

The Shame of the Cross

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn now for a short time together as we would seek the Lord's blessing and his word to the letter to the Hebrews and chapter 12. Letter to the Hebrews and chapter 12, we can read at the beginning of the chapter.

Amen. And we want to focus particularly today, at least for the sermon part of the service, on these words that we have about Jesus himself, that he endured the cross, despising the shame.

Anyway, in common with many other parts of the Bible, the letter to the Hebrews uses the language of athletics, particularly here in terms of running a race, in order to illustrate for us certain things which are important to carry out in the Christian life or to remember as we seek to live for the Lord.

And just as you find in a race, when you watch a race on television, especially if it's a long-distance race, which is really, in many ways, the best illustration of the Christian life, you'll find that it's not necessarily the person who sets out at the front of the pack that ends up winning the race.

And you'll find that, at times, some of those in the pack, and the pacemaker himself or herself will actually bow out, usually. But even the rest of them then, they're changing as to who takes the front and who actually ends up winning.

[2 : 0 3] So in that fact, there's a falling back, you might say. People slacken their pace. People lose pace. They don't actually keep up with those who are at the front. They don't actually end up having crossed the line first.

And in many respects, that's really not important as far as a Christian is concerned. It's not who comes first. But it's that you do cross the line successfully.

And the Bible, as it uses these illustrations such as here, is really telling us that there's one thing that we need to do when we know ourselves to have slackened off in the pace of the Christian life a bit.

When we know we've perhaps fallen back a few paces compared to what used to be the case. There's one thing that we need to do, and that's to look to Jesus. Not to those who are running with us, even though that's not necessarily out of place.

But we need to look to Jesus especially. Because as you find here, Jesus actually had a race to run himself. The life that he lived right through to his death on the cross was in a sense a spiritual race.

[3 : 1 1] And the Bible, I think, is telling us that here, that Jesus had the joy that was set before him, which as we'll see is also athletic language. There's something awaiting him at the end of his course, which he has now entered into.

As it says, he's now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. And so here and elsewhere, you take things here about Jesus that help us in applying them to our lives.

Certain principles of perseverance. Certain principles of advancement and perseverance in our Christian race. That help us to actually gain encouragement for our race when we know that inevitably, from time to time, all of us slacken off and come to lose pace and fail to keep up as we should.

Now, of course, the conditions in which Jesus ran his race were very different in many respects. Though they were similar in the sense that he ran his race in this world, in this world of people and of the conditions of this world.

But nevertheless, the conditions for him were very different in this sense that, as you see there in verse 3, consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted.

[4 : 33] And that word hostility is certainly not a wrong word to use there, but the best translation, I think, is the old translation where it says contradiction. Not only is there a hostility to Jesus as he ran his race, that he faced such hostility of sinners against himself, but there's an actual contradiction in the sense in which all of that hostility is the entire opposite of what he is in himself.

He runs this race as somebody who is perfectly holy in the conditions and in the setting of a world that has fallen in sin and in depravity from the fall of Adam.

The whole setting of this world for Jesus was a contradiction of himself. There was nothing in himself corresponding to the sin and the hostility of sinners against him, and the conditions of this fallen world and the curse that had come upon the whole creation, which he had made.

Nothing was made, says John, of the creation in the opening words of his gospel. Nothing was made that was made without him. He is at the center of the creation of the universe.

Genesis 1 and 2 is the work of Jesus as God, as much as any other person of that holy trinity of God. And that setting into which he came willingly is the setting of contradiction, hostility of sinners against himself.

[6 : 08] You know, sometimes, very often indeed, we find it difficult as Christians to live in the midst of that hostility, in the environment not only of opposition, but of that which is entirely opposite to our Christian values and our Christian attitude and our Christian desires and our Christian way of life.

And sometimes it really gets to your soul when you actually have to go from day to day in that sort of environment. Some of you have that to a much greater extent than I have as ministers to some extent.

And we're, in a way, shielded from the everyday life that has to really mix it with the hostility of sinners. We have our own problems. But you cannot imagine, and I cannot imagine, what it must have been like for a perfectly holy person who had absolutely no bias at all towards sin to live in a sinful world.

A not inconsiderable part of the sufferings of Christ were caused by the contradiction amongst which he lived.

The unholiness, the ungodliness, that was such hostility and contradiction against himself. But as we'll see, in that setting, he ran his own race, if you like.

[7 : 39] The conditions were the worst possible, the most difficult possible. And yet, as we read here, he endured the cross, despising the shame. Not only was it the hostility of sinners against himself, there was, ultimately, in the cross itself, and in the way that he related to God the Father, the hostility of the Father.

The hostility of God's wrath. The hostility of bearing the penalty of sin. He endured the cross. Friends, today we're remembering the death of our Savior.

A Savior. A Savior who had to live a holy life. Who lived a holy life. In the midst of constant contradiction and hostility against him.

A Savior who reached the very nadir, the deepest point of that, in the sufferings of the cross itself. And yet, you're remembering today, not only that he lived that life and died that death, but that in doing it, he endured, he persevered, he saw it through, he finished it.

So, two things, following that introduction. Two things, really, to focus on. First of all, that Jesus knew of the joy that was set before him, as it's described here.

[9 : 03] Who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame. And then, secondly, that Jesus used this knowledge, the knowledge of the joy that was set before him.

That he used that knowledge in a way that endured the cross, despising the shame. Because it's all very closely tied together, isn't it? He says, the writer here is saying that he, for the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross.

In other words, the joy that was set before him was an integral part of how he faced the cross, and the sufferings of the cross, and the life that he lived. So, the two things are very closely tied together in that relationship.

Let's look, firstly, at this joy that was set before him, and that Jesus knew of this joy that was set before him. What does it mean by that? What was this joy that was set before him?

What did it consist of, and how, therefore, did that feature as part of the way that Jesus himself persevered towards enduring the cross and despising the shame?

[10 : 09] Well, we can say, I think, that there are two aspects to this joy. It's a joy, not that he had in this life, in this world, and it would be wrong to maintain that Jesus had no joys whatsoever during his life up to the cross and up to his death on the cross.

While most of the material you find describing his life is one where he is, indeed, the man of sorrows who is acquainted with grief, it would be wrong to conclude from that.

There was absolutely no joy whatsoever in his life in this world. But it is largely a life of enduring hostility, a life of sorrows, a life of knowing the depth of sufferings in his own soul that is very much part and parcel of bearing the sin of his people.

But this joy that was set before him is really, first of all, a joy relating to himself, but also a joy in which the salvation of his people is very much a part of it.

Now, there were, as you know, in the Old Testament, promises given towards or to the Messiah, the Savior, where he himself, having finished the work that he was to do in the world, would actually then enter into rewards, or a reward that was promised him.

[11 : 25] There are promises in the Old Testament. There are statements in the Old Testament that remind us that when Jesus entered into heaven, having finished the work he did here, and is seated at the right hand of God, he was entering into a state and entering into, for himself, enjoyment of the rewards, the joys, that were promised him as one who had finished the work that was given him to do.

I'm just going to pick up one example in the Old Testament. It's buried away in a very small book of the Old Testament, the book of the prophet Zephaniah. It's an absolutely superb verse.

It's one that has many difficulties in it, but nevertheless it has in it something that tells us something about this joy that Jesus looked forward to and that sustained him really in anticipation as he approached the cross.

In Zephaniah 3, verse 17, The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save. He will rejoice over you with gladness.

He will quiet you, or it's better, I think, translated, He will rest in His love, rest upon you in His love. He will exult over you with loud singing.

[12 : 43] That's really a verse which you find impossible to take without taking the incarnate Christ into your reckoning. The Lord your God in the midst of you is mighty, a mighty one who will save.

He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will rest in His love. He will exult over you with loud singing. He will rejoice greatly over you with loud singing.

How does God sing? How does God rejoice and exult in delight? Where does God experience that? Well, certainly, whatever else you can say, it's experienced in the person of our Lord, in the joy that was set before Him during His days on earth, that He's now entered into and is enjoying in His exalted status in heaven.

None of us can enter into that fully, of course. Only He can appreciate that joy set against the sufferings that went before it during His days in this world.

But who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross. And Jesus found Himself in such passages of the Old Testament, in the Psalms and the prophecies, as He actually said to the two disciples in Luke 24, on the way to Emmaus.

[13 : 59] Another really amazing reference there, where Jesus actually then began opening up the Old Testament for them. But what it says is that He, from Moses and the Psalms and all the prophets, He actually spoke to them of the things concerning Himself.

Jesus constantly referred to the Scriptures of the Old Testament and found Himself in these great passages and found the promises for Him on completion of His work.

And He anticipated that joy as He approached the cross. But the second aspect of it, undoubtedly, is the joy that He has in the salvation of His people.

Many times in the Bible you find a reference to that, how He looks forward to the salvation of His people, the completion of that salvation. He prayed for that in John 17, that they may be with Me, that they may see My glory, those You have given Me.

And earlier on in that chapter, He prayed that they might have His joy fulfilled in themselves. This joy of Jesus, that they might have that fulfilled in themselves.

[15 : 16] And I don't think that just means a joy that He was giving them. It actually includes His own personal joy in seeing them redeemed and ultimately glorified.

In Acts chapter 2, verse 25 onwards, you have a great passage that picks up the Old Testament, Psalm 16. Psalm 16, these verses we very rightly sing sometimes at funerals, and other times too, of course, but, you will not leave My soul in death or in hell or in the grave.

You will not suffer, Your Holy One, to see corruption. In Your presence there is fullness of joy. At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore. What does Acts chapter 2 do with these verses?

It applies them to Jesus. It says that David, who wrote them, first of all, is long since dead, but they apply it to Jesus Christ, who is now gone to glory. It's a humbling thought for us today, as we remember the death of our Lord, that He rejoices over us.

That He has profound joy in the depths of His soul over our salvation. That the joy that He's now experiencing in seeing His people redeemed, as He will experience in the completion of that redemption, when they're all home with Him, is that joy that He anticipated during His days on earth.

[16 : 59] And that fits with Him being our example as well, where this gave Him the focus towards the death of the cross, the focus that He was doing this for His people, that there was a reward for Himself at the end of it too, that it was His delight to glorify God in doing the work that He had given Him to do, and in accomplishing the salvation of His people.

In this, He takes delight, He took delight. Psalm 40, again, that we sang, where it's quoted in the earlier passage we read in Hebrews chapter 10, To do Your will, O Lord, I have come, to do Your will, is my delight.

The joy that Jesus anticipated. Who for the joy that was set before Him. Romans chapter 8, verse 18, as it applies to us, For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed in us.

See, there is Paul encouraging the Christians of his day that he's writing to in Rome, that the sufferings that they are enduring and going through are not worthy to be compared to the joy that shall be revealed in us.

And with respect, we can, with all reverence, apply these words to Jesus Himself. This was His outlook. This was really what gave Him the focus towards the cross that enabled Him to endure it and to despise the shame of it.

[18 : 30] What He could say of Himself, I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed at the end of the course.

Secondly, we read that Jesus used this knowledge so as to endure the cross. Now you notice how it says, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross. And it says nothing other than the cross.

Because, the right, the right, the readers well knew what He meant by the cross. The cross, all you had to do in those days was just say, the cross. And that, of course, follows down to our own experience today.

When you read the Bible, you read about the cross. Even if there's no further description of it, that's really all you need to describe something that you know is just so incredibly indescribable in terms of suffering and shame.

It wasn't allowed. It was forbidden to crucify a Roman citizen.

[19 : 42] Such was the shame attached to being crucified, though multitudes were crucified by the Romans. If you were a Roman, the last thing you wanted was the end of your life on a cross by crucifixion.

There was such dishonor about it, such shame, such ignominy, to say nothing of the immense suffering involved in it as well. The cross, and especially the cross of Christ, you know as Christians how the Bible expands on that.

that the cross for him was more than just a physical suffering of death. That he endured on the cross the wrath of God against him.

That inexpressible experience that he himself referred to, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? That indescribable forsakenness that he endured for your sake and my sake.

the very hell that we deserved that he himself came to take to himself and to experience and to overcome.

[20 : 54] That's the cross. Nothing less than that is the cross. There is no other cross like that. There is no other death like that. There cannot be. There never will be.

There never was before it. The death of Jesus, the death of the Son of God in our nature, the death of the Savior, the death of the Mediator, the death of this High Priest who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.

And just take with you, please, everything that is in these words, the cross, these two words. The terrible physical suffering, the shame that's attached to it, the humiliation as we'll see in a minute.

But also the bearing of sin, the penalty of sin, the curse of God over sin. It's applied to him. He took it to himself.

He experienced it. He endured it. He overcame it. That's the cross. That's what we remember in the death of the Lord. In the supper, when we remember the death of the Lord.

[21 : 56] But it says he endured the cross. And today, remembering not only the death of Jesus, but that he endured. Now this is just more than just withstanding something or being patient or having a kind of stoical resistance and just getting on with it despite the suffering that's involved in it.

What it means, actually, is that he, in all the suffering that was entailed in the cross, he persevered victoriously, I think is the best way we could put it.

He persevered victoriously. He endured the cross. He persevered victoriously in the cross. That's why Hugh Martin, in his great work on the atonement, in his book on the atonement, has a wonderful phrase where he says that his dying was his greatest doing.

And that the cross is as much a chariot of triumph as the following resurrection is. It's a chariot of triumph.

He patiently and perseveringly gained victory over death. Not simply by his resurrection, but as you remember from chapter 2 of Hebrews, there's an element in the death of Christ where the devil is actually defeated, where death itself is defeated in terms of its application or demands as a reward for sin or as the penalty of sin, I should say, on us as human beings.

[23 : 26] where Jesus by death destroyed him that had the power of death, that is the devil, and delivered all those who through fear of death were subject to bondage or lifelong slavery.

Why is the Christian not afraid of death as the last enemy? We may be afraid of much that's associated with death, the environment of it, the sufferings, the deprivations, the conditions, but not death itself.

Why? Because Christ has gained victory over it. He has perseveringly approached it and victoriously died that death of the cross.

which is why in the chapter we read earlier, chapter 10, where it says where there is forgiveness, and that forgiveness of course is through the death of Christ, the single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified, where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Death is taken out of the way. You don't need to have an offering against death when the offering has already been given by Jesus Christ or provided by God in Christ.

[24 : 45] He endured the cross. He persevered victoriously through to the end of the race. And of course the word is applied also to the Christian life even in this very letter to the Hebrews.

For example, chapter 11, it's used there in regard to Moses in verse 26, where he says he considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.

By faith he left Egypt not being afraid of the anger of the king for he endured. He persevered victoriously as seeing him who is invisible.

Again, remarkable words. That's what you're doing today. You are remembering the Lord's death in the sacrament of the Lord's supper. You are seeing him who is invisible.

You are persevering victoriously by his grace in such a way that parallels in a way Jesus himself enduring the death of the cross.

[25 : 52] And then it says despising the shame. Now we mentioned the shame of crucifixion, the shame that was associated with that and how much more is that intensified by thinking of who this person was.

Here's the creator of the world. Here's the glorious God in the person of his son in the state of humiliation as a servant fulfilling the command of the father to die this death on the cross for the benefit of his people.

And what is he? He's someone who's put to shame. That's one thing you and I being put to shame. That's another thing God willingly in the person of his son putting himself in that situation where he's saying I am going to suffer shame for my people.

God suffering shame in the person of Jesus for our benefit to free us, to redeem us from everlasting shame.

Now you can have shame as the Bible teaches you by two things. You can shame someone by adding something to them or giving something to them or making them take possession of something.

[26 : 58] You can shame somebody by taking something away from them that they hold precious. By depriving them of something. And for Jesus it was both.

They added lots of scorn. You read the Gospels you find that they took off his outer clothes, they put a purple robe on him, they put a crown of thorns on his head, and they mockingly bowed the knee to him.

dressed as a king that he really was, but nevertheless mocked by those who thought he was very, very much less than that.

But deprived too of things which even he could not finally keep in his possession. sometimes we think that taking the cross away from Jesus and putting it on Simon of Cyrene was actually an act of mercy.

That was an act of kindness. There was nothing like it. It was an act of humiliation. Most people who came to be crucified and carried their cross could at least say, well at least I managed to carry my cross to where I was crucified.

[28 : 22] He was deprived even of that right. The one who could requisition anything in the whole creation and make his own, they took the cross off him and put it on someone else.

They stripped him of his garments. Now we have to let the Bible speak as it speaks. And we never want to speak disrespectfully of God, of Jesus or of any person indeed.

And when the Bible tells us that they stripped him of his garments, it means that they stripped him of all of them. The tunic that was in one piece was the garment that you would wear next to your skin.

he was naked on the cross. Shame of nakedness.

You remember we saw in Genesis chapter 3 very recently how Adam and Eve after the fall sought to cover their nakedness from themselves and God.

[29 : 41] where previously before they sinned, they were not ashamed though they were naked. It's the nakedness now you see of guilt.

The nakedness of being exposed as a sinner before God. That's the nakedness of Jesus. His physical nakedness on the cross is shameful.

Shameful particularly because of who he is. but it's really an outward expression of that other nakedness where he appears there on the cross in the presence of God as accounted guilty, as made in the amazing words of Paul, made a curse.

Ah, the shame of the cross. You are remembering today the shame of Jesus. exposing of Jesus to shame, the everlasting shame of hell as we mentioned earlier that he actually took to himself in your place.

And you know there is no one to cover him from the gaze of God, let alone the gaze of human beings.

[31 : 04] You read in Genesis 3 that having attempted to cover themselves by sewing fig leaves together and making a kind of covering to cover their nakedness. When God actually finally came into the garden and addressed them and drew them out from their so called hiding place, we then read that he made garments of skins to clothe them.

There is nobody coming into the garden where Jesus is crucified to cover his nakedness. He is exposed, he must bear that exposure, he is exposed spiritually as well as physically, and God does not come to say, here is my beloved son, I must cover his nakedness.

There is no covering. There is nothing to lessen the shame. If you are looking on as you are today at this table, this is something you should also take with you.

that you are looking at something that remembers the shame of Christ. And he suffered that shame for sinners like you and I.

And he endured the cross, despising the shame. What does it mean, despising the shame? Well, it doesn't mean that he didn't really feel the depth of that shame, nothing like that at all.

[32 : 29] It doesn't mean that that shame was actually less than it could otherwise be. It wasn't. It was total shame. Despising the shame means that yes, he felt the weight of it and the suffering entailed in it, but it did not allow him, it did not, sorry, he did not allow that to make him slacken or not finish what he had come to do.

You might think that such shame would only be up to a point where he would say, I can't go through any more with this, this is just too much.

But he despised the shame, he put the shame behind him as it were, and he focused on the joy that was set before him for his people and himself, and as he despised the shame, he endured the cross, he persevered, victoriously.

That's what we do today in remembering his death. Remember who he was and who he is, remember how he came into this world by taking our human nature, remember the contradiction in this world for him, the environment in which he ran his race, remember where it ended, where it reached its lowest depth, in the shame of the cross, and how he, despising that shame, persevered victoriously, so that with a loud voice, he said, Father, into your hand, I commit my spirit, he finished it, and it's finished today, and it never needs to be repeated.

Let's pray. Gracious God, we thank you today for all that this passage has set before us, in addition to what we have considered for these moments.

[34 : 46] Lord, we bless you for the reality of these things, for your understanding of them, when it exceeds our capacity, and we thank you especially for the experience and accomplishment in your own person of these things.

Lord, help us today to receive the Lord's Supper with gratitude, with humble thanksgiving, that we are remembering such a great thing, such a great one.

Such a great work, such a perfect atonement, an obedience that is so complete. Lord, we give thanks for all of these things today, and we pray that you would continue with us now as we further wait upon you.

We ask it all for Jesus' sake. Amen.