

“AT THE CROSS”

“You will know the Truth, and the Truth will set you Free” (John 8:32). ¹

Most of you know my sweet wife of nearly 47 years. Jill is the most genuinely good person I have ever known.

And so, if I were to see Jill do something that looked genuinely and horribly mean, I'd have a choice to make. Either Jill has been exquisitely successful in hiding her true nature from me for most of my life, OR there is another, more subtle and more accurate way to understand what I think I just witnessed.

This example is key to what I'm going to try to say tonight, so let me say it again: If it appears that someone I know well and love dearly is doing something they would *never* do, then *something else must be going on*. Hang onto that thought as we make our way toward Calvary. We'll come back to it later.

Tonight I'm going to try to introduce you to a new way of thinking about what happened at the Cross that I have been pondering and studying for the past two years. I've found it challenging but helpful; and I'm going to try to make it intelligible in less than half an hour. Pray for me!

There are several things we need to establish as we begin. Here are six biblical anchors that will hold us steady through the ponderings that follow:

“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

“I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).

“In Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body” (Colossians 2:9).

“I the LORD do not change” (Malachi 3:6).

“You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40).

“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

These six Scriptures tell us four Very Important things:

- 1. Because Jesus of Nazareth is the fullness of God in human flesh, God is like Jesus. In fact, God is EXACTLY like Jesus.**
- 2. And, because God does not change, God HAS ALWAYS BEEN exactly like Jesus.**
- 3. We see that the Central Purpose of all Scripture that preceded Jesus was to point to Him.**

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 9, 2020. Maundy Thursday.

This sermon was developed out of my study of these resources: Gregory A. Boyd, *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017); Robert Foster, “The Motherly Love of a Wrathful God,” *Christianity Today*, March, 2020, 60-64; Bradley Jersak, *A More Christlike God: A More Beautiful Gospel* (Pasadena, CA: CWRpress, 2015); J.D. Myers, *Nothing but the Blood: How the Sacrifice of Jesus Saves the World from Sin* (Dallas, OR: Redeeming Press, 2017), *The Atonement of God: Building Your Theology on a Crucivision of God* (Dallas, OR: Redeeming Press, 2017); Ron Sider, “Nonviolence and the Atonement,” *Christian Ethics Today*, vol. 29, no. 1, Winter 2020, pp. 11-15; Brian Zahnd, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: The Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2017).

4. And we see that if we understand the basic message of the Cross, we know what we need to know about God.

Here are six more things we know for sure:

1. God is Good and is never evil. Indeed, God is the perfection of all that we understand as Goodness.
2. God is Love and in God there is no un-Love at all.
3. God is Light and in God there is no Darkness at all.
4. God is Just and in God there is no injustice at all.
5. God is Truth and in God there is no un-truth at all.
6. God is Beauty and in God there is nothing ugly at all.

Let me try to bring this together in a few more ways. Here's what we know:

1. God has a face, and God looks like Jesus.
2. God has a disposition toward us, and it's the disposition we see in Jesus.
3. God is Christlike and in Him is no unChristlikeness at all.
4. Jesus of Nazareth is the Complete Message of God.
5. Jesus is what God has to say to us.
6. Jesus is the perfect revelation of everything that makes God, God.
7. Jesus is the complete content of God's Self-revelation to us.
8. No one really knows God until they meet Jesus.
9. Every other portrayal of God, from whatever source, is subordinate to the revelation God has given in Jesus.
10. There never has been a time when God was not like Jesus. We didn't always know this, but now we do.

I expect that you agree with everything I've said so far. With all this in mind, then, let's turn our gaze toward Calvary.

As Jesus contemplated the Cross, He said, *"Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, **it was for this very reason** I came to this hour. **Father, glorify your Name!**"*

Then a Voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die (John 12:27-33). Jesus told us that His crucifixion would be the hour when He would finally and completely glorify the Father's Name.

You probably know that in ancient Jewish culture, to speak of a person's name was to speak about their character and reputation. So in this passage, both Jesus and the Father told us that the Father's character would be most clearly revealed—be "glorified"—when Jesus was crucified.

While Jesus certainly revealed and reflected the Father's character throughout His earthly ministry, it would be through His death that He would glorify the Father most fully, and Jesus affirmed that it was "*for this very reason*" that He had come into the world.

So then, if Jesus is the Center to which all Scripture points—and He is—then the Character of God that was supremely revealed at the Cross must be regarded as the Center of the Center. And thus, if all Scripture is really about Jesus—and it is—then *all Scripture is focused on Christ crucified*.

Again, I expect that you've agreed with everything I've said so far . . . and now you may have to pay more attention. As we consider what happened at the Cross, I suggest to you that when Jesus died on the Cross, "taking our punishment" is not what happened. Such a judicial conception of the Cross was not the understanding of the Church for the first thousand years of Christianity, and it is not the understanding of the Eastern (Orthodox) Church to this day.

Think about it this way. When an offense is committed, when someone is wronged, the offended party can either impose consequences on the offender or the offended party can forgive the offender. One cannot do both. Payment and forgiveness are mutually exclusive. If we insist that God's forgiveness of our Sin requires payment of some sort, then what we're really saying is that God never really forgives. Instead, God gets paid off.

Let me say that again: If a debt is paid, then forgiveness is not required. And if forgiveness is extended, then there is no debt to be paid. Forgiveness does not involve receiving payment for a debt. Forgiveness is the gracious *cancellation* of a debt (Colossians 2:13-14).

There is no payment in forgiveness. Forgiveness is Grace. And so the Cross was not the place where God vented His wrath on Jesus. The Cross is the place where human fear and anger were absorbed into God's eternal Love and recycled into the saving mercy of Christ.

God is not like Caiaphas, needing a scapegoat on which to put the blame. God is not like Pilate, requiring an execution to satisfy some idea of justice. The Cross is not where God finds a whipping boy upon whom to vent His rage. At the Cross, God-in-Three Persons absorbed, forgave, and removed the Sin of the world.

At the Cross, at the Cross, where I first saw the Light, here's what happened:

1. At the Cross, God defeated Satan, "driving out the prince of this world," as Jesus put it.
2. At the Cross, God demonstrated for all time that God does not overcome violence with violence. God overcomes violence with Forgiveness and Love.
3. At the Cross, God took into God's own Being both the responsibility for and the anguish that has resulted from God's having chosen to make us free moral agents.
4. At the Cross, God entered fully into our own pain and isolation and opened the door to a Flourishing than we could have ever known before.
5. At the Cross, supernatural Love flows through God's own wounds into the world. At the Cross, the Blood of Jesus flows into our deepest needs, our deepest wounds, and heals them, if we are willing for them to be so healed.

The Cross is not what God inflicted upon Jesus in order to forgive us; the Cross is what God endures as God forgives. The Cross is not about the satisfaction of an omnipotent vengeance. The Cross is about the revelation of divine mercy. At the Cross we discover a God who would rather die than kill His enemies.

At the Cross, Jesus didn't volunteer to get into God's justice machine. God volunteered to get into ours. At the Cross, God in Christ absorbed human Sin and recycled it into forgiveness. At the Cross, humanity violently sinned its sins onto Jesus, and Jesus bore our sins into death and He left them there.

Anyone who gives their own life to rescue another—whether it's a fire fighter dying while pulling someone from a flaming building; a police officer who's fatally wounded while rescuing a hostage; or a medical worker who dies from this virus while caring for others—is “paying the ultimate price.”

First responders often say, “We run in when others run out.” At the Cross, Jesus ran into our plague of violence and absorbed it into Himself. No one took His life. He ran in.

Notice that such sacrifice has nothing to do with punishment, payment, retribution or appeasement. In every case, a life is given for the sake of the other, not to satisfy wrath, placate anger, or pay a debt, but as a life-giving, life-saving sacrifice.

My friends, no one took our Lord's life from Him. Indeed, no one *could*. “*No one takes it from me,*” Jesus said. “*I lay it down of my own accord. . . . Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends*” (John 10:18, 15:13).

So was the death of Jesus a sacrifice? Yes, the death of Jesus was indeed a Sacrifice. But it was a sacrifice to end sacrificing, not a sacrifice to appease an angry god. The hands of our God are not hurling thunderbolts. The hands of God bear scars; they were nailed to a tree as God forgave our monstrous evil.

My friends, if the death of Jesus for the Sin of the whole world means anything at all, it means that no Sin can ever separate us from the Love of God. At the Cross, as we humans were in the very act of committing the greatest crime in human history, Jesus revealed to us the heart of God as He cried out, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*” (Luke 23:34).

If God forgave us while we killed Jesus, will He not also forgive us for all our other sins as well, no matter how grievous (Romans 5:8; 8:31-39)? Such is the Love that flows from Calvary's Cross into the brokenness of our world.

And now, bringing this back to the themes with which we began, we can add to those earlier affirmations that there is no aspect of God that is foreign to the nonviolent, self-sacrificial, enemy-embracing Love that is revealed at the Cross. *God is Love and in Him is no violence at all.*

This also brings me back to my opening question about Jill. If it appears that someone I know well and love dearly is doing something they would *never* do, then *something else must be going on.*

I'm pretty sure you've seen this black and white image before. It's a classic example of what psychologists call a “figure-ground reversal.” Depending on how you look at it, you see either a vase or two people facing each other.





You may not have recognized it, but the background to this week's *PowerPoint* is a figure-ground reversal, too. What you probably see when you look at it is two deer crossing a road. While that's true as far as it goes, the deeper truth is that what you see is a road crossing a forest.

In a somewhat similar way, Calvary's Cross both reverses and solves one of the deepest problems for your faith—a problem so deep that you probably don't even know that you have it.

Here's the Problem. In addition to everything I've said so far, there's a part of you that knows the Old Testament records horrible, unbelievable violence, much of it said to be at God's direction. From start to finish, the Old Testament is a very violent story. But it gets worse.

Based on some people's reading of the book of Revelation, such violence appears to be the real key to God's nature. In this reading of Revelation, the way of peace and love that Jesus preached during His life and demonstrated in His death will finally be rejected for the way of war and violence. According to this sad misunderstanding of the text, in the end, even Jesus gives up on love and resorts to violence.² Do you see the Problem?

Let me try to put a finer point on it. Evangelist A. W. Tozer wrote that "*What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us,*" and I believe he is correct.

It's really impossible to exaggerate the importance of our mental representation of God, because the way we imagine God largely determines the quality of our relationship with God. The intensity of our love for God will never outrun the beauty of the God we imagine.

Even if we rarely think about them, the Bible's violent portraits of God will pollute our mental images of God unless we find a way to reconcile them with the Love of God we see at the Cross. So long as we have lingering doubts about whether God may really be a murdering monster with huge and unpredictable Anger Issues, we will not trust ourselves fully to God.³

Further, so long as we are unable to trust God fully and completely, our love for God will be lukewarm at best. And so long as we are lukewarm, we will never grow into the flourishing, radiant followers of Jesus that God intends for us to be. This is crucial, so let's keep thinking about it.

My friends, if we take the beginning of Genesis seriously, it's clear that God's Original Plan for Creation was that there would be NO VIOLENCE. Until their decision to disobey God, our first forebears were vegetarians. There was no killing. There was no death. And in the New Creation, there will once again be NO VIOLENCE (Isaiah 11:1-10).

Therefore, I suggest to you that *whenever there is violence in God's creation, it is an indication that true knowledge of God is absent.* This is hugely significant as we consider Scripture's violent portraits of God.

² Christ always rules from the cross, never from an Apache attack helicopter. In Revelation, John stresses that Jesus reigns through self-sacrifice by depicting the white horse's rider as wearing a robe drenched in blood *before the battle begins*. Jesus's robe is soaked in *His own blood*. Jesus doesn't shed the blood of enemies; Jesus sheds His own blood. This is the gospel! The rider on the white horse is the slaughtered Lamb, not the slaughtering beast.

³ It's no wonder, then, that the first thing the serpent did to seduce humanity was pollute Eve's mental picture of God (Genesis 3:1-5).

Let me say it again: *God is Light and in God there is no darkness at all. God is the eternal Light of self-giving Love. There is no darkness. No anger. No violence. No retribution. Only Love.*

The “figure-ground” idea helps us move beyond this dilemma, because, if we are truly convinced that God is exactly like Jesus, and specifically like Jesus at the Cross, we then have to conclude that *something else was going on* when the Old Testament attributed moral horrors to God.

Many books have been written exploring what that “something else” may have been and how that works within God’s progressive revelation of God’s Character to humankind. There is no time for us to explore those possibilities just now. The key things to remember are these:

1. God is, and has always been, EXACTLY like Jesus.
2. Because this is True, whenever we see a picture of God that doesn’t look like Jesus, *something else was going on.*

3. Therefore, God is, has always been, and will always be, just as Beautiful as the Cross reveals God to be.⁴

A pastor in Minnesota had delivered a sermon similar to this one when a woman in her sixties came up to him with tears streaming down her face. “All my life I’ve tried to believe God was as beautiful as Jesus reveals Him to be,” she said, “but I never could *fully* give my heart to Him.” Her lips quivered and her voice cracked as she continued.

“It was like I was courting a man who gave me every reason to believe he would make the greatest husband in the world but whom I knew had once slaughtered a classroom full of little children! Regardless of how wonderful he was to me, just knowing he was capable of such an atrocity would prevent me from marrying him. That’s how I’ve always viewed God. I love the God who gave everything for us while we were yet enemies, but I can’t love a God who ever demanded that people massacre untold numbers of innocent babies!”

The passion and pain in this lady’s voice indicated how deeply she felt this contradiction. She then looked straight into her pastor’s eyes and spoke with great emotion, “Today,” she said, “you helped me see that I don’t have to believe God ever ordered babies to be killed! I can finally let myself believe God *really is* as beautiful as the cross reveals him to be! I can finally trust God with my entire heart!”

And that, my friends, is the Very Good News. At the Cross, God demolished the prison gates, jailed the jailor, and is now coming, hallway by hallway and cell by cell, to set the captives free (Luke 4:18-19). And those of us who have already been set free are not to leave the prison, but rather to go further in to bring Hope and healing to those who have not yet heard this News.

My friends, the Cross of Jesus proves to us that the hands of God are not hurling thunderbolts from heaven. At the Cross, the hands of God were stretched out in love and nailed

⁴ If we REALLY BELIEVE that Jesus is ONE with the Father and has ALWAYS been so, then insofar as any divine portrait is not consistent with this revelation, fidelity to Jesus compels us to understand such a portrait, not as an accurate depiction of something God actually did, but as a reflection of something God’s people at the time *thought* that God did.

This is not to say that such portions of Scripture are not fully inspired by God. The record is as God intended it to be. God has always revealed His true character and will as much as possible while stooping to accommodate the fallen and culturally conditioned state of His people as much as necessary. We have compelling reasons to interpret the entire Mosaic law, together with the law-oriented portrait of God it presupposes, to be such an accommodation. The Central Purpose of the Older Testament is to tell us how to recognize Messiah when He came.

to a tree; and those nail-pierced hands now reach out to each of us, revealing the wounds of Love. To be a sinner held in these hands is where our Healing begins.

And we thank God!