

# September 13

## Lesson 2

## Forgiven, Rescued, Restored

**Focal Passage:** Romans 1:15-17; 5:6-11

**Background Text:** Same

**Purpose Statement:** To deepen our gratitude that Jesus offers us salvation in the midst of our sinfulness

### Romans 1:15-17

<sup>15</sup>That's why I'm ready to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. <sup>16</sup>I'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. <sup>17</sup>God's righteousness is being revealed in the gospel, from faithfulness for faith, as it is written, *The righteous person will live by faith.*

### Romans 5:6-11

<sup>6</sup>While we were still weak, at the right moment, Christ died for ungodly people. <sup>7</sup>It isn't often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone might dare to die for a good person. <sup>8</sup>But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup>So, now that we have been made righteous by his blood, we can be even more certain that we will be saved from God's wrath through him. <sup>10</sup>If we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son while we were still enemies, now that we have been reconciled, how much

more certain is it that we will be saved by his life? <sup>11</sup>And not only that: we even take pride in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, the one through whom we now have a restored relationship with God.

**Key Verse:** "The gospel . . . is God's own power for salvation to all who have faith in God" (Romans 1:16).

Imagine three marriages. In the first marriage, the husband betrays the trust of the wife, leaving her hurt, angry, and suspicious. Finally, after much soul-searching, prayer, and hard work, she forgives her husband. Slowly, she begins to trust him again, as she had before the betrayal.

In the second marriage, the husband stands by his wife as she wrestles against an addiction. She seeks out therapy, joins a self-help support group, and battles her inner temptations. Slowly, she begins to find the strength to overcome her addiction. As she regains a sense of control over her life, she tells her husband, "I wouldn't have made it without you. You were my rock amid the turmoil inside me."

In the third marriage, the couple tries to overcome their differences but cannot find common ground. After trying to make it work, they divorce. After some time and personal growth on the part of the husband and the wife, they begin a relationship again, eventually remarrying. Even though the second marriage isn't perfect, the couple finds it more satisfying and sweeter than the first one.

Perhaps these three marriages represent the three things that happen between God and people, according to Paul in Romans 5:6-11. Paul used theological terms that we will explore more fully below. Behind the terms lie elements of relationship, represented by the three marriages.

The first marriage represents forgiveness, the second represents rescue, and the third represents reestablishment. Paul used the theological terms *made righteous*,

*saved*, and *reconciled*. The three marriages do not conform exactly to the divine/human relationship. God does not need to grow when we feel estranged from God; but the concepts of forgiveness, rescue, and reestablishment help us look at the theological terms Paul used.

## Paul's Theology 101: Christ's Death

We have no way around it. In order to understand Romans 5, we must do some theology. Before you close the book and go find something fun to do, hear me out!

Many people find the word *theology* off-putting. We tend to think of theology as long words, impenetrable arguments, and hairsplitting. We might remember the old adage about the advice a church member gave to a young preacher, newly appointed to a congregation: "We don't want theology here; we just want Jesus."

However tempting it might be just to soak up Jesus' love, we have to think about Jesus and what he does for us. At its heart, theology succeeds by making metaphors and drawing analogies. When we talk about Paul's theology in this passage, we can find images and metaphors behind what he said. These metaphors help us understand what Paul meant and trigger our reflection on Jesus' work on our behalf.

The affirmation Paul made in Romans 5:6 affects us on more than one level. Different readers might have different reactions to Paul's adjective *weak*. Some might bristle at the notion that they are weak, while others may feel gratified that Paul might have understood them.

Paul's real sense is that we are unable to rise above our sinfulness and bridge the gap between ourselves and God on our own strength. Even the physically and emotionally strongest people are weak in that sense. Paul's point is that Christ does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

The real struggle comes when we read that Christ died for us. What exactly

does it mean to say that Christ died on our behalf? The great thinkers in the church have grappled with this idea through the centuries, and we must grapple with it, too. We'll consider three ways people have explained this so that you can decide what you think it means.

One suggestion put forward was that Christ died in our place. In this understanding, we deserved to die for our sins, but Jesus died in our stead. The limitation of this suggestion is that it implies that God would not, or could not, forgive us without a sacrificial death.

Even though the Old Testament portrays a sacrificial system for forgiving sins, the Old Testament writers understood that God offered forgiveness out of God's very nature of love and mercy (Psalm 103, especially verse 8). Also, Paul understood sin as a cosmic power that holds all of creation in its grip (Romans 8:19-23), not just an individual matter.

Another suggestion about what it means for Christ to die for us asserts that, in Jesus' death and resurrection, God defeated the ultimate power of sin itself. By breaking the power of sin, Christ died on our behalf so that sin no longer had ultimate power over us. This explanation sounds more consistent with Paul's understanding of the cosmic, universal dimension of sin. If this explanation is correct, Paul does not explain exactly how Jesus' death and resurrection defeated the power of cosmic sin.

A third suggestion that has come down through the church's tradition is that Christ's sacrifice demonstrated pure love, inspiring us to show the same love to God.<sup>4</sup>

Paul did not carefully explain what he meant by Christ dying "for us." These different interpretations show us that the concept is not easy to understand. Even these three interpretations do not exhaust the way we can understand it. We can affirm that Jesus' crucifixion mattered to our salvation, that it accomplished

something we could not do on our own, and that God worked through the Crucifixion.

***What does it mean to you that Christ died for you? How would you explain this to someone else?***

## God's Righteousness

Romans 5:9-10 contains the three essential terms for Paul's understanding of how the death and resurrection of Christ have affected our relationship to God. In the first part of verse 9, Paul says, "We have been made righteous by his blood."

The root meaning behind the term for "righteous" comes from the legal realm (for example, Deuteronomy 25:1). *Righteous* denoted a person declared innocent, vindicated, or acquitted. When Paul declared that the work of Jesus Christ has made us righteous, he meant that, because of Christ, we have been forgiven.

The word *justification* provides a parallel term to *righteousness*. We can then refer to Christ's work for our righteousness as "justifying grace." God removes our guilt but also makes us righteous.

We can talk about this work inside us as "sanctifying grace." God takes away the guilt we cannot remove and works inside us to make us into new people. God transforms us. When Paul talked about God's righteousness (Romans 1:17), he likely intended to say that, by God's very nature, God does the morally right, just, and good thing.

***What does it mean to you that you have been made righteous by Christ's sacrifice? How does this change the way you live?***

## God's Salvation

Paul continued by saying that "we will be saved from God's wrath through him"

(Romans 5:9). The term for "salvation" carries the sense of a rescue. In the Book of Judges, the people disobeyed God, who put them under the power of a foreign ruler. When the people cried out to God, God raised up leaders who "saved" the people. (The CEB translates the word *saved* as "rescued.") Whether the context comes as a battle, a natural disaster, or an illness, the term for "save" implies a rescue.

Paul understood sin and evil, in part, as a battle against strong forces. Paul talked about sin, death, and evil as cosmic forces that affect creation.

In another letter, Paul talked about God's victory over "every form of rule, every authority and power" (1 Corinthians 15:24). He called death the "last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26). In Ephesians 6:10-17, we find the familiar passage about the battle against the "spiritual forces of evil" for which we need armor.

In part, we understand Christ's salvation as winning a battle we cannot fight on our own. Perhaps Paul had this idea of a battle in mind when he talked of God's "power for salvation" (Romans 1:16). God has power to fight the battle.

It's critical that we try to grasp the complexity of Paul's understanding of our sinfulness. Sin and evil stand far above us. Sin has power too strong for us to break and affects all of creation.

Paul understood sin as more than just our individual sinfulness. Nevertheless, we do have guilt for our sin because we participate in the sin of all creation. In uncompromising words, Paul condemned our sinfulness (3:9-18). Sin and evil hold us captive, but we cooperate with our captors.

***In what ways has God rescued you?***

## God's Reconciliation

Because God has rescued us from the power of sin and has forgiven us for our participation in the power of sin, we have also been restored to the relationship

God intended us to have with one another and with God. Through the work of Christ, we now stand in a healed, restored relationship with God and with one another.

As with the other terms, *reconciliation* has a cosmic dimension. In 2 Corinthians 5:19, Paul talked about God's work to reconcile the whole creation. We can understand this reconciliation when we think about restoring a relationship, healing a broken family, or peace between warring nations. God does not consider us an enemy, and we should not consider God an enemy.<sup>2</sup>

***Which of the three terms--forgiveness, rescue, or reconciliation--speaks most clearly to your relationship with God? Why do you think that term applies to you?***

## **Our Response of Faith**

As in the marriage analogy I used earlier, the three aspects of Christ's work for us interrelate. The three marriages give us examples of forgiveness, rescue, and reconciliation. In each example, both spouses would have to move toward forgiveness as part of the process. Each marriage results in a reconciliation. The individual scenarios highlight an aspect of the process, but the three elements affect each of the marriages.

In a similar way, the work that Christ does for us affects us on multiple levels. We cannot experience reconciliation unless God forgives us and works within us to renew us. Even if God works within us, we still must face the powers of evil that surround us and infect the whole creation. God must rescue us from those forces.

All that Christ does for us restores our once-broken relationship with God and with one another in the church. Gratitude forms part of faith, so that we respond to God with trust and gratitude. We trust that God has restored the relationship; and we feel grateful that God, through Christ, has done for us what we could not do for

ourselves.

As Paul teaches in Romans 1, we accept what Christ has done for us by faith. We understand faith as trust in God. Paul considered this sense of trust as basic to our response to God's grace, love, and power, as shown in the work of Christ.

This type of faith goes back to Abraham, who trusted God's promises. Faith reveals itself as trust but also propels us to obedience and love for God and others. Paul engaged in "creative interpretation" when he cited Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17. In Habakkuk, the prophet encouraged the people to have faith when Judah endured attack.

The NRSV translates the relevant part of Habakkuk 2:4 as "the righteous live by their faith." The CEB says, "The righteous person will live honestly." Perhaps we can say that living honestly exhibits the faith that we need to accept God's grace.

***In what ways do you experience faith as gratitude and trust? When your faith feels weaker than you wish, how do you strengthen it?***

**We thank you, O God, for all that you did for us through Christ. Help us come to a deeper understand of the work of Christ, and help us experience a sense of gratitude for Christ's love for us; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

<sup>1</sup>From *A History of Christian Theology*, by William C. Placher (Westminster John Knox, 1983) pages 70-72, 143-145.

<sup>2</sup>From *The Anchor Bible* (Doubleday, 1993); pages 89-93. Also *Interpretation: Romans*, by Paul J. Achtemeier (Westminster John Knox, 1985); pages 89-93.