

**Dwelling in Easter:
Jesus Died Ahead of Us, Not Instead of Us¹
A Sermon Dialogue**

Summary: A dialogue in which one person finds themselves (unbelievably) talking to the Apostle Paul in the present day. The person shares with Paul about the worship series "Dwelling in Easter" and its goal of understanding Jesus' death and resurrection. They then ask him questions about his own writings on the meaning of the death of Jesus as it relates to sin.

Setting/Props: *Sermon begins with Person 1 sitting at a Desk reading the book of Romans, reading aloud Romans 1:1-4.*

Greg: I don't know why Zac told me to read the book of Romans for our series "Dwelling in Easter." While Paul certainly has a lot to say about the death and resurrection of Jesus, he is so difficult to understand in this book! [PAUSE, while flipping bible pages] If only God would send *the Apostle himself* to explain what he was saying.

Paul enters from side door, looking confused and disoriented.

Greg: Oh, hello. Who are you?

Paul (Zac): Um. [Looking around] Name's Paul. Servant of Jesus Christ. And you?

Greg: I'm Greg. Did you say, "Paul?" As in, the Apostle? No, that's impossible. You've been dead for almost 2000 years.

Paul (Zac): I have? [Examines his body] Well, I'm as confused as you are, brother. What is this place? Is this the church in Rome? I have been praying that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you (Rom. 1:10)!

Greg: [Still incredulous] You're really Paul? The Apostle?

Paul (Zac): The one and only: member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews. (Cf. Phil. 3)

Greg: [Reflective, stunned] God heard my prayer?!

Paul (Zac): What prayer?

¹ This phrase and much of the theology informing this dialogue is built on the significant Biblical-Theological work done by Andrew Rillera in his *Lamb of the Free: Recovering the Varied Sacrificial Understandings of Jesus' Death* (Eugene, OR: 2024). The phrase, "Jesus died ahead of us, not instead of us" can be found expressed at various points throughout the book (cf. pp.7, 229, 242, 274, 276).

Greg: Well, I was sitting here, reading your letter to the Romans—completely confused I'll have you know—and I said: "If only God would send the Apostle himself to explain what he was saying," and then you appeared over there [gestures].

Paul (Zac): Thanks be to God! I've finally made it to Rome!

Greg: Oh, Paul. Um, I'm sorry but, you're not in Rome.

Paul (Zac): I'm not?

Greg: No. You are across the ocean from Rome in a place called Canada. Oh, and it's the year 2025.

Paul (Zac): This is truly a mystery.

Greg: I don't know how it's possible, but, here you are. [Pause] On the bright side, you should feel quite pleased to be here!

Paul (Zac): Why is that? Wait...is this Paradise?

Greg: No. While many of us think this land is a little piece of paradise, it's not God's heavenly dwelling. You should be happy to be here, however, so you can see first-hand how your missionary work has been a success! The Spirit has used your writings for spreading the Gospel around the whole world - even across the ocean, in Bloomingdale, Canada.

Paul (Zac): I never wrote a letter to "Bloomingdale."

Greg: Oh, we've only been here a couple of hundred years so you couldn't have written a letter to us, but we still read your letters that you sent to other churches almost 2000 years ago.

Paul (Zac): [Shocked] You're reading my mail from 2000 years ago?

Greg: I've never thought to put it that way before but, yes, I suppose we are.

Paul (Zac): Well...that was an unexpected development. Have my letters actually been helpful for building up the Church here?

Greg: Oh yes! We have been inspired by many of your writings, although...[Pauses] if I'm honest some of them are confusing.

Paul (Zac): Confusing? How so?

Greg: Well, take your letter to the church in Rome, for example - you mentioned it before. I can honestly say, I don't know what it is about.

Paul (Zac): [*Proudly*] Well, that's quite simple, dear brother Greg, my letter is about the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ who was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead.

Greg: Yes...right, I've read that part but, well...I'm still trying to unpack what that means. You see, our church is in a worship series right now called "Dwelling in Easter" and we are trying to reflect deeply on the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection for us and how it should shape our lives.

Paul (Zac): [*Hands raised*] Thanks be to God!

Greg: Well, quite frankly, Paul, despite learning much through the years about the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection, I'm still trying to wrap my head around it. But, now that you are, *unbelievably*, here, can I bother you by asking you some questions about the Good News you say Jesus brings? I think this would really help us in Bloomingdale understand more about the significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul (Zac): Sure, ask away! But let's remember to pray that the Spirit would reveal truth to us, for on our own we cannot know the depths of God (1 Cor. 2:10).

Greg: Fair enough. May the Spirit teach us. Ok, Paul, well last week at our church we talked about how we can understand Jesus as the one God has sent to bring the Good News of healing and purification from the reality of death that holds us captive.

Paul (Zac): Amen! Yes, in Jesus Christ God has set us free from the law of sin and of death (Romans 8:2).

Greg: Ok, so wait a minute there! While we talked about the reality of death last week, we didn't really talk much about another word you mentioned there that I would like you to explain.

Paul (Zac): Which word? "Amen?" It means something like "certainly," "truly," or "may it be so."

Greg: No, not "amen." I mean the word "sin." You said that not only does God set us free from the law or reality of death, but from the law of "sin." Can I ask you, because it's always bugged me when reading your letter, "What do you mean by 'sin?'"

Paul (Zac): Have you read the prophets?

Greg: Yes, in fact, our church recently did a series on them!

Paul (Zac): Well, then you will remember what they identify as sin, namely injustice and wrongdoing against God and neighbour. I agree with the Prophets about this. My only addition is one of emphasis. You see, I see sin as not only one individual person's, group's, or nation's wrongdoing, but as a spiritual power opposed to God, a power that keeps us stuck in cycles of wrongdoing. As I said in my letter to the Romans, everyone is "under the power of sin" and this leads to the major problem of us "turning aside" from God who calls us to a life of kindness and peace (cf. Rom. 3:9-18)

Greg: Ok. I can get behind that, I guess. There's plenty of injustice, wrongdoing, and lack of kindness and peace all over the world so that makes sense to say that we are trapped or held captive by this power. But I'm still unclear, then, how exactly has God set us free from the power of sin in Jesus?

Paul (Zac): You might have noticed from my letters that there are many ways to answer this question.

Greg: I have noticed that! That's partly what's so confusing. In your letters and in letters from other apostles of Jesus, it's like there are numerous explanations for why Jesus' death and resurrection are significant.

Paul (Zac): Indeed! There are numerous explanations. But to answer your question about sin, let's try to stick with one explanation.

Greg: One explanation sounds good for now.

Paul (Zac): In Jesus' life of obedience—of loving God and neighbor, living a life of justice and kindness—Jesus broke the dominion of sin, offering to those he met, even those who crucified him, the free gift of God's forgiveness. Raising Jesus from the dead, God made him the pioneer of a path beyond the power of sin and into the power of new life – a power that is available to us even now through the Holy Spirit.

Greg: Well, Paul, that *sounds* good, but it's still really hard to understand how that all works.

Paul (Zac): Nowhere did I say it was an easy teaching. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the "mystery of God" (1 Cor. 2:1), foolishness to many, but to those who are open to the Spirit, it is also the "power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have redeemed us, saved us from slavery to sin,

kind of like how Israel was saved or redeemed out of its slavery in Egypt.

Greg: So, if I understand you correctly, how Jesus' death and resurrection frees us from the power of sin is a mystery that we can only partially express in words and concepts? I was under the impression there was a sort of simple "equation" at the heart of the Gospel?

Paul (Zac): Simple equation? What do you mean by that?
[*Knowingly*] Are you referring to some kind of new Pythagorean theorem?

Greg: No, nothing quite like that. [*Pauses*] I know! Maybe it will help to explain what I mean if I quote you.

Paul (Zac): Ooh! Will it be a line from my letter to the Galatians that I wrote in [*expressively*] *really large letters* (Gal. 6:11). I was so angry writing that letter.

Greg: No, not that one. This one is still from your letter to the Romans. It says this:

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood. - Romans 3:23-25

Paul (Zac): Interesting. I'm not sure I entirely recognize that line - something about the translation you are using there. We'll come back to that, but what is it about this line that makes you think of an equation?

Greg: Well, appealing to *this* and other lines of yours, the simple equation that I've often heard as an explanation for why Jesus' death in particular is significant for dealing with sin goes something like this:

1. We are all sinners who are under God's wrath and deserve the punishment of death.
2. God requires a sacrificial "payment" for our sin to satisfy God's wrath.
3. God sent the sinless Jesus to die *instead of us*, paying the debt of wrath owed to God. Now we are forgiven.

Paul (Zac): [*Disappointed*] Oh boy. I fear something has been lost in translation here.

Greg: Do you mean this simple equation isn't right? It's a pretty influential summary of the Gospel and it sure sounds like what you said in that line I quoted.

Paul (Zac): No, this equation is not right. There's so much more to the Gospel than that equation suggests. To explain, let me offer you a different translation of that line from my letter that you quoted:

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a mercy seat by his blood. - Romans 3:23-25

Greg: [Shocked] Woah! Wait a minute. Much of what you said was the same, but there was a big difference right at the end. Read the last part of that sentence again.

Paul (Zac): "they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a mercy seat by his blood."

Greg: What happened to the phrase "sacrifice of atonement?" What did you say instead?

Paul (Zac): "Mercy Seat." It's a translation of the Greek term *hilastērion* which was used in the scriptures to talk about the lid of the ark of the covenant.

Greg: [Surprised] The lid of the ark of the covenant?

Paul (Zac): Yes. Incidentally, it was also used in Greco-Roman culture to refer to a gift meant to signal the ending of a conflict and reconciliation between two parties.² What was your translation of that word again?

Greg: "Sacrifice of atonement."

Paul (Zac): No, see that's not quite right because I was talking about the *place*—the mercy seat—where God was made manifest, offering the gift of forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation — the gift of a new covenant.³ While sacrifices were performed by Israel's priests in front of the mercy seat at a certain time of the year, I didn't say Jesus was an atonement sacrifice, I said

² See Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, pp.259-271.

³ See Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, p.259-271; also Brad Jersak, <https://bradjersak.com/the-cross-gods-eternal-mercy-seat-bradley-jersak/>

God put him forward or presented him as a *mercy seat* – the place where God was revealed as offering the gift of reconciliation.

Greg: Ok. [*Pauses to consider*] But what about the “wrath of God?” If God put Jesus forward as a “mercy seat” – a gift of reconciliation, as you say, and not a “blood sacrifice,” then what happens to God’s wrath?

Paul (Zac): Remember the Prophets?

Greg: I sure do. In fact, there’s quite a bit in the prophets about God’s wrath too!

Paul (Zac): Have you ever read Jeremiah?

Greg: Yes. A beloved prophet of hope, even though God asked him to do some weird things at times. [*Animated*] Did you know that at one point God asked him to buy a loincloth, put it on, and then take it off and hide it under a rock? (Jeremiah 13)

Paul (Zac): I did know that, but I think we’re getting a little off topic here.

Greg: [*Embarrassed*] Sorry about that. Where were we? Right! Sin and wrath in the prophets.

Paul (Zac): I’m not sure if you remember, but at one point Jeremiah talks about a new covenant that God would make one day with his people.

Greg: That sounds familiar.

Paul (Zac): With this new covenant, God said: “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

Greg: Yes, I remember that!

Paul (Zac): Well, when I wrote my letter to the church in Rome, I was trying to say that Jesus was God’s presence among the people inaugurating this new covenant through his ministry and eventually through his death and resurrection. God was forgiving the people through Jesus, remembering their sins no more and redeeming them from the power of sin. And not only that, while Jeremiah spoke primarily to my kindred according to the flesh, I saw how in Jesus God was extending this forgiveness and power to all the nations, for sin was not just a problem with my people.

Greg: So, instead of Jesus satisfying the “wrath of God” by dying a sacrificial death, Jesus does what?

Paul (Zac): Announces in his life, death, and resurrection that God is forgiving them and giving them the power to change – to walk in that new way of life opened up by Jesus' faithful life.

Greg: So, no sacrificial killing required?

Paul (Zac): God doesn't need a sacrificial killing to forgive sins and give the power of new life.

Greg: But what about all the "blood" talk in your letter? Don't you say somewhere that we are "justified by" the blood of Jesus and so saved from the wrath of God (Rom. 5:9)? Elsewhere, too, you say that we were "bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20). Doesn't that mean Jesus' death was a sacrifice to 'pay off' God's wrath?

Paul (Zac): Ah! I see your confusion. Well, the language of "purchase" or "buying" is meant to get you thinking of God's redemptive act of freeing you from slavery, not a ritual killing. Jesus "bought" our salvation from slavery to sin in a way similar to how God "bought" the salvation of Israel from slavery in Egypt. In neither case, though, did God have to pay anyone, not least himself.⁴ [Pause] It's also important to remember that there were many ways that blood was used ritually by my people. One important use was to ratify or establish covenants.

Greg: [*Flash of recognition, pointing at Paul*] Like the new covenant of forgiveness God brings in Jesus!

Paul (Zac): Exactly. Here the language of sacrifice *could* be used, but it was a sacrifice offered for the well-being and joining of parties, not as "payment" to God for sin. We are justified by Jesus' blood because through Jesus's faithful life fully offered to God, even to the point of death, God has fulfilled the promise of forgiving our sins and establishing a new covenant with us.

Greg: This is starting to make some sense, Paul, even if there is a lot to unpack here. I suspect we would need much longer to address all the questions I have.

Paul (Zac): Somehow, I sense that I don't have that much time.

Greg: Maybe just answer this for me then, Paul, before God calls you back. If Jesus is not a substitutionary sacrifice paid to

⁴ Rillera, *Lamb of the Free*, p. 203.

God to appease wrath, then how should this change the equation I mentioned before?

Paul (Zac): Well, I don't really like equations in the first place, but I've got some good one liners in my back pocket.

Greg: You're not going to quote the "Love is patient, love is kind" text to me, are you?

Paul (Zac): No, but, I quite like that one! The one-liner I was thinking of was this, call it a 9-word sermon on the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection: "Jesus died ahead of us, not instead of us."

Greg: That's a good one-liner, Paul. Care to, *quickly*, unpack that for me?

Paul (Zac): What it means is that Jesus isn't a sacrificial *substitute* for our own need to die to sin. Jesus died "for us" or "for our benefit," yes, but the benefit of his death is that he has charted a course ahead of us through sin and death so that we might follow him. Jesus is the pioneer, the forerunner of our life of sacrificial service offered to God (Rom 12, Heb.12:2), not the substitute for our sacrificial service.

Greg: Wait, we are supposed to be sacrifices?

Paul (Zac): Yes! Like I say in my letter to the Romans, we are called to offer ourselves as "living sacrifices" to God.

Greg: So, we, too, have to die?

Paul (Zac): Yes - die to sin in life and eventually, die in our mortal bodies. After all, those of us that have been baptized into Christ Jesus - healed and purified by him - have been baptized into his death so that we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4).

Greg: Wow. Paul, I feel like we've only just got started, but thanks for helping me dig deeper into these questions.

Paul (Zac): I sense it's time for me to go now. May God be with your congregation here in Bloomingdale. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the

immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe,
according to the working of his great power. - Ephesians 1:17-19

Paul exits. Play is finished.