

The Goal of God's Love May Not Be What You Think It Is

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Do people go to the Grand Canyon to increase their self-esteem? Probably not. This is, at least, a hint that the deepest joys in life come not from savoring the self, but from seeing splendor. And in the end even the Grand Canyon will not do. We were made to enjoy God.

We are all bent to believe that we are central in the universe. How shall we be cured of this joy-destroying disease? Perhaps by hearing afresh how radically God-centered reality is according to the Bible.

Both the Old and New Testament tell us that God's loving us is a means to our glorifying him. "Christ became a servant ... in order that the nations might glorify God for his mercy" (Romans 15:8-9). God has been merciful to us so that we would magnify him. We see it again in the words, "In love [God] destined us to adoption ... to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Ephesians 1:4-6). In other words, the goal of God's loving us is that we might praise him. One more illustration from Psalm 86:12-13: "I will glorify your name forever. For your lovingkindness toward me is great." God's love is the ground. His glory is the goal.

This is shocking. The love of God is not God's making much of us, but God's saving us from self-centeredness so that we can enjoy making much of him forever. And our love to others is not our making much of them, but helping them to find satisfaction in making much of God. True love aims at satisfying people in the glory of God. Any love that terminates on man is eventually destructive. It does not lead people to the only lasting joy, namely, God. Love must be God-centered, or it is not true love; it leaves people without their final hope of joy.

Take the cross of Christ, for example. The death of Jesus Christ is the ultimate expression of divine love: "God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Yet the Bible also says that the aim of the death of Christ was "to demonstrate righteousness, because in the forbearance of God he passed over the sins previously committed" (Romans 3:25). Passing over sins creates a huge problem for the righteousness of God. It makes him look like a judge who lets criminals go free without punishment. In other words, the mercy of God puts the justice of God in jeopardy.

So to vindicate his justice he does the unthinkable - he puts his Son to death as the substitute penalty for our sins. The cross makes it plain to everyone that God does not sweep evil under the rug of the universe. He punishes it in Jesus for those who believe.

But notice that this ultimately loving act has at the center of it the vindication of the righteousness of God. Good Friday love is God-glorifying love. God exalts God at the cross. If he didn't, he could not be just and rescue us from sin. But it is a mistake to say, "Well, if the aim was to rescue us, then we were the ultimate goal of the cross." No, we were rescued from sin in order that we might see and savor the glory of God. This is the ultimately loving aim of Christ's death. He did not die to make much of us, but to free us to enjoy making much of God forever.

It is profoundly wrong to turn the cross into a proof that self-esteem is the root of mental health. If I stand before the love of God and do not feel a healthy, satisfying, freeing joy unless I turn that love into an echo of my self-esteem, then I am like a man who stands before the Grand Canyon and feels no satisfying wonder until he translates the canyon into a case for his own significance. That is not the presence of mental health, but bondage to self.

The cure for this bondage is to see that God is the one being in the universe for whom self-exaltation is the most loving act. In exalting himself - Grand Canyon-like - he gets the glory and we get the joy. The greatest news in all the world is that there is no final conflict between my passion for joy and God's passion for his glory. The knot that ties these together is the truth that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. Jesus Christ died and rose again to forgive the treason of our souls, which have turned from savoring God to savoring self. In the cross of Christ, God rescues us from the house of mirrors and leads us out to the mountains and canyons of his majesty. Nothing satisfies us - or magnifies him - more.