

Cruciform Hermeneutics

TRAVIS: All right, everybody. Welcome to the Bible Study podcast. I'm Travis Pauley, and here we have one goal: Learn to love like Jesus. I'm here remotely, recording with Wes McAdams, the host.

Hi, Wes.

WES: Hey, Brother. How are you?

TRAVIS: I'm doing well. How are you?

WES: Good. I'm doing all right. We're -- hopefully, this will be the last -- I keep thinking -- every time my family gets COVID or gets exposed to COVID, I keep thinking this will be the last time we ever have to mess with this, and the Lord says, you know, "Not so fast. Don't make plans without asking me first," so I need to keep saying, "Lord willing." So, Lord willing, this will be the last time we have to deal with this, but, you know, my family is getting over being sick, and so we are using and tapping into the wonderful technology that we have at our disposal, and what we would normally be doing together in person, we're doing across town. So here we are.

TRAVIS: That's right. And, Wes, this is going to be the last episode for a little bit?

WES: Yeah, yeah. I think we're going to take a break. We're doing some other stuff. This might be a great opportunity to encourage people to check out all the work that you do for McDermott Road on our YouTube channel, or look us up on Apple podcast, or wherever, but -- so we're doing a Sunday morning Bible class online, and then we're doing daily devotionals through the summer that all go along with our study of the book of Matthew, and so

we're doing that. I'm traveling a lot for speaking engagements, and so we've just got a lot going on this summer, and I thought it would be good for us to sort of take a break for a little bit. We'll take a few weeks off, and that will allow us to reset and get ahead again, but, yeah, so this will be the last episode we put out for a while.

TRAVIS: Yeah, but if you miss hearing Wes weekly, then there's morning devotionals Monday through Friday, and a Sunday morning class you can either watch live or catch up on all on the book of Matthew. So we've got to keep the content coming.

WES: Yeah, there's definitely -- somebody told me the other day that they were traveling. They said, "I listened to three hours of you on the way here," and I said, "That's a lot of Wes."

TRAVIS: That's a lot of Wes.

WES: That's too much Wes, in my opinion.

TRAVIS: I listen to a lot of Wes, and that's a lot of Wes.

WES: Poor Travis. That's his job, is to listen and edit Wes. That's a big job to listen and edit Wes, so there you go.

TRAVIS: Oh, it's good to do it. Now, you gave me a brief -- you basically just told me sort of the title of what we're going to be talking about today, and I had --

WES: You know what? Before we get into that -- and I know you're anxious to talk about hermeneutics.

TRAVIS: I am, because I have no idea.

WES: Before we get into that, I want to give a shout out to the University Church of Christ in Charlotte, North Carolina, the Smith family, especially.

They started listening to the podcast, and so they started talking about the podcast to some of the congregation there in Charlotte, North Carolina. And they initially wanted to do like a Zoom conference for their college students there a few weeks ago, but they're like, "Well, could we get Wes and Hollee to come out?" So my wife and I traveled out to Charlotte and got to hang out with them. So I say that because they're awesome people and really enjoyed getting to know them, all the people with the University church there, but also because I love the way that this podcast allows us to kind of get to know people all over the country. I'm sure that happens to you a lot, too, Travis. Everywhere I go, people say something about your booming radio voice, so --

TRAVIS: That's nice.

WES: -- your voice is well known.

TRAVIS: That's cool. Yeah, shout out to University Church of Christ. That's awesome.

WES: Okay. Yeah, so you were about to introduce our topic of cruciform hermeneutic.

TRAVIS: Cruciform hermeneutics.

WES: That is quite a mouthful, but it's probably shorter than what it could be, and we'll talk about that in a second. And just so that I say this in the beginning, I Googled the term "cruciform hermeneutic" because I was hoping I came up with that term. I did not come up with that term. Other people have also used that term, and I saw a lot of discussion back and forth, and just some of what people, I think, mean by that is different. So when I say "cruciform hermeneutic," I may or may not mean what someone else

means by that. I'll get into exactly what I mean by "cruciform hermeneutic" as we go, but let's just start with "hermeneutic" or "hermeneutics" and what hermeneutics are. What is our hermeneutic? And, basically, that term -- I should probably -- I'll put you on the spot, Travis. Is that a term -- you know, it's always funny; preachers use terms, sometimes from the pulpit, and a lot of times when they're just talking to each other, but is that a term that the average 20-something-year-old or 30-something-year-old is familiar with, do you think?

TRAVIS: I've definitely heard it used, but I couldn't give you a definition.

WES: That's kind of what I figured, and I think that there's probably a lot of people in that category. So a hermeneutic is the interpretive lens that we use to interpret -- to read scripture or when we're reading scripture. In other words, it's how we interpret scripture. And a lot of people -- it's interesting. A lot of people say, "I don't interpret scripture," which I always find really funny, because we do. We interpret everything. We interpret -- I'm interpreting your facial expressions as we talk.

TRAVIS: Right.

WES: I'm interpreting your tone of voice. We interpret the stop sign when we come to a stop sign. We interpret a book that we read, a novel that we read. And we're asking all kinds of questions; particularly, what does this mean? And then, especially with the Bible -- because we're also trying to apply it to our lives. We're trying to say, "How does this apply to me?" And if we're going to do that, then we have to have a lens through which we read.

And, really, there's a lot of layers to our hermeneutic. There's a lot of layers to the interpretive lens that we use, and so I'm going to suggest that

we get really specific with ourselves -- and I don't just mean you and I, but everyone listening -- about what is my hermeneutic? How do I read scripture? How do I interpret scripture? What are -- some of the good questions are things like, "What are the assumptions that I make about scripture when I read it?" "What are some of my biases that I bring to the text?"

And when someone says, "I don't interpret scripture," what they mean is, "I don't know how I interpret scripture," or, "I have no idea what lens I'm reading this through." It's really not a good thing to say, "I don't interpret scripture," or things like, "Well, I just do what it says." I always ask people, when people say that, it's like, "So how's your ark coming along? Are you building an ark?" And they say, "Of course not. I'm not building an ark because God told Noah to build an ark and not me." And it's like, okay, well, there you go. You've applied some sort of a hermeneutic to say this is not a universal command; this was a specific command to Noah and to his family.

So we all have some sort of a lens through which we're reading scripture, and we have to be honest with ourselves and talk about it because the more we talk about it, the more we can analyze it and even adjust it, if necessary. So we have to admit it or acknowledge it, we have to analyze it, and we have to adjust it as necessary.

So I want to read a scripture with this just to kind of tease out how Jesus dealt with people's wrong hermeneutic, because the Jewish people with whom Jesus interacted, they had a hermeneutic, as well. They had a way of reading and interpreting and applying scripture to their lives, and

Jesus -- even though we don't -- Jesus didn't use the term "hermeneutic." Even though that term isn't found there, it's definitely the idea. So we're going to look at Matthew 12:1-8 to start with, and, of course, if somebody's listening and they're familiar with this story, it's where Jesus and his apostles are walking through the grain fields on the Sabbath. In fact, our favorite TV show, *The Chosen*, portrays this, as well.

TRAVIS: Oh, you went there before I did.

WES: Sorry, I stole your thunder. As they're walking, they're picking grains of -- they're picking grain and they're eating them, and it's the Sabbath and you're not supposed to -- you can eat on the Sabbath; you just can't harvest on the Sabbath. And so they're essentially harvesting because they're plucking grain as they're walking along. Now, of course that's a rule that they created, that idea of not harvesting, because they wanted to -- you know, or how much you can or how far you can walk, all of these rules that surrounded the very simple command not to work on the Sabbath and to keep it holy, to rest on the Sabbath. And so they created this entire framework to guard the Sabbath, to keep it from being violated.

Travis, do you want to read for us? You can look at -- read verses 2 and following. I may interrupt you, I don't know, but Matthew 12, starting in verse 2.

TRAVIS: Sure. "But some Pharisees saw them do it and protested, 'Look, your disciples are breaking the law by harvesting grain on the Sabbath.' Jesus said to them, 'Haven't you read in the scriptures what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He went into the house of God, and he and his companions broke the law by eating the sacred loaves of bread that

only the priests are allowed to eat. And haven't you read in the law of Moses that the priests on duty in the temple may work on the Sabbath? I tell you, there is one here who is even greater than the temple! But you would not have condemned my innocent disciples if you knew the meaning of this scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.' For the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!"

WES: Okay. Awesome. So I always kind of chuckle inside when I read those words, "Have you not read," and your translation said something like, "Haven't you read the scriptures," or something like that.

TRAVIS: Right.

WES: And I think, he's talking to the Pharisees and asking them, "Haven't you read the Bible? Don't you know the Bible?" And it's really laughable because of course they've read the Bible, right? Of course the Pharisees have read these scriptures. They're familiar with these scriptures. They're familiar with these ideas. In fact, Jesus even talks to them as if they have read it. It's not that they haven't read it; it's that they haven't read it correctly, and so they haven't really read it. They haven't understood it. They haven't taken it to heart.

And so Jesus asks them kind of facetiously, "Have you not read these passages of scripture?" And then when he gets to that end part where you read in verse 7, he says, "If you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless," or, "you would not have condemned my apostles." So Jesus is saying, if you had understood this phrase, if you had understood the idea that God desires mercy and not sacrifice, then you would have properly read and understood

the passage about David taking the showbread or the passages about the priests that are working on the Sabbath in the temple. He says there's priests working in the temple every Sabbath, and there's David, a man after God's own heart, and he takes the bread that he wasn't supposed to eat because he was hungry. And so Jesus says, if you had really understood this phrase, then you would have properly understood these other passages. And if you had properly understood these other passages, then it would have worked itself out in practical application and you wouldn't have condemned innocent people.

I mean, there's so many layers there, and it's really beautiful to me. Jesus says this phrase "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" is a part of a hermeneutical lens that you've ignored. You haven't incorporated that lens. And, again, I keep using the word "lens" because I think that's a great metaphor. It's like glasses or like a piece of glass that you're looking through. It's not what you're looking at, but it's what you're looking through. And so the phrase "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" should have been a lens through which you read the story of David or through which you read the commandments about the priests on the Sabbath, and then you would apply those passages correctly when it came to actually living them out.

So that phrase right there -- let me just kind of throw it back to you, Travis. When you hear that phrase "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" -- how did your translation put that, again?

TRAVIS: "I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices."

WES: Yeah. So what is it that kind of comes to your mind when you hear that phrase?

TRAVIS: Well, you know, it's interesting. Something I was thinking about since you sort of set up our topic for today, this passage you chose in Matthew 12 ends up being a really great example of what I was thinking about, that, you know, I have -- I grew up in church. I have good, Bible-loving Christian parents that really, you know, had us studying scripture. And the church I went to, they were big on, you know, being in the word every single Bible class, and so I have -- you know, I feel pretty good about my Bible knowledge a lot of the time. But one thing that happens over and over again, especially like when we do this podcast where we're studying scripture is -- maybe it's a scripture I haven't read in a while or maybe it's a scripture that I haven't -- maybe I haven't even read since I was a kid. And I know, this one, I've certainly read it since being a kid, but it reminds me of how a lot of these types of passages where Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees about a law that they say, you know, "So-and-so is breaking the law," or "You're breaking the law," "Your disciples are breaking the law," and Jesus is sort of showing them how, well, that's not actually the case. "I'm breaking *your* law. I'm breaking your traditions."

I sort of remember going through those passages as a kid and thinking, well, this is -- you know, Jesus is coming along and he's removing the law. Like the law is done. And now, like, going through it like we have already, it's like he was using these moments to teach them that they were interpreting the law wrong all along. You know, it's a very different thing than Jesus -- and I think that the perception that I think a lot of Christians have, that Jesus just came and, you know, the law's over. It's like, no, he's -- like we say a lot, he's fulfilling the law, and he's coming along and tearing

down the fences that they've put around the law, you know, over the years to the point where they don't even understand the hierarchy of commands given. You know, "I want you to show mercy more than sacrifice."

And, again, I think it's something that we probably do, as well. We put emphasis on the things that maybe seem easier to understand or provide a better boundary for us because that -- "I want mercy more than sacrifice," that phrase, that kind of makes my -- kind of makes me a little concerned about, well, how do you know when it's better to show mercy than -- you know, it's offering -- it's inviting you to make careful judgments when you see people doing things that seem to be at odds with what God wants them to do. But all that to say, like, I think even the interpretation of how I looked at scripture as a kid versus how I'm reading it now as an adult and having more and more people in my life that make me dive into scripture in a different way. I mean, that's some of my initial thoughts.

WES: You bring up so many good points there, and one of which is that maturing process, like you said, from when we're a kid to when we're an adult, and, unfortunately, unless you have a corrective person in your life -- I think there's an assumption that we sometimes make -- and certainly I think that people in Jesus' day made this assumption, that as you get older, you become more mature, and that's only true if you have the right influences in your life. Unfortunately, if you don't have the right influences, you become hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Your interpretive lens becomes more concrete, and it's very difficult to see outside of that. Hopefully, we have in our lives people who are constantly helping us to acknowledge and adjust our hermeneutic so that we're constantly saying, oh, well, maybe I'm reading

this passage wrongly or maybe I'm applying this passage wrongly, and so Jesus does this for the Pharisees.

Now, of course, they're unwilling to listen and unwilling to accept his adjustment, but for us, like you said, it provides this necessary help to us to say, actually, it's very easy to assume -- and that's what we do is we assume, so we have this assumed hermeneutic when we start. Everybody does. If you just go to a hotel room, and you're an atheist and you pull open the drawer and there's the Gideon Bible there and you start reading, you're going to have an assumed hermeneutic. You're not going to have an informed hermeneutic because you've never read it before or you assume all kinds of bad things. You're an atheist, and so, like, "I don't believe in this God and this mythical book that these Christians believe in," and so you're going to have all of these assumptions through which you're reading the text. But all of us do. All of us have some sort of an assumption.

And so Jesus helps us to acknowledge and then adjust those assumed assumptions and then develop informed assumptions, because it's easy to assume that what we should prioritize, as religious people, is religious ceremony, right? So we should think, well, worship is the most important thing in the world, and going through ritual and the rituals that God commanded us -- those rituals have to be the absolute most important thing in our life, and that tends to be how religious people think. But Jesus says, actually, within the scriptures themselves there's a better hermeneutic that -- you used the word "emphasize." We have this tendency to emphasize one thing over the other, and we're constantly making judgment calls and, certainly, the Pharisees are making a judgment call here, and we all do, and

we have this tendency to prioritize or emphasize ritual and ceremony. As religious people, we have this tendency to prioritize and emphasize ritual and ceremony over people and people's needs. And Jesus says, "Because you don't have the right sort of hermeneutic, because you don't -- you're not reading the scriptures rightly, you've misjudged these disciples."

And so one of the things that we could do, based on what Jesus says here, is we could incorporate the character of God into our hermeneutic, because that's -- he's quoting from Hosea 6, and we'll read that passage next, Hosea 6:4-6, and that speaks to what does God desire? What does God want? What is God's character? If we assume the character of God is one that ritual and ceremony is the most important thing, and God wants you to get all of the rituals and ceremonies right and everything else pales in comparison to getting all the rituals and ceremonies right -- if that's the assumption we make -- and a lot of people do -- well, then Jesus says you're going to misread the scriptures. You're going to ignore certain parts that you should not be ignoring, and you're going to misjudge people and you're going to end up acting unjustly because you don't incorporate the character of God and a true knowledge of the character of God into your study of scripture.

So Hosea 6:4-6 says, "What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away. Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light." And then he says -- in the English Standard it reads, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt

offerings."

Do you have yours open there at Hosea 6:6? What does yours say?

TRAVIS: Yeah. In 6, it says, "I want you to show love and not offer sacrifices. I want you to know me more than I want burnt offerings."

WES: Yes, that's so good. And the word there -- when he says, "I want you to show love," or, "I desire steadfast love," the Hebrew word is "*hesed*," and the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, translates that as "mercy." "*Hesed*," steadfast love. And God says, "I want you to show steadfast love. I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice. I desire the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." This is what God wants. God wants us to show mercy even more than he wants sacrifices. He's not -- he's not one of these pagan gods that is eating the sacrifices. He doesn't need our bulls. He doesn't need our goats. He doesn't need our lambs. What he needs is for us to show him *hesed* the way he shows us *hesed*. The way he shows us steadfast love and mercy, he wants us to show steadfast, faithful, covenant love towards him, but also towards each other. And here's how Jesus seems to apply it, is this mercy that we show to others.

And if they had had the character of God as their primary hermeneutic and understood this is who God is: God is slow to anger and abounding in *hesed*, in steadfast love, he shows mercy to a thousand generations -- like God is just so merciful and steadfast and loving and kind, and he desires us to show that to one another, then there's no way that they would have condemned hungry people for eating food. They would have said this is in keeping with all of scripture. But instead, their hermeneutic was distorted and so they read scripture wrong, but they also applied it wrong, and they

criticized and condemned people when they shouldn't have.

This reminds me, of course -- and I'm sure others that are listening -- to Micah 6. So Hosea 6, but also Micah 6 -- Micah 6:6-8. It gets quoted all the time. It's a phenomenal passage. Micah says, "With what shall I come before the Lord?" Of course, he's speaking as if he's the people. "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, oh, man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness" -- the Hebrew word there, again, is *hesed* -- "and to walk humbly with your God?" This is what God wants: Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.

So I think that what Jesus says here, what we read throughout the scriptures, throughout the prophets, is that part of our hermeneutic -- the primary layer of our hermeneutic should be the character of God. And some even suggest -- there's a book that I read recently that suggested that that should be our only hermeneutic, or our very primary hermeneutic is the character of God. But I think that's really broad, right? I mean, I think that if we say God's character should be the lens through which we read scripture, yes, I completely agree with that. But I think that there kind of needs to be guardrails on that because otherwise I think we could say, wow, God did this or God did that, and so I think that means that God's character is such-and-such. And so I'm sure that the Pharisees would have thought --

if you had said that to them out loud, "The character of God should be the lens through which we interpret the scriptures," they would -- I don't think would have a problem with that and would think that they were doing that, but they misunderstood the character of God, which goes back to what Hosea 6 says. It says, "I desire the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." But that's the thing. The Pharisees didn't know God when God showed up in the flesh. They rejected him. They despised him. They hated him. They nailed him to a cross, which was proof they didn't really love God.

And so that in and of itself should give us pause to say, okay, if the character of God should be our -- the lens through which we read scripture -- and that's really broad so we kind of need to narrow it down a little bit. I think narrowing it down to what is revealed about God in the person of Jesus Christ is helpful. So we could say, well, the character of God is continually unfolded. God gives us in the scriptures his self-revelation that is unfolded throughout the scriptures, so God is continually revealing himself to his people and to the world. This is who God is. But the ultimate revelation of God's character is Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God's character.

So let's read Hebrews -- I know I'm throwing out a lot of verses here. Hebrews 1:1-3. I'll let you read that when you got it, Travis.

TRAVIS: Got it. "Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe. The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains

everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven."

WES: You'll have to read -- I get caught up in how beautiful that translation is, the New Living Translation.

TRAVIS: It's very modern, yeah.

WES: I get caught up in how it sounds and I forget to compare it with the ESV. How does it say in verse 3 -- what does it say verse 3?

TRAVIS: "The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God."

WES: "Expresses the very character of God." I like that, "expresses the very character of God." The English Standard says, he is "the exact imprint of his nature."

TRAVIS: Oh, I like that.

WES: Other passages would be like John 1 or Colossians 1, just this idea that Jesus embodies the entire character of God. He is the imprint of his nature, the radiance of his glory. And so I think it's really helpful to say, broadly, the character of God is our hermeneutic, yes, but we need to get a little more specific. And then a little bit more specific, for me, is the character of God as revealed in Jesus is our hermeneutical lens. Again, that's a mouthful. But yes, the character of God, but more specifically, the character of God as revealed in Jesus, because this is what Jesus -- this is what the whole gospel of John is about, is that if you've seen Jesus, you've seen the Father. You don't need anybody to show you the Father because if you've seen Jesus, you've seen the Father.

So let's just kind of stop right there for a second. We'll get to the cruciform part of this in just a second, but let's just kind of stop there and kind of contemplate the practicalities of that. What do you think, Travis? I mean, as you were growing up and as you were thinking about how to read scripture, were there ever any stories that teachers or preachers or churches that you went to -- that they gave you to sort of give you a lens through which you interpreted everything else? Do you remember any stories like that for you?

TRAVIS: Well, I know one that comes to mind and seems to sort of be -- the way I'm kind of hearing what we're talking about, kind of at the edges always of when you think about the character of God is so many stories in the Old Testament where we see God sort of finally, and some would say brutally, deciding once and for all for a people, for a nation, for a city, you know, "I've had enough of you." You know, "Your iniquity is complete," is, you know, that phrase we see throughout the Old Testament. And I definitely think that, whether it was somebody else sort of using that as an example and I picked up on it, or just -- I think that's something that, as I read scripture, is sort of always at the edges of my mind is, like, the difficulty that I think a lot of people have of, like, we see Jesus, and Jesus is certainly tough on sin, but he's merciful, and he's loving, and he's kind. But then if that's the character of God, how do I hold that together with the fact that, well, people have -- whether it's the flood, whether it's, you know, nations in Canaan, people have degenerated to the point where God says, "I can't help you and I can't stand to see this iniquity anymore." So I think that's definitely one that is sort of probably still a tension for me to hold in

understanding the character of God.

WES: Yeah. I'm so glad that you brought that up because I think that's exactly right, and I think that's why our hermeneutic has to go one step further, because if we just think about Jesus himself -- and it's true; like I don't want to diminish that at all. It is absolutely true, and it actually does create that sort of tension, where we say, okay -- especially as we think about the way I feel every time I read one of the gospel accounts or the way that I feel when we watch *The Chosen*. Every time you and I talk, we talk about *The Chosen*. But if we say this Jesus that's being portrayed by Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, or by these uninspired movie makers -- this Jesus is the exact imprint of God's nature, the character of God is fully embodied in him, if you want to see the Father, look at Jesus of Nazareth -- I mean, that's like, okay. Well, how do we do that? Like, I mean, Sodom and Gomorrah and the flood and Uzzah being struck dead, and Ananias and Sapphira, you know, like all of these different stories that we have throughout scripture, and we sort of have to say, okay, well, what do we do with these others?

The problem I think that I want to hedge against, and especially push back on sort of the way that I was taught to read scripture, is that we tend to take stories like Uzzah being struck dead because he touched the ark, and we tend to make those our hermeneutical lens, and we say, "Okay. I'm going to read the whole Bible through the lens of the people who got struck dead, and this is who I'm going to understand that God is, primarily. This is going to be my primary understanding of God, that God is like an angry fire that's just going to burn people up if they make the wrong step. That's going to be my

primary lens." Well, what we do is we -- then we sort of have to diminish and de-emphasize all of the passages that talk about God's mercy and longsuffering, because they're there. Even in the Old Testament, they're there --

TRAVIS: Absolutely.

WES: -- rather than the other way around, which the New Testament actually teaches us to do. The New Testament teaches us, okay, let's turn that on its head, and Jesus becomes the primary filter, the primary lens through which we read. And then we have to try to figure out, okay, well, how do all of these other passages fit into that? If instead of saying God is this angry, vengeful God and somehow we have to fit Jesus into that picture, instead we say, actually, God the Father is exactly like Jesus, then somehow we have to reconcile those acts of judgment and justice and vengeance with the God who is Jesus, who is the perfect representation of who God is. And I think that's why the cruciform part of that -- and by "cruciform" we mean the cross, something that's shaped like the cross. That's why that becomes so helpful, I think, as an interpretive lens because it helps put everything in perspective. From page 1 of the Bible to the last page of the Bible, it helps to put everything into proper perspective.

So we could say the character of God, that's our hermeneutic. Okay. What do you mean by that? Well, what I really mean is the character of God as revealed in the person of Jesus. Great. What do you mean by that? Okay. What I really mean is the character of God as revealed in the person, and especially the cross, of Jesus Christ. So when I say "cruciform hermeneutic," that's what I mean. And I think Paul is saying the same thing

when he says to the Corinthians, "When I was with you, I knew nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified." The crucifixion of Jesus, the cross of Jesus becomes the lens through which we see everything. It teaches us, who is God? How does God love us? How does God see us? How does God want to interact with us? How does God see sin? What should I do? How should I live my life? Everything revolves around the cross about who God is, how God's love is manifest, and how God wants us to love one another.

So I think when we see it in that light, then we can go back and say, okay, well, what about all of these instances where God struck people dead or where there are these wars or there's God's punishment or God floods the earth? And then, I think when we read scripture that way, when we read especially the Old Testament that way, through the lens of the cross, then we start to see things that never really stuck out before, at least for me. When I went back through the Bible and read it through that lens, as that lens grew more and more vibrant in my mind and as I realized this is who God is, this is the ultimate revelation of God's character is the cross, then I went back and read the whole Bible through that lens and I began to see one of the primary ways that God's justice or judgment is talked about is by -- is in that people are allowed to suffer the consequences of their own behavior, that the natural consequences of sin is death. Like that's not a God-imposed consequence; it's the natural consequence of sin. The natural consequence of taking yourself out from under the protection and love of God is death. That's where you die. That's where you're exiled. And when you're exiled, when you take yourself out from under God's protection and provision, you die.

Now, we could read the Bible -- although it would be weird to read the Bible this way -- that God wants you to do that, or that God is happy when you do that, or God is happy when you meet your end because you're out there all alone. He's not. He's begging the people -- not just Israel, but he's begging the nations, "Come back under my kingship. Come back under my kingship. Let me protect you. Let me provide for you." And he's constantly calling them back to himself, calling, calling, calling, calling, calling.

Now, eventually, as you said, if people stubbornly refuse to come back under God's protection and provision, they suffer the natural consequences of their sin. Now, typically, that's not God striking them dead. Like even if it's talked about that way -- and sometimes it is talked about that way, and sometimes that is what happens, God strikes somebody dead, like Uzzah. But, typically, that's not what happens. Typically, it's a foreign nation. Typically, it's somebody kills you and God just doesn't protect you because you told God, "I don't want you to protect me. I don't want you to provide for me. I don't want you to be my God. I'm going to put my trust in the armies of Assyria or in the armies of Egypt or in the armies of Babylon," or, "I'm going to put my trust in their gods; I'm not going to trust in you." And when you do that, you will suffer the natural consequences of your sin and your rebellion, and that's death, destruction, and we tear each other apart and we behave in self-destructive ways. That's what happens. That's what Paul says. The wages of sin -- this is what sin earns -- is death, and we all die and we know that. We know we're dying people. And then Jesus comes and says, "Let me take it. Let me take it. Let all of the worst of humanity, all of

the worst consequences, let it fall on me and let sin do to me what it does to you, even though I'm innocent."

And in doing that -- one of the ways the Bible talks about sin is like a cup, and we just keep filling the cup up with our sin and our iniquity and all of this garbage that we do, and then it becomes this poison alcohol where when you drink it, you stagger, and you stagger like a drunk person or you stagger like somebody who's been punched and hit and kicked and hurt. And so Jesus says, "I'll drink the cup. I'll drink it down to the dregs. I'll drink every drop of it." Doesn't want to, you know, because who would want to? But he wants to do his Father's will. And his Father's will is for people to be reconciled to him, and so he allows all of those -- that sin and punishment of humanity -- not Wes' and -- just my sin or your sin, but the whole -- this is what humanity does to itself; this is what humanity does to one another, and Jesus allows it to be done to him so that in doing so he can become a sacrifice to set us free from this cycle and this reign of sin and death, and it all falls on him, so that gives us a new way to understand everything that had happened prior to that.

And some people make the mistake that -- there's a heresy known as Marcionism, and Marcion was a person who said the God of the Old Testament is not the God of the New Testament, and he rejected and condemned the God of the Old Testament and said he's an evil tyrant; the God of the New Testament is like Jesus. But that's heretical. That's not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that the God of the Old Testament is the God of the New Testament. The God of the Old Testament is Jesus, and Jesus is the embodiment of his Father, and this is what God ultimately

always wanted to happen, is for the consequences of humanity's rebellion to fall on him, and then for us to adopt and embrace that kind of self-giving love as our primary way of living.

So when Paul -- I mean, think about Philippians or Ephesians or Corinthians. Anytime Paul instructs people about how to live their lives, it always comes back to the cross. He doesn't just vaguely say, "Hey, do what Jesus did," like you said, the WWJD bracelets. Okay, great. What would Jesus do? Okay, yes. But that's too vague and too broad. I mean, Jesus ate fish. Does that mean I should eat fish every day? Jesus turned water into wine. I can't turn water into wine. It doesn't mean do all of the little things Jesus did.

The way the New Testament talks about it is take the cross and this self-giving love, this nonresistance, this selflessness, this self-sacrificing, this humility, this obedience -- take this and live this out in every area of your life. This becomes the primary emphasis on which the apostles put everything, and every time they teach us, "Here's how you should live," the cross is always the example. It's always the lens through which we interpret what's good, what's bad, what should I do, what's wise, what's foolish. The cross becomes that.

And so then if we read the Old Testament and the New Testament through this lens, we say, "This is how much God loves me," yes, but, also, "This is what I should do in any given situation." And so, I mean, even the story that we just talked about, the Pharisees, you know, they were very much -- put themselves in the judgment seat and the criticism seat. They wanted to criticize; they wanted to judge; they wanted to put people in their

place, and Jesus shows us another way. A way of loving people, a way of showing mercy, a way of saying, "Take my grain. Take my food. I have some food. My family has some food. Let me share our food with you." That would be the way of the cross, as opposed to, "I would rather you die. I would rather you starve to death than break the Sabbath." Jesus says that's not God. That doesn't reflect the character of God. That's not a right reading of scripture. And if we're going to read scripture rightly, the cross has to be the lens through which we read every page of the Bible.

So I've talked enough. Let's -- what do you think about that, Travis? What comes to your mind as we sort of hash that out?

TRAVIS: Well, yeah, two big stories came to mind. Another one that -- it always comes to my mind if I find myself getting too caught up in the judgmental, wrath, fire-and-brimstone God as if it's a different -- you know, as we've talked about, as if it's a different character. I always think about Jonah and how we always focus on the fish and him running away. But, I mean, what he's running away from is telling a foreign nation -- a foreign city that God wants them to turn away from their sins, and when he finally does that, you know, there's Jonah's story that he's not very happy that they turned around, but they turn around. And it makes me, of course, speculate wildly about like, well, I wonder how many times God did that, how many times a nation did turn around and were saved from their own destruction in that way. So I always think about that story, that -- well, even, like you said, it's not something that God desires, for people to get the consequences of their sin.

But the other story I was also thinking about -- and I feel like we

could do a whole other podcast on this --

WES: Can I interrupt you right there?

TRAVIS: Yeah, please, please.

WES: Let's talk about Jonah for a second, because that's such a great point. And I think that if you were to read that prior to Jesus -- it's a really interesting book to be in the Hebrew scriptures, especially when you think about how very much like Jonah so many of the Jewish people were in the time of Jesus. I mean, they had this book, and this book -- it condemns their ethnocentrism that says God is a loving, merciful, forgiving God, but we want God's love and mercy and forgiveness for us, not for all you heathen pagans out there.

TRAVIS: We're the chosen, yeah.

WES: Right. We're the chosen people; you're not, so God's love belongs exclusively to us and not to you. And the book of Jonah shreds that theology. It shreds it to pieces, and it says this is not the will of God. The will of God is that everyone experience his character. So the character of God certainly should have been Jonah's lens through which he read the scriptures, and it wasn't, and he needed to learn that God is longsuffering, but his longsuffering, his *hesed*, isn't just for Israel. It's for the nations, as well, if they're willing to avail themselves to it.

But Jesus, I think -- and the cross of Jesus, especially, gives us, again, this even better lens through which to read Jonah because Jesus becomes like the better Jonah, and Jesus becomes the one who doesn't refuse the instructions to go to the lost nations. Jesus goes to the lost nations and he dies, not in rebellion to God -- because Jonah essentially died and was

swallowed up by the fish, and Jesus dies in obedience to his Father's will, and then he is resurrected much like Jonah is resurrected, and the nations are brought to God through Jesus' love and self-sacrifice as opposed to, stubbornly, "Fine. I'll take the message to the nations if you make me take it, but I'm not happy about it and I wish you'd destroy them." Jesus becomes like Jonah in so many ways, but the antithesis of Jonah in so many ways.

And, again, I mean, there's not a single passage -- we could read Joseph through the same light. We could read Moses through the same light. And it takes these stories that revealed so much about the character of God, but then they are illuminated to the nth degree when we read them through the story of the cross. So, sorry, I didn't want to pass Jonah up.

TRAVIS: Absolutely.

WES: What was your other story?

TRAVIS: My other story -- it's one that I've thought about for several years, and it's -- again, I don't want to take us down too much of a rabbit hole, but I'd be interested to know what you think about this, because when we're talking about the character of God, maybe no other story jumps to mind more than when Jacob wrestles with God, and the name that is given to him, and then the people that arise from him, "Israel," those who wrestle with God -- I think about that and how, you know, when we talk about God allowing the consequences for people's sin to consume them, I think one of the big differences between that and being God's people is being one that wrestles with God, that wants to contend with God. That yes, we're human and we're struggling with sin, but we're willing to -- we're willing and we want to bring it to God's feet and let him sort it out.

And oftentimes, you know, I mean, it's in the story of Jacob as a literal wrestling match, but it feels like a pretty literal wrestling match in our lives, I think, as well, that it's -- that the difference between somebody who's beyond saving and the people that God is going to contend with you and fight for you to be saved is those that will also -- that you're willing to contend with God, you're willing to wrestle with God. Anyway, that story just comes to mind, and it's one that I still -- I feel like I'm still trying to get to the bottom of that story.

WES: Yeah, that's so good. And so here's how I tend to think about it. I tend to read that story, and I think why would -- whether there is an angel who is representing God or however God is manifesting himself in this story, that the point that God is so much stronger than Jacob is obvious from the beginning to the end. Like God doesn't have to allow himself to be wrestled with. And that's the amazing thing, that God allows Jacob to wrestle with him, and that becomes the story of Israel throughout the Old Testament, throughout history, that God allows himself to be wrestled with by this people.

Like why? Why put up with this people? Why put up with a people that are stubborn and hard to get along with and they just want to fight against you? And God says, "I will allow myself to be wrestled with by you." And, ultimately, it, I think, only makes sense in light of the cross, that that's the ultimate act of saying, "Fine. Kill me. Kill me. Kill me, and I will bless you." Israel says --

TRAVIS: Yeah, and I'll still fight for you.

WES: -- in the wrestling match, "I'm not going to let go of you until you

bless me," and God allows himself to be wrestled with, not just in that match, but for thousands of years he allows himself to be wrestled with until finally he brings a blessing to Abraham's family, and to the entire world, and it takes him allowing himself to be killed.

That is the condescension -- and I mean "condescension" in the coming down of God. God condescended himself to our level. He became human and he allowed himself to be wrestled with. He allowed himself to be executed and murdered. What kind of a God is that? That's amazing. This is why it's scandalous. It was scandalous to the Greeks. It was scandalous to the Jews. It was scandalous to the Romans. It's scandalous today to say the God of the universe is one that says, "Take away my honor. Take away my glory. I'll make myself a man. I'll let you despise me. I'll let you spit on me. I'll let you take a whip to my back. I'll let you put nails in my hands and my feet so that I can resurrect you and bless you."

TRAVIS: Wow.

WES: What kind of a God does that? A God who is both holy and wants to be honored and respected, but says, "If the only way you're going to honor and respect me, if the only way I can bring you back from your rebellion is to allow you to wrestle with me and murder me, I'll do it because I love you that much." And if that becomes the lens through which we read everything, it turns even the stories of God's wrath and anger on their head, to say, wow, man, they really pushed him to the brink on this one, because God said, "Enough. That's enough. No more. No more. We need a reset," and God would reset things. But he didn't give up on them and he continued to allow them to wrestle. God's always been stronger. God could have stamped them

out at any moment, but he allowed himself to be wrestled with and, ultimately, he allowed himself to be murdered because he loved human beings that much.

Now, I just want to say a word, too, as we close, that this is why -- that little things that we kind of get hung up on sometimes about ceremony and ritual -- I'll just give one as an example, and I realize this may rub some people the wrong way, but it rubs me the wrong way when I see people that get really nervous and scared because they baptized someone and their big toe popped up out of the water, and they're like, "Oh, got to baptize them again. Their big toe popped up." Like I believe in full immersion. I believe in believer's baptism. I believe in all of those things. I think that's what scripture teaches. But to think that's the God of the Bible -- the God of the Bible is the one that, "You tried to get immersed, you tried to be baptized, you tried to give your life to Jesus, but your big toe, it didn't, and so I'm going to use this opportunity to not resurrect you to life and not give you immortality. Even though you followed me faithfully, your big toe came up out of the water."

That kind of God of technicalities who's looking for opportunities to deny people life, that's not the God of the Bible. And when we take stories like Uzzah -- well, he touched the ark, you know, and God did that. Wait, look at everything else that was happening in context. Look at the entirety of scripture. Look at the lens of Jesus and the lens of the cross. When we take these obscure little stories and those become the primary lens through which we read, not only do we do silly little things like baptize somebody three times because their toe kept popping up out of the water -- I think that's

silly -- but when we become like the Pharisees and we hurt people and we criticize people and we become harsh and judgmental and we don't reflect the mercy and the *hesed* of the cross, then we're showing ourselves to not understand the character of God as revealed in the person and the cross of Jesus, and that's where it becomes real, and that's where it becomes really sinful and where we need to remind ourselves of what our true hermeneutic needs to be.

Thank you so much for being part of the Radically Christian Bible Study podcast today. We hope that you've enjoyed this episode. I want to give a special thanks to Travis Pauley and to our McDermott Road church family for making this podcast possible. As always, we love you, God loves you, and we hope that you have a wonderful day.