

God Thinks Otherwise:  
Jesus Demonstrates that God is not Against the War Victims in Sri Lanka

By

The Rev. Sureshkumar Shanthakumar

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The Rev. A. Katherine Grieb, Ph.D.  
Faculty Advisor



The Rev. Joseph Thompson Ph.D.  
Reader

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## Abstract

During Sri Lanka's long civil war, religion was an important part of the collective identity and social narrative of many participants. Though the war was not strictly a religious conflict, understanding the identity rupture between the Tamil (Hindu/Christian) and the Sinhalese (Buddhist/Christian) is central to understanding the chasm between the identity of the Tamil and that of the Sinhalese. The close link between religion and ethnic identity made religious targets particularly appealing for symbolic violence, not only against faith per se, but also against symbols representing the opposing side: worshippers, clerics, and houses of worship.<sup>a</sup>

A classic question in theology asks this: how can a loving, yet Omnipotent, Omniscient, and Omnipresent God permit evil and suffering in the world? An argument in response goes as follows: A God that allows suffering to continue is either a) not all-powerful (not omnipotent) and is thus unable to prevent the suffering; b) not loving because this God has the power to prevent suffering but is unwilling to do so; and/or c) not all-knowing (not Omniscient) because God is aware of the suffering only after it has already occurred and then it is too late to prevent it. This problem of evil and God and God's inability or unwillingness to do anything about it raises the question of God's justice or righteousness, which is known in theology as theodicy.<sup>b</sup>

Religious organizations must be able to answer people's questions about faith amid tragic moments. Religious leaders are expected to mediate between victims of war and God who is in control over everything.

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<sup>a</sup> This paragraph is based on Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, "Sri Lanka: Civil War Along Ethnoreligious Lines," *Religion and Conflicts Case Study Series*, <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/classroom>, August 2013.

<sup>b</sup> This paragraph is based on Mark S. Scott, *Pathways in Theodicy: An Introduction to the Problem of Evil*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015.

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## Introduction

People often default to a spiritual stance that says God is not present when they are stressed, even if, in times of plenty, they believe in God's full presence and participation in their lives. When a human-caused evil thing, such as war or other conflict, disrupts a society and causes loss of life, the victims of evil often question themselves, asking "why do we suffer from this evil?" This question is further extended to God, asking, "why does God permit evil?" Searching for answers to those questions that justify God's actions is part of the larger theological issue of theodicy.<sup>1</sup>

In Sri Lanka, after the Civil War ended, people started to question the existence of God amidst the violence. The deep loss of life, of land, and of individual rights led many people to stumble in their faith. The churches in Sri Lanka have largely failed to communicate God's action during the civil war. Indeed, many church leaders have avoided the discussion, failing to explain the presence of evil and suffering in terms of God's existence. They have kept silent even as the traumatized people have become more and more skeptical about God.

### The Trauma of Civil War

The Sri Lankan nation has been torn apart in all spheres of life due to war and violence. There are two major ethnic peoples in Sri Lanka: the Sinhalese, and the Tamils. The civil war between the Sinhalese government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) continued for twenty-six years between 1983 and 2009. Ultimately the

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<sup>1</sup> Ian S. Markham, *Why Suffering? A Little Book of Guidance* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2018), xii.

government forces conquered the LTTE in May 2009, officially ending the civil war. The majority view about this history is that the root causes of this ethnic conflict were found in the colonial period, and that these issues deepened after independence from the British in 1948.<sup>2</sup> The Church of England, once the established church in Sri Lanka, was complicit in the ethnic separation of our Tamil and Sinhalese communities during colonial times by privileging the Sinhalese and discriminating against the Tamils. The Church of Ceylon (Anglican), as the successor to the Church of England, now carries a sobering responsibility to initiate the process of genuine ministry towards traumatized war victims on both sides as they seek to move into a better understanding of God and God's apparent lack of action.

The civil war did not give political freedom to Sri Lankans. Instead, this war increased deaths, and increased the people's grief and their depression. Moreover, this conflict has escalated the presence of poverty and the sense of hopelessness about the future as a result of the wounds of the war. This woundedness has not been healed by the government nor by the church. These wounded people were traumatized by many tragic events, and eventually many of them started to doubt God: both that God exists, and that God is good. Such post-war trauma needs much attention by the church. Otherwise, this trauma will create even more hostility towards God, or doubt that God exists, or it may fuel the concept of God as stupid or naïve.

During the peak time of the civil war (March 2009 – May 2009), people from the Northern part of Sri Lanka were forced to move from their locations to Internally Displaced Transitional Villages (IDTVs), and they were labelled as Internally Displaced Persons

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<sup>2</sup> Abdul M. Jabbar, and Fatima Sajeetha, "Conflict Transformation in Post War Sri Lanka," South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (2011):2-3, accessed October 10, 2019, <http://www.seu.ac.lk/researchandpublications/symposium/4th/socilascienceshumanities/Conflict%20Transformation%20in%20Post%20War%20Sri%20Lanka.pdf>.



(IDPs). The government, during that time, had blocked the main roads, therefore the transport system for all merchandise collapsed. Almost all the shops were closed because they had no merchandise to sell. People could not buy or sell anything to eat. Some people sold their valuable possessions and real estate just to buy minimal food. Some people died without food. And many people became poor after selling all their belongings. With nothing, they had no choice but to move to a place where they could find something to meet their needs and feel safe. Eventually, their journeys ended in the IDPs.

I had the opportunity to serve those war victims who lived in IDTVs for three years. A significant part of my ministry was listening to their stories, and in some small way sharing in their suffering. I heard in their stories their own struggles to speak about God. I thought that I could convince people who had “why suffering?” questions to keep their faith in God by preaching that God is perfect love, and absolute power. For example, as I preached my very first sermon ever on Romans 8, I struggled in Sri Lanka as Paul had struggled in Romans to talk about God’s lack of actions during the war. I myself asked that same question, “Is God against these people?” And I also answered, “by no means!”

### The Purpose of This Paper

I will argue that Jesus’s proclamation of the power of God’s Kingdom throughout his ministry demonstrates (by analogy) that God is not against the civil war victims in Sri Lanka or any other suffering people. I will do this by exploring that idea, examining first a miracle, then a parable, and finally a prophetic sign action from the Gospels. Through this study, I will show how a three-fold way of understanding God’s fidelity can provide a viable model for churches in Sri Lanka seeking to serve and to communicate God’s action

in the context of post war trauma in Sri Lanka. I will reflect on some of the social implications of Jesus's proclamation and draw on some of the theological principles of the Anglican Church as it seeks to lead the people in conflict transformation.

When people are starving and suffering due to conflicts and other reasons, they often wonder why God lets them be hungry. That is a human way of thinking, but God thinks differently than humans. The "*disruptive thinking*"<sup>3</sup> of God is revealed in Jesus's "*miracle*"<sup>4</sup> of the feeding of the multitude in John 6:1-15. Jesus wanted God's people to think not in terms of what they *did not have* but rather in terms of what *they did have*, because God had given something to them. When the disciples had described the *inadequacy* of their food resources, Jesus proceeded to demonstrate both his and their *adequacy* to feed the hungry people. In this way, Jesus shows the God of Divine Omniscience, who knows people's needs.

Sometimes people who live in poverty due to conflicts think that they are not favored by God, because they are poor; often, they seek to challenge the rich whom they see as oppressors and as favored by God. People living in poverty often say that God is unjust. In other words, these poor people tend to ask whether God is the God of all people or only the God of some people. But Jesus's parable in Luke 16:19-31 shows that God is the God of both the vulnerable poor and the righteous rich; that is God's Omnipotence. God never fails to do justice for all people, even if humankind fails to recognize it.

I believe that God wants the churches to be a visible witness to the invisible God. Churches are called by God to practice justice by being righteous. Instead, many churches

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<sup>3</sup> I got the idea of "*disruptive thinking*" from Walter Brueggemann, and Carolyn J. Sharp, *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture, and the Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> I prefer to use the word "miracle" even though John uses the word "sign" so as not to confuse it with the prophetic sign action in the temple of Jerusalem in Mark 11:12-25.

fail to enact God's action in the lives of the most traumatized people. Jesus's prophetic sign action in Mark 11:12-25 challenges our church leaders to prepare God's house to be a model for the already arrived divine kingdom where God is present, and the arriving Kingdom of God in which people will experience God's Omnipresence and justice. If Churches do not produce the fruit which God expects, these churches are like the withered fig tree, and will face destruction.

Catherine LaCugna notes that, although God's personhood is invisible to humanity, it finds absolute expression through Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> Church leaders are called to proclaim the reign of God as Jesus did, to reveal who God is and what God does (Mk 1:1:14-15). Paul Avis says that the Church is called to serve the mission of God as a privileged instrument, a sign and foretaste of what God's mission in the world is intended to accomplish.<sup>6</sup> If the churches fail to counter the forces of militant and aggressive atheism, Avis warns, those forces will bury the Christian faith.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, even though some traumatized people doubt God, the Church should proclaim and teach people about divine abundance (and human lack) by using Jesus's proclamation about the power of the Kingdom of God found in the Gospels as a model to affirm that God is still at work among the suffering people.

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<sup>5</sup> Catharine LaCugna, *God for Us* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1993), 260-262; 295-296.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Avis, "The Missional Vocation," in *The Vocation of Anglicanism* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 50.

<sup>7</sup> Avis, "The Missional Vocation," 59.

## Chapter 1: John 6:1-15: Miracle and the Presence of the “God of Otherwise”<sup>8</sup>

Hunger is a big enemy to wandering people who seek and search for refuge amid hopeless and threatening situations. In troubled times, who can feed the hungry? Who can find the root causes of their hunger? Jesus makes a claim only God can make: God is in Jesus the bread of heaven that can satisfy the deepest hunger that people experience. God fed the people of Israel in the wilderness with manna through Moses (Exod. 15-16). God fed one hundred people through Elisha (2 Kings 4). God was in Jesus who fed the multitude in the wilderness (John 6:1-15). But while God has been feeding one group of hungry people, another group of people die without food somewhere in the world today. And during a period of war, more people die from starvation than from bomb blasts or gun shots (as in Sri Lanka). Then the question arises: Is God just to the starving people?

The feeding of the multitude is one of the three miracles mentioned in all four Gospels,<sup>9</sup> and one of the occasions when Jesus demonstrates God’s power of love. I prefer the version of this story in the Gospel according to John, because John better portrays the incarnate Jesus, through whom we can see God’s presence in human form, moving among suffering human beings. John also specifies some important details about this miracle: first, there is the inclusion of the Passover Festival in 6:3-4, second, the added detail of a great deal of grass (much grass) in the place (6:10), third, Jesus himself feeds the hungry people (6:11),<sup>10</sup> and fourth, the use of barley loaves in baskets (6:12,13).<sup>11</sup> By engaging these

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<sup>8</sup> I got the idea of “*disruptive thinking*” from Walter Brueggemann, and Carolyn J. Sharp, *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture, and the Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Karoline M. Lewis, *John*, Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 83.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, *John*, 83.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond E Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, The Anchor Bible, No. 29-29a (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 249.

important details in this narrative from the perspective of the suffering people, I will show where God really is in Jesus's response, which can be a model for the church's response today.

### God Dwells Among the Suffering People

The placement of this story provides a clue to understanding the presence of God in human suffering. The feeding of the multitude precedes Jesus's discourse on the living Bread that comes down from heaven to give life to the world (John 6:32-38). Jesus, in fact God, descended to the earth. In John 1:14, John writes, "the Word became flesh and lived among us."<sup>12</sup> This Word of God, who was there at the beginning, who made everything and everyone, now became a real, living, human being. The God of the universe was born as a baby of the world. He grew just as we do. For a period of time, some 2000 years ago, it was possible for people to see God, to talk to God face to face, in the person of Jesus, because of the Incarnation. Jesus's presence on earth means good news for everyone, for all time. All people can now know life with God, because of Jesus. That is why Karoline Lewis calls this miracle a sign of the presence of God.<sup>13</sup>

John begins the story (6:1): "After this, Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias." There a large crowd followed Jesus into the wilderness, where no food could be found. Jesus, testing Philip's faith, asked "where are we to buy bread for these people to eat? (6:5)." Jesus, of course, had a plan; in fact, he had a great miracle in mind, but how would the disciples respond? <sup>14</sup> Philip, thinking that Jesus actually meant for them to go out and buy food, said it would take a small fortune to feed

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<sup>12</sup> All Biblical quotations in this paper are taken from the NRSV translation, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, *John*, 84.

<sup>14</sup> Jey Kanagaraj, *John: A New Covenant Commentary*, New Covenant Commentary Series, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 62.

the hungry multitude. Andrew noticed that a small boy had some food (five barley loaves and two dried fish) but wondered how this could feed everyone. But, with that small amount, Jesus miraculously feeds the multitude to demonstrate that God takes the little and multiplies it for the good of hungry persons (John 6:1-15). Jesus shows us that God is in action, so that God's Kingdom is also in action.

### Details that Help us Know More About God

As I already mentioned, John portrays four important details in this miracle to help us understand God better through Jesus. The first important detail is the mention of the festival of Passover. This is the second of the three Passover feasts that are mentioned in John's Gospel (see also John 2:13 and 11:55).<sup>15</sup> The feast of Passover reminds us how God delivered and provided for God's people in the past.<sup>16</sup> Jesus demonstrated how God was still delivering God's people who were in need, now through him (Exod. 12:43-51; John 2:13; 11:15).<sup>17</sup>

The mention of the Passover being near is more than just a coincidence. John reports the detail of Jesus going up the mountain in vv.3-4. By combining this detail with the mention of the Passover, John draws a parallel with Moses at Mount Sinai and the feeding miracles in the Exodus narrative (Exo.15-16). God's provision of manna to Israel in the wilderness stands behind the Johannine narrative (John 6:14; Deut.18:15-19).<sup>18</sup> The reference to Passover is explicit in 6:4. The naming of the particular feast suggests that it

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<sup>15</sup> Kanagaraj, *John*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Kanagaraj, *John*, 63.

<sup>17</sup> George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, V. 36 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 88.

<sup>18</sup> Gail R O'Day, *John*, The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 594.

is theologically significant. The Passover festival begins with the slaughter of the Paschal lamb, which John evokes with the description of Jesus as the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29). This Passover in Chapter 6 is related to Jesus's discussion of his own flesh being the bread given for the life of the world (6:33,51).<sup>19</sup> Jesus could have called for manna from heaven, but he did not do so, because now God is already present among the needy people, in himself as the bread of heaven (Jn 6:33-35). Now Jesus says, "whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty (6:35)." So, Jesus demonstrates that God's power of love continues in human suffering by feeding the hungry.

The second significant detail is the mention of green grass. Jesus instructed the disciples to seat the multitude on the comfortable grass (6:10). The Greek phrase *χορτος πολυς*, is best read as pasture, green grass (Mark 6:39) or hay (1 Cor 3:12).<sup>20</sup> It indicates the springtime and the freshness of the land during the Passover season explicitly mentioned in v.4.<sup>21</sup> John's account alone gives the season of the year; on this day of early spring the grass would be flourishing and abundant. According to Lewis, "the description (much grass) also alludes to and foreshadows the presentation of Jesus as the Good Shepherd in Chapter 10."<sup>22</sup> We can also view this as the Good Shepherd making his sheep lie down in green pastures (Ps 23:2). The pasture for the sheep signals provision of and abundance of life and this abundance is clearly present in the feeding of the five thousand.<sup>23</sup> Lewis says that life cannot be abundant if it is not grounded in intimacy, relationship and

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis, *John*, 84.

<sup>20</sup> Roger David Aus, *Feeding the Five Thousand: Studies in the Judaic Background of Mark 6:30-44 Par. and John 6:1-15*, Studies in Judaism (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), 61.

<sup>21</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 84; Aus, *Feeding the Five Thousand*, 62.

<sup>22</sup> M. Lewis, *John*, 84.

<sup>23</sup> M. Lewis, *John*, 84.

security.<sup>24</sup> The knowledge and promise of God's assurance of providence cannot be experienced by people unless those people realize that something above the level of minimal survival is possible.

The third unique and significant feature of this version of the feeding story is that Jesus himself feeds the hungry people (6:11). John Calvin states that "Jesus's act in this narrative not only belongs to his eternal Divinity, but also his human nature, and so far as he has taken upon him our flesh, the Father has appointed him to be the dispenser, that by his hands he may feed us."<sup>25</sup> Now Jesus as the good shepherd mediates God's goodness to the hungry people. Lewis notes that, "Not only is Jesus the source of abundant life, but it is being in relationship with him that is also the source of abundant life. Therefore, abundance cannot be separated from its source."<sup>26</sup>

The fourth detail that John mentions is the combination of barley loaves and gathering the leftovers in baskets. Barley bread reflects Elisha's miracle of feeding 100 men with 20 loaves. The story in John shows Jesus doing this on a much grander scale. Raymond Brown says, "therefore, in this miracle we have a question not of remnant but of surplus."<sup>27</sup> Fish and bread were the daily essential food for that time and region (2 Kings 4:38-44).<sup>28</sup>

Roger David Aus identifies clear similarities between the Elisha account and that of John 6:1-15.<sup>29</sup> First, there is a human provider who brings a real but inadequate amount

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<sup>24</sup> M. Lewis, *John*, 84.

<sup>25</sup> John Calvin, "Commentary on John 6:11," in *Calvin's Commentary on the Bible*, 1840-1857, accessed January 1, 2020, <https://www.studyilght.org/commentaries/cal/john-6.html>

<sup>26</sup> M. Lewis, *John*, 84.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *John*, 234.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *John*, 234-235.

<sup>29</sup> Aus, *Feeding the Five Thousand*, 21-22.



of food for the needs of the people. Second, there are the barley loaves, which are described with exactly the same Greek phrase, ἄρτους κριθίνους; (LXX II Kings 4:42; John 6:9). Third, there is a question asked of the servant and a similar question is asked of Andrew: Τί δῶ τοῦτο ἐνώπιον ἑκατὸν ἀνδρῶν, “How can I set this before a hundred people?” And ἀλλὰ ταῦτα τί ἐστὶν εἰς τοσοῦτους, “What are they among so many people? (LXX II Kings 4:43; John 6:9).<sup>30</sup> Fourth, there is the promise and report in II Kings 4:43-44 that some was left over, as compared with John’s report of leftovers.<sup>31</sup> However, as Jesus said, it is not Moses (or Elisha) who gave bread from heaven, but it is his Father who gave them bread from heaven (6:32).

The Greek word John uses for basket is κόφινος (6:13). Mark also uses the same term (8:20). Both of them have borrowed this word from the procedure of harvesting the *omer*.<sup>32</sup> This term for basket also refers to the kind of basket a Roman infantryman used to carry his three-day ration of grain. Soldiers also carried their weapons in this type of basket during wartime.<sup>33</sup> In this sign, Jesus recycled things used to harm people into things that give life to people. God who often thinks “otherwise,” now transforms the tools of conflict into the tools of a miracle to meet the needs of people. When people offer whatever they have, we can expect God to do far beyond what can be imagined (Eph.3:30).

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<sup>30</sup> Aus, *Feeding the Five Thousand*, 108.

<sup>31</sup> Aus, *Feeding the Five Thousand*, 23-44.

<sup>32</sup> Aus, *Feeding the Five Thousand*, 108; The *Omer* (“sheaf”) was a harvest offering brought to the Temple on the second day of Passover Lev. 29:9-14. There is a further command that, from the day when the Omer was brought, seven weeks were to be counted, and on the 50th day a festival was to be celebrated (Lev. 23:15-21).

<sup>33</sup> Aus, *Feeding the Five Thousand*, 109.

## God is Present in the World to Feed the Hungry People

John's version of the feeding of the multitude is not just an event witnessed by thousands of people; it is also a miracle with many lessons about the all-sufficiency of Jesus. This miracle occurs in the face of the vast needs of the world, for God's people who were worried because they had no food.<sup>34</sup> Through this miracle, Jesus shows us that God often thinks otherwise. God says, "for my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways...as the heavens are higher than the earth... [so are] my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isa. 55:8-9)." God's divine nature is Eternal Spirit and Lady Wisdom; that is, Divine Omniscience.<sup>35</sup> Through this miracle, Jesus demonstrates that God has been sufficient to resolve humankind's finite worries, because God is Love; that is God's very nature.<sup>36</sup>

Jesus's feeding of the multitude is another means by which this Gospel restates 1:18, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." When Jesus feeds the multitude, Jesus demonstrates that God can create much out of little. Likewise, God now feeds people through Jesus as God's intervention in human suffering. Jesus came so that we can have life and have it to the fullest (Jn 10:10). In this way, God's goodness exceeds our imaginations.

Through feeding the multitude, Jesus demonstrates the active Kingdom of God: God still dwells among hungry people in the world; God still keeps the intimate relationship with people who suffer; God gives life through Jesus; God expects people to cooperate with God to transform deadly things into life-giving things; God's goodness

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<sup>34</sup> Kanagaraj, *John*, 62.

<sup>35</sup> Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, V. 1, the Doctrine of God (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), xvi.

<sup>36</sup> Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, xvi.

exceeds our imaginations. With these demonstrations, the people who hunger can take heart that God never fails to feed them. Steve Charleston rightly states that all people in the world should proclaim that God is a God of all times, and of all places, and of all peoples.<sup>37</sup> God also needs people to share the things that they have received, in order that the hungry might be fed. God, with human collaboration, can easily feed the hungry people. What is lacking are the agents of God to meet the needs of the people.

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<sup>37</sup> Steve Charleston, "The Old of Testament of Native America" in James Treat ed., *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996),74.

## Chapter 2: Luke 16:19-31: God is God of All, Both Rich and Poor

There are nations in which poverty has led to civil war, for example, the people's war in Nepal. But there are other nations in which civil war has led people to be poor as it has in Sri Lanka. In both cases, the poor are neglected, and they remain vulnerable. Many times, the rich are responsible for making the poor poorer. There are some rich people who just neglect the poor and live a sumptuous life. Poor people see the difference between what they have and what the rich have and think that poverty is their fate. They believe that their position is ordained by God, and they often think that they are not favored by God as much as the rich people are favored. In this situation, any person might ask classic theological questions: How can a loving, yet omnipotent God permit poverty and suffering in the world? Is God the God of just some people or of all people? Therefore, I will discuss how Jesus approaches these questions in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31).

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man can be understood as an example story, which is one kind of parable.<sup>38</sup> Example stories teach possible behaviors.<sup>39</sup> Joseph Fitzmyer, citing Bultmann, says that this particular example does not have an introduction or an application: these are not necessarily important for an example story.<sup>40</sup> Jesus has been teaching about materialism, money, and stewardship through stories, like that of the unjust steward, and sayings, like that about serving mammon. His audience includes his disciples (Luke 16:1) as well as some Pharisees “who loved money” and ridiculed his stand on

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph A Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible, 28-28a (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 1126.

<sup>39</sup> Darrell Bock, *Luke: Vol 2: 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 1361-1363.

<sup>40</sup> Fitzmyer, *The Gospel*, 1126.

money (16:14). The parable of poor Lazarus and the rich man condemns these Pharisees for their love of money,<sup>41</sup> and their lack of compassion for the poor (16:19-31).<sup>42</sup> This example story is the filter through which the surrounding materials we find in 9:51-18:34 may be interpreted, the teachings and warnings of Jesus about the common life of the rich and the poor.

### The Gap Between Poor Lazarus and the Rich Man

This parable clearly shows us the gap between the poor and rich. The “gate” symbolizes this gap in our earthly life, and the “great chasm” shows the same in the afterlife. This disparity between rich and poor is shown in terms of clothes, food, and residences in earthly life. In the afterlife, the chasm appears between Hades and Abraham’s bosom.

The first sign of the gap is that the rich person’s garment is colored purple with Tyrian dye, and he wears fine linen, an expensive undergarment which suggests to us his royal status (Ezek.27:7,16; Rev.18:12; Prov.31:22).<sup>43</sup> In contrast, Lazarus is covered with sores, sores that a dog would lick, meaning that he is unclean. This shows us that Lazarus is the poorest among the poor.

The second sign of the gap between Lazarus and the rich man is the gap in terms of the kind and quantity of food each had to eat daily. On the one hand, the rich man has leftover food which suggests the luxurious food that the rich person splendidly consumes every day (v.19). The word *εὐφραίνω* is used four times for the “celebration” the waiting

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<sup>41</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament-Luke (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publisher,1997), 603.

<sup>42</sup> Green, *Luke*, 599.

<sup>43</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1130; Green, *Luke*, 605.

father hosted for his lost son (15:23,24,29,32) – but here the availability of such splendor “every day” seems a bit excessive. The rich man eats very expensive food every day. On the other hand, it explains Lazarus’ unsatisfied hunger, his longing to eat the scraps from the rich man’s table. The NRSV and NIV translate *των ψιγίων* as “what fell”, and the KJV uses “crumbs”. Omanson points out that the REB translates the word as “scraps” and the TEV as “bits of food,” both of which imply leftovers.<sup>44</sup> The word used here for eating, *χωριζέτω*, is a crude form, frequently used for animals, especially cattle. It is related to *χορός*, “grass, hay.”<sup>45</sup> There were other kinds of scraps that fell. For example, at a feast, bread was used to wipe the grease from one’s hands and then was thrown under the table (Mark 7:28).<sup>46</sup> This vulnerable situation of Lazarus shows us that he is not only poor, but also he is less than human, a status of his social excommunication (1 Kings 21:19,24; Ps. 22:16).<sup>47</sup>

The third sign of the gap is the gate at the rich person’s residence. The rich man has a gate, signifying his possession of an estate or house compound appropriate to his station.<sup>48</sup> Lazarus, however, had no home and “was laid” at the gate. The passive form of the verb would imply that he did not get there by his own power. He was placed there by others. Lying, or being laid at the gate suggests someone has a disability (Matt 8:6, Acts 3:1-4). He did not even have the strength to shoo away the dogs who lick his sores. Another possible irony of this is that the dogs are more aware of the sores than the rich man.

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<sup>44</sup> Roger L. Omanson, Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), 139.

<sup>45</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1132.

<sup>46</sup> François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51-19:27*, Translated by Donald S. Deer, Edited by Helmut Koester, *Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 430.

<sup>47</sup> Green, *Luke*, 606; Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1132.

<sup>48</sup> Green, *Luke*, 609; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Exeter, England: Paternoster Press, 1978), 635.

The final gap is found in the afterlife. Both Romans and Jews valued proper burial for the dead.<sup>49</sup> Upon death, Lazarus finds himself at “Abraham’s bosom.” For any Jew at the time, this seating arrangement would have been a mark of the highest honor.<sup>50</sup> For the word *κόλποζ* in v.22 the KJV translates “Abraham’s bosom,” but the NRSV uses “to be with Abraham,” and the NIV uses “Abraham’s side.”<sup>51</sup> There is a big difference between “to be with Abraham” and “at Abraham’s side” or “held to his bosom.” Each of these translations grows in intimacy – from the least warmth to the latter, “held to his bosom,” with a maternal quality.

The rich man was buried but finds himself in Hades. In Judaism, being in torment in Hell would be one’s fate at the last judgment.<sup>52</sup> I assume that this phrase not only denotes a contrast in places (bosom vs. Hades), but also in fates, for example, how well God receives the poor and less privileged person into God’s place.<sup>53</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson notes that loving money is the first and most obvious reference to “idolatry” in the biblical tradition (Deut. 25:16).<sup>54</sup> Jesus has already suggested that serving mammon/wealth is idolatry (Luke 16:13).

God established justice in the gate in heaven (great chasm) for the rich man to be tortured in Hades, because poor Lazarus was never the recipient of the wealthy man’s hospitality at the gate of his house. The rich man’s love of money has bloomed into a

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<sup>49</sup> Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 607.

<sup>50</sup> John T. Carroll, and Jennifer K. Cox, *Luke: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 336.

<sup>51</sup> Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 1132; Johnson, *Luke*, 252

<sup>52</sup> John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary, 35b (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 832.

<sup>53</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, and Daniel J Harrington, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 254; Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, 255.

<sup>54</sup> Johnson, *Luke*, 255.

callous, self-justifying negligence of other's needs. The rich man's lack of mercy finds its miserable echo in mercy not received.<sup>55</sup>

### God is with the Poor

The theme of God favoring the poor is highly emphasized throughout Luke's Gospel. The parable of Lazarus and the rich man, the parable of relations and responsibilities between rich and poor, echoes other parts of Luke, for example, the Sermon on the Plain (6:20-25) and the Magnificat (1:53). The rich man is similar to the rich fool in Luke 12:19.<sup>56</sup> The theme of unsatisfied hunger and its relation to the unsatisfied hunger of the prodigal son also links to 15:16.<sup>57</sup> The use of dogs to symbolize an outcast status parallels Matt 15:26-27 and Mark 7:27-28.<sup>58</sup> Sending someone from the dead to the living is clearly an allusion to Jesus's resurrection in Luke. This idea can also be found in Luke 9:22 and in Acts 1:22.<sup>59</sup> Luke presents a clear picture that God favors the poor. This act of God shows us that "God is humble and living; that is God's Omnipotence."<sup>60</sup>

Some people conclude that the parable teaches that poor go to heaven and the rich go to hell. The problem with such a view, as St. Augustine noted, is that poor Lazarus is carried to the side of the wealthy Abraham. If wealth alone determines fate, then Abraham should be in Hades right along with the rich man.<sup>61</sup> Instead, the reason for their fates are

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<sup>55</sup> Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 263.

<sup>56</sup> L. Christopher Matthews, "The Gospel According to Luke," *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, Student Edition. Ed. Wayne A. Meeks (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2006), 1796.

<sup>57</sup> Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary*, 430.

<sup>58</sup> Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary*, 430.

<sup>59</sup> Matthews, "The Gospel According to Luke," 1796.

<sup>60</sup> Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, xvi.

<sup>61</sup> Arthur A. Just, *Luke*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 262.



found elsewhere. The name “Lazarus” means “God helps” (Gen 15:2). Vulnerable Lazarus was given a prominent place by God. Meanwhile, the rich man unwittingly condemns himself to Hades by using Lazarus’s personal name (Luke 16:24). If he knows him now, he must have known him then.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, God expects the rich people to care for the poor, remembering God’s words and finding God given opportunities to help them.

### God of Both the Vulnerable Poor and the Righteous Rich

The basic instruction to the rich man from Abraham is “remember.” The rich man had not remembered Lazarus in his lifetime. He had not remembered the words of Moses and the Prophets (Luke 16:27-31). This word “remember” is the same word used by the thief on the cross to Jesus (23:42).<sup>63</sup> The use of this word suggests that the rich man needed repentance while he was alive. When Zacchaeus, another wealthy person, underwent a conversion and gave away half of his wealth to help the poor, Jesus declared him a son of Abraham (Luke 19:9). Zacchaeus bore fruits worthy of repentance, as John the Baptist had preached (Luke 3:8). Through all these references Luke shows us that God’s ways are mysterious, and that God has an overarching plan that we cannot know, because God loves everyone: both the righteous rich and the vulnerable poor. God is the God of all people and God is not unjust and partial to the rich as some poor people think.

Though I say that God is for all, I will also take a stand that God is the One who takes the side of the oppressed. This idea should not be abandoned too quickly for assertions of inclusivity, universality, and equality. God’s “preferential option” for the

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<sup>62</sup> Just, *Luke*, 260.

<sup>63</sup> Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*, 833.

oppressed reminds us that there are limits to inclusion. For instance, in Luke 1:46-55 Mary sings, “he (God) has brought down the powerful from their thrones, lifted up the lowly; he (God) has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away (Luke 1:52-53).” Therefore, the concept of the God of all is not just a matter of upholding fairness and balance, but it is a matter of taking a stand, as Jesus took a stand in his ministry, to teach about justice in the Kingdom of God. This approach of Jesus is an ideal tool for the churches to communicate about God’s nature to the people who say God is not showing favor to them. God expects the churches to communicate a more compelling, scripturally grounded message to the suffering about God's identification with their suffering, as well as about the power of God to bring good from evil. But do churches communicate this message to the people?

### Chapter 3: Mark 11:12-25: A Prophetic Challenge to All Church Leaders

Katherine Sonderegger says that “God is invisible and hidden; that is God’s Omnipresence.”<sup>64</sup> The church, the one holy and catholic church, is the visible manifestation of an omnipresent God. To manifest God’s presence, God expects all church leaders to produce the fruits of justice and righteousness in order to encourage people to hold on to the faithfulness of God. The failure of the Church’s leaders to produce the just fruits that God expects, will, of course, be noticed by its members. This failure of church leaders to practice justice explicitly pushes people to lose their faith in a just God. So, when Jesus sees the corruption of the Temple, he warns the Temple leaders through his prophetic sign action and invites them to remember God’s purpose for God’s Temple (Mark 11:12-25). Jesus’s sign action, then, demonstrates, by analogy, that if church leaders, like the Temple leaders, fail to produce justice and righteousness, God may very well shut down all the operations of the church.

#### The Markan Intercalation of the Fig Tree and the Temple

Mark combines the story of the withered fig tree with that of Jesus’s sign action in the Temple to illustrate the failure of the Temple leaders. This is a storytelling technique known as an intercalation, in which the writer structures the story as a three layer sandwich: first fig tree, then Temple, then fig tree again.<sup>65</sup> Mark tells us a story within a story: the

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<sup>64</sup> Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, V. 1, The Doctrine of God (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), xvi.

<sup>65</sup> Clifton C. Black, *Mark*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 241.

cursing and withering of the fig tree surrounds the story of the protest in the temple.<sup>66</sup> Mark uses this storytelling technique to let these two stories interpret each other.

The cursing of the fig tree is presented in two parts (11:12-14 and 11:20-21) and surrounds the action at the Temple (11:15-19).<sup>67</sup> Mark tells us that Jesus enters Jerusalem, looks around the Temple and the Temple precincts, and then departs (11:1-11). The next day he returns and along the way curses the fig tree, because the tree failed to produce what Jesus was expecting (11:12-14). He then enters Jerusalem and performs a prophetic sign action on behalf of his Father in the Temple precincts, and afterward departs (11:15-19). The following day he returns to the Temple and along the way the disciples see the withered fig tree (11:20-21).

### Jesus Curses the Fig Tree

Mark begins this story with Jesus's hunger (Mark 11:12). Jesus cursed the fig tree when it was not the season for figs. If Jesus was so hungry for figs, why did he not bless the tree so that it miraculously bore fruit? That Jesus cursed the fig tree disturbs many people; it is his only miracle that is destructive.<sup>68</sup> But this viewpoint takes the story far too literally. The story is not about Jesus's hunger and subsequent annoyance at a plant. It is about the Temple's failure to produce its intended fruit, the reason for its coming

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<sup>66</sup> Craig A Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary, V. 34b (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 149.

<sup>67</sup> Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 149.

<sup>68</sup> Kim Huat Tan, *Mark: A New Covenant Commentary*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 152.

destruction.<sup>69</sup> The fig tree is, then, a metaphor for the Temple.<sup>70</sup> By cursing the fig tree, Jesus illustrates the seriousness of those expectations, but what were they?

Isaiah says that God, as a landlord, planted vines expecting them to yield grapes, but the vines yielded wild grapes (Isa 5:2). God expected justice and righteousness, but God saw bloodshed, and heard a cry (Isa 5:7). The same words are used for justice and righteousness throughout the Hebrew Scripture.<sup>71</sup> They are consistent with the expectation of God. God was disappointed to receive bitter fruits in return. The root word for bloodshed relates to the Arabic word *safaha*, or “shed blood.”<sup>72</sup> The cry that God heard was of those who suffer from political or social violence, as in Gen 27:34; Exo 3:7,9; 11:6.<sup>73</sup> Then God says, “I will make it (the vineyard) a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed (Isa 5:5).”

Similarly, when Jesus sees the tree which is literally lacking the expected fruit, meaning it is fruitless, he says, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again (Mark 11:14).” By stopping the tree’s ability to produce fruit, Jesus makes this fig tree no longer useful. Craig A. Evans comments that, by sandwiching Mark’s fig tree story on either side of the Temple incident, Mark indicates that he wishes the fate of the unfruitful tree to be seen as a prophetic sign prefiguring the destruction of the Temple cultus.<sup>74</sup> It is the Temple’s failure to produce its intended fruit that is the reason for its coming destruction.<sup>75</sup> The unfruitful fig tree is, then, a metaphor for the unfruitful temple.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Mary Ann Beavis, *Mark*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 171.

<sup>70</sup> John R. Donahue, and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina Series, V. 2 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 331.

<sup>71</sup> John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah* 1-33, Rev. ed., Word Biblical Commentary, V. 24 (Nashville, TN: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 2005), 56.

<sup>72</sup> Watts, *Isaiah*, 56.

<sup>73</sup> Watts, *Isaiah*, 56.

<sup>74</sup> Evans, *Mark* 8:27-16:20, 149.

<sup>75</sup> Beavis, *Mark*, 171.

<sup>76</sup> Donahue, and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 331.

Joel Marcus points out the conclusion of William Telford, who says that the idea of a “fig tree” is found also in Isa 28:3-4, Jer 8:13, Hos 9:10, 16, Joel 1:7, 12, and Mic 7:1, all of which, like Mark 11:12-14, use the withering of the fig tree as a symbol for eschatological judgment on Israel.<sup>77</sup> For instance, Jeremiah says, “when I wanted to gather them, says the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them (Jer 8:13).” The Hebrew word for “gather,” can also be translated as “harvest” or “to bring to an end.”<sup>78</sup> This judgment of God is destructive, so Jeremiah weeps. He weeps both because of the calamity coming to Israel, and because of the blindness of the people in the Temple. They seem oblivious to their sin and attempt to lay all the blame upon God.<sup>79</sup> Jeremiah prophesies against Jerusalem with a broken heart because God is not able to harvest/gather what God expected.

Since the fig tree represents the Temple, and its leaders, Jesus reminds the leaders of the Temple to bear the fruits of justice and righteousness. God will never forget to hear the cry of the people and God expects the leaders of the Temple to listen in this way to the people’s cry, and to do justice for them in righteousness. But the Temple leaders have failed to do that. Marcus notes that “Jesus’s inability to find fruit on the tree, and his consequent curse against it, stands for the conclusion that the Temple leadership is hopelessly corrupt.”<sup>80</sup> Because of this corruption, the Temple will be destroyed, as it is written in the

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<sup>77</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, 27a (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 789.

<sup>78</sup> Peter C. Craigie, Joel F. Drinkard, and Page H. Kelley, *Jeremiah 1-25*, Word Biblical Commentary, V. 26 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1991), 137.

<sup>79</sup> Craigie, Drinkard and Kelley, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 140.

<sup>80</sup> Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 790.

Hebrew Scriptures: “the unfruitful vine or fig tree will wither and fade away” (Isa 34:4, Joel 1:7-12, and Amos 4:9).<sup>81</sup>

### Jesus’s Prophetic Sign Action in the Temple

Jesus, after cursing the fig tree, enters Jerusalem that same day and this time performs a prophetic sign action in the Temple precincts (11:15-19). When Jesus enters the Temple, he sees that the Temple does not function in the way that it is expected to function. He is not able to ignore the corruption of the Temple leaders. He turns against the Temple leaders, because they have failed to practice justice, and to be righteous; instead they have made the Temple a den of robbers (Mark 11:17). Jesus drives out those who were buying and selling in the Temple, and overturns the tables of the money changers, and the seats of those who sold doves, and will not allow anyone to carry anything through the Temple (11:15-17). Jesus’s action at the Temple was a symbolic shut-down of the entire operation of the Temple.<sup>82</sup> Jesus says, “Is it not written, ‘my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?’ But you have made it a den of robbers! (Mark 11:17).”

The first part of v.17 echoes Isaiah 56:1-7. God says, “for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples (Isa 56:7).” God intends that God’s house of prayer should be a place where all people can experience justice and righteousness. Isaiah says, “Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and deliverance be revealed (Isa 56:1).” Isaiah 56:7 can be linked with 1 Kings 8:1-65 where Solomon’s prayer of dedication of the Temple clearly states that the Temple was created

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<sup>81</sup> Beavis, *Mark*, 171.

<sup>82</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Mark*, Teach the Text Commentary Series, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, a Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2014), 194.

to be a place of righteousness (8:31).<sup>83</sup> Solomon said, “I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever (8:13).” Then the Lord appeared to Solomon, and said, “I have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice (2 Chr 7:12).” The place which is made for people to find the indwelling God, has now become a place where it is hard to find God’s presence.

The second part of Mark 11:17 echoes Jer 7:11: The Temple has become a den of robbers, and the Temple has become a hideout for bandits. Jeremiah was objecting to people using the Temple selfishly, trusting that they would always be safe in the Temple, presuming on the protection of God regardless of their own sins.<sup>84</sup> But the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians a few years later because the people of Israel failed to do what God wanted them to do. Jesus’s saying indicates that at least part of Jesus’s problem with the Temple leaders was their commercialism and the dishonest practices associated with selling and buying.<sup>85</sup> Through these corrupted actions the Temple leaders also failed to produce what God intended them to produce. Jesus predicts the destruction of the Temple.

In view of Isaiah 56:7, Jeremiah 7:11, and 1 Kings 8:1-65, it is clear that Jesus entered the Temple with messianic authority, just as Malachi says, “and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” (Malachi 3:1). These prophetic traditions may also have regarded the ruling priests of the first Temple as failing to live up to the purpose for which the Temple was dedicated, that is, to dispense justice.<sup>86</sup> That ruling priesthood was in danger of destruction according to the prophet, because they were like bad

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<sup>83</sup> Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 176.

<sup>84</sup> Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 174.

<sup>85</sup> Donahue, and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 328.

<sup>86</sup> Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 179



shepherds, leading God's sheep (God's people) astray and feeding themselves at the expense of the people (Ezek 34:1-2). Jesus invoked this prophetic tradition and did so not simply as the prophet of the Eschaton but as God's messianic agent.<sup>87</sup> Jesus's prophetic sign action, therefore, condemns the corrupt leaders of the Temple for failing to produce fruits of justice and righteousness.

### A Lesson from the Withered Fig Tree

The next day, when Jesus and his disciples passed by, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots (11:20). This barrenness of the fig tree probably anticipates the "abomination of desolation" that is prophesied of the Temple in Mark 13:14.<sup>88</sup> Mark refers to Jesus's pronouncement of judgment over the Temple in 13:1-2, 14-20. There Jesus clearly proclaims, "do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down (13:2)."

Mark most likely wrote his Gospel during, or right after, the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. This awful event is possibly what caused Mark to write his Gospel in the first place.<sup>89</sup> For both Jews and Jewish Christians, the destruction of the Temple was a catastrophic event that shook their faith. The point is this: God is willing to allow even God's own Temple in Jerusalem to be destroyed by foreigners, if it does not produce justice and righteousness. The analogy between the fig tree and the Temple shows that, just as the fig tree was barren, so also was the Temple unproductive in its role. Just as

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<sup>87</sup> Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 179.

<sup>88</sup> Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 790.

<sup>89</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Mark*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 135.

the Temple became unproductive, by analogy, if today's churches become unproductive, God may very well shut them down.

Notice that, when Peter pointed out the withered fig tree (Mark 11:21), Jesus replied to him, "Have faith in God" (11:22). This phrase can be interpreted as "hold onto the faithfulness of God."<sup>90</sup> Evans comments that after Peter notes the effect of Jesus's words on the fig tree (11:21), Jesus counters Peter's astonishment (11:21) by calling his disciples to faith in God, that is, to commit their total person to God in the light of Jesus's own ministry.<sup>91</sup> Marcus points out that Jesus's reply might at first be construed as an exhortation not to give up on the Temple, because the Temple is still, after all, God's house.<sup>92</sup> Jeremiah says, "For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not... shed innocent blood in this place,... then I will dwell with you in this place (Jer 7:5-6)." God's appeal to the Temple leaders is an appeal to the possibility of repentance and restoration.<sup>93</sup>

Churches will be enriched by God's presence when they abide in God to bear fruits (John 15). Church leaders, then, have a sobering responsibility to practice justice by being righteous in the church. Then they would become a sign for the people to hold onto the faithfulness of God even in difficult circumstances.

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<sup>90</sup> Donahue, and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 329.

<sup>91</sup> Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 179; Tan, *Mark*, 195.

<sup>92</sup> Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 794.

<sup>93</sup> Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 179.

## Chapter 4: God and War Victims in Sri Lanka

The civil war in Sri Lanka caused many tragic events in people's lives. In this war, many died due to hunger, and some people became poor. Many people have lost their hope for the future. Many of the war victims have lost their faith in God. I had the opportunity to serve those victims of war. A significant part of my ministry was listening to their stories. In this fourth chapter I will share some of their stories. I will also reflect theologically on those stories with the miracle, the parable, and Jesus's prophetic action that I have already discussed in the first three chapters.

### God Knows Hunger, Because God is Also Hungry

Jesus shows us that God often thinks "otherwise" in the feeding of the multitude miracle in John 6:1-15, because God is love and God knows human needs. Will this "disruptive thinking" of God assist the Churches to justify God's action? Let us consider this question in light of a tragic event that happened during the war:

During the peak time in the war, a man moved his family to find safety. While moving, the wife was shot and killed. As a father, he had to save his four children even as he mourned his wife, so he covered her body with linen and left. He never had the chance to pay last respects to his wife. On his way to the IDP<sup>94</sup>, he was also injured and lost his right leg. His children were shocked and traumatized: now they had no mother, and their father was also admitted to a hospital. As they were passing through the deserted places, the four children joined with other people who were also fleeing from the horrible bomb attacks. There were more than 200,000 people wandering without food, water or shelter. Many people died on their way not only because of bombings but from not having food. One of the four children also died without food. Around 180,000 people ended up in the IDTV<sup>95</sup>s. Finally, I found the father of the four children and reunited them. But still they were traumatized. When I said to them, God will protect you, they did not want to talk about God and God's work.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Please refer page 8.

<sup>95</sup> Please refer page 8.

<sup>96</sup> A translation from Tamil language from my personal journal, dated June 14, 2009.

In this context, how can the Church justify God's action? Some people questioned me, asking, "if God exists, why did God let this family suffer? And why did God not provide food to that dead innocent child?" I did not have an answer. Ian Markham, however, offers this response based on the tragic events of Job's life, as told in the Hebrew Bible. Markham suggests that "the Biblical answer is that God is not going to explain why the innocent suffer."<sup>97</sup> That is true, because the evil events of the civil war were despicable acts of human evil by humans against their own brothers and sisters. I believe that, just as the innocent Abel's blood cried out to God from the ground after his murder, the innocent blood of the people who died in the war cries out to God from our land (Gen 4:8-10). God does not give an answer; instead, God will ask a question: "Where is your brother/sister?" (Gen 4:9), because God identifies God's-self with suffering. This is where we learn the seriousness of God's incarnation: infinite God became a finite man.<sup>98</sup>

Suffering people often see God only as a person of miracles. They do not want to see a God who is also suffering with suffering people, like Jesus. Jesus was also hungry, and thirsty. When Jesus met the Samaritan woman, he was hungry. But when his disciples were urging him to eat food, he said, "my food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his (God's) work" (John 4:31-34). Similarly, Jesus did not have anything to drink when he was hanging on the Cross and said, "I thirst" (John 19:28). But Jesus accomplished the will of God even with his death. In this way, God suffers among the suffering people. In the Sri Lankan context, God did not need to feed the dead child and to save her life to

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<sup>97</sup> Ian S Markham, *Why Suffering? A Little Book of Guidance* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2018), 16.

<sup>98</sup> Markham, *Why Suffering*, 18-19.

show God's presence. Instead, God may be trying to invite the nation to know God's own pain, because God is in pain with the people who are in pain.

Kazō Kitamori, a Japanese theologian, says that “God in pain is the God [who] resolves our human pain by his own. Jesus Christ is the Lord who heals our human wounds by his own (1 Peter 2:24).”<sup>99</sup> God enfolds our broken reality and embraces the suffering people completely; this is God our deliverer. Kitamori raises a question: “Is there a more astonishing miracle in the world than that God embraces us in our broken reality?”<sup>100</sup> God personally knows the pain and the broken reality of the dead child's family, that in itself is an astonishing miracle.

God tests the faith of God's agents, as Jesus tested Philip, not the faith of the suffering people, as many people think. Jesus tested Philip to open his eyes, so that he could utilize available resources to make enough for the needy, to move from a viewpoint of inadequacy to one of adequacy. Through God's agents, God can transform a few things to many, and God can recycle bad things to produce good things. This is the approach Jesus uses to justify God's action of feeding the hungry, because God is Omniscient, and God's thinking is often different from human ways of thinking.

### The Poor Are Precious in God's Kingdom

Just as people suffered from hunger, people also suffered from poverty during the civil war in Sri Lanka. This raises the question of whether God shows favoritism for some over others. I remember another story from another victim of the war related to the issue of favoritism.

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<sup>99</sup> Kazō Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1965), 20.

<sup>100</sup> Kitamori, *Theology*, 20-21.

Sunder's family was very poor in their early lives. After becoming Christians, their lives started to flourish. Then they purchased a coconut estate, built a house, and taught children at good private schools. During the war, as they were asked to flee from their place, they had to leave everything. They could not survive only with money, because getting groceries was very tough. They had to sell their valuable holdings to find a daily meal. Finally, they ended their journey at the IDTVs. Sadly, Sunder, the father, lost both of his legs. After the resettlement, they wanted to go and settle on their own land, but their land was occupied by government military persons who put up army camps there. They were asked to live in a tent house, where they had no basic facilities, whereas other people lived in their own houses. Now they have become people with no faith in God, and even no hope for their living in this world.<sup>101</sup>

In this context, how can the church respond to God's lack of action? Sunder's family were rich for a while. Being Christians, they knew about loving their neighbors, just like the rich man in the parable. But they did not acknowledge the needs of their neighbors, because they thought that if they did have any relationship with the poor neighbors, they might come and ask for money regularly.

When I visited the family after their suffering in the war, they regretted their behavior toward their poorer neighbors. Sunder's family was being neglected by their neighbors and even by the church leaders, saying it was a punishment from God. I empathized with them, because like so many others, they were casualties of the civil war.

Jesus says in our parable that the money lovers do not care about the poor, even the poor they could easily reach. In Jesus's ministry, he taught about the danger of being rich and *unrighteous*, because he knew that attitudes about money decide a person's character.

Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris says that, "wherever God is loved and served, it is the Poor that rule, and not poverty, and wherever the poor are loved and served,

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<sup>101</sup> A translation from Tamil language from my personal journal, dated December 15, 2019, and I have used a different name for this family for confidentiality.

it is God who rules, not Mammon.”<sup>102</sup> He concludes that God’s Reign is for God’s poor.<sup>103</sup> The poor are the primary beneficiary of the Gospel that Jesus proclaimed.<sup>104</sup> The parable of the rich man and Lazarus clearly states that poor people are given priority in God’s Kingdom. Jesus teaches us that the poor, like Sunder’s family at present, are loved when God reigns. Also, Jesus teaches us that the rich, like Sunder before, need to remember the teachings of Jesus to love their neighbors in order to bring justice to the poor. Whoever, even the church, neglects the poor is answerable to God’s questions in God’s divine judgment (Matt. 25:31-46).

God not only favors the poor, but God also remembers to bring justice to the poor. God challenges the unjust social system that allows for such economic inequity to exist.<sup>105</sup> This does not mean that God’s Kingdom is not also for the rich. Abraham was a rich man, but because of his hospitality to and love for others, he was given a place in God’s Kingdom. God’s love is for all. If the church could embrace Jesus’s approach to the problem of poverty, the church could defend the presence of God’s love for all people and explain why God favors the poor over the rich who do not see them.

### The Churches are Called to Bear Fruits

I believe that Anglican churches in Sri Lanka are also called to be agents of God to justify God’s action in Sri Lanka. Though the churches have insufficient resources, and not enough leaders who will take risks, as Jesus did, in the context of religious persecutions,

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<sup>102</sup> Aloysius Pieris, *God’s Reign for God’s Poor* (Keliniya, Sri Lanka: Tulana Research Center, 1998), 36.

<sup>103</sup> Pieris, *God’s Reign*, 44.

<sup>104</sup> MiJa Wi, *The Path to Salvation in Luke’s Gospel What Must We Do?* Library of New Testament Studies, 607 (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 81.

<sup>105</sup> Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 250.

still the churches are called to be visible witnesses to an invisible God, so that they might strengthen the world's faith in God. I can remember another true story during the war:

There was a young wife, whose husband was missing, who was raped by an army officer. She had four children. She went and made a complaint to the higher officials about her missing husband and about the army officer. But they refused her. Though she was a Hindu, she went to a church to get some moral and financial support to raise her children. She expected that the church should help her find her husband, and file a case against the army person, because the church leaders always speak about justice from the Bible. But, unfortunately, that church just ignored her and failed to bring justice for her unjust treatment. She lost her last hope, and her faith in God and then she committed suicide in front of her children.<sup>106</sup>

I went to that funeral and met all four children. The older son (he was 12 years old), told me all the things that had happened to his parents. I was saddened to hear this story and I wanted to help this family. I went and confronted the army officials. They saw me as a threatening person and attempted to kill me two times. But God saved me and led me to work for justice for this family. Finally, the government has agreed to support this family. As of this writing, these children are supported for their education by the government. But their father is still missing. There is still no justice for their mother's death. So they do not trust the church. Even though they know that help came from part of the church, the rest of the church failed to help bring justice.

God expects the churches to practice justice and to be righteous. But God still sees bloodshed and hears the cry of the people. If this situation continues, God may shut down all the operations of the church, just as Jesus demonstrated in the Jerusalem Temple.

Lasantha Wickramatunga, a Buddhist journalist, wrote an article exposing political corruption in privatization deals and drew attention to human rights abuses in connection

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<sup>106</sup> A translation from Tamil language from my personal journal, dated Jan 20, 2010.



with the upsurge in fighting between the government and the opposing Tamil Tigers. He was shot by unidentified gunmen while on his way to work. The Rev. Michael Rodrigo, a Roman Catholic Priest, was more worried about the suffering which the poor villagers were forced to tolerate than about the threats made against him by soldiers and Buddhist monks. Though many friends asked him to leave the area, at least for a short period of time, he did not do so, because he voluntarily accepted the miserable poverty of the villagers as a part of his own life. When the Buddhist monks felt that he was a threat, Father Michael was assassinated by the monks. But so far, I have not seen anyone taking risks like them in the Anglican churches in Sri Lanka.

Jesus demonstrates a kind of risk-taking leadership. Jesus's approach challenges all church leaders to work toward both personal salvation and communal salvation. The churches should provide room for people to come and grow in their faith in God. Churches also should reach out to the community to partner with the God who is already at work. Significantly, in the most tragic situations, the church should attempt to act as both mediator and liberator for God. Churches are called to feel that we belong to one another and are responsible for one another's wellbeing.<sup>107</sup> Helder Camera reminds us that, "When you dream alone, it is just a dream; when you dream with others, it is the beginning of a reality."<sup>108</sup> Dreaming with the suffering community is also one of the values of the Kingdom of God.<sup>109</sup> If the churches are failing to accomplish God's dream, God may shut down the operation of the church.

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<sup>107</sup>Elisha Padilla, "An Ecosystem Called Community" in eds. Cathy Ross and Colin Smith, *Missional Conversations: A Dialogue -Between Theory and Praxis in World Mission* (London: SCM Press, 2018), 111.

<sup>108</sup> Padilla, *Missional Conversations*, 113.

<sup>109</sup> Berdine van den Torren-Lekkerkerker, "Community as Mission," in eds. Cathy Ross and Colin Smith, *Missional Conversations: A Dialogue -Between Theory and Praxis in World Mission* (London: SCM Press, 2018), 120.

## Conclusion

In my first three chapters, I have discussed how Jesus's approaches explore the God of Omniscience, the God of Omnipotence, and the God of Omnipresence. Jesus demonstrates the power of the active Kingdom of God through a miracle, a parable, and a prophetic sign action in the lives of people who might lose their faith in God because of hunger and poverty. In the fourth chapter, I have discussed God's expectation that the churches in Sri Lanka practice justice among the war victims. In my conclusion, I will discuss how Anglican churches in Sri Lanka can follow Jesus's three-way understanding of God's fidelity to justify God's actions to the victims of war who are skeptical about God.

### God's Expectations of the Anglican Churches in Sri Lanka

God's acts of transforming the root causes of people's suffering are evident in Jesus's approach in feeding the multitude. When Jesus fed the multitude, he not only fed the hungry, but he also transformed inadequacy into adequacy, and harmful things into peacemaking things. The churches in Sri Lanka are expected not only to feed the hungry, but also to find the reason for their hunger, that is, to transform their lives. At the end of the miracle, the people desired to make Jesus a king (6:14,15). Brown says that John's peculiar ending attributes a political tone to the people's action.<sup>110</sup> Jesus clearly avoided being a political leader; rather, he wanted to be model for God's faithful servants and to serve the people who were in need. Faithful servanthood for God will bring justice to the hungry. This approach of Jesus will help the Anglican Churches in Sri Lanka to proclaim

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<sup>110</sup> Raymond E Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, The Anchor Bible, No. 29-29a (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 249.

the God of Omniscience whose Divine nature is to love people, in order to bring about social transformation in coordination with God's faithful servants.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus not only taught us that the poor are given a prominent place in God's Kingdom, but he also taught us that the unrighteous rich are condemned. Similarly, on behalf of the poor people, it is not enough to do some charity work, but it is also necessary to work against capitalism. Jesus's approach invites the Anglican churches in Sri Lanka to take a stand when they serve the poor, just as Jesus took a stand. Paul says of Jesus, "though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). This act of God shows us God's Omnipotence who is a humble and the living God.<sup>111</sup> This Omnipotent God is journeying with the lowly and vulnerable people to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor. While helping the poor, God will not fail to judge the oppressors and others who do not care about the poor. So, the church leaders cannot ignore the work of transforming poverty, because the master they chose to follow has done it. Church leaders must work hard to narrow the gap between the poor and the rich. They should extend their ministries for justice by becoming one with vulnerable people in order to fight against inequality. If the gap has been narrowed, then God can be the God of all people and God will bring justice to all people.

In Jesus's prophetic sign action, not only did he shut down the entire operation of the Temple, but he also condemned the unrighteous Temple leaders. As Stephen Bevans suggests, the church is committed to the proclamation and service of Christ's Lordship over all creation. The ministry of the church is, then, the liberation and transformation of

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<sup>111</sup> Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology*, xvi.

the world.<sup>112</sup> In this way, churches will become a sign and a foretaste of the coming Kingdom of God, as Bishop Lesslie Newbigin suggests.<sup>113</sup> In so doing, they can manifest signs that this Kingdom has already come, in the here and now.<sup>114</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, citing Darrell Guder, says that the church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the Gospel, but rather its instrument and witness.<sup>115</sup> God appeals to Church leaders to be visible witnesses of God, and of the possibility of repentance and restoration as in Jeremiah (Jer 7).<sup>116</sup> By doing so, church leaders can save the churches from their own destruction.

### God Needs Human Agents

The God of Omniscience, the God of Omnipotence, and the God of Omnipresence, is still the God who needs people to transform the evil world into God's Kingdom. LaCugna says that God's economy and nature is to be in dialogue with people, because God is personal and does not want to be God in isolation.<sup>117</sup> God is not supposed to be isolated. Because God in Christ embraces human suffering, church leaders must also embrace human suffering. Church leaders are called to teach their congregations that we belong to one another and are responsible for one another's wellbeing.<sup>118</sup> Torren-Lekkerkerker says, "through his (Jesus's) death and resurrection, he opens the future, redeeming our broken reality as a first fruit of our eternal hope, the Kingdom of God."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, American Society of Missiology Series, No. 30 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 199.

<sup>113</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, and Roger Schroeder. *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 61.

<sup>114</sup> Torren-Lekkerkerker, "Community as Mission," 117.

<sup>115</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2010), 31.

<sup>116</sup> Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20*, 179.

<sup>117</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 243-245.

<sup>118</sup> Padilla, "An Ecosystem," 111.

<sup>119</sup> Torren-Lekkerkerker, "Community as Mission," 121.

God calls all the church leaders to be coworkers of Christ. They are expected to live out and proclaim the values of God's Kingdom. By doing so, the churches can show signs that God's Kingdom has already come, in this world,<sup>120</sup> in order to grow people's faith and hope in God.

Furthermore, Tissa Balasuriya states that without the help of the church, the Kingdom of God cannot exist.<sup>121</sup> Churches should not be a stumbling block to the establishment of God's Kingdom. This terrible situation would cause people to draw away from God. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) at first entertained the strongest possible objection to God's existence, saying, "If God existed, nobody would ever encounter evil. But we do encounter evil in the world. So, God does not exist."<sup>122</sup> Following Aquinas, Mark Scott points out that when we observe the plethora of evils in the world around us and in the pages of history, God seems like an absent person.<sup>123</sup> However, later on, Aquinas learned from Saint Augustine. He corrected his earlier idea, saying, "Since God is good, he (God) would not permit any evil at all in his (God's) works, unless he (God) were sufficiently powerful and good to bring good from evil."<sup>124</sup> Because of Augustine, Aquinas changed his skeptical thinking about God and accepted that the fact of evil does not negate God's goodness, because God brings good out of evil. This is the faith that the Anglican churches should develop in the lives of people who are skeptical of God's presence and actions amid the human broken reality of post-war Sri Lanka.

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<sup>120</sup> Torren-Lekkerkerker, "Community as Mission," 117.

<sup>121</sup> Tissa Balasuriya, *Eucharist and Human Liberation* (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Centre for Society and Religion Colombo, 1977), 14.

<sup>122</sup> Thomas Aquinas, Brian Leftow, and Brian Davies, eds., *Summa Theologiae: Questions on God*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: University Press, 2006), 24.

<sup>123</sup> Mark S. Scott, *Pathways in Theodicy: An Introduction to the Problem of Evil* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>124</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 26.

LaCugna notes that, though God's personhood is invisible to humanity, it finds absolute perfect expression through Jesus. Here, God's image is revealed. And, through the Holy Spirit, we see God's activity in the world.<sup>125</sup> The Triune God is at work in the world; therefore, God is at work in Sri Lanka both now and even in the past. So, the Anglican churches must identify God's work of bringing good into being amidst the chaotic situation in Sri Lanka.

God chooses to suffer among the suffering people for a purpose. God suffers not to justify evil, but to establish justice for the suffering people. To proclaim to the war victims that God is not against them, and that God is with them, the Anglican churches in Sri Lanka must learn the lessons from these texts, from Jesus's miracle, his parable, and his prophetic sign action, to demonstrate the power of the Kingdom of God in Sri Lanka.

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<sup>125</sup> LaCugna, *God for Us*, 260-262; 295-296.

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