

It was midnight and I was sitting in my living room in Irving, looking out a large picture window through which a streetlight shown. I was in my early twenties, married, and on my own. It was at that point, and I am sure you know what I mean, when you realize that there is no one else around, such as parents, who are going to fix things and you learn that you have to live with the consequences of your decisions. I had been blessed with good parents who spared me many consequences as I was growing up (at least I thought that was good then!), therefore reality was surprising. So I was there in that dark room; feeling the pressure of the decisions I had made.

I had also slipped into believing that the choices I made were a “performance” of sorts, which made me either acceptable to God or not. I needed to be a really good Christian and I did not feel very successful. I wanted what I wanted; I didn’t really trust God completely. I thought to trust him would be like casting myself off a diving board into a pool of water vastly over my head, and not be able to come up for air! I was afraid God would require things of me I couldn’t give. Deep down I knew I wasn’t good enough, and that pressure bore down on me. So those were the thoughts, as I sat by that window to pray. The streetlight illumined the words on the pages of my Bible that night. These are the words I read. READ Ro 5:6-11

I had been raised in the church but somehow I had never fully understood the message of grace until that night. The words “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” just jumped right out of the passage. As I read, “While we were still weak and powerless to help ourselves Christ died for us,” I realized, since he did this for me, for us, “while we were God’s enemies,” what reason have we to fear the wrath of God? God opened my eyes and heart, letting me see the love of Jesus that night.

God’s word is alive and speaks to us. That’s why it is important to give it space in your life to read it so that you let God speak to your needs. God’s word is active and can guide you into what you need to know about yourself, and it can guide you into God’s love. I needed to know Christianity is not about the potential to “fix ourselves up” so that we can somehow reach up to God and please God with newfound good behavior. No, we are born dead in sin. We are powerless to help ourselves. The initiative is always God’s. God knew when we were created that we would fall, requiring God to rescue us through his Son, Jesus Christ. But God took the risk of the tragic. Anytime you love someone you take the risk of the tragic. You never know how it’s going to turn out and your heart may be broken. There are many times God’s heart has been broken by our sin. Yet God created us anyway and willingly reaches down to us, even though it costs God a great deal to do so.

At the time this was written, remember, people were extremely conscious of the wrath of the gods. Remember what Rahab said about the gods? Gods were capricious; humans put effort into appeasing those gods so that they would receive blessing. People were the servants of the gods. So the message of this Scripture was astounding. God would rescue mankind in order to save us?

Now while people of Bible times understood wrath but struggled with the notion that God would rescue us, people today, particularly in our culture struggle with the idea of the wrath of God. You hear it all the time. Why is sin such a big deal? So, people argue, if I choose to sin, I only hurt myself. Why can’t God just “get over it?” Let’s consider this way of viewing the argument.

Evil deserves punishment – that’s the justice that we expect from a just God. And, punishment will happen. But for now, God holds off because God desires that no one should perish. Do you remember the parable Jesus told about the wheat and weeds being allowed to grow together (Mt 13:24-30)? That’s why he allows the “wheat and the tares,” meaning the good and the bad, to reside alongside one another. God’s hope is that all turn to Christ to be set free from judgment. But on judgment day, people who cling to evil will be destroyed. The catch is we are all a part of that evil because we disregard God and God’s will. The Bible says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Ro 3:23).

So the argument in our culture that sin only hurts me is weak. Sin offends God, not to mention prevents me from loving others. Our Book of Confessions interprets it like this, “We are full of all wickedness, distrust, contempt and hatred of God; we are unable to do or even to think anything good of ourselves.”<sup>1</sup> The Bible also says, “The wages of sin is death” (Ro 6:23). And so, evil will be punished, and when evil is judged, because we all sin, we all are subject to punishment and death.

The amazing thing is that God knew all this from the beginning, so God set his heart on plans to rescue those who believe. Do you ever wonder how Jesus copes with the mess we make of things? Why did he always hang out with sinners and love us? Jesus knew he would be given the authority of life over death. What we need to see is the bond of God the Father and Jesus the Son.

Now God is often accused by people of abusive behavior toward his Son. People say, “How could God kill his Son?” But Jesus says he offered himself freely. He says, “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again” (Jn 10:17-18a). Paul interprets it like this, “Jesus was in the form of God, but he didn’t cling to his equality with God. Instead, he emptied himself, humbling himself, taking the form of a man, becoming obedient to death on a cross” (Phil 2:6-8).

So the Father and the Son are together in this plan of salvation, this deliverance from approaching wrath. Remember last week Psalm 91 said God protects us and shows us his salvation? All those promises of Psalm 91 came at the appointed time in Jesus. It is something God planned for us *before we made any move toward him*.

Can you grasp what kind of love that is?

Christ didn’t die for us because he detected that we really weren’t that bad after all and we were trying to overcome our hatred, or to end our enmity toward him. He died to *overcome* the enmity and hatred people have toward God.

So in this way, the cross is a deliverance from sin that leads to death. What Jesus did demonstrates God’s love for us. So it was a joint initiative. Father and Son as one together, loving us and rescuing us, even though we hated him at the time.

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<sup>1</sup>The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.037.

Do you know anyone who has given their life for another? We hear stories, of course. During the Virginia Tech massacre, remember the story of the teacher who blocked the doorway of his classroom from the approaching gunman before he was fatally shot. He risked and lost his life because he wanted to save his beloved students. Jesus gave his life for us when we were not beloved at all but we were his enemies.

This speaks to the fact that God and Jesus have great hope for us. Can you grasp that? If you do, it will transform your life. God has great hope for you. This is hope against hope, that God should love us this much to make such a sacrifice for us. The death of Christ is a demonstration of that love. It proves God's love. You cannot separate God and Jesus in the act of self-giving.

So the cross is a deliverance but the cross is also a sacrifice. Jesus sacrificed his life and that sacrifice is applied to us. God said through Paul in Philippians, "because Jesus did this, I have highly exalted him and all those who believe in what he did will be saved from wrath and thus reconciled to me." Because of his incredible sacrifice and obedience, God gave him full and complete authority for salvation. Jesus' act of goodness and sacrifice substitutes for our "enemy status" before God. We can stand on the hope of Jesus' death for us. He did it out of great love for us.

Do you see the love? Or, do you continue to be hostile to God by separating the love of God from his Son?

God says, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased" (Mt 3:17).

Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father. God rewarded Jesus alone with the authority of salvation.

Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life" (Jn 5:19-24).  
*What does it mean to believe?* The salvation of God comes through Jesus.

So the cross is life, even though it seems to be death. That life starts for us now, here on earth, as we become alive to God by believing in Jesus by faith. Christ enters us and wakes up our souls to care about God, to love God and God's will. That's the part I was missing so many years ago.

We may not love God all at once, but if we persevere in faith, we will love God more and more. That will help us love others and begin to live less hostile to God. It is amazing how when Jesus is a part of your life, when things seem dead and impossible, he can bring life. He can resurrect possibilities you never dreamed possible. He can enact in you surprising gifts and bring you out of depression, meaninglessness, and self-destructive behavior, leading you to life that is greatly satisfying.

This is good news – astounding news. Do you believe it?

How did Jesus do it? How did he come and get himself crucified so that he could cover our sins? He is very strong, obedient, and courageous. He is one with God. He trusted in God's plan. We can exult in such love of a God who does not think of himself first, but of you, his beloved, and He thinks you are worth the sacrifice.

AMEN