

Sermon follow-up:

I have to admit that the theology of "God crucified" has held my attention for several years now. Indeed, I've been mesmerized by it for quite some time. As a result, I've done quite a bit of teaching on God's suffering over the years. Some of that has been recorded and is on the web.

Here are some links:

A two part series on the "Humility and Suffering of God," preached at Auburn Avenue Pres:

<http://www.trinity-pres.net/audio/aa-sermon02-12-01am.mp3>

<http://www.trinity-pres.net/audio/aa-sermon02-12-01am.mp3>

I also did some preaching and teaching on the theme of God's suffering back in '05, after Katrina:

<http://www.trinity-pres.net/audio/sermon05-09-04.mp3>

<http://www.trinity-pres.net/audio/ss05-09-04.mp3>

<http://www.trinity-pres.net/audio/ss05-09-11.mp3>

What was Sunday's sermon really about? It was about the love of God, revealed in Christ Jesus. How has God manifested his love for us? He became man for us. He suffered under the curse. He died for our sins. He rose again to give us victory.

We really need to learn to think of God as he revealed himself in Jesus. It's all too easy for us to think of God as quite different than what we see of Jesus in the gospels. And yet, John's gospel makes it very clear: we are supposed to understand God's identity through the story of Jesus, rather than starting with a definition of God and trying to fit Jesus in. All Christian theology is really Christology -- we're not merely *theists*, but *Christians*, so we insist God is only known truly through his self-revelation in Christ.

Believing in a real incarnation of God in the man Jesus necessitates a "theopaschite" conclusion. Theopaschism is the label given to the view that God (*theo*) can suffer (*passio*). Of course, God is sovereign, so he cannot be *made* to suffer from the outside. God is without "passions," as the Westminster Confession teaches, in the sense that there is no passivity in God. But, in his free mercy and love, he can choose to involve himself in the suffering of creatures. Creatures cannot impose suffering on God against his will, but he can choose to impose suffering upon himself as an act of sacrificial love.

The "god of the philosophers" is not the same as the God who is revealed in Jesus. The "god of the philosophers" cannot suffer, cannot become man, cannot undergo death for us. This was the problem with the Arians in the early church. They did not believe deity could suffer. Thus, they concluded Jesus must not have been God. As I pointed out on Sunday, the church answered the Arian challenge with the Nicene Creed, insisting that the eternally begotten Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, became man, was born of the Virgin Mary, etc.

But there were other flawed ways of trying to evade the theopaschite conclusion. Some said that only the humanity of Christ suffered on the cross; his deity was not engaged in the crucifixion. But this entails several problems. For one, it means that either God does not save or the cross does not save -- since God is not involved in the cross. For another thing, it repeats the errors of the Nestorians, which were ruled as heretical in the early church. The Nestorians posited only a loose connection between the deity and humanity of Jesus. He was not the God-man, or the Word-made-flesh. He was not a unified person, but really two persons -- a divine person and a human

person, closely related to one another, but not conjoined in a unity. While it is important to distinguish the natures of Christ, the Nestorians ended up separating them.

Gregory of Nazianzus got it right:

He prays, but He hears prayer. He weeps, but He causes tears to cease. He is bruised and wounded, but He heals every disease and every infirmity. He is lifted up and nailed to the Tree, but by the Tree of Life He restores us, yes, He saved even the robber crucified with Him. He dies, but He gives life, and by His death destroys death. He is buried, but He rises again; He goes down to Hell, but He brings up the souls; He ascends to heaven, and shall come again to judge the living and the dead.

The "He," of course, is the God-man (or the theanthropic person, as he is sometimes called). All the actions of Jesus are the actions of the God-man. It is not as though when he weeps only his human nature is weeping, and when he does miracles only the divine nature is acting. *All of Jesus does all that Jesus does.* All that to say: The cross is a moment in the life of God (not just the man Jesus). The God-man experienced death. The eternal Son of God died in human flesh on the cross. One of the Trinity was crucified for us (as the early church put it).

So what, then, does it mean to say that God "died" on the cross? How can death reach in and touch the life of God? Obviously this is a mystery -- perhaps the greatest mystery in all of theology and all of history. Bob Dylan (where else do expect me turn in answering such a deep question?!) had some thoughts, going back to the "God is dead" movement of the 1960s, which was building off of Nietzsche's "God is dead" comment in *The Gay Science* (thanks to Jason Smith for bringing this quote to my attention):

I remember seeing a Time magazine on an airplane a few years back and it had a big cover headline, "IS GOD DEAD?" I mean, would you think that was a responsible thing to do? What does God think of that? I mean, if you were God, how would you like to see that written about yourself? You know, I think the country's gone downhill since that day. Obviously, that's true, in a sense. Those who were proclaiming God's death at that time meant that God was no longer relevant to the human situation. He could no longer be counted on to solve human problems. The idea of God no longer carried much weight with modern people. (Of course, all that proved to a fad that faded away even quicker than it arose.)

But I'm not sure so that Dylan was totally right. God *likes* it when we proclaim his death -- provided we also proclaim that he rose again the third day! God has revealed himself in all his glory in his death on the cross. If you want to know how God wants us to see him, look at John 20 -- he identifies himself by his wounds. Yes, our God is sovereign, all glorious and all powerful. But he is also infinitely humble, stooping to serve and save his creatures. Indeed, God's glory is most fully revealed in his humility, and his kingship most fully revealed in his servanthood. (If you look at John's gospel carefully, you will see that Christ's cross is his "lifting up," or his exaltation. The hour of his death is the hour of his glory. The cross is a stepping stone back to the Father's right hand.)

In that sense, nothing is more relevant than God's death. God's death is our life and salvation. God's death makes God relevant to every human problem because it means he makes our problems his own problems. He is not immune to or insensitive to human suffering. Indeed, he has entered into our suffering and taken our plight upon himself in Christ. God is committed to restoring and completing his original project for the human race, even at the cost of his own life. Sometimes, in our determination to get something accomplished, we say, "I'm going to do this even if it kills me!" Well....that's exactly what God has done.

So, with Luther, it is orthodox to speak of "God crucified" (*deus crucifixus*, as Luther put it). But of course that still leaves a lot unexplained from a theological perspective. What could it possibly

mean to speak of God's death? The "death of God on the cross" does not mean that God ceased to exist. Death is not cessation of existence; it is separation. Human death means separation of the body and soul. When Jesus died on the cross, the body and soul of his human nature were separated from one another. The man Jesus died a human death. But also -- at least momentarily, as Jesus shrieked out the cry of dereliction (Mt. 27:46) -- the Father and Son were separated from one another. The one who is God is forsaken by Another who is God. The Son suffers death; the Father suffers the death of his beloved Son. (We should not think of a loving Son pacifying an angry Father; the cross is rooted in the love of the Father every bit as much as the love of the Son. Yes, wrath did need to be turned away, but Father and Son undertook that work as a joint venture of holy love.)

Think about all that. As I pointed out in the sermon on Sunday, this shows us the reality of what sin is, the magnitude of sin. *Only the death of God could undo man's rebellion.* What happens when God and evil collide? What happens when God's love smashed into creaturely wickedness and hate? God takes sin onto himself in the man Jesus and bears "the awful load... that none could bear... but God alone" (see the hymn "Thy Works, Not Mine" by Horatius Bonar). Truly, "'tis mystery all, the Immortal dies; Who can explore his strange design? Amazing love, how can it be that thou my God shouldst die for me?" (as Wesley put it in his great theopaschite hymn, "And Can it Be"). [Note: While sometimes Christian theologians have been reluctant to speak of the suffering and death of God, that has not been the case with Christian poets and hymn writers. The theme of God's death on the cross is pervasive in Christian poetry and hymnody, from virtually every era of church history.]

To put it rather roughly, this means sin busted apart the Trinity. Sin exploded the life of God. But when the Father and Son were separated from one another on the cross, that separation made room for sinners to enter back into the circle of fellowship, love, and glory that the Triune God had enjoyed from all eternity (Jn. 17:20ff). Jesus's death pried open the Triune fellowship, making way for redeemed sinners to enter into communion with God once more, after the resurrection.

Of course, because Jesus is God, and God is life, death could not hold him. He did not merely die for our sin, to remove God's curse. That is certainly central: God saved us from his own wrath, "eating the costs of sin" in order to forgive us. But he does not just deal with sin's consequences. He deals with sin itself. In his death and resurrection, Jesus has defeated sin and death forever. We are assured of a sin-free, death-free eternity because the God-man has taken these things onto himself and destroyed them. Now, their complete removal from the creation is only a matter of time. The cross was not merely the death of Jesus; it was the death of death. On the cross, Jesus set a time bomb underneath death, ensuring it's eventual demise, when he returns to raise us all from the dust.

In the cross, the Father gave up the Son for the sake of the cursed and fallen creation. But in the resurrection, the Father receives the Son back to himself -- and now the creation as a whole is included in their divine fellowship with one another. The work of the Triune God has restored peace to creation.

But there are some other applications of this theopaschite theology as well. Some of this repeats Sunday's sermon, but most of it is stuff I did not get to. Why does the theology of "God crucified" matter?

1. Do you ever wonder where God is when you suffer? When cancer or job loss or insults or loneliness or death touch your life? Is there any point of contact between our suffering and God? Is God involved? Or is he distant and aloof? Is he insentive, or does he participate in our pain? God suffered on the cross -- but is he with us in our daily forms of suffering?

Herman Melville once said, "The reason the mass of men fear God, and at bottom dislike him is because they rather distrust his heart and fancy him all brain like a watch."

But the Bible gives us a different picture. Scripture shows us a God who grieves over human sin (Gen. 6:6; Eph. 4:30). It shows us a God who suffers with his people when they suffer (Acts 9:4, 5; Rom. 8:17ff). It shows us a God with a rich, deep, and complex emotional life. (He is not all brain, as Melville feared.)

And of course, it shows us a God with scars (Jn. 20). The wounds of Jesus show that God suffers with and for his people. Those wounds show God's solidarity with his suffering people. After all, Jesus did more than suffer God's wrath (though that was main form of his suffering). He also suffered human injustice and mockery and torment and persecution. Further, the Father suffered the pain of giving the Son up -- which should comfort all of us when we lose loved ones, especially a child. No matter what kind of pain we endure, we know that God has "been there, done that." God binds himself to his suffering people and suffers with us in our suffering. He is not insensitive -- indeed, he feels the pain of the world's fallenness far more deeply than we ever could. He is not apathetic or emotionless; rather he is absolute passion, the fullness of emotion.

John Stott once said, "In a world of pain, how could one worship a God who is immune to it?...I could never believe in God if it were not for the cross." God is love; love by definition includes a willingness to participate in the pain of the beloved. When you are in pain, know that God is with you. Yes, he is sovereign over your suffering, and that is a comfort. But he is not only transcendent, he is immanent. He is close to you, sharing your weakness and vulnerability. A Christian never suffers alone. Never. Because Jesus suffered alone on the cross, we don't have to -- indeed, our suffering becomes a *fellowship* in his suffering, as Paul says (Phil. 3).

Mark Horne points out that our "groaning" in pain due to the world's fallenness is really just a sharing in God's much larger and deeper groaning over the broken condition of the world (Rom. 8:18-23). Mark explains:

Now do you get the radical claim Paul is making about why we groan over the effects of the curse on creation?

Let me try to make it concrete for you. Say you are at a funeral--maybe even the funeral of closely related loved one, a husband or wife, son or daughter, father or mother. You sit there grieving and start wondering how God feels. How does God feel about the death of your loved one? After all, God is eternal. He knew this was going to happen from before this person was born. It may have caught you utterly by surprise, but God even planned it.

If this person is a Christian that is a great comfort. It means you don't have to mourn as if you have no hope. But what about God and your grief? Is Jesus partying with the departed shade of your dear one while you are left weeping alone? Does God feel anything?

We think that because the way events catch us by surprise factors into our grief that God must not feel because he lacks our limitations. But what the Bible teaches is just the opposite. The only reason we feel anything is because the Spirit shares with us a taste of God's pain over the effects of death creation.

He weeps at funerals more than we ever do.

And while we must confess that God is sovereign and both makes alive and destroys, that he sends natural disasters and all their devastation, we must never allow us to think it is a cold piece of business for him. Katrina was not a gamepiece on a mapboard to him. He is closer than we are, than the cameras ever are, to every single suffering and tragedy in New Orleans and everywhere

else. He groans more than we do about it.

The point is: when we feel compassion for people in their suffering, we are not doing something that makes us different from the God who decreed suffering. Rather we are (just barely) beginning to join with the God who suffers over it.

Edward Shillito makes a similar point, more poetically:

The other gods were strong, but Thou wast weak;  
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne,  
But to our wounds, only God's wounds can speak  
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone

When we suffer we must resist the temptation to think God has abandoned us. Sometimes people ask me as a pastor what I say to people in the midst of horrible tragedy. It is very hard to know what to say, and often it is best to say nothing at all. But we should always remember that the gospel has a great deal to say to people in such circumstances; indeed, it is often much easier to apply the gospel to a person who is suffering than to a person who has everything going his way. It takes wisdom to know how to speak the gospel into the midst of another's trial, but there can be no doubt that the gospel was designed to deal with precisely those sorts of situations. The gospel of God crucified is always adequate.

2. So God suffered for us on the cross and suffers with us now. What role, then, does suffering play in our lives? Since Jesus suffered, why do we still have to suffer?

Jesus shows us that suffering reveals and leads to glory. Suffering is a stepping stone to our share in the triumph of Christ. If even our wounds work for our good, there is nothing the world can do to us that will not serve as part of our victory (Rom. 8:28). The cross shows that suffering (when endured in faith) is a key means through which we become Christ-like, even God-like.

Suffering serves a good end. We are all better off because Jesus suffered for us. (Right?!) And we are better off if we suffer faithfully in our own bodies as well. In fact, the cross shows us that all our wounds are ultimately for our good.

The philosopher Nietzsche said, "The which does not kill us can only make us stronger." But the gospel says, "Even that which *does* kill us can only make us stronger."

This is why Christians have so often been cavalier in the face of death. George Herbert said death used to be an "an executioner," but the gospel has made him into "a gardener." The gospel of God crucified shows that all your battle scars from life's struggles are really badges of your coming victory. God revealed his glory in Jesus' scars and he can do so in your scars as well.

It's instructive to compare John's gospel to the other gospels. In the other gospels, the story of Jesus is U-shaped. The cross is all about his humiliation. It is the bottom the "U." After he has suffered, the Father reverses his situation by resurrecting him and restoring him to glory. But in John's gospel, the cross is not really seen as a humiliation at all. It is seen as the first step towards his exaltation and his return to glory with his Father. The ministry of Jesus is a straight upward climb, with the cross serving as yet another rung in the ladder. This is why John's gospel emphasizes that Jesus determined the timing and manner of his own death (e.g., Jn. 10:17-18; 19:30). Jesus described his cross as an enthronement (Jn. 12:32). As John tells the narrative of his arrest and trial, at every point, he shows that Jesus (not Judas, not the Jews, not Pilate) is really in charge. We find Jesus showing his power, making judgments, claiming authority, etc. (Jn. 18:6, 19:11, 13, 26-27, etc.). All that to say: Suffering not only paves the way to glory (a point

the other gospels stress, along with Paul); suffering itself is a form of glory (John's unique contribution). Faithful suffering does not just make us stronger; it is strength in action.

3. How does this help us deal with doubts? Doubt comes in all kinds of forms. We can doubt ourselves, God, the Bible, etc. But I think the end of John 20 speaks with special power to those who, for whatever reason, lack assurance of God's love. After all, Jesus appeared to "doubting" Thomas to overcome his doubts and generate faith. Jesus showed Thomas his wounds -- and suddenly his faith, hope, and love were restored. He went from stubborn skeptic to making the ultimate confession of faith. Much more was at stake for Thomas than just the "brute fact" of the resurrection.

There are a lot of ways to handle doubt. Some get into formal apologetics. And certainly there is a place for that kind of logical reasoning -- not because we can climb the ladder of human logic to get to faith or to God, but because (at the very least) such arguments can show the intellectual futility of unbelief. Arguments can get us to doubt our doubts, and thus clear the way for faith.

At the end of John 20, we find the purpose why the gospel was written: so that we might come to faith, continue on in the faith, and so have life in Jesus' name. But what is the story of John all about? The confession of Thomas in 20:28 is the climax of it all. You might subtitle this book "The Biography of a Crucified God" (or "Autobiography" if you take into account inspiration). The life-story of God has a cross planted right in the heart of it. It is a cruciform narrative.

I think two helpful ways to deal with doubts arise here. First, Jesus and John make it clear that the written word of the apostles will substitute for eye witness experience (20:30-31). We know Jesus is risen because of their word. Jesus pronounces a blessing on those have not seen (like Thomas) yet believe. The apostolic word substitutes for sight. In itself, this should not be a problem -- we are dependent on the eye witness accounts of others for our knowledge of *all* history. This is just the way God made the world. God does not give each person a private revelation of himself. He makes a public revelation, which is then passed along from one person to the next, and one generation to the next, through "normal" human channels.

This is to say that no one becomes a believer apart from the witness and work of the community (as Thomas demonstrates -- his doubt cannot be separated from the fact that he missed gathering with the other disciples on Easter evening). No one comes to faith autonomously or independently. It is impossible to become a Christian apart from the instrumentality of the apostles and the church. Even a man on a deserted island who comes across a Bible and believes what he reads in it is still dependent on the ancient apostolate and the church, for the church has preserved, transmitted, translated, and printed the Bible, including the words of the apostles that bear witness to the risen Christ. God has worked in such a way that Christian faith is embedded in human history and community. No one comes to faith because they got hit with a bolt of grace from the wild blue yonder. We always come to faith in a relational, communal context. The Spirit's work is embedded in the church body. The church is not an adjunct to the gospel, but the embodied community through which the gospel is preserved and passed along. Lesslie Newbigin explains:

There would only seem to be two possibilities. One would be that God should make his authority known directly to every individual conscience without intervention of any other human agency. But this suggestion is absurd, for no human being develops either reason or conscience except through participating in the intercourse of a human community, family, society, culture. Because no human experience is totally private, divine revelation could not be totally private. The other possibility is that divine revelation should be a matter of public history . . . It is therefore hard to imagine how there could be any other divine revelation authoritative for the whole of human history except one that embraced the three elements we have noted above: a living community, a tradition of teaching, and the continuing work of the divine Spirit illuminating the tradition in each

new generation and each new situation, so that it becomes the living speech of God for that time, place, and culture.

The church is not a loose collection of individuals, held together by nothing more than a series of private, personal decisions for Christ. Rather, the church is God's new family, formed by organic bonds of the Spirit. The church is the Mother of all believers, giving birth and nurturing her children through the means of grace. Of course, that all starts with the eye witness testimony of the apostles, who saw and touched the risen Christ, as transmitted that story to others through their writings, as proof that Jesus is God and the one in whom the covenant promises have been fulfilled.

So our dependence on the writings of the apostles is not a bad thing at all. Peter says the word is "more sure" than eye witness (2 Pt. 1:16ff). We see more clearly through their mature testimony than they could see through their own eyeballs for quite some time. By relying on their word, we get the perfected version of the story, as opposed to the piecemeal account the disciples had to grapple with in the days just after the first Easter. (All the gospel resurrection accounts agree in showing how discombobulated the disciples were on Easter Sunday.) God has given us not their confusion but their confession. And that confession is reliable and trustworthy. We get to take a shortcut around their puzzlement, guesswork, and misunderstanding. While they saw Jesus with their eyes, we see him through their words. Thomas had to see to believe; we believe in order to see. But there is no deficiency in the revelation we have been given. The word of the gospel is sufficient to create and sustain faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.

In other words, the best way to overcome your doubts is to keep immersing yourself in the story of *God crucified*, especially in the context of the church's worshipping assembly. That story -- the best story ever told -- is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1). Like any good story, it draws us in and makes us *want* to believe. It revives dashed hopes. It gives us vision, purpose, and courage. We need to hear the story again and again, with the rest of God's people.

But Jesus does something else for us. No he doesn't come to us and say "Put your hand on my nail scars and into my pierced sides." But he does come to us each Lord's Day and say, "This is my body broken for you. Take and eat....This is my blood shed for you. Take and drink." In the Supper, Jesus gives us a tangible sign of his presence with us and of his crucifixion/resurrection on our behalf. He makes himself known to us as the victorious God-man in the breaking of bread and the drinking of the cup. He shares his peace with us as we gather together. That peace conquers all our doubts and fears, wherever they come from.

4. You become like what you worship (Ps. 115). The kind of God we serve shapes the kind of life we live. If we serve a God who is prideful and power hungry, we will be arrogant power seekers ourselves. If we serve a God who is impersonal and distant, we will have a hard time developing friendship and community. If we serve a God who does not keep promises, we will find ourselves becoming untrustworthy. If we serve a God who does not join with the suffering and the needy, we will find ourselves refusing compassion to the poor and weak.

John 20 shows us God is humble. He uses his power to serve. He loves sacrificially, even to the point of death. He suffers for the sake of others. He speaks peace and forgiveness, even to those who wronged him, so that community can be restored. These are virtues revealed by the wounds of Jesus; they are the virtues that should characterize the people who worship the God embodied in Jesus.

Sadly, these aspects of God's character have not always received their due. In the Presbyterian/Reformed world, we tend to emphasize God's sovereignty and power, often to the exclusion of other biblical themes. We do not focus our understanding of God on Christ and the cross, but on the fact of God's decree. Perhaps this is why Reformed church culture is so often characterized by arrogance and power struggles. We serve a God who is raw power, and then

act accordingly, as we made into his image. We serve a God who is "all brain, like a watch"....and then wonder why our churches lack love.

I'm not saying this rises to the level of idolatry in the Reformed/Presbyterian world, but I do think it reflects some imbalances in our theology, which, if left unchecked, have unfortunate practical consequences. I especially think this is important for those in positions of power -- husbands, fathers, bosses, church leaders, etc. Jesus' wounds show us how power is to be exercised -- in love and in humility, with a view to the well-being of others. If we get our doctrine of God wrong, a kind of de-sanctification can take place. Rather than growing in virtue, we can actually regress.

Ok, that's enough for now. I still have a lot more to say about this, both theology and application. Maybe someday, you'll get more....