

< 1 >

Our Loving God Is the Subject of the Bible

God himself is a God of surprises. Everything we know about God demonstrates that this is so. Right from the very beginning, at the time of creation, this is clear. Creation itself is a surprise. God didn't need to create anything at all. God is totally self-sufficient, in want of nothing. Yet, "God so loved the world . . ." that a beloved *had* to be created—the object of God's love that could, didn't have to, but *could* respond freely to the love God offered. So the universe was formed and a planet within it was created with a garden that would provide the beloved with an all-supplying home. On this planet with a garden, we, the beloved of God, would find all that was needed to give and sustain our lives. It really is amazing to think that the eternal God began time so that we creatures could be *inserted into* time. God had no need to do any of this but he did it. Why?

It was love that compelled God to create and his love is built into and evident in all of creation. We are the objects of divine love. A relationship of love demands the consent of the beloved, the partnership of the beloved, and the cooperation of the beloved, and this response of love must be freely chosen. Love demands free interaction; it cannot be coerced. Love must come from free will. It is from this surprising initiative of God that all creation comes. What a surprise this all is!

As Times Goes On

But like any surprise that repeats itself, the initial impact can wear off. We often forget how amazing it is that this world consistently gives us all that we need. Reimagine what a surprise it is that from a little seed, any seed at all, comes a plant—any and every plant. This plant could be a tuft of grass or a giant two-thousand-year-old sequoia! Looking at that tiny seed, who could ever imagine that from that speck, shoved down into the soil, the largest and oldest living creature could emerge?

This reminds me that when I was a child, my father had the most annoying response to just about anything we kids asked for. It was always the same:

“Dad, can I have a toy fire truck?”

“Whaddya think these toys grow on trees?”

Or, “Dad, can I have a chemistry kit?”

“Whaddya think these kits grow on trees?”

However, “Dad, can I have an apple?”

“Whaddya think these apples grow on . . .” Oops!

Just imagine, God has designed a garden for us to live in and within this garden God created and placed leafy creatures, fruit trees that literally push food out to us on the ends of tree limbs! Again, because we are so accustomed to it, the surprising phenomenon of fruit-bearing trees goes all but unnoticed. Yet it is really a stunning surprise. How could we ever imagine that from the woody “stuff” of a tree limb, edible, delicious fruit could emerge? How is it that potatoes can come up from the sandy soil? How can sweet grapes emerge from a vine? And that huge watermelons grow from that spindly little stem? Who could know that soil, rain, and a seed can conspire to produce a flower, a fruit, a vegetable, or a leafy shade tree?

The surprising love of God surrounds us, gives us life, and supports our very existence. We are swimming in the nourishing waters of divine love. But like the fish unaware of the water in which it swims, so we, God’s most beloved creatures, are too

often unaware of the divine love that envelops us. Yet if we can step back and look at it, we can see that we are the beneficiaries of a benevolence that is without reason. It is a love that is surprisingly uncalled for. Yet here we all are, living in the midst of an all-providing garden.

The ultimate surprise of love is that God wished to share completely in the life we have been given. So God began to reveal his divine self to us. In giving us minds to perceive creation, we learned of the Creator. We learned the logic of God. In nature, we studied the science of God. We began to recognize the beauty of God. We perceived that God is a loving God.

In our hearts that God made, his voice stirs. These stirrings teach us how to live with one another. In tablets that came from the place of the shocking flaming bush, God tried to teach us how to share this earthly home with one another. We fail more often than we learn. But surprisingly, God tries again and again; in other ways, in various hearts, stirred by loving urges, God tries to teach us. With stunning patience, God repeatedly tries to reveal himself to us.

These revelations of God were eventually recorded in sacred writings and collected in a book we now call the Bible. The big surprise of the Old Testament is that God chose a particular people to reveal himself to: slaves he rescued from bondage in Egypt, the Hebrews who became known as Jews. It wasn't only the choice of a particular people that was surprising; it was the way God organized them and had them relate to one another and to him.

God Reveals More of Himself

All ancient religions of the Near East reinforced the sociopolitical status quo of human society. In other words, the hierarchy of the gods within their pantheons represented a heavenly version of the sociopolitical hierarchies of their earthly societies. In those ancient religions, there was a celestial pyramid of authority and

honor among the gods. The “boss” god was always on top. That authority and honor then cascaded down to each lower rung of the pyramid to the lowest heavenly beings and certainly to the lowest rung of all, human beings. Tasks of the gods were distributed among them that marked or sustained their status within the pyramid of the pantheon. There may have been a god of the sea, a god of the sun, and many other gods charged with certain elements of the world.

In earthly societies of the time, human and religious structures mirrored each other. The head of state, usually the monarch, ruled with divine authority over the other members of the royal family or his tribe. The honor and respect due the monarch diffused down throughout the hierarchical levels of society with marked roles or expectations distributed among each social level, from the highest levels of social honor (and usually wealth) down through to the lowest level. This was the level usually occupied by slaves. This infusion of religious meaning into the social structure provided “divine” authority to support and reinforce the sociopolitical hierarchical status quo on earth.

And yet among the Hebrews of the Old Testament, God surprisingly entered into human history to turn this hierarchical pyramid on its head. The book of Exodus records God taking the part of slaves—the bottom rung of the social ladder—against their masters. And note, the master of these slaves was none other than the most powerful human being of ancient history, the pharaoh of Egypt! Talk about a surprise! God takes the part of slaves not just to defend them from the highest level of social power, but to defeat the power of the pharaoh so that these slaves could be free and find a home among the nations of the world. This is shocking! Gods are supposed to reinforce the social structure, not upend it!

This surprising nature of God and how he relates to his people is noted again and again in the Bible. For example:

Ask now of the days of old, before your time, ever since God created humankind upon the earth; ask

from one end of the sky to the other: Did anything so great ever happen before? Was it ever heard of? Did a people ever hear the voice of God speaking from the midst of fire, as you did, and live? Or did any god venture to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by testings, by signs and wonders, by war, with strong hand and outstretched arm, and by great terrors, all of which the LORD, your God, did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? All this you were allowed to see that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other. (Dt 4:32–35)

Like all lovers who wish to share deeply and intimately in the life of the beloved, so too with God. So the Divine Word would clothe itself in the flesh and life of a man. The ineffable, unspeakable God was spoken in humanity as the Christ. The almighty became the defenseless, the needy baby of Mary. In this Word of flesh and blood, God sought to speak plainly and clearly to us. He strove to communicate to us the all-surprising divine love. The love that was Jesus of Nazareth would then confront our sinfulness and, without flinching, experience other dark aspects of human life: hate, pain, disillusionment, heartbreak. As St. Francis of Assisi put it, “Love was not loved.” Sadly, this pain, too, is part of the experience of God’s beloved children, a part that God, surprisingly, also shared.

The followers of Jesus shared memories of their experience of this love-made-man. Eventually those memories of what Jesus taught and how he lived were recorded. The Word of God was scratched in black blood ink onto papyrus and parchment. So it should not surprise us that the written record of God’s love should itself be filled with many surprises as well.

What Is the Bible?

When I was a young layman, twenty-six years old, living in Philadelphia, working for a brokerage service company, I got an awful telephone call from my family telling me that my father had died. Then nine months later, the same thing happened. I received a call that my mother had died. My family was far away from me, in the Midwest. While my dad had been sick with a negative prognosis of lung cancer, he'd lived six months longer than his doctor had predicted. So while it was jarring to get that call, it was not unexpected. But my mother's death was a terrible shock. While my brothers and sisters and I had been concerned about how she'd fare after Dad's death, we were happily surprised to watch her come through the initial grief and begin to do things like make house improvements and start volunteer work. We all said to ourselves, "She's gonna make it." So when I received notice of her death, I was stunned. It was truly awful news.

My father was fifty-eight when he died, and my mom was fifty-nine. At the time, I thought this was much too young for them to have been taken from me. After their deaths, I began to feel a kind of resentment—completely inexplicable to me—toward older people. In fact, I specifically recall riding my bike along the Kelly Drive bike path in Philadelphia. I noticed a woman riding nearby who looked to be about sixty-five or seventy years old. And I thought, "Why is she still alive and healthy and my

mother, several years younger, not?" I'm ashamed to admit that this happened often and the more it did, the angrier I got about my parents' deaths. What kept coming back to me was the verbal equivalent of a fist shaking in protest against the sky: "This isn't fair!"

Five years later, almost to the month of my mother's death, I got what felt like a blinding insight about my anger and resentment. My father had always been a very active, even athletic man. He could ride bicycles backward! (Don't ask me how.) I had seen him walk on his hands at age fifty, up and down the banked lawn of our neighbor's front yard, just to get our five-year-old neighbor to giggle. My father was a construction worker for thirty-three years, and that work meant he was regularly climbing ladders and walking on scaffolding. He even perched occasionally in a boatswain chair to reach work areas high above the ground. My mom wasn't athletic by any stretch, but she certainly was active. No mother of five children, each thirteen months apart, could *not* be active and a hard worker.

Then I began to imagine my parents as really old people. And I realized that both of them would not have "aged gracefully." The challenges and vagaries of old age would have likely been terrible burdens for them. Imagining the scene of my dad's movement being limited by an oxygen tube attached to a tank was one of tragedy for me. I knew my dad could not have tolerated the limitations that advanced years and deteriorating health would have imposed on him. The same was true for my mom. She would have had great difficulty resigning herself to years of incapacitation and a shrinking circle of activity.

And what about us kids? How hard would it have been for us to watch our lively, energetic parents diminish? We would have struggled watching our active parents grow older. It would have taken its toll on us as well. I would have hated to see them in such circumstances.

So I began to see—and I know this sounds odd—that their relatively early deaths were in some ways, really, a blessing. What

had appeared to me as an unfair tragedy, a source of pain and anger in me five years before, I now began to see as a grace from God. Yes, a blessing.

Looking back on my experience became a theological reflection on how God had been working in my life and in the lives of my folks. I didn't see it at the time, in the shock of their deaths, but it was in that theological reflection later that I began to see the hand of God at work. I saw God's care, mercy, and great compassion both for my parents and for me and my brothers and sisters. Theologically reflecting on my past, I saw God working. I did not see his hand when I was in the exact moment of the experience, but I could clearly see that he had been at work when I reviewed my own and my family's history five years after the fact.

The Bible Is a Theological Reflection Too!

The type of experience I had reflecting on my parents' deaths years later and finding God's presence is a similar dynamic to that which took place in the creation of both the Old Testament and New Testament of sacred scripture. The Bible is the record of the theological reflections of the people of God on their own history and experience. They began to understand more about God in terms of their later reflections on their history. It was in those reflections that they came to see the hand of God at work. This tells us something important about what the Bible is and is not. The Bible is a theological reflection on history and how, in that reflection, the people of God began to see God working in their lives. The Bible is *not* a history book. This is clear when we look at *both* the Old Testament and the New Testament.

We find no written eyewitness accounts of events in the Old Testament or of the events in the Gospels. No one was recording a diary of the events of Israel's history as they happened. There

was no one reporting on the activity and speeches of Jesus as they occurred. Rather, in the Old Testament, we find a record of what the Jews told and retold one another of their history. For centuries, the Jews orally passed on their traditions about their past, generation to generation, each retelling shaped by further and deeper reflection. Likewise, the eyewitnesses of Jesus handed down their stories and memories of Jesus orally; only a later generation would attempt to record the stories and memories that had been told to them. In the process of handing down oral accounts, those who shared the accounts added theological reflections about how they saw and understood God at work in their history.

Eventually, God-inspired authors began to write down the traditional accounts that they'd heard and retold. Even these earliest written accounts would be edited and rewritten as the authors' theological insights into their past deepened and broadened. Succeeding editors of the sacred texts would also make changes in the accounts to reflect the situations at the time of that writer or editor.

Let me give an example from the Old Testament. The book of Daniel purports to be an account of the events of the terrible Babylonian crisis. This crisis, which occurred in the sixth century BC, culminated in the destruction of the first Temple and the city of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. But in fact, the book of Daniel was written not in the sixth century BC but actually four hundred years later, in the second century BC. It was not written in the time of the Babylonian persecution and exile but during a later crisis of the persecution and occupation of Jerusalem by the Greek king of the Seleucid Empire, Antiochus Epiphanes IV.

Antiochus Epiphanes IV, this later persecutor and destroyer of Jerusalem, dominated Israel during the Hellenistic period, a time of subjugation by Greek rulers whose dynasties were descendants of Alexander the Great's surviving generals. The crisis stirred up by Antiochus in Jerusalem was both military and religious in nature. He had been trying to conquer Egypt,