

The Impossible Made Possible

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Tonight is Thursday of Holy Week, sometimes called Maundy Thursday. Tomorrow is Good Friday. We celebrate the crucifixion of Jesus Christ when he was tried, hung on a cross and died.

On Sunday we come and we celebrate that God raised him from the dead. If you go back to the old prayer book, the 1662 prayer book, the readings for this week all focus on the trial and crucifixion of Jesus until we come to this night where the focus is Jesus preparing for his passion and suffering, particularly at the last meal.

And I want to talk to you about forgiveness, about the impossible possibility of forgiveness.

And in our modern Western culture, we most have a one-dimensional view of God, that God is a spirit of love and acceptance and tolerance, someone to lean on in times of trouble.

And so there's nothing very remarkable or special about forgiveness. We expect God to forgive us. We are supposed to do that.

[1 : 26] It's his job. And it's a deeply pagan view of God, of course, the idea that God is bound to us by self-interest so that he gives us forgiveness in return for our worship.

But the Bible gives us a very different picture. It reveals to us something of the incomprehensible wonder of forgiveness. The awesome, hardly believable truth, which is at the heart of Easter, where God utterly forgives our sins.

It's good for us tonight, the night of the Last Supper, to think about this. We've read Jesus' words where he said at the meal, This is the blood of the covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

And we race over these treasures as though we are not expecting much. But it's very interesting that Jesus should put the forgiveness of sins and his death together in this sentence.

Because this is at the center of what he's thinking about. This is uppermost in his mind. One commentator says this, So after he was raised from the dead, the gospel we preach, he told us to preach, is repentance and forgiveness of sins be proclaimed to every name under heaven.

[3 : 09] And this focus on forgiveness and not so much our sins went through the early church.

And you see it in the creeds. So the Apostles' Creed, we say, I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting.

The Nicene Creed that we just read together, we say, I acknowledge one baptism for the remission, forgiveness of sins. So this forgiveness we must not take for granted.

And I want to meditate with you on two things to do with forgiveness. I want to meditate with you in the Old Testament a little bit on the impossible possibility.

And then secondly, the impossible made possible. So if you would like to follow along in the Bible, I'm going to start with Exodus 34.

And that's page 74 in the Bible. And I want to think with you about the impossibility of the possibility of forgiveness.

[4 : 30] The reading all I've read for us reveals, and I don't know how to say this more reverently, it reveals a kind of conundrum. Or should I say God himself reveals a kind of conundrum.

In verse 7, as he is revealing his name. Halfway through verse 7, God describes himself as forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin.

And then he says, But who will by no means clear the guilty. Have you ever seen that? How can God by no means clear the guilty, and in the very same breath, as it were, say that he will be merciful and forgive sins, transgressions, and iniquities?

You see, forgiveness in the Bible sense is neither expected nor simple. God does forgive, but he is holy. And he cannot allow evil and injustice and wickedness to go unpunished.

So why does God say this? What's going on? And I want to step back and look a little bit with you at the context of this passage. We're in the book of Exodus. And in chapter 19, God brought his people, rescued them, redeemed them from Egypt, and brought them to himself on Mount Sinai as his treasured possession.

[5 : 57] He descended on the mountain in chapter 20, speaks to them from heaven, gives them the law and the Ten Commandments. And three times, Israel says, all that the Lord has spoken, we will do.

All that the Lord has spoken, we will do. And in the midst of it, God is determined to find a way that he can dwell with his people. And he gives us a preview of that in chapter 24.

If you just keep one finger in 34, and go back to 24. God invites Moses and Aaron and 70 of the elders of Israel to come up to the mountain to eat a meal with him.

And before they come, before they can approach the mountain, they need to sacrifice an animal and then sprinkle blood on themselves. You can see that in verses 3 to 8.

And the sprinkling of blood is a recognition that they cannot be in the presence of God on their own, or they would die. And while the sacrifice and the sprinkled blood does not take away their sin, it doesn't pay for their sin, it does cover it.

[7 : 22] So let me read from verse 8, a couple of verses. Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, Behold, the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.

It is a preview.

It is a little picture of where the Bible is heading, of what salvation really is, of intimacy and fellowship and the enjoyment of one another's company in the presence of God after all that is wrong has been put right.

It is more than forgiveness. But it is what is after forgiveness. And then God calls Moses to go up on the mountain.

And from chapters 25 all the way through to chapters 31, for 40 days, it is a conversation between God and Moses.

[8 : 42] And God is making provisions where he will come and dwell with his people even though they are sinful. And even though their wickedness is still upon them. And he designs a large tent, a tabernacle, and a room in it, and an ark for his dwelling place, and a table, and a lamp.

And he gives Moses instructions for altars, for sacrifices. And then he designs fabrics for the curtains and for the priests.

And if you read it, it is stunningly aesthetically beautiful and highly dangerous. Because if any of the provisions are not made, the people will be consumed by God's glory.

And the 40 days ends in chapter 31, where God reminds Moses about the Sabbath. Because all these provisions are a way for his people to enter his rest.

And then he gives them the two tablets of the law. Chapter 32, if you look at it, disaster strikes. Near the end of the 40 days, Israel is sick and tired of waiting.

[10 : 01] And so they build a golden calf to serve as their God. It's an Egyptian motif. They break covenant with God. Evidently, taking Israel out of Egypt is easier than taking Egypt out of Israel.

They didn't trust God at the sea. They complained in the wilderness. And now, even with the Ten Commandments and the law, sin remains. And they break covenant.

What this means is that for all their promises to do as the Lord had said, it doesn't work. The Ten Commandments, perfect as they are in themselves, have no power to change us.

God punishes them, and yet the sin remains. And though God concedes to Moses that he will travel to Israel and he will give them the land, things have changed.

And so in chapter 33, Moses asks the one question that he should ask. And in verse 19, he asks God, sorry, in verse 18, he asks God to show him his glory.

[11 : 13] Please show me your glory. He knows this is the heart of everything. This is where, this is the danger, and this is the solution. And in verse 19, the Lord says, I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you my name of the Lord.

And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. And then he says to Moses, you cannot see me and live. Even a glimpse would overwhelm you.

So he hides Moses in the cleft of a rock and puts his hand over Moses. And that's where we pick up the reading, as the Lord gives instruction to Moses.

And the Lord makes his glory. Well, what does the Lord do? It's very interesting if we read this passage. Moses does not see his glory. Our focus is not drawn towards what Moses sees, but what he hears.

God proclaims his name. He preaches to him. Verse 5. The Lord descended in the cloud and stood before him there, stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord.

[12:27] The Lord passed before him and proclaimed. And here it is again. The Lord. The Lord. Twice. A God merciful and gracious.

Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Keeping steadfast love for thousands. Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. But who will by no means clear the guilty? The Lord reveals himself in seven perfections. And it's interesting. Only one perfection is mentioned twice. And it is love.

Steadfast love. And only one perfection is qualified as overflowing and abounding and running over. And it is love. Not because God is in love with us.

But because God has set his love on us. And together these perfections tell us the heart of God.

That he cares about us deeply. That he sympathizes with us in our weaknesses.

[13:33] That his heart is drawn out to us in mercy. And in undeserving grace and kindness. That he does not treat us as we deserve.

But as we do not deserve. That he is long suffering. That he is patient. He does not wish to act against us in our sin. But overflows in love.

And he says in my love I forgive comprehensively. The crookedness. The bentness. The breach of relationship. The moving out of the way. All that evil. I will forgive.

And yet there is a seventh perfection that remains. I will by no means clear the guilty. Because you see there is no wedge in God between his love and his holiness.

His love is a holy love and has a moral shape to it. One of the great preachers of the last century said. Forgiveness of sin is the greatest problem a just and holy God has ever faced.

[14:35] By his power. He will punish evil. And if he does punish evil who of us will be standing. All that is evil.

All sin is like a debt that must be paid. But the only way to forgive that debt is to absorb the cost. How can God absorb the cost of evil when the debt is an infinite one.

But this God. Our God. He finds a way. The only way. And if God is going to clear us. And lift our sins away from us to forgive us.

It means that he must bear the debt himself. Which brings us to the second passage that we read tonight. And that is the impossible is made possible.

Before we dive there. I just want to turn with you to Jeremiah for a moment. Jeremiah chapter 31.

[15:39] Well known verses. Page 660. Before we leave the Old Testament. God makes promises.

Through his prophets. Of the forgiveness. That we need. Jeremiah is prophesying in the ruins of Jerusalem. And in chapter 31.

Verse 31. He says this. The Lord says. Behold the days are coming. Declares the Lord. When I will make a new covenant. With the house of Israel. And the house of Judah. Not like the covenant I made with their fathers.

On the day when I took them by the hand. To bring them out of the land of Egypt. My covenant that they broke. Though I was their husband. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel.

After those days. Declares the Lord. And then he says three things. He makes three promises about this covenant. First. I will put my law within them. And I will write it on their hearts.

[16:40] I will be their God. And they will be my people. Second. No longer shall each one teach his neighbor. And each his brother saying. Know the Lord. For they will all know me.

From the least of them to the greatest. Declares the Lord. For. Thirdly. Because. I will forgive their iniquity. And I will remember their sin.

No more. In other words. The new covenant which is promised. Is rooted in forgiveness. The reason the law is placed within us.

Is because we now know the Lord. And the reason we now know the Lord. Is because. Our sins are forgiven. All rests on that. And when the New Testament opens.

We find that Jesus has come. To give knowledge of salvation. To his people. Through the forgiveness of their sins. And that takes us to the second passage. We read tonight.

[17 : 36] Matthew 26. Let's turn there shall we. On page 832.

This is the record of Jesus. Instituting what we call the Lord's Supper. He deliberately sets it. In the Passover. The annual celebration. Of the Passover.

Where many people had Exodus. On the mind. But Jesus in this meal. Deliberately refers to one incident. In Exodus. And that is the meal on the mountain.

Where the 70 elders. Ate the covenant meal. With God. Verse 26. He took bread. And after blessing.

Broke it. Gave it to the disciples. Saying. Take eat. This is my body. And he took the cup. And when he had given thanks. He gave it to them.

[18 : 40] Saying. Drink of it all of you. This is my blood of the covenant. You remember that phrase Moses used. Which is poured out for many. For the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus looking forward to his death. On this next day. Sees what he is doing. Is bringing about the new covenant. The new situation.

The new relationship. Between God and man. The central reality of which. Is the forgiveness of sins. This is my blood of the covenant. Poured out for many.

For the forgiveness of sins. As the son of God. And as the perfect man. Jesus takes the punishment. For our sin and evil.

He pays the debt. And his death. Is infinitely costly. Because on the cross. He's not just abandoned. By his friends.

[19 : 34] But he cries out to God. Why have you forsaken me? This is a quote from a writer. From two centuries ago. He describes Jesus on the cross.

As being without any comforts of God. No feeling that God loved him. No feeling that God pitied him. No feeling that God supported him. He was as if. He had no God.

All that God had been to him before. Was taken from him now. He was. Godless. Deprived of his God. He had the feeling of the condemned. When the judge says.

Depart from you you cursed. Who shall be punished. With everlasting destruction. From the presence of the Lord. And from the glory of his power. Jesus felt. That God said the same to him. He said.

This is the hell that Christ suffered. The ocean of Christ's suffering. Is unfathomable. He was forsaken. In the place of sinners. It was for me.

[20 : 38] And with those words. The possible. Sorry. The impossible. Is made possible. For the first time in history. For the first time in the world.

Our sins can be utterly forgiven. This is the great deliverance. As Jesus Christ pays our debt. And what that means is. That now there is no condemnation.

This night. Means there is no condemnation. For all who trust in him. And as we come to celebrate. The Lord's Supper together. And we confess our sins.

And repent. We are not repenting. To turn away God's anger. Unsure about whether he will forgive us. We're not repenting. To try and keep on God's good side.

Impressing him with our sorrow. We're not trying to atone for our sin. Working up adequate amounts of regret. We're not earning mercy.

[21 : 33] By inner suffering in our conscience. What we're doing is we're receiving. We are receiving the forgiveness. That Christ earned. And it is now both.

Infinitely loving. And infinitely just. For God to forgive us. When we repent. We honor Christ's death. We proclaim.

His death and resurrection. We realign our lives. To his purposes. We don't. We don't confess our sins. Under duress.

We're not doing it as the last resort. We're not going through the mitigating circumstances. In our minds. But we confess freely. We look to Christ.

And we receive his forgiveness freely. Knowing the infinite cost. The infinite faithfulness. And his steadfast love. Which remains.

[22 : 31] That's what tonight's about. Amen.