

The Good News of Redemption

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[0:00] Father God, we do want to give you thanks for the free church that we are a part of, and! for the work that you are doing through your people, that you are building your church in lots of different places, and you invite us to play our part in seeing your kingdom grow as we pray. And so, we are glad to be able to pray together for churches in our region, in our presbytery.

We think of Dunfermline in Fife, and we give thanks that in a couple of weeks they'll have a new minister. We pray for Andrew and his family as they get ready to move to Dunfermline to begin that new challenge and opportunity. We pray that you would give them peace and joy as they seek to serve you. We pray that as he brings that message of reconciliation to the people in Dunfermline, that hearts would be encouraged and lives would be changed, that you would be with the congregation, help them to love and support and to pray for that new minister and new ministry, and use them in their wider community. And we also want to give you thanks for the church in Aberdeen, for Bon Accord. We thank you for their desire and the opportunity that they have to plant a church in Aberdeenshire. We recognize that that part of our country has not got many churches, gospel churches, and so we pray that as they plan to start a new church, that it would be a means of many people getting to hear the good news, that you are the one true and living God, that you have provided a way of salvation through the Lord Jesus, and that many people would be changed, to be with them through that whole process. Lord, we thank you for the work of the gospel in Kirkcaldy, again over in Fife. We thank you for their sacrificial support of a new church in Leaven, and we pray for Jeff and Elijah as the new team develops there in Leaven, as they preach your word, as they look to make inroads into the community. We also pray for John and his ministry in Kirkcaldy, continue to encourage the church there, enable them to be faithful in communicating hope and good news to their immediate community. Thank you that they have a new missionary family working with them. Pray that they would adjust well, come to be a real blessing as they have sacrificed in order to serve the local church over there in Dunfermline. Lord, we're also conscious of the needs of our islands. We thank you for the islands of Scotland. We thank you for the history and heritage of your word being preached and proclaimed. We pray for the island of Aran as they seek to find a new minister. Lord, that you would provide. We recognize that there is such a need for a clear communication of what the Bible teaches. There is such a great need for people to encounter Jesus as Lord and Savior.

So will you direct someone to take up that position? We also remember the islands of Skye and of Lewis. We recognize the need for new ministers to support congregations that don't have a minister.

We pray that you would encourage those who are already working in gospel ministry, that as they bring your word Sunday by Sunday, as they look to serve their local communities, that you would draw many men and women and boys and girls to put their trust in the Lord Jesus.

And we recognize as we scan around our country that there are so many opportunities for the preaching of the gospel, but there are so few laborers in the harvest field. And so we pray that you would continue to raise up new men who would gladly sacrifice and serve for the cause of the gospel.

[4:36] We pray for the work of ETS, that it would continue to be faithful and effective in preparing people for a life of service for the sake of Jesus the King. Lord, we thank you for churches with a particular focus on training people for ministry. We think of churches like St. Andrews. We thank you for Chalmers Church here in Edinburgh. We thank you for placements that ETS students get to have through the year as well as in the holidays.

Lord, as experienced ministers look to share their skill, their learning, their pastoral experiences, that it would serve to equip and strengthen an up-and-coming new generation of pastors and teachers.

And Lord, we pray for churches in hard places in Scotland. We think of some of the schemes around our cities. And we thank you for gospel work going on there in places like Nidre and Gracemount here in Edinburgh. We think of the work in Charleston and Merkinch and Inverness. And we ask that you would prosper that work, that you would protect and unify and enable the church and your people to be a source of light in a context where there is often so much darkness and confusion. There would be reconciliation where there is so much breakdown. Lord, we do ask for your kingdom and for your glory, that your church would continue to expand as people are called to put their trust in Jesus. And we pray this for your glory and in the name of Jesus. Amen. Now, let's turn in our Bibles back to the passage that we read, especially to verses 16 to 21 of 2 Corinthians chapter 5. Again, if you're using the church Bible, it's page 1162. Because here we're thinking about reconciliation as the very heart of the gospel.

In Australia, from the 27th of May to the 3rd of June, there is this year's Reconciliation Week, recognizing past mistreatment of Aboriginal peoples. Maybe we've heard stories of those forced adoptions of Aboriginals being removed from the land. And so this week becomes a celebration of Aboriginal culture, focusing on a shared history, at the same time as it deliberately being a plan to pursue reconciliation and justice for First Nations people. And the interesting thing that I find about Reconciliation Week, so it's a relatively new thing for Australia, is it began with the churches.

In 1993, the churches began to pray. There was a week of prayer for reconciliation, which by 1996 had become the National Reconciliation Week. And that gives us some clue and some insight that for the message of Christianity and for Christian people, reconciliation is something basic and fundamental. That it is indeed the very heart of the gospel message.

[8:05] That there is this powerful transforming force within the gospel that brings reconciliation between people and societies, and fundamentally speaks of reconciliation with God Himself. And that takes us to the language of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5.

that he makes the point to this church that God reconciles us to Himself through Jesus, and that then Christian people and Christian churches become ministers and ambassadors bringing this good news of reconciliation. You may have picked up in our reading that as Paul writes, he's also writing to defend himself. In this letter, we find him a lot defending his calling as an apostle, somebody who's been set apart and then sent out by Jesus with authority to bring good news. And we also find him defending his gospel message.

There are other groups, there are false teachers who are pouring scorn on Paul and Paul's message. And so what we have here is really significant, I think, because as he writes to the Corinthians, he says, listen, here is the essence of my gospel message. If you want to remember what my message, my ministry was all about, it's here. You get that sense? Here is how Paul looks when he goes to different places to fix the truth in people's minds. He speaks in terms of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is such a powerful thing because it reminds us of the idea of barriers and of hostility. And the gospel is this declaration that God has acted in Jesus, His Son, to end hostility, to deal with sin, to bring a people home to Himself that we could be called children of God.

And so he really unpacks again the beauty of reconciliation, reminding his listeners, his first listeners and hearers who are beginning to be skeptical about Paul's teaching. Listen, remember, this is God's answer to separation and breakdown. This is the wonderful thing that happens because God acts in power to remove the barrier, to remove the alienation, to establish good relationship.

[10:34] This is what happens because God has given and extended forgiveness to people. This is an act of God turning enemies into friends.

And Paul invites the Corinthians, invites us, indeed, to look at the cross, to recognize in the cross, here is the evidence of the lengths that God in His love will go to so that people like us can be reconciled to Him. So it truly is the very heart of the good news because it's the very heart of our God.

So that's what we're going to do this evening. We're going to take a look at the message of reconciliation as we find it here in 2 Corinthians chapter 5. We're going to do that using a few questions. The first question, which is a really important question, is who is the agent of reconciliation? So we'll need our Bibles for this. And when we take up our Bibles, we see three times it becomes clear that God, God the Father, is the agent of reconciliation. The first place we see this is in verse 18. All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ. We see it again in verse 19. God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ. And then we see it again in verse 21.

God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us. And so Paul wants us to be absolutely sure and clear that the source of all our salvation, the fountain from which our salvation flows, is found in the loving heart of God the Father. And this is in the context of reconciliation. So let's think for a moment about the creator-creature relationship as we have it in the Bible. What we discover is that ever since Adam and Eve first fell into sin, for us as people, we are the ones who create the breakdown.

We are those who have turned our back on God. To think about that famous parable of Jesus, we are the prodigal son who will happily take our father's gifts, but by nature we want nothing to do with our father. So in the relationship, all that we supply in real terms is the fact that we are sinful and we stand in need of reconciliation. God our Father, He supplies the rest. He is the source of the eternal plan of salvation. He is the one who in love sends His Son. He is the one who takes the initiative to act to show us grace. This isn't something that we deserve. This is something that God freely gives because of His love. And I think where Paul emphasizes it's God the Father, God the Father, God the Father, it prevents a couple of misunderstandings. So one misunderstanding that people have as they look at the Bible and think about this topic is that the Father is somehow the reluctant partner, but He is forced to be willing because Jesus is full of love and Jesus goes to the cross and Jesus makes the reluctant Father sort of grudgingly accept people.

[14:04] So some people have that view of they think Jesus is so full of love, but the Father is much more reluctant and stands on the same. And that's simply not true. The Bible is really clear that God the Father loves with an everlasting love, that the Father loves to save, that He lovingly sent His Son, that He paid that price so that He could gladly welcome sinners into His family. The Father is not reluctant. And actually, we need this for assurance. And sometimes, Christians, we struggle with this because we don't understand the extent to which the Father, our Father in heaven, is for us in love in Christ. And if we don't understand that, we'll always struggle and wonder, does God really love me? If I mess up, will He still love me? But the Gospel says absolutely always love with an everlasting love in Christ. There's another misunderstanding as well. It goes to probably the starting point. It's the misunderstanding that says, well, we must, you know, if we've messed up, then it must be our responsibility to reconcile ourselves to God. If we are ever to experience His love, then we must do a better job. And that's the kind of the, it's entirely the wrong starting point.

But it's what leads people to try and turn over a new leaf, to try and do religion better, to try and somehow climb the ladder to God. But it doesn't deal with a fundamental problem. And it's not the way reconciliation works. It always comes from God, from His initiative down to us.

Because the problem, you know, reconciliation implies there is a problem in a relationship, there's a separation. The problem is a moral problem. It's the problem of our very real guilt.

It's the problem that our sin separates us from God. And that God is righteously angry with us because of our sin, and that we by ourselves, we cannot fix our sin problem. To think about it a slightly different way, the Bible could almost use the language of having a posture problem.

Some of us, we struggle with our posture. But there is something about sin that curves us in on ourselves. So that instead of giving glory to God, instead of looking up to Him as King, instead of making Him the center of our lives, sin curves us in.

[16 : 42] That we will claim glory that properly belongs to God. That we will live where we are the center, where it's as if we are on the throne of our lives and God is pushed to the side. We have a posture problem because our worship is not right. And again, we can't fix that by ourselves. But God's answer, the Father's answer, is to send the Son. And Jesus the Son becomes fully human, fully God, fully human. And He is, for us, the perfect image of God. And He is also the perfect mediator between God and people, because He is fully God and He is fully man. And it's in Jesus' substitution and in Jesus' sacrifice, which is all planned by God the Father, that reconciliation comes to be.

And here is the joy that Paul finds in the gospel. Here is what he joyfully communicates as he travels around, that God the Father has acted in Jesus to remove that sin barrier, to remove that hostility, to restore us to the image of God, to raise our eyes from ourselves to see God our King.

So that's who is the agent of reconciliation. The second question, also very important, is this, who benefits from reconciliation? Some of us were here as we finished off the Jonah series last week, the story of Jonah. It's a very interesting one. We were thinking about the mindset of Jonah.

Jonah. And Jonah wasn't sort of unusual in his day for thinking there are some people in the world, in his case, thinking Jewish people, who deserve God's love and God's favor. But other people, people like those in Nineveh, evil, wicked people, they don't deserve. And Paul was somebody who was raised in that kind of environment, that Israel was the chosen people of God, and the other people known as Gentiles, they were far from God. And in many cases, undeserving of anything from God. But then what happened in Paul's story is that he met the risen Lord Jesus, and he discovered the good news of the gospel.

And he discovered actually all along God's plan was that blessing would come, not just to some kinds of people, but to all nations. And so Paul is now writing this letter as someone who has been sent by Jesus to travel from place to place. And as he travels, and as he establishes churches, and as he strengthens Christians, he's sharing the good news of Jesus with anyone and with everyone, because he understands that the gospel is wide. God's grace runs wide. And when it comes to the question of who benefits from reconciliation, we need to see there's two things going on in this passage. Both, there's that sense that it's very inclusive. It's a message for the world.

[20 : 09] But it's also exclusive in that it's for those who are in Christ. So it's both inclusive, it's for the world, but it's also exclusive, it's for those who are in Christ. See it there in verse 19.

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ. So here is something that's absolutely fundamental to Paul's gospel. That God does not discriminate. That God is God for all people.

That Jesus came as the Savior for the world. That the Son of God truly is the only Savior for all people. It's the reason, incidentally, why Christianity is the one truly global religion.

Because ever since the coming of Jesus, and then as Jesus from heaven with the Father sends the Spirit, the church is not tied to a particular place. We don't have holy places. It's not limited to a particular people group. It's not limited or restricted to one kind of culture. Rather, it's God's gift, God's message for anyone, so we can go anywhere with the message of Jesus. That we can say to anyone, for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life. So it's inclusive. It's for the world.

But to avoid a misunderstanding again, Paul is not saying that everybody automatically goes to heaven, that everybody automatically is saved and enjoys eternal life with God. So he is saying Jesus is a sufficient Savior. He is all that we need, all that anyone needs for salvation. That his sacrifice, it means that he is. He is a sufficient Savior. He is a sufficient Savior. He is a sufficient Savior.

[22 : 20] But it only becomes effective in our lives when we have faith. Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. And that's why as we read 2 Corinthians 5, you would have heard the language of being in Christ. So verse 19 again, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ. How are we reconciled? When we are in Christ, when we are trusting in Christ. It's all about knowing the Son, having a saving relationship with Jesus, the Son who gives us full access to the Father and to his love. That's how we benefit from this. That's how we move from being strangers and enemies of God to being friends and children of God.

It's through knowing Jesus, the Son. There's a story from the American Civil War that maybe helps to illustrate it. So there was one particular soldier who, during the fighting over a number of years, had lost both his father in the fighting and his brother. So he was the only male left in his family.

And his mother was at home running the farm. And this soldier knew that she couldn't do it by herself. And so he thought the thing to do was to go to Abraham Lincoln to speak to him for permission to leave the army in order to go and help to care for his mother. So he knew where Abraham Lincoln was stationed at the time. And so he went hoping to gain a meeting, but he was turned away at the gate by some other soldiers. And so this soldier found himself sitting down, I guess maybe pondering what to do next, when he was spotted by Abraham Lincoln's son, called Todd, who came up to him and said, well, you look very sad today. And he told his story. And little Todd Lincoln said, I can help.

And the way he helped was he walked him directly into his father's office, taking him past the soldiers, taking him past the guards, taking him right into a meeting. Abraham Lincoln turned to his son, hello, Todd, who's your friend? And Todd said, Daddy, this soldier needs to talk to you.

And as they talked, Abraham Lincoln helped. And he was released so he could go and serve on the farm. Faith is what unites us to Jesus, the Son of God. And with Jesus as our friend and our Savior, we too find ourselves invited all the way in to the presence of our Father.

[25 : 21] We are sons and daughters loved by the King when our faith is in Him. The third question then, which is an important one for us to ask is, how does reconciliation happen? So we know that it's from the Father, we know it's open to the world, and we receive it by faith, but how does it happen? Well, key to the gospel of reconciliation is verse 21, often known as the great exchange. God made Him, that is Jesus, God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. It's an imagery that comes from the realm of currency exchange. So we are familiar with this, I imagine, when we move to a different country, or even if we go on a foreign holiday, we probably find ourselves looking at the exchange rates, and we find depending, if we're from here, depending on the strength of the pound, either we do well or not so well, how far our currency will take us when the exchange takes place. There are some countries where you can feel like you have got loads of money if you go because the exchange rate is very much in our favor. Other times things are more tight. Well, God in His grace has provided an extraordinary exchange. This exchange in verse 21 isn't about money. It's about something more important than money.

It's about our moral standing. And what happens here in the good news of what God does for us in Jesus is that Jesus takes our sin and He credits us with His perfect righteousness. That's the great exchange that takes place on the cross. So remember what we said earlier, that our big problem is guilt. It's our moral problem. It's like an ugly stain that makes us unfit for the presence of a holy God. But God's response of grace again is that He sends His Son Jesus, and Jesus Himself takes the sin burden, the moral debt, and the moral debt, and the moral debt, and the moral debt, and the moral debt. And He sends us to the sin, to the sin, to the sin, to the sin, to the sin, to the sin, to the sin, to the sin, reconcile because of this wonderful exchange that takes place at the cross. And this great exchange that happens at the cross is actually something that is anticipated earlier in the Bible. The whole sacrificial system, I think, anticipates it. But to give us some focus, let's think about the

Day of Atonement. So, the Day of Atonement, which you'll find it in Leviticus 17 in the Old Testament, was an annual reminder to the people that God is holy, that they are sinful, but God has graciously provided a way of sacrifice to remove sin so that God and His people can stay in right relationship with each other. And central to the Day of Atonement were two animals, two goats. And on this day, the Day of Atonement, there was one goat that was chosen to be the sin offering. And the goat that was chosen for the sin offering, it was killed. The judgment fell. So, the sins of the people were, as it were, transferred onto the goat, and the goat was killed. An act of judgment. But then there was the second goat, and that goat was known as the scapegoat. And again, the imagery was of the people's sins being loaded up onto this goat. And this goat was then sent off into the wilderness to go into the exile place. And the effect of the actions of the Day of Atonement was that forgiveness came, that peace came, that peace came, that God could continue to live with His people.

Now, take that idea and think about what happens to Jesus on the cross. And we see both of these things fulfilled. That as Jesus dies bearing sin, the just judgment of God falls on Him as our substitute. And at the same time, Jesus experiences the sense of exile of the scapegoat.

He is sent out into the wilderness. He dies outside of the city. He dies in the darkness. He dies crying, my God, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And the reality is that Jesus is judged and abandoned so that His people can be forgiven and welcomed. But it takes that great exchange. Jesus takes my sin and He credits to me His perfect righteousness. And the good news is that while the imagery of the Day of Atonement, it helps us to see, in a sense, this transfer, what Jesus provides on the cross is far better, far more lasting than the Old Testament system. Because the Day of Atonement happened year after year after year. Sacrifice after sacrifice after sacrifice, because in God's plan, it was never that an animal would sacrifice for a human, but that Jesus would become a man to sacrifice and substitute

[32 : 15] Himself for us. And His sacrifice, because He is the perfect Son of God, is a sacrifice of infinite value. Fully covers all of our sin, so that peace is restored, not just for a year, but peace is restored with God forever. There is no need to repeat Jesus' sacrifice. That's why He's now returned to heaven, and He's sitting down. His work is finished, though He continues to pray for us.

So it is true to recognize that if you and I, if we trust in Jesus as our Savior, God will never count your sin against you or against me, because those sins have already been counted against Jesus as our substitute. The debt has been paid. And because of that, we can know that God is always for us and never against us.

Because we know that as Jesus was raised the third day, it was as if God the Father is saying, I love my son. He's finished the work. Here's the vindication that what he has done has been effective.

And God is always for His Son, Jesus. And Jesus has stood for us. Therefore, God is always for us and never against us. So this is the greatest exchange. It's a gift that comes from the Father. It's a gift we receive by faith. It's a gift carried out by Jesus on the cross. One last thing then to ask them, what difference does reconciliation make? I don't know how sentimental others are in the room, but I have always, I think, loved big reunion or reconciliation stories. I suspect it's good. So as a kid, and some of you will remember, I was raised on, I think it was Friday, still a black surprise surprise.

Remember a silly black surprise surprise. The last, I don't remember what else happened in each episode, but it always finished. Usually there'd be an older person, and they'd tell a little bit of their story, but maybe they'd been sort of adopted as children, and they'd lost track of their sister or their brother.

[34 : 35] And every episode always ended along this. You know, that sister you haven't seen for 50 years, or that brother you didn't even know you had. Well, here they are to say hello. And you get this wonderful reunion played out on a TV studio stage. It's a beautiful thing. And I think it's beautiful because we are made for relationships. And we know that breakdown and loss is always painful, but recovery and reconciliation then is always beautiful. And we never really got to see what happened to those families, but you could well imagine if you had lost contact with a brother or sister for decades, and then you have them, then it's like entry into a new life. Now you've got a new family. You've got all these memories to catch up on, this future to live together. Well, in a much more profound way, the good news of Christianity is life-changing. When we put our faith in Jesus, there's a much greater reconciliation. We're reconciled to God the Father. Now we have Jesus as our elder brother. Now we always enjoy the presence of God in our lives as He comes to live in our hearts by the Spirit. Everything changes. B.B. Warfield said this, the revolution in our standing is marked by a revolution in living. And we can see that in 2 Corinthians 5 verse 17. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here. Again, to quote from B.B. Warfield, his wonderful little book called The Savior of the

World. He says this, a believer with the life of Christ flowing into his veins will discover himself a new creation, looking out as such on a new world, filled with new enthusiasms, directing himself to new ends. We see life differently. What fills us with a sense of joy and purpose is entirely different because of reconciliation. The God who gives life at creation makes us new creations in Christ, gives us new life in Christ. And it's very much a case, as Paul says, of out with the old and in with the new.

So just to think, four things that we can see from our text that become new. First of all, as we are reconciled, we have new eyes. Verse 16, he says, from now on, we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. So Paul is someone who came to have a very radically different view of Jesus when he met the risen Jesus. But this is true of all of us when we come to have faith. Now we see him as Lord. And because we see him as Lord and as Savior, now we love him. And now we see that we enjoy his presence and we live by his power and we're guided by his words. And Paul says, we also learn to see other people in a different way as well.

We learn to see them, I think, more and more as Christ sees them. People made in the image of God, deserving of our dignity and our love. People who need to be reconciled to God. People we now want to share the good news of Jesus with. We have new eyes. We also have a new heart. I think we read verse 15.

Let me read it again. It says, Jesus died for all, all those who believe in him, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again.

[38 : 43] Now we have a new reason for living. Now we have a heart transplant. Now we live to show our love for God and for Jesus, our Savior. And in this way, we're very much restored to, as it were, our factory settings. When God made us, we were made in his image to love him and to glorify him. Sin corrupted that. But by God's grace and in the gospel, we are restored.

And our being restored in order to love God and to love our neighbor again. And Paul reminds us that our love and our obedience is always in response to how God has loved us in giving us Jesus, the one who died for us and was raised for us. So we have new eyes and a new heart. It's also true to say that when we are reconciled, we're also given a new community. Now you may be noticed the language is very much plural. It's very much us and we. So we can go to verse 18. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. Who's the us?

Who's the we in this section? It's the church. It's the people of God. And so when someone comes to put their trust in Jesus, immediately we're brought into God's family. We have a whole collection of brothers and sisters. And so we can worship together and we get to serve together. And as we're reminded here, we also get to practice what we preach together. Forgiveness and reconciliation becomes who we are and what we do. And that's tied into the fourth and the final thing to recognize is that we're given a new purpose. Verse 20 reminds us, we are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

So here's our purpose. Now we're speaking for our King. We are ambassadors. It's not our message. It's God's message. And that message is reconciliation. We're sent out to share God's story.

Listen to what God has done through Jesus so you can be brought home to Him through trusting in Him. And we get to share our own stories of how we have come to experience reconciliation and how God has been at work through Jesus to transform us. So as we draw to our close, hopefully we've seen with Paul that reconciliation is indeed the heart of the gospel. To borrow the question that Anselm of Canterbury asked hundreds of years ago, why did God become man? Here's one wonderful answer.

[41 : 43] Jesus became a man to fix the fractured relationship between us and God, to remove the barrier of sin between us, for His gracious sacrifice to be God's way to cancel our guilt.

And since this is the heart of the gospel, and since this is God's heart, it's absolutely true that whoever we are, whoever we are, and whatever our current relationship with God, you and I, we need the reality of this message in our lives. That we would let the great exchange of the cross totally change our own lives, leading us to enjoy life with our God. So let me pray for us now.

Father God, we thank you for that eternal love, that eternal plan of salvation that involved you willingly sending your Son into this world to become sin for us, to suffer and die for us, so that by trusting in Jesus we might become the righteousness of God, that we might have the barrier of sin removed, that we might enjoy fellowship and friendship with you, the living God.

And we pray that more and more as we appreciate and live out of this truth, that it would really transform us, that you would give us new eyes and a new heart, that we would enjoy our new community and our new purpose, and that our hearts would always be full of a sense of wonder, that you loved us and you gave your Son for us. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.