

Loved To Love: The Cross & Salvation - Sunday 28th January 2024

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Hi everyone, full house today, good to see you all. We're on, as Marie was saying earlier, the last of these three weeks that we've been doing through January on this series called Loved to Love, a series where we've been exploring the idea of salvation, this word that means saved or rescued.

So if you've been with us over the last couple of weeks or you've caught up online, just a tiny little recap because we began a couple of weeks ago by exploring some of the ideas about how God saves us.

We saw that it's not perhaps like a transaction where God puts conditions on us, you know, if you do this, then I'll do that, says God.

No, neither though is it a one-way thing either, one-sided in which God does everything and we're just passive bystanders. Now instead, this was a couple of weeks ago, we saw how God's saving of us is perhaps best understood as a two-way, mutually loving, ongoing relationship, saving us from sin and death for a new life with Jesus.

And then last week, we looked at the story of Jesus' encounter with a little guy, Zacchaeus, a story in which Jesus promised to Zacchaeus that today salvation has come to this house, salvation has come to you effectively, Zacchaeus.

[1 : 30] Salvation, therefore, this relationship with God, saved from sin for life with God, is intended for today, for the here and now and not just something which is reserved for us in heaven.

All of which I hope overall sounded like good news. And yet I'd suggest a couple of questions that we probably still need to consider in light of this understanding of salvation.

Salvation might be along these lines. So firstly, if salvation is primarily a relationship between God and us of mutual love, where does the cross, where does Jesus' death and resurrection fit in to all of this?

And then secondly, if salvation is for today, for the here and now, how does it continue to play out in the rest of eternity, you know, with whatever comes after we die?

So, the cross and life after death. Slightly ambitious, perhaps, to try and cover all that this morning, especially when some of you will be relieved to know, I'm fully aware, it's Wolves Baggies at 11.5 today.

[2 : 51] And there's a number who've said to me, don't go on too long, Matt, because we've got to get back for the football this morning. So, a big game, I know, I know. But let's see what spiritual surface we can scratch this morning, perhaps, at least.

So, let's start with the cross. The cross, this word which is shorthand for both the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

The cross signifies Jesus' death because it was the means of Roman execution by which Jesus was killed. But it also signifies Jesus' resurrection because the cross is empty.

Jesus didn't stay dead but came back to life and is alive today. And this dual meaning, this ultimate cross purpose, if you like, of death and resurrection, that's crucial.

Because, as I hope we'll see, we need both parts, we need both Jesus' death and his resurrection to grasp the reality of God's saving love for us.

[4 : 02] Now, there are various ways, though, in which the writers of the Bible try to understand the cross. You know, why it happened, what it means, and so on. And so, throughout the New Testament in particular, there's all sorts of words like sacrifice or substitution, atonement, ransom, victory.

They all make an appearance at various points. And often, as we read through those things, perhaps one or other kind of idea might resonate more strongly with us. Often, people tend to pick or choose perhaps the understanding of the cross, which makes most sense for them.

So, for example, I guess the main way the cross has been understood in recent times is to see it as the way in which God's justice has been done.

And it's often explained something like this. So, God is perfect and holy. And he made us humans, in his image, to live perfect, holy lives.

To enable us to do this, he gave us laws to follow. However, because we've sinned, we're guilty of breaking these laws. These same laws, though, they state that the penalty for sin is death.

[5 : 21] So, a just God requires death. However, the only death sufficient to pay the penalty for all of our sin is if a perfect law keeper dies.

You know, someone without sin. And so, God decided to allow his own perfect son to be killed on the cross as payment for the penalty we deserve.

You know, since God's justice has therefore been satisfied, we are now free to live with God forever, so long as we are grateful for his mercy towards us.

That's it, in a nutshell, basically. I appreciate you might be thinking, well, maybe there's a lot more to it than that in different angles and so on. But this kind of legal understanding is often how the story of the cross is either communicated or heard.

And yet, it raises questions, for me at least. You see, if justice is why the cross was necessary, then God allowing the undeserved killing of his son is surely about as unjust as it gets.

[6 : 41] Equally, if our sins have been paid for in full by Jesus, then what justification would God have in sending anyone to hell, since surely that implies that there's still a penalty to be paid?

Above all, I'd say, this way of understanding the cross kind of makes us a problem of God's own making, in which love doesn't seem to play much of a part at all.

For example, there's a meme, we've just been doing the rounds a bit on Facebook, and I think it kind of sums up a key problem, perhaps, with this dominant justice approach.

It's this one here, with Jesus standing at the door saying, let me in, person inside, why? So I can save you. From what? From what I'm going to do to you. If you don't, let me in.

Yeah. Made me laugh. First time I read it as well. I guess partly because its bluntness is maybe pretty revealing in some ways. But looking at this, thinking it through, the more I think I've thought about it, the more upsetting, actually, I find this image, because the Jesus it portrays, you know, the understanding of salvation that it portrays, it's so far removed, so counter to the truth of who I believe Jesus to be, that if this kind of threatening Jesus is what some people genuinely think he's about, which I'm sure a lot of people do, then we've got some serious work to do to turn that view around.

[8 : 32] Now, salvation and the cross, it can't be about a threat. It's got to be good news. You know, the gospel, by definition, has to be good news. Good news which is first and foremost rooted in love, not in some twisted idea of justice in which God is a tyrant to be feared.

Indeed, true justice, God's justice in the Bible, is not about dishing out punishment, but bringing healing and reconciliation.

It's about making things right through mercy and love and compassion and grace. God doesn't punish. Punishment hardens.

Rather, compassion, I'd say, is what reforms a heart. It says this in Zechariah. I said, this is what the Lord Almighty says. Administer true justice.

Show mercy and compassion to one another. Why? Well, because as it then says later on in Romans, it is God's kindness that leads us to repentance.

[9 : 49] You know, that's not to gloss over sin. Now, in fact, just the opposite, I'd say. You know, sin, this word we use, this way of summing up, perhaps, the way of doing life which runs counter to God's ways.

Sin is not to be ignored or glossed over or mucked about with. It's a horrible, horrible thing, sin. It inflicts pain and hurt on those who are victims of it, whilst enslaving those who succumb to it.

I mean, I know when I've sinned against others and against God because it feels rotten. It feels rotten.

You know, I might try and pretend it doesn't sometimes. Often for quite a long time, I pretend it doesn't feel rotten. But it does, always. It runs counter to who I'm meant to be.

Kind of lures me in with a promise of pleasure or satisfaction. But ultimately, sin robs me of joy and peace.

[10 : 56] And so that self-inflicted wound, that lack of peace and joy, needs healing. It needs healing. Equally, though, when I see others sinned against, either by me or by others, it robs them too as victims.

You know, it's heartbreaking, watching other people being hurt by the sins of others because we know that's not the way life is meant to be. We know it's wrong.

We know that too needs healing. And so since both the oppressed and the oppressors in sin need rescuing, healing, we might say saving from this power of sin, I don't think it's something that can be sorted out through some legal tit-for-tat transaction on the cross.

No, sin is more important than that. It requires a far more radical, far more redemptive, I'd say far more relational solution than that.

Therefore, instead of this penalty-based justice idea, you know, this substitution or satisfaction idea of the cross where Jesus incurs God's punishment instead of us, perhaps a better way to understand Jesus' death and resurrection and the difference it makes for our salvation is to see the cross as victory, as victory.

[12 : 34] Victory over evil, victory over sin, victory over death. Let's unpack that a bit. What does that mean? Well, above all, I'd say the cross, Jesus' death and his resurrection, again, this cross-purpose stuff.

Jesus' death and resurrection is the victory of love. It's the victory of love. For a start, though, the cross is the victory of love over evil.

And the cross reveals that no system of oppression, no violence, no amount of hatred or evil can ever defeat love.

God did not require Jesus' death. No, it was hate that killed Jesus when he stood up for love. But God used this tragedy to bring about life.

And just as Jesus prevailed over death, so love will always prevail over hate. We see in Jesus that love can overcome every strike, every nail, every form of suffering and still emerge victorious.

[13 : 54] Indeed, the cross totally disarms evil because if even death can be overcome, then what else does evil have left in its locker to threaten us with?

And what's more, because this victory is not achieved by meeting violence with violence or seeking revenge, but rather by choosing forgiveness and compassion and peace, I'd say that gives us hope that in the midst of all the rubbish of life, hope that says love is worth pursuing, that love is worth persevering with.

Yes, it's hard, and the cross is anything but an easy ride. But the good news of the cross is that ultimately, love wins.

Secondly, though, the cross, I'd say, is the victory of love, not just over evil, but over sin, a victory which we see played out on multiple levels.

So Jesus' journey through death and resurrection shows us that there is healing for any and every hurt that has been done to us, that whatever ways we might have been sinned against, Jesus is the one who offers restoration and renewal.

[15 : 17] The sins done to us, they might be great, but God's love is greater. Love which promises to wipe away every tear, to do away with all pain.

Jesus, having gone through that pain, is the resurrected healer, the great physician, the Bible calls him, the saviour, who knows how to heal our hurts.

Jesus is the therapist who helps us to get better, not bitter. What's more, the cross, I'd say, is the victory of love over the sins, not just that are done to us, the scars we have from those, but it's the victory of love over the sins we do.

You know, we have all sinned, we've all behaved in ways which rob ourselves and others of peace and joy. But God's response to those sins is not to seek retribution by punishing either us or Jesus on our behalf.

No, two wrongs never make a right. Instead, Jesus we see on the cross, the one who prays even at this time, Father, forgive them.

[16 : 35] that Jesus meets our sins with love. And it's not love that doesn't care about what we've done. Rather, it's love which cares so much about that that it meets the sinner in their sin in order to break them free from the hold it has over them.

It's the kind of love which doesn't define people by their sins, but in compassion works out the reasons why they've succumbed to them and offers healing for those initial hurts which led them towards sin in the first place.

It's the kind of love which goes down with people into the pits of their sins, even into the depths of death itself in order to lead them out again.

Indeed, the model that Jesus demonstrates time and again is not that we first repent and are then forgiven, but rather that we are first forgiven and then we repent.

We don't have to be good in order to be accepted and loved by God. Rather, we're accepted and loved by God and then we can be good.

[17 : 54] It's there in the place of acceptance and safety with God that we have the chance to then change, to be purified, to have, if you like, our humanity restored.

That, that is salvation. That is the victory of the cross, the victory of love over sin, people being freed from their sin for a new life with God.

But then thirdly, as well as victory of love over evil and victory of love over sin, the cross ultimately is the victory of love over death.

And it's this which I'd say gives an eternal perspective to the salvation on offer from God in that we're saved from evil, sin and death for goodness and freedom and life.

Life with God which begins in this world but which continues into eternity. That's why the cross can't be about punishment or some kind of divine justice because punishment or legal justice alone doesn't require resurrection.

[19 : 13] but the resurrection that Jesus does, overcoming death, the resurrection is the whole point of the cross. Yes, in dying Jesus meets us in the pits of our despair, he meets us in the realities of the sins we've done or had done to us but Jesus rises again because the story of his love can't be stopped, the story of his love continues both in this world and on into eternity.

Indeed, the salvation which the cross of Jesus brings about means we're saved from the power of evil, sin and death for this ongoing story, this ongoing relationship, this ongoing marriage, if you like, that we talked about the other week, this eternal life with God.

And so what does this ongoing eternal life with God look like? Well, I don't think it's simply about us going to heaven when we die, you know, floating on clouds and being all sort of strumming our harps and that kind of stuff, all that kind of thing.

We might get to do that for a while, I guess some of us might secretly wish that was the case for a while anyway. But the picture more often that's given of life after death, particularly that we're given in the book of Revelation, is that it's ultimately about God not evacuating us from earth as an escape, but of God bringing heaven to earth in a new combined creation.

Indeed, little passage coming up here that the writer of Revelation, John, when he describes the vision of this eternal future that God reveals to him, he says this, I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.

[21 : 07] I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them.

They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.

He who was seated on the throne said, I am making everything new. It's good that. I like that.

It's a picture of the sort of ultimate fusion joining between heaven and earth in a new, renewed creation where God brings heaven, where God and all those who have gone before us have been dwelling, brings that down to earth.

[22 : 15] This new heaven, this new earth, seems it's a physical, literal place of resurrection and life where everything that's been good in this world will carry forward and where a world of new possibilities of kind of fulfilling work and rest and play will be ours to enjoy with God free from pain, free from grief, free from the power of evil, sin and death.

Did elsewhere, Jesus likens this future to a great banquet, proper wedding buffet even, he says at one point, a wedding feast where we and God are like a married couple, you know, celebrating the goodness of love and life.

And what's the invitation of love and life that we, that God and us declare? We're told in Revelation, the spirit and the bride say, come.

Whoever is thirsty, let them come. And whoever wishes, let them take the free gift of the water of life. Whoever, whoever can come?

Well, we're told in Revelation 21, 25 that the gates of heaven are never shut, implying that the invitation is open to all for all eternity, which sounds about right to me if the cross of Jesus has defeated evil and sin and death.

[23 : 49] That's the eternal salvation of Jesus, I would say, which we've all been saved for. Salvation of God's good creation. Salvation in which, as Jesus says, he will draw all people to himself.

But as Jesus also said to Zacchaeus, that same salvation is ours today. And that means that the whole point of salvation, the whole point of God's saving love for us is not just that we say yes to a relationship with God now, but it's to anticipate and build for and pray in this saving reality for all, that God's kingdom might come here on earth as in heaven.

That means we're called and equipped by God to offer this same saving love, this love which meets evil with good, sin with compassion, death with life, with all those who God has given us to share this world with.

And that means we're called and equipped by God to combat injustice, eliminate poverty, overcome exclusion and so on, so that God's ways of fairness and generosity and inclusion and hope can increasingly shape our common life together.

That's the gospel. That's the good news that God's salvation is for all. Saving people from their sins for a life with the crucified but resurrected Jesus, the one who is salvation.

[25 : 33] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.