**But God proves his love for us**

Genesis 18:1–15, (21:1–7)

Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19

Romans 5:1–8

Matthew 9:35—10:8

**Text: Romans 5:8**

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

**Introduction**

What time is it? I don’t mean to ask about the time of day but about the time we live in; about how we regard the ‘times’ in which we live. What time is it? Is time to be thought of in terms of where we are in the progress of dealing with COVID-19? Is time the measurement of the stages of the development of our children and grandchildren? Is the time we live in the battle with some disease looking hopefully to the days of victory? Is time measured in election cycles desiring next time to elect a more likable crop of leaders? Is time the way in which we measure the achievement of goals and objectives in our business or personal lives? Is time the life joys measured in terms of the before and after of weight loss? Is time now the waiting for the inevitable—as the Apostle Paul said,” the time of my departure has come?” These and many more are experienced as the ‘times’ of our lives. But how do they all work together? What time is it?

1. Douglas Farrow is professor of theology and Christian thought at McGill University. In a recent lecture titled [*The Secret of the Saeculum*](https://www.firstthings.com/article/2020/05/the-secret-of-the-saeculum) (a period of long duration, age) he addresses this subject of how we regard the times of our lives. He describes accurately the secular age many think we are in. We have jettisoned God and understand our lives as taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order. “We no longer depend on a divinely instituted or revealed order but only on such order as we ourselves freely create. We live in a “secular” saeculum because its character is determined from below, not from above; from within, not from without. … our thinking and acting is now self-referential; appeals to transcendence are entirely optional and have no direct bearing on our life together.’

Farrow goes on say that the gospel declares something vastly different. “Our age is a very definite age,” write Farrow, “a very well-defined age, precisely because it is bracketed by the first and second comings of the Christ. It derives its limits, its lineaments, its character from those brackets. It cannot be understood apart from them. It begins with the ascension… of the resurrected Jesus, the living Jesus, who ascends to the right hand of God that he may receive power and glory and dominion before the hosts of heaven. It begins, in other words, with his heavenly Parousia, and it ends with his earthly Parousia, with the manifestation here of what is already manifest there: his authority over all things, over angels and over every human being, living or dead.”

And so, concludes Farrow, the open secret of our age is that it is the age of announcement of the good news of Jesus. Farrow concludes, “The heavenly court will sit, whether we like it or not. Surely it is already stirring in its chambers. Meanwhile the open secret of the saeculum must be declared openly. The churches of the living God, like embassies scattered among the nations, exist precisely for that purpose, “so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God” (2 Cor. 4:15).”

2. The Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Romans from Cenchreae, a port-city directly adjacent to Corinth, probably in around AD 56/7. He had just completed an extensive phase of ministry around the eastern Mediterranean, particularly in Greece and western Asia. His plans now were to return to Jerusalem to deliver the collection taken up from the gentile churches, and after that to travel to Rome itself, as he had often longed to do, and then proceed further West to Spain. One of the reasons Paul writes this letter was too secure the support of the Roman churches (several house churches) for a forthcoming mission to Spain.

When Paul (Saul of Tarsus) was intercepted on his journey to Damascus by Jesus Christ, he wasn’t a man looking for God or insecure about his commitments to God. He was right in his zeal for God, but wrong in understanding of what God was up to. To say that a seismic revolution occurred in his thinking, would be to state it mildly. Everything was now focused on the figure from whom there streamed a blinding light, the figure who now addressed Saul as a master addresses a slave, the figure he recognized as the crucified Jesus of Nazareth. Heaven and earth came together in this figure, and he was commanding Saul to acknowledge this fact and to reorient his entire life accordingly.

A lot of water has gone under the bridge since that day. He has gone on three successive missionary ventures establishing churches in the eastern side of the Roman empire. At this moment at Corinth there is relative calm for him as he plans to take the gospel to the western parts of the empire. Paul has long understood that God is faithful to his covenant; the covenant God first makes to Abraham will not fail because of God’s faithfulness. He has had time to think through what God’s faithfulness to his covenant means in light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (messiah) and how Jew and Gentile alike are included. His letter to the Romans is a distillation of all that he has written and declared about the gospel.

Romans, as N.T Wright has noted, “is about God and the world; about what it means to be truly human; about the complex and contested place of Israel in the world, and in the divine purposes. And it is about all these things and much more because it is about Jesus, Israel’s Messiah and the world's true Lord; about the Holy Spirit, at work to bring all creation to new birth and to refashion human lives as an advance sign of, and means toward, that goal.” Paul believes that the times he lived in was included in this age of announcement that is bookended by our Lord’s first coming and that day when “God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.” (Romans 2:16) It is clear from his plan to turn his attention to the western parts of the Roman empire that he believes everyone should hear the gospel. Taking our clues from his previous work, his objective is to establish churches in the west as he had in the east as the conduit for making this good news known.

Romans gives us a vision of what Paul thought he was trying to achieve by his Apostolic labours. Paul believed that it was his vocation, rooted in Israel’s scriptures, to announce that the promises and purposes of Israel’s God had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Indeed, Romans provides a syllabus of topics to expound. However, if this book were to be summarized and put on a banner at the front of the church, it might read, as one theologian suggested; “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

What time is it? What time takes up all the times of our lives and enfolds them in its time? We live in the age when “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” We live in the age for announcing this amnesty made known in the coming of Jesus; the age of calling people to believe.

3. In Genesis, the serpent raises the questions, “Did God say?” and “Was God being truthful?” It knows better than to ask, “Does God exist?” But is that not the very question at the heart of today’s secularism? Collectively, we are now those whom God, if he exists, has not addressed. Secularism doesn’t acknowledge that God has spoken to us. When we consider how we should live, our own questions, as Karl Barth charged, “replace the command of God as the proper theme, the framework of all thinking on the subject.” God’s command to love him with heart, mind, and strength is replaced with there is no god to love.

But God has spoken, declares the gospel; spoken in the Son who is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being. But God. In those two words we come to the heart of the gospel. Except that God acted we would be left to the dreadful implications of a godless world. But God. Humanity’s saviour could never come from among us, such is the corruption of sin. “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

Why is this love, Christ dying for sinners? In the first part of Romans the Apostle Paul makes the case that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Without equivocating he declares that God who abhors sin has judged us rightly. The Genesis story says that God put us out of the garden (kicked out); we didn’t wander away in curiosity about what was outside the garden. God has something against us. Our modern era disdains such talk, refusing to allow that there is any such thing as sin—save the sin of honoring God and admonishing one another to heed the commands of God, which is now both a sin and a crime.

Because Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God, he possesses the same nature as God. Father and Son are one in nature, one in purpose, one in will. It is never the case that the Son is willing to do something that the Father is not, that the Son is kind while the Father is severe, that the Son is eager to pardon while the Father is eager to condemn. Incarnation means that Father and Son are of one nature and mind and heart. To say, then, that Jesus bore the judge’s just judgement of our sin is to say that the judge himself took his own judgement upon himself. But of course, he who is judge is also father. Which is to say, when Jesus bore our sins in his body the Father bore them in his heart. The just judge executed the judgement that he must, then bore it himself and therein neutralized it, and all in order that his characteristic face as Father might be the face that shines upon you and me forever. Father and Son are one in judgement, one in execution, one in anguish, and one in pardon. What the Son bore the Father bore, in order that justice uncompromised might issue in mercy unimpeded.

4 God’s love for us is astonishing. While we were still sinners; while oblivious to our predicament; not knowing we needed a cure, we weren’t looking for one; not realizing that God had anything against us we went merrily (and sometimes not so merrily) on our way; even so in the midst of our rebellion the love of God provides the cure, makes known our need, makes the peace we need, when Christ died for us. Before we even asked, it is done!

The Apostle Paul had already stated the outworking of the love of God in justification by faith. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” By justification Paul means being set right with God; the enmity that was between God and us sinners is rectified in the death of Christ—peace has been made for us. What God has against us that lead to expulsion from the garden is dealt with and we are welcomed home. Keep in mind that, like the prodigal son, we have to get up and go home—this is the essence of faith, relationship restored.

Paul’s teaching on justification by faith is a part of the unpacking of his thesis declared at the beginning of his book (Romans 1:16-17). In the gospel, the good news of Jesus, “the righteousness of God is revealed.” In Jesus, the righteousness of God is revealed; in bearing the judgement of our sin in himself, justice uncompromised is done that mercy would issue unimpeded. Keep in mind that God’s justifying us presupposes his judging us; he judges us to restore us. And this righteousness is revealed through faith for faith. The word faith and faithfulness is the same here. The righteousness is revealed through God’s faithfulness to his promises that we might respond with faith or faithfulness to him. As it is written, “The one that is righteous will live by faith.” God’s faithfulness calls from us faithfulness to our Lord’s commands. Paul understood that his apostleship of gospel proclamation was to bring about the obedience of faith.

5. What time is it? Jesus, as we read today, had sent his disciples first to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel to proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 10:6-7) After his death and resurrection Jesus commissioned those same disciples to go with this good news to all nations. What time is it? According to the gospel, this is the age of the announcement of the news that “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” Jesus implied as much when he said to his disciples to “ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest.”

I understand that the message, that God has proven his love of us sinners in Christ’s death, sounds strange in our culture. Humans are prone to say, if there is a God who loves us bad things would not happen to us, disease would not run rampant through our world, natural disasters would cease, no tragedy would come near us, all would be fair. I have noted with you before that Jesus rarely answered directly the questions asked him because the assumptions of our questions are flawed. Jesus insisted on another framework for our thinking. God insists that it is at the foot of the cross where we see God’s love proven for us. We think it should be proven elsewhere and elsehow; God says look here. The gospel is ever rearranging our mental and emotional furniture, ever challenging our assumptions about love.

The scope of God’s redeeming love is also way more that we imagine. Think with me about a world where natural disasters are no more. A world filled with people whose hearts are purified such that every neighbour looks to the good or every other neighbour, where love gives way to more love, exponentially so. Such is the future secured in the death of Christ. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.