

Do You Know My Jesus? Part 5

Let the Lamb Tell the Story

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April 9, 2023 | danielr.net | northbroadal.com

How it Usually Goes

*For whatever was written in former days
was written for our instruction, so that by
steadfastness and by the encouragement of
the scriptures we might have hope.
(Romans 15:4)*

Paul said that reading the Scriptures should give one hope, but is this how it usually goes? A lot of people read the Old Testament and walk away with lots of questions about violence, sacrifices, outdated rules, and what they sometimes call the “God of the Old Testament.” I’m sympathetic towards these questions because I’ve asked them, and continue to ask them, myself. I think this is because we have a pretty good grasp of the timeline of the story, but we miss out on all of the details that give us a glimpse of who God actually is as revealed by Jesus, the Word of God.

A lot of this misreading is because we read it more from a legal perspective.

Here’s how it typically goes.¹

In the beginning God created Adam and placed him into the garden. Good so far? Then, God gave him a wife, and they both did the one thing they weren’t supposed to do: eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Since sin requires a punishment, and since a holy God cannot look on or be in the presence of sin, God cast them out of the garden, which is a kind of

¹ Both of these stories have been told by hundreds and hundreds of Christians, but I am especially indebted to Dallas Burdette, Brad Jersak, and Brian Zahnd for helping me in my journey of thinking about God’s story of redemption. In the actual sermon, I use two chairs to make my point, which is something both Brad and Brian have done. Look them up online; their versions are far more polished than my own.

death, and employed his angels (the one's that have flaming swords) to keep man out of his garden and away from life.

Later on, a man named David was born. He became the king of Israel. But when he became king, he slept with one of his soldier's wives, and, to cover it all up, had him killed in a war. So much for a man after God's on heart, right? God was very angry, and since God cannot look at sin, he sent a prophet to scold David and poured out his wrath on the king.

After choosing Israel, God gave them a covenant to follow so that they could have a relationship with him, but what did they do? They turned away from it again and again, and since God cannot look on sin, he had different kingdoms plunder their cities and send them into exile. The northern tribes would be all but completely wiped out by Assyria. Judah wasn't much better. They sinned and sinned, and God, who cannot look on sin, sent Babylon to carry them away into captivity as well.

Eventually, God sent Jesus to live on this earth and preach to the people. After three years of preaching and performing miracles, Jesus died on a cross. At this moment, God placed all of the sins of the world onto Jesus, he became a curse, and, as our songs say, God poured out the wrath we all deserve onto Jesus until it was completely satisfied. Since he has to punish someone, and, since God cannot look on sin, "The Father turned his face away."

Fortunately, since Jesus was sinless, God raised him up the third day. Now you have a chance to believe in him, but you better do it quickly because God's full wrath is at the door, and, since he cannot look on sin, he is waiting on you to put your trust in Jesus so he can have a relationship with you. So, avoid Hell and trust in him.

Three Problems

Now, from a certain angle or perspective, a lot of the details here are at least mostly true, but I have three problems with the conclusion that is reached when the story is told using this language and in this way, especially the bit about the cross.

First, this story seems to put all of the responsibility on us. In the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin, the shepherd and the woman look for what has been lost *until they find it*. Yes, we are to "work out our own salvation," but this is only possible because "it is God who is working in us" (Philippians 2:12-13).

Second, this story seems to pit God against man. That is, God is just waiting for us to mess up, and when we do, boy are we in trouble! But, thankfully, Jesus has tricked God. Now when God looks at us, he doesn't see what terrible, awful, slime balls we are; instead, he sees the righteousness of Jesus. Now we can be in the presence of God because, while we may still be awful people who deserve death, Jesus has appeased the wrath of the Father.

Third, this story seems to pit God against Jesus. "And on the cross when Jesus died the wrath of God was satisfied." It was? Then why does the Bible talk about God's wrath after the cross? Did Jesus only die for some people, or did he die for the whole world? Or how about these lyrics: "The Father turned his face away" and "...and he died alone for you and me." What Jesus actually said was, "The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me" (John 16:32). And Paul likewise wrote,

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

We think that the Father turned his face away because we think that God cannot look on sin. If that's the case then who is Jesus? Is Jesus not God? And is Jesus not a perfect picture of the Father? And isn't it true that God is like Jesus? So if God can't look on sin, what was Jesus doing for thirty-three years? Was he blind or something? Didn't he eat with sinners, much to the chagrin of the religious leaders? But we think all of this because of two major verses. The first is from Habakuk which says that God's eyes are too pure to look on evil (Habakuk 1:13). But we miss the fact that this is Habakuk making this point, not God, and then asking, "So why do you?" The second passage is from Isaiah 59:1-2 which says,

See, the Lord's arm is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. (Isaiah 59:1-2)

Isaiah then spends 12 more verses talking about their pitiful condition because of sin, but that's not the end of the story. In verse 15, he says that when God looked down and saw what was going on and that no human could fix the problem, he decided to clothe himself in righteousness, justice, vengeance, and salvation, and his arm, which is a reference to Jesus, would bring him and his people victory.

The Lion or the Lamb?

I think one way to explain the difference between this first story and the one I'm about to tell you is by thinking about how we think about Jesus. Jesus is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, right? This is from at least two passages: Genesis 49:9 and Revelation 5:5. And so we read this and think that Jesus walks about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour...of course that's what Peter said about Satan. Instead, when we actually read Revelation 5, something else happens.

In heaven, John saw a scroll that had seven seals. There was no one on heaven or on earth that could open this scroll, so John began to weep. The elders who were worshipping God knew what's up, so they told him not to worry because the Lion of the tribe of Judah has conquered and can open the scroll! Great! So where is he? When John looked around for this mighty Lion, all he saw was a lamb that looked like it had just been slaughtered. This is our God. Though we expect a mighty lion who devours us when we make the smallest mistake or misstep (one sin keeps you out of heaven, which makes for a peaceful life free from anxiety, right?), what we find is a lamb, full of compassion and love for his creation. While Jesus had all of the power and authority of a lion, he refused to exercise it, and he refused to let his followers go down that path; instead, he gave us life, choosing to die instead of taking the lives of his enemies. This is who God is because God is like Jesus.

But before we tell the next story, one note on salvation. When we typically think of salvation, we think of it from that legal perspective of forgiving a debt or having our judgment pardoned, which is language the Bible does use, but it's not the only way the Bible talks about salvation. In Matthew 1:21, an angel said that when Jesus would be born of Mary, he would bring salvation. The Greek word here is *σῶζω* which is the same word used for healing throughout the gospel accounts.² When Jesus would heal someone, the Bible uses the same word it uses to talk about saving someone's soul, so salvation has something to do with healing, not just a legal transaction. So instead of a legal perspective, let's retell this story from a medical perspective, and while we tell this story, let's try to look for the lamb who dies for his people instead of the lion who walks about seeking whom he may devour.

² The most recent person I've heard say this is John Mark Comer in his book *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (2019).

Letting the Lamb Retell the Story

In the beginning, God created Adam and placed him into the garden, but tragedy struck. Adam and Eve ate of tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and God told them that they would die in the day that they ate the fruit. And what does God do? He goes for a walk in the cool of the day to look for his friends. After finding them, he expresses concern for them, and they immediately begin making excuses and playing the blame game. They have died spiritually. God explains the consequences of their actions, he clothes them, promises victory over the snake, and sends them out of the garden. Why? So that they don't reach out and eat of the tree of life and end up staying in that condition forever.

Then, after leaving the garden, they have two sons: Cain and Abel. Both boys offer a sacrifice to God from their labor. Abel offers the first of his flock, but Cain just brings some of his fruit, not the first fruits. When Abel's offering is preferred, Cain begins plotting his murder. What does God do? He goes to Cain, asks him what's up, and warns him not to go down the path he is considering. Of course, Cain does it anyway. That's when God snaps, right? Wrong. That's when God shows up again and asks where Abel is. He tells Cain that he will have the same curse his parents did with the ground not producing as well as it once did (perhaps marking off land as our own and fighting over it isn't the best move?). That's when God leaves Cain? Nope. Cain says his punishment is too great to bear, and he commits to leaving. He also says that God has sentenced him to death. God tells him that none of this is true, and he places a mark on Cain to keep him from harm, but Cain, not God, decides to leave anyway.

Eventually we get to Abraham, but he was originally called Abram. Abram lived with his family and worshipped their gods, so he was pretty much a lost cause. Except that's not true at all. God tells him that he will bless all families of the earth through him. But Abraham got a little impatient with this, so Sarah suggested that he use a sex-slave to produce a child. She then gets jealous, and Abraham lets her run Hagar and Ishmael out of the camp and into the wilderness to die. This is where God turns his back on Abraham and picks someone else to be the father of the nations, but you know as well as I do that God didn't do that. The lamb showed up.

First the lamb showed up to Hagar and Ishmael because they were the real victims here: abused, taken advantage of, and sent to die in the wilderness. He reaffirmed the promise that Ishmael, which means that God hears, would be a great nation. She names God (she was the first

one to do so) “The God who Sees.” God then went to Abraham and told him to get it together, but he also told him that he is going to keep his promise to him. God is way better at keeping his promises than us! Sometimes we make God in our image by suggesting that he throws us out every time we make a mistake, but that’s not who God was, and that’s not who God is.³ So God gives Abraham the sign of circumcision, which to me is like God saying, “Please think with your brain from now on and put your trust in me.”

Then there’s Moses. Moses, like God, looks at Israel’s suffering, and despite being in a position of privilege, wealth, and power, he had pity on them, but he decided to take matters into his own hands and killed an Egyptian. God waited until the statute of limitations was over and showed up in a bush one day to rub it in Moses’s face: “It’s safe to go back to Egypt now, but don’t bother. You are a horrible leader, you stutter when you talk (Aaron is a way better communicator by the way), and you don’t even know who I Am.⁴ They wouldn’t believe you anyway.” Those were actually Moses’s excuses. God shot each of them down, and told him that he had chosen Moses to lead his people.

David became king, and he ended up having an affair with his soldier’s wife, killing the guy off, and trying to cover it up. But God went right to him, called him to repentance, and then promised him that the Messiah would come through Solomon, who would be born of Bathsheba, the very one with whom he had an affair.

Israel sinned and was going to be taken into captivity, but God sent Hosea to tell them that even though they have sinned, and even though they have rebelled against God, the Messiah would come to make it all okay and save them from death and from Sheol, which is the Hebrew word for Hades.

So you don’t have to worry about the God of the Old Testament. It turns out he’s pretty cool too.

Then, if there was any question about God’s character, in the New Testament, Jesus kicks it up a notch. In an ultimate revelation of who God is, he flipped over every table he came across which attempted to alienate and take advantage of God’s children, the least of these.

³ By the way, isn’t this what cancel culture is all about? I think we tend to do that because we can’t forgive ourselves, and since we can’t forgive ourselves, we don’t extend forgiveness to others, even if the stupid Tweet they made was twelve years ago.

⁴ Pun totally intended.

When he came across a woman who had been married five times and was currently living with someone who wasn't her husband, he didn't condemn her. He told her she looked thirsty, offered her the water of everlasting life, and then enabled her to become the first Samaritan missionary. Tradition says that her and her family ended up being put to death for proclaiming the good news of Jesus.

When Jesus came across lepers who were exiled from their city and were forced to shout out "unclean" whenever someone would come near, Jesus approached them despite their shouts, touched them, healed them of their leprosy, and restored them to their place in society.

When Jesus was preaching one day, a paralyzed man was let down through the roof. When Jesus saw the faith of his friends, he forgave the man's sins, and then he healed him. In a culture where people looked at physical ailments as being a judgment of God, Jesus flipped that table too in a dramatic showing of who God actually is.

When some religious leaders brought a woman caught in adultery to Jesus, Jesus didn't pick up a rock to stone the criminal. Instead, he bent down and drew in the dust until everyone left. He then told the woman that he didn't condemn her either, and he told her to stop going down the path she was headed.

When Jesus came across a man named Zaccheus, he didn't ostracize him for being a traitor to his people and a cheat. Instead he befriended him. This led Zaccheus to right his wrongs and give his possessions to the poor. Jesus announced that true healing had come to his house that day.

Now Jesus was short with the religious leaders, no offense to Zaccheus, but when it came to the common people who knew no better, who had no shepherd, and who were victims of their environment, he showed compassion, love, and patience again and again. This is who God is.

And since Jesus was only God, not more or less, they killed him. And even then, God didn't turn his back on the people. Jesus extended the invitation of the kingdom to the thief who hung beside him and he forgave the very ones who rejected and killed him. And God was there the whole time, reconciling the world in Christ.

When Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This wasn't because God had forsaken Jesus, it was because Jesus was quoting from a Psalm which gives lots of details about Jesus's death, and the whole point of the Psalm is that even if it looks like God abandoned Jesus on the cross, he was with him the whole time and didn't look down on the afflicted.

You might be thinking, “This all sounds good, but what about the story of Noah and all of the other stories where disobedient people were judged in the Old Testament?” That’s a great question. Well, it turns out that when Jesus died, he didn’t just chill in heaven for a few days, but Peter says that he went and preached the gospel to the spirits who were in prison, the very ones who were disobedient during the time of the flood (1 Peter 3:19; 1 Peter 4:6).

Then, having the keys of death and Hades in his hands, Jesus was resurrected and led a bunch of captives to freedom by making captivity itself a captive (Ephesians 4:8). Then, he went to the very disciples that abandoned him and commissioned them to preach this beautiful gospel to the world. And if Jesus has the keys of death and Hades, what do you think he’s going to do with those keys?

Many perished in the flood, but Jesus went to preach with them. The people had their languages all mixed up, but God sent the Spirit to cause the apostles to speak in tongues and give them a new language: the gospel of Jesus. David shed a lot of blood and wasn’t allowed to build the temple, but Jesus, the son of David, shed his blood and asks us to be his temple in which all nations can worship and become part of as a spiritual stone.

And even in the book of Revelation, with all of its talk about wrath and judgement and a lake of fire, the end of the book says that the gates of the kingdom of heaven will **never** be shut, and even though there are people outside of the gates, there is an open invitation for one to wash their robes and enter the city to receive healing that’s available to all the nations. “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come!’”

Then there’s us. We suffer addictions to drugs, alcohol, porn, and even our work and busy lives. And yet as hard as we try to run away, there’s God in relentless pursuit, looking for the lost sheep until he finds it, sweeping the house to find the coin, watching for his son from the front porch every single day, and when he finds us, he throws a huge party welcoming us home. He then asks us to participate with him in sharing this beautiful resurrection gospel. And even then, when we fail and lose our way, there he is again. It truly is a love that will never let go. It truly is a reckless love. It truly is a love that never fails.

Do you know this Jesus? Do you know my Jesus? Because this is who he is with no apologies at all. Try as we might to make him into our image—petty, unforgiving, three strikes and you’re out—here he comes to flip that table too and call us into a renewed relation with him. And that, my friends, is some good news.