

Palm Sunday

COACHING WITH UNDERSTANDING

Philippians 2:5-11

Palm Sunday

Analysis by Ben Williams

*5Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

*9Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Author's Note: Reading Paul's letters gives us little glimpses

into the ancient world. Each community Paul wrote faced particular issues that Paul specifically addressed. I like to think of Paul as a coach for these communities: giving guidance or admonishment when necessary. In this passage from the letter to the Philippians, Paul gives one clear directive to the community: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus..." It may be tempting to turn Christ's actions of self-emptying into our own call to action; but, the focus of the Christ hymn is to draw our attention to what Jesus does. Our call from Coach Paul, then, is to reflect on Christ's work and how we might live into that work by rejecting exploitative power.



Entry of Christ into Jerusalem (1320) by Pietro Lorenzetti-
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Jesus embraces the vulnerability of being human for us; a divine act only God could accomplish.

DIAGNOSIS: SOMETHING TO BE EXPLOITED

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Coaching Athletes

“Winning isn’t everything. It’s the only thing. If you can shrug off a loss, you can never be a winner.” This quote from Coach

Vince Lombardi is emblematic of the challenge coaches face when success is the priority of coaching. It can easily reduce athletes to the total sum of the outcomes of their endeavors. If a player isn't producing to the level expected, then the player's value is diminished.

Of course, we can rationalize this at the professional sporting level. But it is not just coaches who face this challenge. Parents living vicariously through their children's success face this temptation. Employers or managers might feel pressure to view their workers as numbers on a spreadsheet. The value of employees, children, friends, athletes or any other human relationship can be reduced to a performative metric of our own device.

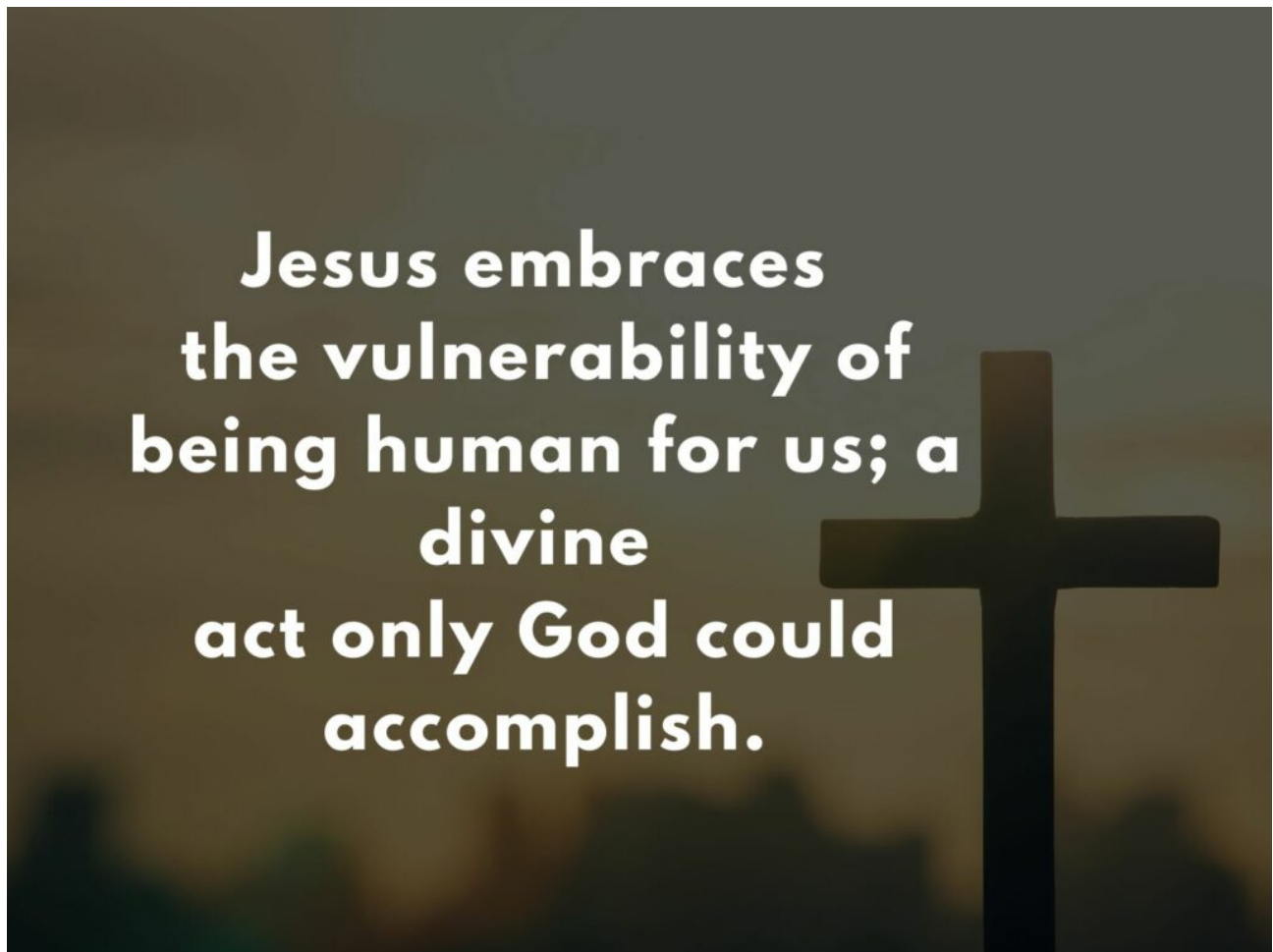
Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): A Call to Succeed

In turn, we are weighed down by pressure to perform. We become convinced that success is a measure of godliness. Those who are successful are elevated to the divine realms and idolized. Athletic prowess is considered super-human at the upper-levels of one's sport. Parents beam with pride when their child accomplishes a feat the parent could not. Fattened wallets become the only evidence to judge a business as good. Regardless of the cost, harm, or impact we buy the idea that it's okay to leverage power if it leads to success.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Left Exploited

Exploitation lurks just around the corner when success is the only valued measurement of worth. Why? Because unfounded power that claims its own divinity always wields that power to protect itself. And Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited..." So, Jesus refuses and rejects the use of exploitative power. We find ourselves chasing our own exploitation when we deny our humanity.

by claiming our own divinity; or worse, entrusting such divinity to another.



Divine Act (from Canva)

PROGNOSIS: HIGHLY EXALTED

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Found Exalted

And yet, Christ “emptied himself” of the divinity to which he rightly held claim. “And, being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” Jesus embraces the vulnerability of being human for us; a divine act only God could accomplish. And he is found to be highly exalted, given a name above all names, so that all may know where true divinity lies.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): A Call to Be

This act frees us from our obsessive need to secure for ourselves the so-called success that proved our worth. Rather, we live into a call to be exactly who we are created to be: human beings who falter and persist: parents who love their children for who they are, employers who value their employees and not just their labor. Regardless of profit, benefit, or success, the Holy Spirit opens our hearts to reflect God's compassionate love for all that God created, including ourselves.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Coaching Human Beings

"For me, success is not about the wins and losses. It's about helping these young fellas be the best versions of themselves on and off the field." This quote from fictional Coach Ted Lasso is emblematic of the potential coaches have to make a positive impact in their players' lives. It can easily make a profound difference in a player's life to be seen as more than just an athlete. If a coach coaches with understanding, then the players full potential is realized.

Of course, its not just coaches who make this life-changing impact. We all have the capacity, because of God's gracious love, to see one another as more than the sum total of our actions. We all can approach one another with understanding that we are human beings—beloved by God—first and anything else second. "Let the same mind be in you as in Christ Jesus," Paul writes. May it be so.

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Pride Becomes Blindness, Blindness Becomes Servanthood

John 9:1-41

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Analysis by James Squire

1As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. 4We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." 6When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, 7saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. 8The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" 9Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." 10But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" 11He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." 12They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." 13They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. 14Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. 15Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." 16Some of the

Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And they were divided. 17So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened." He said, "He is a prophet." 18The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight 19and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?" 20His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; 21but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself." 22His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. 23Therefore his parents said, "He is of age; ask him." 24So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner." 25He answered, "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." 26They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" 27He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" 28Then they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. 29We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." 30The man answered, "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. 31We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. 32Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." 34They answered him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach

us?" And they drove him out. 35Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." 37Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." 38He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. 39Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." 40Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" 41Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

Author's Note: Jo-Ann Brant, a Johannine scholar at Goshen College, who says that "Essentially, the story of the man with blindness serves as a miniature version of the larger story of Jesus. The narrative of the healed man parallels Jesus' narrative in many ways, including the following: the crowd questions his identity (9:8-9), he asserts 'I am' (9:9), he speaks frankly and logically throughout but is treated as an invalid witness (9:18), he is accused of being a sinner, and he combats the Pharisees with sarcasm and truth (9:34). This story within the story heightens the ironic punchline of the episode—that those who think they can see are blind to the truth while the one who was blind (and a sinner and accused of being an invalid witness) is the one who sees." We are also meant to see "how followers of Jesus might go on after he has left the stage of earth: like the healed man, they should imitate Jesus as a bold witness to the truth despite opposition."



By Eustache Le Sueur – Christ Healing the Blind Man, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4204876>

The Pharisees have no satisfactory answer to their ultimate dilemma: a blind man can now see because of Jesus' intervention. "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" All the evasion cannot make this question go away. This simple miracle punctures the authority of the Pharisees in this story, and they show no signs of acknowledging their own blindness.

DIAGNOSIS: Blind Leader

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Leadership by Gatekeeping

A man has his sight restored on the Sabbath by a rival to us, the existing religious authorities, and the healed man dares to lecture us about it. He does not know his proper place. Unauthorized healing is prohibited in our establishment. Moreover, no straight answer is provided by any respectable witness to get to the bottom of this mystery. The man's own parents are elusive and secretive. No one is respecting us. And our rival is not taking responsibility for his effrontery. He is not even showing himself, except to talk trash about us after the healing. Why is everyone blind to our authority?

Spitting on authority is generally a form of blindness, but authority figures can also be blind to the truth they are charged with safeguarding. "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs" fades, and the authorities' glaring need to be the final stamp of approval on any good thing that happens takes center stage. Leaders have a tendency to become gatekeepers rather than servants, making it necessary sometimes for renegades to intervene.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Only Gatekeepers Are Worthy of Trust

Frankly, this man is a sinner whose testimony is not to be trusted. Why else was he born blind? Is this not what we teach, that calamity befalls those who have strayed from the path? A sinner healing a sinner? This is not how things are done. The blind leading the blind, indeed. Who knows what sorcery was involved. God, through Moses, put us in charge, and we will get to the bottom of this if it is the last thing we do. No one gives glory to God except through us—that is our function in this world, to be Moses to these people. This interloper cutting corners is not to be trusted.

"Power corrupts"—so the trusty saying goes. Leaders believe

their own hype. Facts that contradict such hype are rationalized away. (“We know this man is a sinner.” “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?”) Today we call this “confirmation bias.” More importantly, such leaders—especially within the church—impose their own will as if it were God’s.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Gatekeepers Suffer Terminal Blindness

“Your sin remains.” The nerve of this interloper! We interpret what sin is, not him. If he is going to go around healing people on the Sabbath in defiance of our authority, we will deal with him once and for all. People will know who is in charge here. Interlopers can go to hell.

Tough talk—if you can back it up. In fact, that is what it comes down to. Who has the real authority from God? The Pharisees have no satisfactory answer to their ultimate dilemma: a blind man can now see because of Jesus’ intervention. “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” All the evasion cannot make this question go away. This simple miracle punctures the authority of the Pharisees in this story, and they show no signs of acknowledging their own blindness.



Jesus healing the blind XIX c. Brashlyan

PROGNOSIS: Sighted Servants

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus Pays the Price for Our Blindness

This interloper, Jesus, has a very interesting way of

demonstrating godly authority. He is not approved by the religious authorities of his day. They exercise their earthly authority to punish him for his offense. Under Roman occupation, this leads to his death because Rome has a vested interest in quelling any possible religious turmoil. He never apologizes for his ministry among them. He never stops butting heads with them, even as they put him on trial. But he also will refuse to marshal an armed insurrection (18:36) to free himself. He will argue all the way to the cross, but he will go there all the same and die. He will meet his apparent end with the declaration: "It is finished" (19:30). Having given sight to the man born blind, he is done in by those who call him blind, but he insists that his mission statement (3:16ff) has been accomplished.

When the tomb is discovered to be empty and Mary is greeted by the risen Jesus (20:16), those who have had their eyes opened by him know that he was right in his dying declaration. Moreover, they know that their sin does not remain. It has been wiped clean just as surely as their eyes have been opened by Jesus (v. 41).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Jesus Earns Our Trust through Service

When our eyes are opened by Jesus, we recognize that we were previously blind. We can see him. Like Mary outside the tomb, we hear his voice and follow him because we know him (10:4). Moreover, when people question us about who opened our eyes, we testify freely (vv. 9-11) without fear of reprisal, because we belong to the Good Shepherd (John 10). If church authorities question us, we testify freely (vv. 15-17) without fear, even when others in the community may not support us fully (vv. 22-23). We cannot be frightened into silence about Jesus because his light cannot be overcome by the darkness in our

world (1:5).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Leadership by Healing Service

Leading in a worldly fashion is quite the burden. If you are not willing to use force, it can be a disaster. If you are, it can easily become a joke. But with eyes opened by Jesus, we follow him and lead according to his example, which means servant leadership of the type exhibited by Jesus in John 9. We risk the ire of power-hungry people who prioritize protocol over service. We may even risk punishment to facilitate Jesus' ministry among those who walk in blindness. We do not seek to ruffle feathers intentionally, but when we see a need, we do what we can to address it, and put up with the fallout if there is any—just as Jesus addressed a need and then dealt with the blowback. Most importantly, we make the story about the one being healed instead of ourselves. Our Good Shepherd is nowhere to be found from verse 8 through verse 34—after the blind man is healed, and until he is “driven out.” The bulk of the story is the blind man living his newfound freedom in the midst of a hostile world, seeing clearly what the so-called leaders cannot. Jesus returns at the end to encourage him and support him. That is the kind of servant Jesus frees us to be.

First Sunday in Lent

Ooh, That Looks Tempting!

Matthew 4:1-11

First Sunday in Lent

Analysis by Timothy Hoyer

1Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 5Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 7Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 8Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" 11Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

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Immenraet_Temptation_of_Christ, Philips Augustijn Immenraet, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

When we think Jesus is not worth trusting as our God, we are actually thinking that God would not act this way. ... We don't like gods who are weak and helpless and embarrassing. If God is behind this Jesus, we are against God. And that is our deepest problem.

DIAGNOSIS: Great Things Tempt and Win Our Hearts

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): The Test Is to Look Away from Jesus

Grounding: Jesus was tested. The devil (always God's devil) tested Jesus' heart to expose whether Jesus was loyal or

disloyal to God, faithful to God or unfaithful (to not trust). God's testing is never "an enticement to evil" (*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 568). It was as if before God sent Jesus towards the cross, God wanted to make sure Jesus had the faith to go there.

Tracking: All of what people experience is a test of their values, morals, character, and of their faith in whatever god they have. For those who are Jesus-trusters, the test they face is, "If Jesus is merciful, why am I not receiving mercy? If Jesus forgives, why wasn't I forgiven? Or, why don't I feel forgiven? If Jesus promises me eternal life, when I die will I really be taken into heaven to live with him forever?"

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): The Heart Gets Tested

Grounding: (Trivia: In this story there are three names for this character: tempter, devil—from the Greek *diabolos*, meaning slanderous, accusing falsely; and Satan—transliteration of the Hebrew word meaning "adversary.") The tempter attacks Jesus' faith with his very first word, "If..." Is the tempter not sure that Jesus is the Son of God and wants proof or is the tempter testing Jesus' confidence or knowledge that he is the Son of God, who did not "regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Philippians 2:6b-7)?

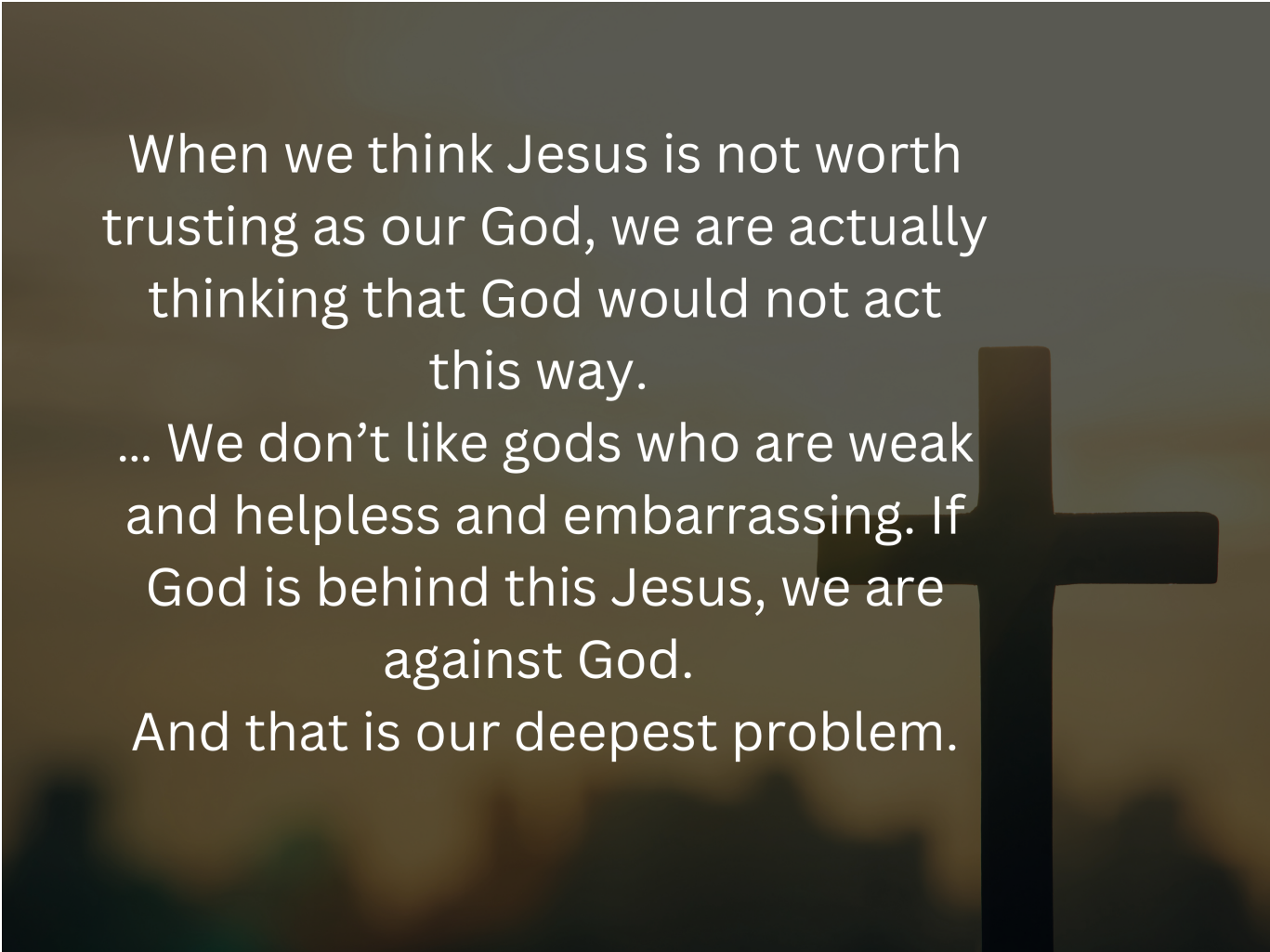
Tracking: Is Jesus really God? More to the point, is Jesus worth trusting as our God? Do we demand signs to prove he is God? And what help is Jesus with our daily challenges of an impatient spouse? Or with gun violence? Or bullying in schools? Or that no one will help a grown daughter buy a bus ticket to a city 250 miles away so she can go bury her mother? Or that no one will help a young mother get diapers for her six-month-old

baby? Or end the war in Ukraine or any other war you want to pick? What good is Jesus? He won't even change a stone into bread.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): We Think God Fails Our Test

Grounding: Jesus is tempted to prove he is God. It's as if Jesus, being in human form, is an insult to Satan's idea of what a god should be. God should not be human or mortal. Or Satan knows of Jesus' mission to die on a cross and he wants to prevent Jesus from completing that mission. Satan just wants to stop whatever God is doing. He is against God.

Tracking: When we think Jesus is not worth trusting as our God, we are actually thinking that God would not act this way. God would not become weak, without power, subject to death. A god who is like that is of no help at all. We don't like gods who are weak and helpless and embarrassing. If God is behind this Jesus, we are against God. And that is our deepest problem. It results in our eventual death.



When we think Jesus is not worth
trusting as our God, we are actually
thinking that God would not act
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... We don't like gods who are weak
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against God.
And that is our deepest problem.

Trusting God (from Canva)

PROGNOSIS: The Death and Rising of Jesus Are for Our Heart

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus Passes the Test of Death

Grounding: Jesus remains human and weak, refusing glory and power. He remains so even when he is forced on to a cross and dies. But then we see what Jesus can do. He changes the stone of death into the bread of resurrection for us. He is then seated at the right hand of God above all powers and dominions,

so that he is now the final judge of the living and the dead. As the final judge, he pronounces forgiveness. He acts with mercy. He overcomes all judgment against us. He pronounces us to be good before God. He is our goodness, the very thing we have always worked for but never quite achieved.

Crossing: Jesus remained human for us. He remained weak to be our strength. He died to be our life. He did not just die on a cross. He did all things for us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Jesus Tempts Us to Trust Him And His Mercy

Grounding: Jesus trusted in God and God's word—God's promises, "One lives by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Crossing: Jesus is relevant for us. We trusted in power, in our self-promoting pride, in our ability to be better than others. We trusted in judging others. We trusted that those who do better receive rewards and those who do worse receive punishment. That faith failed to make us right with God or give us mercy. Now we put our faith in Jesus as the Son of God who died for us, and receive the power of his mercy, the power of his forgiveness, and the power to be raised from death.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Hearts that Trust in Jesus Use His Mercy

Grounding: Risen from the dead, Jesus now gives us his Spirit so that when our hearts get tempted to say Jesus is not worth our trouble, that Spirit keeps our hearts trusting Jesus.

Crossing: Trusting in Jesus' power of mercy, as we keep dealing with the challenges of life—the violence and abuse, our own weariness and selfishness—we follow the way of mercy to heal, to forgive, to give life to others. Maybe changing stones into

bread would help feed the hungry, but it won't change the hearts that refuse to help hungry people. Maybe impressing others with great deeds would get people to pay attention, but only for a day, or until they asked for another display to impress them; impressing others does not change their hearts. Maybe having political power would set things right, but people already have political power and they do nothing for the weak and the sick. It is us, with new hearts trusting Jesus and his mercy, who daily—here and there—help, care, listen, offer a meal, give a ride, tell a story of Jesus and so invite (tempt) people to trust Jesus and his mercy.