

God's Relationship

According to an article in the New York Times, there are an estimated 75,000 state and federal prisoners in the United States held in solitary confinement. Most spend 23 or more hours a day in their cells, allowed out only for showers, brief exercise, or doctor's visits. A long-term study of the effects of solitary confinement revealed that most prisoners never really get used to their isolation, and some begin to lose their grip on reality. One prisoner that was interviewed for the study said that when his father died, he received a fifteen-minute phone call. He had been in solitary for 24 years. He said, "I realized that I have family that I don't even know, or even their voices." Another prisoner said that he placed photographs of his family facing the television in his cell and talks to them while he watches TV. "Maybe I'm crazy," he said, "but it makes me feel like I'm with them." My point in bringing this up is not to debate the merits of this type of punishment, but simply to demonstrate that human beings, even those who have committed heinous crimes, have a deep desire for relationship. It can be extremely troubling when we are cut off from relationships that have fed our souls.

Why are relationships so important to us? I would suggest that the very idea of "having a relationship" has its origin in God. The God of the Bible has, from the very beginning, lived in relationship with Himself. Way back in Genesis chapter one, God can be overheard talking to himself, saying "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Who could he be talking to, except those parts of himself that we have come to know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? That very idea is expressed in Proverbs 8. Here, Jesus is portrayed as a master workman alongside his Father, crafting the world with creative power. Their work is joyful, but a careful reading of verses 30 and 31 reveals that the act of creation is not the only happiness described; it says, and this is from Jesus' perspective: "I was his daily delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of men." Did you catch that? As the Father is raising the skies and filling the oceans, his delight is in His Son. You can almost envision His hand on His Son's shoulder as they share this indescribable experience. Father, Son, and Spirit have lived in relationship with one another from eternity. The act of creation is a decision God made to live in relationship with other beings beside Himself—namely, human beings. He wanted—and still wants—to live in relationship with people so that his delight and rejoicing will be multiplied! What a thought! When you live in relationship with God, He rejoices! You are fulfilling His purpose for creation.

But tragically, it's hard for us to live in relationship with God. We may be born with a God-shaped hole in our souls, but on our own, we don't know what it is. We know there's an emptiness there, so we try to fill it with achievements; with friends, family, or anyone who seems to care; with possessions; with excitement; and when things get desperate, we put various substances into ourselves trying to fill that hole up. But we will never do it. What we

try will never work, because it is a God-shaped hole. The only thing that will fit there is a relationship with God. And because we are by nature spiritually dead, we cannot initiate the relationship that can finally make us whole.

Knowing this, The Father, Son, and Spirit formulated a plan that would keep their dream alive—their dream of living in relationship with people. The Son, with whom the Father had hung the stars in the sky and laid the foundations of the mountains, would become one of the human beings that they cared so much for, and in this way, God would deal with the problem of sin. Sin had a devastating effect on relationships. It made people not care about God and even less for their neighbor—witness the son of Adam and Eve murdering his brother. But if sin could be dealt with—if sin's debt could be wiped out—then a renewed relationship could be possible.

And so Jesus is born into the world he helped create; and so Jesus speaks continually about His Father; about honoring His Father; about being sent from His Father; about His Father giving Him glory; about knowing His Father; and about doing His Father's will. And it is His Father's will that he, Jesus, should become the once-and-for-all offering for sin, and that makes it all sound very neat and tidy. It is His Father's will that He, Jesus, should be hated, betrayed, made fun of, spit upon, beaten, whipped, and finally nailed to a wooden cross. Yet none of that was the worst. No, the worst came when the Father turned away from his Son, withdrawing his relationship from his beloved, co-creating Son, ignoring the cries of the one in whom he had so delighted. This is the hell that Jesus faced on the cross. Not some lake of fire, but his Father turning away.

And there was only one reason for this. Because of our sins of thought, word, and deed; because of the things we have done and the things we have left undone God could have and should have turned away from us. He would be justified in turning his back on us in sadness and disappointment. But the Father put Jesus in the place we were supposed to be, and Jesus willingly and obediently took what we deserved. He took it. He didn't complain that it wasn't fair. He didn't run away or bail out at the last minute. He took it, because He, with His Father and the Spirit, had one goal: to live in relationship with you and thereby to delight and rejoice in you.

Having dealt with sin and hell at the cross, and having crushed death with the resurrection of Jesus, God could now go about initiating the relationship with us that he so desired. So the Holy Spirit goes into action. Through water and the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that very Spirit initiates the relationship that is so precious to Him. In Holy Baptism, the Spirit wraps his arms around one whom he loves, and gives that one the gift of faith—the ability to respond to the Spirit's embrace with one of his or her own. The Holy Spirit opens your eyes to see all that Jesus did so that you can live in relationship to God. It has all been done for you. It has all been done to you. Spirit, Son and Father moved heaven and earth for you. The relationship between Father and Son was broken so that your relationship with Him could be repaired. He just wants the joy of knowing you. And as you are drawn into a relationship with Father, Son and Spirit, you realize that there is another way you can multiply His delight. That is to live in relationship with other people with the commitment and love that God showed to us.

Beyond the greatest gift of our relationship with Him, we also have been given the gift of living in relationship with mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, sons and daughters, sisters, brothers, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, cousins, friends, teachers, students, co-workers, and the list goes on. Sin can damage these relationships just as sure as it can damage a relationship with God; but when our relationship with God is strong, then we will approach all of our other relationships with the grace that we have received and learned from Jesus. We will see the other person that we're looking at as someone who needs mercy, compassion, forgiveness and friendship, and we'll share those gifts because Father, Son and Holy Spirit shared them with us. You were built for this.