

“Look in Trust”

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Those may well be the most familiar words of the Bible, perhaps challenged in familiarity only by the Twenty-third Psalm. *“The Gospel in the nutshell,”* it has been called. It has been memorized, posterized, cyber-netted, and regularly puts in an appearance (at least by the designation “John 3:16”) at the SuperBowl, March Madness NCAA Basketball Tournament, World Series, and (yes, I have seen it) at many a political rally.

The problem is, when all that is seen is the word “John” and the numbers 3:16, we “in the know folks” seem to be the only ones who “get it.” And we do “get it.” We comprehend what Jesus is talking about as He shares these words with Nicodemus. We embrace the notion of God loving us and why that is Good News . . . or do we?

Why did Jesus enter our world? Was the coming of Christ aimed at God, to satisfy His justice and receive His punishment as God stood against us? This notion is referred to as “Forensic Justification,” and it is the dominant motif in Western Christianity.

The scene is that of a courtroom. God, the Judge, has issued the verdict; we, the accused, stand convicted: “Guilty!” Christ, our Advocate, stands between us and God the angry Judge to declare that, while the verdict is both accurate and fair, He will accept any punishment that is due.

We have sinned against God. This sin is a serious issue with eternal consequences. In this Forensic Justification model, sin has robbed us of a wonderful plan that God had set in place before the foundation of the earth. God is angry because we have sinned. In God’s holiness, He is compelled to pour out wrath upon us — He is willing to punish us for all eternity because, now that we have sinned, God is against us. The entire premise of this model is transactional: we did a deed, God does a deed.

By some this is called “duck theology;” it means you had better duck. It

can also mean: You are damned; you are unlovable; you are corrupt; God wants to kick you to the curb. This shapes the way in which we approach God. It becomes the paradigm by which people live their lives. It is how they live, even if it is not what they profess. It makes our lives about sin management.

It makes God the Father the Enemy, such that we may want to get to know Jesus, spend time with Jesus, hang out with Jesus, but we would prefer to keep the Father — the angry Judge — at much more than arm's length. We would rather not approach Him at all.

Why did Jesus enter our world? Was the coming of Christ aimed, not at the Father, but at us? Was this the great gift from the Father, given to destroy everything that stands in the way of our entering the fullness of His love and embrace? Do we dance?

Sin has robbed us of a wonderful plan that God had set in place before the foundation of the world. But we need to know this: God hates sin — not sinners. This, Luther says, is God's "alien work." God is not angry with us for sinning; He is angry over what sin has done and is doing in our lives.

God looks from heaven and sees that we are not living in the fullness of His purposes for us. So He devises a plan to overcome whatever gets in the way of us coming to Him and enjoying all He wants us to have. Jesus doesn't come to the cross to "calm God down." He comes to the cross as an expression of God's great love for us, so that we can enter fully into the love God has for our lives.

In the Incarnation of Christ, He enters into our condition and gets us out — He leads us to a new place. He leaves His glory out of love to come and find us. He then takes us to a place where we could never have gotten to on our own.

There are only three responses we can give to this news: *"I hear this, and it takes my breath away and I want to surrender my entire life."* *"I hear this, and now what can I do to secure it?"* *"I hear this, but what bad*

things am I doing that are going to put this at risk?” To the second two responses, we need to hear God saying in Christ: “You cannot secure it, but I have,” and, “Nothing you have done, are doing, or will do can change this.”

This is called “DANCE” theology: God delights in you. God adores you and accepts you. God wants to nurture you. God cherishes you. God wants to encourage and embrace you and extend to you the treasures of His Kingdom.

“So why is it, Pastor,” you may want to ask, “Why is it that we see God act with such anger toward the people of Israel?” This account of the serpents in the wilderness is a very disturbing account. But let’s see what we can ferret out of it to gain a deeper understanding of what God is doing and what it means for our lives.

On the surface it looks like God is simply acting out of pique that “***The people spoke against God and against Moses . . .***” Kind of thin-skinned isn’t He? Well, not really. This impatience and grumbling and griping had been going on for weeks and months. Nevertheless, we would like to believe that God has a little more tolerance than do we and could not hold off on blowing His stack.

Let me go back to what Luther called “God’s ‘alien’ work.” God does indeed, throughout the Old Testament, punish — individuals, groups, and the nation. But it is always punishment designed to win people back. It is God saying, “I need you to see what it would be like if I did turn my back on you.” But in every case, God provided (as He does here) a way out, which is repentance: “***Turn to me and be saved . . .***” He announces again and again. Even in the midst of their greatest rejection of Him, God never rejected them, but brought them low enough to realize how far they were moving away from Him and what that would mean for their lives.

Jesus uses that motif to explain to Nicodemus what is going on in the Incarnation: “***Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may***

have eternal life.”

“Just as . . .” Note well, nothing here about anger or wrath; in fact, Jesus hastens on **“For God so loved . . .”** So it has always been out of love that God works. Once we know this (and by “know” I mean not just that we can get our left brain to agree to this as propositional truth but that we can embrace it and live in it), once we know this we can get out from under what is called “Jesus plus” theology.

“Jesus plus” theology suggests that there is something we need to add to what Jesus has done. We need to become obedient (on the assumption that rules can produce holiness). We need to maintain the “goodness meter” (makes sure that we have more good behavior than bad behavior). We need to commit to some greater act than we have been doing heretofore. All that “Jesus plus” theology winds up providing is a light within that is nothing but darkness.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life . . .” provided that they don’t: smoke, chew, dance, drink, play cards, go to movies, engage in any kind of sexual activity, be of a certain disposition AND as long as they vote the right way, read the right version of the Bible, keep up their financial pledge to the church . . . and on, and on, and on?

Thank God, God did not say to Moses, *“Make the bronze serpent and set it on a pole, then add a detailed list of everything the people need to do and stop doing from now on.”* They’d have all been dead trying to read, much less honor, that list. But no, God didn’t say, *“Obey!”* as a condition of restoring a right relationship with Him. He said, *“Trust.”* Trust is not informational; trust is transformational.

Baxter Kruger says it this way: *“There is an infinite difference between religious obedience to a divine being or a divine rule and soul knowledge of the Father’s heart. When we know the Father’s delight, something happens to us, something we cannot do by ourselves, something far*

deeper than the ability to do right: We are [made alive] with hope. In seeing the Father's true face, our souls are baptized with an unearthly assurance, with a security and confidence not of this world. With this assurance comes an awakening, and with awakening comes freedom — freedom to stand up, to walk, to risk, to venture forth.” [Across All Worlds, p. 8]

St. Paul says it thus: ***“You were dead through the trespasses and sins . . . But God . . . made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”*** That is all we need — praise God! For that is all we have.

And all that is asked of us is that we trust — that we look up and trust. In trust we will be led, and nourished, and enabled, and equipped, and supplied, and encouraged, . . . ***“so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God”*** and not through self, not out of fear, and not to satisfy some bean-counter deity off somewhere waiting for us to mess up.

Look up in trust and see the face of Jesus, the face of God's unconditional love. Look in trust and see in that face the embrace that has received us into full relationship with the Father. Look in trust and see that now we are ***“cleansed, accepted, justified, embraced, included . . . forgiven . . . reconciled . . . found . . . at home in God's pleasure.”*** [Baxter Kruger, God Is for Us. p. 55]

Amen.