

God is Dead

Introduction

Have you not heard of the madman who lit a lamp in the bright morning and went to the marketplace crying ceaselessly, “Where is God? Where is God?” There were many among those standing there who didn't believe in God so he made them laugh. “Is God lost?” one of them said. “Has he gone astray like a child?” said another. “Or is he hiding? Has he gone on board ship and emigrated?” So they laughed and shouted to one another. The man sprang into their midst and looked daggers at them all. ‘Where is God?’ he cried, ‘I shall tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun?... Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night and more night coming on all the while? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God?... God is dead... And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves?’ (Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Gay Science," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954), p. 95)

How do you answer this madman's question – where is God? Is he lost? Did he take the last train for the coast? Is God dead? Did we kill him?

I. John's is a Gospel of Questions

John's Gospel is a Gospel of questions. The Jews come asking John the Baptist, “Who are you?” Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night asking, “How can a man be born when he is old?” “Where do you get that living water?” asks the Samaritan woman at the well. “I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?” Jesus asks Martha at Lazarus' tomb. “We do not know where you are going, so how will we know the way?” Thomas asks Jesus at the last supper. Questions seeking answers. Always more questions, and only hints of answers given in return.

John's telling of the suffering and death of Christ is no different. This Jesus does not give answers without asking questions.

- When the guards come for him in the Garden it is Jesus who asks them, not once but twice, “Whom do you seek?” Who are you looking for? Is he lost? Is he hiding? (John 18:4 and 7)
- When Pilate asks him if he is a king, he does not simply say “You say so,” but questions Pilate back: “Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?” (John 18:34)

Pilate, in turn, is revealed a man seeking answers to questions he can't even begin to know how to ask. When he woke up that Friday morning Pilate had no idea that his questions would be recorded for all of history, and be the ones that would echo in churches around the world:

- “What is truth?” (John 18:38)
- “Where are you from?” (John 19:9)

- “Will you not speak to me?” (John 19:10)
- And to the crowds: “Shall I crucify your king?” (John 19:15)

Shall I crucify your God? Can a God truly die? Can a God be truly dead?
He *is* dead. And we have killed him.

We marched to Gethsemane, to grab this man who did nothing but heal our wounds and forgive our sins. We grabbed the whips, the leather strips imbedded with bone, and rained down blows on our Savior. We pushed him through the streets of Jerusalem, mocked him, and spit on him. We took the nails and hammered them through this bleeding hands and feet, and we were only too glad to do it.

In the movie Independence Day, the peace-loving President of the United States is confronted with a representative of an attacking alien race. He pleads with the alien: “Can there be peace between us?” “*Peace?*” the alien answers, “*No peace.*” The President asks again, “What do you want us to do?” To which the alien answers bluntly, “*Die.*”

The question posed to us all, even today, rings out: “Shall I crucify your king?” “We have no king but...Money. Time. Pleasure. Petty vengeance. Work. Grudges. Sex. Self-pity. Crucify him.”

So God is dead. And we have killed him. May God have mercy on our souls, for the evil we have done.

II. The Answer is Jesus’ Redemption

But as we heard last night, this is the way it had to be. At every turn, left to our devices, we have turned to our own gods. Like sheep without a shepherd, we have all gone astray, every last one of us. We have thought of ourselves first, and others last. We have thought the worst of others, instead of putting the best construction on things. We have put everything we possibly could ahead of God. And the Lord has laid all of our evil on his Son, so that we might turn to him and live.

Surely he has born our griefs, and carried our sorrows. But we considered him an oddity, a strange prophet worth hours of TV documentaries and books but not an hour of our worship. He was oppressed, he was afflicted, but even now he cries out to the peoples of the earth to turn to him, and be washed clean. Today he calls out to us to turn from our sin and evil and cling to him alone. He wants us to come to his cross and learn the true meaning of love and of forgiveness. He wants to bear our sins, and make intercession for us.

If it were not for this man, this Son of God, and his love for us, we would be left defenseless before the throne of God. We would find ourselves standing before the throne of a God more supreme and sovereign than anything we could imagine. We would find ourselves stripped bare of all pretenses, our mouths shut up. We would know ourselves as we truly are and all of that without excuse. No one who has read the Old Testament should doubt the terrible wrath of the Lord. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, “For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Hebrews 10:30-31).

Because of this sacrifice, because this man endured our sin and suffered our scorn, we can stand acquitted before God. That’s why this Friday is *good*. One man died for the people that the whole human race might not perish. God himself lays down his life for his people, even lets the people he’s trying to save take away his life, so that he can turn to us and say, “Peace be with you. Your sin is washed away.” Because of Christ, when the time comes for us to be weighed in the scales, our sins will not even measure.

As Luther wrote about the wonderful mystery of this day,

We Christians should know that if God is not in the scale to give it weight, we, on our side, sink to the ground. I mean it this way: if it cannot be said that God died for us, but only a man, we are lost; but if God's death and a dead God lie in the balance, his side goes down and ours goes up like a light and empty scale...But he could not sit on the scale unless he had become a man like us, so that it could be called God's dying, God's martyrdom, God's blood, and God's death. For God in his own nature cannot die; but now that God and man are united in one person, it is called God's death when the man dies who is one substance or one person with God. (Luther's Works AE, *On the Councils and the Church*, Vol. 41, p.103)

God is dead. Our sins have killed him. Yet that God still looks upon us with the last words from the cross: "It is finished." The debt is paid in full.

Therefore the Lord will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:12)

Amen.