



Remembering What He Has Done

[2:13-15]

Chris Bullard

“And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him” (2:13-15).

One quirk of human nature is that we quickly forget what others have done for us. A classic case recorded in the Book of Esther tells of a king troubled with insomnia. King Ahasuerus decided to have his old diaries read to him in order that he might go to sleep listening to the chronicles of his great accomplishments. In the records he discovered that a Jew named Mordecai had once saved his life from assassination by two of the royal officers in the king’s court. The king had forgotten all about it and had never done anything for him.

Surely it is because of this quirk in our nature that the Lord Jesus gave us unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine for us to remember His death on the cross. He knew that we would be prone to forget that He had died for us. How well we respond to Jesus as our Lord is directly related to how well we remember what He did for us.

In Colossians 2:13-15, Paul went back to the old rugged cross, reminding us what Jesus did for us. We need to restudy what the apostle had

to say lest we trivialize the memorial meal that the Lord left and forget what He has done for us.

All that the Bible teaches about the death of Jesus can be summarized in five words: “Christ died for our sins.” Everything comes under that sentence. But the thoughtful person will ask: “What is the connection between Jesus dying and my sins?”

The Bible contains a variety of responses to that question for the person who will read it slowly, looking for the answer. Three connections between Jesus’ death and our sins are mentioned by Paul, one in each verse of our text, and they are related to the three conditions in which our sins have brought us.

First, our sins have brought upon us a condition of *deadness*. Second, our sins have brought us into a condition of *debt*, a debt which we could never hope to payoff. And third, our sins have brought us into a condition of *domination* where we no longer have control over our own destiny.

Deadness . . . debt . . . domination—these three conditions in our experience were dealt with by the cross of Jesus Christ.

OUR DEADNESS— WE ARE MADE ALIVE (2:13)

The first condition experienced because of our sins is deadness: “When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh” (2:13a).

Being dead can have different meanings. Death can mean something has happened to our bodies. Someone has said that as soon as your heart begins to beat, it is like a drum beating a funeral dirge to the grave. Death can mean the *physical* event. But God wants us to understand that human beings can die in other ways.

Verse 13 gives two of those ways. On the one hand, we were dead *morally* because of our sins. That part of us that would choose the good, the upright, the holy, was dysfunctional. It was like a car battery can be on a cold morning in the winter—dead. Being dead morally, we were powerless. Sin robbed us of the ability to do the moral thing.

Not only were we dead morally, we were also dead *spiritually*, for Paul speaks of “the uncircumcision of your flesh.” We lived in a state of constant and permanent rebellion to God. Verse 11 pointed out that spiritual circumcision is the cutting out of our hearts all that is in opposition to the will of God. Before that spiritual surgery is performed by Jesus, we live in defiance, not just to morality, but to God Himself. We have no relationship with Him. Our spirit can have no fellowship with God’s Spirit. Thus, we are dead in our sins because alienation from God means we are alienated from the source of all life, whether physical or spiritual.

That was our condition. We were dead spiritually and morally. But here is the good news of the gospel: God “made you alive together with Him” (2:13b). Earlier, Paul said that we had our sinful nature cut out of us, “having been buried [with Jesus] in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (2:12).

Through a miracle, God gave the dead body of Jesus new life so that He could walk out of that borrowed tomb a new man, never to die again. Likewise, God has given our dead souls new life. Ephesians 2:4, 5 says, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).” God did not have to do it. Therefore, it is of grace. God did it because He wanted to give us new life. The moment we arose out of the waters of baptism, God was spiritually giving us new life. We became alive morally and spiritually. We became sensitive to God and wanted to do what is right. The gift of His Spirit was given

to us so that our spirits could live again and choose the good, the upright, the holy. Without the resurrection of Jesus, we could not have new life. Because God raised Jesus to live again, He can raise us to live again—first, spiritually in baptism, later eternally at the return of Jesus.

OUR DEBT— IT IS CANCELED (2:14)

The second condition we experience because of sin is an enormous debt. In verse 14 Paul speaks of “the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us.” Many read these words and conclude that Paul is referring to the law of Moses. Paul is much more graphic than the law.

The Greek word translated “certificate of debt” literally means “handwriting.” What is the significance of this word? In those days, no printing presses, no typewriters, no laser printers existed! Everything was handwritten. What did Paul have in mind?

“Because we
did not keep God’s
commands, that promissory
note stood against us.”

In the time of the early church this was a technical word used of promissory notes. In one of the apocryphal books, the Book of Tobit, Tobit remembers some money that he left in trust with a fellow named Gabael. Tobit calls in his son Tobias and asks him to go get the money. The story continues: “Then Tobias answered him, ‘Father, I will do everything that you have commanded me; but how can I obtain the money when I do not know the man?’ Then Tobit gave him the receipt” (Tobit 5:1-3). “Receipt” in the Greek is the word for “handwriting.” It was an “IOU” that guaranteed payment of a debt on demand. Tobit knew that when his son, Tobias, presented Gabael with the certificate of debt, he would have to turn over the money.

Because we were created in the image of God, we are supposed to live like God. Paul uses a vivid metaphor, saying it is as though I had given God a handwritten note which read: "I, Chris R. Bullard, will fully obey Your commands for me, or You may punish me as You deem appropriate." Then because we did not keep God's commands, that promissory note stood against us. We incurred a debt we did not and could not pay. God's only option was to punish us.

Here is the good news: God forgave "us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us" (2:13c-14b).

Imagine your mortgage company canceling your debt on your house! Imagine Mastercard voiding all your debits for the rest of your life! If that is hard to envision, how much more staggering to imagine a holy God canceling all our sin debt against Him!

"Imagine Mastercard voiding all your debits for the rest of your life!"

That word "canceled" originally meant "to erase." In Paul's day the ink they used did not have any acid in it, so it did not eat down in the papyrus or vellum on which they wrote. The ink just laid on the surface. When you photocopy a document, have you noticed how you can scratch it off the paper? Scribes could do the same thing. Since writing materials were hard to come by, a scribe would often scrape the ink off old documents, then sponge them off to remove every trace of the ink. (Many ancient manuscripts of the Bible have been found on reused documents. Such documents have a special name: They are called "palimpsest" which means "rubbed off.")

That is the very idea here. God took the written record that proved our sin, scraped off the writing, and sponged it down, wiping it out as if it had never been. When we were baptized,

at that moment God forgave us, He wiped out our sins. That is total forgiveness! To borrow the language of the Psalmist: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Psalms 103:12).

How is this possible? Paul said, "He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (2:14b). God not only took the record of our debt, scraped it down, and washed it off so that no trace of our debt remained; He went one step further and raised it up out of our midst and nailed it to the cross of Jesus.

Possibly Paul was thinking of the Roman *titulus* that every condemned man had carried in front of him to the site of his execution and attached to his cross. That written list of crimes, publicly displayed, justified the horrible punishment the man was receiving. In Jesus' case, the list of crimes was false; it was a mockery. Yet, Paul sees in that *titulus* a list of *our* crimes against God, an accusation against us but borne by Jesus.

Thus, the picture is complete. God does not simply overlook our sin. He forgives us. He cancels our debt because He pays it for us Himself!

Three months after Maxine and I moved to Overland Park, Kansas, in 1977, our first son, Christopher, was born. The insurance policy I had at the time limited maternity benefits to \$300.00 under any conditions. As if that were not bad enough, complications came at birth, and Christopher had to be in the intensive care unit for five days. When the morning came to take him home, I had the dubious task of going to the business office to see how I could settle my account. I had absolutely no idea how I could pay such an enormous debt.

At the cashier's window I told the lady, "I need to find out how much I owe." She looked up my record and said, "You don't owe anything." I said, "No, you don't understand. My insurance policy only pays \$300.00. My baby spent five days in intensive care. I owe you a fortune." She said, "You don't owe anything. It says here your account has been paid in full by some friends at Overland Park." I still have no idea who did that for us. But I do know this: I owed a debt I could not pay; someone paid a debt they did not owe. All I could do was shout with joy! Incredible joy comes when you discover someone else has paid your debt for you. Psalms 32:1, 2 says, "How blessed [happy] is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is

the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity.”

It is a happy thing to be forgiven. If you are filled with doubts and feelings of guilt all the time, you must conclude that either your baptism was not valid or God lied when He said He forgave you *all* your sins through the cross of Jesus. A person who knows he is forgiven will be filled with joy over what God has done.

OUR DOMINATION— SATAN IS DISARMED (2:15)

The third condition we experience because of sin is that we were dominated. Paul said, “When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him” (2:15).

Today, the world’s woes are explained in terms of economics, sociological factors, education, or politics. But the Bible says that a spiritual dimension is behind the world’s troubles. Paul speaks of “the rulers and authorities.” The personal forces of evil are behind the scenes, trying to manipulate men like pawns in their great battle against God. Their avowed aim is to disrupt, defeat, and destroy human lives whether on a social or individual scale. That is why the Word of God says that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Paul was not saying that we do not have human enemies, for we do. He meant that they are not the real enemy. Men who oppose the cause of Jesus are only dupes of the devil. Paul told the Corinthians: “. . . the god of this world [the devil] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Praise God, you and I do not have to be dominated by that kind of spiritual blindness any longer. Satan’s hold on us has been broken once for all. God has “disarmed the rulers and authorities.”

The word “disarmed” can be misleading. This is not the image of an army defeated, stripped of weapons, but rather the imagery of a royal court in which public officials are stripped of their rank and publicly humiliated.

At Calvary the hosts of hell thought that they had triumphed over God and crushed His Son

by killing Him. These demonic forces working through some Jewish leaders, and Roman soldiers stripped off the clothes of Jesus, holding Him up for contempt before the masses and celebrating a victory over Him. Three days later, God raised His Son from the dead, thus using the cross as the means to show that He is the one in authority. Every ruler, power, and demon in the spiritual realm that opposed God was stripped of power and held up before all the heavenly host for derision. Until we see that great cosmic victory, we have missed the essence of the cross of Christ.

No longer does any evil force have the right to dominate your life. Every power and authority that opposes God has been broken by the cross of Calvary. The victory is yours! In the name of Jesus, you can face and challenge any demon that tries to take control of your life. He cannot stand before the cross. So James says, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

This, then, is what happened at Calvary many years ago. This is what we celebrate every Lord’s Day as we remember what another has done for us to conquer death, to cancel our debt, and to crush that which once dominated us.

CONCLUSION

Three paradoxes surround these three truths. First, we fight a defeated foe. Satan is defeated, but we still have to fight. The decisive battle has been won at Calvary, but skirmishes between good and evil will continue to the end of time. That is the reason we have to put on our spiritual armor every morning. But remember you are fighting *from* victory, not *for* victory!

Second, though our debts have all been canceled, we still owe everything. What do we not owe God? He has canceled my debt; therefore, I owe God my all.

Third, though God has made me alive in Christ, I still have to go through physical death. Death has lost its sting now. My real life is hid with Christ in God and is untouched by my physical death. Consequently, when you celebrate the cross on the first day of the week, remember this: Death is not putting out the light; it is putting away the lamp because the dawn has come.

Jesus died our death. He canceled our debts. He secured our deliverance. No wonder we glory in the cross!