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GLOBAL GOSPEL PROJECT

Proof of a Good God: 'Crucified Under Pontius Pilate'

*Why this 'factoid' from the Nicene Creed is key to ending our nightmares about God.***Mark Galli** | posted 4/05/2012 09:38AM

Rob Bell's *Love Wins* attracted a great deal of attention last year partly because of the questions he raised. They are not just Bell's questions, but questions all of us have. Take these, raised twice in the book:

Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number "make it to a better place" and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?

These questions come in many forms today, and range from the theoretical to the personal: The Buddhist child who dies in some remote corner of China, having never heard the gospel—is she going to hell? Why would a good God allow my wife to get cancer? And so forth.

No matter how or why it is asked, its basic form is this: How do we know that God can be trusted to be good?

That question usually comes with a partial answer, which also depends on the particular concerns of the questioner. It often goes like this: "Well, I know one thing for sure, I could never believe in a God who would ____." Fill in the blank. Like: "I could never believe in a God who would condemn the Buddhist child to hell."

This is one way we shape our faith as we stand in the shadows of one of these dark scenarios. Faith becomes not confidence in the love of God but mostly a defensive bulwark against our nightmares, against the haunting possibility that God may be unjust and arbitrary.

But can we do better than this? Is there a way to face this question squarely—is God good?—and come away with even more confidence in the love of God?

Job's Gospel

A faith that defends itself against the nightmare with "I could never believe in a God who would ____" is not much of a comfort in the end, because we know we're just making things up. Whether we happen to believe in a God who would do this or that has no bearing on who God actually is. Our belief about what is or is not possible with God cannot make him into the being we want him to be.

We've known too many unbelievable scenarios to have any such confidence. "I could never believe my husband would run off with another woman," says the astonished wife. And yet her husband did just that. The wife's belief had no bearing on the character of her husband. All well and good that we could never believe in a God who would do *x*, but it may make no difference. God may do it anyway.

We are not called to reject or believe in a God who would do this or that to a Buddhist child—or whatever other scenario whose possibilities alarm us. We are called to believe in the God who has died for us in Christ.

To that, many reply, "Well, I'd rather spend an eternity in hell than worship a God who would ____."

This strikes some as foolish, given who we're talking about: the almighty Creator of heaven and earth. They too may feel troubled by questions and answers surrounding God's goodness, but they reply, "Well, I may not like a God who would do *x*. But better to submit to this all-powerful, if sometimes arbitrary deity and take my chances!"

They are no doubt thinking of Job, who after shaking his fist at God for the injustices perpetrated upon him, is interrogated by God with, "Who do you think you are, questioning the Creator of heaven and earth?"

At which point, Job submits in abject fear and humility: "I didn't know what I was talking about. Of course, I worship you, Lord" (to paraphrase Job 40-42).

Many Christians imagine this is the only way out of this dilemma, and they put their hope in the gospel according to Job: "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21, NASB). Fortunately, that is not the gospel of our Lord

Jesus Christ. And it is only when we look at Jesus—at his incarnation but especially his crucifixion—that we are able to hear some really good news.

Crucified Under Pontius Pilate

The problem with the way we sometimes frame both the question and the answer is that Jesus Christ never makes an appearance in either. When Jesus Christ is not a part of this conversation, the conversation becomes abstract. In such conversations, God is said to be *good*. Or *powerful*. Or *evil*. Or *impotent*. Or whatever we conclude, based on our understanding of these abstract words, which we apply to another abstract word—*God*.

From a variety of sources, we've come up with a working definition of these abstract words and this abstract God—the God of logic, who must do *y* if in fact he is *x*. So when we are told not only to believe in this abstract God but also to give every part of ourselves to him, to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength—well, *faith* or *trust* is hardly the word to describe what we do. It's more like "cross my fingers," "hope against hope" that he'll turn out to be a good God.

In the Gospels and the Epistles, we are never called to believe in a God who would or would not do *x*. The New Testament does not begin with the abstract. It does not give us words like *good* or *power* or even *God*, then ask us to trust in those words or ideas. Paul teaches that, in fact, God is not the God of our imaginations or of our logic, who must do *y* if in fact he is *x*. No, we're talking about a righteous and holy God who justifies sinners. This is a God whose workings are more wonderful and concrete than we can imagine.

Our God is not the God of philosophers, the God of metaphysicians. In the New Testament, God is first and foremost the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, as the Nicene Creed puts it with great specificity, "was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried." Only when we fully grasp the historic, concrete, fleshly, and deathly nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ—the one crucified under Pontius Pilate—can we turn the corner on the question that so plagues our age.

The message of the gospel is decidedly not: "Buddhist children who die without hearing the name of Jesus Christ are going to hell; repent and believe in the gospel!" It is not, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." No, the gospel, the good and specific news, is that God has come to us in Jesus Christ, was crucified under Pontius Pilate—a particular magistrate at a particular time and place—died, and was buried.

The New Testament, of course, is the revelation of the meaning of this event: God has looked upon his miserable creatures, rebels against his goodness, defiant in the face of his love, trapped in the nexus of sin and death, fully deserving every evil that comes their way in this life and the next—this God has looked upon all this in his holy righteousness and righteous holiness and has said, "Enough!" And he came to live among us, taking on not just a human body, but flesh, that is, the brokenness and the sinfulness of humanity. He has become *the* sinner who deserves to die, and he has died on the cross, for the very people who put him on the cross, that they might know who he really is.

This is a startling and counterintuitive revelation; this is not a grand religious idea one can logically work toward, but an event that occurred under Pontius Pilate, not a theology but God caught in the act of loving us. This factoid and its revealed meaning are what we are called to believe and to proclaim, not what God might or might not do in this or that situation. We are asked not to preach according to our imaginations or our nightmares, but according to what God has, in fact, done for us in Jesus Christ.

This is the God we are asked to trust. Not the God who is said to be *good* or *loving* or *powerful* by some definition we might put on those words. We're asked to trust in the God who gave himself for us on the cross in Jesus Christ.

'I'll Let it Sit with Him'

At one point in the movie *Patton*, General Omar Bradley tells General George Patton that Patton may be given a crucial assignment: leading troops in the invasion of Europe. Though he had played a decisive role in the battle for Africa and in the invasion of Sicily, Patton at the time was cooling his heels in England, having been disciplined for slapping a soldier in a field hospital. So Patton is anxious to get back into the thick of battle, and when he hears about the possible assignment, he can hardly contain himself.

Bradley tells him no decision has been made, that it's in the hands of General George Marshall. Patton is a man of action, who took initiative while others stood around deliberating their options. But when he heard that his fate lay in the hands of Marshall, he calmed down. "He's a good man," he said of Marshall. "At least he's a fair man. I'll let it sit with him." He said this based on his knowledge of who Marshall in fact was and how he comported himself in action.

The God we know, the God we've seen in action has done this: He died for us. It is because of this that we say with confidence, "He's a good God. He's a fair God. All these questions that torment us—we can let those sit with this God."

That means we don't have to go with our fear: "The Buddhist child is definitely going to hell." Nor do we have to make stuff up, like, "The Buddhist child is definitely going to heaven." We do not have to begin with the cold logic of God's righteousness or the feel-good theology of sentimental love. In fact, the Bible simply shows no interest in our speculative questions or our sentimental theology.

Instead it reveals a God who, in fact, is perfectly just and perfectly merciful, not in the abstract but in the flesh. Jonathan Edwards, the great American theologian, put it this way:

There meet in Jesus Christ, infinite justice, and infinite grace. As Christ is a divine person, he is infinitely holy and just;

hating sin, and disposed to execute condign punishment for sin. He is the Judge of the world, and the infinitely just Judge of it, and will not at all acquit the wicked, or by any means clear the guilty.

And yet he is infinitely gracious and merciful. Though his justice be so strict with respect to all sin, and every breach of the law, yet he has grace sufficient for every sinner, and even the chief of sinners. And it is not only sufficient for the most unworthy to show them mercy, and bestow some good upon them, but to bestow the greatest good

Not only is this not abstract in content, it is not abstract in direction. This is the gospel *for us*. It is the good news regarding what God in Christ has done *for us*. That he came to save us from our sins, and not just us, but the whole world (1 John 2). That he was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them (2 Cor. 5). That in Adam all have died, but in Christ all are made alive (Rom. 5). And that we are all called to repent—to turn around, turn away from all the speculation and nightmares that fill our imaginations that make us fear and doubt God's goodness—and believe in this astounding news.

When it comes to that Buddhist child, what will God do? We don't know. This has not been revealed to us. What has been revealed is that God has come to us in Jesus Christ and shown himself to be perfectly just and perfectly merciful.

This is the God who is in charge of all those scenarios that keep us awake at night. We are not called to reject or believe in a God who would do this or that to a Buddhist child—or whatever other scenario whose possibilities alarm us. We are called to believe in the God who has died for us in Christ, and trust him to do what is just and merciful for all.

During the fascist rule in Nazi Germany, many Christian leaders were killed—some in war, some while resisting Hitler. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian famous for his radical commitment to Christ and his own courageous (and ultimately fatal) resistance to Hitler, once comforted his fellow believers upon hearing of another spate of deaths:

Who can comprehend how those whom God takes so early are chosen? Does not the early death of young Christians always appear to us as if God were plundering his own best instruments in a time in which they are most needed? Yet the Lord makes no mistakes We should put an end to our human thoughts, which always wish to know more than they can, and cling to that which is certain.

Coming from the lips of some people, this advice could be scoffed at as simplistic or naive. But Bonhoeffer was neither; he was one of the most realistic Christian theologians the church has known. In fact, Bonhoeffer expressed a biblically informed response to our nightmares about God's apparent injustice: the one who has shown himself in Jesus Christ to be perfectly just and perfectly merciful will do what is perfectly just and perfectly merciful. We can let it rest with him. Thus we can pray not hoping against hope but with abiding confidence, like the Psalmist:

Lord, my heart is not proud; my eyes are not haughty.

I don't concern myself with matters too great or too awesome for me to grasp.

Instead, I have calmed and quieted myself, like a weaned child who no longer cries for its mother's milk.

Yes, like a weaned child is my soul within me.

O Israel, put your hope in the Lord—now and always. (Ps. 131, NLT)

In the face of the most perplexing questions, we put our hope not in the God of our nightmares or our dreams, but in the God who came to us in Christ and died under Pontius Pilate, died not only for our sins, but for the sins of the world. To whom can we go if we cannot wholly and completely trust *this* God to be good?

Mark Galli is senior managing editor of Christianity Today. He is author of God Wins: Heaven, Hell, and Why the Good News Is Even Better Than Love Wins (Tyndale, 2011), from which part of this article was adapted.

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