

“Christ is our All”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

I like science fiction things, so while I ride my bike in the morning I'll have my ear buds in and I will be listening to different books on tape. One of them was a science fiction book. I have listened to quite a few in a row, so I can't remember which book this little story came from. (You can't go back when it's an audio book and find the page.) The story was about a man who went to Heaven, to the Pearly Gates. He saw God and God said to him, "You are now blessed with this opportunity to fly like the angels, and you can go anywhere in the universe you want to go. It's all yours."

He [the man] was so excited. He flew with the speed of light over all the parts of the universe. It took some 10,000 years to go to all of the different parts [of the universe] he could find.

But, one day he came back to God, and he said, "God, this is all fine but where are all of the people and where else am I going to go? I have been really excited to see all there is to see." And God said, "You haven't seen it all." The man replied, "Really?" So he went back up again and he flew to different places. The universe was continually growing and expanding. He went to all of these other places, and this time the man thought, "I'm going to be sure and go to every single place." So he was gone almost one million years. He comes back, sees God and says, "I've seen it all, but I'm missing people. Where are they?" God said, "This is what you have. Make the most of it."

So the guy went out and flew around some more, went in and out of worm holes, went to every Milky Way [galaxy] there was to find. He came back and said to God, "Is this it? If this is it, I just want to go to hell for a change, after all of these years." And God said, "Where do you think you are? Where there are not relationships, there is hell?"

I listened to that and I almost stopped the bike, because the first thing I thought of was - was that what God must have felt like before humanity was created? Was the universe created all this time before and all of these beautiful amazing things - but it was hell, until this relationship with humanity was born? That was what made it Heaven; to be in relationship. Then we made it hell again because, in our imperfection, in our sinfulness, we drove God absolutely nuts. Over and over again, God would try something; provide the Garden of Eden in all of its beauty and perfection, and we found a way to muck it up. Then God starts another covenant and it doesn't work out, so God finally goes to Noah and that didn't work out. So he destroys the world and starts over again. It took long enough to start over and have a few people back on earth for us to muck it up yet again; and every time, God sits down and makes a new covenant with the people, because God knows what real hell is like: to be without us.

So each time there is a covenant, if you read through the Bible, there is a different moment in time where God becomes more intimate with us. You could almost grasp the very mind of God as you read through the Bible, because with each new covenant, at each new moment and time, you have God figuring out a way to become more *intimate* with us human beings. And each new covenant and each new time, we muck it up. So God says,

“The more I become intimate with them the more they will learn about me. And when they grasp the wonders of being with God in the same way that I want to be in relationship with them, they will want to be in a relationship with me, and they will stop mucking it up.”

And we never learn.

So God says one day - you could almost feel God scratching his head, or her head: “What am I going to do now, to be in a relationship with these beings who I need as well as they need me, without them mucking it up? I know what I’m going to do. I will go down to them, but how am I going to do that in such a way that I won’t just totally ruin them? Because when I went down as God, if they saw my face they would die. These human beings are very fragile - emotionally, spiritually and physically. I had to be in the cleft of the rock, just so they could see my shadow and it was almost too much. The only thing I can do is be in total human form - but even that isn’t enough. I have to *be* one of them, and then I have to experience their pain, their suffering, their emotions, their loss, everything. Then I can show them how to live a sinless life, and they will find the joy that has always eluded them.”

We can be in the most intimate relationship imaginable, and you can almost experience God being excited - until God got here, and we mucked it up again. You can go through the whole story from the birth, to the fleeing to Egypt, all the way through to the Crucifixion, the rolling of the stone away. And even then in the Resurrection, they didn’t get it. Even the 12 who were the closest to him and the women, who were even more faithful than the men, did not get it. Yet God never got so angry enough to destroy us. Then God continued, through the Holy Spirit, to speak to people in new ways, and God is continually doing it today: trying to figure out how to speak to us in ways that will help us to be in relationship, without mucking it up.

How frustrating it has to be for God! But God does not curse this world and destroy us. We are still here. And I believe that through all of that history on it and all of these descriptions, there are glimpses of the personality of God that we can learn from so that we will know how God can relate to us in the future.

I had a theology professor in seminary, (sometimes you don’t appreciate your elders until they are no longer here) that I struggled with - John Burkhardt. (I couldn’t get more than a B. I never figured out how to please that man and now I quote him all of the time. It makes me mad.) [Laughter.] But one of the things he always said is that he could not prove universal salvation, but I prayed for it every single day.

In this passage, where it is talking about Christ, and how Christ and God are one, and Christ was there before the foundations of the world and the first born of all creation; as he is describing all of this, the word “all” from verse 15-20 - five verses - the word “all” comes up seven times. I believe this primal scream from God [saying], “I will make ‘all’ acceptable. I will forgive ‘all’ and I will bring salvation to ‘all.’”

I go back and I say I can’t just say it from those few little words in one passage. I have to go back to other places from the New Testament and find out how Jesus represents God to the world. Does Jesus show this commitment to forgiving and guiding all people?

I turn in Scripture to Matthew 20:1. It begins the story of the laborers in the vineyard, and you know this story. The owner hires some people to do work for him, but then he needs more [workers], so he hires some more in the early afternoon, then he hires some more in the late afternoon, and then hires some more an hour before the work is done, and then he pays them all the same amount of money at the end of the day.

The people who were there from the beginning of the day are crabbing and stomping their feet, because they got the same amount as the ones who only worked an hour. Verse 20 of that same chapter ends with: "The first will be last and the last will be first. I will forgive those who have been with me all of the way along, and I will forgive those who don't even deserve it, because they were not even here an hour - maybe they were not even here at all. I'm going to give them the same salvation."

It's not about fairness - it's about love. And any of you who have ever been a parent knows, there is nothing fair about being a parent. I had one child, so I don't really know what I'm talking about. But I have had to watch those of you who have had more than one child, because all of you say you don't raise them the same way, because they are different. Which means the way you raise them is different, and while your children look and point the finger at you and say, "It's not fair because she got more than I did," you know that different children need different things, in order to get to the same healthy place.

God's goal is not fairness. It's to get us to that healthy point. Some of us are more stubborn, some of us are more frustrating, some of us are almost evil, and yet God will carry us and save us *all*, I believe. If God cannot save someone, that person has power over God.

Let me explain.

God wants to save everyone - that is all throughout the Bible. So, if I'm so powerful that I can sin so much, that I can keep God from giving me what God wants, then I'm more powerful than God, And I'm not! My ability to sin is nowhere as powerful as God's ability to forgive me. I can't control whether I'm saved or damned. I have to rely on God, and God wants everyone to be saved, so whether I'm faithful or not, I can't control my salvation. I hold on to that every day as a blessing, and its grace. That's what we mean about not being able to earn it.

So, we move ahead in Scripture. We look at Luke 9:54-55. Here it talks about the Disciples who look on the Samaritans - who they hate - and they say to them, "Lord, do you want us to command the fire to come down from Heaven and consume them [the Samaritans] just as Elijah did?" And Jesus looked on them, and looked at those horrible Samaritans, and he turned and rebuked them, because even those awful Samaritans were worthy of Jesus' love.

We continue to turn to different parts of the New Testament. Now we turn to II Timothy 2:12. "If we are faithless, Jesus remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself." He cannot deny himself. The very foundation of the personality of God is seen in Jesus. That's where we get the personality of God is from Jesus. And Jesus cannot deny himself by failing to heal, restore and save humanity - each and every one of us.

So in those moments when you have a loved one that never professes faith in God through Jesus Christ, you need not worry because I don't believe there is a barometer. Well, if

you're not faithful enough, you didn't hit this line, you didn't say the right salvation prayer - it isn't about us. It's about what God wants, and God wants all of us.

That is why I can hold to the blessing of first learning what the personality of God is, see it in Jesus, and its wanting us all - every single one. So the next time you struggle with worrying about your own salvation, whether you have been acceptable enough, or a loved one who just never committed - worry less about them and dive back into Scripture. Find out that personality of God that you find in Jesus Christ, and you will find hope, you will find love, and you will find commitment to all. May that be our comfort this day and always. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen