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**Reflection questions...** [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

*"How do you remain hopeful? How do you keep trying to convince yourself that it's really going to happen without becoming delusional?"*

*"How do we understand the death of Jesus?"*

*"Do you remember the first time that the person you looked to (counted on) for strength and stability, flashed glimpses of frailty?"*

*"What do you do when your Messiah is having a melt-down?"*

*"What have you concluded/assumed to be true about God based on the cross? Was the cross, ultimately, the consequence of human sin or the desire of God?"*

*"How might your assumptions about this scene be transformed knowing that Jesus did not simply die for you because he had to, but because he loves you?"*

*"How would you respond to this statement:"*

**You can't get to the "your will be done" without, first, wrestling with how it conflicts with your own.**

*"Everything is possible for you..."*

*"What kind of tension might the reality of that statement create as you consider the God-possibilities, in contrast with your present circumstances?"*

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**Teaching Notes...**

We live in a culture that relies on the exchange of facts and data and information to explain or understand our reality. Our faith comes to us, not as a collection of random God-facts to be received, but as a story to be told. Not one that we have creatively manufactured on our own, but one that comes to us... is revealed to us... by God himself.

When Jesus is attempting to help his followers better understand the seemingly confusing and conflicting events transpiring around them, he tells a story. He re-enacts a liberation/freedom story which he connects, ultimately, to himself.

The Jews of Jesus' day believed that their God was the One-True, Creator God, who remained involved with and sovereign over his world, even though there was no shortage of evidence all around them to suggest otherwise. Something had gone terribly wrong and the signs were all around them: sick bodies, fractured relationships, broken people, unjust systems, spiritual decay. The whole project was in need of restoration.

By the time of Jesus, it had been approximately (600) years since Jerusalem had been ransacked and destroyed by Babylon. Those that had returned from exile were able to re-build a scaled-down version of the temple and re-institute worship, but everyone knew it wasn't the same. There was one small detail missing: God. He was gone, but he left the lights on.

*"How do you remain hopeful? How do you keep trying to convince yourself that it's really going to happen without becoming delusional?"*

You keep singing songs, telling stories, re-enacting significant God-moments which declare your confidence in the Story... even when nothing remotely resembling salvation seems to be happening around you.

*"How do we understand the death of Jesus?"* It's easy to assume that he was just another naïve country-boy who sponsored his own "Messianic FB" site.

It's even easier for us, as Christians, to formulate our own theological explanations which are replete with concise God-language, but fail to capture the enormity of the event (e.g. "*Jesus died for our sins*": while I would fully support that--- and recognize that to trust such a statement does not demand that we are able to fill in all of the blanks--- I also believe that such a statement has to be unpacked over a lifetime, and not simply in a one-off, seasonal presentation).

What we can say, I believe, is that:

**First**, Jesus died as he lived: Sacrificially. With clarity, with resolution. With joy. "*When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied*" (Isaiah 53:11). In every encounter, Jesus was confronting "evil" ('disorder; not as it ought to be') in its various forms. He was healing, welcoming, forgiving, restoring... all of which culminated in the cross.

**Second**, there is a sense in which Jesus' death is "representative". He embodied a Story in which Messiah would stand in for his people, Israel, who would, in turn, represent the whole world. Meaning, what would be true of Jesus, would be true of everyone he was representing (e.g. David and Goliath). His victory becomes theirs.

**Third**, there is a sense in which Jesus' death is "for us", "because of us", "with us", and "instead of us". He is, somehow, as Isaiah says, "*It was our weakness that he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But, he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so that we could be whole. The Lord laid on him the sins of us all*" (53).

The Jesus Event (life, death, resurrection) is somehow the climax of the Story. In him, the Kingdom was coming. God's will, God's desires, God's way of life was being made available to all, as he confronted the real enemy of humanity--- the evil, spiritual powers and rulers, "...*cancelling the record of the charges against us and taking them away by nailing them to the cross. In this way, he disarmed*

*the spiritual powers and shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross”* (Colossian 2). He let evil do its worst, drawing it out in the open and exposing it, only to demonstrate his power of it.

### **This scene reminds me that the human dilemma is the divine dilemma, as well.**

Evil is more than just the mess we've gotten ourselves into, but the frustration that God feels over the disruption and distortion of all of his good creation **and** the pain that he feels with us as we experience the inevitable consequences of such disorder.

### **Without the garden, we don't get to the cross; we don't make it beyond death to the resurrection, which is the seminal moment in the story. “Life”.**

The importance of this historical episode is, I think, too easily under-estimated. I think it not too dramatic to say that history hinges upon this moment.

*“Do you remember the first time that the person you looked to (counted on) for strength and stability, flashed glimpses of frailty?”*

*“What do you do when your Messiah is having a melt-down?”*

This scene messes with our sensibilities. This is the God who created the entire terra-firma who is now face-down in it. It seems sacrilegious. Disrespectful. It's hard to watch.

Without this story, we would have accumulated a lot of information about Jesus, but we wouldn't really “know” him. This is the place where we might actually most identify with Jesus.

*“Falling to the ground”* is this universal expression of grief and soul-crushing disappointment (e.g. mothers who receive word of the death of their child, people who witness unspeakable tragedy, children who don't get....)

We can no longer ‘stand’ under the weight of the event or news. This is Jesus saying, *“I need you guys!”* We never thought we would hear God say that!

In our distress, we get “up close and personal” with our humanity, don't we? Face down in the dirt! [Adam: from ‘adamah’- ground].

### **Unless you are convinced that God has a more robust vision and a better will than your own, you will never trust him.**

Surrender says, *“Father, your will is better than mine. I trust you with my children, more than my parenting skills. I trust you with my marriage, more than my determination to change my spouse. I trust you with my financial future, more than my ability to forecast a volatile market”*.

In that sense, it's not a battle of the wills, but a surrender of the will. It's not about God overtaking you, but about you--- overwhelmed with love--- surrendering to his good intentions, despite the absence of clarity and despite the presence of some favorable alternative.

### **The early followers of Jesus formed conclusions about the cross that we often fail to reach: the cross was not simply a story of human tragedy, but of divine love.**

Something that pleases the Father because Jesus was the willing bearer of healing, restoring, reconciling love to those who were ‘sick, lonely, despised, rejected, alienated, hopeless.’ He was the “good shepherd”, who would lay down his life for the sheep (John 10:11).

*“But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners”. Romans 5*

*“For God so loved the world...” John 3*

**The historic confession of the church has been, “Jesus is human, but he’s God.” This scene seems to emphasize it this way: “He’s God, but he’s human!”**

**If he didn’t struggle with suffering, we would say he wasn’t human (challenge his humanity). If he wasn’t willing to suffer, we would say that he wasn’t divine!**

If he would have ‘tapped out’, none of his disciples would have chided him for it. He’s done it before. Why didn’t he slip through the crowd, again?

How does such a Story, such a faith movement, survive such inauspicious beginnings? How does a Story, riddled with so much failure and inconsistency, ever go on to become so historically transformative? The answer, I propose, is in “*the rest of the story*” (Thank you, Paul Harvey 😊).