

Begins Easter Friday 2017

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Father, thank you for your love for us in the Lord Jesus. Thank you for this passage. Lord, you need to break through so we can understand how deeply, deeply, deeply we need you.

And what you've done to bring us home to you. So help us to come home to you today and we ask it for your sake. Amen. Many years ago, I worked at a place.

It was one of the best jobs in the world as far as I was concerned. It was Mount Capitan National Park. I worked for the National Parks and Wildlife Service. And Mount Capitan's claim to fame is that it is the highest peak in Australia outside of the Snowy Mountains.

It's not a massive claim to fame if you live in Europe, but it's a claim to fame. It's 1,510 metres above sea level. It's hardly even called a mountain, really.

It's really a hill. But it's not so impressive. But what makes it impressive is it stands beside the total contrast of the northwest slopes and plains of New South Wales.

[1 : 02] Just 55 kilometres west of Mount Capitan is the town of Narrabri, where I grew up. And it stands at a staggering 200 metres above sea level.

And it's on the edge of the vast plains of western New South Wales. And the contrast between Capitan and Narrabri is quite staggering and very significant.

You see, the view from Narrabri is pretty pathetic, really. You can't really see anything at all. But on a good day, at the top of Mount Capitan, you can see 11% of New South Wales.

That's even more than what you can see from the top of Mount Kosciuszko. Mount Capitan is at least 10 degrees cooler than Narrabri. And it got almost twice the amount of rain that Narrabri received.

A wonderful oasis. And there is a similar staggering contrast when you look at the passages that Sam just read to us that's on our sheet this morning.

[2 : 04] The contrast is from death to life, from hell to heaven, from slavery to freedom, from pessimism to hope. It's a staggering contrast.

The contrast from who we are without Jesus and who we are in Jesus. For those of us who have joined us for today, the theme over the past few weeks we've been working through here at St. Paul's is the journey home.

And it might seem a bit strange, after several weeks into that theme, that my goal today is to take us back to the beginning. And where the journey begins.

But Good Friday is where the journey begins. For all of us. And there are three things that I want you to see in these verses this morning from the Bible.

Firstly, the journey that we need rescuing from. Secondly, the journey that we're rescued for. And thirdly, how you begin that journey home.

[3 : 08] So, first of all, the journey we need rescuing from. It's in verses 1 to 3. And it's really important as we get into this that if you've got an illness, you need a correct diagnosis.

On the side here, I've got an insulin pump. I'm a diabetic. It's no good me going to a doctor and a doctor saying to me, what you need is some Panadol. You need to understand the illness you've got in order to get the correct medicine to deal with the disease you've got or the issue that you've got.

And the first three verses are a comprehensive panoramic picture of the human condition outside of God.

And it says quite bluntly, dead, dead in transgressions and sins. Now, the Apostle Paul, who wrote these words, is making an absolute statement.

He doesn't mean that the Christians at Ephesus were merely in danger of death, but that they were in a state of real and present death before Jesus intervened.

[4 : 14] Death is not a figure of speech here. He's not using hyperbole. These people are absolutely dead. Now, although he speaks of Gentiles in verse 1, he includes his fellow Jews in verse 3.

The state of spiritual death is universal, is what he's saying. He's not describing some decadent, depraved segment of society, but all of humanity from top to bottom, dead in transgressions and sins.

All people are spiritually dead apart from Jesus. And when Paul says dead, he means it to have universal and an absolute application.

No exceptions here. No exceptions. So what does it mean to be dead in transgressions and sins? After all, you know, look at us here today.

You know, people whose bodies are active and minds are sharp and whose personalities are brimming. What does it mean? It means to be enslaved.

[5 : 27] Notice the word followed in verse 2, and it's there again in verse 3. It says in verse 2, you followed the ways of the world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air.

And then again in verse 3, it says, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. And the word followed there means to be mastered.

It means to be controlled by something. The reason we are dead in trespasses and sins is that we are as helpless as a dead body.

Completely controlled. Totally mastered. Unable to move. Unable to act on our own. There are three things here that we are enslaved to.

Verse 2, it says, we're enslaved to the ways of this world. Verse 2 also says that we're enslaved to the ruler of the kingdom of the air. That's talking about Satan, devil. This morning I want to notice just the key idea.

[6 : 31] It's in verse 3. Now, the term flesh there in verse 3 doesn't mean human flesh and bones.

Like, you know, that stuff. It literally refers to self-centered human nature. It's the self-centered human nature which drives us, which masters us, which controls us.

According to the Bible, the reason we are dead in trespasses and sins, the reason we are enslaved to sin, is because the human heart is profoundly self-centered.

Every one of us. The 16th century church reformer and theologian Martin Luther put the condition of the human heart quite succinctly.

He described it as curved in on itself. Curved in on itself. Absorbed in self.

[7 : 37] Looking inside self-centered. That is what it means to be human apart from God. And Luther said that our nature is so deeply curved in on itself that it, to quote him, wickedly, curvedly, and viciously, seeks to use all things, even God, for its own sake.

It's like all of us had this little computer in the center of our heart that never, ever, ever stops.

It is constantly analyzing everything, every person, every object, every interaction, every event, every setting. It's analyzing the basic question, what's in it for me?

Everything is being analyzed by how it benefits my happiness, how it benefits my glory, how it benefits my comfort, my reputation, my control of all things.

How does this help me? How does it serve my interests and fit my interests? How does this make me happy? Everything gets put through that grid and the computer never stops.

[9 : 05] Now, it's obvious to most of us, I think, that self-centeredness can make us a pretty cruel person. You know, it's not hard to identify the dictators and the tyrants who were egotistical and proud and self-centered and murderous and they want to get their own way and they will do whatever it takes, even immoral things, in order to get their own way.

More often than not, though, however, self-centeredness actually makes you a really moral person. It makes you a good person. If everything is about my need to feel good about myself, then there is no better way for that to happen than for me to be a good person, a moral person.

You see, self-centeredness drives most people towards attempting to live a good life, trying really hard to serve the needy, to be a good child to a parent, to honor my parents in some way, to be a good parent to my children, a good friend who assists wherever they possibly can, a good person, a dutiful person who does what's expected of them.

And what lies beneath all of that is a self-centeredness where we do it for ourselves, where we do it to help ourselves. We do good things to be noticed by people, to receive the applause of people.

It's so we can feel like we've got a meaningful life. We feel like we're a good person when we've got the acclaim of others. Now, I'm not sure if you remember one of the greatest Hollywood classics of the last century, the first Rocky movie, starring Sylvester Stallone.

[10:58] Now, quite frankly, he's an underrated actor who should have by now won an Academy Award. Nominated three times, pipped at the post each time. Poor guy. It's amazing he was nominated three times, frankly.

His love interest in that movie asked him why he was fighting the world champion, Apollo Creed. It was a spectacle fight.

He was not expected to win in any sort of way. And his reply, if you can get through the mumbling and get the translation right, his reply is, I want to go the distance.

Then I'll know I'm not a bum. Now, deep down inside of us, if we ever allow ourselves to go to that recess of our hearts, we all feel like bums.

We're trying to do something to convince ourselves and to convince the world that we're not and that we're good. And so we evaluate everything in terms of whether it makes me look good or whether it doesn't make me look good.

[12:10] Self-centeredness can make you a tyrant. Self-centeredness can make you a moral and a good person. But self-centeredness can almost, so make you a very religious person. We can devote ourselves to obeying God and turning up to church and reading the Bible and praying and giving and doing all the sorts of things that we've been doing right here, right now, all good things and right things to do.

So how do I know when I'm doing it for me? When things aren't going well for you in life, you start to pull away from these good things.

It's because you're doing these things in order to do, as Luther says, use God. We do good things and expect God to come through for us.

Be generous to someone. God's going to be generous to me. It means it's all about us. It's awful to think about it, but it's possible to, in fact, even to get into Christianity to have God serve us rather than for us to serve God.

It's astounding. Self-centeredness clings to everything in our lives like a rash.

[13:31] Verse 3 uses the word craving to describe our self-centeredness. It's a word that means inordinate desire. It means that our egos are addictive. The little computer is addictive.

It means that we are living for our own glory and it will never be enough in the same way that a shot of heroin for an addict will never be enough. There's got to be more.

The little computer in us is in overdrive, running evaluations, but no amount of glory, no amount of acclaim, recognition, comfort will ever be enough.

It's addictive. And it's never satisfying. And it makes you miserable. C.S. Lewis, the Oxford professor and author, wrote that there is nothing more enslaving and miserable than self-centeredness.

He wrote that it is hell begun in us that will eventually take us to hell because it's taking us towards the person that we are becoming.

[14:44] The ruler of the kingdom of the air as Ephesians 2 says. The framework that every human being begins with without Jesus is that if you, is that you give your life for me.

It's me first. You serve my interests. That's even how we relate to our creator, our sustainer, our God. It's me first. And the Bible's view of sin is that every part of the human person is tainted by sin. It doesn't mean that humans are not capable of any good. It doesn't mean that there's no dignity in human beings. In fact, I would argue the Bible places more than any other world worldview, supreme value on human dignity.

But it means that no part of the human being, the mind, the emotions, the heart, the will, is left untouched by sin and self-centeredness. And so the consequences at the end of verse 3 is shocking to our modern context that says we want to be able to live how we want without any consequences.

Not only dead, but condemned. That's the consequence. Not only dead, but condemned. Verse 3, like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

[16:05] That's God's anger. God's anger is not like human anger. It's not a bad temper. It's not spite. It's not malice. It's not animosity. It's not revenge. It's not arbitrary.

It is predictable. And it's not governed by mood or by whim. It is God's personal, righteous, constant hostility towards all that is evil, unjust, and sin.

It is his settled refusal to compromise with it and his resolve to condemn it. And that is the life journey, the trajectory that we are all on and that we need rescuing from.

Now in a moment, I'm going to talk about how God saves us from that life. But first, I want to take us to the end of these verses where it talks briefly about the life that we are rescued for.

This is the kind of life that God wants to give us and this is the life he wants to bring us into. Starting at verse 8, for it is by grace you have been saved through faith.

[17:14] This is not from yourselves. It is a gift from God, not by work so that no one can boast.

For we are God's handiwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Now there are a couple of fascinating terms right in there. The first is in verse 8, it is by grace you've been saved through faith and this is not from yourselves, as a gift from God. It is saying that we are not saved, we do not give ourselves the evaluation of being a good person by doing good things and being moral.

We are not saved by anything that we do. God's salvation, his gift is a gift. This new life that he wants to bring us into is a gift and once we get this gift we start to see everything in life as a gift.

It's not my entitlement, it's not there to serve me. Even faith is something that God gives us. The life that God wants us to have is a life where we see everything as a gift.

It's not a life where we divide the world up to into makers and takers to quote a taxi driver that we had in the United States. Everything is a gift.

[18:29] We don't deserve anything. It's a life that is lived through faith as we're told here and faith isn't just about intellectual belief. It means that but it means much more than that.

Faith means trust. It means resting. See, a Christian person is a person who's at rest. They are characterised by what verse 9 says, no longer boasting.

They're not boasting anymore. Now, when we hear the word boast, we hear bragging. You know, look at the things I've done and achieved.

Now, boasting meant something a bit different and probably more profound in the first century.

Boasting for them was to give yourself confidence, to gee yourself up, to face something really hard.

That's what boasting was in the first century. So, imagine a military leader got his troops there, rallying his troops, getting them pumped up because they're about to run in and face death.

[19:34] He would stand there and he'd boast, look at the size of our spears, weeny little spears, these guys, and look at how many guys we've got. They've only got a few over there. Look at our tactics.

We've been winning all, our tactics are much better than their tactics. The soldiers would go, yeah, grab these spears, yeah, I'm going to die. That's what boasting is.

This is the sense here. The boasting here is about where your confidence is placed. And we are told here that one of the great things about the Christian life is it brings to an end of all boasting in self and into placing my confidence in my fickle personal hope that I'm trying to build for myself.

everyone is looking around for something to boast in, to have confidence in, to trust in, to rest in, in order to face life.

Everyone is trying to find something to give us that sense of value, that sense of worth. Some of us look to careers, some of us look to our family, some of us look to salaries, some of us look to moral decency, some of us look to religious performance.

[20:51] A life looking at things to boast in is a life that's scrambling, scrambling for identity, scrambling for self worth, and it is exhausting.

And as C.S. Lewis says, it makes you miserable. And the new life that God gives us is a gift, and because it's a gift, we are set free from that, liberated from trying to find our boast, trying to find our confidence, from within ourselves to pin our hopes on, and in verse 10 it says this wonderful vision of the new life, he says, we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

In the old life, we are dead in our sins, but the new life is described as God's handiwork, we are his artwork, his masterpiece. No longer dead, but instead remade, set free to do good works without the constant calculation of whether I've done enough to get the applause that I so desperately

desire.

God's greatest masterpiece is humanity saved from condemnation, made alive and set free from slavery. The old life means we work hard in the hope of getting the applause, the praise of the praiseworthy, the new life because we have the praise of the most praiseworthy already.

We are set free to serve and love with free abandon. So we've seen the life that we need to be saved from and the life that we are saved for.

[22 : 27] So how do we begin this journey? Where does it start? And the answer to that is both profound and simple. It says in verses 4 to 7 that God has done something incredible in Jesus.

It says, because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you've been saved.

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. Notice the last verse in verse 6. God has raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms.

Now the first recipients of this letter knew exactly what that meant in the Roman world. You see, in the first century Roman world, the conquering war, the general would return from a great victory and he was given as a reward the greatest place of honour in the capital city.

And that is the seat beside the throne of the emperor. right hand seat. Jesus died, he was raised again and he was given the place of greatest honour, the seat on the right hand throne in the heaven.

[23 : 57] It can't mean that we are raised from dead literally because I don't think that I've died just yet. I'm jet lagged but I'm not dead. It can't mean that I'm in heaven because I'm still here.

It doesn't mean that we are literally seated with him there just yet. It means that we are legally seated with him there right now in Jesus. You see, when you believe in Jesus, all your sins are so hidden, they are so covered that you are treated as if you have done everything that Jesus has ever done.

Through Jesus, God delights, he honours, he accepts and he rejoices over us in the way that he has his perfect obedient son.

How can that be when we have been so, so self-centered? The key there is in verse 7, he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

The word kindness there of Christ Jesus literally means a costly action. It's more than just saying, you know, I love you. It is putting your money where your mouth is, as we say, or for Jesus' sake, it is putting his life where his mouth is.

[25 : 28] The first three verses tell us that the essence of sin, which is the reason why we are dead, is putting ourselves where only God should be, the center of our lives, on the throne of our lives, in control of our lives.

That is what sin is, is putting ourselves where only God deserves to be. Salvation, according to the Christian faith, is the exact opposite.

And salvation is God putting himself where we deserve to be, on the cross. That's what Good Friday is all about.

Jesus took the just and the righteous punishment from God that we deserve for putting ourselves in the place where only God belongs, on the throne as rulers of our lives.

The punishment he took on the cross was much more than the cruel and the excruciating physical punishment of crucifixion. It was a cruel way to die.

[26 : 33] He took the wrath of God that verse 3 says we deserve. He was cut off from his father and he experienced the agony that we would experience if we were cut off from God for all of eternity.

And I cannot imagine, even begin to imagine what that was like for him. He sat in our seat so that we now can sit in his seat. One person put it so, so succinctly, the essence of sin is us substituting ourselves for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us.

And that's what Good Friday is all about. We have put ourselves where only God deserves to be and so God chooses to put himself where we deserve to be.

And so the way to be blasted out of our self-centeredness is to see that Jesus saved us by doing the exact opposite of us.

He saved us through the most radically unselfish thing anyone has ever done. Though he is equal with God, he emptied himself of his glory, he came down, he took our place as a servant, he traded

his life for ours, and the contrast of these verses is startling.

[27 : 49] The very next words after verse 3 that says that we are deserving of God's wrath says, but because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ.

Even when we were dead in transgressions, it's by grace you've been saved. We were dead in our transgressions, but God intervened. We were bondage to sin, but God intervened.

We were objects of wrath, but God intervened. God who is rich in mercy intervened. Our condition was hopeless, but God intervened in grace. From hell to heaven, from bondage to freedom, from gloom to light, from despair to hope, from wrath to glory, from death to life, that is the glory and the magnificence of Good Friday.

That's why it's called Good Friday. And when we see him doing that, when we know he has done that, when we see his mercy, his love, his grace, then it helps us to see that our sense of who we are is already filled up.

You can disconnect the computer. His selflessness has overcome our selfishness. We see ourselves as complete because we are seated with God in the place of honour.

[29 : 08] We have all the acclaim, all the honour, all the approval, all the acceptance that you could possibly want. There is only one boast that will stop all boasting. One boast that stops us scrambling through life trying to figure out a way to find the confidence that we need in order to face life, whatever it's going to throw at us.

And it's the same Apostle Paul who wrote in Galatians chapter 6, may I never boast in anything else but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.

Now I'm assuming that there are some people in this room today and you may even have been a regular in this church for decades but you need to start that journey today.

The journey needs to begin for you today. You need to get off one road and on to the other. You need to switch roads, stop looking to self, start looking to God and whatever you've done, whatever you've become on this good Friday, day Jesus has possible for you to come home to him.

Make this good Friday the day that you come to Jesus and experience his love and his grace and his mercy the day you go from hell to heaven, from bondage to freedom, from gloom to light, from despair to hope, from glory to wrath, from death to life.

[30 : 33] Sorry, from wrath to glory, death to life. If that's you, then there's a really crucial prayer for you on the back of our service sheet.

It's called the prayer for belief. I want to encourage everyone to pick one up. Pick one up and look at that prayer at the end of the back of the service sheet. It's really simple.

Lord Jesus, I admit that I'm weaker and more sinful than I've ever dared to admit, but through you I'm more loved and accepted than I ever dared to hope.

I thank you for praying my debt on the cross, taking what I deserve in order to offer me complete forgiveness, knowing that you've been raised from the dead. I turn from my sins and receive you as my Lord and Saviour.

Amen. We're going to, Sam's going to lead us right now. Come on up, Sam. He's going to lead us into the Lord's Supper right now, which is again a reminder of what Christ has done for us.

[31 : 35] And as he does that, as we go through this, can I just encourage you to ponder over the words of that prayer and whether or not that prayer is a prayer for you to pray today and to begin the journey to follow Jesus.