

**God On The Cross:
BROKEN IMAGES**

Genesis 1:26-31, 3:1-7

*Sin distorts the image of God
in which we were made.*

A sermon preached by
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One of the best basketball movies ever made is “Hoosiers,” starring Gene Hackman as Norman Dale, the new high school basketball coach in the tiny town of Hickory, Indiana. Norman had a spotty past as a coach, and the people of Hickory took their basketball very seriously. The basketball team had languished, and when Norman took over, he was much more of a disciplinarian than the previous coach. After only one practice, two of his nine players quit.

So the leading men of the town brought the new coach to the barber shop for a little meeting, to see what he was all about. One man asked him point-blank, “What are you going to do with our team?” Norman answered, “First, I’m going to break them down. Then I’m going to build them up.”¹ I won’t spoil the whole movie for you if you never saw it, but after a very rocky start and lots of drama, the little group of boys had a very successful season.

That’s a pretty good description of Lent. Lent is the 40-day period, not counting Sundays, prior to Easter. It is a time when we inspect our spiritual lives, repent of our sin, make amends with those we have hurt, and try to get our souls ready to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on Easter. We break our lives down, so God can build us back up for the big party. Lent parallels the journey of Jesus into Jerusalem for the last week of his life, his passion and death. Jesus, too, was broken down before God lifted him up.

We are going to approach this Lent with a series of sermons called “God On The Cross.” (You may remember last Advent we did “God In The Manger”—or not.) When we see Jesus crucified, that is God on the cross. That is God’s radical act of salvation for the world. If we want to understand what Easter is all about, and if we want to understand the deep meaning of salvation and grace and peace, then we have to understand what God was doing on the cross.

In theological terms, this is called the atonement, or as I like to call it, the “at-one-ment.” It is this act on the cross put puts us “at one” with God. It restores our relationship to God. It brings us back into fellowship with our Creator.

But why does God have to go to this great length to restore us? Why was the cross necessary? What does the cross accomplish? That's what we are going to deal with during Lent this year.

So let's start with the problem. What has separated us from God? Why are we out of fellowship with our Creator? What's the problem?

The answer is a little word with a big meaning: SIN. Sin separates us from God. Sin has been a problem since the first people walked on the planet. But it was never intended to be that way. In the beginning, God capped off his creation with his best work—human beings: “*Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God ... saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.*”²

But what does that mean—to be created in the image of God? It means that unlike any other created being, we are “like God somehow.”³ We possess the same attributes as God, in a much less complete way. We are made to be like God. In the New Testament, this idea is applied to Jesus. He is called “*the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation,*”⁴ and Paul talks about “*seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ...For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*”⁵ Our journey of faith is to grow into the likeness of Christ, to mature into the image of God we were created to be.

What does this image look like? Think about God. God is love; we should love God and love our neighbor. God is good; we should live lives that are good, moral, and decent. God is eternal, and we have the

promise of eternal life. We know that this life is not all there is to life. There is something more and greater beyond this life.

Most importantly, God is relational. God created because God wanted to be in relationship with God's creation. We are relational beings. We are wired for relationship with God, with other people, and with the world God created. God is all about community. God exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The one God is a community within God's own self. We are made for community as well. We need to be in community with God and one another. Life is not a solitary enterprise; it is always done in plural.

We are created in the image of God. Sin breaks the image of God in us. It destroys the beauty and wholeness of God's creation that we were intended to be. Sin is inevitable, yet we are responsible, because it involves a choice, a wrong choice, a misuse of our God-given freedom. So instead of love, we live in fear and hatred. Instead of goodness, we are immoral, self-indulgent and lustful. Instead of taking the eternal view of things, we prefer instant gratification and the pleasure of the moment.

But the most tragic consequence of sin is that we sin against the relational nature of God. We turn away from a relationship with our Creator. We refuse to be in community with God. We are quite happy to try to be in charge of our own lives and to go it alone and take care of it ourselves. And when we do that, we put ourselves in place of God. As Paul put it, we worship the creature rather than the Creator. And that always ends badly.

Pastor Matt Woodley recalled a time when he was about ten years old. His father, a medical doctor, received a special gift from one of his patients. It was a musical globe of the earth. The globe spun around on its base and played one of his dad's favorite songs. The base of the globe would wind up, then it would rotate and play music when it was set down. Matt's dad warned his children, "You can touch it, but don't wind it, because you might break it."

A week later, while his dad was at work, Matt found the globe and took it to his room. Although he had heard his dad say, “Don’t wind it up,” he decided to wind it up anyway. He wound it up, and it played for about five seconds. So Matt gave it another twist and another and another. And suddenly the base snapped off of the globe! Matt desperately tried to fix it. He tried forcing the two pieces back together. He tried gluing it and taping it. Finally he realized it was broken beyond repair. So, like Adam and Eve in the garden, Matt went into his closet, shut the door, and hid.

Pastor Matt wrote, “Our world is like the broken globe: it's been twisted too far, and we can't put it back together again. Relationships break; our sexuality breaks; we're slowly breaking the Earth. Our hearts break; nations break down and go to war; our health breaks; our politics break. All the glue, tape, and positive thinking can't put it back together again.”⁶

So what do we do with this broken world, this fallen creation, this shattered image, this sinful, empty, unsatisfied soul of ours? What we need is atonement. We need to be at one with God again. We need to overcome our sin. We need somehow to be justified, put back into a right relationship with our heavenly Father.

And that is the story of the cross. Despite our sin, God never stops being God. God still loves us. God is still good. God still wants us to live in eternal relationship with him. God still wants community and wholeness and peace with his little images. But because the grip of sin is so tight around our throats, God has to do something radical to break the grip, to destroy sin, to defeat evil. So there’s the cross. God offers his Son, who is God, to die an excruciating death on the cross to redeem the world, to put us right, to forgive our sins, to save us from death, to heal our spirits, to restore community.

When we repent, which we have to do because we have to choose, the at-one-ment we experience radically re-orient's our life. God never forces our choice, but if we choose God, we are put on a new and right path to life abundant and eternal.

Bruce Larson was a pastor for 50 years on the West Coast and wrote 23 books on various aspects of ministry. He died in 2008. But as a young man he was a soldier in the Army in World War II. He was involved in the victorious thrust of the Allies across Europe, but his life was totally messed up. He had seen things and done things he wasn't proud of, and he hated the person he had become. Then one night he had this experience:

I was standing guard in a bombed-out building on the hills surrounding Stuttgart. I was fed up with myself and ashamed that I had taken on the coloration of the social and moral garbage of my surroundings. More than that, I began to sense that the dream each of us shared, to return home to normalcy, was in fact nothing but a dream. Returning to loved ones, jobs, careers, schools would not really change us. What I was now in Stuttgart I would always be unless I opted for the alternative I saw before me. My overseas environment had not made me what I was. It simply revealed what I had always been and always would be. There was no veneer. The future was uncertain. But clearly the choice was mine.

I took my carbine off my shoulder and laid it against a brick wall, ground out my cigarette, knelt down and looked up at the stars in the night sky through the charred rafters of the building. I prayed my first real prayer, "Lord, if you are really out there, and if you really do love me and want me, please come and take over my life."

During the days and weeks that followed, quiet miracles took place—of morality and cleansing, of changed values and goals. I seemed to have new eyes to see and new ears to hear. But at first I told no one for fear I was on a trip that wasn't genuine and wouldn't last. But it was real, and it did last and has continued to this very day. My relationship to Jesus Christ has become the central reality of my life!

...I felt as if I knew the ultimate secret about life—that God loves us and cares about us and has forgiven us, and that Jesus Christ wants to live in us and share our very lives.⁷

That is what atonement is all about—love, care, forgiveness, and relationship!

The prophet Jeremiah one day felt called to go to the potter's house in Jerusalem. There he saw the potter making pots. But some were not perfect. In fact, sometimes the potter had to scrape the clay off the wheel and start all over. The Lord spoke to Jeremiah and said, "*Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.*"⁸ God's people were like broken pots, useless and misshapen. But if they would return to the Lord, the Lord would restore them, start them over, and craft them into perfect pots.

Today we come to the Lord's Table. As we come to take communion, there are some things to remember. We remember that we are broken images, separated from God by sin. We come to the Table only by God's grace and mercy. We come because Jesus was broken on the cross for us. That is atonement. As a sign of God's grace and our brokenness, after you take communion today, we want you to take a piece of broken pottery. Put it in your prayer place or somewhere you will see it. Let it be a visual reminder day by day that you are created in the image of God. You are broken by sin. But you are restored to life by the grace of a loving God and the Son who died on the cross for you.

Some of this is hard to hear, but in the end, all of it is amazing Good News for you and me!

¹ *Hoosiers*, written by Angelo Pizzo, directed by David Anspaugh (Dehaven Productions, 1986).

² Genesis 1:26-27, 31.

³ Scott McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville: Abngdon, 2007), 21.

⁴ Colossians 1:15.

⁵ 2 Corinthians 4:4-6.

⁶ Matt Woodley, "The Story of Our Broken World," *PreachingToday.com*.

⁷ From a sermon by Dr. Norman Neaves. No footnote.

⁸ Jeremiah 18:6.