



Roanoke, Virginia

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“God Revealed”

Part II of the sermon series, “Lift High the Cross

Philippians 2:1-11

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Our passage has the shape of the letter V. The passage

- begins high with Jesus with God,
- goes low as Jesus becomes human
 - lower still in being a servant of others,
 - and lower still as Jesus dies on the cross—
 - a style of execution meant to humiliate who is killed,
 - and crush the hopes of those who thought Jesus had something to offer.
- God then raises Jesus from the dead and gives him the seat of honor.

The V Paul draws is an illustration, not a definition. Don't take from the passage that when Jesus was on earth, God no longer was in heaven... or no longer God. Paul is speaking to the world that assumes

- that perfection would have nothing to do with imperfection,
- that purity is not to be tainted by immorality,
- and that God would not want anything to do with the mess of fleshed life,
 - much less submit to a death meant to demean and humiliate.

The V illustrates the wonder of God's best being exposed to the worst about us, and still serving us.



For me, the interesting question of this passage is not, “What happened to God while Jesus lived?” The interesting question is this: “Does God change?” Or more to the point, “Did God become a better God? Did the God who created humans learn to become more humane?”

Travel the V with me as I read our passage from Philippians:

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, ² make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
⁹ Therefore God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name
that is above every other name,
¹⁰ so that at the name given to Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

I am a better grandparent than I was a parent. I know a lot of grandparents say that, but they say it because it is true. At least it is true of me.

I was in my 20s when I was given the parenting assignment and I had some anxiety about getting it right. On the one hand, I wanted my girls to love me because I loved them so much. They learned to use that to their advantage. Refuse me a hug, and my mood was spoiled. Or give me a hug, and suddenly I’m buying ice cream.

On the other hand, I was anxious about their not doing what I told them to do because I wanted them to get educated and not become awful people. They should have understood that, so why did I have to explain myself all the time. I’ll admit it, sometimes I was a “Thus Saith the Dad” kind of dad. Now, I am not confessing anything terrible. The world forgot to give me a “Dad of the Year” award, but I did all right. I am just saying that as my girls grew, I grew, and now I’m a better grandparent than I was a parent.



Hush! This is church and some of you are thinking too loud and it is distracting. I can hear you thinking, “Emory is only five years old. Let’s see how *the right DR. Reverend I’m-a-Better-Grandparent* does when she hits 13.” Well, I’ll cross that bridge to therapy when I get to it. The point is I can compare apples to apples. Emory is 5 and I can remember when my girls were 5, and I can see that I’ve learned a trick or two;

- I don’t get triggered so easily.
- I’m more of a turn-the-other-cheek kind of guardian.
- I let most things slide that can slide,
 - and when I have to lay down the Law, pouting doesn’t bother me.
- And, yes, when I need to, I can turn her over to her mom and go watch Carolina lose to Duke *and probably blow their chance at getting into the tournament.* (***How many wide-open field goals can a team miss in a game?***)

Like I said, I’ve matured. I was a good parent, but with Emory, I’m a *kinder, gentler, more patient* version of that parent. You know, more grace than law.

Many have said that this is how it is with God. “[God has grown up](#),” they say. The New Testament God is a *kinder, gentler, more patient* version of the Old Testament God. Look at how the Bible stories are told:

- God created the world and all if it seemed good. God threatens to kill Adam and Eve if they mess up what God just made. But when they do mess up, God reconsiders and doesn’t kill them. Instead, he sends them to their room ... or rather out of the garden and into the world.
- When Adam and Eve’s descendants keep blowing it, God decides to wipe the slate clean with a flood...
 - but then has a change of heart and saves
 - Noah,
 - Noah’s family,
 - and a starter couple for every kind of animal.
 - God puts a [Rainbow Poster](#) in the sky as a reminder not to lose it like that again.
- God decides to call Abraham and make of Abraham’s descendants God’s people...
 - but along the way, when Abraham’s descendants get too frustrating, God threatens to break up with them... to abandon the family.
- God delivers Hebrews from slavery,
 - but then Moses has to talk God into not breaking their agreement when their complaining gets to be too much.
- God admits to the prophet Hosea that for a brief moment the thought crossed his mind to leave the family, but then he never would do that and never will.
- Remember when God told the Hebrews entering Canaan to have nothing to do with the people of the land, sometimes even commanding their slaughter?



- Remember when the first king, Saul, could do no right in God’s eyes, whereas it seemed David could get away with murder?
- And then we see God stop being so over-protective,
 - pushing his children out of the nest and into the big world,
 - telling them to be happy where they land
 - and improve the lives of those around them.
 (Although sending the Jews into Exile seems a pretty harsh way to cut the apron strings. Let’s remember that psalmists prayed prayers where they complained that God is an Absentee Dad)

We read those stories and it seems sometimes that God was a young, insecure parent who needed to learn on the job. God was

- impatient,
- too quick tempered,
- too harsh with the rules,
- too protective of the children sometimes
 - and giving up on them too early at other times.

It is easy to read the Hebrew Scriptures in that way.

It is also easy to say that when God became flesh and lived among us—

- when God was in Christ and walked in our shoes for a life—
 - that God learned a thing or two,
 - that God saw how hard it is for us to live up to unrealistic expectations,
 - and that we need to be *cut some slack*.

Like I said before, some who read the Bible say that God was a good God before Jesus, but through Jesus, God became a *kinder, gentler, more patient version* of God’s self through Jesus. They say,

- the Old Testament is a Book of the Law
 - and the New Testament is a Book of Grace,
- that God is the God of wrath in the Old Testament,
 - and God is the God of love in the New Testament.

However, they say it,

what they are saying is that when God was in Christ
God changed... and for the better.

I’m not going to deal with the question of whether God changes, or whether God is supposed to be some Unmoved Mover; some deity above it all where past, present, and future are all the same. That doesn’t get us anywhere. Jewish and Christian faith is relational, and relationships change. They are dynamic. The only way we can experience God is in relationship,



and the way to talk about relationships is through stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end... or maybe we're still in the middle.

You get my point. So, whether God in heaven changes or not, the only way we can know God on our side of things is to experience our relationship with God changing.

What I want to talk about is whether through Jesus God became a better version of God's self or whether in Jesus we can see more clearly who God has always been.

Revelation, not change, is what Paul is talking about in our passage, I think. Look at the picture he draws with his passage. He speaks of Jesus being with God from the beginning. So, whatever we say is true about Jesus was true about God from the beginning. *We* might have thought that God is so majestic, so pure, and so demanding that we can only offer cowed worship and fearful obedience. We might say even that it took God killing his own son to see how far his wrath can go, and thus then with a broken heart forgives us for the mistakes we make. But at the beginning of the V, Jesus was with God.

Then Jesus did not think equality with God as something to hang on to. The pristine goodness of life with God is not something God wanted to protect from being spoiled by us. Jesus became a life emptied into human life.

So, what that says, I think, is that

- It turns out that God's goodness isn't tarnished by our sin. God's goodness isn't to be protected by avoiding sinners.
 - Jesus reveals that God's goodness is expressed in embracing sinners.

- If God is perfect,
 - Jesus reveals that God is perfectly compassionate.

- If God is pure,
 - Jesus reveals the purity of a servant's heart.

- If God is Law,
 - Jesus reveals that God is Love, and whatever Law of God we talk about must be about the Law of Love.

Jesus reveals just how loving God has always been, Just look at the point at the bottom of the V. Jesus was so emptied into human life that he died a human death, even to the point of being crucified on the cross. And in that moment of dying when he was supposed to be exposed as a failed king and a false messiah, Jesus asks forgiveness for those who did this to him.

More than anything else, that is what is revealed about the true nature of God. God is the God of reconciliation. God is the God of Healing the Wounds of Life. And if we are going to do what Paul says we should do,

- that is be of the same mind and heart as Jesus
 - than reconciliation, is what we have to be about as well.



The funny thing about a really good revelation is that it clears things up. It's this simple: we are to be about reconciliation or we are not about what Jesus is about. It is that simple... and that hard.

I'll talk about reconciliation again in a couple of weeks. But lift high the cross, for it reveals just how far God's love will go, and, on our side of the relationship, what we need to do to become *kindler, gentler, more patient versions* of ourselves.

