

# THE GOSPEL

— ACCOURDING TO PAUL (NOT SMIT) —

DAILY DEVOTIONALS - WEEK 4

# MONDAY

The belief that Jesus' death on the cross was a powerfully saving act of God's self-giving love, not a mere execution, was revolutionary in the apostle Paul's first-century world, and still is today. Something "revolutionary" creates a dramatic, fundamental change. Computers revolutionized the way people use technology. The internet revolutionized the way people communicate. Paul's teaching about Jesus' death revolutionized the way people saw (and see) God's power and wisdom.

- First-century Judaism strongly believed in God's power. But they never expected God's power to work through the crucifixion of the long-awaited Messiah. Paul said Christ crucified was a "scandal" (verse 23) to the Jews. Yet through the crucifixion God's power triumphed over the epitome of darkness—death itself. Where has God's power worked in your life in unexpected ways? How can trusting God's death-conquering power sustain you in the challenges you face today?

- Ancient Greeks (i.e., "Gentiles") loved "wisdom" (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Stoics). No admired Greek philosophers found it "wise" to think a crucifixion was saving or hopeful. That's why Paul said Christ's crucifixion was "foolishness" to Gentiles (verse 23), that "the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom" (1 Corinthians 1:24). Did you ever not get something you really wanted, but see in hindsight that that was for the best? Can you trust in God's wisdom even when it works in unexpected ways?

## read

1 Corinthians 1:17-24

## pray

*Living Lord, you are God, and I am not. That's hard to remember sometimes, but I'm grateful that your power and wisdom are greater than mine. Help me to trust that in the end your wisdom and power always prevail. Amen.*

# TUESDAY

The apostle Paul said people's deepest spiritual issue is alienation from God. He was a vivid example of the term a "new creation." As a young Pharisee, he fiercely opposed early Christians. Yet he wrote today's passage to Christians that he himself, won to faith in Jesus in the city of Corinth. He said Jesus' death gave us forgiveness, but not by convincing an unwilling God to love us. Instead, "God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ."

- Have you, like most of us, moved away from God at some point(s) in your life? When you create that distance, do you picture God as eager to bridge it; as indifferent to you and distant; or as angry with you and out to punish? How has God's reconciling action through Jesus' death made you "a new creature in Christ"? Who do you know who needs to hear that good news (quite possibly from you)?
- You can read in Acts 9:1-20 about the encounter with Jesus that changed Saul's life. He went from "spewing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" to being the apostle who wrote, "The love of Christ controls us.... All of these new things are from God.... If anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation." In what ways is the effect of Christ's death reshaping your identity and way of life as you live in God's "new creation"?

## read

2 Corinthians 5:14-19, 21

## pray

*Lord Jesus, the Father was reconciling the world (the world that includes me) to himself through you. Shape me into a transparent, winning beacon of the message that God loves us all. Amen.*



# WEDNESDAY

In ancient Rome, during a triumph, the emperor, dressed as the god Jupiter, would lead defeated captives behind him, showing them off before their execution.... because the cross was the most humiliating instrument of execution, Paul inverts the world's wisdom here (verse 15). Paul said

Jesus, on the cross, defeated God's earthly enemies (people teaching that it took religious rituals to win God's favour, or Roman persecutors) and led them in a victory parade for God's kingdom.

- As we try to make our lives better, sometimes our idea is, "Let's make strict rules, for ourselves and others." Rules and regulations, Paul said, may seem wise, but in themselves, they do not change our inner self. Have you ever tried to put yourself on a strict program (for any purpose) when you had not inwardly "bought in" to what you were doing? What were the results? Do you

believe Paul (and Jesus) were right that inward change precedes lasting outward change?

- Paul opposed "rule-makers" who said the Colossians must follow their rules, which often began with laws in the Hebrew Scriptures. While recognizing that God inspired Old Testament precepts with true principles in mind, Paul suggests that such principles are fulfilled in Christ. Christ nailed, not the laws, but our indebtedness (i.e., guilt) for not obeying all the laws to the cross. How can you point others to Jesus' grace rather than to rules, even those you choose to follow?

## read

Colossians 2:12-17, 20-23

## pray

*Lord Jesus, Paul also wrote that "now there isn't any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Thank you for triumphing over my failures and debt on your cross. Amen.*

# THURSDAY

In Paul's world, there were high barriers between Gentiles and Jews. Paul had lived out that bias (cf. Galatians 1:13-14). There was a real physical wall in the Temple in Jerusalem, warning Gentiles that if they passed it, they were subject to death. Interpretations of purity laws resulted in Gentiles being excluded from the court of Israel (for Jewish men) and even the less pure court of women (for Jewish women).

- The angry young Pharisee Saul, who approved of stoning the Gentile Christian Stephen (cf. Acts 7:54-8:1), became the apostle Paul, who wrote, "Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group." What changed him? Do you see any difference between peace as a human effort based on "splitting differences" and weighing interests, and peace based on who Jesus is and who you are in him? Is one more lasting than the other?
- All major world faiths (including ours) attract some people who nurture feelings of hatred and grievance, and who advocate violence against people of other faiths. How can you differentiate those in any faith who seek to build walls from those who wish to tear down walls and create more goodwill, peace, and cooperation? What attitudes and actions show that you have committed your life to the "one body" (Ephesians 2:16) Jesus came to create?

## read

Ephesians 2:14-17

Colossians 1:19-22

## pray

*Lord Jesus, you showed us a better way - you reached out to people who snubbed you, and asked God to forgive the soldiers who crucified you. Help me to live into the power of your love. Amen.*

# FRIDAY

The apostle Paul used two vivid images to express how Jesus' death affects the way we live. Jesus died, he said, so “we wouldn’t be slaves to sin anymore.” That sounds good. But then he didn’t say we are free to do whatever we want, but that “you are [always] slaves of the one whom you obey,” so we became “slaves of righteousness.” Then to give us more to think about, he used a bookkeeping image, urging believers to “consider yourselves dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus.”

- Paul contrasts life without Christ as slavery to sin with life in Christ as slavery to God and righteousness. In this new life, the master sin is replaced by the master righteousness (6:18). But Paul did not mean exchanging one miserable, harmful slavery for another. Slavery to sin leads to death; slavery to God leads to righteousness and life. How is choosing Jesus as your “master” life-giving, as opposed to serving the destructive, death-dealing ways of “sin”?

- In verse 11, Paul switched metaphors, saying “consider yourselves dead to sin but alive for God.” The word he uses [for ‘consider’] is a word used in bookkeeping, in working out profit and loss figures, all the calculation does is to make you aware of what in fact was true all along. We need to remember who we really are, so that we can act accordingly. How can remembering that you are “alive for God in Christ Jesus” help you when you stumble in your spiritual journey?

## read

Romans 6:6-11, 17-18

## pray

*Lord Jesus, thank you for dying for me so that I can be set free from slavery to all that needs to die in me. I choose you to be my loving, life-giving master. Amen.*

# SATURDAY

The center of all the apostle Paul believed and taught was that Jesus' death on the cross reconciled us to God. Rebellious humans on their own couldn't close the gap between them and God. Only God could do that. And God did it! Scholar N. T. Wright explained: "When we look at Jesus, the Messiah, we are looking at the one who embodies God's own love, God's love-in-action. Look at [Romans 5,] verse 8. What Paul says here makes no sense unless Jesus, in his life and death, was the very incarnation, the 'enfleshment' (that's what 'incarnation' means) of the living, loving God. After all, it doesn't make sense if I say to you, 'I see you're in a real mess! I love you so much that I'm going to... send someone else to help you out of it.' If the death of the Messiah shows how much God loves us, that can only be because the Messiah is the fully human being (how much more human can you get than being crucified?) in whom the living God is fully present."

• Scholar William Barclay wrote, "The coming of Christ and the death of Christ, is the proof of God's love. Sometimes the thing is stated as if on the one side there was a gentle, loving Christ, on the other an angry and vengeful God; and as if Christ did something which changed God's attitude to [people]. Nothing could be further from the truth...Jesus did not come to change God's attitude to [people]; he came to show what it is and always was." Paul knew God did not have to be "talked into" saving you (as he wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19). That's why, in a world in which Roman philosopher Cicero wrote, "The idea of the cross should never come near the bodies of Roman citizens; it should never pass through their thoughts, eyes or ears," Paul (a Roman citizen—cf. Acts 22:25-27) said, "God forbid that I should boast about anything except for the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14). Jesus' cross transformed his life for the better. Do you join Paul in trusting Jesus, your crucified king?

## read

Romans 5:6-11

## pray

*Lord Jesus, the old hymn asked,  
"What wondrous love is this?"  
It's hard for me to find words  
for my gratitude. But I offer you  
my loyalty, my love, my life.  
Amen.*