

Jesus, the Bible, and the Sacrifices

Everything we do in our lives is hampered, to some extent, by the blindness of our fallen nature. Reading the Bible is no exception. We think it ought to be a simple exercise: just pick up the book, read it, and do what it says. But our sin means it will never be that simple.

Take our human fixation with the death penalty for example. In Genesis 3 Adam and Eve are hiding in the garden because they assume the Lord is going to execute them for their crimes. After all, didn't the Lord say "If you eat the fruit you will die"? We, like Adam and Eve, automatically assume that the Lord means "Eat the fruit and I will kill you." This way of reading continues in the story of Israel. When the Lord tells Israel to bring animal sacrifices in worship we assume that he is saying "I'd like to slit your throats and roast you on an altar, but if you'll slit a lamb's throat and roast him instead then I'll be able to stand to have you sinful people around me." Later, we read our death penalty fixation into Jesus as well. When John the Baptizer says "Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" we assume he means "Behold the ultimate sacrifice, the one who will take the beating from God that God would really like to give to all of us." We think all this makes sense. We hate sinners, so the Trinity must hate them too. We want to execute law breakers, so the Father must want the same thing. Then the Holy Spirit says "Sorry to rain on your parade, but you're blind as bats and you're reading the Bible in your blindness not in the light of who Jesus is."

In the light of Jesus the warning in the garden of Eden is like the warning a loving Father gives to his children: "Don't play in the street or you'll get hit by a car and killed." A loving Father doesn't say "Do wrong and I'll kill you." The loving Father was saying to Adam and Eve "There is no life outside my life. If you eat the fruit and thus try to live without me then you will find only non-existence (death) on that path." In the light of Jesus the sacrificial system of Israel is not to meet the Father's need for blood but rather a condescension to Israel's need for blood. Steeped in the blinded, pagan world in which they lived, Israel could not imagine approaching their God without a sacrifice. So the Son tells them "Since you can't come to me without a sacrifice, bring a lamb, whose blood and gentleness will prophesy of me in the flesh as the man Jesus." The Word of God gives Israel the sacrificial system to help them, not to help himself. And therefore, when we call Jesus the lamb of God, we're not talking about the lamb who changes the Father but the lamb who changes us. The lamb whose blood is the sign to us that human nature has been received into the Holy of the Holies—the inner sanctum of the Triune Life. The blood that thus assures us that our Father in heaven is not a "hanging judge" (like we would be) but rather a loving Father who has embraced humanity in his Son Jesus.

It makes a difference to read the Bible in the light of Jesus doesn't it? And that is the theme of this month's issue: reading the Bible in the light of who Jesus is. May we read the words of Scripture and see nothing but Jesus there.

~ Jonathan Stepp

Who-ology?

Go to any evangelical seminary and sign up for the Hermeneutics class, and you will probably be taught that studying the Bible has to do with determining the author's message to his original audience, and then applying that message to your life today.

This is fine as far as it goes, but there's something missing. It implies that the object of our study is the author's mind. That when we have the author's thoughts, we have the primary data required for our theological endeavor.

This is entirely appropriate if we are engaging in Paul-ology, John-ism, or Peter-onomy. But it is inadequate if we are attempting Theo-logy. In theology, the object of our study is God (Theos), not the biblical authors. In theology our encounter is not with Peter, James and John, but with Father, Son and Spirit.

Few would disagree with this, but the difficulty arises when we ask how this works out in our actual process of studying the scriptures. In what way does my engagement with Paul (or any other biblical author) become an encounter with the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit?

I have spent the last couple years seeking to DO this, and as I've muddled through, I've tried to pay attention to HOW I'm doing it. And one thing I notice is that I have begun to engage with the author in two distinct phases, each quite different from the other.

In Phase 1, I am doing what my Hermeneutics teacher taught me to do; I am trying to get inside the author's mind, to hear what he has to say. For example, when I study an epistle of Paul, my first task is to study at Paul's feet, to be taught what he knows. As Master Yoda is wise in the ways of The Force, the apostle Paul is wise in the ways of the Great Dance. He is a master of the art of submitting to the mind of Christ, and he is worth learning from. Even more than that, Paul is an apostle who has special authority for teaching us about the Dance. As such, we are his students.

But just as Master Yoda is not The Force, Master Paul is not the Great Dance. Rather, he is guiding me toward participation in the Dance that is greater than both of us.

So as I enter Phase 2, I continue being Paul's student, but I begin to function also as his colleague. I recognize that his mind is wrestling with Someone, and that he has trained me to join him in wrestling. It is here where my encounter with Paul becomes an encounter with the Triune One. It is here where, through the Spirit, both Paul and I become apprentices to Jesus himself in his life with Father.

We see clearly in Paul's epistles how he wrestled with what would later be called the Trinitarian nature of God. And as the early church joined him in wrestling, they were able to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity. Paul did not articulate this doctrine himself; rather, the reality of the Trinity was what his mind wrestled with. And today we recognize the Trinity as the invisible reality that makes all of Paul's thinking make sense.

This same dynamic occurs in other areas of thinking and living:

Children study at the feet of their parents, so that they will eventually become fully-functioning adults who join their parents in the shared quest of living wisely and well.

Abraham Lincoln studied at the feet of the Founding Fathers, many of whom embraced slavery.

But as he joined them in their quest, he began to apply the principle of Liberty in ways they never could have imagined. By moving beyond Jeffersonian-ism, Adams-onomy and Madison-ianism, he moved the U.S. closer to the ideals grappled with in the Constitution. In so doing, he made his country MORE Constitutional, not less.

William Wilberforce studied at the feet of theologians who used the Bible to justify slavery. But as he joined them in submitting to the mind of Christ, he saw things they had not.

Einstein studied at the feet of Newton, and later when he became Newton's "colleague," he became able to see things even Newton couldn't.

It is right and good for us to apprentice ourselves to the masters—Peter, Paul, John, etc. And also to learn from the masters who came later—Justin, Gregory, Athanasius, Cyril, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Barth, and Torrance. But how sad for us if we stop there!

The true theologian does not settle for being a Athanas-ian, Luther-ite, Barth-ian, or even a John-ist or a Paul-ologian. The writings of the masters (even the apostolic masters) are the means to an end, not an end in themselves. We apprentice our minds to theirs, but only for the purpose of our shared pursuit—the mind of Theos Himself.

~ John Stonecypher

Not By Might

Readers of *The Adopted Life* are used to reading about Jesus and his impact on humanity in cosmic terms. Because of who he is, his effect upon everything and everyone is HUGE! Jonathan Stepp's booklet *Jesus is... A Study Guide To The Good News of Jesus* (available on *The Adopted Life* website, www.theadoptedlife.org/books) is no exception to this way of thinking about Jesus.

When I got to the section entitled "Jesus Is...The One Who Believes," I really connected with the section where he wrote "The Holy Spirit is trying to awaken us to the fact that we cannot get ourselves adopted, or save ourselves, by the exercise of our own, sin damaged belief." This made me think about my own recent musings on the scripture passage in Matthew 19:13-26. In this passage, the story of Jesus' interaction with children and the so-called "Rich Young Man" (RYM for short) is described.

Basically, Jesus tells us to come to him as little children. Children have no great abilities, skills or resources with which to enter his Kingdom; instead, they just trust Him! In fact, the children were BROUGHT to Jesus, and Jesus reminds us that "the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

Then the scene shifts to the RYM. He asks Jesus the WRONG QUESTION: "What GOOD THING must I DO to GET eternal life?" Jesus—who had just revealed to us that it is NOT about our ability to DO anything (we are like helpless little children, and that's OK!)—seems to go along with the Rich Young Man's flawed logic by actually describing what it looks like to PARTICIPATE in ("enter") the adopted life Christ has already given us. The RYM is totally wrapped up in what he must DO to GET IN (Hey! He's already in and doesn't realize it!), and it all sounds too hard.

Who could blame him? He has grown up in a culture that has given itself WHOLESALE to the idea that it is ALL ABOUT WHAT I MUST DO - "RULES R US!" The RYM goes away sad. He thinks Jesus is telling him that he must work up his own perfection to GET eternal life. Then Jesus

tells his disciples that famous statement: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" - again, talking about how hard it is for us humans, in our fallen minds and in our OWN power to participate in the adopted life we've already been given by grace. Jesus is NOT describing how we are adopted in the first place, but the disciples don't get it.

Here is the really amazing and telling part. Notice the reaction of his disciples: They are flabbergasted by Jesus' statement! The various translations have them "astonished," "staggered," "exceedingly amazed," or "astounded!" Ever wonder about their reaction? It is because they too had bought into their culture's belief (ours too!) that it is up to them and their ability, their belief, to obtain salvation.

When your theology is all about what YOU must do, what YOU must believe in order to make salvation HAPPEN, then you think that the best and brightest, most advantaged, and the richest, MUST be the MOST able to make it happen! When Jesus says that even these folks can't make it happen, they say "Then who in the world can be saved?" He brings us back to the little children episode theologically when he replies "Humanly speaking, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE. But with God everything is possible."

Whew! What a relief! It is not our ability or even our faith, but HIS ability and faith alone that brought us into the eternal relationship with the Father, by the Spirit. Our righteousness doesn't get us in and our failures don't keep us out. It is all by the GREAT grace and mercy of our loving Triune God. Thank you Jesus!

~ Jerome Ellard

Zechariah 4:6: Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD Almighty.

The Eye of the Needle

There have been many attempts to explain—and explain away—Jesus’ statement in Matthew 19:24 that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom.” For example, some commentaries try to connect the “eye of the needle” to a particular gate in Jerusalem through which it was difficult—but not impossible—for a camel to pass. Many rich people like this interpretation.

Such interpretations are rooted in the sort of Bible reading that John Stonecypher warns us about on page 2 of this month’s issue (in his article “Who-ology?”). It’s a way of reading that says “if we can just figure out the original meaning of this phrase by connecting it to some obscure element of Jewish culture, language, or history then we can find a way to make this verse easier to accept.”

I think Jesus was talking about the tiny eye of a sewing needle and a big, spitting, stinking camel. In other words he meant “It’s impossible.” Because, as Jerome just eloquently explained to us above (in “Not By Might”) no one enters the Kingdom by his own effort. We have all been brought into the Kingdom by Jesus. That’s the easiest thing in the world - or the hardest, depending on what you think of Jesus.

~ Jonathan Stepp

Let’s Be Distracted by Jesus and the Trinity!

When was the last time you were so distracted by Jesus, the Pearl of Great Price, that you “sold everything you had” to be with Him, even as He is already with and in you (Col 1:27)? When were you so distracted by Jesus recently that you missed out on work, or overtime at work? Missed supper? Missed TV? Gave your family inheritance to the body of Christ (John 12:1-8)?

For some of you, when was the last time your heart burned for relating with the Trinity like it burned in fellowship with others about the Kingdom, the “Place of Safety,” or the “Wonderful World Tomorrow”? Burned with delight for Jesus like it used to burn with delight about the Sabbath...the Holy Days...the Beast of Revelation... the European Union?

When is the last time you stood up to your boss to defend your time off to spend with Jesus and His Body on a Sunday (which is still your right and privilege under the laws of the United States, if you live there)? And NOT because it was required as church law or legalism, but because it was required by you in your Union and Adoption with Christ AND the fact that you WANTED to be with Him and His Body on earth (because you have learned by relating with Him that you just can't or won't do anything apart from Him and other like minded believers!)?

My point is not that I, you, or we should return to former ways or feelings as we experienced them in the past, or to try to drum up this zeal—because, honestly, we can't! My point is to help us question our obvious lack of passion for the Person of Jesus Christ and the Trinity in His Church as contrasted with our desires for other things! I want to help us question how we can know about our union and adoption with God in Christ (the Pearl!) and still be barely breathin', still missing something (Someone?)!

This lack of passion is not something that I am making up. It is what I experience, through

constant conversation and observation as I relate regularly with the Body of Christ, especially other pastors. Everyone in the Church that I know and speak with regularly seems to be noticing a malaise in the Church combined with a lack of vitality and life that we know, tacitly, should be seen and experienced in the Church. The one thing I DO notice in these conversations is that despite the fact that Eternal Life is what we are promised and rewarded with in our Adoption, and even though Eternal Life is primarily relational (John 17:3), many of us keep searching for some thing, or some purpose to do, rather than some Persons to relate with.

Through the witness of the Spirit in scripture we can see that unusual and radical things tend to accompany Personal Fellowship with Jesus or at the sight of Jesus Himself! Below is one of many examples I think we ought to consider at a time like this, considering that the Adopted Life is primarily about relating with the Trinity and Humanity (Luke 10:27) even more so than understanding and explaining doctrine (John 9:39-40), or even finding more programs and principles to apply. Consider Luke 10:38-42:

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Hmmmmmmmm.....

MARTHA	MARY
LUKE 10:38-42	LUKE 10:38-42
Martha was SERVING	Mary was SITTING
Martha was WORRYING	Mary was WORSHIPPING
Martha was HURRYING	Mary was HEARING
Martha was busy with the WORK	Mary was attentive to the WORD
Martha was troubled about many things	Mary was concerned about one thing
Martha was trying to UNDERTAKE	Mary was trying to UNDERSTAND
Martha was OVER-OCCUPIED	Mary was OCCUPIED WITH CHRIST
Martha was LABORING	Mary was LEARNING and LOVING
Martha was ENERGETIC	Mary was ENJOYING the Lord

(Source: Middletown Bible Church in Middletown, CT.)

I don't know about you, but even though I KNOW and believe that both of these ladies are Adopted, Included and doing in the service of Jesus, Mary's distraction with Jesus sounds more like the kind of renewal I think the Church is REALLY looking for. I KNOW it's what I am looking for!

As a pastor friend of mine said recently:

Isn't it interesting that the times we feel most refreshed and energized in the Lord is when we are spending time with him on a sabbatical rest or retreat where we are not busy except with the Lord in prayer? And when we look back on it, it was the negative consequences of other distractions that finally drove us there to the quiet times for renewal?

I told him I thought he was preaching Gospel, literally the Person of Jesus Himself!

I personally think that the Church is really looking to be more involved with the Trinity! Not just talking about Jesus and the Trinity, or having Jesus and the Trinity in our Mission Statements, or doing something for Jesus and the Trinity, but actually spending MUCH time relating with Jesus and the Trinity and especially together as the Church in prayer. Hey, if we can't pray together, what in the world CAN we do together!? When we proclaim to people that relating more with Jesus is what you are looking for, and that actual fellowship with the Trinity is the Reward you are desiring, they are like "What?! Are you kidding me? I want to know what Jesus wants me to do! I want to know what thing/s He is going to give me! I want something more than Christianity 101, I want the deeper things!"

And the Truth is, there is no deeper thing than Jesus! There is no greater reward than the Trinity Himself! There is no greater thing to do than to embrace, speak to and relate with Jesus, the Pearl, and His Father in the Communion of the Spirit. Our overlooking and rejection of that "simple" and "basic" truth is only an admission of how far off-track we have gotten from the Gospel—God the Father, Son and Spirit Himself, and where we really need to go to work in the grace of the Trinity!

We've tried every other kind of distraction and what has that led to but MORE weary tiredness and lack of vitality? Why not try being distracted by JESUS and see what happens? Maybe the real work we need to engage in as a Church is the kind that looks radically different and "lazy" to the untrained eye. The kind of work Mary got engaged in by being fascinated and distracted by Jesus, the Person Himself.

~ Tim Brassell

Martha and Mary

**Martha in the kitchen, serving with her hands;
Occupied for Jesus, with her pots and pans.
Loving Him, yet fevered, burdened to the brim.
Careful, troubled Martha, occupied for Him.**

**Mary on the footstool, eyes upon her Lord;
Occupied with Jesus, drinking in His Word.
This the one thing needful, all else strangely dim:
Loving, resting Mary, occupied with Him.**

**So may we, like Mary, choose the better part:
Resting in His presence--hands and feet and heart;
Drinking in His wisdom, strengthened with His grace;
Waiting for the summons, eyes upon His face.**

**When it comes, we're ready--spirit, will, and nerve;
Mary's heart to worship, Martha's hands to serve;
This the rightful order, as our lamps we trim--
Occupied with Jesus, then occupied for Him!**

--Lois Reynolds Carpenter

Source: Middletown Bible Church in Middletown, CT.

The Bible and the Nicene Creed

Consider this: virtually every Protestant denomination includes in its statement of beliefs a statement on the nature of the Bible. Most of these statements speak very clearly about the nature of the inspiration of the Bible. Many churches make their statement on the Bible the very first statement in their beliefs - before their statement on the Trinity or the person of Christ.

Compare that with the Nicene Creed. (Here's a link to the text of the Creed: <http://www.gci.org/aboutus/beliefs>.) The Nicene Creed contains no doctrinal statement on the Bible. Not a word about its inspired status or how and to what degree it is authoritative.

Does that mean that early Christians didn't value the Bible? Of course not. The writings of the Church Fathers, including those present at Nicea, are filled to overflowing with quotes from the Bible.

Here's what I think it means: That the early Church worshiped the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, not a book. They looked to Jesus as the Word of God and the revelation of the Triune Life. They relied on the Holy Spirit to guide them into all truth. The Bible was part of their lives, but the Trinity was the center of their lives. They looked to Jesus in order to make sense of the Bible, they didn't look at the Bible to make sense of Jesus. Perhaps we could all learn something from their perspective.

~ Jonathan Stepp

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