’s in Revelation 12:9-10. But the story of Job also illustrates it. So Satan, a Dark Force inside us, comes to us, to everyone, to every human being, saying, “You’re wrong. You owe a debt in the scales of justice.” And in the moral calculus of the universe, you have done wrong. And now you see the consequences, and you know you are wrong. And you can’t escape or evade responsibility. God knows. You know. Sometimes we’ve made a Faustian bargain: we’ve sold our soul for our own personal advancement. And now the dark force says, “Now, you have to pay up.” Of course, you do.

But Scripture is saying that there is great good news. There is Gospel! At the cross something unbelievably wonderful happened. Satan demands payment. The Dark Force drives deep into your soul. Your wrongness overwhelms you. Most days you can’t even look at it clearly. So you try to forget it; you settle for making it through the day, or making it through the night, or making it till the weekend. But underneath it all, it’s all still there. Worst of all, it keeps you from your real life task. It paralyzes you, freezes you, and takes you out of commission. You spend your life on a spiritual injured reserve list somewhere.

Jesus, however, takes these IOUs – he dies for our sins – and pays them off. In this sense, he becomes our ransom. He took what was against us – that stood against us – and nailed it to the cross (Colossians 2:13-15). He snatched the accusation from deep down in our souls and paid it off himself. Think about it: This is psychologically the most true thing you’ve ever heard. Deep in your soul this, finally this, makes sense of life.

So I stand accused. I try to deny it. I try to dodge it. But deep in the night – down in my soul – I know I’m accused. And on my own, I have no answer. And now I’m frozen. But Jesus himself died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous. I knew

something had to be done. Something had to be done about me. About my sin. And Scripture is saying over and over, “And it was! It was done!”

Christ died for sins once for all. It’s done. It’s taken care of – to bring me to God, to show me that the way back home is open. And now finally at the cross we can see that at the heart of the universe there is not accusation but love. Christ died for sins. He is, in this sense, the ransom. He disarms the force of accusation at the heart of being human, and triumphs over it to bring us to God, to bring us all back to this God who is fabulously joyful and ever loving.

So this God became one of us and died for us, was in Christ, suffering the scourging and the stripping, feeling the nails driven in, enduring the thirst, the taunts, the excruciating pain in wrists and feet, gasping for breath. Can you see what would happen on Planet Earth if everyone could see God this way? Can you see what would happen in your workplace or in your neighborhood? God was not the one who demanded ransom. God was the one who paid it. Can you imagine the places where this story, this story, is told and understood filling with people who need the darkness in their souls to go away.

We then are called to understand and to celebrate the end of the Dark Force inside us that is always telling us that we are wrong. That ransom is paid. God paid it. Far from needing the ransom paid to him, God paid it. The way back home to God is wide open.

This is the best news you’ll ever hear or anyone else will ever hear. This is the most exciting possibility for the world that we’ve ever known – that the world could be brought together as one, that reconciliation is possible, awaiting only a people on earth committed to it. The world needs it. This could save the world: roomfuls of people who really believe what Scripture says about reconciliation, about God being in Christ reconciling the world to himself, so that now we can turn the other cheek, love even our enemies, and forgive those who have sinned against us, a community that really believes this, and not just a person or two, or a group or two, but hundreds, thousands, millions and millions, a great global spiritual awakening founded on the knowledge that God is all the way through love. We are called to be a people who really believe Jesus, and who he was, and what he taught, and why he died, and who if necessary will follow him even to our last excruciating breath. As he did. And we can do this because we know our glorious story goes on and on. Beyond fear. Beyond death. Forever and ever.

– Dale Pauls