

The Upside Down Guide to Life:

Paying the Ransom

Matthew 10:38-45

April 9th, 2006 (the 6th Sunday in Lent)

We just heard a gripping story of a man named Jesus dying on a Roman cross. It's moving; it's powerful; it's truly passionate. But let's pause for a few minutes this morning and ask a simple question: Why or what's the point? Perhaps we've heard the stock phrase "Jesus died for our sins" but what does that mean and why did he have to die?

Let's be honest: some people (and perhaps you're one of them) have a difficult time with the cross. A famous Oxford professor recently argued that of all the historical religions, Christianity may be the worst primarily due to this idea of Jesus dying on the cross, an idea he finds "intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous."¹

Let me say first of all that the Jesus' suffering in and of itself was not the point. In many ways the movie called *The Passion* is a beautiful, spiritually-enriching film, but you might get the impression that the pain and blood are the main point of Jesus' death. But did you notice that our Gospel story doesn't dwell on the gory details? Verse 24 starkly says, "And they crucified him." But why? Why did he do it? What was happening at the cross? Or maybe we should ask: what was God doing on the cross?

The New Testament offers not just one perspective to that question, but a whole collage, a kaleidoscope of images and pictures. This morning let me just offer one picture or image from that collage. This picture comes from Jesus and you'll find it in a conversation Jesus had before he died. Back up with me to Mark 10:45.

Jesus said this in the context of a story, so let's briefly review the story that begins in verse 35. Some of Jesus' followers start asking if they can have the best seats in heaven – sort of like some kids arguing over who gets to sit shotgun or who gets the window seat. Then in verse 38 Jesus says, "You don't know what you're asking. Can you drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" In other words, can you truly live as a servant to God and the broken world around you? Can you really pour yourself out in love for others? Well, this conversation peeves the other disciples who are "indignant." So Jesus gathers the disciples and in verse 42 he tells them ... Everyone knew this was true. With the rise of Caesar Augustus as ruler, the Roman Empire was a tight-knit, rigid hierarchy. But then Jesus said, "But not so with you." I'm calling you to a different, counter-cultural lifestyle. See verses 43-44.

And then Jesus offers himself as the ultimate example of this radical way to live. Read verse 45. Now this is absolutely astounding. Jesus does what no other religious leader in the history of the world has done. This radical call to drink the cup of suffering, to plunge ourselves in his life, to pour ourselves out for God and others, is NOT a call to

¹ Quoted in John Stott, **The Cross of Christ**, page 43.

serve Jesus. It is a call to be served by Jesus and to allow him to ransom us from captivity. As someone has said about this verse, “You need to feel how wild this is. No man ever spoke this way – except maybe in a mental hospital. No respected religious leaders ever spoke this way” (John Piper).

This is not just another religious teacher giving good advice and rules about how to live a good life. And Jesus is not just forming another institution that pressures its members to perform and at the same time excludes non-members. That is not the Gospel. Mark 10:45 tells us clearly, undeniably and boldly that following Jesus is good news. You see, it’s impossible to follow Jesus, it’s impossible to be freed from our sin and selfishness so we can pour out our lives for others, it’s impossible to please God, UNLESS Jesus first serves us. That is the Gospel. Jesus serves us. I don’t just need someone to give me rules and tell me how to live. I need someone to free me from captivity to my sin and then empower me to live that way. The Christian life is taking Jesus seriously when he says, “I came to serve you.”

I want us to realize how radical and strange this is. It’s radical to me. I come from the land of Minnesota, the land of fiercely self-sufficient Swedes and Norwegians. Minnesota’s tongue-in-cheek visitor’s guide called *How to Talk Minnesotan* cautions newcomers, “If a Minnesotan says, ‘Can I get you a cup of coffee? you should not say, ‘Yeah, that would be great, thanks, with a little cream and sugar. And how about one of those cookies?’” Instead, Minnesotans say, “No, I wouldn’t want to put you out” or “I appreciate it, but no, I can’t let you.” But isn’t that how so many of us approach the Christian life or religion? “No, God, I wouldn’t want to put you out, but let me serve you or let me serve the church or let me try to get my life together.”

But Jesus says, “I came to serve you and to free you from your captivity.” Jesus himself put it this way, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit (i.e. you will leave a legacy; your life will bring life to others and glory to God), for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). In other words, if you don’t let me serve you, if you don’t let me live in and through you, then you can’t follow me. So every time Jesus tells us to do something – love your enemies, forgive those who hurt you, live a life of purity, share the Gospel, give generously of your time and money – he’s really asking us to be served by him. When you become a Christian, you do not become God’s helper; God becomes your helper. That’s why becoming a Christian requires deep humility. We admit that we need help; we need someone to serve us. And you never mature out of this. Once you stop depending on Jesus it’s like you’ve stopped breathing. Your spiritual life begins to suffocate.

We’ll return to this in a moment, but what does this have to do with our original question: What was Jesus doing on the cross? Jesus gives us the answer: I am serving you. How is he serving us? Let’s read the rest of verse 45: “to give his life as a ransom for many.” That’s Jesus’ most succinct answer to what he was doing on the cross. He is serving us by paying our ransom. In this passage Jesus tells us that his death will ransom all those who believe in him. The New Testament reaffirms this idea: “There is one God and one mediator between God and people, the man Jesus Christ, who gave himself as a ransom

for all people” (1 Timothy 2:5-6). Again, it is a ransom for us, or even more precise, in our place as our substitution. In other words, something happened to Jesus that should have happened to us and we received something – our freedom – that he should have had.

What does it mean to ransom someone? In Jesus’ day ransom simply meant “to release, deliver, or set free.” It had two very specific images. First, people in Jesus’ day would have thought of the Roman slave trade. When someone wanted to set a slave free he would pay the price of redemption and the slave would become a free man. The ransom set you free from bondage. Secondly, for Jesus’ fellow-Jews the idea of a ransom also pointed backwards to the story of the children of Israel who were delivered – or ransomed – by God from Egypt. God had compassion on them and set them free. In the same way, we were enslaved to sin and death and fear and judgment, but when Christ died on the cross it was for us, in order to set us free from the power and penalty of sin.

The concept of freeing someone from slavery isn’t just an ancient concept. For instance, over the past three months many of us have watched the unfolding story of Jill Carroll, an American reporter who was kidnapped on January 7th in Baghdad. For 82 days numerous groups throughout the world worked for her release from captivity. On January 20th her father appeared on two Arab-language networks and pleaded with her captors, “I want to speak directly to the men holding my daughter Jill because they also may be fathers ... My daughter is powerless and does not have the ability to release anyone. As a father, I appeal to you to release my daughter for the betterment of your cause.” After international appeals, Jill was suddenly released and then on Tuesday of this week her plane touched down in Boston and she was reunited with her family.

Now, in this scenario, as far as we know, no one paid a ransom for her release. But keep the image in mind of Jill’s captivity: she was held by another power, she was enslaved, and as her father said, she was powerless and did not have the power to release herself. Help, release, deliverance, freedom had to come from outside Jill’s own resources. She could not serve or deliver herself.

What does this have to do with us? Well, there is a strong theme in the Bible that says the same thing. You and I have been enslaved by the power of sin. According to the Bible (and all the references are in the sermon notes), sin wraps up the sinner in strong cords (Proverbs 5:22). Sin is like a weight tied to our feet that keeps tripping us on the race of life (Hebrews 12:1). Jesus warned us that “everyone who sins is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). The Apostle Paul talked about his own story when he said, “(I have been) sold as a slave to sin ... a prisoner to the law of sin (Romans 7:14, 23). And according to Jesus himself, if we don’t resolve the problem, the bondage of sin, we will stay stuck in captivity for all eternity (see Matthew 25:46). Like Jill Carroll, we have been placed in captivity and we can’t free ourselves.

But is it really that serious, you might ask? I’m not that bad – at least I’m not as bad as her or him or them. A few weeks ago I asked you to do a little experiment: try picturing all the people who you don’t like. Then I asked you to write the words “Loved by God” on their face so that every time you see them, you will love them as Christ does. Now

loving people we don't like is an unnatural act. And before I met Jesus I didn't want to and even if I wanted to love them, I couldn't muster the willpower to love those who I had deemed unlovely. That is one instance of hundreds in which sin has enslaved us. According to the Bible (and Jesus), we don't just sin every once in a while but we can fix it by saying, "Oops, my bad." We are slaves of sin and we need a deliverer.

So let's go back to the Jill Carroll story. Spiritually speaking, like Jill Carroll, we are hostages. Remember what her father said: "My daughter is powerless and does not have the ability to release anyone"? That's us. Now let's imagine our government decides to send in a one-man anti-terrorist hostage rescue to save Jill. It works and Jill is set free but there is only one catch: our one-man hostage rescue squad takes Jill place and in the process he is executed as her substitute. That's a picture for what Jesus was doing for us on the cross. He took our place. When Jesus died on the cross he did exactly what he said he would do (and notice that this is no accident; nothing went awry in the rescue mission; this was planned by God the Father and God the Son before the foundation of the earth) – he ransomed, delivered and set us free from sin. He became the one man rescue squad and the hostage all at the same time. On the cross Jesus didn't just show compassion; he displayed power, the power we needed to free us from sin's grip.

Throughout history sincere Christ-followers have asked, "If Jesus paid our ransom, who received the payment?" Some Christians say, "O, Jesus must have paid the devil." But Satan isn't mentioned anywhere near this statement by Jesus in Mark 10:45. When Jesus died on the cross Satan didn't get a payment; he got crushed with a sledgehammer (see Hebrews 2:14). Most Christians recognize the ransom concept for what it is: a figure of speech. For instance, in the Old Testament when God delivered his people from slavery, God didn't pay a ransom to Pharaoh. Ransom or redeem can just mean "doing what is necessary to set someone free from captivity." In the Biblical story we find that God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – are united in this hostage rescue. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

What difference does this make in our lives 2,000 years later? Jesus paid the ransom, what does that mean for me? The Bible is an incredibly practical and life-giving path for our lives. God wants to make a difference in the nitty-gritty places of our lives. In the sermon notes I've actually listed six things – which you can read later if you want too – but I'll mention four this morning:

1. **Jesus' ransom frees us from condemnation.** What motivated people to rescue Jill Carroll? People constantly spoke about her worthiness and her competence. "She is smart and fair and an independent thinker and compassionate" everyone said, "and she's entirely innocent." What motivated Christ to take our place as our ransom? It wasn't our innocence and goodness. It was his grace. Do you know that right now, if you have placed your trust in Jesus, if you have prayed something like, "Jesus, thank you for being my ransom from sin; I believe it and accept it with my whole heart," you have been set free from the condemnation of sin forever. There is no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). Think about it: God paid the highest price possible – the life of

Jesus – to set us free, while we were still sinners. By looking at the cross we see the magnitude of the forces that held us captive: it was serious! But we also see the love that motivated our rescue from those forces. Once you look at the cross you see God’s love in an entirely different light. It overwhelms you with wonder and joy and delight. And then you can’t look at yourself the same way either. You are loved more deeply than you could ever imagine. You are the beloved of God. Of course this doesn’t cause us to sit back and make much of ourselves; it makes us want to make much of our one-man rescue squad who has set us free.

2. **Jesus’ ransom frees us from our past.** I love a verse from the New Testament which says, “You were ransomed from the futile ways of your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ...” Perhaps you noticed that we have something in common with very “primitive” people: we believe in the power of ancestral bondage. They talk about ancestral spirits and curses. We talk about genetic influence and abusive, wounding relationships in our family of origin.² You can mock this if you want to, but I have no doubt that both perspectives are on to something profound. We can’t overcome our past by ourselves. We get locked in. I can’t believe how many times I’ve repeated some of the dysfunctional patterns and ideas and habits I picked up years ago – stuff I vowed never to repeat. The abuse and neglect and the curses stick with us and we can’t get free. Did you hear the good news in this verse? Christ has set us free! He paid the ransom not just for our sins, but for the futile way of life handed down from our forefathers and foremothers. You aren’t locked in. You can step into a new life. When you accept Christ, he breaks the bondage from the past. But remember you don’t separate this from what Jesus said in Mark 10:45 – he serves us. One of the ways that Jesus is serving me, is to help me, day by day, to be free from all the futile, painful, unfruitful habits that I’ve accumulated.
3. **Jesus’ ransom frees us from a resentful marriage.** *Wow, you say, that flows from Jesus dying on the cross?* Absolutely. And sorry, guys, but this is primarily addressed to husbands and future-husbands. The New Testament puts it this way, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25). God’s design for marriage is that husbands will love their wives the way Christ loved the church. It doesn’t mean that we can ransom our wives out of sin – only Jesus can do that. But it does mean that as Jesus serves us, as he laid down his life for us, so we are called to serve our wives and lay down our lives for them. Husbands are not Jesus, but we are called to be like him. And what did Jesus do? He took the initiative to be our ransom, to serve us. Now, guys, please understand: this isn’t about laying a burden on us. And it almost never helps when women lay burdens on us either. This is all about what Jesus said in Mark 10:45, namely, that Jesus said he came to serve us, not the other way around. So the essence of marriage – or any other aspect of the Christian life – is simply this: are you allowing Jesus to serve you. Any time of the day or night I

² John Piper, **The Passion of Jesus Christ**, page

can cry out from my office or my backyard or my car, “Jesus, I need help. I need you to serve me so that I can serve my wife.”

4. Jesus’ ransom frees us from racism, creating a multi-cultural community (see Ephesians 2:11-14 and Revelation 5:9).
5. Jesus’ ransom frees us from the fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15).
6. Jesus’ ransom frees us from an ungrateful life. What do you think happened when the Carroll family learned of Jill’s release? They exploded with gratitude. Here’s what the family wrote on March 30th, “Our hearts are full. We are elated by Jill’s safe release. We would like to thank all of the generous people around the world who worked (for her release), especially those who took personal risks.” When we see the bondage we were in and the price that was paid to set us free – the death of our hostage rescue squad, Jesus – it fills our hearts with gratitude. We want to say, “thank you” and “I will live for you” and “I will trust you.” As we gather around the Table of Communion, I invite you to say “thank you” and “continue to help me.”