



Session 3 ■ Special Interest Topic 1 The Power of Love

Opposing directions

There is clearly something wrong with the world. Between acts of genocide, suicide bombers, widespread pollution, random street muggings, sexual abuse and smart bombs that stupidly kill children, we can all tell that some sort of pervasive evil has twisted the minds and hearts of human beings. We long to believe the world and those who live in it are basically good but most of the everyday evidence seems to run in the opposite direction.

“God is love”

The Bible tells us things were not always this way. Before there was an earth, before there was even a universe, there was an Eternal Lover— a Being whose very nature was and is love. “I have loved you with an everlasting love,” this Being declares. Before there was an earth or any human being, this loving God envisioned what it would be like to have a universe full of creatures that could love and be loved. Like a woman who falls in love with a baby before it is born, God loved the creation before it was created.

The Bible goes on to tell us that God prepared the way for the creation by filling it with innumerable tokens of His love. There are flowers, almost infinite in variety, with hundreds of shades of every imaginable colour and incredible perfumes, running from light and delicate to rich and dusky. There are fruits, grains, nuts and vegetables with their infinite variety of smells and tastes. There are animals ranging from the awesome and magnificent, like the lion, tiger and bull elk, to the unbearably cute, like the koala, kiwi, chipmunk and meerkat.

The Bible tells us that these features of our world are the gifts of an extravagant Lover, who wants to fill the lives of those He loves with exquisite joy. In spite of the evil we experience in the world today, these tokens of God’s love are still there to be noticed and enjoyed.

Beauty mixed with pain and suffering

But if God’s intentions were so good, why is there so much pain and suffering in the midst of this beauty?

It all goes back to a choice God made. When it came time to create beings, God had to decide whether these beings would be controlled by Him or be truly free. One wonders at times whether it would be better if human beings did not have free will.

As “robots,” we could be programmed to be good and kind, to function in a way that enhances the good of the whole creation.

In a world of such beings, things would never go wrong.

Love me...love my robot?

But there is a problem. Full robotic control leaves no room for love. Imagine your spouse was a robot with a computer for a brain. Imagine you could program him or her to have the perfect body, and respond with loving words and actions in all circumstances. While at first blush this may sound like the perfect partner, the delight in such an arrangement would quickly wear off.

“I love you so much,” you say to your favourite robot.

“I love you with all my silicon,” the robot responds.

When you realise the response isn't free, the words rapidly become empty. Genuine love requires free will. It is only meaningful when it is chosen and given as a gift to the other. Love occurs only when someone is free to choose not to love, or to love someone else. But when someone is free to love you, they are also free to hurt you and reject you. The possibility of love requires the possibility of evil. Freedom is the greatest of all risks.

The bottom line is this: love and freedom go together. In order to have one, you have to have the other. So when the God who is love, who is the Eternal Lover, decided to create, He also decided to make himself vulnerable to the choices of His creatures. He made all things good but He also allowed His creatures the freedom not to love—the freedom to reject Him. Ultimately, evil exists not because God is a tyrant but because He is committed to openness and freedom. Evil exists in this world not because God is powerless but because He wanted human beings to be powerful in ways that mirrored His own freedom of action. He placed His loving heart in their hands, to cherish it or reject it. God opened Himself to pain and suffering in order to experience the genuine love of His creation.

God favours love and justice

When rebellion did come, God decided neither to rule the universe by force nor to sanction the evil that infected it. Instead, He did a number of things to gradually turn the tide away from evil in favour of love and justice.

First, He provided the conscience, an inner sense of right and wrong that few humans are without. Then He provided some, such as Abraham, Moses and Paul, with visions and dreams that helped clarify the central issues of good and evil. Next, He provided the story of a people (Israel, the Jewish nation) and the struggles He used to teach them more clearly about Himself.

And then God did the most amazing thing of all. In Bethlehem, just south of Jerusalem in the Middle East, a baby appeared whose birth we celebrate every year at Christmas time. When He reached adulthood, He went about doing good works. He had an amazing ability to heal the sick and, on occasion, even raise the dead. He brought delight to a wedding couple by turning water into wine. He fed thousands with a handful of bread and a few fish. He also taught some memorable things. There were great one-liners, like “Do to others what you would have them do to you,” “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” and “Love one another as I have loved you.”

The Greatest Love Story on Earth

The climax of the story took place one Friday in Jerusalem, a sequence of events dramatised in Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*. The story of that Friday actually began on Thursday night, in an olive grove just east of Jerusalem called the Garden of Gethsemane. When they arrived at the garden, Jesus agonised in prayer over the events He was about to experience.

According to the Bible, Jesus' agony had little to do with the physical suffering He would go through the next day. Rather, as the “God-man,” He was designated to experience all the consequences of human evil in His own person. His death on the cross would sum up all the pain, all the suffering, all the regret and all the rejection evil has caused the human race. He would suffer loss of meaning, loss of relationship and all the misery of human sickness and death. His anguish was much more mental and emotional than physical (in contrast to Gibson's movie).

After His arrest, Jesus was taken for immediate trial before the high priests of the national religion, Annas and Caiaphas. Due process seems not to have been a concern at the trial of Jesus. False witnesses gave their “testimony,” although disagreements among them mitigated its value to the accusers. Torture was used to try to extract a “confession” from Jesus. Over the course of

His various trials, He was slapped in the face, beaten with rods, whipped with long cords, mocked and derided. They spat in His face. A “crown” of thorns was pressed into His head. Today, such a trial would attract major attention from Amnesty International.

After some consideration, Pilate sent the innocent man to death by crucifixion. Crucifixion was a peculiarly Roman form of execution. An individual was required to carry the heavy wooden cross piece to the place of execution as a public warning to others. Some people were nailed to the cross, others were tied with ropes. The key element, however, was that in order to breathe, victims had to exert strength to raise their bodies. Death came by suffocation, when they were no longer strong enough to raise themselves. The process was slow and painful. An additional element of torture was shame and exposure, being hung naked in front of family and friends in all kinds of weather.

Arriving at Golgotha, the place of execution, Jesus was nailed to the cross through the wrists and ankles, and then put on display between two common thieves. Three hours later He was dead—more from emotional and spiritual anguish than from physical causes. Rich friends of Jesus then secured His body and placed it in a cave tomb nearby, closed off behind a huge stone.

The story reaches its climax about 36 hours later, early on Sunday morning. Several women decided to visit the tomb and anoint Jesus’ body with spices, to preserve it and show Him honour, even in death. But when they arrived at the tomb, the stone had been moved away and the tomb was empty. One or two men were standing nearby in dazzling apparel (one witness called them angels). The women were told not to seek the living among the dead. Jesus had risen from the dead. Eventually, all His followers began to realise that because He lives and conquered death, they will also live beyond the grave. With this knowledge, they began to turn the world upside down.

So what does this mean for us?

Change of heart

The cross changes the way we look at our personal lives, particularly our mistakes and failures. According to the Bible, human beings are not simply imperfect creatures that need improvement; we are rebels who must lay down our arms. Those who crucified Jesus acted no differently than we would have, given the same circumstances.

In other words, the struggle to overcome evil is not, first of all, a social or political task. It is a struggle against the evil within from which we need to turn away. The Bible calls this “repentance” and teaches that we find this when we realise how good God is and how evil we are.

This “repentance” is not fun. Acknowledging failure is humiliating and repugnant. But it is the necessary path toward redeeming our lives from the downward spiral of the evil that besets us all. It is the only way to bring our lives into the sunshine of reality. Repentance is simply recognising the truth about us. We will never change until we are willing to be changed—until we recognise that change is needed.

God’s plan for us

The wonderful thing about God’s plan is that He understands what this struggle for authenticity is all about. In submitting Himself to the humiliation of the cross, Jesus experienced the kind of surrender we need. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus struggled to give Himself up to God’s plan. And the Bible teaches that if we follow Him in His surrender and humiliation, we will also share in His conquest of death and find new life in our present experience.

The cross was the most evil act of all time. When human beings, for temporary and limited political advantage, crucified the God who came down and lived among us, they acted in the most incomprehensible, unfair and evil manner possible. In rejecting Him, they were doing more than just condemning an innocent man to death; they were destroying the source of their own life and

rejecting their own place in the universe. The cross of Jesus Christ is an evil act of infinite proportions. If the human race is capable of such an act, no evil action is unimaginable.

But there is a silver lining to the dark cloud of human evil. God has turned the cross into a powerful act of reversal. The greatest evil ever done has been transformed by God into the most powerful act of goodness ever performed. By death, God brings life. Through defeat comes victory. Through shame, humiliation and rejection, there comes glory, grace and acceptance. Through the cross, God has turned the tables on evil and death. The greatest evil has become the basis for the greatest good.

Does God understand how much I am hurting?

The times when we experience undeserved suffering and pain are like our own Friday in Jerusalem. We feel as if our experience is unique, as if no-one has ever been more alone. But Jesus himself went there in depth on the original Good Friday. He understands what it is like to be totally alone, rejected and abused. He's been there and done that. And, in a sense, He tasted just a bit of everyone's experience. In fact, the Bible states He tasted death for everyone as He died in our place that we might be freely forgiven.

But for Jesus, the story didn't end on that Friday. When He cried out to God, "Why have you forsaken me?" He himself seemed to see no hope for the future. But His suffering and abandonment turned out to be a prelude for an incredible affirmation of His love. When He was raised from the dead, His acceptance with God was reaffirmed. In some sense, the whole human race stands in a new place with God as we can now find His acceptance by connecting with Him. The cross has turned human suffering into a prelude.

The cross changes everything

What difference does it make to believe in the cross today?

For me, it changes everything about suffering. Some have used undeserved suffering as an excuse to disbelieve the existence of God. But atheism has not lessened human suffering one iota. If anything, it makes it worse, because one is alone in the suffering, with no meaning and no future.

But the cross demonstrates several things that make a difference. It tells us we are not alone, even though it may feel that way. It tells us suffering doesn't mean that God is heartless; He cares enormously but doesn't always intervene to avert pain. God's absence in suffering is not a hostile or helpless absence; it has a higher purpose.

In the light of the cross, we have a reason to endure, even though we may not know the particular reason why.

When we suffer without deserving it, we share in the experience of Jesus. When we feel the absence of God in our pain, we share in the experience of Jesus. He went there before us and understands how we feel.

Valueless or priceless life?

We all have a fundamental need to value ourselves and be valued by others. But how can we value ourselves when we recognise that the seeds of evil are within? It seems the better we know ourselves, the more we dislike ourselves and the worse we feel. How can we elevate our sense of self-worth without escaping from the dark realities inside? That's where the cross comes in.

How much is a human being worth? It depends on the context. If someone were to melt us down into the chemicals of which our bodies are made, we would be worth about \$12. But the average person is valued more highly than this by their workplace—for many, it's \$50,000 dollars a year. Suppose you were a great basketball player like Michael Jordan. Suddenly, the value jumps to tens of millions of dollars a year. And if you designed software like Bill Gates, you would be valued at tens of billions of dollars.

You see, we are valued in terms of what others see in us. But according to the Bible, human value is infinitely higher than the value we assign to each other. Jesus was worth the whole universe (since He made it), yet He knows all about us and loves us as individuals.

When He died on the cross, He established the value of the human person.

When the creator of the universe decides to die for you and me, it places an infinite value on our lives. And since the resurrected Jesus will never die again, our value is secure in Him for eternity. We, along with Him, will live forever in the world as He meant it to be in the first place.

Note: Adapted from C S Lewis's "Mere Christianity" by Dr Jon Paulien.