

The Cross of Christ: The Victory of God

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome to another Sermon on the Web from St. John's Shaughnessy Anglican Church in Vancouver, Canada. You are free to use this mp3 audio file and to redistribute it to others without alteration and without charge. After the sermon, listen for more information about St. John's Shaughnessy Church and the St. John's website. The following message is from the October 8, 2000 service at St. John's Shaughnessy. The Reverend David Short delivered his message from the book of Colossians, the second chapter, verses 13 to 15. The title of the message is

The Cross of Christ, the Victory of God. If you're with us now for the first time, it's our custom at this point in the service to take out the Bible which is in the rack in front and to open it to the passage that's going to be looked at.

In this case, we're going to begin on page 188 near the back. It's because we believe this is the normal way God speaks to people through his word and to make sure the preacher doesn't go too far off track. Colossians 2. This week, the National Post ran an apology. It's the first for everything.

Earlier in the week, they had published a terrible story on the violence in Israel and you may have seen the picture of a young man bleeding profusely from the head, sitting on the ground. Behind him was a Jewish soldier, an Israeli soldier, baton raised, anger on his face directed towards people in the background. The story underneath claimed that the young man was a Palestinian who'd been beaten by Israeli troops. The very next day, they reprinted the picture. In fact, the young man was an American student who had been pulled from his car by a mob of Palestinians who'd beaten him with rocks and he'd managed to find his way to this Israeli outpost and the soldier's baton was raised not in attack but in protection. And I tell you that story not to have sympathy for the Israelis because I'm sure we could tell the story on both sides but for this reason that appearances can be very deceiving.

It is possible to look at something and get the completely wrong idea and I think that is nowhere more true than in the cross of Jesus Christ. When you look at Jesus dying on the cross as many have, it's very easy to think that evil is triumphing over good. Here is a man most innocent, indeed without any sin. A perfect man, betrayed, abandoned by his followers, hounded, persecuted and rejected by his religious authorities, cruelly beaten and punished by the Romans, falsely accused, dying in pain.

[3 : 1 9] We read forsaken by God himself. How can this Jesus be the great conqueror of death? He does not die at the head of a mighty insurrection. He doesn't die and bring about a potent revolution.

He dies in weakness and he dies in disgrace. How is it possible that we can start the service this morning with those words, I hold the keys of death and hell? And I think it's difficult for us today to imagine what a massive liability the cross was for early Christians. We're used to thinking of the cross as a religious symbol or a piece of fashionable jewellery. But in Jesus' day, of course, it was neither.

It was neither religious nor was it beautiful, but it was entirely offensive. The Roman author Cicero describes the cross or the crucifixion as most cruel and disgusting and he says that any mention of crucifixion is unworthy of a Roman citizen. It should be banished far from your thoughts. Yet the amazing thing is that the early Christians not only admitted that Jesus died that way but boasted about it.

It seems absolutely ridiculous when you think of what the cross meant in those days. Do you know the earliest picture we have of the cross from history comes from 225 AD.

It's a picture of complete contempt and ridicule. It comes from an excavation of the page boy's quarters in the emperor's palace. It's a picture of a young man saluting someone who's on a cross.

[4 : 56] And the figure on the cross has the head of an ass. And underneath the crude inscription reads, Alex Amonos worships his God. The cross was a huge handicap to early missionary endeavour.

Nobody in Jesus' day would have dreamed of wearing a cross around their neck. It would have been the worst possible taste. It was not an ornament of fashion but an instrument for execution. And I think that's what makes it so remarkable that New Testament speaks about the cross in terms of victory and conquest and overcoming and triumph. I mean perhaps we could understand it if the New Testament spoke about the resurrection in those terms but the New Testament specifically uses those terms when it speaks about the death of Jesus on the cross. What is it about the cross that changes it from a victory for brutality and jealousy and evil into a victory for God? How on earth does Jesus on the cross defeat Satan? How does he defeat death when he seems defeated by death? And this morning I want quickly with you to turn to two passages and the first one is in Colossians 2 verses 13 to 15.

When you study the New Testament one of the things you will find is that when it comes to death there is a complete absence of sentimentalism but there is a striking realism. Death is never in the Bible considered as something natural and normal. It is a hostile power which cannot be domesticated and cannot be explained by human wisdom. The Bible says that we are made as human beings in the image of God and that death was not part of God's good creation. Rather death entered the world as a result of sin or in biblical thinking death is the penalty or the punishment for rebelling against God.

It doesn't mean that the time of our death or the manner of our death is related to some personal sin of ours but it does mean that in the Bible thinking there is an unbreakable connection between sin and death and if we miss that connection we cannot understand the real nature of death.

When I first started taking funerals as a young minister in Australia it was distressing to witness the way so many used sentimentality to try to come to grips with the death of their loved ones and the most common way of coming to death or dealing with their grief was to say that this wonderful person somehow lives on in the minds of those who remain or in the lives of their children. I want to say to you that is not a Christian view of death nor do I think it's even an honest view of death. The famous atheist Bertrand Russell has the honesty to say our life is brief and powerless and when we face those gates of darkness all we can do is to worship at the shrine built of our own hands.

[7 : 55] It's a little cynical but I think he's at least being honest. And when we turn to Colossians 2 we find a very different atmosphere altogether. Still there is this categorical connection between sin and death.

Look at verse 13. The Apostle Paul says, And you who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him having forgiven us all our trespasses.

The Apostle says that before we become Christians we are under the power and dominion of death, alienated and separated from God who is the source of life.

Everyone apart from Jesus Christ he says is without spiritual life. Why? The reason is through our trespasses and our sinful nature, through our disobedience to God we place ourselves under the tyranny of death.

What we need therefore is not morality or philosophy or religion but we need an act of incomparable power to release us from this bondage and to bring us new life and that is exactly what God has done through Jesus' death on the cross.

[9 : 11] You see it in verse 13? He made us alive with him having forgiven our trespasses. So here is the point of verse 13.

The gospel, the Christian message of good news has two sides, not just one. When we place our faith in Jesus Christ and his cross we do not just receive the forgiveness of our sins but we also receive deliverance from the power of evil and the power of death.

Forgiveness and deliverance from death are not two separate blessings. They are part of the one blessing that God gives us through the cross of Jesus Christ. You see the penalty for sin and the power of sin go together and when the penalty for death or the penalty for sin is broken so is the power.

When we receive forgiveness the power of death is forever shattered. Now how can that be possible? The apostle answers in verse 14 and if you look at that verse he speaks about our sin as a bond, a massive IOU to God, a certificate of our indebtedness.

We owe him our love and obedience but we have not given it. We owe him a debt we can never pay and he says it stands against us. Verse 14. He says having cancelled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands, this he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

[10 : 38] God takes our indebtedness and as Jesus dies on the cross, he nails it to the cross, he sets it aside, he removes it totally, permanently, utterly.

He wipes it clean, he nails it to the cross. As Jesus died on the cross, you remember the Romans nailed a false accusation against him. But you see what held him there was not the Romans accusation, it was our sin.

It wasn't his trespass, it was ours. And as he dies God nails the record of our sins to that cross and all that stands against us, Jesus took into himself.

So as Jesus bears our sin, the bond against us is cancelled. All that you have done against God, all that you and I have not done that we should have done, God sets aside.

He takes the record of everything we've done, every thought, every word, every deed, and he says, I wipe it away, I set it aside. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

[11 : 44] And in verse 15, he speaks about the other side of the blessing. He says, he disarmed the principalities and powers, made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him.

Principalities and powers is the New Testament way of speaking about Satan and his demons. In his death, Jesus has disarmed them. The most powerful weapons that Satan holds against us, death and hell and separation from God, Jesus takes to himself.

And in doing so, he exposes them for what they are. And then he drags them in a victory procession. They don't gladly surrender, but they are forced to submit against their will to a power that they cannot resist.

And that is why the cross is a place of victory for us. It means freedom from Satan and freedom from death and freedom from demonic forces. They are not some extra blessing that you get for being a super Christian.

They are all there in the cross of Jesus Christ, in the forgiveness that's ours. And before we turn to the second passage, I just point out that this is not, he's not talking about the resurrection.

[12 : 58] He's talking about the death of Jesus. It's not that the cross is defeat and the resurrection is victory. It is in the cross that the devil is disarmed. And in the resurrection, God gladly says yes and proclaims and demonstrates that what happened in the cross was indeed victory.

Let's turn to the second passage. If you turn to the right a couple of pages to Hebrews chapter 2, we are drawn a little deeper into this on page 204.

This is one of my favorite texts in all of scripture. The writer takes a step back and he tells us why Jesus left heaven, why he became incarnate in the first place. In verse 14 we read, Since therefore the children, that's us, share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature.

That through death, he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death are subject to lifelong bondage.

When he says that the devil has the power of death, it doesn't mean that he has complete authority over a death. The devil is not free to inflict death on whoever he likes or whenever he likes.

[14 : 10] It's somehow within the economy of God, God allows him to wield it as his own tool. Death is his realm. The reason for that is he is the author of sin.

It's through his work that sin entered the world in the first place. And through sin, death. Death is his realm. And as he draws us into sin, he draws us under the power and dominion of death.

He makes death serve his ends. And the way he does that is by making us slaves to the lifelong fear of death. And I think you'll agree with me, that is still his greatest weapon.

I mean, if you could feed every hungry person in the world, if you could clothe and house and bring justice to every human being, if we could remove every form of human oppression in the world, it'd be fantastic, but our deepest problem would still remain.

We would still be slaves, tyrannized by sin and by death and by Satan. But the astounding and audacious claim of the New Testament is that through his death, Jesus destroyed the devil and has liberated us from lifelong fear to death.

[15 : 23] That is why he became human. He couldn't suffer in our place from the safety of heaven. He took our flesh and blood so that he could die our death and so disarm the devil.

We've seen a little tiny picture of that this week in the remarkable events in Yugoslavia. Milozovich, who wielded power so brutally, was forced to concede defeat. And amongst those who most benefited from his defeat was a young Canadian from Victoria called Liam Hall, who since August 1 has enjoyed the hospitality of the Milozovich prison system.

You see, Milozovich's defeat means freedom from Hall, for Hall, I'm sorry, as Satan's defeat means freedom for us. But you say, just a minute, we still face temptation and we still sin and we still die and that is true.

And when you look at verse 14, when the writer says that Jesus destroyed the devil, the word in the original does not mean he annihilated and obliterated him.

The word means to render ineffective, to make inactive or powerless. The same word is used here of the devil, it's used of our sinful nature, it's also used of death itself.

[16 : 43] These things have not ceased to exist, but their power is broken. They are not eliminated, but they are overthrown. They still wield real power, but through the death of Jesus, you and I have been rescued from Satan's grip.

We've been freed from a slavery, rescued from all condemnation and guilt and raised to new life. It is in the cross, it is in the cross that you and I find victory and life.

We still sin, we still face death, but death is powerless now, powerless to separate us from God. Christ has taken that death to himself.

When he comes again, we are told, he will destroy every enemy and the last enemy to be destroyed is death itself. And we long for that day.

So I want to urge you, as we conclude, please take a Christian view of death. And I think that means two things. Firstly, it's more and more important for us today to bear witness to the biblical view of death.

[17 : 57] The death is not a friend. It is not normal. It is not natural. It's not just the next stage in your evolution. Despite our best attempts to domesticate it and pretend that it's not fearful, apart from Christ, men and women are still held in lifelong bondage through the fear of death.

The experience of death is not the same for all and neither is what lies after death. I want to encourage you to hold in your hearts the inexorable biblical connection between sin and death to see that death is still regarded as an enemy, even this side of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We can only help one another if we're honest with this truth. But secondly, there is another side. Death is an enemy but it is a defeated enemy.

Through the cross of Jesus Christ death has lost its sting. Through the cross of Jesus Christ death is no longer a great unknown. It's no longer the final end for each of us.

It becomes the entry into heaven, a place where we go and we meet Christ. Because of the cross, the thought of death stirs within our hearts a desire and a longing for home.

[19 : 15] And if you're a Christian and you know that Christ has died for you, you should know that death is not the worst thing that can happen to you despite what the media tells us. The problem for us, isn't it, is that we live in Vancouver.

It's so easy to be seduced by the beauty of life here. to think that this life has real meaning apart from God. It's so easy and convenient to exchange the real God for images we create.

It's so easy to run after eating and drinking and being wealthy and to work on the Tower of Babel and gradually fall in love with this world. But I say to you, all the money and all the achievements and all the fear therapy this world can offer cannot change the essential nature of death.

Only Christ in his cross has won that victory. Are you frightened? Are you fearful of death? And I don't mean the process of dying because I think there is real fear there. I mean, are you frightened to die?

It can only be because you and I have not grasped what Jesus has done for us in the cross. His great purpose in coming to earth was to triumph over the world and over sin and over death.

[20 : 28] Your sins are nailed to that cross. Satan has been robbed of his power over you and you and I do not need to live without hope. It's the cross that gives us freedom, the cross that gives us hope.

It's the cross that gives us confidence and direction and purpose to say that there is nothing in all creation, neither height nor depth, nor death itself, that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen. This MP3 sermon, along with many others, is available from the St. John's Shaughnessy website at www.stjohnschaughnessy.org That address is www.stjohnschaughnessy.org On the website, you will also find information about ministries, worship services, and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy.

We hope that this sermon on the web has helped you and that you will share it with others. Music .

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