

## Jesus, Commission'd From Above

*Ambrose Serle (1742–1812)*

Jesus, commission'd from above,  
Descends to men below,  
And shows from whence the springs of love  
In endless currents flow.

He, whom the boundless heaven adores,  
Whom angels long to see,  
Quitted with joy those blissful shores,  
Ambassador to me!

To me, a worm, a sinful clod,  
A rebel all forlorn:  
A foe, a traitor, to my God,  
And of a traitor born.

To me, who never sought His grace,  
Who mock'd His sacred word:  
Who never knew or loved His face,  
But all His will abhorr'd.

To me, who could not ever praise  
When His kind heart I knew,  
But sought a thousand devious ways  
Rather than find the true:

Yet this redeeming Angel came  
So vile a worm to bless;  
He took with gladness all my blame,  
And gave His righteousness.

Oh that my languid heart might glow  
With ardour all divine!  
And, for more love than seraphs know,  
Like burning seraphs shine!



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## ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### **The Human Problem**

*Brett Williams*

In 1947, the French Nobel Laureate Albert Camus wrote the novel *The Plague*. The fictional story is set in the city of Oran in French Algeria. Oran, as actually happened many times in its history, experienced a terrible plague and the town was eventually quarantined and sealed off. The occupants, some residents and others simply passing through, suddenly find themselves trapped in the town with no escape and the prospect of death encroaching. The allegorical narrative centers around several main characters, each of whom represent a specific worldview. The cast includes an atheistic physician who, through his medicinal knowledge, seeks to find a cure; a suicidal and delusional introvert whose mood ebbs and flows with changing news; an educated civil employee who overcomes personal disappointment to organize volunteers in the community during the long period of tragedy; a visiting Parisian journalist who desperately misses his wife; and a respected Jesuit priest whose indomitable spirit is supported by his fidelity and devotion to God and others.

Each character tries, in his own way, to overcome the horrors of the plague, only to find suffering unavoidable. The physician spends the entirety of the novel attempting to alleviate pain and suffering but realizes that he is fighting a losing battle. When the plague worsens, the eccentric introvert attempts suicide, then tries to become friendly, then ends up reverting back to his delusions and finally begins randomly shooting at people to hasten death. The stoic civil servant, though trustworthy and intelligent, eventually contracts the dreaded disease. The journalist plans a foolhardy escape over the barricades to return to his wife but ultimately decides to remain in the city as he develops a sense of cultural connection. The priest believes that the disease is the result of divine judgment. Though he personally cares for the infirmed and encourages the other characters to trust in God, in the end the priest succumbs to the plague and dies. Death comes sporadically as each finally accepts the futility and randomness of life.

Camus, an early postmodern, uses these characters to promote the idea of the absurdity of existence. Each character represents some form of modernity, either attempting to find meaning through science, self-improvement, human ingenuity, or cultural systems. Even the priest, representing religion and faith, is at first praised for offering hope, but ultimately cannot recon-

cile a transcendent, omnipotent God with human suffering. God cannot understand pain and death because God cannot suffer and die. In the end, the only success is that of the civil servant, who, by embracing the human spirit, experiences some small semblance of happiness. According to Camus, humanity must stop looking for outside help through theism, science, or political theory. It must find its own way. Camus' critique of finding joy and meaning within a structure is correct. Every attempted human explanation fails to ultimately address the true problem—inescapable death.

Scripture knows something about suffering and death. Many biblical characters, like the trapped residents of Oran, were faced with death while questioning God's actions. "Some were tortured...others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword" (Hebrews 11:35–37). Throughout its pages, humans (like Job's friends) seek to explain the human problem by positing worldviews, but ultimately fail to adequately understand the human experience. Scripture shares Camus' critique of finding ultimate answers in methods, explanations, or even theism.

The gospel, however, is unique, not because it offers a better explanation or varying system but because it offers something entirely different—a story. A story about the Divine embracing the authentic human experience, not merely existing in some aloof transcendence. A story about the Divine suffering and knowing real temptation, not callously watching from afar. A story about accepting death, not attempting to escape it. A story about overcoming the plague of sin, not by human accomplishment or ingenuity, but by humble faith. A story of victory through pain, not the avoidance of it. A story of life because of one Man's death, not life despite death. A story of the triumph of the human spirit through the Holy Spirit. The gospel is a message from God, written through humans to humans.

Camus' critique is correct, though incomplete. He recognizes the futility of salvation through systems. Every human explanation is utterly insufficient. Hope must come from outside of the world, outside of ourselves. Simultaneously, any answer to the human experience of pain and death must also be just that: human. The answer lies both outside and inside of humanity. Only the gospel accomplishes both. The gospel offers a story that is transcendent yet immanent, fully divine yet fully human.

"Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6–8).

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This essay is by Brett Williams, Provost and Executive Vice President at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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