

Christ, the Curse and the Cross



Gary Wilkerson May 22, 2017

“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see *my glory* that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24, *my emphasis*). Jesus prayed this for his disciples, and that includes us. He asked the Father that we may see his glory, meaning to know him.

There were certain times in the Old Testament when Jesus revealed himself in human or angelic form. You know what happened in those times. When Isaiah saw God’s glory in the temple, his body quaked and he fell on his face. When Jacob tried wrestling the Lord, he broke Jacob’s hip. When Moses asked to see God’s glory, the Lord told him, “Okay, but first I have to cover your face. Then I have to hide you behind a rock. Then I can only let you see the trailing afterglow behind me...” In short, he had to protect Moses from the full revelation of himself. It wasn’t an easy thing to be in the glorious presence of the Holy One!

This didn’t just happen in the Old Testament. When Peter first met Jesus, he fell on his face, suddenly aware of his unworthiness, and declared, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). There was no frivolity about encountering the Lord. It was true also of the apostle John, exiled on Patmos, when he received the Revelation. When the Lord’s voice first spoke to him, John fell on his face in terror.

We know from Scripture this is the normal response that men and women have when they see Jesus. It begs the question: Have we seen Jesus? Are we transformed by the merest glimmer of his presence in our lives? What would happen if we saw him as Moses or Isaiah or John or Peter did?

My message to you about all this is simple: Jesus is beautiful!

I use this phrase with great struggle. It carries so little power to convey the awesome reality of his glory. And I’m not using “beautiful” the way we normally do, meaning, “Isn’t she lovely?” or “Isn’t he handsome?” We can’t fathom all the depths of Jesus’ beauty—how glorious, amazing, wonderful, separate, unique and special he is.

Yet all of his attributes bear saying again and again and again. Jesus is tender, kind, precious. He is full of majesty and splendor. He is wondrous, strong, mighty, powerful. He is clever, wise, outstanding. And he never fails.

He never slips, he’s never weak, and he’s never knocked down for a single moment. He is never not listening to us; he always advocates for us. He never takes a break from fighting Satan for us, and never stops loving us even when we fail. You’ve been taught all these things about Jesus. I ask you, isn’t he beautiful?

For example, the Bible describes Jesus in ways it would never describe us. It says he knew no sin. Isaiah says there was no deceit in him, meaning, he had no false motives. He didn’t preach to attract crowds or heal to impress people. It also says he was tempted in all ways, meaning, he was subject to every kind of battle you and I face. Yet he is so beautiful that even in those temptations he was without sin in every way. In fact, he said of the Father, “I am pleased to do your will.” His very desire and pleasure were to “think upward” of how he could please his Father.

I'm sure the biblical writers longed for deeper words to describe Jesus. Song of Solomon says his mouth was full of sweetness and that he was wholly desirable. The author of Hebrews uses the words "innocent," "undefiled," "separated from sinners" (meaning, having no scent of sin), and "exalted above the heavens." He concludes, "It was fitting for us to have such a high priest."

In his first epistle, Peter calls Jesus "unblemished." This isn't about Christ's physical appearance but his character, saying there's no mark against him. And that includes the character of his relationship with us. Some may object, "Jesus didn't come through for me when I needed him," but Jesus has never failed anyone. That's true not just for the history of humankind but before Creation, including his reaction to the rebellious angels in heaven.

So how did Jesus describe himself? He says he's gentle and humble in nature. Yet he uses "humble" not the way we do, as self-effacing. His meaning is much stronger, suggesting he willingly lowered himself from his rightful place in heaven to become human flesh. He set aside his reign from on high to take on a dependent form of divinity, so that as a man he relied on his Father to empower all his divine activities on earth. Talk about real humility; who gives up power once they have it? And nobody has the kind of power Jesus possessed. What he did is beautiful!

Theologians use a strange word to describe Jesus, saying he is "impeccable." To be peccable is to fail, to sin, to be at fault, to struggle, the idea that something in you can be riled up. But even in his human nature, Jesus's divine nature overrode all that. There was no lust in his eyes and no pride in his heart. That in itself is glorious. And even in his human nature he remained sovereign, one with God (Matthew 18:18, Colossians 2:10).

Now consider these beautiful attributes: He is perfectly righteous (John 8:46) and full of justice (8:16). He is both just and our justifier (Romans 3:26). In other words, he finds a way to maintain his justice while justifying us from our unjust deeds.

He is eternal, existing forever (1 Timothy 1:17). He is worthy of our praise for eternity. And he is love (John 13:34)—a love that's unfathomable! He is omnipotent—almighty, with no lack of power. His hands aren't tied by the devil nor by our free will; he has power over any situation at any time. He's omnipresent—everywhere at all times. And he's omniscient, knowing the beginning from the end even before the end arrives.

All of this flies in the face of a false teaching nowadays called open theology. This states that God does one thing in history and we do another—that he reacts to what we do and makes adjustments. No, never! When Jesus was crucified, God didn't look on passively and say, "Oh, I'd better do something to redeem that." He had in mind a Lamb of sacrifice long before Creation. He has all authority and he rules in perfect judgment. In sum, he is beautiful—the desire of all nations!

You may think you have certain things figured out about Jesus, such as his Second Coming and end-times theology. You may know these subjects inside and out, from pre-millennial to post-tribulation, and that's fine. But you'll never be able to fully comprehend Jesus' beauty—his justice, his love, his righteousness, his sovereignty, his eternal nature.

Most important of all, Christ's beauty addresses a curse.

Because of Jesus' beauty, he won't look upon anything that's imperfect or sinful and simply dismiss it. He won't say, "I'll overlook that, excuse it and let it go." Because he is beautifully just, he brings every sin into judgment. In Romans 1-3, Paul speaks clearly about the wrath of God against sin. Of course, this isn't a popular subject in most churches. Our culture likes to paint God as a big teddy bear. But even the New Testament declares, "Vengeance is mine says the Lord." If we ignore that aspect of God's character—that his justice is an aspect of his beauty—we do so at our peril. Why is this important? It's because our sin places us under a curse. In Deuteronomy 27, God demonstrated this with his people. He divided the twelve tribes and told half of them to stand on Mount Ebal, and the other half to stand on another mountain a short distance away. The Levites were to yell out all the curses that would fall on the people if they rebelled and turned from God's Word.

It began this way: "Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the Lord, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret.' And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen'" (Deuteronomy 27:15). As the curses were called out, all the people on the other mountain answered,

“Amen!” They were agreeing to the justness of God’s law—about dishonoring parents, coveting neighbors’ goods, and perverting justice for widows, orphans and the homeless.

But then the blessings were read to the people (see Deuteronomy 28)—blessings of prosperity, of long lives for children, of strength against enemies, of blessings coming in and going out. God’s people must have thrilled in their hearts to hear every incredible blessing enumerated by his priests.

This whole scene was about agreeing with God’s law and affirming it was good. Yet this wasn’t just some Old Testament conviction; it’s confirmed as well in the New Testament. Paul emphasizes the completeness, holiness and righteousness of God’s law in Galatians 3:10: “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’” His point of emphasis here? *All* of the law, meaning every single command, was worthy of being kept. If even a single jot was disobeyed, you were cursed.

Of course, it’s impossible for any human to keep God’s law perfectly. Paul then shows us how we escape this curse: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith” (3:13-14).

You and I deserve the curse—make no mistake about it. We should have been on the cross. But instead it was Jesus—the unblemished lamb, full of beauty and splendor, omnipotent and impeccable. What a wonder: The only person in history to have completely kept the law—the most admired of all people—took on the curse for us. That means every sin in the world was put on him.

Jesus felt the weight of that sin. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed for the Father to let the cup pass from him. Some have said, “He was afraid of the cross, of the torture to come.” Not true: Others in history have marched to their martyrdom singing songs, and Jesus was stronger than them all. His trembling came at the thought of everything in the cup—all of humankind’s sins—and not just a sip, but all of it, down to the very dregs.

It could be that when he drank of the cup, Jesus heard all the curses of Deuteronomy 27 coming down on him: “Cursed will be your flock. Cursed will be all that you do, all your coming and going. Cursed will be your thoughts, tangled in confusion.” Our beautiful Savior took on all of that and more—the sins of every mass murderer, every greedy idolater, every sexual predator in history. He drank it all, and he drank it to the full.

It breaks my heart to think of it. Putting the curse of all our sins on Jesus was like putting the Mona Lisa through a paper shredder—the greatest piece of artwork known to humanity tossed onto a garbage heap. All the crushing weight of sin’s penalty should have been on us. Instead, “he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5).

Why did God give that cup to Jesus? Why does Scripture say it pleased him to do it? It was because then his people wouldn’t have to drink that cup. And both Father and Son were in agreement about that.

Some mock this thought, saying it’s “divine child abuse,” that no loving father would do that to his son. But a greater love was at work, revealing the sacrificial, giving nature of both Father and Son. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16, my emphasis). Friend, there is one reason today that you and I don’t have to drink that cup: It’s because Jesus drank it for us.

The glorious nature of the cross is not just that our sins are forgiven. They are expiated, meaning they’re fully taken away. Then something is put in place of our sins, a transaction known as propitiation. “Whom God put forward as propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Romans 3:25). Christ’s blood saves us from God’s justified wrath when it comes to judge sin.

All of this gives you a crucial right as a follower of Jesus. When Satan comes against you saying, “You still have dregs of sin in your life,” you stop him right there. You call him a liar. You don’t let him trample on the precious blood that Jesus shed for you—because Jesus drank the whole cup, including every dreg. Then don’t let the devil push you to do penance. You can never drink the cup that Jesus did, no matter how many promises you make to God about your improved performance. His loving act alone rescues you from all wrath. And he completed that work in full, saying, “It is *finished*” (John 19:30, my emphasis).

Yes, we are full of sin, totally undeserving. But our beautiful Savior has declared, “I drank it all. I paid the penalty in full. Now my people, who wholly put their faith and trust in me, have no penalty to pay, no guilt to hang onto, no shame to bear. I took it all for them.” That is the best message in the world. And it is the beauty of our amazing, incomparable Savior, Jesus Christ!

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