

113 Relationship from beginning to end

To an 18-year-old, coming from a dysfunctional family, the Christian community at Scargill in Yorkshire was a revelation! Over the next 50 years, that sense of relationship (a.k.a. love) has waxed and waned. Now, I have found it again, big time!

And, guess what, it's actually what the whole of God's Big Plan is all about. Always was, always will be.

With my recent insistence that we can only really understand the gospel if we see that the gospel is right there, in the Old Testament, I think I'm seeing the Old Testament in a whole new light.

I was thrilled to hear my Muslim friend say that there's more in the Qur'an about Allah's love than there is about condemnation, and I think I would now say exactly the same about the Old Testament, so let's trace it through (® = 'relationship')...

Creation: 'it's not good for man to be alone': ® is essential.

Garden of Eden: "Did God say...?" By our doubting God's good intentions, ® goes wrong.

Abraham is "the friend of God" ®

Abraham trusted God ® and it was counted to him as righteousness (= right ®)

Abraham: "through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me" – bringing ® to the world.

[We're going to be here all day if I go right through whole of the OT, so just a highlight or two and then, when you next read something in the OT, you can ask yourself if it's ®.]

The ten commandments®? Rules, rules, rules?! Actually, no! The 10C are *all* ®? Even "Six days shall you labour..." because developing ® takes time: the Sabbath, very positively, gives us time.

Most obviously, ® is in the Jews' hymnbook, the heart of their worship: whilst the psalms are brutally honest, yet they are stacked to the gunwales with ®®®.

The book of Hosea (do read it if you don't know what I mean): Amazingly, unrelentingly ®®®!

The Suffering Servant in Isaiah. ®®®!

Even Job is ultimately ®.

Then there's the wonderful book of Ruth ®®®.

So we can see that right through the OT, God rescues, redeems and forgives his people. They sin, but God forgives them; over and over again God forgives them and draws them back.

“But isn’t the OT all about how God smites people when they do wrong?!”

Well, sort of, but underneath it all is God’s overwhelming love for the people of God (and “through them, all the nations shall be blessed,” is the plan). The negative stuff comes when God’s people stop trusting God; God never breaks their special relationship (covenant); always it’s the people who doubt God’s goodness or God’s power, so they look for other forms of security – other gods; “we want a king”; they make alliances with other (unbelieving) nations... As a result, it all goes horribly wrong, and the people suffer.

When this happens, you could say that “God is punishing them” – that’s how it feels – but at root it’s all about their having doubted God’s goodness, doubted God’s power, God’s wisdom, God’s provision, God’s love, God’s forgiveness: They have broken ®!

But God *keeps on forgiving them, keeps on forgiving them*, keeps on drawing them back, keeps on loving them. What a long-suffering God! ®®®

That’s the glorious, wonderful God I now see in the Old Testament, but...

(And here I’m going to do something very naughty; I’m going to play devil’s advocate, big-time; I’m going to use over-statement for effect. “Really?!” Please forgive me.)

... what a different view we get of God when we get to the New Testament! The God of the New Testament says:

“You have sinned against me and you deserve to die – the wages of sin is death! You were born in sin and you will be eternally separated from me, unless you believe.

“But I am a loving God and so I will give my Son to die a cruel and painful death so that you can be forgiven.”

So we sing, “On the cross when Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied”.

God says, “There is *no forgiveness* unless and until you appreciate that Jesus took upon himself the awful punishment *you deserve for your sins*: Jesus died in your place.”

OK, I’ve over-stated the penal substitutionary view, but is there anything in what I have just said that you have **not** heard time and time again from pulpits up and down the country?

My own view is that an over-emphasis on penal substitution has given us a distorted view of God, which we have then projected back onto the Old Testament, so we cannot see how even the Old Testament shows the aching, longing, prodigal love of the Father that Jesus taught about – forgiving, forgiving, forgiving to the uttermost!

No wonder people hung on Jesus’ every word, as he revealed to them the Good News of the Kingdom – there in the Jews’ own Scriptures.

Now add to what I see as that distortion of the gospel, the hours that Christians have spent telling other people, including non-believers, (with the best of motives!) that the way they are living is wrong, and that God will judge them for it. It's hardly surprising that a diminishing fraction of the people we live amongst will darken the doors of a church on Sundays!

We need to heal the gospel [111,112] (that we have allowed to become so distorted) and get back to the loving God of the Old Testament!

Paul Bev. 18.2.20