

The Centrality of the Cross, Pt. 1—Explanation
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Before we actually start our focus material today I wanna read a passage of Scripture. And I want you to have a visual event in mind, a scene from a biblical story, 'cause we're gonna be talking about some of the...conceptually about some of the things around this, but it's really important that you see what we're talking about, that there's a real event that's at the center of everything we talk about today. I'm gonna pick up the reading here in Matthew 27. We'll look at another passage later that...more in detail. But this one I just wanna read to put this scene in your mind. Matthew chapter 27...and I'll pick it up at verse 27. Jesus has just been condemned by the governor, Pilate; he has released a terrorist named Barabbas, and he has condemned Jesus to be scourged and to be crucified at the demands of the people. We're told, then, that he handed Him over to be crucified, and

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the praetorium and gathered the whole Roman cohort around Him. And they stripped Him and they put a scarlet robe on Him, and after twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head and a reed in His right hand. And they knelt down before Him and they mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they spat on Him, and they took the reed and they began to beat Him on the head. And after they had mocked Him they took the scarlet robe off Him, and put His own garments back on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him.

The Bible indicates that in the hours that followed this, as they took Him out into the streets and then to the hill, and they hung Him on a cross, the Bible indicates that those hours right there are the hinge-point in God's redemptive story. They're the pivotal moment; they're the point in time where the outcomes were determined. If you take the whole story of God's grace, from it's very beginning in the book of Genesis and follow it all the way to the book of Revelation, to the very end, this place here at the cross is its centerpiece. It was there where the outcomes were finally decided. It's the hinge-point. It is so important that, as we've been reviewing the story of God's grace this year, we've chosen to slow down right here, at the cross. And last week we focused on developing the centrality of that event. And this week we're gonna begin a three-step process where, number one, today, we're gonna focus on making sure we can explain it clearly, that if the subject comes up you can talk about it clearly. And then secondly we'll come back later...not today, but in the weeks ahead...and we're gonna discuss how to defend it confidently. It's one thing to explain it; it's another thing to defend it. And we're gonna talk about how you can defend the centrality of the gospel with confidence. And then third, and last, and this is probably most crucial here because this isn't just something here we wanna be able to explain and defend; it's something we want to live. And so our desire is, as we go through this set of weeks, that you'll be renewed in the experience of the centrality of the cross—not just in the big mega-story of God's grace, but in your own, personal story of experiencing God's grace. That's what these three weeks are about as we go through this.

And this week we're gonna focus in on explaining it with clarity, and I wanna be very careful here to make sure you understand where we're headed here today, because it's gonna be a little different style of sermon. My goal today, my educational objective, if you wanna put it that way, is that by the time we are done you will be able to explain the cross...the centrality of the cross...with clarity; that whether you're talking to your child, to your spouse, to a friend at work, to a colleague, to a school mate, that any time, any where, any circumstance...if the subject of the cross comes up you can explain to anyone how and why it is so central to us as Christians. That's our target, is that you will be able to do it. I'm not here today to kinda do an expanded, complex explanation of all the mystery and the wonder of the cross, where you walk outta here with your eyes glazed over and you don't know what to say next. My goal is to make it such that you can easily repeat what we talk about today in any conversation this week.

To do that, one of the things we're gonna focus on is clarity. See, when the subject of the cross comes up, we as Christians are so...it is so important to us, and it's so central to our understanding and our relationship with God, that we tend to...when the cross comes up that's when we are really gonna be at our best. I know that challenge as a pastor. I mean, whenever the cross comes up, that's when I really wanna have that emotional gripper that gets everybody really into it. Or I wanna have that profound way of describing it, that has everybody saying, "Whoa!" And yet, the Apostle Paul says, 'You know, when the gospel comes up I don't use clever speech. I don't use words of wisdom.' He says, 'I just talk about Jesus crucified.' There needs to be a clarity that comes with plainness when

we talk about this event and understand it. And so we're gonna be emphasizing that today, that there's a clarity, and it's unadorned with fancy, human ideas. We just go to the central...central thesis.

The other thing that we're gonna be doing as we do it, is we're gonna concentrate on explaining it. When we're done, my desire is you'll be able to explain why it is so central to us. Now, somebody may want to debate you at that point. Somebody may want to discuss that. In fact, along the way as I talk today, you may say, 'Well, what about...?' We're not defending it today. We'll talk about that at another time. See, one of the things that happens is when we begin to talk about the cross and why it's so important to us, and we'll come along and we'll make a statement, and the person we're talkin' to will just say, "Wait. That can't be." And they wanna debate it. And we never get finished explaining it because we're sidetracked by this argument and that argument. What I wanna make sure it that we can explain it concisely, comprehensively, clearly. Then we'll come back in another week and talk about ok, how do you go about defending that.

Lastly, is we are gonna make it textual. We are gonna connect it to two passages of Scripture. I don't have a whole lot of verse references I'm going to have you running through. I'm just gonna link it to two passages of Scripture that you can go back and connect with. And today, when we're done, if you can simply say, like my brother says, "The Good Book says...", I will be satisfied. You don't even have to remember the references, ok? You just gotta be able to say, "Somewhere in the Good Book it says this..." and remember what it says, alright? That's where we're headed today. You with me? Let's start off.

Here's the explanatory statement. Somebody comes to me and says, "Why is the cross so important to you? Why is it so central? Why is it every time we get together you're talkin' about Jesus, and then you keep talkin' about Him being crucified? Why is it so central and important to you as Christians?" And the explanatory statement I would give is this: The cross, planted in the middle of human history, is the one place and the one time where God's righteousness comes together with God's love, in one person, for the release of God's saving grace to all those who believe. That's why the cross is so important. You scan the whole horizon of human history and there is one point in time, one place, where God's love and God's righteousness came together in one person—Jesus—for the release of God's grace to all those who would believe.

Now, I know you won't remember that sentence. Ok? If you want people to remember a sentence you usually gotta limit it to seven words. Ok? So you're not gonna remember this sentence. But I'm gonna help you remember the idea, and that's gonna be easier, alright? So let's start this. Number one is you need to recognize there's two main things in this particular sentence, and there're two main focuses to the cross, and two main things that make it so important. Number one, it is God's righteousness, and number two, it's God's...love coming together. So those are the two major things you wanna focus on, and here's how I'm gonna help you focus on it. Are you ready? Ok. Take your right hand... Oh, I love this, I love this, 'cause most of you are just like me. [mutters 'I'm not gonna do it.'] Ok. Take your right hand, ok, and touch it with your left. Just go right hand like this, ok? [Touches right palm with left index finger.] Alright, now think of this. Right hand, righteousness...got it? Right hand...'R'...righteousness. Ok. Now, God's righteousness. Now take your left hand, go like this. [Touches left palm with right index finger.] Left hand, right? What do you think, word might go with that? Love. Ok? God's love. So, we got right hand...God's righteousness, left hand...God's love. Now here's what we do. Ready? The cross is really important to us because 1) it is God's righteousness and God's love, coming together [clasps hands together] in one person [raises one index finger from the clasped hands] for the extension and the release of God's grace [opens hands and extends arms in front of him] to all those who believe. Ok?

Wasn't hard, was it? Now pretend I'm your favorite Sunday school teacher, and you really don't wanna do what I do, but I've got a bag of candy over here for everybody who does it right. Alright? Let's walk it through one more time. God's righteousness, God's love, coming together in one person, to release God's grace to all those who would believe. Alright? That's easy to remember.

Let's tag some Bible verses to it. And we're gonna put two verses to it that we would need to connect and that I want you to remember, at least that 'they're in the Good Book,' ok? One is found in Romans chapter 3, and it refers to the demonstration of God's righteousness; and that links to "right hand...righteousness", ok? There's another verse that is very similar, found in the book of Romans, and it's worded almost in the same way. That's why I like to put the two of 'em together. And it, too, is speaking about the cross. This one in Romans 3 is talking about the cross; Romans 5 is also talking about the cross, and it'll say it a different way. What it'll say there is that 'but God demonstrates His own love towards us', ok? Those are the two verses I want you to remember to link to, that in the Good Book, in the book of Romans, it talks about the fact that the cross is a demonstration of God's righteousness and the demonstration of God's love.

See, that's important to remember, 'cause if you were to look at human history and all that has happened throughout human history, it would be very hard if someone were to say to me, 'Larry, can you prove that God is really a God of love? Given everything that's happened in human history, how can you say that God really loves us?' And likewise, the individual that would come to me and say, 'Larry, how could you say God is really righteous, just, and fair given everything that's happened in human history? How can you say that?' Without the cross I can't defend those two statements. I can't. See, the cross is a piece of evidence that God has planted in the human history that is so confusing. And when we wonder 'Does He really love us?' and we wonder 'Is He really fair?' God says 'I put in the middle of human history a piece of evidence.' And that's the idea behind the word 'demonstration'; it's a legal term. It's a piece of evidence brought into court that says, 'There, I do love, and I am righteous.' It's the cross that proves God is righteous and loving.

Those two verses...the first one of the two is the most complicated to explain and talk about. And the background to it a little deeper than the other one, and so I'm gonna take a little bit of time to talk about it. And I'm gonna do this fairly quickly. We're gonna go to Romans chapter 3, and I'm gonna ask Nate to turn the lights up just a bit because I want you to hear the context and get a feel for where that verse is, and a sense of how it fits, and then we'll move on and look back at the verse.

This is a paragraph written by the Apostle Paul, and one of the most complex passages of the New Testament. Ok? Romans chapter 3 is a very complex, logically intertwined passage of Scripture that is built on a whole series of arguments by the time we get here. And this is the heart of it, this is the core of it. In fact, some commentators will argue that this is the center of the Bible. Romans chapter 3...and we're gonna pick up our reading at verse 21, and we're only gonna read five verses here, but it'll give you a sense of the passage this phrase is found in. And then we're gonna go back and we're gonna key on two of those statements. We're not gonna try and analyze it; we're not gonna try and show you all the intricacies of how the thought flow goes; we're just gonna give you two big handholds in this text that helps you grab onto this verse. It starts out at verse 21 where Paul says

But now, apart from the Law...

...the Old Testament Law...

...the righteousness of God...

...and here the particular idea here, the rightness that comes from God...

...has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,

The Old Testament talked about just a thing, a righteousness coming from God.

...even the righteousness of God...

...or the rightness of God...

...through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified...

...that is, being set right...

...as a gift by His grace through the redemption...

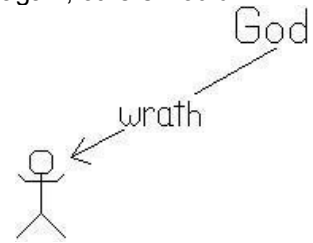
...the price paid,

...which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;

...in the Old Testament; He gave forgiveness prior to the cross. And then he goes, verse 26, our verse,

...for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Again, this is a spectacular passage. (And Nate, we can bring those lights back down so we can see the PowerPoint a little clearer.) This is an intricate passage of theology, but we can get enough out of it to understand this verse with just two key phrases that we need to zero in on. Number one, when we look at it, is the sin problem identified in chapter 3 verse 23 where, in the middle of that paragraph, Paul says “...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” That’s the Bible’s statement. Now other people have different ideas. I understand that. But if you go to the Bible this is what the Bible says. Everyone has sinned and falls short of the glory of God. We have all refused and willfully resisted God, as God, in our lives. We all have refused to give God the honor due God. That’s the idea of sin. At some point we have all willfully refused to live the truth concerning God and all that He is, whether it’s truth revealed in creation, whether it’s the truth revealed in our consciences, whether it’s the truth revealed in Scriptures...at some point we all, we all fail willfully to live out the truth concerning God. And we, according to the text, fall short of the glory of God. We fall short of giving Him the glory and the honor and the excellence He merits. That’s sin. And we’re all guilty of it. And the Bible indicates...and again, others would debate this...but what the Bible teaches is that a very serious thing, because sinners are under the righteous wrath of God. And I’m not gonna use many diagrams today. I’ll just put this simple one because we’re gonna come back to it in a bit. It’s the idea that we’re all, as sinners, under the wrath of God. His wrath is directed towards us. And that’s a serious thing. We are not talking about a simple, upset, detached ‘Ok, you’ve done wrong, I think that’s wrong.’ We are talking, when we talk about the wrath of God, we are talking about His personal passion that demands justice in a situation. Ok? It’s His passionate, personal demand for justice. It’s powerful, it’s passionate, and it’s personal.



See, God isn't this detached judge sitting over the Law and saying, 'Ok, I'm not really...I don't have a dog in this fight, but you know, here's the rules. You know you broke 'em; you need this judgment, you need...' No, sin is personal against God. And He reacts personally and passionately with a demand for justice when we dishonor Him. We're under His wrath.

One writer...I enjoyed readin' him on this a bit...and his point, and he didn't put it this way, but his ultimate point was this, is you know we, as Christians, we look at the world around us and all its fears—the fear of war, the fear of famine, the fear of violence, the fear of disease, the fear of a collapsed economy, the fear of personal bankruptcy, the fear of unemployment, the fear of marital breakdown, the fear of government intrusion, the fear of that diagnosis that says 'cancer', the fear of Alzheimer's...you just name it, we live a life in our world where there's all kinds of things we're afraid of. And the Christian stands in the middle of that and looks at the world and says, 'All your fears are too small. Your fears are too small.' The one and only great fear ought be the wrath of God...revealed at times in the past, manifest in places around the world today, and promised to come in the great and awful Day of Judgment. That is what is to be feared. Our fears are too small if that is not our fear.

Now right away, and some of you may be, right now, thinking, 'Larry, you can't be...you're talking about an Old Testament God that was angry at times. But really, God is love. You could...' I am telling you simply what the Bible says, Old Testament and New. Ok? Now we can come back another time, and we will, saying 'How do you defend such statements about God? How does the Bible verify those kinds of statements when it makes 'em? How?' We'll talk about that another week. Understand right now, though, this is the Christian worldview. This is the Christian understanding of God. This is what the Bible says—we are all sinners, and that is an awful condition to be in. Because we are under the wrath of God...His personal passion that demands justice when dishonored.

Now we're ready for the next verse. That's the sin problem. There is a grace solution that's identified in this text, and it's really the main theme of the text. But we're just gonna zero in on one phrase, and it's this one here. And this is where I'm gonna get most technical for you today, more technical than any other part, because there's one word in here that we're gonna have to define, and it's not a common word. I doubt if you've used it in a sentence the past six months. So ok? But it's an important word. What happens is Paul's unfolding this text, and unfolding this truth of the grace solution. One of the statements he makes in reference to Jesus, as he wraps up verse 24 he speaks of Jesus, and he says

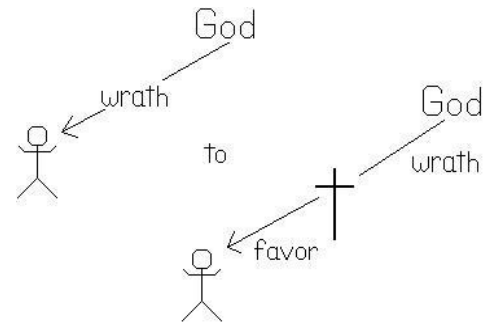
...Jesus Christ, whom God displayed publicly...

That's a reference to the cross. In other words, God put Jesus on that cross for everyone to see, and He displayed Him publicly. And here's the key phrase...

...as a propitiation in His blood through faith.

The key word here is 'propitiation'. What is that? God put Jesus out there in public display as a propitiation. What do we mean by that? I have tried to find other words. I've looked for other words. This is really the one word that fits. This is the one word most specific to what is trying to be communicated. The definition of it, if I was to put it in a simple definition, is this: a propitiation...and this is a term that came out of the religious life of the early Biblical days...a propitiation was a sacrifice that turns divine wrath into divine favor. It was a term used not only in Christian circles, but in all different types of religions. And the idea was is that if you had a god that was angry at you, if you had a god that was wrathful, if you had a god who was demanding justice of you, then what you would do is you could bring a sacrifice. And you'd put that sacrifice in front of that god and he would be satisfied then, and his wrath would turn from anger and justice to simply good will and favor. Propitiation—a sacrifice that turns divine wrath into divine favor.

Let's go back to that little diagram that we had before, of a sinner under the wrath of God. The concept of propitiation fits in here with the cross like this. God's wrath is directed towards all of us as sinners. We may not see it, we may deny it, we may try to ignore it, but His wrath is towards us and it is coming at us in the Final Day. But the cross comes in as a propitiation. Think of it as an intervention in the process. And at the cross God's wrath towards sinners is turned to favor because of that sacrifice. Now I'm not gonna get into all the complexities of that, how it could be, and stuff. Just understand that's what the cross accomplished.



We say, 'Well, how does that impact me? How can I have that favor in my life? How can I, in essence, stand underneath that cross so the wrath turns to favor in my experience, in my life?' And the answer is in this text—it's through faith. It's simply believing that that's what happened when Jesus died, that He did everything necessary to turn God's wrath towards you into favor. Believe that, believe in Jesus that way, and God's wrath will turn to favor in your life.

Question: why does God do that? Why doesn't He just change His wrath to favor without a sacrifice? That's where we go back to the verse we started with. It's talking about that cross, and it speaks of that cross being a demonstration. At the present time God demonstrated His righteousness, His rightness, His justice, so that...and here's the purpose, why He did the cross to do that...so that He could be just, so He would be...it isn't just to show us that He is, but so that He literally would be just. In other words, His demand for justice would be met. His demand for rightness would be satisfied. He's not One who's simply going to stifle His wrath and repress His judgment. He's committed to expressing it and giving it full force, because that is justice. And God put Jesus on that cross so that His justice, His righteousness, could be displayed as His wrath falls upon Jesus. And He is then, in turn, also able to justify sinners, like you and I, who have faith in Jesus. It's an amazing transaction where a sacrifice is given, justice is completed, and sinners are set right. The cross demonstrated that God is just, and He will have His justice. At the same time, He will save sinners.

The second verse is much easier to work with, much easier. It's one we identify easier with. It doesn't talk about sin and judgment and wrath, and we're all uncomfortable with those kinds of discussions. Problem is, we can't appreciate this verse unless we appreciate those. But this second verse talks about the cross being a demonstration of God's love. It's a time in the letter where Paul's talking about the fact that Christians go through a lot of difficulties. And sometimes, as we're going through those difficulties, everything's falling apart and it looks like we don't have anything but hope. And he says, you know, hope is enough for us as Christians. We don't have to have everything right now, even when we're suffering; and the reason being, he says, is because the love of God is poured out in our heart. We know God loves us. And then he goes on to say and it's more than a feeling. It's more than a feeling; we've got something hard and objective to grip when we say that God loves us. And that's where he comes to this verse. He says

But God demonstrates His own love toward us,

...He comes out, He proves it objectively in the middle of human history...

...in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Interesting verse. Stop and think about it a second. It says God demonstrates His love, but it's Christ who died. It's really important to be careful here, 'cause a lot of times you'll hear the cross discussed this way, that we have this angry Old Testament God who's wrathful towards sinners, and He's vengeful and He's judgmental, and He's after retribution. And then we've got this loving, caring person named Jesus who intervenes, who stands between this angry, vengeful God and these helpless sinners over here, and He absorbs all the anger and all the wrath because He loves us. The Old Testament God, God of wrath; New Testament Jesus...there's where we find the love.

That's erroneous. That's a wrong perception. What this verse highlights, and the other verses we've already read highlights, is that God...that Old Testament God who is the same God as the New Testament God...looked at sinners, and He is the One who put Jesus in between us. It was His choice. It was His love that put Jesus there.

It's intriguing to me that when you study the love of Jesus in the New Testament it will acknowledge that He loves us, and that's one of the reasons that He went to the cross. But it emphasizes more importantly that the primary reason that He went to the cross was not because He loved us but He loved the Father. And He said to the Father, 'Whatever You want Me to do, I will do it.' And the Father said to the Son, 'I want You to die for those sinners, because I love 'em.' And the Son did. That's a crucial point. The cross...the cross isn't just about Jesus' love for us. What the cross proves is God is a just and righteous God who is a God of love for sinners...so much so that He would put His Son in wrath's way.

Let's go back and review. You ready? Here we go. Right hand...ok? Right hand...the righteousness of God. Left hand...the love of God. At the cross, coming together in one person, so that God's grace could be released into all the lives of those who believe. That's why the cross is so important to us.

Next action steps, where to go from here...two things. Number one is my next action step. I'm gonna pray for you in just about thirty seconds. We always finish with a prayer song of witness, and today instead of singin' it I'm gonna pray it over you. Because I want you to concentrate on something else, ok? I'm just gonna pray that God continues to give you confidence with His truth, because I tell you what, Paul's very clear about it when he talks about when he went out in the first century and began to tell people about the cross. They looked at him and said, 'This is foolish. This is nonsense. This is ridiculous. This doesn't make sense...a man died on a cross was really the pivotal point in history? Is God's righteousness and God's love coming together to extend grace to all in one person? It's foolish!' We need confidence to be able to talk about it. So I'm gonna pray over us for that. We can explain it clearly. We need the confidence to speak it clearly. And we'll be talkin' about that even more in the weeks ahead.

But the second thing...that's my action step, to pray for you. Your action step is this...is sometime within the next week, preferably within the next twenty-four hours, I want you to stop, and I want you to go 'righteousness of God, right hand'... I tell you what, guys. If you can remember right and left, you can remember this, ok? And don't do it now, because then you can't...you'll count it. No. Ok? Right hand, righteousness of God. Left hand, the love of God; coming together in one person to release God's grace into all those who believe. That's why the cross is so central. I want you to walk through that sometime in the days ahead, those simple motions, and remember it; because I want you to be able at that time, when a friend is looking at you and saying, 'Why is the cross so special?' You can go, 'Ok, right hand, left hand, I can do this.' Ok? Let's stand.

Our Father in heaven,

What a wonder! And to talk about it conceptually and try to put it into an explanatory statement is different than gripping it with our hearts. But Father, we need to be able to understand it, and so we thank You that we had this opportunity today, and that Your word is there to help us to see. And our prayer now, as we go out from here, my prayer for this people, in all the varied circumstances they'll face, Father, it's unlimited the number of things, and situations, and conditions this people in this room face in the coming week. I pray, as they go through it that each day You'll be there for them...not just as provider and sustainer, but Father, You'll be with them, giving them the confidence in every circumstance, to speak of the reality of Jesus and the centrality of the cross with confidence and with clarity, that others, Father, might come to know that grace He released.

In Jesus' name, Amen.