

Looking at the Cross

[Knowing God Through Suffering Lesson #6]

Last week as we considered our friend Job, it was especially gripping to me that even in the midst of inestimable pain and suffering, he never abandoned God.

Oh yes, misguided/weak/faltering at times, but Job remained a man of faith.

(Job 1:20-22) “Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. ²¹And he said, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.”

Our sufferings are often shrouded in darkness/mystery/confusion and our only hope of maintaining any sanity and stability is faith. Not some naïve sentimentality, but firm faith that is focused upon the reliability and faithfulness of God, and when we seriously and thoughtfully consider suffering and evil in the world. (that sooner or later finds its way to our door)

We need confidence/conviction/certainty (faith) that God understands/God knows our pain/He will be there to see us through the fiery furnace, and I propose to you this AM that the most productive exercise to develop that faith is to consider the central/predominant focus of all the Bible, “the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

[Meta-narrative, the big picture of the Bible.

Incarnation/Life/death/resurrection/exaltation/eminant return of Jesus Christ.]

As we study the Bible there are, no doubt, a myriad of ways and means by which we can come to a more mature knowledge of God, but the cross puts us in touch with God at a level that nothing else will. God sent His Son, His only Son into the world to save sinners through suffering a cruel and horrible death that defies description. He knows your pain dear brother/sister.

Carson, “The God on whom we rely knows what suffering is all about, not merely in the way that God knows everything, but by experience.”

All the theological themes that flow from the cross that could be helpful are far too varied and vast to consider in one lesson, so we must narrow our focus on the cross as it relates to suffering and evil in the world. What can we learn about God from our Lord's death that will encourage our faith and trust in Him as we find ourselves in the depths of trouble/suffering.

I would like to point out just four lines of thought.

I. The Triumph of God's Justice and Love

In a lost/fallen/dying world where suffering/evil/persecution and injustice abound, we must focus upon the cross of Christ where God has triumphed over human sin and rebellion out of a heart of love and compassion.

Let me explain. All of us have a set of scales in our hearts. I'll call them "scales of justice."
{Explain how they work}

Usually, due to the effects of the fall, when those scales are tipped by some injustice that touches us, we want justice. Justice now!

Or perhaps, as we look upon some terrible injustice that is somewhat removed from us, but none the less disturbing, we long for justice/we cry out for justice.

(Ps. 94:3) "O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?"

We want God to do something!!

But God has done something. Ultimate justice for all suffering and persecution and evil in the world is found in two places.

Pure Justice: Hell

Justice with Mercy and Love: The Cross

Let's refresh our understanding on the matter:

(Rom 3) I want to call your attention to a paragraph in this chapter that Martin Luther believed was the "chief point of the Epistle and the chief point of the whole Bible." Won't argue with that analysis, but the paragraph is central to our understanding of the triumph of God's justice in the sending of His Son to die, motivated by love beyond degree.

Note with me:

1. Context: The dark reality of man's plight (Gentile and Jew) under the just condemnation of God for their sin (1:18 – 3:20). Bad news!
2. The Good News set against that backdrop of universal sinfulness. (vs 21 – 24) {all of grace}
3. Christ's sacrifice vindicates God's justice. (vs 25 -26) {How can God be just and let sinners off the hook?}

No doubt many other texts could be referenced to prove our point, but I want to spend time here on:

How does this truth help me deal with injustice I see in the world, or (perhaps more urgently) the injustice I experience. {scales are tipped in my heart} How does the justice of God vindicated at the cross help me at all?

What effect should this truth have on my thinking/my attitude/my response to this powerful feeling that often comes over me? Allow me to suggest just two avenues of thought.

First: The cross should temper our response to injustice.

As God's people we stand as beneficiaries of the triumph of God's justice and love at the cross!

(2 Cor 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."

Therefore at some level that reality should produce in us some pity and compassion on a dark/dying world full of spiritually blind human beings that do not know their right hand from their left.

We see that in Paul's logic as he pens (Titus 3:1-7) (Eph 2:1-5)

When you witness injustice/when you suffer injustice at the hands of a blind unbelieving world, look to the cross. "Father forgive them."

Second: The cross teaches us patience in the crucible of suffering injustice.

Because of the cross, you can know that justice and vindication will come. It may not be in this life, but it will come. That truth is what undergirds Paul's admonition in (Rom 12:17-19).

But what about suffering injustice among the people of God {a Christian's brother/sister}?

(1 Pet 4:8) "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins."

(Matt 18:15-17) "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

Bottom line is this, somethings need to be left at the cross for final resolution/vindication.

II. The Cross as an Encouraging and Comforting Contradiction

When people in western culture think about the cross, their minds often visualize a piece of jewelry or something that adorns church buildings, but in the first century Roman Empire, it was not so.

The cross was an obscene symbol of punishment reserved for the scum of the Roman society.

For slaves, traitors to Rome/Barbarians, it was a hideous public death that would produce a sense of revulsion in the minds and hearts of the citizenry.

Small wonder then that Paul would refer to the cross in this contradictory way. (1 Cor 1:18)

The message of Christ crucified was a ridiculous contradiction having no credibility, not worth considering.

Jew “a stumbling block.” Messiah was to come as a conquering king not a crucified criminal {signs of power}. No way.

Greek “foolishness.” How could a credible philosophy on the meaning of life rest on this Jew that was executed for treason in the most abhorrent way possible. HA! Forget that! Look for your answers elsewhere.

But (where Jews see weakness, Greeks see foolishness) this contradiction has become to another group, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

As we see suffering/as we experience suffering, there will be times that it all seems to be such a contradiction/such a disconnect.

{God is sovereign/God is good/God is wise/God loves me/why am I in this mess/I don't see the sense of it, the end of it}

Go back to the cross. View afresh Christ crucified. What appeared to be the greatest of contradictions resulted in the salvation and eternal bliss of an innumerable mass of humanity, of which you are part.

Carson, “In the blackest night of the soul, Christians have something to hang on to that Job never knew! We know Christ crucified.”

Let the world mock/devil rage. We know the power of God/the wisdom of God. {God is able to turn your seemingly contradictory mess into something glorious. Must believe it. Paul's thorn in the flesh.}

III. The Cross Reveals to Us What God is Like

There are many ways we come to know what God is like as we read out Bibles.

But the central focus of the Bible's revelation of God's person finds its way to the cross and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. {Meta-narrative of Scripture already mentioned}

(Jn 14:9) “Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

My point is this. The Son, unchanging eternal God of the Bible, who according to:

(Job 42:2) "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."

(Mal 5:6) "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed."

(Eph 1:11) "In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will."

(Heb 6:17) "So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath."

The transcendent/creator God who is all those things and more is also a personal/affectionate and emotional/responding/intervening/interacting God with His people. That reality is true in the OT and the New, but is supremely demonstrated at the cross. (Is 57:15)

(Heb 2:14f) In love beyond degree (the God-man has entered into the sufferings of His people to rescue them from the prison house of sin! {Identifies with them in their sufferings in order to help them. Help you, not angels.})

Perhaps no one understands/or even worse, perhaps none cares about what your present struggles are (at least seems that way).

Look to the cross and know that God not only understands/cares in deepest caring affection. He has done something demonstrable. (1 Jn 4:10) "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." And from that reality, Paul can say in (Gal 2:20) "And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

It is the cross that gives ultimate meaning to OT texts like:

(Ps 103:13-14) "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust."

Ultimate meaning to the glory of God.

(Jn 17:1) "When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, 'Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you.'"

(Ex 34:5-7) {Context of 33:18f} "The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. ⁶The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands, ^[a] forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of

the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.”

(Ps 24:10) “Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory!”