

A Public Story

Lessons from a public story

Most people reading these notes need not be reminded of the drama of the O.J. Simpson trial. It was, after all dubbed “the trial of the century.” But the trial of the century must be seen in the shadow of the trial of the centuries, the trial of Jesus. The trial of Jesus and the trial of OJ Simpson share some common themes. These themes can teach us a lot about our suffering and God’s hand in the affairs of life. In each of these two trials there is much more going on than the superficial evidence reveals.

Looking for God’s hand in strange places

One of the characteristics of a person who lives a penitent life is the ability to correctly see the hand of God in the affairs of man. In the early (Gnostic) Christian tradition, the Greek word “metanoia” took on a special meaning of awakening, shared intuition, and direct knowing of God. This is the same word that was eventually rendered, “repentance.” Penitence can not be separated from sharing God’s perspective, which is acquired by sharing the experience of Jesus’ walk. I think of the patriarch Joseph’s ability to see God’s hand in his suffering at the hands of his brothers. I think of Joshua’s recounting Israel’s history in Joshua 24, where he sees God’s blessing in spite of Israel’s failures. I think of Peter’s assessment of the role of godless men in the crucifixion of Jesus (Acts 2:23). Coming into agreement with the way God sees things is the essence of repentance. We do not repent in an experiential vacuum. We repent as we come to our senses through special experiences of suffering and pain.

It is sometimes hard to see God’s hand when we are suffering injustice. How can we have a relaxed attitude in the face of a wrong suffered? It is easy to discern an injustice. It is much harder to see God’s hand in it and to respond graciously. In this chapter, I want to talk about two controversial trials. Their verdicts upset a lot of people and left everyone with questions. Both trials were filled with unique circumstances. The sense of injustice that was raised in each trial has left many people stunned. The question I want to ask is - How is a Christian to respond to the pain of injustice? How can injustice lead to deep understanding and fellowship with God?

The Simpson trial

The trial of O.J. Simpson, a prominent athlete, movie personality, and sportscaster who was accused of the brutal murder of his former wife and a companion, will long be remembered as the trial conducted on national television. This trial and verdict touched a nerve in our culture with the effect of escalated racial tension. The civil trial that followed the criminal trial did little to erase the memory from our minds of the hours of testimony and the dramatic verdict of the criminal trial. As one woman announced to the nation on a popular talk show after the verdict, “I have now become a racist.” OJ Simpson was declared “not

guilty.” The vast majority of white onlookers were shocked by the verdict in light of what seemed like clear and overwhelming evidence to the contrary. What was nearly as shocking to many whites was the fact that the majority of African Americans had a very different view of the justice of the verdict.

Three spheres or perspectives are necessary in understanding this verdict. First, the acquittal of the defendant made no sense to many who were white and to some who were black. Second, most white people did not appreciate the broader issue of the struggle of African-Americans with the judicial system. Third, the hand of God in the affairs of our lives can too often be missed and I think it may have been missed in this trial. To understand the Simpson verdict, we must visit another trial. Let me share with you a part of the manuscript of the trial of Jesus.

Matthew 27

“Now Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor questioned Him, saying, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And Jesus said to him, " {It is as} you say." And while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He made no answer. Then Pilate *said to Him, "Do You not hear how many things they testify against You?" And He did not answer him with regard to even a {single} charge, so that the governor was quite amazed. Now at {the} feast the governor was accustomed to release for the multitude {any} one prisoner whom they wanted. And they were holding at that time a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. When therefore they were gathered together, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you? Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew that because of envy they had delivered Him up. And while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that righteous Man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him." But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the multitudes to ask for Barabbas, and to put Jesus to death. But the governor answered and said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?" And they said, "Barabbas." Pilate *said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all *said, "Let Him be crucified!" And he said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they kept shouting all the more, saying, "Let Him be crucified!" And when Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the multitude, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see {to that} yourselves." And all the people answered and said, "His blood {be} on us and on our children!" Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he delivered Him to be crucified.

Three levels of meaning

We must view this trial on three levels if we are to understand it. On the surface it seems very unfair. A just man is condemned and a guilty man is set free. But why? How could this happen? The facts were clear yet the verdict seemed to ignore the facts completely.

There is a second level that is very important if we are to understand this verdict. The evidence presented at the trial of Jesus was not the whole story. There was a lot going on that did not make the record. If we do not understand the cultural-political context we will misunderstand the event. The social, political forces are vital. The religious and political leaders feared that Jesus would displace them, so they wanted Him out of the way and persuaded the crowd to turn on Him. The crowd included people who were deeply disappointed that Jesus did not turn out to be the Messiah they wanted and expected. In their minds he was a liar and a fraud. Jesus became a symbol of issues that had little to do with the lack of evidence against him. People were voting their fear, their anger, and their distrust.

There is a third level that is also important for us to understand. A Divine plan was at work. The hand of God was guiding the events.

Acts 2:22-23

“Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, -- this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.”

As strange as it may seem, God was using the injustice of this trial to bring about the most strategic move in his plan to redeem his people. There was a gross miscarriage of justice, but it bore fruit for all races and ages. Sometimes there are defeats that are greater than victories.

We are now ready to revisit the Simpson trial and see it also from three levels.

FIRST: The Simpson trial on the surface

This trial was unique in that most Americans had a chance to see the whole procedure and in a sense sit as a jury. Nearly 70% of America concluded that the evidence of Mr. Simpson's guilt was so compelling that they were stunned and angry at the acquittal. The DNA, the diaries, the attempted escape, and the improbability of a highly sophisticated and coordinated LAPD cover-up all lead to a guilty verdict in the minds of most people.

There is a second alarming fact in this case. The difference of opinion among black and white people polled is dramatic. 77% of whites vote guilty, 72% of blacks vote not guilty. Why? This suggests that the broader issue might be the struggle of African-Americans with the judicial system - the social/political issues. The issues that are just beneath the surface may trump the physical evidence.

SECOND: The broader issue of the struggle of African-Americans with the judicial system

It is hard for many white people to understand the bitterness, fear, and hopelessness that many black people feel in the hands of a system that seems too often to be used unfairly against them. At a leadership conference some time ago, I roomed with a prominent black pastor from Dallas, Texas. He shared with me his experience while a student in southern

California. He was stopped by a patrolman and beaten to within an inch of his life, for reasons unknown to him. When he saw the Rodney King tapes where police were beating a black man while on the ground, he didn't see a bizarre act of a few irresponsible officers out of control, he saw an evil, unjust system exposed.

With the OJ Simpson verdict, many white people have a chance for the first time to feel the rage, fear, and despair that blacks have felt for over 200 years. Can you imagine a series of many OJ Simpson verdicts? What would be the result in the hardening of a white person's heart toward the system? Especially if they, like African-Americans, felt powerless to change it and ignored when they protested against it.

What was on trial here in the minds of many was not only or primarily OJ Simpson (he was a small fry). What was on trial was the system exemplified by the LAPD's image of incompetence, prejudice, and unrepentant injustice. The crowds that cheered "Go OJ" as he was being chased by the LAPD after the crime left many of us confused. Why were they cheering him on? The writing was on the wall already; it was not OJ, but the system, that was in trouble. The same type of cheers were heard again after the verdict. "The system has finally been exposed. The people have won." This is what many black people were trying to say. I am forced to realize that I remain insensitive until I can appreciate, if not share, the pain and distrust that is felt by my black brothers and sisters. I now know my black friends in a way that I did not know them before. I feel what they have felt. I share some of their frustration. I know them now better than I did before. There is something about shared suffering that brings a "fellowship" of souls.

THIRD: The hand of God in the affairs of life

There is a third perspective. It is the area where I see God's hand in this trial. We might highlight three separate issues.

First, what a society sows it will reap. I am sure that many black mothers wondered if God heard their cries in the 40's, 50's and 60's when they lost their sons to angry lynch mobs, only to have the murderers go free in spite of eye witnesses testimony? God heard those cries and he has responded. Society reaps what it sows. A culture that thinks it has escaped and gotten off the hook has simply postponed the wailing of its forgotten mothers, sisters, and daughters. God will not be mocked - there is perhaps a strange justice in this verdict even if Mr. Simpson committed the crimes.

Some of us have learned a new term in following the Simpson trial - JURY NULLIFICATION- which means the jury responds to a bigger issue than the technical letter of the law and the superficial evidence. There are times when a jury votes its broader conscience. Racial understanding and reconciliation will not take place until there is an understanding of the American Black experience with the system, by whites. In this trial, this tension between black Americans and "the system" is an important part of the bigger picture.

Second, with this verdict we are reminded that our hope must not rest in the institutions of our land, but in God. OJ Simpson is not a free man, nor will he elude justice if he is guilty.

He, along with each of us, will face a judge who will know the truth and judge with equity. We must leave ultimate justice to God in cases like this.

There is a Tower of Babel in our time that is less stable today because of this trial. For many Americans, our hope has been in our system of government, our culture, and our nation, not in God. We have established justice, or so we think. We can bring peace, prosperity, and happiness by our own wisdom, education, and might. God is not as impressed as we are with ourselves and our feeble attempt at managing life our way.

Perhaps the most dramatic symbol of the American confidence in the power of humanity, globalization, and economic salvation is the World Trade Center in New York with its two gigantic towers. There could hardly be a better candidate for a modern "Tower of Babel." These massive structures were a sign of man's power to control his own destiny. In less than an hour these beautiful towers lay in rubble after terrorists flew two commercial airliners into them. The false might and fragile confidence of man's ability to manage life was exposed. God has much to offer sinners who feel hopeless. He has nothing to offer arrogant and self-sufficient dreamers who have graduated from a need for God.

You say, "but America was founded as a Christian nation: In God we trust." America borrowed Biblical values and vocabulary. We like God's Kingdom but we are very clear in insisting that the King is optional. America has consigned Christ and the gospel to the reservation as a respected part of our heritage but of little significance in the present life of our culture or nation. He is at best a piece of antique furniture with sentimental significance but no real function.

With the OJ Simpson verdict and the World Trade Tower disaster, God is reminding us that we cannot manage our affairs very well, but I suspect we will keep trying. Those who have ears to hear will repent. They will turn from their trust in and blindness to a world that is inherently unjust. This world does not have an appetite for the truth, it wars with itself in its search for the waters of life in empty cisterns which hold no water. Those who have ears to hear will repent and turn an ear to the word of the cross.

There is a third issue. Some of us are asking, "how would God use such injustices to accomplish His will?" But have we forgotten how God used Joseph's brothers to save his brethren? Have we forgotten how He used the Assyrians to humble Israel? Have we forgotten the trial of our Lord and the injustice of the cross to bring salvation to all mankind?

We who know the good news understand injustice in a way that warms our hearts, quiets our fears, and frees our love. We, like Barabbas, were set free while Jesus suffered for us. Be we white or black - we can live with injustice because we have benefited from it. Christ, who knew no sin became sin on our behalf that we might have eternal life. We can live with injustice because we know that only God will judge with truth and that every tear will one day be wiped away and every inequity righted.

For those who have ears to hear

For those who have ears to hear, the Simpson trial can bring unexpected blessings, like a sensitivity to the experience of Black brothers and sisters. Without this sensitivity there will be no racial reconciliation. Many of us who are white now understand just a little bit more what it is like to be black. We have felt the injustice at the hands of a system that was driven by factors other than the immediate evidence. In a special way, white people know black people in a way they did not before. They share a common experience of suffering.

The most dramatic lesson, however, may lie in the fact that, like Barabbas in Jesus' trial, we who deserved to be convicted, are set free as Jesus is condemned. We are made sensitive to the injustice that Jesus experienced because of our sins. We know him as we are sensitive to his suffering and our sharing in it.

Are you as thankful as you are confused or angry? We who are in Christ know a lot about living with injustice, for we worship one who was convicted for our guilt. We know a lot about walking away free when we deserved condemnation.

Repentance is seeing things as God sees them. Repentance is a whole lot more than just dealing with moral failure. It means dying to our selfish hopes. It means dying to our rights and excuses. It means coming home from a distant land where we are calling the shots. It means bringing a perspective to social injustice that is both humbling, eye opening, and compassionate. It means experiencing and expressing grace. But most of all, it means experiencing and acknowledging the suffering and pain of life's injustices as Jesus did. We know him as we walk in his steps and the fellowship of his suffering. The effect of shared suffering is to melt our pride, enable us to see ourselves and God in a new way, and to know Christ, the suffering servant.

A remarkable story is told by David Seamands in an article entitled "The Kamikaze of God" (on pp. 58-60 of the 12/3/01 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY). The story involves two military men - one American and one Japanese - who were motivated by hate throughout most of the war, but who were touched by the Holy Spirit and eventually reconciled to God and to each other.

The American was Sergeant Jacob ("Jake") DeShazer. He was stationed at an Army air base in Oregon when news came of the Pearl Harbor attack. Inflamed with a desire for revenge, he eagerly volunteered for what came to be known as "Doolittle's Raiders." This secret and dangerous mission called for flying long-range B-52 bombers from aircraft carriers into Japanese airspace and, at a low altitude to avoid radar detection, bombing key Japanese cities. Afterward the bombers were to make their way to friendly Chinese airbases for landing.

Unfortunately, the Japanese spotted the convoy of naval vessels, so the B-25s had to take off early, greatly increasing the distance needed to reach Japan from the original 400 miles. Therefore, many of the pilots had to ditch their planes and parachute to the ground in unfamiliar territory after bombing Tokyo and other cities. Most of them made it to friendly Chinese territory, but the others - including DeShazer - did not.

Soldiers in the Japanese Army captured the latter group and imprisoned them. The servicemen suffered round-the-clock interrogations, starvation diets, beatings, and torture. DeShazer's ordeal lasted 40 months, 34 of them in solitary confinement. During the latter period, he and his fellow prisoners begged for books. Their captors finally fulfilled the prisoners' request. Among the books thus supplied were a copy of the American Standard Version of the Bible.

Each prisoner eagerly read this Bible for his allotted three weeks. When it was DeShazer's turn, he read it through several times. He memorized passages such as the Sermon on the Mount and I Corinthians 13. The Holy Spirit worked through this exposure to the Word to melt DeShazer's heart. On June 8, 1944, DeShazer prayed for forgiveness and joyfully gave his life to Christ.

Following this experience, DeShazer sought to be obedient to the Lord's command to love one's enemies by treating his cruel guards with respect and kindness.

After the war, DeShazer returned to Japan to share his testimony and minister Christ's love to the people there. After Bible college in Seattle, he and his new wife sailed for Japan and arrived in December 1948. A large crowd greeted them, because the Japanese press learned of their mission in advance. The people wanted to see the member of the bold and daring Doolittle's Raiders who suffered so much at the hands of their army during the war but who now wanted to reach out to them with love. DeShazer's testimony was published in a brochure entitled, "I Was A Prisoner of Japan," which circulated throughout the country. The Japanese man in this story was Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, the fearless pilot who led the 360 bombers that attacked Pearl Harbor. Because of his success in this mission, Fuchida received a hero's welcome in his homeland, as well as an audience with Emperor Hirohito. Beginning with Pearl Harbor and throughout the war, Fuchida sensed that something was protecting him. After the Pearl Harbor attack, he examined his plane and found 20 large anti-aircraft holes, plus a nearly-broken main control wire. In August 1945, he was stationed in Hiroshima. A call came summoning him to headquarters. He left the city at 5:00 pm; the next morning at 8:00 am, it was destroyed by the first atomic bomb. On the following day, he received orders to return to Hiroshima to perform a 3-day inspection of the damage with other officers. The high levels of radiation in the rubble caused most of the officers to fall seriously ill and die, but Fuchida's health remained perfectly normal.

After the war, Fuchida heard stories of how well Japanese prisoners were treated in the U.S. He long pondered a phrase from the Emperor's surrender broadcast: "To pave the way for a grand peace for all generations to come." Increasingly, Fuchida was convinced that only a supernatural source could bring about the Emperor's wish.

In October 1948, he was waiting for a train in Tokyo when someone handed him DeShazer's testimony brochure. Fuchida was greatly interested to read this account by one of the famous Doolittle's Raiders. This prompted him to buy a Bible. When he read it, he was gripped by its message. He was especially taken with Jesus' words from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:24) The realization that this prayer included him, and that Jesus died for him, brought him to tears. He gave his life to Christ in

September 1949. He was baptized on Easter Sunday 1949 with DeShazer, now a close friend, witnessing the ceremony.

In the years following, Fuchida and DeShazer spoke to large crowds, both separately and together. Their ministry brought thousands more Japanese to Christ.

This story is a perfect example of how God can bring good out of evil. As the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:28, "...in all things God works for the good of those who have been called according to his purpose."