

The Cruciform God

I CORINTHIANS 1:18; 22-25 (NRSV) *For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ...* ²²*For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom,* ²³*but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,* ²⁴*but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* ²⁵*For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

A basic human question is, "What is God like?" The prologue of John's Gospel says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." "Jesus put more directly, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." Paul wrote of Jesus, "He is the visible form of the invisible God" (COLOSSIANS 1:15). And today we read, "...we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles..." What foolishness?

Mark Driscoll, former pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, said, "In Revelation, Jesus is a prize-fighter with a tattoo down his leg, a sword in his hand and the commitment to make someone bleed. That's the guy I can worship. I can't worship the hippie, diapered, halo Christ because I can't worship a guy I can beat up."¹

I find that image extremely troubling—almost blasphemous; and I see no resemblance between that image and the Jesus we did, *in fact*, beat up: the compassionate healer whose commitment to love led him to bleed for us.

In *A More Christlike God, a More Beautiful Gospel*, Bradley Jersak writes,

"When I personally turned my gaze to the God who is completely Christlike, I was confronted with how un-Christlike the 'Church-God' or even the 'Bible-God' can be. ... Jesus' life and character challenges my religious clichés and standby slogans—especially the rhetoric of supreme power and irresistible force.

"Christ never reveals God that way in his teachings and especially not in his arrest, trial, torture and death. Yes, he proves victorious in his resurrection, but remember that Paul resolved to preach 'Christ and him crucified' (I Cor. 2:2). You could resist him, you could mock him and beat him up. You could kill him. And we did. Our God is revealed in the crucified Christ, the 'weakness of God' (I Cor. 1:25) whose weakness is stronger than human strength. Why? Because he operates by love that overcomes, not by force that overwhelms."²

There's this great human need to divide people into categories: friend/foe; good/bad; us/them. Sometimes I think we humans can't operate without an enemy to compare to ourselves, so we can feel better about ourselves. The problem is: we set up ourselves as the standard. We begin with the assumption that "we're right." Therefore, anybody who disagrees with us is "wrong." And it's only a short trip from being "wrong" to becoming "the enemy."

Well; this Jesus, who said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," this

¹ Mark Driscoll, "7 Big Questions) Relevant Magazine, 24 (Jan/Feb 2007).

² Kindle edition, location 343.

Jesus, of whom Paul wrote in Colossians, "He is the visible image of the invisible God;" this Jesus also said, "Love your enemies!" What if he really meant that?

Our own religious zeal can become counterproductive to the Gospel—especially when we allow our politics to distort it. I guess it's always been that way. Paul could not have written today's text only a few years earlier in his life.

Paul realized that his own religious zeal had led him to become "a violent man" in God's name. Paul had read the Bible extensively, religiously, zealously, and he still got God completely wrong. *[Do you think that may be possible today?]*

It wasn't until he was encountered by Jesus - C. S. Lewis wrote, "It is Christ himself, and not the Bible, who is the true Word of God. The Bible read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers will bring us to him. We must not use the Bible as a sort of encyclopedia out of which texts can be taken for use as weapons."—It wasn't until Paul was encountered by Jesus that he was able to re-read Scripture through Christ-cleansed lenses, and thus to embrace a radically different story of grace and love-of-enemy found in the same pages³ where previously he had found a violent, vengeful God of retributive justice. If you want a vengeful God, you can find him in the Scriptures; but you won't find that God in Jesus. And the trajectory of all the Judeo/Christian Scriptures points to Jesus.

Romans is Paul's masterpiece. Beginning with Martin Luther and reaching its climax in John Calvin, Romans generally had been read from the perspective of one asking, "How can I escape God's wrath?" But when we step outside those 16th century perspectives, and take a closer look at the actual epistle, we see that was never Paul's focus. Instead, it was Paul's religious audience who longed for God's wrath to punish their enemies! In other words, Paul is addressing people who see things the way he used to⁴ see things—and the way some people still see things today, and he's saying, "We got it wrong."

So in Romans Paul discontinues any reference to violence against Gentiles, and instead begins to declare God's mercy in Christ for all people. This is a major redefinition of justice: instead of meaning God "delivering" Israel from their enemies through military victory, Paul now understands justice to mean the restoration of all people in Christ, including even those same "enemy" Gentiles.⁵

What if God's justice is not about punishing and hurting, but about mending and making things right again? What if God's justice is not about deterrence through negative consequences, but about doing something good to reverse those hurtful underlying forces? What if real justice is about repairing broken lives?⁶

³ Derek Flood, *Disarming Scripture*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

And, what if the cross is not about retribution; but restoration—not about appeasing a God of wrath who demands payment for sin; but a loving God who gives Godself to ransom those **God** loves and who are held in bondage by the real enemy?

C. S. Lewis offers a viable solution to this misinterpretation of the cross. In *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, he doesn't picture God requiring payment. It is the witch who demands punishment—a life for a life—leveraging the law of sin and death against Aslan. As Jesus does in the New Testament, Aslan voluntarily gives his own life and, in the end, “a deeper magic from before the dawn of time” resurrects an innocent one killed in place of a traitor. [self-giving love]

Paul's warning is not, “God's gonna' getcha!” He points to the built-in consequences of sin. Sin opens the door to “Satan”. To Paul, where wrath appears, Satan is the destroyer. God is the redeemer. And when you read church history and early theology, that understanding was consistent until Augustin in the 4th century—and Augustin's distortion was picked up in the 16th century by Luther and Calvin.

The story is old. God created humankind and placed them in a garden to care for the animals, steward the garden and to live in relationship with their creator.

But the unthinkable happened. They decided they could do it better their way; only to discover that their way led to futility and death.

The great problem the Gospel addresses is not mainly our guilt or God's need to punish it. Rather, it is about saving us from death and the fear of death because that fear is what Satan uses to control our lives and hold us in bondage.

Enslaved by that fear, the couple in the garden fled into the shadows and tried to hide. And what does God do? God comes looking for them! And when God finds them, out of their guilt the blame game begins.

And what does God do? In God's compassion God sends them from the garden that had become the source of their shame, and provides for them a different way of being in relationship with God. And note: God not only sends them from paradise—God goes with them; and clothes them to cover their shame.

And there's story after story in the Bible, if we read them through Christ-cleansed lenses, that have similar endings. Persons, tribes and nations turn from God. And what does God do? God comes looking for them—not as punitive judge. Sin already has judged them; and in their guilt, like Adam, they try to blame God. But God comes looking for them to save them from their sin; because God's love is inexhaustible. How do we know? “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” And, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lays down one's life for one's friends.” There is not a more accurate picture of God than Jesus hanging on the cross. That's the foolishness of God that's wiser than human wisdom; that's the weakness of God that's stronger than human strength.