

Easter: Celebration of Divine Initiative

2 Corinthians 5:21

"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God"

Introduction: There are a few types of pursuits, some positive and some negative, yet most are intriguing. The negative pursuit is when someone is chasing you, like in a dream, or when one is being chased down the freeway after evading a CHP officer. This type of pursuit brings fear and can paralyze us, though let's be honest, we'll all watch it if it's on the news. The positive pursuit is **welcomed and appreciated**. It happens when someone **takes initiative** to notice, to care, and to express love. How do we feel when we receive a note from a loved one out of the blue, or when you receive a thoughtful gift from someone who knows you, listens, and remembers. It reminds us that we are not alone, that we are cared for, and are loved. Just over 20 years ago I started a pursuit of a woman that hasn't stopped to this day. Getting to know her it was clear to me that I wanted to initiate a relationship, so that is exactly what I did. Now she may have thought it was the *negative type* of pursuit, but I'd like to think I wore her down until she saw that I was God's will for her life.

You are here today because of the **resurrection of Jesus Christ**, whether you believe it or not. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was the greatest of miracles the world has ever seen. It **announced** that the death could not contain or hold Jesus. This singular event where Jesus exited the tomb on Sunday morning after facing death on a cross on Friday **affirmed** all that He had declared about Himself while on earth. **Romans 1:4 says, "(he) was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord."** The resurrection of Jesus **signals** the fact that death is NOT the end, but that there is life after physical death and we can live forever with Him, knowing that we either will live with Him or separate from Him into eternity.

But you are here for another reason as well. You are here because God has pursued you, and you are saved today because God has **initiated a relationship with you**. We were created for a purpose, and that was to be in relationship with the God of the universe. God, who has always existed, was and is perfect in glory and shared perfect unity among the trinity, the Godhead, who experienced the fullness of that glory (John 17:5). He shared that glory by creating mankind, putting him on the earth to live and enjoy satisfaction with God Himself, whose relationship overflowed to us. Adam and Eve were to fill the earth, to eat, farm, have children, and make much of God in everything they did, which was designed to be an everlasting experience. However, **sin changed all of that. Sin entered through rebellious disobedience to God's design and commands and separated mankind from God**. This is the essence of death itself. Physical death separates us from those we love, while **spiritual death**, which we ALL face, separates us from fellowship with God. It is spiritual death that is our greatest problem, because it means that we face judgment from God *because of our sin*. That is what each of us has **in common today: we were born sinful so we sin, and our sin places us at odds with God and puts us under His wrath**. This is why Easter is such a celebration! Not because of nice weather, great candy or time with family. It is a day we celebrate the fact that **God initiated or pursued us while we were still sinners, which confirms for us this indelible fact: that we are infinitely loved by the God of this universe, who was willing to sacrifice His Son on our behalf to bring us into a right relationship with Him**. You are here today because God pursued mankind, initiating through love a redemptive story through Jesus Christ, which included His life, death, and resurrection. This morning we want to answer the question: *How did He actually do that? What happened on the cross that allowed God to bring us back?* The answer is really in **15**

glorious words, 15 words that changed the world and changed us forever, 15 words that show that God initiated salvation so that we could believe, and in believing we could have forgiveness and life in Christ.

God initiated because of pervasive sin

For our sake He made him to be sin...

- Dead men tell no tales (Eph. 2:1-3)

*"And you were **dead in your trespasses and sins**, in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience ---- among whom we all once lived in the **passions of our flesh**, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."*

We don't have to look much further than a cute, cuddly, chubby cheeked baby to realize that we were born into sin. No one has to teach us the words like "NO", "MINE", or to be whiny, or complain, or not want to clean their room. My kids did not have to have us teach them to lie, embellish, or blame shift. We are born **rebels**, focused on ourselves and our own glory from birth. We **sin because we were born into sin**. Ephesians says that means we are not sick or weak, but rather we are **walking dead**, living for ourselves but under the control of the course of this world, blinded by our own passions and desires, and ultimately deserving the **wrath of God**.

We might be tempted to think: *wait, but aren't some people good? Clearly there are some that are worse than others. I'm not that bad deserving something like judgment or hell?* Unfortunately, the Bible is clear on this point as well: "**None is righteous, no not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one...there is no fear of God before their eyes.**" (Rom. 3:10-12; 18; cf. Psalm 14:1-3, 36:1). Here is a picture of our condition, of ALL OF OUR CONDITION, before God brings salvation. We are sinful and **love it**. We don't want God, and if we do, it's a **God of our own making**, not one that demands holiness. We cannot **make ourselves moral or righteous**, and we ultimately don't want to move toward God. This is why God HAD to intervene, to pursue, because if salvation was left up to us, we run with fervency AWAY from Him into judgment, thinking we somehow were in control of our life.

- The Cross tells God's tale (Acts 2:22-24)

*"Men of Israel, hear these words of Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you **by God** with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know ---- this Jesus delivered up **by the definite plan and foreknowledge of God**, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. **God raised him up**, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it."*

This is where God's massive grace is lavished on us. The cross was **God's idea, His plan, accomplishing His purpose, by His design**. Redemptive history was not a reaction to sin entering the world where God was caught off guard, but part of the definite plan before the earth began to spin. Notice that in **Acts 2**, that God was the one who displayed the signs and wonders to prove Jesus was the Christ, that Jesus went to the cross as His predetermined plan rather than a successful conspiracy of the Jewish leaders and Roman officials. Pilate was God's instrument as much as Judas to fulfill exactly what He had planned: **Jesus living a perfect life to fulfill the Law, dying a perfect death, and rising again**. This is the definition of love, since God did all of this **knowing** that He would be saving a bunch of selfish, prideful, humanistic, hedonistic, self-glorifying, pleasure seeking, God mocking people like me (and you). This is why **Romans 5:8** comes alive when we understand our condition: *"but God*

shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." This is a pursuing, proactive, and initiating love. He pursued us when we were His enemy, hating Him, or indifferent to His glory, and yet He died FOR us. Not one should leave here this morning feeling like no one loves them because in Christ we are infinitely loved. But how did this death matter?

God initiated through a perfect sacrifice
who knew no sin..

- **Christmas Matters**

Since God set up the plan of redemption, only God could satisfy the requirements of God, but only a human could take the place of another human. So this human had to be divine AND be perfect humanity. *Let's be honest, that kind of narrows the field of who qualifies* (a little like the pre-requisites for dating my daughters!). Jesus could NOT be just any average man, but He had fully BE a man. That is why our celebration at Easter is tied to our celebration at Christmas. Jesus had to be unique, born into the world as a human yet without a sin nature. So He was born of a woman but not out of an earthly dad. He had to be born like Adam in the Garden of Eden with a nature untainted by sin so that He could in fact be sinless, and that is exactly what He did.

- **Christ succeeded where Adam Failed**

Back in Genesis 3, when Adam was tested to obey God, he failed miserably. He failed to lead his bride, disobeyed God's direct command by eating of the fruit of the tree, and then turned around and blamed Eve for making him do it (and blamed God for good measure). Because Adam had responsibility for his family and all of humanity, his sin flowed down to the rest of us, and the reason we all **face death today** is because of Adam. But where Adam failed, Jesus succeeded.

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."
Hebrews 4:15-16

Jesus faced real temptation as a man, equipped with the same resources that you and I have. He thwarted Satan's attempts while he fasted 40 days in the wilderness by using God's Word to answer the devil's threats and promises (Matt 4:1-11). While Jesus awaited the cross in the Garden of Gethsemane He asked three times that God would let the cup of suffering pass, but still yielded Himself to the will of God, not His own (Matt. 26:36-46). Jesus faced every temptation, harder and more acute than any of us will ever face, and He did all of it **sinlessly**. He was perfect, blameless, spotless humanity. God had always required this type of perfect sacrifice (see Exodus 12:1-5) in animals, and Jesus fulfilled the requirement once for all.

God initiated through a perfect substitute
so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God

- **Jesus' life substituted for ours**

The reality of what Jesus did on the cross can be summed up in the word **substitute**. He gave His life for ours. There was a phrase we skipped over a bit earlier, that said, "**God made him to be sin.**" Does that mean that Jesus became a sinner on the cross? People certainly

thought He was, which is why they put Him on the cross in the first place. But Jesus was perfect and if He became a sinner, it would nullify His work. No, Jesus became sin in this sense: ***God treated Jesus as if He had committed every sin by everyone who would believe throughout time, yet He committed none of them.*** God saw my sin and credited it to Jesus, and He poured out His wrath stored up from that on Him. On the cross, God wrung out His wrath to balance to books, to take all of the sin credit from my life (even the sin I have yet to commit) and treated Jesus like He should have treated me. Even as I write these words I tear up! But that is NOT ALL, since that is really only half the equation.

- **Jesus life was credited to us**

Not only was my sin credited to Jesus, but **His life was credited, or imputed, to me!** We receive His righteousness, and God now looks at us and does not see our filthy, sin laden, guilt drenched life, but the perfect life of Jesus. We get His righteousness imputed to us, which frees us to **live righteously, not to gain salvation but because salvation was gained and given to us.** When God raised Jesus from the grave, it was announced that the sacrifice was accepted and His wrath was satisfied, and **death no longer held us in its curse.** Though we die physically, God has reconciled sinners to Himself, overcoming our hostility and separation from Him through the work of Jesus Christ alone.

So what does that mean for us? How do we get this great promise?

At the end of Peter's sermon in Acts 2:37, the people's hearts were cut to the quick, and asked the question, "*what should we do?*" The answer: **Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.** (Acts 2:38). Repentance is an aspect of believing, where we believe with our minds or intellect that Jesus is God who lived as a man and died in our place. True faith then is convinced of this reality to the point that we ask Jesus to forgive us because we understand that we ourselves are sinners and are under God's wrath. And Faith trusts our life to God, turning from our former life and following Him. Baptism is simply the public expression of faith that has been gifted to us by God (Eph. 2:8-9). Today is a day that you can know that your sins are forgiven, you can receive forgiveness through Jesus Christ by placing your faith in Him. A few verses before 2 Cor. 5:21 says "***If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, the new has come.***" No matter what you've done or what has been done to you, you can be NEW, new in Christ because He has taken your sin and given you His life.

I close with a story I've told before but that illustrates this point, and reminds us that it takes faith like a child to know Jesus, and even children can understand the idea of substitute. When my nephew and niece were 8 years old they were playing hide and seek in the house. Caleb, one of the twins, was having the kind of rough day 8 year old boys tend to have: disobedience leading to multiple disciplinary actions, including corporal punishment. With clear instructions, he was told to NOT go into the closet since he would knock over the stacks of storage in there. When 8 year old boys hear "DON'T", their minds say "GO". Of course he went in the closet, knocked the racks over, and fell under the wrath of a watchful mother. On the way to the bathroom to receive another swat, his sister Emma stepped in. Being an 8 year old girl, she had NOT received any punishment all day but had observed Caleb's saga. In an act of sheer love and sacrifice, she asked her mom if she could step in and take the punishment for her brother. She didn't ask if he could be left with a warning, but knew the act had to be paid for. So my sister in law took Emma in and gave her the spanking that was earned by her brother. This, folks, is what Christ did for us, the innocent for the guilty, the pure for the dirty, the perfect Messiah for wretched humanity. This is the gospel. This is the message of Easter. This is the work of our glorious Christ.