



GOD *with* US



Exploring God's Personal
Interactions with His People
throughout the Bible

GLENN R. KREIDER

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P U B L I S H I N G

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To the group of men and women
who made Sunday evening from 5:00 to 6:00 my favorite hour
of the week
as we met to discuss “Theology for the Rest of Us.”

I learned how to read the Bible better by doing it together with you.

I miss our time together.

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The Son of God just does what he sees his Father doing. He empties himself and takes the form of a servant because that's the way they do it in his family. And God exalts Jesus Christ and gives him the name above every name because that too is the Godly way—to exalt the humble, to get very enthusiastic about those who spend themselves for others.¹

IT WAS THIS PARAGRAPH from a sermon of Cornelius Plantinga that gave birth to the idea for this book. I am grateful to the publisher for patience and for the prodding and the encouragement of Robert Peterson. He was gracious to me throughout the long process of bringing this work to completion. His feedback improved my work, and his friendship improved my walk with Jesus. Several other readers of the manuscript gave excellent and helpful feedback that improved the work, for which readers will be grateful.

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1. Cornelius Plantinga, “A Sermon for Advent: I Believe in Jesus Christ, God’s Only Son, Our Lord,” in *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles’ Creed*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 77.

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I

INTRODUCTION



BETWEEN APRIL AND JULY 1994, approximately one million people were killed in Rwanda as tribal conflict in that central African country escalated into genocide.¹ The conflict transcended religious and social boundaries. Nearly every family was touched by the tragedy. The Christian church in Rwanda was deeply impacted as well. During those one hundred days, approximately 70 percent of the pastors in the country were murdered, sometimes at the hands of other Christians. Hutu Christians killed Tutsi Christians, and Tutsi Christians killed Hutu Christians. Tribal loyalty had become more important than Christian identity. Brothers and sisters in Christ had become enemies of one another.

As this period of violence and bloodshed came to an end and relative calm returned, the church faced the overwhelming task of ministering to the survivors. Most had lost family members.

1. The information that follows is from Celestin Musekura, "Celestin Offers Forgiveness to Rwanda," DTS Stories, December 11, 2007, <http://www.dts.edu/media/play/celestin-offers-forgiveness-to-rwanda-celestin-musekura/>, and "The History of ALARM," ALARM, October 5, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcHyxqtWXFc&feature=youtu.be>, as well as personal conversations with Célestin and Bernadette Musekura.

Some had been responsible for the deaths of others. Everyone was touched in one way or another. Survivors were asking deep and troubling theological questions. Where was God in such tragedy? How could God have allowed such evil? Why had God not intervened to protect his followers, especially the innocent? Others faced “survival guilt,” asking why they had been spared while so many had been killed. Within the country as a whole—and the church in particular—feelings of guilt, shame, sorrow, grief, fear, and anger were rampant.

A Rwandan pastor, Célestin Musekura, was a student at Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST) in Nairobi, Kenya, during the genocide. When he was able, he returned to Rwanda to minister to his family and church. Recognizing the need for a ministry of repentance and forgiveness, and desiring to raise up Christian leaders to lead the struggling churches, he founded ALARM, African Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries, in 1994.² The mission of ALARM is “to empower the African church to impact the African continent by developing and equipping leaders with skills and tools to nurture and deepen the Christian faith for the transformation and reconciliation of the African communities.”³ Through conferences and seminars, by starting schools and training programs, and through its Youth Advocacy Program and African Women’s Initiative, ALARM serves the African church with a transformative ministry of reconciliation.⁴

This ministry of reconciliation and forgiveness soon became intensely personal for Célestin. Several years after

2. For a brief history of ALARM, see “ALARM’s History,” ALARM, accessed July 3, 2012, http://alarm-inc.org/who_we_are/our_history.

3. “Who is ALARM?,” ALARM, accessed July 3, 2012, http://alarm-inc.org/who_we_are.

4. See *ibid.* See also Célestin Musekura, “An Assessment of Contemporary Models of Forgiveness” (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2007), as well as L. Gregory Jones and Célestin Musekura, *Forgiving As We’ve Been Forgiven: Community Practices for Making Peace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

the founding of ALARM, in December 1997, five members of his family were murdered in a revenge killing connected to the genocide. Although such a response could hardly have been more difficult, Célestin chose to react to this horrific incident by forgiving the murderers of his family. In God's providence, one year later, he came face to face with several members of the families who had been responsible for the murders. In a Christlike expression of love, he personally extended forgiveness to them. Believing that love and forgiveness can break the cycle of vengeance and violence, Célestin and his family incarnated this message in their interaction with the very face of evil.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness and reconciliation are powerfully transformative forces. Forgiveness breaks the cycle of retribution that ultimately leads to more violence. Forgiveness breaks the cycle of death and destruction and leads to peace. Forgiveness of those who commit horrible atrocities is made possible through the humble and gracious heart of one who has been forgiven, who recognizes a responsibility to forgive as God has forgiven him.⁵ Because of his understanding of God's character and what is expected of his followers, Célestin was able to grant the gift of forgiveness instead of pursuing vengeance.⁶

Forgiveness is a gift of grace. Because grace is unmerited favor, it cannot be earned or deserved. Thus, forgiveness can never be forced or mandated. Yet the Scriptures teach that the recipients of grace should be good stewards of it. Having received

5. Even those without the Spirit sometimes manifest grace. For several stories of grace experienced outside the church, see Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997). Especially poignant is the story told in the film *Babette's Feast* (see *ibid.*, 19–23).

6. See also Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

grace from God, we have the privilege and the responsibility to extend that grace to others.⁷

Jesus teaches his followers to pray, “Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). He continues, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you” (v. 14). He says elsewhere, “Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37). Jesus does not mean that forgiveness is conditional, as if it needs to be earned. Rather, since “right thinking shapes right living,” those who have experienced forgiveness will extend that forgiveness to others.⁸ Elsewhere, Jesus teaches his disciples that they should forgive up to seventy times seven times (Matt. 18:22). Having been forgiven, they must forgive others.

Forgiveness is extravagant. In fact, the more one has been forgiven, Jesus teaches, the more one will love. In defending the excessive gift of a forgiven woman, Jesus says, “Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little” (Luke 7:47). The extravagance of grace grows exponentially as it transforms the lives of those it touches and as they extend the grace of forgiveness to others.

Forgiveness is rooted in the character of God. Jesus’ opponents correctly noted that no one can forgive sins except God (Mark 2:7). At the heart of the character of God is love for sinners, mercy and compassion that is manifested in forgiveness (Ex. 34:6–7). God condescends toward rebellious humans when he forgives them.

Humility

God’s humility, expressed in sacrifice, submission, forgiveness, and condescension toward his creation, is a major biblical

7. The purpose of extending grace to others is not to pay God back for the grace he extended, but to demonstrate a forward-looking faith in God’s future grace. See John Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1995).

8. Piper, *Living by Faith in Future Grace*, 12.

theme. His humility is displayed in his creation, his response to the fall, and the promise of a new creation. This is the biblical story in microcosm. In short, the self-sufficient, wholly other, transcendent, and holy God condescended to create a world and creatures, knowing that they would reject him and rebel against him and that he would, because of his love, condescend to provide for their redemption. Story after story in the biblical narrative manifests this attribute of God. Then, in the incarnation, we see the ultimate example of condescension. In Jesus, God became human while remaining fully God. The Creator became a creature without ceasing to be the one through whom all things come into existence and continue to exist. The infinite One became finite, retaining his infinitude.

Although he was eternally self-sufficient, God created the universe and entrusted its care to humans. His decision to create evidences his condescension. He did not create anything out of need. Then, when the first humans rebelled against him, God began a plan of redemption that culminated in the death, resurrection, and return of his Son. In order to redeem humanity and to bring to completion the regeneration of all things, God himself came to earth, became a creature, and submitted to the created order—even to the power of sin and death—to defeat evil and subdue it. The redemptive work of God culminates in a new heaven and a new earth, the eternal home of the redeemed and the Redeemer, under the reign of the King of Kings.

Condescension

The term *condescension* is used in two significantly different ways in contemporary discourse. It evokes negative emotions when it is used in the sense of “a patronizing attitude or behavior,” but the connotation is much different when it indicates “voluntary descent from one’s rank or dignity in relations with an

inferior.”⁹ In the latter sense, condescension is intertwined with humility, grace, submission, forgiveness, compassion, looking out for the interests of others, and love. The greatest of all, the transcendent God, cares for his creatures by coming into their world. And he serves them, cares for them, provides for them, obligates himself to them, and loves them.

From the beginning of the biblical story, God’s humility is on display in his activity in the created order. Since what he does reveals who he is, God is revealed as a transcendent being who condescends to care for his creation. The ultimate example of condescension is in the incarnation, but this is not the first time in the biblical story that God humbles himself for the sake of his creation. Rather, the incarnation of the eternal Son of God was prefigured or foreshadowed in God’s appearances on earth, his active involvement in the created order from the beginning, and his engagement with his creatures in their world. God’s way of relating to his creatures is by condescending to come to where they are. In the incarnation, the eternal Son of God became the eternal God-man, permanently condescending to be one of us.

If the condescension of God is central to the biblical story, then why has this theme not received the attention within theological and biblical literature that it deserves?¹⁰ I suspect there may be a number of reasons for the lack of extensive treatment of the subject of God’s humility. I will propose two. First, it may be because there is something counterintuitive about the idea that God is humble and condescends toward his creatures. God is sovereign; he is transcendent and wholly other. He is great in power and position. How then could he be humble? Isn’t humility a form of weakness? This would seem to be a misunderstanding of humility, but such thinking is widespread.

9. “Condescension,” Merriam-Webster Online, accessed March 12, 2013, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/condescension>.

10. See K. Scott Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

Second, I suspect that the humility of God is difficult to accept because of the implications that such a doctrine would have for us. If God is humble, then his people ought to be humble. If God submits himself, by giving up the rights and prerogatives of his transcendence, then his people ought to submit to one another. If God condescends to look out for the interests of his creatures, then his people ought to care for one another. If God is merciful and compassionate, then his people ought to treat one another with mercy and compassion. In short, if God is most clearly revealed in his Son, and if this revelation is humble and sacrificial, and if God wants his followers to be like him, then surely understanding God in this way compels his followers to give up their rights, privileges, and prerogatives for the sake of others.

As the Rwandan genocide illustrates, selfishness, tribalism, arrogance, fear, revenge, and anger lead to violence, destruction, and death. But repentance and forgiveness can produce reconciliation and peace. Had Célestin waited for the murderers of his family to ask for forgiveness, he would likely still be waiting. Both his family and the families of the murderers would have continued living in fear or plotting revenge. Instead, Célestin forgave them and, having granted the gift of forgiveness, replaced fear and anger with love and peace. This is, after all, what Micah says that God requires: “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

The rest of this book will explore God’s condescension in the biblical story. Chapter 2 provides biblical and theological foundations for our study. Chapters 3 through 5 read through the Old Testament stories to see God’s condescension to his creation, particularly to the people of faith. Chapters 6 and 7 explore the incarnation as condescension. Then chapter 8 continues through the book of Acts and the Epistles. The new creation, as the permanent home of the Creator, is the focus of chapter 9. Chapter 10 concludes our study with a call to live as people of love.

THE HUMILITY OF GOD is a mind-boggling concept. The self-sufficient, transcendent Holy One . . . does he really come *down* to the level of those he has created?

Yet this is not only true, but in fact a major biblical theme—God’s way of relating to his creatures is by condescending to come to where they are. The ultimate example is Christ’s incarnation—but the Bible is filled with other times when God has humbled himself for his creation, both before and afterward.

Glenn Kreider explores the whole Bible to show us the full scope of God’s active involvement in his creation from the very beginning. This better understanding of God’s humility will affect our own humility and our attitude toward serving those around us.

“This is not a book that shrinks the greatness of the God of Scripture, that cuts him down to our size. On the contrary, it recounts how the biblical story shows this great and awesome God humbling himself again and again to rescue the likes of us! I pray the Lord will use it to promote a passion for generous humility.”

—ROBERT A. PETERSON, Professor of Systematic Theology,
Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri

“Surprising to some, shocking to others, unappealing to the proud, missed by the mighty, but challenging to the disciple and so very comforting to the weak and destitute—God humbles himself for our sake. Read this book. Meditate upon its biblical teaching. See God. Be changed, comforted, and challenged.”

—D. JEFFREY BINGHAM, Associate Dean of Biblical and Theological
Studies, Professor of Theology, Wheaton College

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