

Isaiah 10:17-22; 37:28-37
Romans 9:22-33

THREE THINGS I NO LONGER BELIEVE

There are many reasons why it is necessary for Christians to pray every day. This sermon is my attempt to highlight one of the big ones.

There are three things I no longer believe:

- 1.) That success or fame is a sign of God's favor, or of our being "right," or our doing it right.
- 2.) That God punishes the wicked, or rewards the righteous – in this world. (I mean in some direct, personal fashion, in addition to the way things normally work.)
- 3.) That we can know the truth or make faithful decisions according to outer circumstances.

These three things I no longer believe. Let me admit and confess that I know all three were believed by the vast majority of people in the ancient world. Most people believe them still today. Even those who do not, keep reverting back to this mode of thinking in careless moments. It is very difficult to go through our days without acting and thinking and speaking as if we believed these three things.

I.) SUCCESS OR FAME IS NOT A SIGN OF GOD'S FAVOR

Most of the people who have lived on the face of the earth have assumed that success or fame is a proof that "we are doing it right." And that God has built the universe so that what God approves of will win and survive. Many ancient cultures had various forms of trial-by-combat, assuming God would help the righteous warrior, or the righteous cause. The priests of Israel made most of their decisions by casting the urim and thumin – bones which were the forerunners of dice. The whole nation assumed that if a priest threw the dice in a formal setting, while ritually pure, then God would make the bones fall the way they were supposed to. Many people died – or were exonerated – by this "cast of the dice." I am simply saying that it has been largely assumed through most of human history that success or fame is a sign of God's favor, and that God will physically and outwardly reward those who are doing it right.

We grow up with the stories of our faith heritage being a major influence on the formation of our thoughts and concepts. Even if we don't know them, they form the basis of most of our Western culture. Mostly, we get the simple version. Abraham was faithful, so God made him a great promise. Joseph stayed faithful, so God put him in charge of all Egypt. Joshua and Gideon were faithful, so they won their battles. David was faithful, so he became king. Saul was unfaithful, so he lost his kingship. Goliath was a pagan who worshipped other gods, so he lost his head. The message behind the stories is reiterated more and more deeply, whether anybody intends it or not. But they do intend it. Parents and teachers have an agenda that affects the way they tell the stories. They want the stories to be useful to the children. They want the children to identify. They want the children to grow up to be responsible, successful, dependable citizens. So do I – don't you? So the stories are *used* to teach children to “be good” – to do their school work, obey their parents, be nice to others, “grow in favor with God and man.” And the message behind them is: God brings success to those who are obedient and do right. Not a very big jump from there to the conviction that success or fame is a sign of God's favor, of our being right, or of our doing things right. If it works, God blessed it.

But this is not true.

II.) GOD DOES NOT PUNISH THE WICKED OR REWARD THE RIGHTEOUS

Isaiah believes God is punishing Israel (even God's Chosen) for breaking the Covenant – for failing to be faithful. He rejoices that God will not destroy them utterly (even though they deserve it). A remnant will remain to pick up the pieces and try again. It is the basic assumption of much of the prophetic tradition in the Old Testament. It is the assumption of most of the people in the New Testament as well. And it is the assumption of most religious people today: God will reward the righteous and punish the wicked. Why else would we turn from evil and try to do good? For most people, the notion of conversion includes an awakening to the realization that we are in big trouble with God for our evil ways, and that coming to Jesus includes a decision to repent and make some big changes in our records before the axe of God's judgment falls. In short, many people convert because they are afraid they will go to Hell if they don't. Concurrently, many people do not convert and never bother to support the church or work for the Kingdom because

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they are somehow convinced that God will *not* throw them into Hell. Is that the only thing wrong with being atheist, or agnostic?

I live in a world where most people assume that being “Christian” means being successful in the world – even though the world is not at peace with God, and is not obedient to God. From everyday casual conversations, to television interviews, to noticing the frameworks of thought behind articles and books, the assumption is everywhere apparent. When the guy who wins the pennant (or the cup or whatever) thanks God for his success over his opponents, I’m annoyed. Even though I know Jesus loves boxers, I suspect Jesus cringes to be publicly thanked for helping somebody beat somebody else into oblivion, or, for that matter, to be thanked for any other kind of victory over competitors or opponents. (Whom have *we* decided God doesn’t anymore?) Doubtless Jesus appreciates the personal loyalty and gratitude, but what about the smear on His reputation? And what about His love for the loser? When somebody tells me that the earthquake or the famine or AIDS or a job loss is God’s personal punishment on wrongdoers, I think that is a terrible judgment call on their part – and a terrible insult to the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Besides, why would polio, typhoid fever, or tuberculosis be God’s punishment on thousands only a few generations ago, and on almost nobody today? Is modern medicine fighting against God – trying to take away God’s thunderbolts?

I quote from that great Christian prophet, Ezekiel (33:11): *“Say to them, ‘As I live,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?’”*

Many say: “Well, God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous, but there is a delay. The results are not immediately apparent. If you deserve punishment, God will get you later on. If you deserve reward, God will see to it later on.” And from this comes all sorts of notions about patience, and Heaven, and Hell – all of it going right back to our old way of thinking, only slightly revised. As soon as we die – or as soon as Christ comes again – God will change back into what we all know God really is: he will set the old rules back in place, rip away the mask of grace and mercy and forgiveness, and then wreak vengeance on the bad guys and heap blessings on the good guys. And he will probably have to set up some kind of purgatory to process all the rest of us who are such a mixture of the two.

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There is sufficient evidence, and there are sufficient witnesses, for us to conclude a far better truth. The process of our learning to love the good because it is good – and to hate the evil because it is terrible – is going on all the time. It is going to continue to go on – in this world, and the next. God is not going to interfere by using special rewards or punishments that would throw us out of the learning curve and cause us to love good for the reward instead of for its own innate goodness. And God is not going to change character and turn evil and vindictive in some “last judgment blood bath.” GOD IS *NEVER* GOING TO PUNISH – ONLY CORRECT – AND ONLY THOSE WHO REQUEST IT. Nevertheless, most people hesitate to draw conclusions about such matters, just as early Christians were hesitant to trust that Jesus’ authority was great enough to save them if they broke the Law of Moses. Why are you here on Sundays? Because some of your ancestors finally took the leap and concluded that the Resurrection (Sunday) was greater than the Ten Commandments (“*Remember the Sabbath day [Saturday], to keep it holy*”). In the same fashion, we are hesitant to conclude that God is truly loving and merciful – clear to the core. We are loath to give up the comforting simplicity that “God punishes the wicked and rewards the just.”

All my life, I have been privileged to be present with people who were picking up the broken pieces of their lives. All of them who made it found changes to make and confessions to make, and they found new levels of meaning and dedication. But most of them have not been worse people than other people I have known. They have often made more improvements. But I cringe at the extra weight they have often had to carry from thinking that God was especially angry toward them. Some may suppose that view helped them to make the necessary improvements in their lives, yet I am unable to read it that way. Always – from what I have been able to comprehend in my own experience or from what others have shared with me – it was and is when we encounter God’s caring that we find the strength and purpose to mend our lives and try again.

God is never interested in destruction, only in reconstruction, creation, redemption. It is one of our deepest convictions, when we think of it in personal terms. God has mercy on the sinner. Even the worst of us, if truly repentant, can turn to Jesus and be forgiven and start afresh. Yet this has always been only the “minority report.” It is *never* God’s desire to punish. God’s intention is *always* for restoration, correction, healing, redemption.

III.) WE CANNOT KNOW THE TRUTH OR MAKE FAITHFUL CHOICES ACCORDING TO OUTER CIRCUMSTANCES

All of it leads to this third conclusion. It is terribly disconcerting and disorienting for us humans to finally come to this conclusion: We cannot know the truth, set our bearings, or make our choices according to the temporary results of what is happening in the physical world all around us.

A man named Stalin had enormous earthly success. Russia came to the apex of her size and might and influence because of his leadership. Yet as far as I'm concerned, Stalin was the worst and most evil man who has ever lived on earth. A title not easily won in a field with so much competition. How do *you* read history? I note and love all the hero stories in the Bible, but I happen to think they teach lessons far deeper than the ones I was taught in Sunday School.

For example, Gideon did *not* know he would win the battle. That is, Gideon did not know the very thing we try to teach when we tell his story. He was terrified, and kept asking for more and more reassurance. Even when he got the reassurance, it seemed crazy to follow the instructions he was getting. The whole drama of the story is that Gideon decided to do it like he believed God wanted it done – *regardless of the outcome*. He won, but I don't think he thought he had any chance of winning – until it was all over. We always long for some way to control God. "If I do this and this and this, then God has to make it work. God has to be my genie in a bottle." Sorry, not with the Living God.

How do *you* read history? Who were the famous and successful players in biblical history? I will tell you who: Babylonians, Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans. All of them had success, fame, wealth, power, cities, societies, art, and armies so vast that Israel is only a footnote in a few of their travel diaries. "Oh by the way, we squashed Israel on the way to Egypt." Yahweh was a poor, little, back-country God in comparison to Dagon, Ra, Isis, Zeus, or Marduk. Yahweh was *never* rich or famous or powerful in comparison. Yahweh just lasted longer. David and Solomon ruled over a united Israel, but only because the mighty empires surrounding them were temporarily distracted with internal problems, and temporarily depleted from fighting each other.

Every time we look more deeply at the heroic moments, we find them in the context of a much larger picture wherein God is not bringing success and fame to the good guys by any standard any of us would

claim. One thing history makes terribly clear is that neither Judaism nor Christianity has survived by earthly success – by being more physically blessed than other nations or peoples. Invariably, the vast, popular, successful religious movements and fads have not been the ones carrying the deep and lasting spiritual truth. It has been carried by the remnant. It has been the small fellowship of dedicated, devoted, deeply committed people – somehow touched by the living presence – banded together for purposes the world did not notice and did not at all care about. It is the remnant who love God entirely apart from earthly success. They are the ones who carry the MESSAGE, and live for the faith and love and hope of an unseen realm far greater than anything on earth.

The “cause and effect” system for rewards and punishments simply does not operate like we want it to. God does not step in to punish or reward us directly. WE ARE PUNISHED *BY OUR SINS*, NOT FOR OUR SINS. WE ARE REWARDED *BY OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS*, NOT FOR OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. Meanwhile, and greatly confusing the issue, the world often rewards us for our sins and punishes us for our righteousness. Those with power in the world will often reward those who please them, and punish those who displease them. It’s hard not to turn such people into our gods. And the real God takes an active part – to guide, to correct, to inspire, to comfort, to change us or our direction – *only when we invite it*. But the terrible and terrifying reality is that we must learn to hear God’s voice behind and more deeply than whatever is going on around us. That is what walking the Christian Way is about. As we sometimes say here: “It goes with the territory.”

Why does the error persist that success and fame in this world are signs of God’s favor – that if it works, we must be doing it right? You would think that a Cross would have smashed all such notions from our minds forever. You would think that the lives of all the heroes of our Faith would have smashed such notions from our minds forever. If it has not happened for you yet, let it happen now. Do not believe that success or fame is a sign of God’s favor, or of being right, or of doing it right. Even if it is somebody else’s success. Even if it is your own success. Neither is it a sign of God’s displeasure – or a mark of your being wrong, or uncaring – if you fail. Earthly success simply is not the measurement. Most people around you still think it is; many passages in Scripture still think it is, because they were written by humans still carrying that perspective. If reading history does not change your mind,

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let Jesus awaken you. He does not believe that earthly success is the measure. His whole life rebukes and denies it.

We could add almost countless illustrations here, but all we really have to do is think of Jesus at prayer. Again and again, sometimes all night, Jesus goes within – to the interior place – because He knows He cannot make His choices according to what’s going on outside and around Him. It cannot work that way. If He tries it, He will end up living like everybody else: pleasing His mother; trying to impress Nicodemus; caring more about the opinions of His disciples than He does about God’s will. Some days His ministry is working; some days it is not. Some days He is brilliant and everybody is being convinced. Some days the opposition is nasty, and people are falling away. (*“So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’”* (John 6:67)) Sometimes He has power to heal, and it feels like nothing can stop Him. Sometimes the possibilities have faded away, and everything looks bleak. (*“And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And he marveled because of their unbelief.”* (Mark 6:5-6))

Think of Jesus at prayer. You cannot know the truth or make faithful decisions according to outer circumstances. We deal with our outer circumstances, yes, but they do not contain our truth or set our direction. We are citizens of an unseen Kingdom – no less real for that. We worship an unseen God – no less real for that. We seek comfort and guidance and swear obedience to an unseen Spirit – no less real for that. And it is the unseen things which are eternal – the only things of true and lasting value.

There are three things I no longer believe:

- 1.) That success or fame is a sign of God’s favor, or of our being “right,” or some proof that we are doing it right.
- 2.) That God punishes the wicked or rewards the righteous – here on earth. God waits for all of us to repent, and then comes with correction and healing.
- 3.) That we can know the truth or make faithful decisions according to outer circumstances. If God does not inspire us, guide us, and help us all along the way, it is all in vain – whether we tried to accomplish good or evil, whether we worked for ourselves or for others, or whether we did it all poorly or brilliantly.

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They called Him the stumbling stone because He goes beyond all old familiar truth. And He calls His followers to seek first the Kingdom of Heaven – to live in and for the unseen Kingdom of God, which is both here, and coming. In order to do that, we cannot just notice what is working for the moment in the outer world. We have to pray every day – realign our lives to the presence of the Holy Spirit – and swear allegiance not to earthly fame or success, but to Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.