

GOOD FRIDAY The Supreme Son

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much for your son. We thank you for all that he's given us. And we thank you for your word that tells us about your son.

And Father, we pray today that as we look at your word together, you would make the great news about Jesus and his death clear to us again, that we might rejoice in it, even while we grieve for it.

And Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Friends, you should have been given just a half a four sheet of paper. I would encourage you to have that with you because we're going to work through the passages that are there.

Let me start by telling you about Carl. Carl was born into a progressive and wealthy Jewish family. His father had come from a long line of rabbis, but the family had put aside their religious beliefs.

But Carl Marx went further even than his family had gone. He thought religion ought to be totally thrown away. He thought that it was the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world and the soul of the soulless condition.

[1 : 13] He thought it was not worth keeping. In his greatest quote, he said it is the opium of the people. And so early in the 19th century, Carl Marx longed for the end of religion.

He had some very strong company. Auguste Comte, the founder of the discipline of sociology, predicted that religion would actually end. The communist state in China tried to do away with religion or to tame it.

But all such attempts in our world have failed. Religion has not died. In fact, religion is thriving in the contemporary world. It may have changed, but it is still alive and kicking.

It is undeniably a part of life, of human life. It's here to stay. And here's the central part of the problem, you see. You see, the world in which religion won't go away is this world that we live in.

It's a world where we are interconnected with each other. It's a world full of technology and communication. It's a world of trade and travel and the internet and economic globalization. It's a world of interdependence. And as we've seen in these last few years, and even in this last day or two, that world of interconnection and independence is a fragile world.

[2 : 27] And one of the greatest problems in it is religion itself. For we in the modern world know that some of the most difficult conflicts in the world have religious roots. At this moment, there are an incredible number of conflicts around our world.

And many of them, if not the major ones, have religious roots to them. So how do we as members of the world solve this problem? Well, one of the solutions is something called a soteriological pluralism.

That is, this is a proposal that there are a variety of means of attaining salvation. In other words, there are many ways to God. Now, this has been a very popular proposal.

Many people have taken it on board. You know, that great philosophical genius, Oprah Winfrey, expounded it in April 2002 when she said, One of the great mistakes we make is to believe there is only one way.

There are many diverse paths to God. Now, underneath that sentiment there, I think, lies a deep hope. The hope is that if we can break down our religious divisions, we will keep our fragile world afloat.

[3 : 44] Well, today I want to address this very question. And I want us to see whether the Bible will let us do this. And the way I want to do it is to look at the Bible's analysis of God and of human beings.

So with that in mind, I want you to come with me into an imaginary situation. I want you to imagine that it's your responsibility, that is you and you and you, your responsibility, to try and get to arrange a meeting where you are to try and get two people in one room talking to each other.

Okay? Two people in one room talking to each other, relating to each other. Now, with that in mind, I want to tell you who these people are, these participants. The first participant is God. Now, the second participant is humanity, or if you like, you can imagine some representative human being.

And let's find out a bit about our participants to see whether this is going to be possible or not. On your outline, I've put a couple of passages from the Bible that give you a portrait of God. So have it there open or in front of you.

Let's imagine that these present a sort of character assessment or personality profile of God. It is, of course, incomplete, but it gives you the general idea. Look at these two passages and ask, what do they tell you about God?

[4 : 59] Who is God? What is God like? The things to look out for are the names of God and what they imply about him and perhaps poetical ways of talking about his character. So look at the first passage, Isaiah 6.

Look, just scan down it. I've put it there for you. Skim through it. Now, I want you to notice, what are the names that are used to describe God? Well, he's called King, isn't he?

Lord Almighty, the Holy One. Look at the activities he's seen to do. He's one who sits on a throne. That implies he's some sort of king or maybe a judge.

But there's more. We're told that he's a holy God. He is highly exalted above his creatures. He's totally separate from them and different from them. He's enthroned a king, judge of all the world.

And now go to the second passage, Isaiah 40, verses 18 to 26. And I'm going to read parts of this for us. But listen, ask yourself as we do, what is God like?

[6 : 01] So here we go. Verse 18. With whom then will you compare God? To what image will you liken him? Then down to verse 21. Don't you know?

Haven't you heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth. And its people are like grasshoppers.

He stretches out the heavens like a canopy. He spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught. And he reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

No sooner are they planted. No sooner are they sown. No sooner do they take root in the ground that he just blows on them. And they wither. And a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal? Says the Holy One. Well, lift up your eyes and look to the heavens. Who created all these things? Who brings out their starry hosts one by one?

[6 : 56] Who calls forth each one of them by name? Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. Now friends, this picture of God that we get here is that he is the one who creates the world.

He upholds the world. He oversees the world. He's sovereign king over all the world. Every government is under his oversight. He is not a product of human imagination.

He's not man-made. Instead, he is the one who created us humans. And all humans, all creatures are under his rule. And he does with them as he sees fit. So there's the first set of passages.

There's a portrait of God. Now let's look at the second set of passages. The focus of these passages is humans. Now again, I want you to ask yourself, who are humans?

What are they like? Again, just don't look at the words. But look at the impression created by the words. And I'll just give you a minute to do it. Particularly look at the passage from Romans 3 and 9.

[7 : 58] Just the first ten verses or so. The poetic section there. Now I wonder, as you take that in, if we can sort of create a composite picture.

Remember what we're doing? We're wanting to analyze two people, try and get them to meet together in a room. Okay? First, we see that humans are created beings. We knew that from the previous passage.

That means they are responsible to a higher being that is their creator. They were created to relate to him. But there is a force within them that pushes them to live independently from him.

That independence affects the way that they think, they act, they relate, they speak. It affects their whole being. It affects every one of them. You know, there is none that is sinful, not one.

Everyone is like this. There is none that does good. All humans are like this. None is exempt from this disposition, this nature. Humans are like this. Now, I do know that I've been reasonably selective in the passages I've chosen.

[9 : 02] However, I want to tell you that these passages are representative passages of what is in the Bible as a whole. They capture what God in the Bible says on the whole.

Other passages might add some fine tuning of things, some extra things. They might give us some portraits, some, you know, what the hair looks like, as it were, on the people that we're looking at and so on.

The fine detail. But the personality won't change. But the personality won't change. The personality we see in these passages won't change. The profile of each of the participants won't change much.

On the one side, we have God who is a holy, sovereign creator and judge. A being who cannot live with impurity or sin. A being who cannot live with humans that are sinful.

A God who is pure and holy and cannot tolerate being in the presence of sin and unholiness. And on the other side, well, on the other side, we have humanity. They are prone to independence.

[10 : 04] They seek to do their own thing their own way without him. In other words, they are sinful. They are opposed to living the way that their creator commanded them and wants them and intends them to live. So, given that's the portrait, do you think you can get the two parties together, given their inbuilt dispositions and personalities?

Can they relate, do you think? Can God meet with humanity? Well, the clear answer from our two passages is no. No, they are so great in their difference and so opposed to each other in their being that the gap between them is enormous.

Sin has separated them. They cannot coexist, as it were, in the same room. It's an impossibility. On the other hand, God cannot simply forgive and forget human sinfulness and remain a holy God, can he?

He would no longer be holy if he did that. And humans cannot change their fundamental nature. So, from the surface of things, we've got a big problem. However, maybe there is some hope.

After all, we are dealing with God here, aren't we? And this God is the God that Isaiah and the rest of the Bible tells us is not only holy, but compassionate, merciful, kind and forgiving.

[11 : 24] In the words of Exodus 34, he's the Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. In the words of Isaiah 59, verse 1, he's the God whose arm is not so short that it cannot save.

So, perhaps there's a way out of the impasse. But whatever it is, it'll have to be a way that doesn't involve God compromising his nature. He must remain God.

And human independence, rebellion and sin must be recognized for what it is. That. Independence, rebellion and sin. Sin must be dealt with as sin.

And the Bible tells us it can be managed. That God has shouted a clear yes to our instinctive hope. He's found out a way in which mercy may triumph over judgment.

God has a yes. And this yes is found in the event we remember today. It is found in the death of Jesus on the cross.

[12 : 27] You see, as Jesus is lifted up on the cross, God is shouting out to his world this. Look here, will you? Yes, look here. It is possible. I can meet with humanity and I can meet with you.

The New Testament writers are clear that in the cross, God brings relationship with him into the realms of possibility. You see, in the cross, humans are declared to be human.

That is, they are independent and they deserve judgment and they are judged. In the cross, sin is seen in all its awfulness. For sin takes Jesus to the cross.

It is the only way it can be forgiven. Sin is awful. It is separating. And in the cross, though, God is also God. He is holy and just and sovereign and merciful and loving and saving.

That's what our passage captures. Have a look at it. Look at Romans chapter 3, verse 21. And I soak up the words as we look at them. But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God, that is the possibility of being righteous with God and God's own act in righteousness has been made known to which the law and the prophets testify.

[13 : 46] This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

And all are now justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came in Christ Jesus. And then we're told how. Look at it. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement.

That is a way of setting the situation right through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith. And he did this to demonstrate his righteousness because in his forbearance he left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.

And he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time so that and it's in the cross so that as to be just. That is, he's dealt justly with sin.

But at the same time, one who justifies those who have faith in Christ, that is, who can set human beings right again with him. So, just and the one who can justify those who believe in what God has done in his son.

[15 : 00] Now, please understand what I'm saying. I've deliberately presented things the way that I have today. You see, the issues we're talking about are real spiritual issues. They have to do with God and his nature.

They have to do with us and our nature. And we have to decide what set of beliefs in our world fit that solve the problem we have.

And in my view, it is in this area that Christianity distinguishes itself above all others. It takes the uniform and univocal portrait of God from the Bible seriously.

It says, yes, God is like this. God, you see, is not a nice English, good, nice English gentleman. He's not. No, he's all you'd expect a good God to be.

He is holy and he cannot tolerate evil. But at the same time, his whole disposition is toward grace and mercy and compassion. He longs for relationship with us, his creation, with all his heart.

[16 : 03] Christianity also, not only does it have a clear portrait of God, it has a clear portrait of sin and its awfulness. It acknowledged what is plainly obvious to anyone who has eyes to see humans are inclined towards self-centeredness.

And that means they are inevitably inclined toward evil. Because if they're inclined toward themselves, they will be inclined toward not doing what is good for everyone else as well. Because I want only what works for them.

Evil is simply doing what is good for you at any cost, isn't it? Christianity acknowledges these two things. And it asserts that if you're to be in relationship with God, then something outside of ourselves needs to happen.

We cannot be saved. We cannot be reborn. We cannot be made whole. We cannot achieve fulfillment without external intervention. We cannot pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

We need help. And the Christian faith tells us that God does the only thing that is possible. He acts on our behalf. He himself acts on our behalf.

[17 : 16] He acts in surprising grace. God himself becomes a human being in Jesus. He becomes one of us. And as a human being, he acts as no human being has acted previously.

In total unselfishness, total obedience. And as the one righteous human being, he takes the punishment of all human beings upon himself.

And he turns his, God as it were, turns his anger upon himself. And mercy triumphs over judgment. And at one at the same time, God is holy and gracious and sin is sinful and shameful.

And all of that is found in the person of Jesus Christ. And in one particular event, it finds its focus. And that event is the event we remember today.

The death of Jesus on the cross. And this is found here in this day, in this person. You see, amongst all faiths, that which is founded on Jesus Christ is unique in the world.

[18 : 23] It is unique because its saviour is unique. Christianity is not an attempt to find God, friends. It's a revelation. It's a revelation of what God is like. A revelation of what we are like.

And a revelation of how God has met these things and made reconciliation possible for us. Please understand. All religions are not basically the same.

Christianity says some fundamentally different things. For Christianity speaks about Jesus. The God-man. And beside him, everything else pales into insignificance.

He is the fulfilment of all human hopes and aspirations in relation to God. He is the embodiment of truth and righteousness. He represents all that is good and true. He is the saviour of the world.

Friends, I want you to abandon the myths that this world presents us with. I want to urge you to abandon false ideas that our world has about God.

[19 : 29] Many religions capture some little bits and pieces of what God might be like. But none of them, none of them capture fully the truth about God found in Jesus.

Many religions tell us little snippets of truth about humanity and how to live in the world. But none of them capture fully the truth about humanity that is found in Jesus.

Jesus is unique in the world of religion. He alone is the way, the truth and the life. He himself said that. He alone is the way, the truth and the life. And no man comes to the Father but through him.

Without him we are left with a truncated view of God or a warped view of humanity. And today, on this day of all days, we remember this. And as we do, I urge you to flee to Jesus.

For he alone is your hope. He alone is the hope of the world. He alone will bring you to God. And he alone is the saviour of the world.

[20 : 29] So let's pray. Our Father, we thank you for the words of Jesus that he alone is the way, the truth and the life.

And without him, we cannot come into relationship with you. Today we remember this, Father, as we remember the death of your son. Help us to flee to him again and again, knowing that he alone is the hope of the world.

Please help us to bring these truths to the world. Thank you that he alone will bring us to you and establish relationship with you. We thank you and we remember this day that he alone is the saviour of the world.

We pray this in his name. Amen.