


# HOW CAN YOU BELIEVE IN A GOD WHO...?



WRESTLING  
*with* GOD,  
FAITH,  
*the* BIBLE,  
& DOUBT

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## ***How Can You Believe in a God Who...?***

### ***Wrestling with God, Faith, the Bible, and Doubt***

In season one of the TV series, ***The Chosen***, a look at the life of Jesus from the perspective of his disciples, Jesus invites Matthew to join his band of followers. Matthew is a tax collector, one of the most hated, despised men in all of Israel. Like other tax collectors of his day, Matthew was a Jewish man, collecting taxes from his Jewish neighbors, on behalf of the Roman oppressors. Tax collectors were traitors to their people and no one wanted anything to do with them.

When Jesus brought Matthew to the other disciples, the disciples were not having it! Especially Peter, one of the first chosen by Jesus. Peter had had his own run-ins with the unfair tax practices of the Romans carried out by people like Matthew. And he was not happy!

To put it into 21<sup>st</sup> Century context: Imagine Peter is a rabid Arizona Cardinals fan. He eats, drinks, sleeps, and bleeds Cardinal red (we Cardinals fans do a lot of bleeding!). Jesus introduces Matthew to the group and Matthew is wearing a Seahawks jersey. Or a Rams jersey. Or a Packers jersey.

You can feel the visceral disgust Peter had at that moment when Jesus introduced Matthew to the group.

Peter pulls Jesus aside and says:

“I don’t get it.”

“You didn’t get it when I chose you, either,” Jesus responds.

“But this is different. I’m not a tax collector.”

To which Jesus replies:

## ***Get used to different!***

The writers are taking poetic license at this point as Jesus never said that as far as we know. But it does capture the essence of Jesus and his view of God.

I grew up in the church. I've never known a day in my life when Jesus and the Church weren't a part of it. I was rooted in the epic Bible stories from Genesis to Revelation. Wanting to be a pastor since 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, I was one of those odd kids who enjoyed theological discussions and books.

Along the way, like many, I've tripped over tough topics like *How can a loving God send people to hell?* and *How can you believe in a God who allows such pain and suffering in our world?*

The answers I was given to those questions, and the answers I often came to through my own study, held me for a while. But they were the kinds of questions that continued to challenge my understanding of God.

I've learned over the years that *doubt and questions are an act of faith*; that God's Spirit meets us in the space of doubt with the grace we need to wrestle with these big, tough issues.

I've also learned that the starting point matters. If our starting point is an angry God hell-bent on punishing us (or someone) for our sin, we'll read the Bible one way. If our starting point is different...

And that's the hope of this e-book: That God's Spirit of grace will meet you in the creative, life-giving space of doubt with different: a different thought, a different perspective, a different way of asking the question, a different understanding of God, a different starting point.

***Get used to different.*** That's where Jesus is. That's where grace is. That's where God is.

Tim Wright ([www.boldrecklessgrace.org](http://www.boldrecklessgrace.org))

**Losing My Religion:** *Time for some real talk. I'm genuinely losing my faith, and it doesn't bother me. Like, what bothers me now is nothing. I am so happy now, so at peace with the world. It's crazy. This is a soapbox moment so here I go. . . How many preachers fall? Many. No one talks about it. How many miracles happen. Not many. No one talks about it. Why is the Bible full of contradictions? No one talks about it. How can God be love yet send four billion people to a place, all 'coz they don't believe? No one talks about it. Christians can be the most judgmental people on the planet—they can also be some of the most beautiful and loving people. But it's not for me. I am not in any more. I want genuine truth. Not the 'I just believe it' kind of truth... Lots of things help people change their lives, not just one version of God. Got so much more to say, but for me, I'm keeping it real. Unfollow if you want, I've never been about living my life for others. All I know is what's true to me right now, and Christianity just seems to me like another religion at this point. –Marty Sampson, Former Hillsong Worship Leader*

Over the last several years Christianity has sustained one body blow after another as a number of prominent Evangelical leaders have either abandoned their faith or questioned it to the point of uncertainty.

During the pandemic of 2020-2021 church attendance continued to take a hit, not only because of lockdown, but because during lockdown many people finally pulled the plug. They made their drift away from the church complete. The lockdown simply sped up an already fast-moving attendance decline. And one of the many reasons for the decline is that Christian people have been tripping over tough faith questions.

*Theresa MacBain, 44, was raised a conservative Southern Baptist. Her dad was a pastor and she felt the call of God when she was 6. She had questions, of course, about conflicts in the Bible, for example, or the role of women. She says she sometimes felt she was serving a taskmaster of a God, whose standards she never quite met.*

*For years, MacBain set her concerns aside. But when she became a United Methodist pastor nine years ago, she started asking sharper questions. She thought they'd make her faith stronger. "In reality," she says, "as I worked through them, I found that*

*religion had so many holes in it, that I just progressed through stages where I couldn't believe it."*

*The questions haunted her: Is Jesus the only way to God? Would a loving God torment people for eternity? Is there any evidence of God at all? And one day, she crossed a line. "I just kind of realized — I mean just a eureka moment, not an epiphany, a eureka moment — I'm an atheist," she says. "I don't believe. And in the moment that I uttered that word, I stumbled and choked on that word — atheist."*

As I read these heart-wrenching stories of the loss of faith—and those who have lost their faith will tell you it's heart-wrenching—I've noticed several themes coming up over and over again:

The big questions:

- *How can a loving God allow suffering?*
- *How can a loving God send people to hell?*
- *What about all of these other religions that believe they are the one truth path to God?*
- *Why is God so angry at us?*

The challenge science seems to pose to Christianity:

- *Evolution seems to disprove the Creation story*
- *Science seems to disprove miracles*

The challenge of a messy Church that:

- *Doesn't allow for doubt*
- *Comes across as judgmental and mean spirited*
- *Is too tied to a political party*
- *Is full of hypocrites*

Another theme is the common form of Christianity most of these people have experienced, a form that included Purity Culture, Fundamentals of the faith, an

obsession with the End Times, copious altar calls, an angry God, and certainty over doubt.

I was born and raised in the church. I started my journey in a small Lutheran Church in the Minneapolis area. When that small church was unable to sustain a youth program we headed off to the Evangelical Free Church. I attended a Covenant High school. I dated and married a Presbyterian girl. I attended a Lutheran Bible School/College; a General Conference Baptist Seminary; and graduated from a Lutheran Seminary ([ELCA](#) for those of you who might be interested). I have been an ELCA pastor since 1984. In my spiritual journey I have feasted on an interesting diet of conservative evangelicalism and progressive mainline Christianity.

I have been through several periods of doubt in my life. Doubt made me question the assumptions I had about God, the Bible, and/or the assumptions I had been taught.

I'm a big believer in doubt. Doubt is the creative space where the Spirit meets us.

It pains me to read from some of the quotes above that there was never any space allowed for asking tough faith questions. Or maybe the questions were asked but the answers didn't contain enough substance to hold the person while in doubt.

I don't have all the answers. But I'd like to jump into the conversation in part because my heart is with those who doubt and question, and in part because I think God created us to question, doubt, and think about faith! We'll look at some of these pressing issues and I'll try to offer a few "What if?" possibilities to mull over.

For example: *What if God's way of revealing who God is to us is to strip away our religion? What if losing my religion is the pathway to faith?*

**The Trouble with God—Part 1:** *The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.* – **Richard Dawkins, [The God Delusion](#)**

Wow! I'm with Dawkins. Who would want to believe in a God like that?

*If God is all loving, and all powerful, why is there evil in the world? Can he not do anything about it. Does he choose not to? Is the evil in the world the result of his desire to give us free will? Ok then, what about famine and disease and floods and all the suffering that isn't caused by humans and our free will? If God is loving, why does he send people to hell?* –**Jon Steingard, Hawk Nelson.**

If that's what God is like, no wonder Christians are jumping ship. No wonder people want nothing to do with God.

This is the view many Christians and non-Christians alike have of God.

But... *this God is nothing like the God of Jesus.* The God is Jesus is...different.

Jesus painted many pictures of God through his parables, actions, and death and resurrection. But perhaps the most shocking, radical, and dare I write, reckless, picture of God is found in Jesus' story of the Father and his two sons.

(My thanks to [Kenneth Bailey](#) for his insights into this story.)

In Luke 15, responding to criticism from the religious elite that he spends too much time with the wrong kinds of people, Jesus tells a story in two parts. He uses this two-part story to show us what God is like.

The first part centers on a rebellious younger brother:



One day the younger son approaches his dad to ask for his inheritance early. In Jesus' day, that very request was scandalous. In essence the son was saying: *Dad, I wish you were dead. I'd rather have your money than live any longer with you!*"

In no uncertain terms this young man was bringing shame onto his father. In an honor/shame culture, you couldn't get any lower than that.

The father relents and gives his son the money. The son takes it and leaves his home and village.

Living in a small community, this request would have rocked the whole village. The son's request not only shamed the father but brought dishonor on the entire neighborhood. Should that son ever try to come back home the villagers would grab him, beat him, and banish him for life from their community.

Then it gets worse.

The son heads to a far-away land, code for a non-Jewish land, and spends all of his money on wild living. He eventually winds up broke just at the moment a recession hits the area. He's forced to feed pigs.

The audience hearing Jesus tell this story for the first time would have been shocked and horrified. The son:

- Insults and shames his father (and the community) by asking for the inheritance early—strike one
- Lives in a non-Jewish land—strike two
- Feeds pigs: unclean animals—strike three

From their perspective this young man was dead to them. Any chance of reconciliation was over. He was done.

Eventually the son realizes all he has lost and decides he's going to take a risk and head home.

It's at this point that Kenneth Bailey's insights are important and profound:

We often hear that the young man goes home a changed man, ready to repent and humble himself before his father—throwing himself on the mercy of dad.

But that's not the case. The son is not going home to repent. He is going home to try to pull another one over on his dad. He creates a scheme:

- He will admit the obvious—he can't be a son again. But if dad will just hire him as a regular worker, perhaps he can *pay back* all that he lost, *work himself* back into his father's good graces, and then maybe, just maybe, dad will let him back into the family.

This son is not repentant. He's going to try to trick his father into letting him back into the family bit by bit. Nothing about him has changed!

As the son got closer to the village, he must have wondered how he would make it down the street without the other villagers catching him first. If they do, they will beat him and banish him.

But surprisingly, he doesn't have to figure it out.

Because to his shock, running down the street toward him... is his father!

Again, Kenneth Bailey fills in the blanks.

In Jesus' day a father, especially a man of import in the community, would never run in public. It would bring shame on him. And he would never lift his robes to run. It would ruin his reputation. A mom might run to her child, but never a dad.

But this dad didn't care. He had to get to his son before the villagers did. He sacrificed his reputation and his character in order to reclaim his lost son and restore him before the villagers could carry out justice.

The father threw his arms around his son—to protect him.

He threw his robe around his shoulders—to say that he was under the Father's protection.

He put a ring on his finger—to say that this is his son.

He put sandals on his feet—because servants go barefoot; sons wear shoes.

Then he led his son home and threw a party for this child who had rejected him, shamed him, and humiliated him; this son who came home to manipulate him one more time.

All of this an act of scandalous, reckless, lavish, irresistible, wild grace!

And that, says Jesus, is what God is like!

God does not run to us to punish us. God doesn't run to us out of anger to condemn us. God doesn't wait for, or even expect, us to clean up our act before God embraces us. God isn't hell bent on sending us to hell.

God always, and only, runs to us for one reason: To embrace us with grace. To clothe us with forgiveness. To put the ring of sonship/daughterhood on our fingers. To immerse us in the joy of his love for us.

*It was the only time I ever saw him run*

*And then he ran to me, took me in his arms*

*Held my head to his chest*

*Said, "My son's come home again"*

*Lifted my face, wiped the tears from my eyes*

*With forgiveness in his voice*

*He said, "Son, do you know I still love you?"*

*He caught me by surprise and brought me to my knees*

*When God ran, I saw him run to me.*

--***When God Ran*** by Benny Hester and John Parenti

That God of Jesus, by the way, is the God of the Old Testament, the God that Dawkins and so many others find so horrifying. That's who Jesus sees in the arc of the Hebrew Scriptures. That's his starting point for God. ***Get used to different!***

And in looking at the tough questions about life and God, that's where Jesus invites us to start as well.

But there's another son, the older son, waiting in the wings, offering Jesus another chance to show us the real face of God.

**The Trouble with God—Part 2:** *The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you were suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell. –Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. July 8, 1741.*

Wow. Just... Wow!

Unfortunately, that's the god far too many people think of when they think about the Christian God. Because, unfortunately, far too many Christians think that that's what God is like.

No wonder so many leave the faith. No wonder so many don't even look into Christianity.

Back to Luke 15

So far we have seen, in the father's response to his rebellious younger son, that God is a God who, contrary to Jonathan Edwards, doesn't abhor us, but loves us. God is not a God whose wrath burns against us but who runs to us always and only out of reckless, lavish, irresistible grace and love.

Jesus reaffirms that view of God in the father's response to the self-righteous older brother.

Full disclosure:

I've been a first born for 64 years (I was born in December of 1957 so depending on when you read this you may need to add a year or two!). According to Birth Order Theory first advanced by Alfred Adler in Vienna in the early 1900's—and later popularized in the 1980's by Dr. Kevin Lehman—I was born into rarified air.

For example, first borns tend to have higher IQ's than their younger siblings (just ask my brothers and sisters!).

A few tweets from first borns provides some insights into the first borns club:

*Being the oldest child is a compliment. Think about it, your parents decided you were amazing and wanted more of you.*

*My nine-year-old just referred to her brothers as her "sequels."*

*First borns get sonnets like, "He likes to eat peaches and avocados, he loves to laugh, bath time is his jam, he keeps Mom and Dad up at night but we love him" and the second born gets, "It's been ten months. Love this guy!"*

What explains this first born specialness? We were the *first* born. We're the ones parents raised by the book. The ones parents obsessed over to get us right. First borns are typically raised with lots of rules. They are fawned over... until the next sibling comes along! And then first borns have to fend for themselves, having to become responsible for themselves and ultimately their siblings at a young age.

The result: First borns tend to be

- Responsible
- Structured
- Achievers

- Reliable
- Organized
- On-time
- Natural leaders
- Perfectionistic
  - Know-it-alls
  - Bossy
  - Resentful
  - Arrogant
    - Um... wait a minute...

Which brings us to the first born in Jesus' story.

His younger brother has embarrassed and shamed the family publicly by asking his dad for his inheritance early, meaning, he wanted his father dead so that he could live it up. The last the first born had heard, his little brother had left the country—and good riddance.

But one day, after a long, hard day working the fields—fields he would one day inherit so he had a vested interest in making sure they produced—he came home to the sound of music and dancing. As the first born he's supposed to know when parties are being thrown. He's immediately upset because there's a village-wide celebration happening at his house without his knowledge. In his mind he's being dissed.

He asks one of the young neighbor boys, who's enjoying the party out in the courtyard, what's going on. The boy tells the amazing story the whole village is now celebrating:

*Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.*

As was custom, the whole village was waiting for the older son to join the party. Once he walked into the house, they would greet him with cheering and applause.

But the first born is hacked off and refuses to go into the party. He's livid that his father would welcome back this son who brought so much humiliation on the dad and on his older brother. Even worse, that his father would throw a party for him

By now the whole village knows he's outside refusing to come in. The tables have turned. Now it's the first born humiliating his father, bringing shame on the family name.

Normally dad would send the servants out to lock the son in a closet or small room until after the party and deal with him then. But this father does something extraordinary. He goes out to the son. In front of all of the guests the father destroys his public reputation to try to reconcile with his son

The older son, once he's warmed up, let's his father have it. He humiliates his dad by refusing to address him with the title of Father, instead saying, "Hey, you!"

He complains of how his father has never appreciated him; how he's worked like the obedient good son but was never even offered a goat to celebrate with his friends, let alone a fatted calf. He's livid that his father has been so reckless with his forgiveness toward his do-nothing younger brother.

All of the negative traits of first borns explode out of this young man toward his father—publicly.

And the father stands there and takes it! He's seemingly impotent against the first born's tirade.

But once his oldest runs out of steam, the father makes his move. Not the one we'd expect, however.

He doesn't let loose on his son. He doesn't send out the servants to lock him up in order to give him a beating later.

Instead, he responds with the compelling power of grace—the same reckless, audacious grace offered to the undeserving younger brother.



The father said to him: *My beloved son! You are always with me. All that I have is yours. I'm throwing this party because I've given your brother back his life. Now come on in. And let me do the same for you.*

That, Jesus says, is what God is like.

What if Jonathan Edwards got it wrong? What if the “older siblings” have it wrong?  
What if so many Christians have gotten it, and continue to get it, wrong?

And what if Jesus got it right?

*This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only son into the world so that we might live through him. (1 John 4:9)*

*God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Jesus died for us. (Romans 5:8)*

*See what great love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called the children of God. And that is what we are. (1 John 3:1)*

What if that's what God is really like?

**Would the Real God Please Stand Up!** As a pastor, and as a pastor who takes joy in being challenged to keep thinking about faith, I've seen many people over the years "abandon" the faith based on views of God, Jesus, the Church, and the Gospel that don't find support in the Bible. I'd abandon that faith, too, if the concerns expressed by so many were true.

For me, it all comes down to our starting point. What is God like?

Since the beginning of time God has been accused of some horrific things by human beings:

- Acts of nature like earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, famine, and flooding. We even have a name for them: Acts of God.
- Someone dies of cancer and the bereaved are comforted with words like: It was God's will.
- A child dies and we try to help the family come to terms with it by suggesting that God must have wanted her in heaven more than here on earth.
- For some people a broken, suffering world suggests that God doesn't care... or that God doesn't exist.
- Others justify acts of violence in name of God, saying they are acting on God's behalf to destroy infidels or to wipe out sin. Some Christian leaders, for example, said 9/11 was God's judgment on the US for embracing abortion and alternative lifestyles.
- Others use God to condemn those with whom they disagree claiming to stand on the side of God (usually this coincides with their political ideologies).

Put all of those pictures together and it's hard to understand why anyone believes in God.

More challenging is that all of those views of God seem to be affirmed in the Bible—especially in the Old Testament:

- God is seen as the cause of the great flood in Noah's day wiping out all life on earth with the exception of one small family.
- God is the one who calls Israel to destroy its enemies: men, women, children, and livestock.
- God is portrayed as violently intolerant of the wrong kinds of people.
- God almost seems schizophrenic at times with his own people. On the one hand he loves and rescues them. Then he's angry at them and punishes them horrifically. Then he promises to stop hurting them and love them again. Then he warns them to obey or else...
- In the New Testament God seems to be more gracious yet some suggest that God is only gracious because he slaughtered his own son in order to vent his wrath and anger at us onto Jesus.

As an online meme puts it: *I've read the Bible. That's why I'm an atheist.*

It's hard to read the Bible and not come away completely confused as to who God is. Especially when it seems as if the God of the Old Testament is so different from the God of the New Testament or the God of Jesus.

And yet, the God Jesus promoted, the God Jesus called Father, the God Jesus believed in, is the God of the Old Testament! That was the only Bible Jesus had.

So what did Jesus see that we've missed?

We'll pick up that question ahead but let's start here with a summary:

The God Jesus sees is:

- A God of radical love
- A God of scandalously inclusive forgiveness
- A God of non-violence
- A God who runs to the death for us
- A God who will do whatever it takes so immerse us in his grace

## **How Can You Believe in a God Who Allows Suffering—Part 1:** Where has God been?

- Millions of people around the world have died from COVID
- Millions more have suffered from the virus
- Millions have lost their jobs
- Mental and emotional distress has increased exponentially
- George Floyd was murdered by a police officer on his neck
- American citizens tried to overthrow the US Government
- Afghanistan has fallen once again into the hands of the Taliban
- The Ukraine has been invaded by Russia

And that was in the span of 18 months. And that doesn't include ongoing poverty, homelessness, people killed by drunk drivers, and the growing chasm between the haves and the have nots!

***If God is a loving God, why does God allow all of this suffering?*** Why doesn't God put an end to it? Why doesn't God intervene? Where has God been?

That question, along with the Hell question, presents one of the biggest stumbling blocks to faith and has done so since humans could ask questions.

In times of chaos, upheaval, and suffering we all look for something to make sense of it all—to bring meaning to the meaninglessness of it all.

And for people of faith the search for meaning begins with God (and that holds true even for those who don't consider themselves religious).

There are generally two go-to responses to the question of suffering:

**The first is *the-God-is-control* answer.** One of the common encouragements used to bring some hope in the midst of hardship is: *Don't worry. God's got this. God is still in control!*

For example, consider this word of hope from social media:

*Sorry to break up the big panic, but the coronavirus will not take anyone outta this world unless that's the good Lord's plan. And you're not gonna change that no matter what you do or what you buy.*

In other words, none of this is beyond God's control. In fact, this is all a part of God's grand plan.

But... if this is what *God-is-in-control* looks like, what does it look like when God isn't in control?!

This view of a God who has everything under control pictures God as a master puppeteer. Think Geppetto with Pinocchio, controlling and manipulating every move at every moment of every day; pulling the strings of human interactions, circumstances, and world events.

But when we dig down into that view of God, we find that it makes God responsible for all of the death, violence, chaos, and loss that we all experience in life. It makes God responsible for pandemics and cancer and divorce and suicide and car accidents and poverty and war and the Holocaust, etc.

If that's what God is like, no wonder people want nothing to do with God!

**The second response** is the same as the first, but rather than fixing suffering onto God to bring hope, **suffering is blamed on God** in order to **dismiss God altogether**. *How can a loving God allow suffering?*

The argument goes something like this:

- *God is all-powerful so can prevent suffering.*
- *God is good and loving so you would imagine God would want to eliminate suffering.*
- *But suffering exists so God is not all powerful or good or loving.*

And with no seemingly viable answer those questions, many people either abandon the faith or give up on the possibility of a God before even getting started with the questions.

But when we dig deeper into this second view, we also have some unresolved issues.

Let's take God out of the equation for a moment. Many people who simply can't believe in God because they can't believe in a loving God who allows suffering, still have the problem of suffering.

Suffering doesn't go away if we give up on God.

So how then do we explain it or come to terms with it?

Here's atheist Richard Dawkins on suffering and evil:

*The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive, many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear, others are slowly being devoured from within by rasping parasites, thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease. It must be so. If there ever is a time of plenty, this very fact will automatically lead to an increase in the population until the natural state of starvation and misery is restored. In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference. (River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life)*

If Dawkins is right, if life is chance or pitiless indifference, where does that leave us?

***But what if it's true that God's love and suffering are related, but not in the way we're often taught?***

What if a loving God speaks to suffering, to this seemingly pitiless indifference, not in the way we think God should, but in the way we need God to? Does suffering automatically prove that God isn't loving or powerful? That God doesn't exist?

**How Can You Believe in a God Who Allows Suffering—Part 2:** Leslie D. Weatherhead, in his must read book: *The Will of God*, tells this story:

*I was standing on the veranda of an Indian home darkened by bereavement. My Indian friend had lost his little son, the light of his eyes, in a cholera epidemic. At the end of the veranda his little daughter, the only remaining child, slept in a cot covered over with a mosquito net. We paced up and down, and I tried in my clumsy way to comfort and console him. But he said, "Well, padre, it is the will of God. That's all there is to it. It is the will of God." (pp. 11-12)*

For many people, ascribing suffering to God's will offers hope. It holds out the promise that the senselessness of it all is not all that senseless; that there is sacred meaning and purpose behind it. At the very least it offers the assurance that God is in control. Because life would be intolerable if it is random and beyond the control of God.

But while ascribing suffering to God's will provides hope to some, for others it makes God the actor in our suffering. And it turns God ultimately into a monster.

Weatherhead tried to make that point with his friend:

*Fortunately I knew him well enough to be able to reply without being misunderstood, and I said something like this: "Supposing someone crept up the steps onto the veranda tonight, while you all slept, and deliberately put a wad of cotton soaked in cholera germ culture over your little girl's mouth as she lay in that cot there on the veranda, what would you think about that?"*

*"My God," he said, "what would I think about that? Nobody would do such a damnable thing. If he attempted it and I caught him, I would kill him with as little compunction as I would a snake, and throw him over the veranda. What do you mean by suggesting such a thing?"*

*"But, John," I said quietly, "Isn't that just what you have accused God of doing when you said it was his will? Call your little boy's death the result of mass ignorance, call it*



*mass folly, call it mass sin, if you like, call it bad drains or communal carelessness, but don't call it the will of God."*

*Surely we cannot identify as the will of God something for which a man would be locked up in jail, or put in a criminal lunatic asylum.*

If God is the source of suffering, then the question is valid: *How can anyone believe in such a God?*

As highlighted in the chapter above, a second way people tend to handle suffering is to deny the existence of God or to call into question God's character.

But, as we saw, we can take God out of the story but suffering remains.

So then what?

Either God allows suffering which calls into question God's character and love, or we live in a world of pitiless indifference (in the words of Richard Dawkins above) leaving us with lots of pain but no hope.

But **what if there's a third way?**

**What if** it's true that God's love and suffering are related but not in the way we have been taught? What if a loving God speaks to suffering—to this seemingly pitiless indifference—not in the way we think God should but in the way we need God to?

Does suffering automatically prove that God isn't loving or powerful; that God doesn't exist? Or is it possible to see the true character of God in the midst of suffering?

Christianity offers a radically different answer to the question of suffering, and it's found in a cross.

The story of the cross is a profound story of God's stop-at-nothing love for the world. It's the story of a God who in Jesus:

- Enters into our solidarity with us

- Enters into the human experience with us with compassion and grace
- Suffers with us because life is broken
- Absorbs our pain so that we don't have to carry it alone
- Transforms our points of suffering by turning death into resurrection

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr says it this way: *Christianity is a faith which takes us through tragedy to beyond tragedy, by way of the cross to victory in the cross.*

Suffering is not God's will for you. God's will for you, seen in the cross of Jesus, is to meet you in the midst of suffering with grace and love. To meet you in the senselessness of it all with hope, kindness, and goodness. And to let you know that suffering will not have the final word. Life will. Resurrection will. Grace will.

As Paul says in his letter to the church in Rome, chapter 8:

*Can anything separate us from Christ's love? Can trouble or problems or persecution separate us from his love? If we have no food or clothes or face danger or even death, will that separate us from his love? No!*

*I am sure that nothing can separate you from God's love—not death, life, angels, or ruling spirits. I am sure that nothing now, nothing in the future, no powers, nothing above you or nothing below you—nothing in the whole created world—will ever be able to separate you from the love God has shown you in Christ Jesus your Lord.*

**Does Christianity Matter?** Philip Yancey, in his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* asks some tough questions about the state of Christianity. In reflecting on how people interacted with Jesus 2000 years ago he noticed that people who once ran to Jesus now seem to run away from him (or at least his Church). The worse people felt about themselves the more likely they were to seek out Jesus. Today, not so much (again, at least not through the Church).

So what happened? Does the Christian story matter anymore?

Throughout history, as human beings have tried to come to terms with God, we've almost always seen God as angry; as a Being not only deeply disappointed in us but downright disgusted with us—or most of us, anyway.

Yet, this God seemingly and begrudgingly offers us a way out. If we

- Follow certain laws
- Get our act together
- Make the right sacrifices
- Believe the right things

then maybe, just maybe, God will accept us.

We see that storyline in almost every religion and spirituality known to humankind—a storyline that says that we have to earn God's love somehow in some way. Once we've earned it, we're in. And once we're in we now have the right to judge and condemn those who are out.

All too often, Christianity, as a religion, seems to say the same thing. One doesn't have to look far to see it:

- Christians threaten non-Christians with an eternity in a fireball of torture and despair
- Christians determine who can come to church and who can't

- Christians become the arbitrators of who God will love and who God can't possibly love—all the while pretty certain, of course, that God loves us!

But when anyone, Christian or not, takes a look at Jesus, they see a shockingly and scandalously different view of God. A radical view of God. A God so foreign to our impressions of God that we simply can't believe it.

Jesus shows us a God of messy grace. A God who

- Doesn't condemn—but loves
- Doesn't judge—but forgives
- Doesn't demand right behavior—but transforms us with kindness

This view of a God of grace was so radical that Jesus was ultimately killed because of it. This view of a God of grace is so radical today that most churches built on the name of Jesus can't fully buy into it.

And yet it's precisely that radical, messy, scandalous, unearned, splashed-indiscriminately-on-everyone grace that makes the Christian story unique. It is the only religion or spiritual expression on planet earth that stakes its claim on God's ***unconditional*** love.

Christianity is the story of radical grace. It's the story of a God who always runs to us with love. It's the story of

- A rancher who paid a full day's wage to those who had only worked an hour
- A shepherd who leaves behind 99 sheep, risking his life to find one lost lamb
- A woman who rips her whole house apart to find one lost coin
- A father who throws a feast for a rebellious son
- The God who enters into human history as one of us
- Jesus who died for his enemies
- The God who finds us worth dying for

What sets Christianity apart, what makes it unique, is Jesus and his unrelenting grace. And the radical go-to-the-cross promise that

- You are the one God loves
- You are the one God forgives
- God is for you

Period!

**The Relentlessness of God:** Too often God is presented as mean, vindictive, condemning, and hell bent on sending us to hell. And too often this presentation is made by Christians.

Jesus, however, paints a far different picture. And his primary way for painting that picture is through story-telling: telling stories that turn our perceptions of God upside down.

Like this story about a rejected invitation:

***The scene:***

Jesus was the guest of honor at a Sabbath meal hosted by a Pharisee. It's an interesting invitation in that many of the Pharisees were Jesus' fiercest critics. They didn't feel he obeyed the rules enough. They were scandalized by his penchant for hanging out with the wrong kinds of people. And Jesus didn't pull punches in his critique of them.

Yet this particular Pharisee invited Jesus to be his guest of honor. Was he curious about Jesus? Did he want to catch Jesus out? Did he want to join his team of followers?

Almost immediately Jesus proves to be a pain-in-the-butt guest.

First, during the meal, he heals a man—on the Sabbath Day, the day of rest. Some of the guests would have seen that as a provocative breaking of the Sabbath rules.

Next, he criticizes those who fought for the most prestigious spots around the table as they sat down for the meal.

Then, he calls out his host for inviting friends, telling him that he should instead be inviting the outsiders to a meal—those whom God has seemingly abandoned: the crippled, the lame, and the blind.

You get the sense that Jesus probably didn't get invited back to parties often.

### ***The story trigger:***

Then, perhaps to change the subject or lower the room temperature, one of the guests said: *Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God!*

It was a brilliant move. Immediately the minds of all the guests turned to the long-awaited promise of God—the promise of a day when all of Israel’s enemies would be vanquished and Israel would live in peace.

It was a promise made in Isaiah 25. On that day God will spread out a banquet feast where death will be at an end and tears will be wiped away.

One small problem: Isaiah said that this banquet would include Gentiles—non-Jewish people. But by the time of Jesus, however, Biblical interpreters added commentary to that passage saying that while the Gentiles will be invited, it will not be an honor for them but a meal of shame and plagues. Others said that the Gentiles would be slaughtered at that meal by the angel of death.

For some of the Jewish elite in Jesus’ day, the inclusive feast of Isaiah had become an exclusive feast for the chosen Jews only. No way would outsiders be invited in.

When the guest threw out that promised feast as a topic of conversation, he was hoping Jesus would turn from his somewhat cantankerous mood to a more upbeat, celebratory tone. But Jesus saw it as an opening to rock their view of God with a story of outrageous, relentless grace.

### ***The Story:***

A man wanted to host a feast and invited many from the community. In Jesus’ day the invitations would be sent out without a specific date because all of the food was prepared fresh. A servant would bring word of a soon-coming banquet, get RSVP’s from the guests, and then the process for gathering and preparing the food would begin.

Once all was ready the servant went out immediately to say: *The party is on! Come quickly.* And the guests would stop what they were doing and head to the party.

But in this story, rather than keeping their commitment to the party, many of the guests began to make excuses for why they couldn't come.

- One had purchased a piece of land he needed to inspect
- One had purchased five oxen and needed to test drive them
- One had just gotten married

These all might seem like appropriate excuses today but those listening to Jesus would know that none of those excuses were valid in that culture. They instantly understood that the invited guests in this story were intentionally dissing the man who invited them to the party. In an honor/shame culture, such behavior was scandalous.

Imagine you had planned a big banquet. You invite your friends. They all turn up. You put the food in front of them. And then, rather than eating, one by one they make some kind of excuse.

Oh, I just forgot! I need to:

- Mow the lawn
- Feed the cat
- Catch the next episode of the latest binge-worthy show

And then leave.

How would you feel? Angry? Hurt? Bitter? Dissed?

And what would you do or want to do? Drop them from your Facebook friends list? Diss them on Twitter? Delete their contact information from your phone? Never speak to them again?

The party host has the same response. Jesus says that he was angry. But notice what he does next: Rather than taking vengeance on those who hurt him he extends his grace even further. This man's natural expression of anger is remarkably more grace!

He tells his servant to go out and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame—all those seemingly abandoned by God



Then, when there's still room for more, he instructs his servant to go out onto the streets and compel people to come in—because he wants his house full. He has a bountiful feast and he wants to share it with as many people as possible.

This well-known socialite, so to speak, hosts a banquet for:

- People sleeping in the doorways of Macy's
- People used to eating scraps from the trash bins behind swank hotels
- People who haven't bathed in a summer of Sundays

And it costs them absolutely nothing. It is undeserved, unexpected, unearned.

This party host proves to be relentless in his desire to share his abundance with as many people as possible.

***The Point: This is what God is like!***

Jesus shows us that:

*God is relentless when it comes to grace!* Grace abhors a vacuum. God will not rest until heaven is filled. God is a gracious heavenly father who's prepared a feast for all humankind and he will not stop until the banquet table is full—pursuing us through the cross.

*God's grace always includes those we think are beyond God's grace.* Whoever it is we think is unworthy of God's grace, Jesus says, "Surprise! God loves them, too!" As the Reformer Martin Luther reminds us, grace is always for and only for sinners.

Or, to quote Episcopal priest Robert Capon, Grace says: *All you have to be is a certifiable loser and God will send his servant Jesus to positively drag you into his house!*

The God of Jesus will not stop surprising you with that unexpected, relentless grace!

**The Patent Unfairness of God:** Jesus' primary way for answering the question: *What is God like?*—apart from the cross—was through the telling of provocative, compelling, jaw-dropping stories; stories that shocked and delighted his audiences again and again.

Take, for example, this story:

Imagine... You're an employee of a small business consisting of 60 full and part time workers. You've been there since the beginning: investing blood, sweat, and tears into making the company go; enjoying the fruits of success; taking pay cuts when times were tough. Over the years you've seen employees come and go but a few of you have been the foundation of the company from the start.

One day the boss calls you all together. You have no idea why. Without saying anything, he has you line up in order of years served beginning with the newest employees. He explains that it has been a very good year and he wants to say thanks through a bonus.

He starts with the newest of the part time people and hands each of them a check for \$1000. Your heart starts pounding as you think to yourself: *If the new part timers get that amount, what am I going to get?*

He continues to make his way through the line handing out checks but the amount is always the same.

Then he comes to you and the three others who have been there from the beginning. The boss takes a moment to thank you publicly for your support and hard work and says that without you the company would not exist.

And then he hands each of you a check for \$1000.

How would you feel?

On the one hand... grateful for the surprise bonus?

On the other hand... miffed? Angry? Hacked off by the obvious unfairness of it all? Like you've just received a slap across the face?

That second response is the one some of the workers had in Jesus' story about the Vineyard Owner (Matthew 20:1-16). They'd put in a full day's work, having been promised a full day's wage. But throughout the day more and more workers were hired to join them in the fields, with the final batch starting work one hour before quitting time.

At the end of the work day, 6 pm, the foreman called all of the workers together to pay them. Starting with the last ones hired—those who had only worked an hour—he handed out the same pay to all of the workers: a full day's wage, no matter how many hours the laborers had worked!

The men who had put in a twelve-hour shift were livid. They said to the foreman: *These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat!*

I'm guessing most of us would side with these guys in their anger and sense of outrage. It's patently unfair to be treated that way.

And that's precisely Jesus' point. He uses this maddening story to say something radical about God.

What we think we want is a God who is fair. However, a fair God has to weigh us in the balance, judging our every action and motive. That makes God judgmental, condemning, and angry, having to treat us as we deserve. And we end up mimicking that kind of God, nitpicking over who deserves what from God's hand.

But Jesus tells us that God is nothing like that. God is patently unfair. God is a God who dispenses grace to all of us recklessly and lavishly—and equally unfairly.

No matter who we are, no matter what we've done, no matter when it happens in the scheme of things, God's grace is given to all of us free of charge. In patently unfair amounts. And that's radically good news... for all of us!

For those of us wondering if God's grace includes us, this story serves as God's great big yes!

And that picture of God changes everything when it comes to how we see God.

**How Can You Believe in a God Who Sends People to Hell?** I want to start off with a question of my own as we jump into this big, tough issue:

***Why is a belief in hell—an eternity of horrendous torture mandated by God—the litmus test for true Christianity?***

I was born into and raised in the Church. And like the overwhelming majority of Christians, I believed in heaven and hell: That those who believe in Jesus, no matter what kind of people they are, will go to heaven; and that those who reject Jesus, no matter what kind of people they are, will fry in hell.

Admittedly, it seemed to make sense. God, in Jesus, has made it possible for us to live in relationship with God. That relationship is one of grace and forgiveness. If we choose to reject that overture of love we'll live with the consequences—forever.

But as I began to wrestle with my understanding of the character of God, I realized that my starting point was wrong. I began to see that the starting point for God's character is not that of an angry judge but that of a radically gracious parent. And if that's the true character of God, the issue of hell becomes increasingly problematic. If God truly is lavishly and recklessly gracious, then how can that same God be capable of creating such a horrific eternity for those who might reject that grace?

For a while I tried to say that hell is, in essence, an act of love. Love forced is not love but abuse. A loving God will not force God's self on us. If we chose to reject God's act of love in Jesus, God will love us enough to respect that choice. God, out of love, would not want to force us to spend eternity with him.

But still... it didn't answer all the questions:

- Is my rejection of God's love stronger than God's love for me?
- Does my free will usurp God's grace?
- Will the God who goes to the cross for us finally give up on us?
- Is God's grace bound by human time and space?

Or, as my friend, the late BJ Thomas, put it in one of his songs: *I wonder why the pure in heart... they have to have a judgment day. I wonder what the Lord has made... that he plans to throw away.*

This is a big topic. And one short chapter will not solve the problem of hell.

But I want to suggest a place to start by going back to the story of the Prodigal Son which I referred to earlier.

**The Context:** Jesus is caught red handed in the act of eating with the wrong kinds of people: sinners and tax collectors—those the religious leaders had written off because they believed God had written them off. No self-respecting Jewish Rabbi would debase himself in such a way. By eating with these people Jesus was in essence treating them as friends and equals. And in the process, ceremonially defiling himself. In response to criticism from the religious elite, Jesus tells the story, which we've looked at above, of a father of radical, reckless grace.

**A quick summary:**

- 1) The younger son asks his father for his inheritance early bringing shame onto the father, his family, and his village. *Strike one.*
- 2) The younger son takes his money to a non-Jewish (unclean) land and wastes it all there on wild living. *Strike two.*
- 3) The younger son ends up feeding pigs (unclean animals) for a gentile (an unclean person) in order to survive. *Strike three.*

Culturally, this younger son has gone beyond the point of no return. He is now considered dead to the village and his family with no way of redemption. Story over!

**A major point:** When the son decides to head home, he does not go home, as we often assume, repentant. He goes home defiant. He goes home with a scheme in place to manipulate his dad. He wants his dad to hire him in the hope that he can work off his debt, weasel himself back into the family, and receive his inheritance all over again when dad dies. This young man is still dead! He still rejects his dad's love.

## What does this have to do with hell?

Should the villagers catch the son walking into the village they will beat him up and banish him (to hell) from the community once and for all.

But notice what the dad does. And remember, this son is defiant. This son still *rejects his father's love!*

The father (representing God) runs to this son who deserves only punishment and condemnation—***and rescues him with grace.***

- He throws his arms around his son to protect him from the mob.
- He puts the family robe around his shoulders.
- He puts the ring of sonship on his finger.
- He puts shoes on his feet.
- Then he throws a party for him!

All this for a son who, to that point, has rejected his father's love!

As the father says to the older brother later: *This son of mine was lost, but I found him. He was dead. But I made him alive again.*

The grace of the father proved stronger than the rejection by his son.

The picture Jesus paints of God in this story is not one of a God who condemns people to hell but who runs to hell-condemned people and graces them with life. God runs to dead people—people who can neither reject or accept love—and raises them to life!

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann says it this way: *According to this Christian view, neither God nor human beings decide about hell, but Christ alone: 'I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and hell' (Rev. 1:18). What is Christ going to do with 'the keys of hell'? 'Christ hath burst the gates of hell,' says Charles Wesley in his Easter hymn. So all its gates are open. Hell is no longer inescapable... ([In the End, the Beginning—the Life of Hope](#). 2004)*

Or as John says it in his Gospel: *For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.* (John 3:17)

Does God send people to hell?

The Cross says: *For God was in Christ, reconciling **the world** to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them.* (2 Corinthians 5:19)

The Cross says:

You were lost but God found you.

You were dead but God through Christ raised you to life.

You are the one clothed in the robes of grace.

You are the one wearing the ring of sonship/daughterhood.

You are the one wearing the shoes of forgiveness.

Because God's grace will always have the final word...

And that word is **life**.



**Here Comes the Judge:** *He (Jesus) will come again to **judge** the living and the dead.* (The Apostles Creed)

That sounds ominous!

And for many, it is.

Because our view of judges, especially for those of us living in the US, is that of public officials, sitting behind high desks, wearing intimidating robes, banging gavels, passing sentences and pronouncing punishments on wrongdoers.

As a result, our view of judgment is filtered through a punitive or punishment-driven filter.

In essence, punitive justice is punishment that fits the crime; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, etc.

And that's often what comes to mind when we confess that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead: One day we will all stand before the high court of God, with Jesus on the bench, dressed in a stark robe, passing sentence on those who rejected him, punishing them by sending them to hell, and welcoming those who received him into heaven.

The case for a punitive Judge Jesus goes something like this:

Question: *How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?*

Answer: *It is precisely because God is good that he sends people to hell. God is a fair judge who **punishes** evil and rewards righteousness.*

**God is good, so he must be just.**

- Goodness and justice are inseparable.

## **God is just, so he must punish.**

- God is a righteous judge who will not ignore evil. Hell is the expression of his just punishment against sin.
- Hell is fair.

## **In his goodness, God has provided a way to escape hell at great cost to himself.**

- Jesus took our punishment (God's anger) onto himself so that we don't have to suffer God's justice.

This view of God assumes that justice is punitive. And since God is just, God must punish.

The starting point here for God's character, then, is God's anger and wrath. God is hell-bent on punishing our sin so he takes it out on Jesus. Sin must be punished.

Because the foundation of justice is punitive.

## **Or is it?**

What if there is another way to speak of Judge Jesus? What if his justice is not fair? After all, who will stand a chance if Jesus is fair? What if his justice is recklessly unfair (or fair in that it's recklessly unfair to everyone!), built on the foundation of grace rather than punishment?

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann (*In the End—the Beginning: The Life of Hope*) raises some challenging questions around our punitive view of God's justice:

*If the judging God is at the centre, no one knows how righteous he or she has to be. Everyone is delivered over to the unknown judgement of God.*

*If the responsible human being is at the centre, no one knows what future he or she will arrive at, because voluntary human decisions can vacillate.*

*If the God of wrath is at the centre of judgement, we must despair of God; if the freely deciding human being is at the centre, each of us must despair of him- or herself.*

*According to both ideas, human beings are really the masters of their own fate, or their own executioners. In both cases the role of God is reduced to that of executor or accomplice of the human being's free choice. Heaven and hell become religious images which endorse human free will.*

The view of a punitive God is a view devoid of hope and good news. It puts all of the pressure onto us, and we simply can't stand under it. It lacks Gospel.

Thankfully, **the Gospel is Good News**. Good News about a God who is for us. A God who runs to us in our brokenness and sin and puts us back together. [A God who through Jesus uses restorative justice](#)—a justice that puts to rights what we put to wrong. A justice immersed in grace, not anger or condemnation.

In other words, a justice that is radically and recklessly unfair in that we are not treated as we deserve! And that is great news!

**Judge Jesus:** A woman is thrown down at the feet of Jesus. A group of men accuse her of having been caught in the very act of adultery. They say that, according to the law, she should be sentenced to death. And they want to know what Judge Jesus has to say.

Jesus stoops down and begins to write in the dust.

We have no idea what he might have been writing.

Perhaps he wrote down words like lust, judgmental, greed, hypocrisy. Maybe he wrote a question: Where's the man who must have been caught in the act of adultery with this woman? Perhaps he just doodled to give himself time to think or calm down.

What the men wanted, what they demanded, based on the law, was punitive justice. They wanted her crime punished. They wanted her stoned to death.

But Jesus was about to deliver a body blow to their collective spiritual gut.

*Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.*

One by one the accusers dropped the stones on the ground and walked away.

Now alone with the woman—who was, remember, guilty as charged; whose sin, remember, was punishable by death—Jesus asked her:

*Is anyone left to condemn you?*

*No one sir.*

Again, she's guilty. The law says she should be punished (punitive justice). And she has neither confessed anything nor has she repented.

And Jesus says:

*Neither do I condemn you.*

Incredibly, he lets her off the hook! No repentance! No confession! No promise from her to do better next time!

Only grace!

*Now go, and sin no more!*

Rather than dishing out punitive justice, rather than punishing her, Judge Jesus holds out a radically different form of justice:

***Restorative justice.***

He doesn't condemn. He doesn't punish. Instead, through the power of forgiveness, he puts her back together and gives her a brand-new start.

He reconciles her to himself.

He puts to right what she put to wrong.

And all of it an act of unrequested, unearned, undeserved, unexpected grace!

Hell demands a God of punitive justice.

Grace declares a God of restorative justice.

Judge Jesus stands on the side of grace.

*For God was in Christ, **reconciling the world** to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. (2 Corinthians 5:19)*

*For God in all his fullness*

*was pleased to live in Christ,*

**20** *and through him **God reconciled***

**everything** to himself.

*He made **peace with everything** in heaven and on earth*

*by means of Christ's blood on the cross. (Colossians 1:19-20)*

*According to what righteousness will Christ judge when he comes and is manifested as the Son of man-judge of the world? Surely this righteousness will be no different from the righteousness he himself proclaimed in his gospel and practiced in fellowship with sinners and the sick! Otherwise no one would be able to recognize him. The coming Judge is the one who was put to death on the cross. The one who will come as Judge of the world is the one 'who bears the sins of the world' and who has himself suffered the suffering of victims. [Jurgen Moltmann](#)*

### ***Punitive Vs Restorative Justice Comparison***

#### **Punitive Justice**

- God is angry
- God is fair
- *Problem:* Sin as behavior
- *Solution:* Punish behavior
- *Justice:* Punitive
- *Way out:* I accept Jesus

#### **Restorative Justice**

God is loving  
God is gracious  
Sin as broken relationship  
Restore the relationship  
Restorative  
Jesus reconciles me to God

***God's answer to sin is not punishment, but reconciliation.***

Judge Jesus does not dispense punitive justice but uses restorative justice to welcome us home.

Here comes the Judge! And that is good news.

**Why is my faith not good enough for God?** Four men carry their paralyzed friend to Jesus on the mat that has been his home for who knows how long. The friends have heard rumors about the healing powers of Jesus. They're determined to get an audience with Jesus in the hope that Jesus will heal their friend.

When they arrive, they discover that others have the same hope they do. The house where Jesus is teaching is packed inside and out. No matter what they do or say no one will give an inch of space to the men and their paralyzed friend. It is impossible to get to Jesus.

But they didn't come all this way only to leave with their mission unfulfilled.

They spot an opportunity. It's bold. It's reckless. But they are *desperate*.

The house where Jesus is teaching was typical of houses of that area and that day. On the side of the house runs a narrow set of stairs leading to the roof. The roof is slightly slanted to create run off during rain storms. The roof itself is made up of beams with mud and/or dirt and/or grass packed between them.

The men carry their friend up the stairs. It had to have been a chilling, dangerous, hair-raising climb with the stairs being so narrow. But they manage to get to the top of the house and immediately begin tearing away at the mud, dirt, and grass packed between the beams.

Down below Jesus is teaching. Perhaps someone notices bits of grass and mud falling onto his head or maybe Jesus feels it himself. When he looks up, he sees a mat lowered down through the roof, landing at his feet, with a paralyzed man on it.

Luke records what happens next this way in his Gospel:

*"When Jesus saw their faith..."*

While the story ends well for the paralyzed man, this moment, right here, is a crucial part of the story. If we don't get it right, if we misunderstand what Jesus sees, we can

cause untold damage to the faith and lives of people already struggling with challenging issues.

At stake here is faith: The meaning of faith and how faith works. Verses like this one... *When Jesus saw their faith...* and similar verses where Jesus says to someone: *Your faith has healed you*, have caused lots of confusion and heartache for far too many people, acting as a death blow to the faith of many of them.

A lack of healing, an unanswered prayer, the sense of God's absence, all seem to suggest that we didn't have enough faith:

- *Maybe grandma would still be alive if we had had more faith.*
- *Maybe I would have been hired for that job if I had believed more.*
- *Maybe we're struggling financially because we don't trust God enough.*

To misunderstand what Jesus is saying here, to misinterpret what Jesus means by faith, can lead to all kinds of spiritual and emotional damage.

Perhaps a few pictures can help restore our faith in faith:

**Picture #1:** One of my favorite actors is [Victor Mature](#). In the 1940's he portrayed the Biblical character, Samson, in the epic Cecil B. DeMille movie: [Samson and Delilah](#). In an iconic scene near the end of the movie, the defeated, blinded, chained Samson stands between two pillars holding up a temple to the gods of those who captured and blinded him. His hope is to push the two pillars enough to bring the temple down along with all of his enemies.

The whole temple rests on those two pillars.

The Bible says that faith is like that. The temple itself is passive. It's the pillars that are doing all of the work. It's not the "faith" of the temple that holds it up. It's the "faithfulness" of the pillars.

It's not my faith that holds me up. It's the faithfulness of God.

It's not my faith that draws God to me. It's God's faithfulness that creates faith in me.



**Picture #2:** In December of 2016, a ride at Knott's Berry Farm in California became stuck 148 feet in the air. There were 20 people on board, including seven children. Firefighters tried to reach the stranded passengers by using a massive ladder, but it was too short. Fire crews had no choice. They would have to lower each passenger from 148 feet in the air, harnessed to a single rope.

Fire Captain Larry Kurtz said to the 20, "It sounds scary, but... we have very, very strong ropes that have 9,000 pounds of breaking strength on them." Captain Kurtz was trying to create faith in them.

No doubt some of the 20 couldn't wait for what would be the ride of a lifetime. Others may have been apprehensive and still others downright terrified.

But it wasn't their feelings or sense of confidence that got them safely to the ground. It was the strength of the rope and the skills of the rescuers that lowered everybody back to safety. The rope proved faithful and saved them, no matter what they believed about the rope.

**Picture #3:** You're probably reading this while sitting in a chair of some sort. Sitting is an act of faith. It's the act of placing the full weight of our lives onto the chair (much like the temple placing its full weight on the pillars). But the action doesn't begin with us! It starts with the chair. The chair doesn't hold you up because you believe it will. *You believe it will because the chair holds you up.* In fact, the chair will do what the chair does no matter what you believe about it because the chair always "faithfully" holds people up! You believe in the chair because the chair creates faith in you.

My faith doesn't make the airplane fly. I trust the airplane because it flies.

My faith doesn't forgive me. Jesus does. I confess not so that Jesus will forgive me but because Jesus has already convinced me of his forgiveness.

Faith is not first and foremost a cognitive decision I make for Jesus. Faith begins with God's decision for me in Jesus.

It's the grace of Jesus that moves me to believe, not my faith that moves Jesus to act.

Those men came to Jesus because they had heard the stories of his healing power. The actions of Jesus built trust in them. Their faith didn't move Jesus to act. It was the actions of Jesus that moved them to act on behalf of their friend.

What Jesus saw in that moment was their need, their desperation, and their commitment to their friend.

A young boy was out swimming in the ocean. His mom sat watching him from the shore. Suddenly she noticed that something was wrong. Her son was struggling. He sank under the water for a moment and then reemerged, gasping for air.

Paralyzed she frantically screamed at the lifeguard for help. The lifeguard ran to the shore and stood next to the mother. But didn't move. He watched.

Mom yelled at the lifeguard, pleading and begging for him to do something. But he refused to move.

And then the boy seemingly lost all strength. He began to sink.

At that moment the lifeguard dove into the water, swam out the boy, and dragged him back to the shore.

After several moments of CPR the boy was ok, scared, shaken, but ok.

Mom was grateful and yet angry at the lifeguard. "Why did you wait so long? He could have drowned!"

The lifeguard replied: "If I had tried to rescue him while he was fighting to save himself, he would have drowned both of us. It was only when he was helpless, only after he had given up the fight, that I was able to save him."

Faith can take on many different forms:

- Desperation
- Helplessness
- Despair

- Hope
- Confidence
- Trust
- Doubt

The common denominator in all of those expression of faith: Jesus.

The grace, faithfulness, and love of Jesus moves us to trust. Regardless of how that trust expresses itself, Jesus will always be Jesus. And Jesus will always be faithful.

It is not my faith that moves Jesus to me. It is his faithfulness that moves me to him.

On any given day when Jesus looks at your “faith” he might see

- Desperation
- Helplessness
- Trust
- Doubt

But what moves him to act on your behalf is not your faith; not the amount of trust you can conjure up, and not even your belief system.

What moves Jesus to act on your behalf always and only is his unconditional love for you. And that’s a love that will remain faithful and constant no matter what.

**How Can Jesus Still Possibly Love the Church?** Philip Yancey, in his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, tells a tragic, heart-wrenching story related to him by a friend. This friend worked with the homeless and street people of Chicago.

One day a woman approached him asking for help. The woman lived on the streets and made her living on the streets. She needed money to feed her two-year old daughter.

She suddenly broke down and began to pour out her heart. She admitted to the shameful things she'd done in her life and to her daughter to make money, including selling her two year old for sex—not to buy food, but to support her drug habit.

Yancey's friend had heard many horrific stories doing mission on the streets. This story shocked him. Once he finally regained his balance, he asked the woman if she had ever considered going to a church for help.

This time it was the woman's turn to be shocked. She said:

*Church! Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse.*

Hypocritical.

Judgmental.

Mean.

Condemning.

Holier-than-thou.

These are just a few of the criticisms leveled at the Church.

And you don't have to look far to find the evidence:

- Sexual scandals and abuse perpetrated by and covered up by the Church
- Christians shunning people and trying to deny them their rights if their beliefs or lifestyles don't align with those of church-goers
- Acting one way on Sunday morning and the opposite way the rest of the week
- Creating hoops to jump through and rules for people to adhere to in order to attend church
- The blurred lines between the Church and a particular political party or ideology
- Pastors buying private jets with cash donated by their parishioners

The history of the Church doesn't help.

The (very oversimplified) story of the Christian movement is too often one of Christian leaders seeking power, obtaining power, being corrupted by power, and then abusing that power.

We see it in the abuse of the Inquisition, where the Church tried to force people to become Christians or die.

We see it in the abuse of Indulgences, where essentially Christian leaders lied by promising that if people gave more money to the Church, they would spend less time in Purgatory (hell, not the ski resort!).

We see it in the demeaning of women, not allowing them into leadership roles in the Church.

And the list goes on and on.

The Church has provided—and continues to provide—an easy excuse for writing off all of Christianity.

And that's exactly what many people are doing. In fact, it's become somewhat of a spiritual badge of honor to say, *I believe in Jesus but not the Church.*

Which leads to the question, *How can Jesus, after 2000 years of disfunction and abuse, still love the Church?*

One could imagine that by now Jesus has had enough.

Certainly, many of his followers have.

Yet, surprisingly, if not shockingly, Jesus holds a high view of the Church!

The Bible calls the Church *The Body of Christ*, suggesting that Jesus has tied himself and his reputation to the Church.

The Bible calls the Church *The Bride of Christ*, reminding us that Jesus gave his life for her.

It's a head scratcher.

But if you know anything about Jesus, it won't come as a surprise at all. In fact, his commitment to the Church goes to the very heart of the Gospel.

**This is, Remarkably, Why Jesus Still Loves the Church:** In Mark 2 Jesus created a firestorm of shock and scandal both in his inner circle of followers and among the religious elite.

He had the audacity and chutzpah to invite Matthew to follow him.

Matthew was a tax-collector, one of the most hated, despised people in all Israel. Matthew, a Jewish man, worked for the Roman Empire. He collected taxes from his fellow Jews on behalf of the Roman oppressor. While we don't know this for sure, we can guess that Matthew, like many of the other tax collectors, overcharged his fellow Jews and pocketed the difference, becoming rich in the name of the Romans and on the backs of his fellow Jews.

No wonder the Jews despised tax collectors.

No wonder so many were so miffed at Jesus.

But then it got worse.

Later Matthew invited all of his tax-collecting buddies to dinner and Jesus was the guest of honor, sending the Religious Establishment into a full-blown tizzy.

By eating with them Jesus was publicly treating the tax collectors as his friends.

The religious elite had had enough. They asked him to explain himself. They wanted to know how he could possibly identify with people obviously written off by God.

Jesus said to them:

*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.*

**And that's why Jesus still loves the Church!**

Because Jesus loves sinners.

Because Jesus has a fondness for broken people.

Because the Church is made up of messy people:

- People in need of grace
- People in need of hope
- People in need of forgiveness

The Church is not a place for perfect people.

It's not a place for those who have their act together.

It's for people who fumble their way through life. Sometimes getting it right. More often than not getting it wrong.

But always loved by Jesus no matter what.

To be clear, that doesn't give the Church the license to hurt others, judge, or condemn. The Christ the Church follows calls us to a radically different relationship to our neighbors. But the reality is, when you bring messy people together messy things will happen.

And that messy stuff makes it easy to dismiss and diss the Church.

At the same time, it's quite difficult to write off the Church given the impact this messy group of forgiven people has had on the world the last 2000 years.

When a deadly plague hit Rome in the early days of Christianity, the rich and the doctors fled the city for fear of their lives. But the Christians stayed behind. They risked their lives to care for the sick and the dying. And acts of kindness like that have been repeated millions of times since by Christian people over the last 2000 years.

Christians give more money to relief efforts around the world than any other group, and it's not even close.



Historian and author, [Tom Holland](#), in his epic book, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, (US edition), makes the compelling historical argument that our concepts of equal rights and human dignity grew out of the Christian movement. He also argues that modern education, health care, science, literature, and music, as we know it, were shaped by Christianity.

Is the Church messy! Absolutely.

Is the Church transformational! Absolutely.

Does Jesus love the Church? Look to the cross.

Perhaps another way of articulating the relationship Jesus has with the Church is this:

*If* Jesus can't love the Church... he can't love you.

*If* Jesus can't accept the Church... he can't accept you.

*If* Jesus can't stand by the Church... he can't stand by you.

Because you are the Church!

***But***—and this is the Good News:

**Because** Jesus loves the Church... you can rest assured that he loves you.

**Because** Jesus is invested in the Church... you can be confident that he is invested in you as well.

**Because** Jesus is pro Church... you know that he is pro you.

Because you are the Church.

The Church—this

- Messy

- Hypocritical
- Judgmental
- Ignorant

group of people stands as a constant reminder of God's grace:

That Jesus only and always seeks out sinners.

And if he can love the Church, he can love you, too.

**What's Up with the Bible? *I've read the Bible. That's why I'm an atheist!***  
(Online meme)

As a Pastor, and as one who loves the Bible, I get it.

After all, the Bible is filled with violence, either at the hand of God or commanded by God. There's a lot of smiting going on in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament.

Women seem to be demeaned over and over again. Patriarchy seems to reign. The Bible is hard to understand. It's archaic to say the least.

Sure, it has some beautiful poetry. [Psalm 23](#) comes to mind (The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...). Or the [Genesis 1](#) creation story (In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...). Or one of the most moving passages in all of literature, [Luke 2](#) (In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus...)

Sure, it has some interesting insights into life (see Proverbs).

Sure, Jesus, in the Bible, offers a radical view of God and life.

But on the surface, the Bible seems to have far more to overcome than is worth the effort.

Then again, the Bible is the best-selling book in the world. Not bad for a book that's thousands of years old.

Some great and not so great movies have been made based on the Bible from *Samson and Delilah* (starring the late, great [Victor Mature](#)) to *The Greatest Story Ever Told* to *David and Bathsheba* to *The Ten Commandments*.

Many of the "catch phrases" we use in culture come from the Bible:

- Scape goat ([Leviticus 16:8](#))

- Good Samaritan ([Luke 10](#))
- Turn the other cheek ([Matthew 5:39](#))
- A stitch in time... (that's not actually in the Bible... just seeing if you are paying attention)
- David vs Goliath ([1 Samuel 17](#))
- A cheerful heart is good medicine ([Proverbs 17:22](#))
- A house divided against itself cannot stand ([Matthew 12:25](#))
- Do to others as you would have them do to you ([Matthew 7:12](#))

But that doesn't negate the fact that the Bible is filled with so much violence. That the God portrayed there seems to be so cruel and hell-bent on destroying us.

Or... is there another way to read the Bible?

Let's start here: The Bible is a difficult book to read. Because it wasn't written to us. It was written to people who lived thousands of years ago, in a very different part of the world from many of us, with a very different world-view.

They didn't have 21st Century science available to them. They didn't have social media. They didn't have access to the international information we have today.

When we try to read the Bible as if it were written to us, we quickly get confused or frustrated.

Another way of saying it—the Bible needs to be read as the Bible wants to be read, not as we think it should be read from our 21st Century world-view.

For example, the earliest Bible characters, like the cultures around them, lacking modern science, assumed that anything and everything that happened, good or ill, happened at the hands of the gods (or God). If it rained, the gods made it rain. If there was a drought, the gods caused the drought. They didn't have a Farmer's Almanac to guide them in their planting seasons... only a primitive view of the gods.

They had a pre-modern world-view. And as the Bible writers wrestled with issues of God, life, and faith, they did so through that world-view.

It was easy for the people of Israel to assume that their God was like the other gods—petulant, angry, condemning, one to be afraid of. And we see that view of God again and again in the Bible.

But alongside of that view we also see something shockingly radical about God—that the God of Israel is nothing like the other gods. That the God of Israel is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

The God of Israel, unlike the other gods, despises child-sacrifice. The God of Israel is not a tribal God, but the God of all creation—a God who creates out of love and grace, not out of violence like the other gods. The God of Israel created male and female equally, in God's image.

The Bible is an amazing journey of discovery as the people of Israel, living with a pre-modern mindset, surrounded by the gods of other cultures, encounter a radically different kind of divine being: one who loves, saves, and rescues.

That journey reaches its highpoint in the story of Jesus—the One who shows us the true face of God through a cross.

The Bible needs to be read as the Bible wants to be read. That starts with context: The Bible was not written *to* us.

But the Bible was written *for* us.

Once we understand the context and how the text was understood originally, we can then ask the question, what, if anything is that text saying to us today?

**How to Read the Bible:** Whether it's Shakespeare, Tolkien, Kipling, or Alice Walker, the path to fully engaging with authors and their writings is to understand the context: the history behind their stories, the times in which they were written, and the type of literature they used.

The same is true with the Bible.

Far too often the Bible has been misused, misunderstood, dismissed, condemned, or ridiculed because it has not been read as the Bible wants to be read.

Part of reading the Bible as it wants to be read is to understand what the Bible **is not** and what the Bible **is**.

As we read the Bible we want to keep in mind that the Bible **is not**:

- *A self-help book*, although there are many great life-insights in the Bible
- *A rule book* with guaranteed rules to follow for a successful life
- *An answer to every question book*, although it does wrestle with the big questions of life
- *A life-manual*, although it can certainly be useful for living

The Bible, at its core, **is** a *human-divine story*. (Check out this great line from the Netflix Film: [A Boy Called Christmas](#): *The Universe is made up of stories, not atoms.*)

It's human in that the story is rooted in the human experience. It tells stories about:

- Who we are
- How we came to be
- Why we are the way we are
- How we disfigured our humanity
- What our purpose is

It's divine in that God enters into the human story to reveal God's self to us. The Bible is:

- The story of God's passionate drive to claim us, shape us and guide us with his love and grace
- The story of the radical nature of God's love for us
- The story of the depths to which God will go to capture us with that love

The Bible is filled with stories about God reaching out to humanity with grace, in real human settings, seen through the lens of the context, history, world-view, and language of real human beings. As the story moves through history, humanity's understanding of God grows and evolves.

The Bible was written by human beings in a particular context and setting. But somehow their words have life in them—life breathed into them by the Spirit of God. These are not dead words or old stories. These are ancient stories that still speak life to us thousands of years later.

To read the Bible is to interpret the Bible. No one can read it without trying to discern its meaning. So, if we want to read the Bible as the Bible wants to be read—if, regardless of our belief about God or Jesus, we want to understand this unique story—then the following principles can guide us.

*1) Start with the context:*

- When was it written?
- To whom was it written?
- What was their understanding of the world?
- What did this passage/story mean to them in their time in their world?
- Why is the story there?
- What questions/issues is it dealing with?

Context matters.

I received the following email from one of the members of my congregation:

*I was taking a theology course and about the second session we started getting into "creation." I raised my hand and said, "So, Professor, cut to the chase for a minute. Do you believe the account in Genesis is true?"*

*He replied, "Well, Tom, you're going to have to learn to ask better questions."*

*I thought that was rude, but he went on to explain that we could argue that question both ways for the rest of the semester and never get anywhere. Then he said, "Isn't it a better question to ask: What is there in the stories we find in Genesis that were so powerful to the emerging people of Israel that they preserved them virtually verbatim for centuries and then wrote them down when doing so was still very difficult, expensive, and time consuming? Why were they so important, and what does that say about their relationship with God? Isn't that a much more useful question?"*

## *2) Understand the genre or literary type of literature*

The Bible, a "library" of 66 books, is made up of a variety of genres or literary styles: Poetry, History, Parable, Gospel, to name a few. All of them need to be read in the context of their literary style.

We don't read Harry Potter the same way we would read a biography of Abraham Lincoln. We don't read poetry the way we would read the newspaper.

Genre matters.

For example, in describing a time of great joy Isaiah says:

*For you shall go out in joy,  
and be led back in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before you  
shall burst into song,  
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. (Isaiah 55:12)*

If we say we take the Bible literally, then we have to believe that at some point mountains and hills will grow the capacity to break out in song and that trees will grow human arms and hands so they can clap along.



Or, we can literally believe the truth behind the metaphor—that someday all of creation will be renewed under the compassionate rule of God. And that will bring about a world-wide celebration.

Genre matters.

### *3) Apply it to today:*

The Bible was not written to us, but it is written for us.

Once we have context and genre down, we can then ask the question: What is this passage/story/poem/history, saying to us today?

### *4) Let Scripture interpret Scripture:*

The Bible is remarkably consistent in its message. Even though the view of God evolves over time, God's mission in the world does not change.

When struggling with tough Biblical issues, it's helpful to let the Bible interpret itself. And it's important to not build a whole theology on one verse or one historical event in the Bible.

There's the old story about a man who wanted God to speak to him:

*God, when I open the Bible, I pray you will speak to me through the first verse I read.*

He opened his Bible and the first verse his eyes fell on read: *Judas went out and hanged himself.*

So, he tried it again. He opened his Bible and the first verse his eyes landed on said: *Go and do likewise.*

Probably not the best way to let the Bible speak to us.

### *5) Recognize that some things in Bible are more important than others:*

- Loving our neighbor is more important than not picking grain on Sabbath
- Forgiveness more important than head coverings for women in worship
- Mercy and justice are more important than animal sacrifices

6) *Jesus is the key for understanding the Bible*

Jesus is the Word made flesh. Jesus is the ultimate expression of who God is. Jesus is the face of God. If we want to know what God is like, we can look to Jesus.

Jesus is the filter through whom we read the Bible. He's the lens that helps us see what God is like from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21. Jesus is the context for how to interpret, read, and hear what God is saying to us through the Word in writing—the Bible. And it's always important to remember that the God Jesus shows us is the God of the Old Testament.

**Detangling Christianity:** Over the last few months I've heard from people who are stepping back from the Church because they are in the process of "deconstructing" their faith. For a variety of reasons, the faith they currently embrace no longer works for them.

Part of the purpose behind this e-book is to stand alongside those at such a moment in their faith life by saying that doubt, often the precursor to deconstruction, is not only okay, but that it's good for us! Doubt and even deconstruction is the creative space where God's Spirit meets us and expands our understanding of who God is.

I wrote early on that I wanted to provide some "what if's," in the hope of offering a different way of seeing God. Perhaps, for some of us, it's not so much that we need to deconstruct our faith as we need to detangle it from unhealthy, un-Biblical, or toxic understandings of the Gospel.

So below are 21 "what ifs" that provide a summary of what we've been wrestling with throughout this adventure together:

- 1) What if grace is more radical, more inclusive, deeper, wider, and higher than we currently imagine it to be?
- 2) What if God's will that **all** be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth actually happens?
- 3) What if **every** knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father?
- 4) What if Jesus comes not as a punitive judge but a restorative judge?
- 5) What if grace is not bound by time or space or human lifetimes?
- 6) What if God has all of eternity to win us over with his finally irresistible love?
- 7) What if God's grace is stronger than unbelief?

- 8) What if repentance is not our action but God's work in us?
- 9) What if repentance is the response of faith to the kindness of God?
- 10) What if the more orthodox one's faith, the more liberal (lavish, generous) one's understanding of grace?
- 11) What if God isn't angry at us because of our sin but heartbroken over it?
- 12) What if the death of Jesus was not the act of an angry God venting his fiery wrath meant for us onto Jesus, but the act of our creator rescuing us from sin, death, the flesh, and the devil?
- 13) What if the death of Jesus is an act of supreme love not anger?
- 14) What if the power of prayer resides in the faithful character of God and not in our words, persistence, boldness, or consistency?
- 15) What if hell is not a place of eternal damnation but "last stand defiant" face to face encounter with all that is holy and good and gracious, a meeting with the finally irresistible grace of God that purifies one as silver is purified through fire?
- 16) What if we're really dead in our trespasses and only the grace of Jesus can raise us from the dead... not our repentance, not our confession, not our sinner's prayer?
- 17) What if the will is in bondage and can only choose against God?
- 18) What if Jesus frees us from that bondage through a pure act of grace?
- 19) What if the faith to believe is God's work in us, not our decision?
- 20) What if God loves sinners... and only sinners?
- 21) What if God will have the final word over all of us in eternity... and that word is the Gospel?

**Grace is the big idea:** *It's a mind-blowing concept that the God who created the Universe might be looking for company, a real relationship with people, but the thing that keeps me on my knees is the difference between Grace and Karma...*

*You see, at the centre of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics – in physical laws – every action is met by an equal or opposite one. It's clear to me that Karma is at the very heart of the universe. I'm absolutely sure of it.*

*And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to upend all that "As you reap, so will you sow" stuff. Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff. (Bono—U2)*

At the risk of dating myself, one of my favorite singers is the late BJ Thomas. BJ had a string of hits from the 1960's through the 2000's in pop, country, and gospel. Among his hits: *Hooked on a Feeling; Rock and Roll Lullaby; Most of All; New Looks from an Old Lover; What Ever Happened to Old Fashioned Love?; As Long as We've Got Each Other (the theme from the TV series—Growing Pains)*. Not only was he one of my favorite singers, but I had the chance to get to know him as a friend.

Whenever BJ was in the area, I would do my best to take in his concert. One year he was up in Vegas in a big Vegas casino showroom on the Strip. The room was filled with BJ fans. And BJ didn't disappoint. He came out, as he always did, and sang one hit song after another.

Then, in the middle of the show, as he always did, he sang some of his Gospel hits. But when he started to sing *Amazing Grace*, the entire atmosphere of the place changed. Up to that moment people were engaged and singing along. But when *Amazing Grace* started it was if a holy hush descended on that Vegas casino showroom. The room went still. I looked around and saw men and women wiping tears from their eyes. And then I listened in wonder as BJ invited us to sing along, and the entire Vegas casino showroom was filled with a congregation singing *Amazing Grace... how sweet the sound... that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost... but now I'm found... was blind, but now I see.*

It was if Church had broken out on the Vegas strip.

In that moment the audience was blindsided by unexpected, amazing, lavish grace.

Victor Hugo's book, *Les Misérables*, tells the story of Jean Valjean, a decent man who spent nineteen years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister's hungry family. Those nineteen years drained him of his life and passion, turning him into the hardened criminal he was accused of being.

When he was released from prison, he discovered that life outside of prison was even more difficult than life on the inside. Because he was an ex-con, he couldn't get a job, buy food, or find a place to live. He was continually ostracized by the community and harassed by the police.

Finally, near the end of his rope, Jean Valjean found himself on the doorstep of Bishop Myriel, a man known for his compassion. He invited Valjean into his home for dinner and offered him a place to sleep. During dinner Valjean couldn't help but notice the expensive silverware they were using, and a plan began to form in his mind. In the middle of the night he crept downstairs, grabbed the silverware, and ran—right into the police. He tried to convince them that the bishop had given the silverware to him, but they didn't believe him.

They marched him back to the bishop's house to make their accusation. But when the bishop opened the door, he shocked them all. He looked at Valjean and said, "Ah, there you are! I'm glad to see you. You forgot to take these two silver candlestands I gave you along with the silverware. They should get you several hundred francs." And with that he dismissed the police.

Jean Valjean was stunned. He didn't know what was happening. He'd stolen the silverware and the bishop knew it.

But then... Bishop Myriel leaned down and whispered into Jean Valjean's ear: "Forget not, never forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man..."

Jean Valjean had no idea what the bishop was talking about. He'd made no such promise.

The bishop continued: "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!"

Victor Hugo writes that Jean Valjean was dazzled by virtue. Those words of grace broke through his broken life and transformed him into a new man.

Like that Vegas audience, like the woman caught in adultery, like the younger son and his older brother, like the day laborers, Jean Valjean was blindsided by amazing grace.

That's the business God is in. God always and only runs to you with transforming, amazing, reckless grace.

The cross proves it.

May Jesus blindside you with that grace each and every day.

And may that grace invite you to follow him!

Tim Wright

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