

Meditations of the Heart - Reflections on the Scriptures

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

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A Consideration of Kingdoms, Expectations and Evil

Luke 10:17-20

As I write this edition of Meditation of the Heart, my mind is occupied with many thoughts. On Monday evening, I learned of the death of an old friend – Earl Witmer. Earl was an elder in the church in Atlanta where I served as a pastor. Indeed, it was in my serving as a deacon and working side-by-side with Earl on the church's missions committee that Earl had a significant role in encouraging me to go into ministry.

So, yesterday afternoon, Marguerite Witmer, Earl's wife of 60 + years called to tell me that Earl had requested to his family that I serve as one of the pastors at his memorial service. I don't know quite how to express to you how great of a man Earl was. If you've ever heard of the term 'Church fathers' (those leaders in the Church who emerged after the apostles), you could say that Earl was a modern-day Church father. I could tell you of Earl's love for the Lord. I could tell you of Earl's concern, as an elder, for the flock of the congregation (and I learned much from him in that regard). I could tell you of Earl's heart for the gospel to spread in his own community and around the world.

Earl suffered a heart attack in 1999 and I wondered then whether he would make it. The man lived another 10 years and served the Lord devotedly. When I last spoke to Earl three weeks ago today, it was clear that he did not have the energy he used to have. I thought then about those 10 'extra' years we all had with Earl – a gift from God indeed. I will be talking in the memorial service about a man whom Earl led to the Lord – a year or two after Earl had his heart attack. Let it suffice to say that, for me, with the exception of being called to pastor the congregation that is Faith Presbyterian Church, I cannot think of a greater honor that I have ever received as a pastor than to be asked to participate in Earl Witmer's memorial service. It is a sad time, and yet it is a glorious time – for "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints". (Psalm 116:15).

So, contrast that news with the phone call that my wife received yesterday afternoon – in which she learned of the death of the 21 year-old daughter of a family friend. The cause of death is not yet known, but foul play is suspected. This was a young lady who grew up in a Christian home, was well cared for by her church, and was the subject of many prayers on her behalf, and ... now ... this...

It's not my intent here to try (foolishly) to make sense of such a tragedy. Nor is it my intent to speak some easy platitude about God being in control. Yes, we know that's true, but such knowledge doesn't take away the loss intensely felt by this young girl's family (or the loss felt by Witmer family, for that matter).

But I do go back to what we considered in Luke 10:17-20 this past Sunday morning. We need to stop and assess whether our faith in God is prepared to deal with the evil in the world. Is your God big enough to deal with the evil in this world even when God's actions do not meet your expectations? I am not talking about whether GOD Himself is prepared to deal with the evil in the world. I am talking about whether our faith, our VIEW of God, is prepared to deal with the evil in this world? According to Jesus, it should be.

Jeremy Begbie, a theologian at Duke University, spoke about the postmodern suspicion that many people have towards Christianity – a suspicion that is largely based on what is perceived as escapism from the reality of suffering, hardship and the effects of evil in this world. Begbie says that a real understanding of Christianity cannot in anyway BE escapism because what is so central to Christianity is the cross of Christ. And in the cross of Christ, we have *"God giving us hope not by promising to pull us out into a different world, but by offering us a fresh beginning IN this world. In the person Christ, God Himself comes to walk among us to live in the very sort of place we are tempted to escape!"*¹

And so when God is here incarnate in human flesh, how does God meet and deal with the reality of evil in this world? He does it by suffering, even by dying, and rising from that death back to life. As Begbie says, *"God gives us hope not by defeating the powers of darkness with some equal act of violence from above, but by submitting Himself to the powers of darkness and bearing their force from below. In other words, Jesus defeats evil not with an imperial force that crushes from on high but with a love that absorbs from below"*² – in the way of suffering – on our behalf.

Does his suffering remove us from experiencing pain, hardship and suffering ourselves? Experientially, we all know the answer is "No". But when Jesus tells the disciples: "I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you", how do we make sense of it? Indeed, the same apostles who heard Jesus say "nothing shall hurt you" all (save one) lost their lives for the sake of Christ. However, it's not as if the disciples weren't prepared for such an [earthly] end. The same Jesus who told the disciples that "nothing shall hurt you" also told them to not be afraid of those who can kill the body but after that can do no more."

As Tim Keller puts it, *"God came to deliberately put himself on the hook of human suffering. In Jesus Christ, God experienced the greatest depths of pain. Therefore, though Christianity does not provide the reason for each experience of pain, it provides deep resources for actually facing suffering with hope and courage rather than bitterness and despair."*³

So, why does God allow evil and suffering to continue? According to Keller, *"We look at the cross of Jesus and we still do not know what the answer is. However, we now know what the answer isn't. It can't be that he doesn't love us. It can't be that he is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he was willing to take it on himself."* [So, it is in the cross of Christ that] *"we have deep consolation and strength to face the brutalities of life on earth. We can know that God is truly Immanuel – God with us – even in our worst sufferings."*⁴

¹ Begbie, Jeremy, *Theology Transposed: Re-Discovering The Gospel Through The Arts*, Regent College/Regent Audio, Disc 4 – Living (in) Waves, 2006.

² Begbie, Disc 4.

³ Keller, Tim, *The Reason For God*, Dutton, New York, NY, 2008, p. 27-28.

⁴ Keller, pp. 30-31.