

THE COSMIC COURTROOM OF THE CROSS

Many people today collapse my life into what happened on Wednesday October 31, 1517 500 years ago when at the age of 34 year and to protest the abuses in the Roman Catholic Church at that time, I posted those 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church Wittenberg, Germany. That's a little too simple. A whole series of events led up to that great breakthrough that woke me up to the good news. Earlier in my Life God absolutely frightened me; and I shook in mortal terror before a holy and just God.

On July 2nd 1505 at the age of 21, in the midst of a **violent thunder storm**; suddenly a lightning bolt struck right at my side. Hurling to the ground, panic-stricken, I trembled in anxiety before the threat of death, the righteous judgment of God, and the everlasting misery of hell. I cried, "*Help me, St. Anna! I will become a monk!*" [[Christian History](#), #34, p. 12].

But the life of a monk could not silence that angst I felt in my gut. I made daily confession of my sin; two sometimes for three hours on one occasion. Even a trip on my knees, up the steps of *Scala Sancta*, sacred stairs where Christ had been condemned by Pilate and brought to Rome; kissing each step while saying the Lord's Prayer could not ease my troubled conscience. I flagellated myself. I whipped myself. I went through nights without sleep, enduring bitter cold without a blanket. I said, "*If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of monk, it was I*" [[ibid](#)].

On May of 1507, when I was 23 I **celebrated my first mass**. And I came to that exalted moment when the **Host** was raised and dedicated; that miraculous moment when tradition said that the ordinary bread and wine turned into the physical body and blood of the Lord. I was stunned speechless. It lasted for what seemed to be an eternity. "*I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken*" before the Majesty and Holiness of God [Roland Bainton, [Here I Stand](#), p. 30]. I felt so unworthy, so full of sin, a miserable man of dust and ashes before the bewildering, fierce and unapproachable Judge of the Universe. Somehow I regained my composure and rushed through the rest of the mass. In the presence of God, Luther felt anything but secure. "*Love God?*" Luther asked. "*Sometimes I hate Him!*" [R.C. Sproul, [The Holiness of God](#), p. 113].

I felt no peace until April of 1515, at the age of 31 I began pouring over the pages of this fantastic document and launched into my lectures on the Letter of Paul to the Romans. The words of Romans 1:16-17 seized me in the gut. "*I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."*" I had an epiphany! Suddenly, it made sense. There in the upper story of that Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg, [[image](#)] my eyes were opened to the staggering wonder of the Gospel. The year before I died [1545] I wrote: "*Night and day I pondered until...I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, He justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven*" [[Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity](#), p. 366; [cmp Preface to Latin Writings](#), John Dillinger editor, pp. 11-12]. It gripped me to the core that Christ's righteousness wasn't something I earned, but was freely given. I learned that though I was terrible flawed, I could share in the flawless, righteousness of Christ. God no longer became a

threat to me, but the source of my greatest security. God became to me, A mighty fortress; a fortress of strength and comfort. That profound moment in the tower transformed me. I was never the same again. [Luther leaves].

Like Luther you can sense the doors of paradise blown open to you. You can rush into that strong tower, if you can grasp the staggering drama of justification summed up in Romans 4:25: "*He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*"

False Narrative: Earning Favor. When it comes to salvation many people are into the brokerage firm concept. You know, much like that Pit and Barney commercial of a while back. We figure we get salvation the old fashion way. **We earn it!** We get the wrong drama playing in our head.

In almost every area of life, your performance closes doors or opens them. You want a dream job. You put together your resume. You put together your high school or college and credentials. You lay out your job performance in other positions. If accepted, if approved that resume validates your performance and becomes your gateway to a new status, that premium position you so badly want. You want to get accepted at a college, you make a formal application. You put pen to paper, your ACT or SAT scores, your high school academic GPA and performance record. You write an essay and the quality of that resume, that application gives you entre, throws open the door to that new school. Your application is approved, you're accepted. You tear open the formal letter and it says, welcome. You've been approved to enter the school of the elite: Stanford, Harvard, U or Illinois, Calvin, Trinity, Dordt, MIT. That's how the academic, vocational world works. Your amazing record gives you access. But when it comes to our relationship to God; our record, our resume is trash. "*For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*" [Romans 3:23]. We have a criminal record and our resume is toast. The performance ethic is the pits. None of us is good enough. Now then, if you want to defeat this self-defeating performance ethic in your heart, you need to be caught up in history's most significant courtroom drama. Using courtroom language Paul spells out Act One and Act Two of this drama. "*He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification [or better] our acquittal.*" [Romans 4:32].

I. ACT ONE: SIN'S VERDICT & SENTENCE EXECUTED ON SKULL HILL. I want you to do something visually right now. With your imagination, I want you to open your computer screen for me. On one side of the screen I want you to draw near to Golgotha Hill, the rocky place that looks like an ugly skull [[picture](#)]. Imagine Jesus whipped to an inch of his life, his back terribly lacerated, later getting help, carrying the cross to a place like this. With a crown of thorns pressed into his scalp, they slam Jesus down on the cross and drive huge spikes through his hands and his feet. Later they thrust a spear into his heart and out pours his very lifeblood. From nine in the morning until three in the afternoon Jesus hangs naked and screams out the 7 final words of the cross. The Lamb of God in utter pain and breathes his last. That's screen one, what happens on the earthly stage of history.

But behind the scenes, enveloped in mystery, with your faith fired-imagination open another screen. You step into the story. You enter an awe saturated place. It's God's courtroom.

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There are no exits to this courtroom. No means of escape. We all must face this great judge of the universe. *"All have sinned and fall short of God's glory"* [Romans 3:23]. And before this Holy, Holy, Holy God we tremble. Our everlasting destiny hangs in the balance.

Mysteriously, a stranger enters the courtroom. We don't face this cosmic judge alone. I John 2:1 announces: *"We have a legal advocate--a defense attorney with God the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."* Unlike defense attorneys, Jesus doesn't plead our innocence. He openly confesses it. In fact, he identifies himself with it so much that he becomes our sin bearer. *"He who knew no sin, became sin for us"* [2 Cor 5:21]. Our guilt was transferred to him. The Judge *"laid on him the iniquity of us all"* [Isaiah 53:6]. Suddenly we are taken off the witness stand. And Jesus our defense attorney takes our place, goes on trial for us. It isn't easy for the Judge. For the person on the witness stand now is his Son, his only Son. He sees his only Son laden with our guilt. The Judge must therefore pronounce a just judgment. This is the verdict: Guilty. And in a moment of terrifying agony for Father and Son, Christ is condemned to die on a Roman torture rack. Sin's verdict and sin's sentence is executed at Golgotha, skull hill. The text says, *"He was delivered over to death for our sins."* It's hell for Jesus. And he cries in that blackest moment of history: *"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!"* Christ dies and is buried, and God the judge completes the first act of the drama of salvation. Sin's verdict: Guilty and sin's sentence: Hell, have been executed on the cross. And court is adjourned to reconvene the day after tomorrow at the crack of dawn.

II. ACT TWO: AT THE EMPTY TOMB SIN'S VERDICT & SENTENCE HAS BEEN REVERSED. On the third day [April 5 33 AD], court reconvenes. The Judge enters the courtroom. And suddenly we can hardly believe what we see. The Judge raises his Son our lawyer from the dead. He's alive. And Christ's resurrection gives a completely new twist to the trial.

If His death shouts sin's verdict [guilty] and sin's sentence [death]. Christ's resurrection is proof that God's verdict toward the new humanity has been changed. The sentence has been reversed. And because we are one with the risen Christ, the verdict he received has become ours. You see Christ didn't rise from the dead, solo. He came out of the grave as the head of the new humanity, the new human race. You came out of the grave with Him. **YOU NO LONGER BELONG TO ADAM. YOU BELONG TO CHRIST!** By faith you rush from the courtroom with an exciting new verdict in your fist. Not guilty! *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"* [Romans 8:1]. For sure, we blow it. We mess up. Sometimes royally. We miss the mark i.e., we are twisted and broken. But praise God, we have been justified. Declared right with God. In God's sight we are without spot or blemish. Indeed, we share the righteousness of Christ. Though our resume is trash, our record appalling, we receive this surprising new verdict: Not guilty! Not guilty! We share in the Perfection of Christ. And so in God's eye you are blameless, without spot or blemish. You are declared Perfect.

Friend don't take the word "amazing" out of grace. This is the surprise, amazing grace! That God would save a wretch like me. Using courtroom language Paul announces this flabbergasting reality [4:5] *"God justifies the wicked."* It's not fine, law-abiding citizens that receive God's new verdict, not folks with

an impeccable resume, but down and out, scum of the earth, royally messed up people; criminals who receive this new verdict. **GOD JUSTIFIES THE WICKED!** It doesn't matter how you feel inside. It doesn't matter how notorious your sexual track record or how many skeletons were in your closet. Jesus cleans out your closet and makes it sparkling new. By faith you take that new verdict and make it your own. And faith is just the empty hands of a beggar accepting the free gift of a King. You are not guilty!

There are many truths woven into the fabric of the world's religions. And you and I can learn a lot by studying the world's religions. But my friend this is what sets apart Christianity from all the rest. Someone called this do-do religion!

- **Mormonism says do.**
- **Buddhism says do.**
- **Hinduism says do.**

But Jesus says, done. He cries from the cross, **"It is finished!"** The Cross is history's great shredder. Think of it! When Jesus cried, "it is finished," your sins were shredded at the cross. When you think of the cross and the empty tomb; when you think that Jesus laid down his life for you, personally, as if you were the only person in the world. How can I suppress the emotion, how can I dam up the flood of joy that should erupt in praise?

It was 1527, 10 years after I nailed the 95 Theses on the door of Wittenberg Castle Church door. It was the absolute worst of times. My attitude was in the toilet. I was depressed and in a terminal funk. My circumstances were lousy. For ten years I had been at the center of emotionally frightening political & theological storms. Dangerous people wanted to take my neck in their hands and snuff out my life. A **terrible plague** swept through Wittenberg until November of that year. My home became the city hospital, my son became ill and many of my friends had died. In April 22nd of that year I had **dizzy spells** in the pulpit and had to quit mid-sermon. On July 6th I had a terrifying **buzzing in my ear** and I thought this was it: I am on my death bed. Illness and depression afflicted in August, September, and December of that year. I wrote to my friend Melanchthon, *"I spent more than a week in death and hell... [I felt] completely abandoned by Christ....but through the prayers of the saints [my friends] God began to have mercy on me and pulled my soul from the inferno below."* It was that horrendous year 1527, when Psalm 46 became especially precious to me. *"God is our refuge and strength an ever-present help in time of trouble."* And out of it I wrote: *"A mighty fortress is our God. A bulwark never failing. And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us. We will not fear for God has willed His truth to triumph through us...One little word shall fell him."* If God works all things out for the good of those love Him; does it not make sense that the season of suffering you are going through could be redeemed? That the very worst of times could be the very best of times. And no matter how bad life can get; God is your Rock of Gibraltar, your Mighty Fortress. No one or nothing can rip you from His invincible arms.