

PM Hosea 14 & Romans 5:1-8 Understanding the Cross: Love

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[0 : 00] The prophet Hosea, the Old Testament, and the prophet Hosea, and we're going to read chapter 14, the whole of the chapter, Hosea chapter 14, page 918, if you have the church Bible, page 918, Hosea and chapter 14.

Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words and return to the Lord. Say to him, take away all iniquity, except what is good, and we will pay with bulls the vows of our lips.

Assyria shall not save us, we will not ride on horses, and we will say no more, our God, to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy.

I will heal their apostasy. I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel. He shall blossom like the lily. He shall take root like the trees of Lebanon.

His shoots shall spread out. His beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow. They shall flourish like the corn. They shall blossom like the vine. Their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

[1 : 30] O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you. I am like an evergreen cypress. From me comes your fruit. Whoever is wise, let him understand these things. Whoever is discerning, let him know them. For the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them.

Amen. May God bless that reading of his word. This letter to the Romans. Romans and chapter 5. I'm going to read verses 1 to 8. Page 1135 of the Church Bible. Page 1135. Romans chapter 5. And we'll read verses 1 to 8.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand.

And we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, character produces hope. And character produces hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Amen. Again, we ask the blessing of God and the reading of his word.

[3 : 34] Amen. So just as in the morning, I'm certainly going to refer to Romans chapter 5, but some other passages as well.

So please keep your Bible open in front of you. In 1916, an Australian soldier, Private William Jackson, was awarded the Victoria Cross, which, as you're probably aware, is the highest military award for bravery in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth Armed Forces.

He was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions on the battlefields of France. Jackson had twice entered No Man's Land, the fields which lay between the fortified trenches of the opposing armies during the First World War.

He went into No Man's Land under heavy fire to rescue comrades who had been injured. And on the second attempt, the second time he went into No Man's Land, while carrying a comrade, a shell landed close to him and it blew off his right arm.

And yet Jackson and another soldier still managed to get their injured comrade back to the safety of their own trench. Now this morning, we were trying to understand the cross, at least to understand the cross better, and we looked at it in terms of forgiveness.

[5 : 04] What is it about the cross that leads to forgiveness? How can we understand the cross in terms of forgiveness? And this evening, we want to better understand the cross of Christ in terms of love.

Now it's a, you know, the cross and love, it's a massive subject and we've only really got a few minutes this evening, don't we? But like forgiveness, I think I commented you can also look at the cross in terms of victory and many other aspects as well.

But like forgiveness, the cross and love has also proved controversial. And I certainly don't want to overdo the controversy, you know, overdoing controversy is never helpful.

But we can't pretend that in this world there isn't real controversy and we ourselves will find ourselves in, you know, controversial discussions. There are areas of controversy in life.

So I'm not wanting to overdo it, but I will spend a little bit of time on it tonight. Because I do think in this instance to try and get to grips with some of the controversy surrounding the cross and love ultimately helps our better understanding of the cross.

[6 : 27] So first of all then, the cross is a demonstration of love. Now the suggestion that the God of the Old Testament was one of judgment or is one of judgment or was one of judgment, depending on different points of view, and the God of the New Testament was or is one of love, that suggestion was made a long, long time ago.

But the truth, of course, is that in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the love of God is the primary feature of his nature.

Now, yes, the prophets are full of the judgment of God. You dip into any of the Old Testament prophets, from Isaiah to Zechariah to Malachi, and you find passages and verse after verse which do speak of the judgment of God.

But it's never, notice this, it's never an unrelieved judgment. And the love of God is, it seems, the bedrock, in fact, on which all else is founded.

Now, Hosea chapter 14, the last chapter of the prophecy of Hosea, is a prime example of this. Because there in Hosea, as a prophecy, you have an exposure of the enormous unfaithfulness of Israel towards God.

[8 : 01] The closing chapter of that prophecy depicts God as a loving father. A loving father who lavishly is pouring out his blessings on his wayward children.

And that, in fact, encapsulates the message of the prophets. They do not spare, they do not pretend that the judgment of God is real. And as we were speaking this morning, it is real, and it is just.

And his anger is righteous. And yet, in all the prophets, this judgment is not left unrelieved. And always, you return to this loving God, who, as Hosea there in Hosea 14 is depicted, as a loving father lavishly pouring out his blessings on wayward children.

So when in the New Testament, in Romans chapter 5, we read that God demonstrates his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

We shouldn't be so surprised to find that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are the same God. And it's a good starting point, I think, in helping us understand the cross in terms of love.

[9 : 26] Now, I hinted at this this morning, that the cross of Jesus Christ is at the heart of Christian faith and the Christian message for this world.

The crucifixion of Jesus may indeed be foolishness to Greeks and a stumbling block for Jews, but few would deny that the Christian church has always held the cross, the death of Christ, to be of central importance.

Whatever the world thinks, whatever the world thinks of the church, whatever it thinks of its message, whatever it thinks of the cross, the Christian church has always held it to be of central importance.

But, again, maybe rather strangely, some of the most damaging misconceptions regarding the cross have come, not from outside the church, where, you know, you can expect from outside the church, not always, not by everyone, but outside the church, you might expect there to be doubts, misunderstandings, of course, and even slanders.

But some of the most damaging misconceptions have actually come from within the church. And that's why I say we're just not going to escape controversy tonight.

[10 : 49] For at least 250 years, the period of history, the history of thought and philosophy, which we usually know as the Enlightenment, has influenced not only society as a whole, but the church as well.

The Enlightenment, you know, its high point was very much in the 18th century. The Enlightenment saw human thinking as the only way, and, you know, I stress this, because there is such a thing as human thinking, which has value, and so on.

We must never forget that. But saw human thinking as the only way to test and discover whether things were true, things were good, things were useful, or even just simply reasonable, or we might say rational.

And certainly, you know, as I was saying there, there have been many positive benefits from the so-called Enlightenment in terms of scientific inquiry, a certain, you know, rigor and setting standards in academic study, and so on and so forth.

But the biggest problem has been the tendency for an Enlightenment point of view, Enlightenment thinking to overreach itself.

[12 : 14] As a theory, for example, it denies the sinfulness of human beings, the finiteness of human beings.

That is, we do not know, and we cannot know everything. And also fails then to see that an unquestioning reliance on human reason alone will actually lead and has led to complacency in the face of evil, and in the long run, an actual decline in education, scientific inquiry, and all the rest.

Now, it's not my intention to give a lecture this evening on philosophy, apart from not really being capable of doing it. We just don't have time to go into all the reasons for why that is.

But it is enough to say that an Enlightenment influence in the Church has led, over the course of decades and even centuries, has led to a desire to strip Scripture and Christian teaching of what are considered the irrational or unreasonable elements to be found in Scripture and Christian teaching based on it.

And the two main areas in which this has happened and which it is seen are attempts to reinterpret both the birth and the resurrection of Jesus.

[13 : 52] And hopefully we'll see how in doing that you then cannot but help have problems with the cross. Reinterpreting the birth and the resurrection of Jesus.

The Bible accounts and the traditional doctrines of the Church creeds are viewed as being, they're just too simplistic. They're the product of a more gullible age gone by and in brief are irrational.

So, since human reason alone is humanity's supreme guiding light, which is, I suppose, probably where the term Enlightenment came from, if humanity's reason alone is our supreme guiding light, you know, we cannot uncritically accept these aspects of the Christian faith any longer.

A virgin birth, a bodily resurrection. We can't just turn off our brains and accept that, can we? But as I say, you do that, you reinterpret these and you have a huge problem when it comes to the cross.

You cannot just throw the cross away you cannot just bypass the cross and then say that you are a Christian or that you belong to the historic Christian faith and its community of people in any real sense because the cross has always been held as central and of central importance.

[15 : 30] Do away with it. Sorry, how are you a Christian? Bypass it. In what sense do you in any way belong to the historic Christian faith? In what sense are you part of the community of Christ's people?

But without a real virgin birth and a real resurrection of Jesus, how can you really understand the cross?

Now this, you see, has then led to a reinterpretation of the cross. It's inevitable. Do away with, reinterpret, explain away, or whatever it is you try to do because you're applying your human reason alone, enlightenment thinking to the birth of Christ and to the resurrection of Christ, inevitably you will then come to the cross and try to reinterpret it in order to try and make it fit with what you've done with his birth and with his resurrection.

And this is, as I say, led to this reinterpretation. And what it does is bypass much of what we said this morning when looking at the cross in terms of forgiveness.

And this reinterpretation focuses on the cross as a demonstration of God's love. You heard me correctly.

[16 : 57] It focuses on the cross as a demonstration of God's love. And if you're a bit shy, you're just saying to yourself, well, that's good.

That's good, isn't it? Because that's what it is. In fact, did Paul not just say in Romans 5, verses 6-8 that God shows his love for us in this?

That while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. So when you say the cross is a demonstration of God's love, what is the problem? Okay, yes, but this reinterpretation of the cross sees it merely as an example of God's love.

So it maybe goes something like this. Jesus was willing to give up his life. And if we want to be true followers of Jesus, then so should we.

Jesus did this out of love because he knew and understood that God is love. And again, maybe you're still saying there to yourself, I don't see the problem with that.

[18 : 16] Well, let me put the problem to you in admittedly a stark, and very extreme way. To be a suicide bomber takes great commitment of a certain kind at least, right?

But the suicide bomber in giving up their own life, you see, we've just said Jesus gave up his life out of love and so on and if we want to follow him we should do the same.

Well, the suicide bomber has great commitment. The suicide bomber gives up their own life. That's how we can say man, they have some commitment. But at the same time is trying to take the lives of others, not save them.

Of course, they may claim that they are aiming to save others' lives, perhaps in some other place, by making their cause known, by hurting those that they see as enemies, enemies, yes.

But, you know, let's again be frank. Do you immediately think, after hearing of a suicide bombing, do you immediately think, oh, these guys must have tremendous love, or ladies, may have tremendous love for others?

[19 : 35] Is that your first thought that comes to you? Someone has blown themselves up, taking five, ten other lives with them. Oh, they must have had some love for others.

And we'll come back to this in a moment. So the cross, a demonstration of love, yes, but we have to say more than that.

If we were to turn to 1 Corinthians 15, for example, the first few verses, if it hasn't immediately jumped to your mind when you open it, 1 Corinthians 15, then you'll go, oh, yeah, yes, yes, yes, Paul and the resurrection of Jesus.

Yes, but let's just read these first few verses. Now, I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance, what I also received, that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the twelve.

[21 : 00] of. You see, this enlightenment, we might call it rationalist, or rationalistic interpretation of the cross, it just simply doesn't go far enough.

As just a very simple statement, the cross is a demonstration of God's love, there's no argument with that, so far as it goes, but it's inadequate.

The cross is a demonstration of love, but it leaves out so much as to become meaningless, or at least totally ambiguous.

Now, that very simple, concise passage I just read from 1 Corinthians chapter 15, in it itself, in these few words, shows us that there is much more to the cross of Christ.

In fact, even in these few words, it's able to point us to words, why the cross was necessary. Let's go back to Private Jackson.

[22 : 06] If he had simply wandered off into no man's land, had his arm blown off, would he have been awarded the Victoria Cross? Now, hopefully, if they got him back to his own trench, he would have received medical attention for his arm, or his lost arm.

Perhaps, he would have had, or should have had, a mental health assessment as well, because no one left their trench to enter no man's land just because they felt they needed a walk and fresh air.

So what am I getting at? Well, I'll tell you another story. A former minister of mine, who's now a retired colleague, he once visited a lady in hospital, and this lady had suffered horrendous burns to her hands and arms.

Perhaps you know the story. She'd been involved in a car accident, and the car had caught fire. She managed to get out of the car, but then quickly realised that in all the shock and panic that you'd have if you had an accident and then your car went on fire, she got out of the car, but then realised that her baby was still in the back seat of the car.

She returned to the blazing vehicle, rescued her child before it was too late, but of course at the cost of severe burns to her hands and arms.

[23 : 36] You see, you see there what love will do. But what we'd say if that mother, with her baby safely at home with dad, had returned to her burning car and simply bathed her hands in the flames.

Would we see it as credible, rational then if it were claimed that she had burnt her hands in the flames for love or out of love?

Could it then possibly be a story that moves, inspires us or in any way changes us other than maybe some pity that someone would do this, that there was some disturbance going on that would lead you to do something like that?

You see that just saying the cross is a demonstration of God's love and leaving it at that doesn't make sense. Lots of people died on crosses. Were they all a demonstration of God's love?

In other words, if you die on a cross you're demonstrating God's love. Does that make sense? Why was Jesus' death different? Would anyone looking at that story of Jesus' death on the cross, the events that led up to the death on the cross, would they see it as anything other than perhaps just a tragic ending to a good man's life?

[25 : 09] And that's one of the better explanations. You know, others might conclude that there's clearly more going on in Jesus' life than his friends and the gospel writers and then the church have been able or willing to tell us.

It is not then at all clear what the cross under this view tells us about God, about love, or about anything else.

in particular. But if we stick to the Bible's whole picture, then we can understand the cross and why it is a demonstration of God's love.

And there's three foundations that enable us to do this. Firstly, the Bible is realistic about human nature.

Remember we said that the Enlightenment basically sought to banish the idea of human sinfulness and inherent human sinfulness. Well, you see the Bible firstly is realistic about human nature.

[26 : 24] Without God revealing himself to us, we will not find our way to him. We are incapable of discovering what he is really like if he does not first reveal himself to us.

In truth, we don't really want to find God. Not only are we incapable of doing it, we don't really want to.

Because if we were able to do that, we would not like what we found. It's actually one of the reasons for accepting the Bible as God's word.

since this word does not conform to human wisdom and refuses to keep us comfortable by merely following our own ideas that we have about this world and in this world and about ourselves.

And a key point in all this then is that human nature needs to be challenged and needs to be changed. And it is only God who can challenge it properly, fully, honestly, and it's only God who can change it.

[27 : 42] The second foundation is this, and it is that it's entirely consistent that God should enter this world in order to take on the task of challenging and renewing sinful human nature.

And how better to do that than taking on that nature himself. This he has done.

This he has done in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. So if you want to get rid of the virgin birth, the virgin birth of Jesus, then you must accept that God is dealing with us through this man, Jesus, or the person, or whoever this Jesus then is, he's dealing with us in a very different way from what is presented and assumed in the Bible.

Was it a real man who died on the cross? Was it only someone who appeared to be a man? And then the third foundation is this, the real resurrection of a real man.

A real resurrection of a real man who God sent into this world to save sinners. And that resurrection is the proof, is the vindication of the claims Jesus made during his life and ministry.

[29 : 13] Now, yes, the resurrection of Jesus, it is more than that, but it's not less than that. A vindication or proof of the claims that this man Jesus made during his life and ministry.

And such a vindication depends on it being a real resurrection of a real man. These are the foundations. But what is the conclusion?

We sang it this morning. How deep the Father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure, that he should give his only son to make a wretch his treasure.

So in truth, it's only the Holy Spirit of God who can show that to us and enable us to take it to heart so that it becomes life-changing and life-giving.

And so you see that the triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God, shows real love, by real and effective action.

[30 : 32] Amen.