

ON THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

The Theology of the Cross

How God Hides in Order to Be Found

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*

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There is a way of thinking about God that comes to all of us naturally, and it is almost entirely wrong. It runs like this: God is great, so He is to be found in great things. God is powerful, so His hand is seen in strength. God is good, so where He is at work there will be visible blessing—health, success, a rising line on the chart of your life. And by the same logic, where there is suffering, weakness, and loss, God must be absent, or displeased, or asleep.

Luther gave this way of thinking a name. He called it the *theology of glory*, and he set against it what he called the *theology of the cross*. The distinction first appears in a set of theses he prepared for a meeting of his order at Heidelberg in 1518, and it is among the most important things he ever wrote. It is not a doctrine about one corner of the faith. It is a whole way of knowing God—and getting it right is the difference between a religion that will fail you in the dark and a religion that was built for the dark all along.

Two Ways of Seeing

The theologian of glory, Luther said, looks at the invisible things of God as though they could be clearly perceived in the good and mighty works He does. He reasons upward, from the visible splendor of the world to a God of splendor. He assumes that God is known best where God appears strongest. And so he is forever scanning his circumstances for evidence—reading blessing as favor and hardship as abandonment, treating his own experience as the measure of God’s disposition toward him.

The theologian of the cross does the opposite. He knows God not by climbing up through glory but by looking down at a cross. He has learned that God, in His deepest self-revelation, chose to be found in the last place any of us would think to look: in a condemned man, bleeding and forsaken, hanging on a Roman gibbet outside the city walls. If that is where God most fully shows Himself, then God is not most reliably found in strength and success at all. He is found under their opposite.

Luther put it starkly in the twentieth Heidelberg thesis: the one who deserves to be called a theologian is the one who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. And in the twenty-first, the sharpest of all: a theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil; a theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. The point is not that suffering is good. The point is that we do not get to name God by our circumstances, because God has already named Himself—at Golgotha.

God Hidden Under the Opposite

Scripture prepares us for this everywhere, once we have eyes to see it. *Truly, you are a God who hides himself* (Isaiah 45:15). When Moses asks to see God's glory, he is not granted a blaze of visible majesty; he is hidden in the cleft of a rock and shown only God's back as He passes (Exodus 33:18–23). God reveals Himself, again and again, precisely by concealing Himself—under weakness, under ordinariness, under the very opposite of what we expected.

Paul makes it the center of his preaching. *We preach Christ crucified*, he says, *a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles*—and then, astonishingly, he calls this crucified weakness the very power and wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:18–25). To the eye of glory, a crucified savior is a contradiction in terms; power does not look like that. But God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, and what is foolish to shame the wise, so that no human being might boast before Him. Paul resolved to know nothing among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2)—not because the cross is one topic among many, but because it is the lens through which everything else comes into focus.

And then there is the darkest word of all, the cry from the cross itself: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Matthew 27:46). Here is the Son of God in the depths of dereliction, and here—precisely here, not in spite of the forsakenness but in the very midst of it—God is accomplishing the salvation of the world. If God was never more at work than when His own Son felt most abandoned, then we can no longer read the felt absence of God as proof of His real absence.

What This Does to Your Suffering

Now bring this home, because this is where the theology of the cross stops being a doctrine and starts being a lifeline.

Perhaps you are suffering. Perhaps the line on the chart is falling and has been for a long time. Perhaps you have prayed and heard nothing, and the silence has begun to feel like a verdict. And somewhere underneath it all, quietly, the theology of glory has been whispering its lie: *If God loved you, it would not be like this. Look at your life. Draw the obvious conclusion.*

The theology of the cross tells you the obvious conclusion is wrong. It refuses to let your circumstances preach to you a God other than the one revealed at Golgotha. Your suffering is not evidence that God has withdrawn; it may be the very place He is nearest, hidden

under the opposite of what you can see. The God who saved the world through a cross is not put off by your cross. He specializes in being found there.

Paul learned this personally. He begged three times for his thorn to be removed, and the answer he received was not the removal but a promise: *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*. And so he could write the sentence that no theologian of glory could ever write: *When I am weak, then I am strong* (2 Corinthians 12:9–10). That is not resignation, and it is not a brave face over private despair. It is the discovery that the weakness he wanted taken away was the very place the strength of Christ came to rest.

Reading the Christian Life Rightly

This reframes not just acute suffering but the whole ordinary texture of the Christian life. The theology of glory expects the believer's road to bend upward—more victory, more feeling, more evident progress, a steady graduation out of struggle. When that fails to happen, when the old sins still war and the old doubts still visit and the mountaintop turns out to be surrounded by long valleys, the theologian of glory concludes that something has gone wrong, that he must be doing it incorrectly, that real Christians must not live like this.

The theology of the cross expects the valley. It knows that God ordinarily works on us the way He worked in Christ—through humbling, through weakness, through a dying that we might live. It does not read the cross-shaped life as a detour from grace but as the very form grace takes in this age. This is why the mature Christian is so often not the one who has escaped suffering but the one who has stopped needing to escape it in order to be sure of God.

And that is the final gift of this theology: assurance that does not depend on the weather of your life. If you knew God only through glory, your certainty of Him would rise and fall with your fortunes, and every dark stretch would reopen the question of whether He is really for you. But if you know God through the cross, your certainty rests on something no circumstance can touch—a Savior who was forsaken so that you never will be, whose worst day secured your every good one. The theology of glory offers a God for your best moments. The theology of the cross gives you a God who has already met you at your worst, and stayed.