

THE RECONCILED SELF

Charles E. Thomas Jr.¹

Abstract

The emphasis of this writing is to address the issue of internal reconciliation of the divided self. The divided self is a notion of the internal struggle of the Christian who claims to have faith based upon being created in the imago dei or the image of God; having a relationship with God through the Messiah and the Spirit of God residing within the believer. When traumatic experiences, such as the pandemic occur, why do some persons of faith seemingly have no faith in the one who proclaimed, “Do not fear for I have overcome the world” (John 16:33, NIV)? Persons of the community of faith have reported suffering from depression, anxiety, frustration and fatigue while at the same time agreeing with the psalmist, “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

¹ Rev. Dr. Charles E. Thomas Jr. is the Interim Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program and adjunct professor at The Interdenominational Theological Center. Prior to this appointment, Dr. Thomas has served as the Vice President of Administrative Services at ITC, pastor, associate pastor, adjunct professor in Rhetoric and Communications at Duquesne University, Slippery Rock University, and adjunct in Homiletics, Ethics, and Church and Society at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

I will fear no evil” (Psalm 23:4, NKJV). In my view, this points toward an internal battle between the intellect and the soul of believers. This work looks at potential causes of such a condition and offers some, however not exhaustive, recommendations for alleviating some of the conceivable struggles that we face with our divided selves.

As I have researched the topic of reconciliation from several theoretical perspectives and have crafted a Christian Narrative approach, the individual has often been neglected due to a focus of reconciliation being on communal concerns. Within the broad scope of research, reconciliation is most often concerned with the restoration of broken groups, communities, and nations after a traumatic event or catastrophic action has taken place involving two sides. In this vein, reconciliation is most often conceived as a communicative praxis, narratively situated to create peace and stability after conflict has terminated. Reconciliation is therefore a means to restore justice and communal order, repair broken relationships, provide an atmosphere for stability and safety and heal communities. At the heart of reconciliation lies a necessity of dialogue to facilitate the principal aspects of

repair that are necessary to establish or reestablish relationships between conflicting parties². Daniel Bar-Tal for example suggests that reconciliation addresses “changing the motivations, goals, beliefs, attitudes, and emotions of the great majority of the society members regarding the conflict”³. Which in turn creates the potential for a community to heal from the dividedness. Nevertheless, reconciliation between individuals remains a minor researched area and reconciliation with oneself is nearly a mute topic.

When a woman or man who is a part of a relationship, group, or community become invited to partake in the process of overcoming trauma with the expected result in reconciliation, often the individual reconciliation is succumbed by the communal goals. Such is the case with many Truth and Reconciliation

² Charles E. Thomas Jr, *Rhetoric of Reconciliation: Implications from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's [work] for a Communicative Praxis of Reconciliation grounded In Christian Narrative* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 2011), 3.

³ Daniel Bar-Tal. “From Intractable Conflict through Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation: Psychological Analysis”. *Political Psychology*, 21, no.2 (2000): 351-365.

Commissions (TRCs) wherein the objective is communal peace and social renewal while the individual may continue to struggle internally⁴. While the community or nation reaches a collective reconciliation, how does the individual affected by the trauma reconcile with themselves? The internal battle that rages within the individual is no less turbulent than that which occurs between rivaling parties. What about the internal dichotomies of rage and depression; elation and anxiety; relieved and convicted; freed and imprisoned? To this end, what does a person do with an unsettled mind, no less an unsettled spirit? While our current state of national affairs is trying to come to grips with so much division, I dare to question how do we deal with our own personal, internal division that keeps us from expressing our true selves? Furthermore, as we have entered into another year of a pandemic that many thought was nearing an end, how has the isolation, fear and anxiety affected our spiritual selves? How do we rebound from our own trauma,

⁴ Antjie Krog. *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 6.

sometimes self-inflicted, to become a whole, happy, loving person again or even for the first time?

Psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman suggests that one of the most enduring consequences of experiencing a distressing event is “shattered assumptions”⁵. People have expectations of their daily routines and livelihood in general that consists of a certain level of security and safety. There are cultural, societal and religious predispositions about how a given community will function; the moral and ethical dimensions that are observed; and how one’s life ought to unfold. When these primary assumptions are disrupted, the psychological expectations are “shattered”⁶. The trauma has the propensity to become a deep-seated psychological phenomenon that does not subside when the experience has ended, but sometimes is relived in the mind for an unidentifiable amount of time. Additionally, when theological expectations based upon a misconceived faith perspective are not met, there is the potential for persons

⁵ R. Janoff-Bulman. *Shattered Assumptions* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 8.

⁶ Janoff-Bulman. *Shattered Assumptions*, 8.

to have their faith expectations shattered. A crisis of faith may occur when the outcome of a situation is not the expected outcome for the person of faith—in other words, God did not act in the way God was supposed to—based upon a misconceived faith of God must act in every situation the same identical way. This work seeks to address how a misconceived faith perspective coupled with the shattering of expectations has some potential for internal struggles.

While I make no suggestions that I am an expert in the field of psychology, counseling or the like, though I have had a fair share of pastoral counseling sessions as well as classroom, hallway and office spur of the moment sessions. I do not dare to venture too deeply into the psyche, I leave that for my colleagues whose profession therein lies. I do, however, want to raise issues and make suggestions from my own vantage point of pastor, theologian, rhetorician, professor and all the other various hats I have worn throughout my life. I want to couple my journey with what I have researched, lectured and more

than anything pondered about for some time--- reconciling the self.

While people of faith, specifically Christians, attest to their ongoing existence to be attributed to their relationship with God through the saving grace of Christ's sacrifice. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9, NIV). This free gift of grace, which to the Christian is spiritual evidence which coincides with the doctrine of salvation, is foundational to an eschatological understanding. That is the guarantee of the soul's eternal residing in the presence of God and the company of those who share in the reception of this gift of grace. Furthermore, salvation is to provide a different vantage point, perspective, or lens to view life's situations through. The believer is admonished to take heart, "I have told you these things, so that in me you have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33, NIV). Jesus' words convey a conviction to abstain from allowing troubles

encountered in this life to overtake us for such has already been conquered. The writer James furthers our understanding of Christ's words by suggesting, "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4, NRSV). James seems to suggest a celebratory stance in the face of adversity due to the trauma's ability to increase endurance or perseverance with every new encounter as an athlete giving 110% to increase their stamina.

These often-recited passages along with many others ought to solidify in the mind of the believer a sense of calm during any traumatic experience that may come in life. If such is the case of the rudimentary aspects of a Christian life, why then do Christians, in my characterization, present traits of schizophrenia and/or personality disorder when we are faced with troubles? What is it that causes even the leaders of Christian communities to seemingly run low of faith fuel when

accosted by unexpected circumstances? Do we somehow not really believe what we claim to be the overcoming essence of faith pronounced in the Gospel? Do we in our own inner-communication question or even dare to blame God for the situation we find ourselves in? Furthermore, in our isolation, such has been the case throughout the pandemic, do we wrestle within ourselves about ourselves? In concert with Apostle Paul's lament, "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin..." (Romans 7:21-23, NRSV). While Paul's struggle is not exactly about faith in respect to encounters of suffering, he does share his own split personality story pointing to a human dichotomy we fight to resolve. The resound of 'we need to just have more faith', as if it can be increased on a whim like a quick stop at a refueling station to top off our vehicle's gas tank, is not an acceptable nor long lasting solution. A dark night of the soul cannot be countered with misused Biblical quotes, well wishes and lopsided promises of others to pray for

us. There is something significantly noticeable and complex within this dichotomy of the self.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology lends some initial understanding to this war within. Bonhoeffer's stance was not that of 'this world' versus 'other world' dichotomy, but rather he envisioned these worlds being reconciled through Christ's atonement, which was for all. By worlds, Bonhoeffer is referencing the physical and the spiritual. Therefore, the trajectory of his thought begins with an understanding of the human condition as a fallen state and centered upon oneself as representative of the falling away from God. The self-centered individual is at constant conflict within him or herself as well as with other individuals in the world. Bonhoeffer addresses the primary instigations of conflict—misunderstanding and desire. The solution for Bonhoeffer (and me) to overcome this internal and external conflict is reconciliation with God through Christ. Bonhoeffer argues that when God created man, God "fashioned humankind out of the dust from the ground and blew into its nostrils the breath of

life”⁷. In this way, Bonhoeffer raises his premise that God expresses two complementary things. It expresses the physical nearness of the creator to humanity as well as the omnipotence of the creator⁸. While everything else that was created was done by the word of God, wherefore let it be and so it was commands the existence of creation, but for humanity God gave of God’s self through the shaping, forming and breathing life into this new creature. Bonhoeffer wrote, “Human beings do not live as human beings apart from God’s spirit. To live as a human being means to live as a body in the spirit”⁹. The human’s existence varies from all other living creatures in that it contains the spirit of God, which constitutes its *Geist* or essential being. Daniel Migliore furthers Bonhoeffer’s human condition by proposing “Being created in the image of God is not a state or condition but a movement with a goal: human beings are restless for a fulfillment of

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 70.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 72.

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall, A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, 74.

life not yet realized”¹⁰. Therefore, humanity bears within humanity’s self an essence that is directly from God; part of God; a likeness of God and ever being guided to God for fulfillment and self-actualization.

The makeup of human existence in the likeness of God yet not God, reinforces the opening sentiments of Christians being predisposed to a faith that all struggles will be won over by the believer. The breadth of the creator coursing through the spiritual veins of the believer ought to provide the confidence Jesus attempted to instill in the disciples to be at peace because I have overcome the world. Therefore, if we allow the premise to take its course, the internal war should be won before, during and after troubles beset our lives. So, in the exterior lives of believers the rhetoric becomes synonymous with antecedents of rationalized faith wrapped in statements of accepting the struggles as a part of being the growth process of every believer. I will overcome; God will see me through; I can do all things through Christ... are the

¹⁰ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 128.

reactionary responses given. Molefi Kete Asante notes, “people believe that suffering brings redemption. In fact, it is the peculiarly African American emphasis in the Christian myth that gives it the potency it possesses in contemporary society”¹¹. Nevertheless, our mouth communicates one thing while internally our minds and spirits are still at war with one another. As a very wise and intelligent friend comments, “that’s what your mouth says...”. There continues to be a disconnect between the head and heart; mind and body; intellect and spirit that provides a never ceasing internal dichotomy at odds.

In *Creation and the Fall*, Bonhoeffer writes of the primal condition of Adam and Eve as representative of the human condition of being free for and free from. Adam was living free from and free for that constitutes living a harmonious relationship with Eve. Bonhoeffer further suggests that the creator knows that this free creature that has been created with limits can bear the limit only if it is loved, therefore the creator creates a suitable helper for

¹¹ Molefi Kete Asante, *Race, Rhetoric & Identity: The Architecton of Soul* (New York: Humanity Books, 2005), 154.

Adam. “The helper who is a partner had to be at once the embodiment of Adam’s limit and the object of Adam’s love. Indeed, love for the woman was now to be the human being’s very life (in the deepest sense of the word)”¹². Bonhoeffer posits the relationship between Adam and Eve in the primal state as the foundation for understanding community in that they [Adam and Eve] constitute the first community. The relationship is also how the church is to be understood. “It is therefore the church [Kirche] in its original form. And because it is the church, it is a community bound with eternal bond”¹³. The community is constitutive of being free from and being free for one another to share in the limit. However, beyond its’ original form, the church is not a community without struggles, pains and wounds. Henri Nouwen affirms, “A Christian community is therefore a healing community not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision”¹⁴. Nevertheless,

¹² Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 89.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 91.

¹⁴ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (NY: Doubleday, 1972), 90.

at times even the Christian community is broken for when there is no space for individual healing, the sharing of the ups and downs; ebb and flow of life are no longer embraced by the community and the individual must cope alone. Even further, the individual no longer senses the ability or responsibility toward the other and therefore one who struggles within, heightens the struggles with others and minimizes the propensity ‘to be for’ the other.

Furthermore, Bonhoeffer proposes that this internal war of the human condition is central and derivative of the sinful and subsequently shameful nature of humanity placing the self at the center of life instead of God. Shame arises only when the knowledge of good and evil, *tob* and *ra*¹⁵, enter upon the scene. *Tob* and *ra* are the ultimate split and are “concepts that express what is in every respect the deepest divide in human life”¹⁶. Shame comes out of humankind’s knowledge of dividedness and

¹⁵ *Tob* and *ra* are Hebrew words, each having a range of meanings. *Tob* means “good, pleasing, pleasant, delightful, delicious, happy, glad, joyful,” while *ra* means “bad, evil, disagreeable, displeasing, unpleasant, harmful”. (See The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Genenius Hebrew and English Lexicon.

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 81.

difference. After the fall, both Adam and Eve's eyes were open and they saw that they were naked and attempted to cover themselves with fig leaves. Disobedience by humanity gave way to shame due to the knowledge of difference. Bonhoeffer wrote, "Shame arises only out of the knowledge of humankind's dividedness, of the world's dividedness in general, and thus also of one's own dividedness. Shame expresses the fact that we no longer accept the other as God's gift."¹⁷ Shame therefore becomes the rationale for covering and hiding of the self's evil as well as questioning of the other's motives. The dividedness caused by disobedience created a disillusionment of the self no longer being free from[*sin*] and free for [*community with the other*]¹⁸, but rather ashamed of oneself. Could this shame of one's divided-self cause a crisis of faith in times of duress?

The past eighteen months of the pandemic has caused many to be in total isolation from others. The isolation created intense moments of persons being alone

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 91.

¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and the Fall*, 79.

with their thoughts, hang-ups, regrets and oneself. The lack of face to face church community; group functions and friend interactions that would normally keep one's physical and mental capacities busy came to an abrupt halt. The daily short bursts of self-talk to make it through average daily tasks gave way to hours, days, weeks and for some months of mental, physical and spiritual drain to press on. Connections to others became virtual meeting and facetime calls among other technologies. Time was occupied by cooking new recipes and binge-watching television shows and movies. However, there is only so many new recipes to try and shows to watch before in such a condition one comes face to face with oneself and the internal demons. It is possible that the 'shame' Bonhoeffer wrote about has a poignant entrance at this juncture. Bonhoeffer makes a distinction between shame and remorse through suggesting that remorse arises when a person knows that they have been at fault for something. However, shame on the other hand is a result of knowing that he/she lacks something¹⁹. Bonhoeffer states, "The

¹⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 25.

peculiar fact that we lower our eyes when a stranger's eye meets our gaze is not a sign of remorse for a fault, but a sign of that shame which, when it knows that it is seen, is reminded of something that it lacks, namely, the lost wholeness of life, its own nakedness"²⁰. Shame seeks to be covered and hidden, hence Adam and Eve's action of making covering to hide their nakedness.

Humanity attempts to conceal and cover themselves from one another and from God. Bonhoeffer asserts that the concealment is "a necessary sign of the actual situation of disunion"²¹. However, the mask of concealment is not a disguise of deception, but rather a covering of the longing for the restoration or reconciliation of the lost unity with the origin of life. The dialectic of concealment and exposure covering, and revelation become the essence of a life of disunity from God and from men. "Self-knowledge is now the measure and the goal of life"²². Life for humanity becomes a continual conflict with others and even more profoundly

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 26.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 28.

²² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 30.

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with the self. The knowledge of good and evil creates a divided self from which reality and understanding emanates. The knowledge of self is no longer derived from the creator, but from the self and therefore it is from the self that God and others are understood.

The individual as the center of one's own existence develops a conscious that is also not derived from God, though it is often mistaken as the voice of God. "Conscious is concerned not with man's relation to God and to other men but with man's relation to himself"²³. Man now is divided and in conflict with himself. The point of decision-making becomes the point of ethical examination and choice that is no longer derived from the relationship with God but from the relationship with the self—the divided-self wherein conflict is constant. To this end, Migliore asserts,

If being human in the image of God means responding to God's call to accept our freedom as a gift and to live freely with and for others, then sin in dealing with fellow creatures takes the dual form of

²³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 29.

*domination and servility; self-exaltation and self-destruction*²⁴.

Sin is posited as against God and against our fellow human. Migliore argues that the outcome is a divided-self with respect to how we treat the other in the breadth and depth of relationships, interactions and responses to their personality. An indecisiveness with and toward others coincides with the internal contemplation of the good and bad; poor choices juxtaposed with notable ones; defeats and victories; loses and gains; the ongoing war between an imprisoned mind and a liberated spirit. Shame, if given into, has the power to disable life functions giving way to anxiety, depression and a crisis of faith.

The American Psychology Association reported that, “psychologists are seeing more patients with anxiety and depression since the start of the coronavirus pandemic”²⁵. The article goes on to suggest that the

²⁴ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 131.

²⁵ “*Psychologists Report Large Increase In Demand For Anxiety, Depression Treatment*”, American Psychological Association, November 17, 2020, <https://www.apa.org>.

pandemic has taken a heavy emotional toll on persons with “more than four in 10 psychologists (41%) said that they felt burnout, and 30% said that they have not been able to meet the demand of treatment for their patients”²⁶. Pastor colleagues have discussed the dramatic increase of church members voicing concerns of personal emotional crisis during the period of isolation. Therapist colleagues have reported an increase in caseloads citing that many people have sought therapy over past issues resurfacing that had been locked away but never fully dealt with. Colloquial dialogues often arrived at a theodicy question that parishioners and therapy clients alike raise, where is God in all of this and/or what have I done to deserve this? Again, a dive into the divided-self. For if as a believer, one has the essence of God within, then bad things should not be happening so why is God letting this suffering to occur? And in light of the suffering, even self-afflicted, the question of what has one done to deserve the suffering is often raised even if only to oneself.

²⁶ “*Psychologists Report Large Increase In Demand For Anxiety, Depression Treatment*”, American Psychological Association, November 17, 2020, <https://www.apa.org>.

The questions are not new, nor ones that have not been raised in previous generations when tragic events occur. As a matter of fact, Biblical narratives are riddled with such contemplations, questions and outcries for clarity. Abraham had indecision; Moses had questions; Job had utter confusion; Elijah wanted euthanasia; Peter resorted to denial; and even Jesus cried out “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me!” (Matthew 27:14; Mark 15:34, NIV). Furthermore, the names etched in the hall of fame of faith in the book of Hebrews includes people whose actions seemingly were counterintuitive to faith. Sarah laughed when the angel announced she would have a child in her old age. Jacob tricked Esau out of their father’s blessing and later wrestled with God all night. Moses made excuses for why God should not send him back to Egypt. Gideon kept asking for one more sign. David had highs of dancing out of his clothes in praise and slaying Goliath and then bouts of deep depression and uncertainty. How is it that those we are to learn from are counted as having great faith when in times of turmoil they seemed to have crisis of faith? While their stories have different contexts, proponents and stressors, the

common denominator between the faith hall of famers and 21st century Christians is a crisis of faith during some circumstance of detrimental proportion.

The author of Hebrews makes multiple rhetorical turns throughout the delineation of the giants of faith. One turn occurs in the often-quoted verse six, “and without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6, NIV). The insertion of a further defining of faith comes after presenting Enoch’s story of being only one of three Biblical characters who were ‘taken up’ rather than enduring death. Additionally, it is noted that Enoch was “commended as one who pleased God” (v.5b). Contemplation of the author’s intent is warranted for there are two distinct attributes of the believer to be deemed as having faith; a belief in God’s existence and a belief that He [God] rewards those who seek Him. Therefore, the writer is providing fundamental aspects of faith. “The first aspect declares the reality of divine governance; the second aspect commits “whoever would approach” God

to a discovery of the delight of welcome, access, grace, and what it is “to please God” (v.6a)”²⁷. In-between the two pronouncements there is an implicit comprehending that must be raised.

The relationship between God and humanity must be factored into the equation. The believer’s theology contributes to the heightened or lessening of anxiety associated with struggles internal and external to oneself. An agnostic view of God as being the sum total of all that exists does not follow the notion of ‘believing He exists’ nor ‘seeking’ because this perspective does not acknowledge God as being outside creation and relatable. Furthermore, if one has no anthropomorphic terminology in their understanding of God, then a personal relationship inclusive of dialogue cannot be accounted for. A belief of God as creator but not concerned nor participatory in the ongoing unfolding of history appeals to ‘believing He exists’ but not to ‘seeking Him’ because from this perspective, He will not be found.

²⁷ James D. G. Dunn and John Rogerson, ed. *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Logos Research Systems Inc, 2020).

The revelation of God's self is instrumental in the development of the God-human relationship. Revelation in this sense is not to be understood as synonymous to intuitive insight or enlightenment suggesting that what is revealed could have at some point been comprehended through cognitive processes. "The Augustinian formula is: to believe is to think with assent. Faith agrees that what is said is true"²⁸. While Augustine, Thomas and many others are correct in there being a cognitive dimension to arriving at faith through the acceptance and agreement with general or natural revelation understood as God's self-disclosure through what can be observed; processes of nature and the universe. However, general and/or natural revelation directs humanity's gaze toward a divine creator but not in a personable sense. One can attest to the belief in a divine creator yet not have a faith that leads to religious conviction. Divine revelation necessitates such a conviction toward repentance and faith. Divine revelation is a much more personal self-disclosure that transcends cognition which moves the human to

²⁸ John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 29.

recognize, agree and accept what God chooses to reveal. “Revelation is the personal disclosure of God”²⁹ through which the individual is apprehended and produces faith. This self-disclosure of God is an act and an encounter. When God so chooses to reveal God’s self it occurs in some historical time and space as an act or event outside of the ordinary daily routines. God interrupts time and space to transcend cognition for God’s own choosing of self-disclosing some aspect of God’s personhood and relationship to and with the recipient. This God encounter creates and/or reinforces in the recipient a belief that God is; that God does exist.

This divine revelation or self-disclosure of God to the individual is a gift. It is a gift of grace to be acknowledged as God’s ongoing presence in and through adversity. “To know God is to experience the acts of God in the concrete affairs and relationships of people, liberating the weak and the helpless from pain and humiliation”³⁰. In this sense, one’s relationship with God

²⁹ Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine*, 30.

³⁰ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Orbis, 1997), 57.

and simultaneously their faith established based upon the revelatory activity of God in their lives. Such has been the case throughout Biblical revelation for “when Israel saw the great power which the Lord had put forth against Egypt... they put their faith in Him”³¹. The example of Israel’s relationship with God continues today in that one’s faith is at a ceremonial height when God does some action to alleviate or overcome an obstacle. However, when the next challenge comes along, there is a reemerging of the anxiety replete with the questions of why me, why now, how will I make it, etc. Consider the grumbling of Israel against Moses and Aaron when they were hungry and exclaimed, “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death” (Exodus 16:3, NIV). How do they put their faith in God in chapter 15 and then doubt in chapter 16?

One such cause of a crisis of faith may in fact be of one’s own view of the relationship with God, in which

³¹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 58.

from a cognitive approach, God provides according to our desire and will. Robert Bilheimer warns,

If my spirituality is drawn chiefly from a few passages of my own choosing, I short change myself. If my own needs and, even more, my own view of my own needs determine which portion of Scripture is most gratifying, I slip into a spirituality of personal preference, molding God to my own desires³².

In other words, when life does not go as anticipated there is a tendency to doubt that the situation will turn out favorably and more specifically, turn out the way one wants it to. No one wants their loved one to die; a child to go to jail; hear the cancer is back; be jobless; homeless, however these very incidents do happen to otherwise good people who are believers. When atrocities occur in the

³² Robert S. Bilheimer, *A Spirituality for the Long Haul: Biblical Risk and Moral Stand* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 10.

lives of those who have created a level of faith built on a theology of God protecting them from all adversity and if God does not, then there is either something wrong with the individual or with God. One must be careful to take Jesus' words to heart, "He [God] causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45, NIV).

It is a theological dialectical, God is love but there is hate; God is sovereign but there is suffering; God promises but people doubt; God is faithful but humanity is wishy-washy. The dialectical tension between Biblical revelation and hermeneutical interpretation; Divine revelation and present condition on the level of cognitive processes does not often make sense. The first clause proposed by the writer of Hebrews is not voided, for even in a crisis of faith for most if not all still believe that God exists. It is the second leap of faith, 'seeking' that creates an even more heightened anxiety. "He rewards those who earnestly seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6b, NIV). The term reward or the Greek (γίνομαι) *ginomai* can mean, "come to exist; **be**, possess a certain characteristic; **become**, to

come to or acquire or experience a state”³³. Therefore, those that earnestly seek God will be rewarded or provided with an experience and an understanding [state of mind or spirit] that had not previously existed, in other words a divine revelation. However, in times of turmoil, such as isolation in the pandemic, there are more questions raised than seeking. Often to the extent of putting God on trial with demands of why did you let this happen; I thought you loved me; I thought you would protect me; why me; why now; what did I do to deserve this and on and on. When people find themselves in such a torn condition there is a tendency to want answers to the wrong questions. The ‘reward’ God provides is not always bound to an outcome of our choosing or desire. God wants our earnestly seeking to be that of ‘what now’ rather than ‘why’. So even if the child dies, as in King David’s Biblical story; or there is loss of everything, as in Job’s situation; or a seemingly utter abandonment, as in

³³ James Strong, *Dictionary of the Words in The Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible with their Renderings in the Authorized English Version* (Logos Research Systems Inc., 2009), G1096.

Jesus' situation, the reward or revelation is tied to what now rather than why.

We can place ourselves in an unsettling predicament if we misunderstand the revelation of God through experience(s) and Biblical texts. Let us begin with the latter. The theologian James H. Cone rightly suggested,

The hermeneutical principle for an exegesis of the Scriptures is the revelation of God in Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed from social oppression and to political struggle, wherein the poor recognize that their fight against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel but it is the gospel of Jesus Christ³⁴.

To exegete or draw out of scripture requires a hermeneutic or vantage point to begin any interpretative strategy. While this is not a treatise on Biblical interpretation, it is important to recognize some important aspects of the process regardless of one's disposition toward the Bible

³⁴ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 74.

and where one is situated theologically. First, Biblical narratives provide insight to God's nature through the interaction God has with human actors in a specific historical time and space. Second, because Biblical narratives are set in a definite time and space, the narratives are not identical with other historical times and spaces. Third, Biblical narratives provide content not always context for the believer understand what God has done in route to recognizing what God is doing and where God is leading one toward. Cone goes on to state, "The biblical emphasis on God's continuing act of liberation in the present and future means that theology cannot merely repeat what the Bible says or what is found in a particular theological tradition"³⁵. To this end, coming away from a Biblical story with a belief that God will act on your behalf identically as God acted on the behalf of someone in a certain manner is to create a seriously false sense of faith. Humanity may repeat history, God does not. The nature of God's acts in time and space are progressive or moving forward to an eschatology yet to be fully

³⁵ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 75.

understood. Just because Moses struck a rock with his staff and water sprung out does not mean that Christians can go around striking rocks and waiting on water to gush from it. While this example may seem absurd, the point remains that what ought to be garnered from Moses' story is that God provides in dire situations. However, it is God's discretion of how the provision is made. The process of Biblical interpretation is to make connections of content from one explicit time to one's current historical position to reveal how God may act if God so chooses to act based upon previous actions.

The personal experiences of God one has are also situated in a specific time and space and provide another layer of God's essence for the recipient. Furthermore, how and when God decides to act in any given situation correlates to God's progression not setting a precedent for how God will and must act in every like situation. Cone rightly asserts, "Christian theology does not move from human needs to God, but from God's revelation to our needs"³⁶. God interrupts time and space to reveal an

³⁶ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 90.

aspect of God's nature to the believer, or nonbeliever, and addresses a specific need. However, God is not bound to only act when there is need for God can reveal God's self when there is no presumable need. To this end, God is not to be placed on the shelf like a good luck charm and then retrieved when a troubling situation arises. Furthermore, just because God decides to act in a certain situation does not mean that God will act in the same way when a similar situation occurs. Nor does it mean that God must act at all. The inactivity of God, which can be from a myriad of reasons, can cause a crisis of faith.

When parameters are placed upon God to act in a specific way in every similar situation based upon previous experience and God does not act in the same way or at all, a person can be left bewildered. In a past experience God could have been showing us that God is present in our struggles. God could have been revealing that there is always a solution to every struggle and sometimes the individual already has the capacity to provide the solution. For example, at some point in the past one may have needed a job and a job offer came when

it was least expected. The Christian response is to thank God for the job and rightly so. Fast forward ten years and one finds themselves in need of a job again for whatever the reason might be. If one uses the previous occurrence as a duplicate expectation in a new setting, great disappointment, frustration and confusion can arise when God seemingly does not 'do it again'. It is possible that one's past work experience, education and recommendations contributed to the previous job offer and therefore what one needs for another job is already present. One could argue that God created the opportunity; God predestined the position; God convicted the interviewer to offer the job. While this all maybe true, it does not indicate that God will act in the same exact way as previously. Additionally, God will not always duplicate in our lives exactly what was done in another person's life. Many give testimonies of God instantaneously healing them of drug addiction while others take months and years to reach the same destination of clean and sober. It is not that one has more or less faith than the other, it is more of a recognition that God chooses to reveal God's self in every situation however God

chooses to. The experiential revelation of God occurs to further develop one's relationship with God and a newer personal comprehension of God's character.

The dialectical tension should not bring about the believer's spiritual, emotional or physical destruction. The discussion began with questioning why there seems to be a division within oneself when there is trouble in one's life. How the claim of faith and the author of faith are called into question when the unexpected invades our time and space interrupting the normal ebb and flow of life.

A trace of the conceptualization of faith from the writer of Hebrews brought a knowledge of two perennial conditions of believing God is and the necessity to earnestly seek God. Through this two-pronged approach, God rewards or reveals more of God's self to the believer. Biblical revelation provides a looking glass into past historical interactions and relationships of God with and on the behalf humanity. Biblical interpretation bears witness to the past while providing a guide, not duplicate, for the present and the future.

Conclusion

Based on this short and by no means exhaustive discussion, when troubles, struggles, tragedy invades time and space the believer ought to keep some preliminary aspects in mind. First, there is no Biblical promise that bad things will not happen to people of faith. Second, there is nothing new under the sun and therefore nothing will ever happen that some other human has not experienced in some similar way and more importantly there is no occurrence outside God's comprehension. Third, here is where it gets rough, it will do us no good to tell God how we want the situation to be resolved. To be clear, some diseases will not be cured; some possessions maybe lost; you may not get the job you want and the outcome of a many other situations may not be what you want or expect. Fourth, the believer must believe God is and not just because you have ascribed everything good in life to God and everything bad to Satan. Such a theology will undoubtedly create confusion and does not follow the premise of Jesus' stating the rain will fall on the righteous and unrighteous. Fifth, the believer must

earnestly seek God. Seeking God is not giving God directions, suggestions or exhortations. One ought to seek God for revelation of God's choosing not our own. Divine revelation is to gain more insight of God and ascertain 'what now'.

None of the above rhetorical debate offered is meant as a swift and immediate resolution to deeply embedded matters of the soul and psyche. There are often traumatic experiences and past issues that need reconciled with a professional's assistance. Furthermore, legitimate psychological, mental and/or physical disabilities could further contribute to a divided self beyond what has been discussed which by no means are to be discounted. Nevertheless, in final analysis one can reconcile oneself through recognizing the dialectical tensions that may endure throughout one's existence. Nevertheless, we must continue to earnestly seek God. I close with words of the author of Ecclesiastes, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind" (Ecclesiastes 12:13, NIV).

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