



September 24, 2017

JESUS IS GOD'S BEST IDEA EVER
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ROMANS 3:19-28

NRSV

¹⁹Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

²¹But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

How do we find a gracious God? That's what Martin Luther was wrestling with, and he was filled with inner turmoil. Luther was born in 1483. He was part of an upwardly mobile family that was involved in copper mining. From early in life, Luther was marked for an education. His father, Hans, had high hopes of him becoming a lawyer so he could help run the family business. But like a lot of young people, Luther had a mind of his own. And he had a lot of questions: What am I doing here? To whom do I belong? Where do I stand? Luther started law school in the summer of 1505. His dad bought all of the texts for him. Young Martin buckled down with his usual level

of dedication. But something was churning inside. And eventually it would change the direction of his life.

We're not exactly sure what that something was, or where it came from, but it was likely rooted in Luther's search for a gracious God. Perhaps there were several factors involved: 1) Luther struggled with a troubled conscience. He felt unworthy of God's love. 2) He had lost three of his friends to the bubonic plague. Over a third of Europe died in that plague, which was often referred to as "the black death." Many of the writings of the day were preoccupied with thoughts of death, impending judgment, and the end of the world. And, 3) on a personal level, Luther was badly injured in a hunting accident. He drove a dagger deep into his thigh. While a friend ran for help, Luther propped up his leg against a tree and put pressure on the wound to staunch the bleeding. Probably all of these factors and more were involved in compounding Luther's anxiety.

Then one day Luther was on foot near the town of Stotternheim. A particularly violent storm arose. Lightning and thunder were crashing. Suddenly Luther fell to his knees. The storm around him seemed to match the conflict within. Overwhelmed and afraid, Luther cried out for help to the patron saint of miners, "St. Anne, help me, and I will become a monk."

Like a lot of people, Luther made a vow to God in midst of a turbulent time. Isn't that what we do sometimes - *God, get me through this, and I'll quit drinking...and be a better husband...and be nicer to others...and on and on we promise.*

Several years ago, my brother Tim and I visited some missionaries in South America. Tim had spent a couple of summers in the jungles of Bolivia working for an organization called *A Cup of Cold Water* ministries. The purpose of the ministry was to do acts of kindness in Jesus' name. Tim was part of a crew that took the frames out of old Volkswagen vans salvaged from American junkyards. They cut them down in size, added a 16-horsepower motor, and built a box on the back. The finished product looked like a combination of a small pickup truck and a golf cart. The vehicle was perfect for maneuvering winding roads through the jungle. It enabled farmers in outlying villages to bring their produce to the city and earn a decent living.

One day Tim and I went with a local missionary to visit one of those outlying villages. We walked several miles to get there. We talked to a number of people, but especially we were going to see a woman who had lost a stillborn baby just a few days before. As the woman told her story, the tears began to flow and didn't stop.

The hours passed quickly. By the time we started back, the sun was getting low in the sky. In fact, we had to find our way over the last couple of miles by starlight. When we finally arrived at the grove of banana trees, we knew we had made it back safely. There was only one the last obstacle between us and home. *How do we get*

across the river? The missionary cried out in Spanish, “Help.” There was no answer from the other side. He said it again, a little louder: “Help.” Again there was no answer. Finally, he shouted at the top of his lungs, “Please come over here and help us!” Yet again there was no answer. But after a few minutes we saw a lantern. Out of the darkness, appeared a little man with a dark cap. He was guiding a boat made of a hollowed-out tree. He carefully loaded us into his boat and we started across the river. The current was swift, however, and the rickety boat was soon rocking back and forth. We didn’t have life jackets. We were scared half to death. In a moment of desperation, my brother made a vow, “Lord, get us across this river and I will become a missionary.” And sure enough, the Lord got us across that river.

Now, whether or not my brother was completely serious about his vow or merely said it in desperation, only he can answer. But whenever I remind him of it, he gets a sheepish grin on his face and says: “There are lots of places to be a missionary, you know, and not all of them are overseas.” And I have to admit, he’s got a point.

There’s at least one more thing about this story from Bolivia that’s worth mentioning. The name of the man in the boat, the man who came across the water and rescued us, was “Salvador,” which in Spanish means “savior.” He came and saved us, and wouldn’t even accept money for it. “It’s a gift,” he said, a free gift.

How do we find a gracious God? Sometimes God shows up in places where we least expect it: a turbulent river in the dark of night; a violent thunderstorm that drives a person to his knees. God comes and saves us in ways we never could have imagined, and sets us on our feet again.

As it turns out, Luther was serious about his vow. He dropped out of law school and entered a monastery. He wasn’t a monk in the traditional sense, living in the country and focusing on prayer and manual labor. Instead, he was a friar, living in the city. He studied to become a priest, and then to be a university professor teaching the Bible.

Despite this new direction, Luther’s old question continued to haunt him: How can one find a gracious God? If anything, Luther’s inner turmoil was getting worse. At his ordination, Hans could barely contain his disappointment over his son’s decision. Hans held his tongue during the ceremony, but afterward he blurted out, “I hope it was God [who called you], and not the devil.” The more Luther studied the Bible, the more convinced he was that God was often much like his father – harsh and demanding. And Luther felt unworthy. It hardly seemed possible that Almighty God would choose to work through a sinner like him.

Sometime in late in 1516, Luther had a breakthrough. It’s commonly referred to as his “tower experience” because Luther had a study in a tower in Wittenberg. Perhaps the breakthrough came, not in a single moment, but over a period of time. Luther

was reading from Romans. He came to chapter 3: “The just shall live by faith.” Suddenly a light went on for him. He realized he could never be good enough to deserve God’s favor. No, says Romans, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We are justified – we are made right with God – not by being really good people, not by always pleasing our earthly parents, not by doing a certain number of good works, but only “by God’s grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

These words hit home for Luther. His troubled conscience came to rest, at least for a time. He felt as if he had been reborn. Instead of trying to earn God’s favor, all he needed to do was to trust what God had already done for him in Jesus. That was it: it was a gift, and it was free and unconditional. As Luther received the gift, he came to believe that *Jesus was God’s best idea ever*.

Do you want an example of a free and unconditional gift? Consider the story of Steve Bartman, a life-long Chicago Cubs fan. You may remember that fateful night in October of 2003. The Cubs were playing the Florida Marlins at Wrigley Field. They were ahead in the game 3-0, and held a 3 games to 2 lead in the series. It was the top of the eighth, only five outs to go. What could possibly go wrong?

Then a high fly ball came down the left field line. It was foul, but Cubs outfielder Moises Alou was poised to catch it. The Cubs would be only four outs away from the World Series, their first World Series since 1945.

Unfortunately, Steve Bartman also had his eye on the ball. He reached out to catch it, and ended up deflecting it away from Moises Alou. As luck would have it, Florida went on to score eight runs that inning, and they won the game. And the next night they won the series, and the century-old curse of the Chicago Cubs continued.

Understandably, Cub’s fans were outraged. Steve Bartman was vilified as the goat. He had to be led out of the stadium by security escort. The police had to guard his home. He could barely show his face in public. Bartman later apologized for his actions, but clearly it wasn’t enough for many of the fans. The Illinois governor suggested – perhaps only partly in jest – that Bartman might want to consider a witness protection program.

Now, if you follow sports, you know that the Chicago Cubs finally broke through last season and won the World Series. They danced in the streets of Chicago. The curse was lifted. This past July they announced who would be getting World Series rings. And would you believe that Steve Bartman was on the list?

Bartman humbly and graciously accepted the gift. His name was engraved on the side. As he did, he commented: “Although I do not consider myself worthy of such an honor, I am deeply moved and sincerely grateful.... Most meaningful to me is the

genuine outreach [from the Cubs organization and fans] signifying to me that I am welcomed back into the Cubs family....”

How do we find a gracious God? By looking in some of the most unlikely places: a World Series ring on the finger of one who'd been vilified as a goat; a trip across a river in a rickety wooden boat with passengers scared half to death; a powerful thunderstorm that redirected a life and eventually changed the world.

Here's the truth: Jesus is God's best idea ever. His names mean “savior.” In Jesus, God comes and saves us even though we are not deserving. God comes and saves us in ways we never could have imagined. It's a gift, a free and life-changing gift. Thanks be to God.