

The Faithfulness of Jesus Christ

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a three-part series

March 17, 2013

©2013 Scott L. Engle

Jeremiah 33:14-16 (NRSV)

¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

Mark 15:21–32 (NIV)

²¹A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. ²²They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). ²³Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. ²⁴And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.

²⁵It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.

²⁷They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. ^[28] ²⁹Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰come down from the cross and save yourself!”

³¹In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! ³²Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

Galatians 3:10-14 (Common English Bible)

¹⁰All those who rely on the works of the Law are under a curse, because it is written, “Everyone is cursed who does not keep on doing all the things that have been written in the Law scroll.”

¹¹But since no one is made righteous by the Law as far as God is concerned, it is clear that “the righteous one will live on the basis of faith.” ¹²The Law isn’t based on faith; rather, “the one doing these things will live by them.” ¹³Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us—because it is written, “Everyone who is hung on a tree is cursed.” ¹⁴He redeemed us so that the blessing of Abraham would come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, and that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-24 (Common English Bible)

¹⁶I’m not ashamed of the gospel: it is God’s own power for salvation to all who have faith in God, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷God’s righteousness is being revealed in the gospel, from faithfulness for faith, as it is written, The righteous person will live by faith.

²¹But now God’s righteousness has been revealed apart from the Law, which is confirmed by the Law and the Prophets. ²²God’s righteousness comes through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who have faith in him. There’s no distinction. ²³All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory, ²⁴but all are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus.

It is by Jesus’ faithfulness that we have been made right with God.

And so it comes to this. Jesus has been betrayed by Judas and disowned by Peter. He has been tried by the Sanhedrin and condemned to die by Pilate. He has been mocked by the soldiers and scourged until he can hardly stand.

Now he must carry the heavy crosspiece¹ to Golgotha, where he will be nailed to a cross and left there until dead.

I’ve written at length in these studies about crucifixion. The basics are straightforward. Crucifixion was simply the most horrible way the Romans had available to publicly torture those who opposed Rome. The process of dying was painful and often went on for several days. The mounting of the victim on the cross ensured that death came by slow suffocation,

¹ An entire cross would be too heavy for anyone to carry. It is likely that the Romans kept the uprights permanently in place and hoisted the condemned while attached to the cross bar. Even the cross bar would

for as the dying man grew increasingly unable to lift himself, he could no longer expand his lungs and breathe.

The Romans did not invent crucifixion but they did perfect it and used it more widely than any empire before them. Crucifixion was not typically the death meted out to common criminals; it was generally reserved for those who stood up to the power of Rome. Thus, for example, when Jesus was a boy, several thousand Galilean Jews were crucified along the roadways to put down a rebellion against Roman authority.² The sign over Jesus' head that read "King of the Jews" marked him as someone who was crucified as a challenger to the power of Caesar.

But why does the cross sit at the center of our faith? Why hang a cross over our altar? First, it grounds us in what actually happened. It was on a cross just outside the walls of Jerusalem that Jesus died. Second, it inevitably acknowledges that, by virtues of his claims to lordship, Jesus *did* oppose Caesar and his empire.

God's "Long Game"

Underlying all God's promises is the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12:3. Yes, Abraham will become the father of a great nation. Yes, he will go to the land given him by God. But, more importantly, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" through Abraham. In the Old Testament, blessing is a gift from God, encompassing material well-being, peace, and success in life. Blessing shapes the lives of Abraham's family and the "outsiders" they meet.

Abraham was not chosen by God merely for his own sake, but for the sake of others. God rescues the Hebrews from Egypt for the sake of the whole world. Jesus' disciples were not chosen for their sake alone but for the sake of the whole world. The same is true for you and me. We have been saved for a purpose larger than ourselves.

Now of course, it was always easy for the Israelites to forget that they were to be the city on the hill to which all nations would stream (Isaiah 2:2-5; Matthew 5:14-16). It was tempting to them, as it is tempting to us, to turn inward, to build barriers, to see people as "outsiders." Jesus would remind his fellow Jews that they were to be the "light to the world." They were to face outward, pulling down walls and serving others. . . . But it all began with that promise to Abraham.

Third, and I think the hardest for us to comprehend, is that the symbol of the cross affirms that Jesus suffered the most humiliating and shameful possible death. Crucifixion was so horrible and shameful a death that it couldn't even be mentioned in polite company. For a culture built upon the acquisition of honor and the avoidance of shame, this aspect of crucifixion might well have been the most awful in the eyes of many. This is the love that love that Jesus has for us, enduring not just death – but *this* death. He met the worst that the world has to offer – for us.

Paul captures this humiliation well when, speaking of Jesus, he wrote, "he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). It is indeed a "wondrous cross," expressing the love of God as words never could.

The Faith of Jesus Christ

Christians often speak of their "faith in Jesus," sometimes leaving the impression that their own trust in Jesus saved them.

But that can't be right. We have been made right with God by his grace – so that no one can boast (Eph. 2:9). As Paul writes, Jesus became a curse, hung on a tree, so that we might be redeemed. It is Jesus who has saved us – by his faithfulness all the way to the horror of death, even death on a cross. He knew what lay ahead, anyone would have known. Others had claimed the mantle of Messiah and died for it.

Wasn't there another way? Jesus had prayed in Gethsemane for just such a way, but there was none. If Jesus was going to be true to the vocation given him by God, if he was going to genuinely love God and neighbor without fail, then he would collide with the powers of this world, with those invested in and committed to

² Given that the rebellion was centered in Sepphoris, a city about 4 miles from Nazareth, Jesus would have certainly witnessed some of these crucifixions first-hand.

their way, rather than God's way. It was true then; it is true now.

The apostle Paul was tasked with trying to understand what Jesus' death on a cross really meant. What did it say about God and his work in this world? Why was Jesus born? For what purpose? Why did God humble himself in this way, taking on a full-blooded humanity and dying on a cross?

If your answer to these questions is "to save us," you are right so far as it goes. But God's rescue involves far more than just us. It is the keeping of promises that God made long before, such as those to Jeremiah.

The Passover

We've gone through Mark's story of Jesus' slowly, in small pieces. As we consider Jesus nailed to the cross, we need to remember that this happened during the Jewish festival of Passover. Much of our most meaningful Christian imagery is grounded in this.

In the book of Exodus, when Moses confronts the Egyptian Pharaoh demanding freedom for the Hebrews, the Pharaoh refuses. Assorted plagues fall on Egypt but the Pharaoh won't relent. Finally, Moses tells Pharaoh that unless he changes his mind, all the first-born of Egypt will die. But, tragically, Pharaoh's heart has hardened and so this final, horrible plague comes. As their savior, God has told the Hebrews what they must do to be "passed over" by this last plague. They are to put the blood of an unblemished lamb around the doorway to their home and share a meal of the roasted lamb and unleavened bread. After the death of Egypt's first-born, Pharaoh allows the Hebrews to go.

God instructed his people that every spring they were to celebrate the Festival of Passover, including the meal of a sacrificed, unblemished lamb and unleavened bread, as a "day of remembrance" so the people would never forget that God had saved them – again.

When Jesus comes to Jerusalem for what would be the last week of his life, he comes to celebrate Passover. The Last Supper is the Passover meal shared by Jesus and his disciples. In this powerful imagery, Jesus was the Passover lamb, sacrificed so that God's people might be saved – a body broken, blood shed.

Grasping that Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection demonstrate God's faithfulness to his promises is the key theme of Paul's letter to the Romans. Like Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul lived in a time of great turmoil, as many Jews resisted Roman rule. They awaited the day when God would finally keep his promises, when, as written the scroll of Jeremiah, "I [God] will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is right and just in the land" (Jeremiah 33:15, CEB).

But the Jews had waited many centuries and it was natural for some to wonder if God's promises would forever go unfulfilled. The Jews knew that they weren't really keeping their end of the covenant God had made with them – they didn't really love God and neighbor every day and in every way. But still, where was God?

For Paul, the fact of Jesus' faithfulness, even to death on a cross, revealed that God had kept his promises. In a sense, Jesus was the "righteousness of God" in the flesh.

Jesus was the way out of the covenant dilemma. Despite the unwillingness or inability of the Jews to live up to the covenant and to be the light to the world, God had provided the means of covenant-keeping. This means was Jesus Christ, the one Jew who did truly love God and love neighbor without fail. Jesus' own faithfulness to the covenant and to God all the way to the cross revealed that God is not only the covenant maker, but the covenant keeper. In Christ, God's covenant people had been restored to a right relationship with God. Hence, they had been saved. And who are these covenant people? Namely those who have faith in Jesus Christ, Paul writes.

To reiterate, God's righteousness (his covenant faithfulness) was revealed to the world through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, for the rescuing of all who believe. This is the Good News. This is the message for the whole world that we are to bring them. Alleluia!

“The Righteousness of God”

In his letters, Paul uses the phrase “the righteousness of God” eight times, of which seven are in Romans. What does Paul mean and what does it mean for us? Romans 3:21-22a are pivotal in this letter: “But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ² for all who believe” (NRSV). “Righteousness” is a virtue, the quality of doing what is just and right. In the Old and New Testaments, the “righteousness of God” carries two complementary meanings.

First, it refers to God’s covenant faithfulness. God is the great covenant-maker and covenant-keeper – he keeps his promises. Thus, Paul is saying that God has kept his promises to Israel, as revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Because God is the great covenant-keeper, we can rely on his promises.² The story of God’s relationship with his people will end well, because he has promised that it will (see Revelation 21). Indeed, the truth is that God’s complete victory over sin and death has already been won, though not yet.³

Second, “the righteousness of God” refers to God being a fair and impartial judge. In ancient Israel, law courts worked differently than in our day. Rather than using public prosecutors and juries, there were three parties – a judge, the plaintiff and the defendant. A judge was a good judge (a righteous judge) if he tried the case according to the law, if he was impartial, if he punished sin, and if he protected the weak and defenseless. Thus, as the righteous judge, God has been true to his word and he has judged impartially, for Jew and Gentile alike. Through the faithfulness of Jesus, God has dealt with sin and vindicated the helpless. He has declared innocent (“justified”) those who have “have faith in Jesus Christ (v.26).

¹Though this phrase has traditionally been rendered as “faith in Jesus Christ,” the increasingly preferred translation is “the faith of Jesus Christ,” emphasizing the faithfulness of Jesus, just as chapter 4 emphasizes the faithfulness of Abraham.

²Be careful here. Too often, Christians find, in the Bible, promises from God that aren’t really there. God does promise us that the story for us and for all of creation will end well. He does not promise us a life free of pain, turmoil, trouble, or poverty.

³It is impossible to overstate the importance of this already/not yet perspective to a proper reading of the New Testament. The June 29, 2003, Sermon Background Study gives an overview of this “between the times” perspective, with pictures. It can be downloaded at www.scottengle.org.

Scott Engle’s Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own.

This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Genesis

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class – now studying the Gospel of Mark

Meets every Monday from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Scott’s 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *How On Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*

This series will help us to get ready for the sermon series on world religions that will start after Easter.

Scott’s Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to “worship” and then “sermons.” You’ll find the study with each week’s recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org