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Righteousness and Peace in the Strangest Places

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Genesis 14

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Last year when I was being questioned on the floor of Presbytery regarding the doctrine of Limited Atonement and the extent of God's grace through Jesus Christ and Him crucified, one pastor stood up and said, "Hey, it sounds like you're saying all dogs go to heaven." I remember I just looked at him and didn't know exactly what to say... so when my little sister sent me these pictures which were going around the internet, I found them quite fascinating. Supposedly these are the church signs of two churches on opposite sides of some street somewhere in the south.

Our Lady of Martyrs Catholic Church

Beulah Cumberland Presbyterian Church

SIGN PICTURES

I did a little research and discovered these are doctored photos, and probably not actual church signs. But trust me: it is an actual church debate, and it reflects an actual tension between two poles of the Christian church. Now for lack of better words, I'm gonna use two very inaccurate words in reference to religion, not other things. So please don't make too much of them. But the Our Lady of Martyrs Catholic Church sounds like a classic liberal Christian church. The Beulah Cumberland Presbyterian Church sounds like a very conservative Christian church.

Liberal churches like the idea that God is all about peace and love, so of course "all dogs go to heaven." They like verses like Psalm 36:6 - "You save people and animals alike, Oh Lord." They deal with verses they don't like by saying, "The Bible is an old book and we can't take it literally." For liberals, God tends to be a huge concept like goodness, truth, mercy and love. For liberals, God is usually very large, which is pretty cool, for wherever you are, there God is also. For liberals, God is like everywhere and everything, which ironically is a lot like saying God is nowhere and nothing... Which is then saying goodness, mercy and love are nowhere and nothing, or at least we don't know what they are.

You see: how do we know what God is if we don't know what He's not? ...If we don't have the knowledge of good and evil? (That's something to chew on.) But if God is everywhere and everything, He seems like nowhere and nothing to us. And yet God did say to Moses, "Tell them 'I am that I am' sent you." "Yahweh." "The existing one." Like: I am "isness." He is the ground of all being and

Scripture is pretty clear: He's everywhere that's anywhere. So you see "those liberals" aren't just boneheads like you thought.

Conservative churches love the idea that God is all about righteousness and truth. They like verses like: Revelations 22:15 - "Outside the city (that would be the Valley of Gehenna) are the dogs, sorcerers and sexually immoral." Conservatives deal with the verses they don't like by saying, "Clearly the author didn't intend to mean what he seems to mean..." Conservatives like to think they have God all figured out. God is Spirit, so God saves souls. And dogs don't have souls, so they won't go to Heaven. Now most conservatives may not agree with that particular formulation of doctrine. However, they would be pretty convinced of some other particular formulation of doctrine.

For conservatives, God really isn't everywhere and everything, He's somewhere and something... Like this where and this thing... Like the Law and Covenant in the Holy of Holies... Like Jesus Christ in Israel between 0 and 30 A.D., the Jesus we learn about in books and put on our t-shirts. It's pretty cool, because we know just who God is. It's pretty tempting, because we think we can keep Him in our box.

This is a gross over-simplification, but it seems to me that for liberals, God's pretty big, but they don't know who or what He, She or It is. Conservatives know who He is, but they keep Him pretty small in a box, like some kind of pagan tribal deity... the God of the Americans, or the Jews, or people that have the same box. But what about people that have never even seen the box? What about pygmies in grass huts in Africa that never heard? What about all those people born before Easter in 30AD? What about Hittites, Canaanites and Jebusites – the people of the land whom Israel is to "devote to destruction," 500 years before Christ. Does God care for them? Love them? Is he big enough for them?

Liberals are tempted to be pantheists. God is everywhere and everything, which is like nothing. Conservatives are tempted to be pagans, God is right here and our thing, which is a very small and local, tribal sort of thing.

John 14:6 Jesus said, "I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me." One way, one narrow door. So you see, "those Conservatives," really aren't the boneheads that you thought. And please make no mistake about me. I'm convinced Jesus in the Way, the door – the only way. So what about those that haven't heard? What about Abraham? Is he forever burning in Hell (Gehenna) because he didn't hear? Does that old dog go to Heaven?

Listen to Jesus in John 8: Jesus says to the Pharisees, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did... you seek to kill me... this is not what Abraham did." He acts like He and Abraham go way back. "Your Father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad, so the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." "I AM" is a very big name, and "Jesus" is quite particular and small as a manger. So they tried to kill Him, they thought He made Himself too big, and they thought He made I AM too small.

We need God to be big so that wherever we go, I AM is. And we need God to be small, so that we could know Him and trust His heart. Liberals and conservatives; Pantheists and Pagans... But just how big and how small is God?

In Genesis 14, Chedorlaomer, King of Elam, and four other kings of the East, make war on the four kings of the Valley of Siddim (where the Dead Sea is located). They make war and defeat the four kings, including the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah. “Now the Valley of Siddim was full of bitumen pits, and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them and the rest fled to the hill country. So the enemy took all the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way. They also took Lot, the son of Abram’s brother, who was dwelling in Sodom and his possessions, and went their way. Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, who was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and of Aner. These were allies of Abram. When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, 318 of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. And he divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus.” (This is like Gideon’s army – 300 against thousands.) “Then he brought back all the possessions, and also brought back his kinsman Lot with his possessions, and the women and the people.” ...Of Sodom and Gomorrah. That’s right, Abram saved Sodom and Gomorrah.

“After Abram’s return from the defeat of (slaughter of) Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh.” (That is the King’s Valley.)

Now from the evidence of Scripture and the record of the ancient historian Josephus, it seems pretty clear that this is the Valley of Shaveh. PICTURE. I was there and took this picture. The valley on the left is the Kidron Valley (at Passover, it would run red with the blood of sacrificial lambs). The valley on the right – below the enclosed field (which is the Potter’s Field) is the Hinnon Valley – “Gehenna” – which most English Bibles translate as Hell. The flat spot where these two valleys meet was most likely called “the Valley of the Plain,” the Valley of Shaveh.

So get the picture: Abram has just returned from the slaughter of the kings. In the Old Testament, God commands war (in places) but hates violence. He tells David (for instance) that he can’t build God’s house because he shed so much blood. Abram just shed a great deal of blood, and no matter the reason, slaughtering people must be thoroughly traumatic. But slaughtering hundreds or thousands in order to save Sodom and Gomorrah (not the most deserving crowd)... well, that’s just gotta mess with your head and heart.

So Abram is returning from the slaughter of the kings with blood on his hands, 2000 years before the birth of Christ, and he meets the King of Sodom at the edge of Hell. Ever been there? Is God big enough to handle a place like that? And is he small enough that you could know his heart and believe – even there?

I took this picture from the location of the southern wall of the ancient city of Salem. In Samaritan, “Uru-Salem.” What we call Jerusalem, City of Peace.

“The King of Sodom went out to meet Abram at the edge of... Hell. And Melchizedek (the name means ‘King of Righteousness,’ he sounds conservative), King of Salem (that is King of Peace, now he sounds liberal), brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.)” It sounds like some sort of sacred covenant ritual. This is the first time the word “priest” appears in Scripture. And “God most high,” “El Elyon,” only appears here. It’s a Canaanite name for the highest God in the Canaanite Pantheon. The name is found on ancient clay tablets from 1500 B.C. This Melchizedek guy is not a Jew,

but a Canaanite, probably a Jebusite; ancestors to the people of the land that Moses and the Israelites were to “devote to destruction,” like a sacred offering to the Lord. “And Melchizedek King of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was a priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High (El Elyon), Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High (El Elyon), who has delivered your enemies into your hand!” And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.” He tithed to him.

C.S. Lewis writes:

If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all these religions, even the queerest ones, contain at least some hint of the truth. When I was an atheist I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race have always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most; when I became a Christian I was able to take a more liberal view.

You see, Lewis is saying that there can certainly be truth in other religions. The Gospel of John says that “the true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.” That light is Jesus (just Jesus), but he enlightens every one.

Lewis continues:

But, of course, being a Christian does mean thinking that where Christianity differs from other religions, Christianity is right and they are wrong. As in arithmetic – there is only one right answer to a sum, and all other answers are wrong: but some of the wrong answers are much nearer being right than others.

As we’ll see, the king of Sodom was pretty off. However, Melchizedek appears to be not only partly right, but spot on. Psalms and Hebrews refer to Jesus as “a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”

Hebrews 7:1 “For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.”

Some argue that Melchizedek was Jesus. We know that he was at least a picture of Jesus. And he offered Abram the Good News – the Gospel of Jesus in like 2000 B.C.

Jesus descended from Jerusalem above. He is King of Righteousness and Prince of Peace. He came out of the city and was crucified on a cross for our sins. God is Righteous and must judge our sins. God is King of Peace and chooses to forgive our sins. Psalm 85 “Righteousness and peace have kissed.” Jesus came out of the city and was crucified on the tree where righteousness and peace kissed each other. He offers us His body and blood. He offers bread and wine. He offers us grace. He offers us grace where the blood of the lamb meets the Valley of Gehenna. He offers us grace, which is judgment, upon the Land of Sodom, fire upon evil, but peace, mercy, righteousness and truth on Abraham. Abraham receives grace and offers his worship to God through Melchizedek, the High Priest, then verse 21:

“And the king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself.” But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have lifted my hand to the Lord, God Most High (that is Yahweh, El Elyon. Remarkable – he’s saying: me and Melchizedek are talking about the same God), Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’ I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me.” All of Melchizedek’s dealings with Abram were blessings of grace, and therefore worship to God Most High.

The King of Sodom wants business deals with Abram: contracts and IOU’s. And Abram wants no part of it. So with blood on his hands, outside the city, at the edge of Hell, the king of Righteousness and Peace gives Abram communion of bread and wine. And Abram chooses the good and rejects the bad. This is all 2000 years before Jesus said to the Pharisees, “Abraham saw my day and was glad.”

The author of Hebrew goes on to point out that the new covenant is the eternal covenant, so the Grace of God in Christ pre-dates and supersedes the law. Indeed, Paul argues that it truly is the foundation of all things. He writes, “This is the plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him.” “And through him to reconcile to himself all things making peace by the blood of his cross.” John tells us He is the lamb slain from the foundation of the world! So Jesus said to the Pharisees, “Before Abraham was, I AM.” Jesus is not simply a piece in Abraham’s story. But through Abraham, God chose to tell His story, Jesus’ story, that he might be known “to all the families of the earth.” God, who is large, chose to be small, that He might be larger still. God, who is large, chose to bless Abram (who is small), that He might bless all the families of the earth. That’s large. “This very particularity is the sacrament of universality, wrote JS Whale. God, who is large, chose to be small as a baby in a manger, that He might fill all things with Himself, and in such a way that we would forever know just who Himself is.

I AM is love and light. He is the way, the truth and the life; the Word that creates and sustains all things. I think that means He is everything that is not nothing and everywhere that’s not nowhere; everything that is not darkness, lies and corruption. He is truth, not lies; light, not dark; love, not apathy; pathos, not apathos; good, not bad; substance, not absence; “I AM,” not “I AM NOT.” That’s too hard and too big to hold. But the ground of all being became small as a manger and weak as a dead man on a cross that we might know Him and receive Him (body broken and blood shed), that He might fill us and fill all things. “I AM” is Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

A biblical Christian is way more liberal than most liberals, and way more conservative than most conservatives. A biblical Christian believes God loves all, so God died for all in the broken body of Christ Jesus our Lord. A biblical Christian believes that Jesus is the only way, yet the only way is filling all things. So all dogs may very well go to Heaven, but they only go by the blood of Jesus. Liberals are tempted to turn God into whatever they want, but through Jesus Christ and Him crucified, God has chosen to make Himself known. Conservatives are then tempted to keep Jesus in their own little box, but Jesus always breaks out and we shouldn’t try to put Him back in.

When Jesus was crucified, the curtain separating the Holy of Holies from this world was rent from top to bottom. God’s righteousness got out and the Prince of Peace descended (Eph 4:9) into the depths of the earth and ascended that He might fill all things. What I’m trying to say is that there is no place that Jesus is not. Yet there are many places where people do not know His Name. So you can go any place with courage and every place with His Name.

I heard Tony Campolo tell a story about Billy Graham that Billy Graham had a hard time sharing in public. Years ago in China, on the way up a mountain to preach the Gospel, he saw a monk on the side of the road in deep meditation. He said, "I felt this impulse to go over and share with him the story of Jesus." So with his interpreter, he went over with his New Testament and opened up the Bible and shared Jesus with the monk. Tears rolled down the monk's cheeks as he spoke to him. The monk said "You're giving me this book? How can I thank you? I have never had a gift like this. You see sir, this Jesus that you've described to me... I've always known Him. And even as you were reading from this book, within me He was saying, 'He is speaking of Me... he is speaking of Me.' And when you said the name Jesus, He said to me, 'That's My name. That's My name.' I've always known Him, and now I know what He did for me. And now I know exactly who He is."

Tuesday I had coffee with an old member of our church (Tim Jones) who recently returned from a mission trip in Burma. Tim was ministering to the Korin people of Burma. For hundreds of years, the Korin tribes had resisted the Buddhism of the Burmese because their ancestors told them of the creator God Y'wa, and how the original man and woman were tempted by evil to eat forbidden fruit, and how they fell and were subject to evil spirits, and how one day white brothers would come with a book which contained the words of Y'wa and reveal how they could walk with Y'wa once again. Several tribes in SE Asia had similar amazing legends when missionaries arrived in the 19th Century. And not just SE Asia; all over the world. They are altars to the unknown God, just like the one in Acts 17. (You can read all these stories in Eternity in their Hearts by Don Richardson.) But you see God in Christ Jesus is at work all around you, even where people don't know His name.

In other cultures, even Canaanite culture, even this culture, modern science is making discoveries about space and time and light and meaning that just scream "Jesus! It's Jesus." Hollywood is making movies that scream "Jesus!" The plot is Jesus. I mean they scream "Jesus" without saying His name or knowing His name. All around you, God is preparing people for the Gospel of Jesus. I hope you're liberal enough to look everywhere for His hand, and I hope you're conservative enough to tell everyone, "The one you're looking for is Jesus."

All around you He is preparing people to receive His blessing, and He's calling you to come out from behind the city walls to offer that blessing of bread and wine, His grace, so that people in the valley would know Him and stop making deals with the King of Sodom and the Prince of Darkness and Lies. He's working in other cultures; He's working in this culture, and every person is another culture, another world, another manger into which Jesus is fixing to be born.

So may you be liberal enough to look in every manger and conservative enough to see only Jesus. So small, yet in Him "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Col. 2:4 And with Him, God gives all things.

My friend Sarah said that I could share a poem she wrote. I can't share all, but at least part. It goes like this:

If it's easier for you to get sex on the street than a hug in church
I want you to know that I see God in you

Cars speed past
Cardboard signs being held by
Stick people with long dirty nails
I light my cigarette and pass it on
I have no funds to share and my offering
Is a lit cigarette and God
Accepts it takes a puff

God bends over the toilet releasing the contents
Of her stomach for the fifth time today
And I don't know what to do
So my offering is to hold her hair
And wash her face and mouth afterwards
And she thanks me for not judging her

God just witnessed someone shoot at his house
In the dead of night
And he comes out of the house in his pj's
Adorned with heavy artillery
And I live across the street
And instead of staying inside and
Ducking under furniture
I rush out to help him
And my offering is trying to talk
Him out of revenge.

You see
I never tell people to shut up
'Cuz I see God in their sufferings
I have seen God shoot up and
Held him as he came down
I've seen God run away from an abusive partner
I've held God as she told me about
Being gang-raped at a frat party
God ain't screaming out for offerings
Of millions and money
But of time and community

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these... you did for me.’” Matthew 25:40

I had the incredible privilege of baptizing Sarah a few months ago. That means the King of Righteousness and Peace lives in her, and that means she's part of a “royal priesthood.” And I do believe

that Priesthood is of the order of Melchizedek, for she has the faith, hope and love to walk to the edge of hell and offer Jesus.

But now you can't offer Jesus unless you've received Jesus. Maybe you have blood on your hands and you want peace. Maybe you're stuck in a deal, a bondage, to the King of Sodom, and you want righteousness. Maybe you feel like you've got one foot in Hell and you long for the eternal city. Pay attention: The King of Righteousness and Peace has left His home to bring you a blessing, where a river of lamb's blood flows into the Valley of Hinnom.

And so on the night that the King of Righteousness and the King of Peace was betrayed and delivered up, He took bread and He broke it, saying, "This is my body given to you, children of Abraham." And in the same way after supper He took the cup and He said, "This is the new covenant, the eternal covenant, the blood of the covenant... My blood of the covenant, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you. Do it in remembrance of me."

And so if you want the blessing of the King of Righteousness and the King of Peace, if you want to go into the city... You see He is way, He is the door, and He comes to you and He calls you in. All you have to do is surrender what you have, and follow.

So pray with me, and then we invite you to come to the table and receive his blessing in faith: And so, Lord Jesus, we surrender our lives to you.

Just say this in your heart after me: Lord Jesus, I confess to you, I'm a sinner. And I want you to be my righteousness. I want you to be my peace. I want to go home to your city, the city of peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Communion.

Benediction:

God is so big that He is everywhere working. And God is so small that you know Him. And I hope you see that changes things. I used to be so scared to talk to people that I would meet on the street about Jesus... Like it was all up to me, and I was going into some foreign land. But I think Jesus has said to me, "Peter, I made them. I fashioned them. I know every cell in their body. I have been romancing them since the day they were born. And now it is a gift to you that I have called you to this place that at the right moment, you could tell them my name." That is what God calls you to. So that you can walk even into the Valley of Hinnom with bread and wine and bless the people that are there.

And as we go to the park and have the church picnic and you meet people, remember that. Jesus is working, and He calls you along to tell them His name. You know Him. So in Jesus' name, believe the gospel and speak the gospel without fear, and in hope.