

- ***Last week we explored the absolutely essential and majestic confession of the supremacy of Christ found in Colossians 1:15-20. If you missed this, I highly encourage you to give it a listen, or just read my raw message notes.***
- ***If you had to sum this passage up in one phrase, it is this: Jesus is God. Jesus is the fullness, the totality, the completeness, the exact representation and active presence of God.***
- ***In verse sixteen, we see this:***

Colossians 1:16 *For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.*

- ***When we looked at this, we talked about how Paul isn't just describing physical creation, but also spiritual creation- both good and evil. These are the "Power structures of the universe", including the power structures and systems by which humanity operates, again, both good and evil.***
- ***THEN Paul says these entities and forces are not only created BY Christ, they are created FOR Christ.***
- ***SEEKING to unpack that, I said this:***
- ***"This means that every government, institution, or person who has ever brought harm and suffering to another human being are themselves creations of Christ. The systems of power they use to carry out their exploitation is a creation of Christ, even though distorted. AND, their plans against Christ and creation will ultimately be used by God for His purposes, even His Glory.***
- ***NOW, HERE, I need to make a ...***

† **A crucial clarification**

- ***My clarification regards the idea that "human evil, human suffering... will be used by God for His purposes, even His Glory."***
- ***Do you see a potential problem here? Let me put it in terms of a question... and this is a question believers have wrestled with for centuries- and will likely continue to do so!***
- ***This is also a question, a topic, where just in this audience we may have very different understandings. If this is something you've really thought about, your position (for lack of a better word), may be different from the position I am going to try and stake out- although hopefully humbly so.***
- ***AND, this is a question, a topic, that if followed down paths I am not going to address today, brings to light some of the most profound questions Christians have wrestled with since the birth of the church. HOW DO WE understand the concepts of God's sovereignty and human free will? What do we do with scripture, mostly in the OT, but also some in the NT, where it seems God is doing things we would view as unjust, even evil, if viewed***

through the lens of how we understand of right and wrong- AND also through the lens of scriptural teaching about what is right, wrong, just, kind, and loving?

- **WHEN IT COMES DOWN TO IT, WHO IS GOD? WHAT IS GOD LIKE? WHAT IS THE CHARACTER AND NATURE OF GOD?**
- **SO- THE QUESTION: DOES GOD use human suffering- especially human suffering carried out by other humans- for His purposes and Glory?**
- **Based upon scripture, and perhaps some of your own stories, we would answer YES.**
- **A NT example, among many, is the book of Acts- multiple times we see Paul and other disciples suffer, even die, at the hands of evil men- and yet, this suffering was a significant part of the story of how the gospel spread across the Mediterranean world.**
- **Greatest example, of course, is Jesus, and the cross. Hebrews 12:3... “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart”**
- **There are innumerable stories- perhaps from your own life- where you can look back on a tragedy or time of profound difficulty- even your own sin- and see how God worked to redeem those times and bring about healing, growth, and even goodness.**
- **Does God work through suffering, even evil, to bring about his purposes and reveal his glory and goodness? YES.**
- **HERE’S THE CLARIFICATION- the position I want to stake out. HEAR...**
- **God is PRESENT in all things.**
- **God is at work to bring redemption, reconciliation, healing, and goodness into all things.**
- **God is aware of all things- God is never surprised!**
- **BUT, God IS NOT THE AUTHOR of sin.**
- **God is NOT THE AUTHOR of injustice.**
- **God is NOT THE AUTHOR of human suffering.**
- **God does not cause, or ORDAIN (term used by some theologians) anything that if done by human beings, by any measure, would be considered to be sinful, even evil.**
- **HOW can I say this? Who I am, who is ANYONE, to say what God can and can’t do, will or won’t do.**
- **Because of this fundamental principle.**

God will never violate His nature in order to carry out His purposes. THIS DEMANDS THE QUESTION- WHAT IS THE NATURE OF GOD? ANSWER- and the full, complete, and exact revelation of God’s nature- what God is like- is Jesus!

† **God is like JESUS**

- **NOW- you mean hear this and say, well, yes. Of course! Jesus is God, so God is like Jesus!**
- **But the implications of this are profound, so let’s take a minute to look at this through scripture.**

- **What we see is that this idea- that the nature of God is seen IN CHRIST- this is the CHORUS of the NT.**

Colossians 1:15, 19 *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him...*

Colossians 2:2-3, 9 *My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*

- **We'll get to this, but hear this! "The Mystery of God- the unknowable fullness, HUGENESS, totality of God, the treasures of wisdom and knowledge ABOUT God- this is all summed up, and revealed to us, IN CHRIST" Paul sums this up....**

⁹ *For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,*

Hebrews 1:3 *The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.*

- **KEY- "The Son" refers to Christ in his 'bodily form'- the life of Christ as he lived ON THIS EARTH, culminating in his death, burial, resurrection.**
- **The word for this is the INCARNATION- God taking on human form, God WITH US, the WORD MADE FLESH....**

John 1:1-2, 14, 18 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning... ¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.*

- **In Christ we see God.**

John 10:30 *"I and the Father are one."*

- **There is NOTHING true about Christ, that we see revealed in Christ, that is not ALSO true about the father.**
- **This is what Jesus proclaimed to Philip....**

John 14:8-10 *Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." ⁹ Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? **Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.** How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.*

- **When John began his first letter, he may have been thinking of that encounter, when he wrote...**

1 John 1:1-4 *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ² The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴ We write this to make our joy complete.*

- **You can feel the intensity, the emotion, of John’s words. WE HAVE BEHELD GOD! In Christ, God has been seen, touched, and heard.**
- **One more...**

2 Corinthians 4:4-6 *The god of this age (little G) has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the **glory of Christ, who is the image of God.** ⁵ For what we preach is not ourselves, but **Jesus Christ as Lord**, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. ⁶ For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.*

- **When we look at the face of Jesus, the life and nature of Jesus, we see the Glory of God.**
- **SO... LET’S TAKE THE NEXT STEP...**

† If God is like Jesus, then what is God’s greatest and highest nature?

- **HUGE QUESTION! Christianity’s greatest minds have debated, written about, for ages.**
- **One of most significant ways this question has been frame is....**

Is God pure WILL, or is God pure LOVE?

- **PURE WILL: Concept that God’s greatest, essential nature is his SOVEREIGNTY. Word means ‘supreme power and authority.’ Idea that the highest, defining reality of WHO GOD IS, is that being ALL POWERFUL, ALL KNOWING, He can do anything he wants, anytime, for any reason... and be justified in doing anything for any reason, because he is GOD.**
- **This reasoning places God’s sovereignty ABOVE the concept of goodness and love. ANYTHING God does is by definition GOOD, because GOD IS GOD.**
- **RESTATE- In this reasoning, “God is free to do anything he wills, and if he does, because he is GOD, this makes it good. Gods will, in this understanding, determines what is Good” (Jersak)**
- **THUS, theologians like John Piper will say that the atrocity of 9/11 was ‘ordained by God’. Since God is all powerful, this means he governs all evil, meaning he- at least at times- ordains evil for his purposes. Piper (firsttracks) said “Where would we turn if we didn’t have a God to help us deal with the very evils that he has ordained come into our lives?”**
- **You hear the reasoning. God is justified to bring evil into human lives in order to accomplish his purposes. God is sovereign, therefore anything God does is good and right.**
- **BUT THINK... This leads to the difficult theological predicament that the perpetrators of 9/11 were committing a profound sin, while God, who ordained the event in His sovereignty, was acting out of love and goodness.**
- **BUT IS THIS TRUE? IS THIS the conclusion of scripture? IS THERE ANOTHER UNDERSTANDING?**
- **I, along with many others, assert that NO, GOD DOES NOT ORDAIN EVIL and human suffering, and YES, there is another understanding.**

- **THE ALTERNATIVE is that while God IS SOVEREIGN- his sovereignty is NOT his greatest and highest nature. Sovereignty is something completely true ABOUT GOD, but it is not defining essence OF GOD.**
- **GOD'S ESSENCE IS LOVE. The full, complete, and exact revelation of who God is- of what God is like- is JESUS.**
- **THUS we hear John proclaim, looking at God through the lens of Jesus...**

1 John 1:5 *This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.*

- **Turn with me to 1 John 4:7... Johns famous confession of the essential love of God, and what that means for us...**

1 John 4:7-12,16 *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

- **If we try to comprehend God in anyway other than love, we do not know God, this is not God!**

⁹*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. (JESUS is the revelation of God's love, of God's true nature)* ¹⁰*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

¹⁶*And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.*

- **SO, God's nature, God's essence- is at work in us, WHEN WE LOVE.**
- **KEY- GOD WILL NEVER LEAD US to act in a way- even if we think it is FOR GOD'S PURPOSE- or defending God's work, defending God's nature- that violates God's love as we see it portrayed for us IN CHRIST.**
- **Partially quote one author... "whatever image of God we conceive- or anything we think God is leading us to do on his behalf- if it doesn't look like Jesus, we have got it wrong.**
- **IF THIS IS TRUE- then the next step is to start to get practical... IF GOD IS LIKE JESUS, what does this look like? What will this look like IN US? Just a few thoughts, but I think, very important...**

† God doesn't **COERCE**

- **Imagine Jesus in the garden of gethsemane. "FATHER... is there any other way?"**
- **Many times the church has said, people claiming to act in the name of God have said "YES, there's another way, and it is FORCE. It is LAW, punishment, and fear. It is coercion. If people will not obey you voluntarily, we will make it compulsory.**
- **We see this embodied in the reaction of Peter when Judas and the Roman guards came to arrest Jesus, and Peter famously pulled his sword and cut of the ear of the high priests servant. Do you remember what Jesus said?**

Matthew 26:52-54 *“Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”*

- **HEAR! Jesus says “Don’t you think I have the power to make this all go away? Don’t you think I have the power to call on the armies of heaven to defeat my enemies through violence and coercion? BUT I WILL NOT! That has NEVER BEEN THE FATHERS PLAN. THAT IS NOT MY NATURE, IT IS NOT THE FATHERS NATURE.**
- **We see this outside the gospels as well...**

Romans 2:4 *Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?*

- **What is God’s nature to bring us to repentance, to bring about change and transformation in our lives- and in society? KINDNESS. PATIENCE. LOVE.**

Titus 2:11-12 *For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. ¹² It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,*

- **WE DESIRE that our society would come to say “no to ungodliness... to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives”... HEAR ME! Part of the foundation of a good and just society is Good and Just law! BUT THE TRANSFORMATION OF OUR SOCIETY won’t happen through the power of law! It will happen through the power of God’s Grace that we see in the life, the character, and the self-sacrificing love of Jesus. THIS IS THE CHURCH’S calling to the world- to be the presence of the Grace of God.**
- **You see, human condition says “victory through overwhelming force- through coercion.” The cross proclaims victory through overwhelming love.**
- **NEXT STEP- big one...**

† **God doesn’t CONDEMN**

- **At some point this should be an entire sermon, but walk with me here...**
- **IF YOU want to paint a portrait of God as vengeful, angry, wielding condemnation against sinners, you can find scripture to do so. Go read Jonathan Edward’s famous sermon, “Sinners in the hand of an angry God.”**
- **But we are looking at Jesus, for the NT proclaims that God is like Jesus. Let’s go to the single most famous verse in the NT....**

John 3:16-19 *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

- **God did what? NOT. But we must continue...**

¹⁸ *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.*

- ***This is incredibly important. Jesus says “Whoever does not believe- surrender to, trust- in God’s son stands condemned already”..... We easily read this and think ‘This means that if a person doesn’t believe in Jesus, then God will condemn them.’***
- ***But that is NOT what Jesus said. Jesus said that apart from Him, and the work that God would do through him, we are ALREADY condemned.***
- ***YOU SEE, ‘Condemnation’ here is a word describing our state of existence apart from the goodness, the mercy, the forgiveness, restoration, and love of God.***
- ***Humanity’s condemnation is not at the hands of angry God- humanities experience of condemnation is the result of sin. This is what Paul points to when he says this in Romans 6:20-21...***

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness.²¹ What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!

- ***It is our sin, not God’s anger or God’s nature, that leads to condemnation. In John 3, this is what Jesus goes on to say...***

¹⁹*This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.*

- ***We experience condemnation because we love darkness. We love pride, self-determination, power, and control. Jesus said we stand condemned because of our evil deeds... and the God who came to set us free from the bondage of evil will NEVER, NEVER, lead anyone to do evil things, even if we try to convince ourselves that we would do these things for God’s glory.***
- ***We recently looked at what may be the most poignant image of the non-condemning nature of God in Christ, when the woman caught in adultery was thrown down in front of Jesus by the keepers of the law. After Jesus drove away the woman’s accusers....***

John 8:10-11 *Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”¹¹ “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”*

- ***If you want to explore this more, Go read Romans 8***

Romans 8:1-4 *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*

- ***Sin condemns, and Christ came as the antidote to sin. In Christ, God is the deliverer from condemnation, not the author of condemnation.***
- ***One more example... IN CHRIST we see that...***

✠ **God is self-sacrificing and humble**

- ***We’ll come back to this later, because there is so much here, but just a quick thought.***
- ***Where do we see proof that God is self-sacrificing and humble. THE CROSS.***

1 Peter 3:18 *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.*

- *You don't have to look too far in today's politics to find leaders preaching the ideology that WE are the righteous, and as the righteous, it is our right, our duty, to rule. We need to reign. We need to claim dominion on behalf of God.*
- *We may say, "That is an extreme view", and hopefully it is. But history- including the history of the church- is full of injustice perpetrated and justified in the name of God. The idea that the ends justifies the means is always a temptation, especially when we think the 'ends' is protecting or standing up for God, or God's values.*
- *Because In radical contrast, we see THE RIGHTEOUS ONE, Jesus Christ, suffering, lowering himself, sacrificing himself, and doing so for the benefit of the unrighteous. We see God-in-Christ doing this to bring us to himself.*
- *In his book "A more Christ-Like God", Bradley Jersak makes the point that Jesus extended his 'Radically safe, welcoming Father-love, to people BEFORE they repented. BEFORE they had faith.'*
- *As Paul would write in Romans 5:8... "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this.... HIS NATURE AND CHARACTER IN THIS... While we were STILL SINNERS, Christ died for us.*
- *In Matthew 11, Jesus extended his invitation to all who are weary and burdened... I'm going to read this, but I want you to consider that when Jesus gives this invitation, it is also GOD GIVING this invitation. Whatever image of God you may have, here we see the image of God, fully portrayed In Christ. GOD SAYS:*

Matthew 11:28-30 *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

- *Let me leave us with this.*

† If God is like Jesus, what does this mean for you?

- *If God is like Jesus, and CHRIST IS NOW YOUR LIFE... what does this mean for you. What does this mean for those around you.*