

A Cross in the Heart of God

Session 4:

The Cross in the Old Testament

Based on: Samuel Wells: *A Cross in the Heart of God* (Norwich, Canterbury Press 2020) – Chapters 3 – 5, pp 17-48



There was a cross in the heart of God before there was one planted on the green hill in Jerusalem. And now that the cross of wood has been taken down, the one in the heart of God abides, and it will remain so long as there is one sinful soul for whom to suffer.

(from Charles Allen Dinsmore: *Atonement in Literature and Life*)

I believe the longing to be with us in Jesus was the reason God created the world. But this longing was always going to carry immense risk, and the fundamental choice God made was, 'I am going to carry the consequences of that risk and I am not going to expect humanity to shoulder a burden it cannot share.' In other words, however much we have refused God's invitation to be with us, it has always remained an invitation not an imposition, and the cost of restoration and reconciliation is something that God has borne, not us...God will never give up on us, however much we fail to desire or deserve it.

(*A Cross in the Heart of God*, p 17)

Four themes – Wells discusses six – Covenant, Test, Sacrifice and Passover

Covenant

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.' But Noah found favour in the sight of the Lord.

In the six hundred and first year, in the first month, on the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth;

Then God said to Noah, 'Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth.'

The Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.'

(Genesis 6-9 (abridged))

'This is a story about a face-off between the human heart (corrupt, complicit, carnal) and God's heart (wretched, dejected, sad.) God's power is quickly displayed, but God's love ultimately prevails... God says, 'I'm going to be with you anyway.' God makes a covenant with a people that have shown themselves to be unworthy and ungrateful: 'I will never again destroy.' Never say never – but God does say never. Destruction is ruled out, however bad humanity gets. That means God has to find another way. To demonstrate what that means, God sets his bow in the clouds. No children's Noah's Ark set is complete without a rainbow. But it's not something you play a cello with – it's a weapon of war, and God has put it in heaven out of the way. Every time we see a rainbow, we're looking at God's promise not to destroy us. We won't be devastated: God will. (Wells, pp 20-21)

Test

God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.' Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.' And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt-offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'

(Genesis 22. 1-14)

What does it mean for God to provide?...The ram in this story stands in for all the moments when God provides. For the early church, there's one word for what God provides: Jesus – teaching, healing, food, example, prophecy, hope. Most of all, Jesus provides his own body to be the ram that saves all of our bodies. (p 25)

The story of Mount Calvary both repeats and develops the story of Mount Moriah. In the Mount Moriah story, God discovers that Abraham, and therefore Israel will, at the moment of truth, suspend all its doubts, rationality and dearly held commitments and place its destiny entirely in God's hands. When Jesus says in the Garden of Gethsemane, 'yet not what I will but what you will,' this is repeated...but there's something more: humanity discovers something it didn't know about God, that, at the moment of truth, God's sovereignty, power dignity and majesty will be suspended and God's life will be placed in human hands...on Calvary, we see God's true colours: God provided – a lamb, yes; a son, yes; but in the end, God provided God. (p 27)

Sacrifice

Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, 'All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden sceptre to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.' When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, 'Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.' Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, 'Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.'

(Esther 4.10-16)

What Esther does...is takes upon herself the full weight of what it means to save the entire Jewish people. Esther is the closest the Old Testament gets to a portrayal of Jesus. (Wells, p 34)

Many of us want to tell an angry story about the world and our lives. Others of us want to tell a more idealised story. But the church asks of us to shape our abundant resources to give life to the world. What Mordecai says to Esther he might be saying to all of us; perhaps we have been sent, right here, right now for just such a time as this. (Wells, p 35)

Passover

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbour in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgements: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

(Exodus 12.1-13)

The crucifixion of Jesus took place at Passover. The early Christians came to see that as central to its meaning...Passover links together the three great themes of the Old Testament – God the liberator, who sets his people free; God sets Israel free for a reason, to be God's friends, symbolised by the covenant on Mount Sinai; and the God who sets Israel free to be his friends is none other than the maker of heaven and earth. So Passover is about the creator, the liberator and the sanctifier. On the night before he died, Jesus identified himself closely with the Passover. By saying, 'This is my body,' Jesus was announcing, 'everything the Passover means, I mean.' God passes over our sins and sets us free.

(Wells, p 37)