



# **Presence, Pardon, Power**

**A Study on the Heart of the Gospel**

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# Loved, Sent

We believe that we are people **loved** by God in Christ, and **sent** by God into the world. “Loved, Sent” is a recurring theme throughout all of Scripture. It reflects the gospel’s constant motion. God consistently **loves** his rebellious people. And he is constantly **sending** help – Abraham and the patriarchs, Moses, Judges, kings like David, and prophets like Isaiah. The climax of all God’s “loving” and “sending” is Jesus, for in Christ God himself comes to rescue.

*“As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:18, 23)*

The Father loves the Son. The Son loves the Father. That same love between the Father and Son breaks into human history as the Father sends the Son to love us. It is only natural that those who are loved so deeply by God would be sent into the world to love as well.

**It is incredibly important to speak what you believe in a compelling way.** Yet Christians often fumble awkwardly when it comes to conveying the heart of their faith. It is crucial to speak the gospel in a way that is *clear, concise, and consistent*. In order to help us do this, we speak the gospel as “manger, cross, and crown.” The presence, pardon, and power of God. This corresponds to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

This goal of this study is that in pondering the presence, pardon, and power of God, you: 1.) Grow in your knowledge of the gospel. 2.) See the gospel active in your life. 3.) Gain comfort in speaking the gospel clearly and personally.



**Manger** – The **presence** of God with us



**Cross** – The **pardon** of God for us



**Crown** – The **power** of God over us

# *Your Story*

Many people try to fit God into their life story, when in reality God fits our story into His story. This is good news, because God is the beginning, middle, and end of our story. He has created our story, redeemed it, and will ultimately write its last chapter. To be “in Christ,” a Christian, a follower of Jesus, etc., simply means that God has intervened into our story by catching our life up into His.

In order to speak the gospel personally, it is helpful to reflect on our own story. We can then identify how the gospel has impacted our lives. Sketch a brief overview of your life, identifying 8-12 major points along the timeline. Significant things include joys (births, marriage, graduation, etc.) as well as difficulties (a death, sickness, failure, divorce, etc.).



## **For Reflection:**

- *Which two or three events or seasons of your life stick out as most significant?*
- *Which stick out as the most joyful or memorable?*
- *Which are the most painful or difficult?*

# Presence: The Manger

**The manger is the presence of God with us.**

## **Our Need**

*Beneath all the great accomplishments of our time there is a deep current of despair. While efficiency and control are the great aspirations of our society, the loneliness, isolation, lack of friendship and intimacy, broken relationships, boredom, feelings of emptiness and depression, and a deep sense of uselessness fill the hearts of millions of people in our success-oriented world” -Henri Nouwen*

In a recent book titled *Bowling Alone – The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, author Richard Putman observes a troubling trend in American culture. As a society, we are becoming more and more isolated from each other. Somehow our age of cell phones, texting, Internet and social media have made us less connected. We feel alone. Disconnected and forgotten in a busy crowd. We wonder if anyone will be there for us when we fall apart. Who can we depend on? This sense of alienation even goes beyond our human relationships to our relationship with God. As human beings, we were created to enjoy the presence of God and one another. Without that presence, we ache.

One consequence of sin in our broken world is SEPARATION – from God and from others. We may feel:

- Lonely
- Depressed
- Hopeless
- Alienated
- Abandoned
- Afraid

## **For Reflection:**

- *Describe a time or place when/where you felt the most alone, abandoned, or isolated.*
- *Describe a time or place when/where you felt the most secure, at home, or accepted.*

## God's Response – Manger

Imagine that communication with the person you love the most is limited to snail mail. All of your deepest thoughts, feelings, concerns, and even differences must be expressed in writing, sealed in a stamped envelope... and then you wait. You are separated by time and distance with no idea what the other person is thinking or feeling. Now, imagine that one day the loved one behind the letter showed up in person. Now you are able to embrace this loved one, see their facial expressions, and listen to their words instead of read them.

In a way, this is what God's presence in Jesus is like. From the very beginning, God had sent prophets to speak his word. His presence was located in specific places with specific limitations. God communicated with his people, but in a limited way. But God's people clung to the written and spoken promises that one day their God would be fully present with them. And then it happened. The one who stood behind the message showed up.

We all suffer alienation from God. But the manger means that God is not far away. **The manger is the incarnation—the God who takes on flesh**—even to the point of being born in an animal feed box (a manger).

- The manger means that God is not distant, but **near**.
- It means that He comes **to be with you**, so that you are not without him.
- It means that God **dwells** with you, even in the midst of all your messes.

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. This life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and appeared to us” (1 John 1:1-2)*

Even though Jesus Christ returned to the Father, he is still present with us. Jesus assures us, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). Through baptism he has united us with himself and filled us with his Spirit. Every time we share the meal he gave us, he promises to be there, embracing us with his presence. Our lives are animated by the promise that there will be a day when we will see him face to face.

Take a few moments to slowly read and meditate on these comforting words about God's presence with you:

*“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth... No one*

*has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (John 1:14-15, 18)*

*"Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit that calls out 'Abba, Father'" (Galatians 4:6)*

*"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:30)*

*"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes.'" (Revelation 21:3)*

**For Reflection:**

- *Take note of a particular verse, phrase, or word (from the verses above) that strikes you as really good news. Why?*
- *Describe a time or place when/where you felt most aware of God's presence.*
- *Is there a point on your timeline (page 4) when you were especially aware of the presence of God with you?*

# *Pardon: The Cross*



**The cross is the pardon of God for us.**

## **Our Need**

Guilt. Shame. Blame. Regret. These are all evidence of the bruised human condition. The fundamental meaning of the Hebrew word for “sin” in the Old Testament is to “miss the mark.” Like a master engineer, God constructed his creation to work a certain way. Sin is when we miss the mark of the Creator’s intention. Sin consists of thoughts, words, and actions that go against the way God made things to be.

Sin hurts. It hurts our very selves, as we live as less than the people God intended us to be. And it hurts God, as we rebel against his goodness. Paul describes our human condition in Romans 3:9-20:

*“There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.”*

We know something is wrong, and by nature we try to make things right. But none of our ladders to God reach high enough. All of our actions are tainted with self-interest and sin. In fact, the more we learn about God’s standards, the more we see our failure. St. Paul adds a dismal note to the above text – *“Therefore no one will be declared righteous (made right with God) in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”*

A list of sins would be endless. But know that sin is deeper than just “saying naughty words,” or “telling a lie.” A description of some common sins:

- Obsessive need to control people and circumstances.
- Rival others to be better, right, greater than
- Twisted and perverted sexuality
- Love others so that they will love me back.
- Frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness
- Brutal temper
- The vicious habit of depersonalizing people, making them a “means to an end.”
- Bitterness, resentment, and hate
- Prideful ambition cloaked in morality and religiosity.
- Caring, serving, and loving only when its convenient.

- Putting others down so I can build myself up.
- Hysterical vanity obsessed with how others perceive me.

Sin makes us feel:

- Guilty
- Dirty
- Ashamed
- Unholy
- Angry
- Trapped
- Remorseful
- Unworthy

### **For Reflection:**

- *Think of a time when you have felt guilty, ashamed, or remorseful.*
- *Have you ever doubted God's forgiveness? Why?*

### **God's Response - Cross**

We have crossed lines and broken boundaries. But God does not insist on handing out stiff sentences. He insists on mercy. Even to the point that he would pay – that he would take the consequences that we deserve for our actions. A cross was a cruel form of capital punishment practiced by the Roman government. Jesus shows incomprehensible love in his willing submission to a criminal's execution on a cross. The prophet Isaiah spoke these words a few hundred years before this public act of love:

*“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*  
(Isaiah 53:4-6)

The cross is God's **forgiveness** for sinful people. God sends his Son Jesus on the greatest rescue mission of all time. He doesn't ignore sin, but pays for it himself.

- The cross means **substitution**—His life for yours; his death *in* your place, *for* your sins.
- It means **justification**—you are made right by his sacrificial death.
- It means **forgiveness**— the punishment you deserve has been taken on by another.
- It means **cleansing**—in Christ, God has wiped away guilt and shame.

Take a few moments to slowly read and meditate on these words about the pardon of God for you:

*"I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin." (Psalm 32:5)*

*"And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'" (Luke 23:34)*

*"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will someone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6-8)*

*"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." (Romans 5:1-2)*

*"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1) Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him?" (Romans 5:9)*

**For Reflection:**

- *Take note of a particular verse, phrase, or word (from the verses above) that strikes you as really good news. Why?*
- *Share a time when you experienced guilt and shame lifted from your shoulders.*
- *Is there a point on your timeline when you experienced the pardon, or forgiveness, of God?*

# Power: The Crown



**The crown is the power of God over us.**

## **Our Need**

*We are always tempted with fatalism. When we say, "Well, I have always been impatient; I guess I have to live with it," we are being fatalistic. When we say, "That man never had a loving father or mother; you shouldn't be surprised that he ended up in prison," we speak as fatalists. When we say, "She was terribly abused as a child; how do you expect her to have a healthy relationship with a man," we allow fatalism to overshadow us. When we say, "The wars between nations, the starvation of millions of people, the AIDS epidemics, and economic depression all over the world all prove that there is little room for hope," we have become victims of fatalism. Fatalism is the attitude that makes us live as passive victims of exterior circumstances beyond our control. The opposite of fatalism is faith – Henri Nouwen*

Most of us would like to imagine that we have control over our lives. We hear, "You can do anything if you just believe in yourself!" Reality would suggest otherwise. Perhaps we say these things to comfort ourselves in a world where we have very little control over our destiny. No control over being born into an abusive family. No power over an addiction that possessed our parents and grandparents. Unable to stop a loved one from leaving. We fear words like "foreclosure," "inoperable," or "terminal." As human beings we are weak and fragile, tossed back and forth between circumstances beyond our control. Is God in control? Do my prayers matter?

One of the consequences of our sinful world is a sense that we are POWERLESS. There are so many things beyond our control. Our sense of powerlessness is evident when we feel:

- Oppressed
- Abused
- Weak
- Incompetent
- Sick
- Mournful
- Imprisoned
- Addicted

### For Reflection:

- *When have you felt the most powerless in your life?*

### **God's Response - Crown**

When Jesus was crucified, it seemed like fatalism was proved true once and for all. The power of darkness was so strong that even the light was extinguished by human injustice. But on the third day, God broke the power of fatalism. He raised Jesus from the dead in power, proving once and for all that even in weakness God is more powerful than the powers of this world. The same Jesus who was once dead is now alive and rules as the King of the universe. Through him God is making all things new. Paul points to Christ's power over all in 1 Corinthians 15:

*"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands the kingdom over to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." (vs. 20-26)*

The crown is the **resurrection power** of God. We believe that after three days in the grave, Jesus of Nazareth walked away from the tomb. "Resurrection" literally means "to stand again." He now stands as our strong King, working his power over us even when we are powerless.

- The crown means that Jesus **did not stay dead** and that God is in the business of making **dead things alive**. In Christ, you will not die.
- It means that **Jesus wears a crown** as the supreme, ultimate king of the entire universe.
- It means you have a **powerful, victorious King**, especially when you are *powerless*.
- It means everything will be fully **set right** under the merciful rule of the crucified and risen One.

One of the remarkable things about the power of God is that he works in weak things (I Cor. 1:18; II Cor. 12:9). God has a way of working his powerful will in the midst of weak people and desperate circumstances. Seeing God's power in suffering (a.k.a., the cross) is a uniquely Christian hope. Take a few moments to pause and ponder these words about the power of God over you:

*"It is because the Lord love you . . . that he has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery." (Deuteronomy 7:8)*

*"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." (Psalm 46:1)*

*"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (I Corinthians 1:18).*

*"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" (II Corinthians 12:9)*

*"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!" (Luke 24:6)*

*"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection." (Romans 6:4-5)*

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth... He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" (Revelation 21:1,5)*

**For Reflection:**

- *Take note of a particular verse, phrase, or word (from the verses above) that strikes you as really good news. Why?*
- *Describe a time when you faced a circumstance and God's power intervened.*
- *Is there a point on your timeline (page 4) when you experienced the power of God?*

You have explored the depth of the gospel, the presence, pardon, and power of God. Return to your life's timeline from page 4. Ponder new intersections that God has worked in your story. Consider how the gospel shaped your life.