

Youth Group Devotionals

Week 3

Reflections on the Cross

The purpose of this series of Lenten Devotions is to help us focus on the meaning of what Christ did for us on the Cross and to draw us into deeper reflection of our own lives. Each day we will be highlighting a different aspect of what Christ accomplished through the cross during his final hours. We will also be highlighting a different spiritual discipline each day that you can use to help you reflect on your growth in Christ and devotion to him. God bless.

Christ Takes the Wrath

Romans 4:14-5:11

The very first time I spoke at youth group, I remember Pastor Ben gave me the topic of “God’s Wrath.” I remember thinking, “That’s so hard! How am I going to speak to a bunch of youth on the subject of God’s wrath.” But as I prepared the message, it became increasingly clear that the sermon wasn’t so much about God’s wrath as it was about God’s righteousness, with His wrath being an exceedingly important aspect of His righteousness.

Read Romans 4:13-5:11

Just a quick synopsis from Romans 4:13-25. Abraham and his descendents (Israel) were not justified (or declared righteous) because of obedience to the law. The law doesn’t bring righteousness rather, it demonstrates with certain clarity that we are sinners. Rather, our righteousness is based on faith as was Abraham’s. Faith in God’s promise to accept the death of Christ as a fully sufficient atoning sacrifice for our sins.

So where does this idea of wrath fit into this? Because of our sinful nature, made clear by the law, we know that we’re objects of wrath (Eph 2:3). God’s wrath exists because it is the perfect reaction to His righteous judgment. God’s wrath is what we deserve, and His perfect justice demands His wrath be poured out against sin. The GOOD NEWS is that Jesus bore the wrath for us. He took the punishment, bore the full weight of God’s righteous fury against sin and its complete opposition to His holiness.

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. (Romans 5:8-9)

Jesus took it for us. If there’s no sacrifice by his death on the cross, once for all for our sin, then we stand with nowhere to hide from God’s wrath. But if there’s no wrath, if we eliminate God’s righteous anger from the conversation (as some would misleadingly have you believe) then we empty the cross of its power. Jesus’ death is meaningless if there’s no wrath for Him to bear. No wrath means no need for a Savior.

But the reality is this: God’s wrath is real. It is the perfect outpouring of His holiness on sin. But His love is also real. And it’s His great love for us that sent His son to die on the cross to bear the wrath and condemnation for us. That’s what we’re looking forward to at Easter, the reminder that “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

As we continue through this Lenten devotional series, the spiritual discipline we want to highlight today is Bible Study. Why is it important to study the Bible? Psalm 1 says that the blessed man’s “delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does prospers.” The knowledge of God’s Word produces transformation in us and draws us into deeper relationship with Him. Take some time this week to really commit to studying God’s word. Keep in mind that God’s word was made to be communicated to us in community. Meet up with some friends this week and talk about what God has been teaching you through His word.

A Spiritual Discipline: Stewardship
Reflections on the cross: Christ takes our debt

Read Luke 7:36-50

The woman, labeled as a “sinner” by the Pharisee, was probably looked down on by her whole community. However, not only did the woman receive forgiveness from Jesus, but He used her as an example of how we should respond to God taking our debts.

Her sins were not forgiven as a result of her sacrificing expensive perfume or wetting Jesus’ feet with her tears. As Jesus said, “her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown”. No human “good works” we do can gain forgiveness. The woman’s faith in God saved her, and her grateful actions reflect this.

The Pharisee, high in rank and in “religiousness”, is represented by the person in Jesus’ story that borrowed fifty denarii. He borrowed less, was forgiven for less, and thus loved Jesus less. Jesus makes it clear that this response is erroneous, and rebukes him for it. I read the sentence “but whoever has been forgiven little loves little” almost as a sarcastic statement—does Jesus ever forgive “little”? According to God’s standards, no sin is little. God is perfect and just; even as His heart breaks as His sheep sin against Him, He extends endless mercy for the world’s endless waywardness.

Jesus ungrudgingly forgave both the woman and the Pharisee, and Jesus loves both the woman and the Pharisee—regardless of how much they love Him. God sent His only begotten son to die on the cross; He not only endured tremendous physical pain but also shouldered for us the burden of our sins and absorbed for us God’s wrath. His sacrifice extends past Bible times and into our daily lives. Our appropriate response should be a constant outpouring of gratitude, a lifestyle of worship.

Being sinful human beings, living a lifestyle of worship is not easy. Jesus says, “Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it” (Mathew 16:25). The spiritual discipline of stewardship means realizing that everything we have, including time, money, abilities, relationships, etc. is a gift from God and should be used for God’s glory and God’s kingdom. I have learned from my failures, and am still learning, that I cannot always make the right choices by myself. True strength and comfort always comes from God. We must pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit first, before the Fruit of the Spirit blossoms in us.

Spend some time in thanksgiving for God’s endless and unconditional mercy and friendship.

Spiritual Discipline: Surrender

Reflections on the Cross: Jesus Takes Our Shame

“Living Out the Lyrics: What Does That Even Look Like?”

During youth group and on Sunday mornings we sometimes sing Judson W. Van Deventer’s, “I Surrender All.” The refrain is repeated throughout the song and goes...

“I surrender all, I surrender all; All to Thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all.”

Whenever I sing this song I get a little scared inside. I’m hesitant to commit to my words. Surrendering ALL is an extreme statement. When we sing praise to and worship God we want to mean the words we say and offer them up from the bottom of our hearts, but how can we make such a big commitment without knowing what it means or looks like?

Slowly Read Colossians 2:6-15

“And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

When you think about Christ’s physical suffering and death on the cross, do you see a triumph? Honestly, it’s easy for me to see the shame, the pain and suffering, and the degradation. Yet here the Bible tells us that the powers and authorities of this world were paraded around in humiliation by the cross. I think deep down it’s easy for most of us to look away from the sight of Christ on the cross; a suffering and bleeding savior makes us uncomfortable, so we only think of it when we have to. What should really make us uncomfortable is that Christ’s body reflects our sin and brokenness. Take a good look inside and you don’t have to go very far before you see your own humiliation and degenerateness apart from Christ. However, Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf turned the world upside down. Those of us in Christ understand the triumph that Christ has over sin, over the powers that bound us. We can look at the cross and see that Jesus in being humbled to death absorbed our humiliation and brokenness. *Is there any brokenness that you still need to surrender?*

In versus 6-10, Paul starts off by reminding us that accepting Christ is no one time spoken proclamation, but a process to be lived out. We forget so often that we are living to glorify God, and in the large scheme of things, nothing else matters. The world might be saying otherwise, but we need to kill the selfish mindset and pointless stress, look heaven-wards, and become alive in Christ. We know that HE is the ruler of everything, and already has great plans for us. HE is the one who loves us and died for us. Take Christ off the back burner, and give everything else to Him, the one who controls everything. *What is holding you back?*

In versus 11-12, Paul again reminds us of the past when we accepted Christ into our hearts. He gets metaphor heavy and throws two big ones at us; “circumcised” and “buried with Christ.” In the NLT, it does a great job of telling you straight up what he’s talking about, “When you came to Christ, you were ‘circumcised,’ but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature.” Also, not all of us have been literally been baptized, but when we accepted Jesus into our hearts, we surrendered our sinful nature and were raised to new life. In 12-15, he stresses the importance of the cutting away, and in verse 14, he explains why we can be alive in Christ. “He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.” We’ve all sinned plenty in our lives but we don’t need to be fixated on it because Jesus took it to the cross and wiped us clean. He loves us and wants to be with us; we shouldn’t be ashamed to go to him. Surrendering shouldn’t be a mundane task we’re hesitant to perform but a joyous one that we are more than willing to do in order to have a closer relationship with Christ.

The Simple Cross

Read: Luke 23:26-43

When President Ronald Reagan passed away in 2004, the funeral at the Washington National Cathedral was packed with people we read in history books. Of course, there were presidents Carter, H.W. Bush, Clinton, and W. Bush. There was Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, prime ministers of the United Kingdom, former Soviet chairman Mikhail Gorbachev, French president Jacques Chirac. The body in the coffin was then escorted on an elaborate carriage to Air Force One, where it was flown to California and finally buried in large tomb. It was a fitting tribute to one of the most popular – if not *the* most popular – presidents in recent decades.

Jesus, on the other hand, had no funeral. His “funeral service” comprised of religious leaders going, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” He was escorted along the *Via Dolorosa* on the way to Golgotha. The soldiers drafted an unwilling Simon the Cyrene to carry Jesus’ cross for him. And then, on Golgotha, they crucified him. Crucifixion was a terrible punishment. The physical pain and suffering victims of crucifixion endured was only the tip of the iceberg. Crucifixion was reserved for the most deranged criminals, for those who deserved to be put up in the public for parents to take their kids to and say, “That’s what you get for being a baaaad person!” And to rub salt into the wound, Jesus was crucified between two thieves. The thieves must have robbed someone incredibly wealthy or committed some additional crime on top of their theft, because a pickpocket doesn’t get crucified.

This was no fitting death for “The King of the Jews”. Even St. Paul had a much more dignified execution (he was beheaded alone). But even so, wouldn’t it be better if Jesus were crucified in between two political prisoners or two social justice campaigners or even two overzealous Jews (there was a militaristic faction of Judaism back in Jesus’ day)? But Jesus’ death was an ordinary execution; shockingly ordinary for a king.

The story of Jesus’ crucifixion is simple, and its simplicity magnifies the power and the significance of this story. So let us spend some time reading the story again and again. Put yourself in the shoes of someone witnessing the crucifixion. As Jesus was mounted on the cross, ask yourself: “Is this who I want to follow first in my life?” And as he died on the cross, ask yourself this: “Is this the kind of God I want to worship?”

What does it mean for us to worship this crucified God?

Great God, humble us so that we will be capable of hearing your Word. We thank you for the gift of yourself in the Scripture. We rejoice in its complexity. Give us the simplicity to be confounded by your Word. Amen.

- Stanley Hauerwas

The Way of the Cross

Luke 9:18-27

Recently, I have been student teaching at Wheaton North with ESL students. This week several teachers have been observing me teach the students (very humbling for me!) After every class I teach I have to submit myself to listening to their critiques about my teaching and then try to improve the next class. As you can imagine it creates a lot of pressure, frustration, and discouragement to see all your weaknesses so closely. However, I submit myself to these critiques knowing that it is a refining process and the end goal of teaching well is what will glorify God and open doors when I'm in China. For some reason, when we talk about submission we feel negatively about it (probably because we are selfish beings...) but I hope you keep an open mind and it is more positive at the end of this. *Take a moment to pray, then start by reading Luke 9:18-27*

Here Jesus is praying with his disciples nearby and He asks them two important questions. First, He wants to know who people think He is. Their response included John the Baptist, Elijah, and the prophets of old. Take a moment to think about what these three answers have in common. After reflecting on it you might have realized that they are all humans that have had special anointing or used by God for something important. Next, Jesus wants to know what the disciples think and Peter answers "The Christ of God" (ESV) or "God's Messiah" (NIV). Think a moment about Peter's response. What does 'Christ' or 'Messiah' actually mean? 'Christ' is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word 'Messiah' so both mean the same thing: Anointed.

Peter said 'Anointed one of God' or 'God's Anointed'. So what does the word anointed mean? Usually it means that you are rubbing oil on something to prepare it for holy use. In Jesus' case he was anointed with the Holy Spirit (Isa 61:1, Luke 3:21-22). Peter was repeating what he knew mentally of Jesus and what he had seen as a disciple. But perhaps he didn't really understand what it meant to label Jesus as the 'Christ' because Jesus then explains what is coming and we also know what happens to Peter in Luke 22:54-62. Jesus was much more than just a prophet anointed for God's use. He wanted to make sure the disciples knew that before He told them what was coming, even if they didn't fully understand, so they would be ready when they finally did understand.

Jesus explains what is coming in verse 22. He knew that the only hope for humanity was in His death and resurrection. He had to *submit* to death, God *submitted* himself so that we could gain life! Jesus, so perfect, did not deserve the pain and difficulty of the cross/death BUT He *submitted* to it anyway because there was no other way we could know life in communion with Him. His only request is that we deny our selfishness and pick up the cross He places before us knowing that He will strengthen us (1 Cor 10:13).

Now ask God what are you doing out of selfishness that you should deny and what is the cross placed before you. Stop and listen! This takes time! This is something to ask God daily and moment by moment... it's a discipline you must learn. Most of the time it can be painful and fearful, but just like I am being refined in my teaching through submission to critique (or Peter in Lk 22) so you are being refined in your submission to ASKING what you need to deny and CHOOSING to pick up that cross. We submit because He submitted first for us. The wonderful thing is you will find more *joy* and *freedom* in submission to God than anywhere else because He created us that way...for *submission*!