

The Wood Between Worlds

Forgiveness, Once and For All

My kids love to read, especially at bedtime. Lately, I've been encouraging my youngest, instead of the usual *Dog Man* and *Cat Kid* comic books, to read *Bible* stories. *He's loving it!* But he came upstairs the other day, complaining, "*Every story in the Bible is the same: people do sin and God forgives them. It's the exact same thing every time!*" Clearly, he's grown accustomed to the complex themes, intricate plotlines, and rich character development of the *Dog Man* comics! But he's kinda *right!* At least, he's certainly picking up on a major theme of the Biblical story: the dynamic relationship between *the people who do sin* and *the God who forgives them*.

As we journey through *Lent* together in a series called, *The Wood Between The Worlds*, (which we kick-started last *Sunday* and at our first-ever *Ash Wednesday* service) we're planning to spend all the Sundays from now to Easter taking a closer look at *The Cross*, to explore the rich mystery and meaning of this awe-inspiring symbol which stands at the centre of the Christian faith. American Pastor/Author, *Brian Zahnd* writes in the book that inspired our message series, that, "*Being disguised under the disfigurement of an ugly crucifixion and death, Christ upon the cross is paradoxically the clearest revelation of who God is.*" The cross is the singular defining moment in human history, recognized by spiritual seekers, skeptics, and cynics alike as dividing time into before and after. But more than a historical *event*, the cross speaks to us across time and on so many levels, layered with rich meaning and symbolism, much of which we'll examine in this series. And this morning, to my son's displeasure, we're going to look at how the cross speaks to the relationship between the humans who do sin, and the God who forgives them.

For many, when we looking at the cross, *Jesus dying for sins* and *forgiveness* is what comes to mind first. Paul writes in **1 Corinthians 15:3**, "***For what I received I passed on to***

you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins.” The cross as a symbol of God’s forgiveness is so important because there are none of us whose lives haven’t been tragically and irreversibly damaged by sin. In **Romans**, Paul says what we all know, that ***“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** (3:23) adding that, ***“the wages of sin is death”*** (6:23). Sin is a problem we all share, and one none of us can solve. That’s why God stepped in through Jesus, to do for us what we couldn’t do for ourselves, forgiving sin *once and for all*. Helpfully, the Bible uses a myriad of metaphors to paint a kaleidoscopic portrait of God’s forgiveness. Like a crushing unrepayable debt being fully paid off, *no strings attached*. Like having sin amputated and separated from us, ***“as far as the east is from the west”***. Being healed from an incurable disease, liberated from a cruel slave-master, or sinking our sins to the deepest part of the ocean, never to rise again. It’s being a convicted felon on death-row and receiving an official pardon. It’s God meeting all of death’s ransom demands to free sin’s hostage. It’s laundry soap that washes away every sin-soaked stain, leaving us clean and spotless. It’s divine amnesia that completely erases our sins from God’s memory. These metaphors are all different ways of announcing the same good news that, because of the cross, we’re forgiven and free. Exonerated and absolved. The weight has lifted and we can come out of hiding. We’ve been cleared of all crimes, and received a clean bill of health. No matter what you’ve done, how many times you’ve done it, how far you’ve drifted, or what secrets you keep, The Cross reveals a God who doesn’t hold our sin against us. This is good news indeed! Frankly, we could probably say a prayer, sing a song, and go home!

But I know that for some of us, all this *good news* comes with some big questions; like, what exactly does Jesus’ death have to do with forgiveness? Are we to understand that God

forgives us *only because Jesus died on the cross*? As Zahnd asks, “*Did Christ’s death somehow restore honor to an insulted omnipotent monarch as some have suggested? Is the crucifixion a ghastly appeasement of an offended deity through the torture and execution of an innocent victim? On Good Friday did God vent his anger by brutally killing his Son so he could finally find the wherewithal to forgive? Are we to imagine that John 3:16 actually means God so hated the world that he killed his only begotten Son?*” Perhaps we shouldn’t sing that closing song just yet.

The message of the story of scripture—that God wants to be with us, living in relationship with all humanity—begins in Genesis, where God creates Adam (Hebrew for *Human*) and Eve (meaning *Life*) and lives with them in *Eden* (the Garden of *Delight*). The story of *Eden* depicts the delightful epitome of Human/Life connected to God, but it also reveals the human tendency to break this connection, giving in to our worst, most self-serving impulses – what’s referred to as *sin*. Sin’s origin story in Genesis 3 is remarkably vivid and surprisingly relatable, but today I want to focus, not on the *sin*, but on God’s *response* to sin. If you know this story, your first thought might be of God *cursing* and *casting* Human/Life out of Eden, [as depicted by Michelangelo](#) on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, where the guilty pair are seen being shooed away in disgust, cursed and cast out by an angry, offended, and disappointed deity. But a closer reading reveals a critical flaw in this narrative: God never actually *curses* Adam or Eve. The *serpent* (a depiction of *Satan*) is cursed to slither on its belly (*an image of wallowing in its own filth*), and the *ground* is cursed with thorns (or *weeds*) to grow alongside the good plants (an image of *Good & Evil* now coexisting where once was only *good*), but the ones known only as Human & Life *aren’t* cursed. Now, God *does* describe the pain, suffering, hard labour, and relational strife that will now mark Human/Life’s relationship to the land and each other. But these realities are to be understood,

not as a curse or punishment judiciously imposed by an offended god, but as the naturally-occurring, organic outcome of introducing sin into the world. Sin isn't just an arbitrary list of made-up house rules that God punishes us for disobeying. It's more like junk food that feels good in the moment but over a lifetime makes us unwell; or like polluting, which may seem trivial on an individual scale, but globally, over time vandalizes and degrades our world, leaving water undrinkable, air unbreathable, and an increasingly inhospitable ecosystem. This is how the Bible *primarily* speaks about the *consequence* of *sin*; not as God's punishment, but as the organic byproduct of disconnecting from God and going our own way. Think of it this way: if I get pulled over for speeding and get a ticket, that's *punishment*. There's no organic link between driving fast and the fine. It's a made-up rule with an arbitrary *punishment*. But if my speeding causes me to lose control and crash the car, hurting myself or others, that's not a *punishment*; it's the organic byproduct of my poor choice. James, Jesus' half-brother said it this way:

“Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” (James 1:14-15)

Here, the connection between *sin* and *death* is like the link between *conception* and *birth*; It's just the natural progression. Death is what happens when we cut our connection to the source of all life, *God*. Expecting anything else is like planting corn and expecting wheat to grow. Death is the harvest we reap when we sow the seeds of sin. Sin's consequences aren't a form of God's punishment; God doesn't punish us for our sin. Frankly, it's just the *opposite*.

While pronouncing a curse upon the serpent, God promises a cure for sin, saying, ***“I will put enmity between [the serpent] and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” (Genesis 3:15)*** This is God's *primary* instinct

when it comes to sin: to solve the problem for us, promising a future human who would suffer a great wound and, in the process, heal this rift, undo sin, destroying the dark and dread of death *once and for all*. This is the Bible's first hint at the forgiving work of Jesus on the cross. And while it's true that the guilty pair were banished from the garden, I'd like to suggest that the removal from Eden was really an act of God's protective grace, not leaving them to live with the constant reminder and temptation of the *forbidden tree*, while at the same time protecting them from eating of *the tree of life* and having to live forever in their sin. This is how God responds to sin; not with anger or punishment, but with promise, provision, and *protection*, with an instinct to *heal*, rather than *harm us*; for *restoration*, not *revenge*; to show *mercy*, not *judgment*; not to *discard us*, but to *dress our wounds*. In Genesis, the first byproduct of sin was *shame*. Previously, the humans **"were both naked, and they felt no shame."** (Gen 2:25) But after sinning, **"the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so, they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves."** (Gen 3:7). When God looks for them, *Human* says, **"I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so, I hid."** (Gen 3:10). Do you know that feeling? The fear, shame, and instinct to hide when you know you've messed up? The fig-leaves could hide their *nakedness*, but they could never cover their *shame*. So, **"The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them."** (Gen 3:21) This isn't a fashion upgrade: *Leaves are out; Leather is in*. In a blink-and-you-miss-it, off-camera moment, God sacrifices an animal, using its *skin* to cover their *shame*.

I suspect this obscure hint at animal sacrifice was added by later temple priests to offer an origin story for the Old Testament system of *atonement* through *animal sacrifice*. In reality, **Leviticus 17** suggests Israel had imported the demonic practice from surrounding *pagan* nations.

These religions were built on the idea that the gods were angry, demanding blood sacrifice to appease their wrath and feed their appetites, an idea that stands in direct contrast to the God who self-describes as being **“compassionate and gracious... slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.”** (Exodus 34:6) Believing that God’s anger must be appeased through sacrifice is what theologian N.T. Wright calls, *“the paganizing of atonement,”* saying, *“If we arrive at that conclusion... we have portrayed God not as the generous Creator, the loving Father, but as an angry despot. That idea belongs not to the biblical picture of God, but with pagan beliefs.”*

But rather than do away with the practice of animal sacrifice altogether, God reimagines them as something entirely different. The sacrificed animals weren’t *fed* to God; rather, once they’d served their ceremonial purpose, they were eaten by the priests and people. Picture a community BBQ with some religious ceremony to turn the *meal* into a *moment*. These sacrifices weren’t violent displays put on by people trying to curry the favour of a disinterested God; they were a meal provided by a deeply invested God to show favour to a mostly disinterested people. God was providing them with a tangible mechanism to receive forgiveness and reconciliation.

Now, there were several different “sacrifices” in this system, some animal, some grain, some for forgiveness, others for thanksgiving at harvesttime. But the most important, central sacrifice to the community took place on the annual *Day of Atonement*. At the centre of the *Day of Atonement* was a ceremony involving not one, but two animals, each with a unique symbolic purpose. As all Israel gathered at the tabernacle (an early portable-tent version of *the temple*) the priest would take the *first* of the two goats and press down on its head. This is a practice the New Testament refers to as *the laying on of hands*; it was done to commission priests as the people’s sacred representative to God. The *pressing* transferred the people’s identity onto the

priest, making them a kind of spiritual *avatar*. On the *Day of Atonement*, the priest would then *lay hands* on this animal, anointing it as the representative or avatar of *all* the people, including the priest. This animal symbolically *became* the people and was then sacrificed by the priest. Now, if you're picturing a theatrical scene in which an animal is strapped to an altar and killed in a big dramatic moment, that's not *this*. Leviticus places very little emphasis on the *killing* itself – it happens almost off-screen and in a relatively humane way. The emphasis is on what happens *next*, in two distinct yet complementary rituals. First, the animal's blood was drained from its body to be sprinkled all over the inner room of the tabernacle and on the altar. Now, I get that this might conjure a kind of *Stephen King* vibe, but we need to suspend our modern sensibilities and judgments and climb into the mindset of an ancient Israelite. While the blood splatter may seem gory, gruesome, or even violent to *us*, *they* saw blood much differently. In *Leviticus*, God clarifies multiple times that the blood in this ritual doesn't represent *death*, but *life*. God says:

“The life of every creature is its blood. That is why I have said to the Israelites, “You must not eat the blood of any creature, because the life of every creature is its blood” (Leviticus 17:14)

Blood, in their culture and in this ceremony, was equated not with death, but with life. And the blood of a pure, spotless animal was thought to be the cleanest, purest life of all. So, when the priest sprinkles and smears blood all around, they would've seen this as a *cleansing*, washing away death with pure, unpolluted *life*. To them, this was a beautiful sacred image. But what I want us to notice is that the death of this *first* goat doesn't have anything to do with forgiving sins; it's about cleansing the tabernacle to make it hospitable for the presence of God.

Holding that image to the side, the other thing that happened with the *first* animal was that its body was burned on the altar, essentially barbequed, transforming its body into smoke which rose to heaven on a symbolic journey to God's presence. *You see what's being imagined*

here? In a way that's totally symbolic and made-up, yet also entirely real, the atoning sacrifice is creating a Heaven/Earth link where the people, through the body of their animal avatar, are made able to ascend to God in Heaven, and God, because of the cleansing blood, is able to descend to be with them on Earth. It's a dramatic portrayal of cosmic oneness, unification, the true meaning of *atonement*, which is literally the word *At-One-ment*: being *at one* with God. The atoning sacrifice, *in a way that's totally symbolic and made-up, yet also entirely real*, was all about God re-connecting with us, not about appeasing wrath or making a payment for sin.

That's where the *second* animal comes in. This *second* animal was called *The Scapegoat*. Now, the surprising thing about *The Scapegoat* is, it wasn't *sacrificed*, wasn't *killed*. Instead, the priest would symbolically transfer the sin of the people onto the goat, then release it out of the camp and into the wild. You could almost think of it as a garbage truck collecting all our trash and taking it to the dump, outside the city limits so its stench doesn't rot and pollute our homes and neighbourhoods. Symbolically, *The Scapegoat* was carrying sin away from the community, in order to present it to an entity referred to as *Azazel*. This mysterious being is understood to be the same crouching creature that deceived and devoured the life of Adam & Eve in Eden, referred to elsewhere as *The Satan*, or *The Devil*. The image here is that *The Scapegoat* collects all the sin, takes it away, and presents it to the Lord of Sin, dumping it all on the devil's doorstep, as if to say, "*If you like sin so much, you can have all our sin – we don't want it anymore!*"

These images captured the imagination of early Christians as they re-read these ancient texts through fresh eyes, having witnessed Jesus' death. With one eye on *The Day of Atonement* and the other on *The Cross*, they saw in Jesus the ultimate atoning sacrifice – how Jesus' blood cleansed the temple (*not the building, but the community of believers*) to be hospitable for

God's presence, *once and for all*; and how *in his body*, he became our representative in death, rising to reunite us with God, *once and for all* – and as the ultimate scapegoat who carried our sin outside the camp, *once and for all*. Because Jesus was crucified during a sacred festival, the religious leaders inadvertently cooperated with God in bringing this imagery to life by insisting he be crucified ***“outside the city gate”*** (Hebrew 13:12) incidentally, adjacent to a place called *Gehenna* (which some Bible's incorrectly translate as *hell*); a *desolate, desecrated*, and thought to be *demonic* valley, described by a later rabbi as a burning garbage dump. Jesus refers to it as the place our sins are incinerated. In a sense, that's exactly what Jesus did; like a divine garbage truck, he carried the trash of our sin outside the camp, all the way to the realm of death and, like *The Scapegoat to Azazel*, presented it to the Lord of death and darkness, dumping it into the devil's lap as if to say, *“If you like sin so much, have it all; we're done with it – It is finished!”*

This is how Jesus secured our forgiveness on the cross. It wasn't about appeasing God's wrath, but dethroning death. At the cross, Jesus didn't persuade God to reluctantly relent and forgive. As Zahnd writes, *“The cross is not what God inflicts [on Jesus] in order to forgive; the cross is what God in Christ endures as He forgives.”* The powers of hell conspired with human institutions to throw every evil at their disposal, including death, at Jesus, only for him to absorb it into his body and, in the process, forgive the whole world, not just to the repentant faithful, but those participating in the conspiracy, praying, ***“Father, forgive them; they don't know what they're doing”*** (Luke 23:34), as they abused and assaulted him. At the cross, the serpent struck Christ's heel, but its head was crushed in the process, rendering it powerless to punish anyone ever again, sin and death, now a toothless threat. God's promise in Eden fulfilled: forgiveness,

once and for all: for all *people* and for all *time*. So, what do we do with this *good news*? How do we apply this forgiveness to our daily lives, and to what affect? I'd like to suggest three ways:

First, as we've seen, **The Cross frees us from The PENALTY of Sin**. Ephesians tells us that,

“Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we’re a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free, either. Abundantly free!” (Ephesians 1:7, The Message)

The cross invites us to live guilt-free lives, liberated from fear and shame. No more hiding, no feeling like second-class citizens in God's kingdom. You are not a collection of your worst mistakes; you are a brand-new person, seen by God as innocent as a newborn baby. You don't need to hang your head or drag your feet; your stains have been washed clean, the call has come in; you've got a full pardon, a clean bill of health. Not just barely, but abundantly. So, live with the joy, lightness, and zest for life that comes from knowing you got a second chance.

Second, **The Cross frees us from The POWER of Sin**. In Romans 6 we read:

“For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin, because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.” (Romans 6:6-7)

The cross not only removes the *penalty* of sin, it frees us from sin's control over us. Sin is a cruel master we no longer serve. Because of the cross, we now answer to a new master, one who leads us in the way of life and freedom, not only abolishing all condemnation, but inviting us (in Jesus' words) to ***“go and sin no more.”*** (John 8:11) The cross empowers us to actually leave our spiritual junk-food-eating and relational-polluting ways behind, to follow a *new* path. Forgiveness isn't just a *get-out-of-jail-free* card, it's the chance to *pass go* on a brand-new life.

And finally, **The Cross frees us from The PRESENCE of Sin**. In Hebrews 9 we read:

“He has appeared once for all... to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself... Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear

sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.” (Hebrews 9:26-28)

Because of the cross, we know that all sin will one day be incinerated and we will live in blissful delight with God for eternity. All we’ve done and all that’s been done to us, will not even be a distant memory; it will be gone, annihilated, vaporized, evaporated, dissolved into nothing.

We recently took our kids to see the *Dog Man* movie. The ending is based on the comic, *Grime & Punishment*, in which Cat Kid (son of the main bad guy, Petey) tells Petey to stop hating his father who abandoned him and lives to torment him. In the end, Petey forgives his father and, in turn, is forgiven by the Chief for all his crimes. Friends, the ache for forgiveness in the human heart runs so deep that Dog Man comics imagine it with fictional hope. But forgiveness isn’t just cartoon-fiction; because of the cross, it’s real.

Because of The Cross, we have a *clean slate* and *communion* with God; *forgiveness* and *reconciliation*. Our sins are gone *as far as the east is from the west*, cast outside the city walls, incinerated by fire, sunk to the bottom of the sea, never to rise again. And because our sins have been dissolved, we can be reunited with God, like Adam & Eve, walking with God *in the cool of the day*, at peace, at home, *at one*. *The Day of At-one-ment* is no longer just an annual ceremony; it is an everyday reality. And if you want to experience that reality today, I invite you to join us in a ritual of sacrifice, an ancient ceremony reimagined by Jesus on the night he was betrayed, where taking a cup of wine and breaking some bread, he said (*if I can paraphrase*) “*This bread is my body, broken to carry you in its aroma into the presence of God*” and “*This cup is my blood, poured out to cleanse your temple-heart and make you a hospital place for God to dwell.*” A sacred meal, provided by God, to announce forgiveness to all, to cleanse us and transform us, and to restore and reunite us to God, *once and for all*.