Robinson Crusoe and Those Who Have Never Heard of Christ

Published in 1719 by Daniel Defoe, the famous story of a man shipwrecked on an uninhabited island for 28 years has captivated readers throughout generations. The book has been called the first bestseller in the world and has spawned several cinematic versions depicting the triumph of the human spirit over loneliness and the powers of nature. But what was that story really about? Few remember that in the original story Crusoe meets Christ in his island before he ever meets Friday. Defoe depicts Crusoe’s spiritual journey, from reading God’s general revelation in the nature and His special revelation in the Bible, to the touching scene where Crusoe kneels and accepts Christ with tears of joy flowing down his cheeks. And what finally happened to Friday, a man who had never heard of Christ and would never have heard unless God in his providence hurled Crusoe onto that cursed island for many years? This workshop allows us to study the world-famous story in the light of Romans 1 and 2 and to analyze how Defoe’s story reflects his understanding of 18th century natural theology and reverence of the Scriptures – themes that have generally gone unnoticed by modern readers and neglected by movie depictions.

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1. General and special revelation according to the Scripture (Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-31; Romans 1:19-23; 2:12-16; Hebrews. 1:1-2)
2. Daniel (De)Foe (1660-1731) - The hand that wrote about the world-famous footprint   
   1. About the author and his book.
      1. Puritan family; seminary; bankrupt business; politics; twice imprisoned, pilloried, started *The Review* political magazine (1704-1713).
      2. 1719: *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*
         1. Partly based on real story of Alexander Selkirk (1704) who was shipwrecked for four years.
         2. Themes: religion, culture, morality and happiness.
         3. The book became very popular, and it was accepted in all societal levels.
         4. 1719 sequel: *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe.*
3. The story Survival and Salvation
   1. Fateful journey from Brazil to Africa begins 1st September 1659 ends in a shipwreck: “SEPTEMBER 30, 1659 – I poor miserable Robinson Crusoe, being shipwrecked during a dreadful storm in the offing, came on shore on the dismal, unfortunate island, which I called ‘The Island of Despair’, all the rest of the ships company being drowned, and myself almost dead.”
   2. Months fighting for survival in harsh conditions. His only companions are one dog, two cats and a parrot. He gets some first provisions from the wreckage of the ship near the shore. Also two Bibles.
   3. 10 months after the shipwreck Crusoe finds Christ - Defoe’s depiction:   
      1. Illness and a dreadful dream lead to spiritual awakening:
         1. “… I had this terrible dream: I thought that I was sitting on the ground, on the outside of my wall, where I was when the storm blew after earthquake, and that I saw a man descended from a great black cloud, in a bright flame of fire, and light upon the ground. He was all over as bright as a flame, so that I could but just bear to look towards him; his countenance was most inexpressibly dreadful, impossible or words to describe. When he stepped upon the ground with his feet, I thought the earth trembled, just as it had done before he earthquake, and all the air looked, to my apprehension, as if it had been filled with flashes of fire. He was sooner landed upon the earth, but he moved forward towards me, with a long spear or weapon in his hand, to kill me; and when he came to a rising ground, at some distance, he spoke to me – or I heard a voice so terrible that it is impossible to express the terror of it. All that I can say I understood was this: ‘Seeing all these things have not brought thee to repentance, now thou shalt die;’ at which words, I thought he lifted up the spear that was in his hand to kill me…” (117)
      2. Reading God’s natural revelation
         1. “[I] sat down upon the ground, looking out upon the sea, which was just before me, and very calm and smooth. As I sat here some such thoughts as these occurred to me: What is this earth and sea, of which I have seen so much? Whence is it produced? And what am I, and all other creatures wild and tame, human and brutal? Whence are we? Sure we are all made by some secret Power, who formed the earth and sea, the air and sky. And who is that? Then it followed most naturally, it is God that has made all.” (122-123)
      3. From Scripture to Christ
         1. “In the morning I took he Bible; and beginning at the New Testament, I began seriously to read it … I found my heart more deeply and sincerely affected with the wickedness of my past life. The impression of my dream revived; and the words, ‘All these things have not brought thee to repentance,’ ran seriously through my thoughts. I was earnestly begging God to give me repentance, when it happened providentially, the very day, that, reading Scripture, I came to these words: ‘He is exalted a Prince and a Savior, to give repentance and to give remission.’ I threw down the book; and with my heart as well as my hands lifted up to heaven, in a kind of ecstasy of joy, I cried out aloud, ‘Jesus, thou son of David! Jesus, thou exalted Prince and Saviour! give me repentance!’ This was the first time I could say, in the true sense of the words, that I prayed in all my life; for now I prayed with a sense of my condition, and a true Scripture view of hope, founded on the encouragement of the Word of God…” (127-128)
      4. Finding contentment and gratitude towards God
         1. “My condition began now to be, though no less miserable as to my way of living, yet much easier to my mind; and my thoughts being directed by a constant reading the Scripture and praying to God, to things of a higher nature, I had a great deal of comfort within, which till now I knew nothing of … I had now been in this unhappy island above ten months … and I firmly believe that no human shape had ever set foot upon that place.” (129, 130)
         2. “SEPT 30 – I was now come to the unhappy **anniversary** of my landing. I cast up the notches of my post, and found I had been on shore three hundred and sixty-five-days. I kept this day as a solemn fast, setting it apart for religious exercise, prostrating myself on the ground with the most serious humiliation, confessing my sins to God, acknowledging His righteous judgements upon me, and praying Him to have mercy on me through Jesus Christ … as my life was a life of sorrow one way, so it was a life of mercy another; and I wanted nothing to make it a life of comfort but to be able to make my senses of God’s righteousness to me, and care over me in this condition, be my daily consolation…” (137, 175)
4. After 15 years: A single footprint in the sand.
   1. Finding the footprint brings fear and confusion to Crusoe’s life.   
      1. “It happened one day, about noon, going towards my boat, I was exceedingly surprised with the print of a man’s naked foot on the shore, which was very plain to be seen on the sand. I stood like one thunderstruck, or as if I had seen an apparition. I listened, I looked around me, but I could hear nothing, nor see anything; I went up to a rising ground to look farther; I went up the shore, but it was all one; I could see no other impression but that one … there was exactly that print of a foot – toes, heel, and every part of a foot. How it came tither I knew not, nor could I in the least imagine…” (203-204)
   2. Later Robinson finds other signs of humans other side of the island: human skulls and bones on the beach, A place where man-eating tribe during a high-tide visits the island to ritualistically eat their captives.
   3. Robinson makes plans and preparations to kill the visitors when they come, but theological and ethical reflections change his mind.
      1. “I debated this very often with myself thus: ‘How do I know what God Himself judges in this particular case? It is certain these people do not commit this as a crime; it is not against their own consciences reproving, or their light reproaching them; they do not know it to be an offence, and then commit it in defiance of divine justice, as we do in almost all the sins we commit. They think I no more a crime to kill a captive taken in war than we do to kill an ox … although the usage they gave one another was thus brutish and inhuman, yet it was really nothing to me: these people had done me no injury … It was no my business to meddle with them, unless they first attacked me … Religion joined in with this prudential resolution; and I was convinced now, many ways, that I was perfectly out of my duty when I was laying all my bloody schemes for the destruction of innocent creatures – I mean innocent as to me. As to the crimes they were guilty of towards one another, I had nothing to do with them; they were national, and I ought to leave them to the justice of God, who is the Governor of nations, and knows how, by national punishments, to make a just retribution for national offences, and to bring public judgements upon those who offend in public manner, by such ways as best please Him. This appeared so clear to me now, that nothing was greater satisfaction to me than that I had not been suffered to do a thing which I now saw so much reason to believe would have been no less a sin than that of willful murder if I had committed it; and I gave most humble thanks on my knees to God, that He had thus delivered me from blood-guiltiness…” (227-228).
5. After 26 Years – Saving Friday from death and leading him to know Christ
   1. Saving Friday from a cannibalistic ritual.
   2. Teaching Friday Christian truths about God and Christ  
      1. Existence of one true God by natural revelation: ““During the long time that Friday had now been with me, and that he began to speak to me, and understand me, I was not wanting to lay a foundation of religious knowledge in his mind; particularly I asked him one time, who made him … who made the sea, the ground we walked on, and the hills and woods. He told me, ‘It was one Benamuckee, that lived beyond all;’ he could describe nothing of this great person, but that he was very old, ‘much older’, he said, ‘than the sea or land, than the moon or the stars.’ I asked him if the people who die in his country went away anywhere? He said, ‘Yes; they all went to Benamuckee.’ Then I asked him whether those they eat up went thither too. He said, ‘Yes.’ From these things, I began to instruct him in the knowledge of the true God; I told him that the great Maker of all things lived up there, pointing up towards heaven; that He governed the world by the same power and providence by which He made it; that He was omnipotent, and could do everything for us, give everything to us, take everything from us; and thus, by degrees, I opened his eyes. (282-283)
      2. Knowing Christ as Savior: “He listened with great attention and received with pleasure the notion of Jesus Christ being sent to redeem us; and of the manner of making our prayers to God, and His being able to hear us, even in heaven. He told me one day, that if our God could hear us, up beyond the sun, he must needs be greater God than their Benamuckee, who lived but a little way off, and yet could not hear till they went up to the mountains where he dwelt to speak to them…” (283)
   3. Teaching Friday unsuccessfully about the existence of the devil leads Crusoe realize the limits of General revelation and the value and need of special revelation in Christ through the Gospels.
6. Two significant theological themes of the Crusoe’s story
   1. Getting to know God via natural and special revelation:   
      1. “… it was a testimony to me, how the mere notions of nature, though they will guide reasonable creatures to the knowledge of a God, and of a worship or homage due to the supreme being of God, as the consequence of our nature, yet nothing but divine revelation can from the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and of redemption purchased for us; of a Mediator of the new covenant, and of an Intercessor at the footstool of God’s throne; I say, nothing but a revelation from Heaven can form these in the soul; and that, therefore, the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I mean the Word of God, and the Spirit of God, promised for the guide and sanctifier of His people, are the absolutely necessary instructors of the souls of men in the saving knowledge of God and the means of salvation.” (286)
   2. Providence and the question of the unreached who have never heard about Christ
      1. “…when I reflected that in this solitary life which I have been confined to, I had not only been moved to look up to heaven myself, and to seek the Hand that had brought me here, but was now to be made an instrument, under Providence, to save the life, and for aught I knew, the soul of a poor savage, and bring him to the true knowledge of religion and of the Christian doctrine, that he might know Christ Jesus, in whom is life eternal; I say, when I reflected upon all these things, a secret joy ran through every part of my soul, and I frequently rejoiced that ever I was brought to this place, which I had so of the thought the most dreadful of all afflictions that could possibly have befallen me … the hours between Friday and me was such as made the three years which we lived there together perfectly and completely happy, if any such thing as complete happiness can be formed in a sublunary state. This savage was now a good Christian, a much better than I…” (287-288)
7. Crusoe leaves the island after 28 years.
   1. “And thus I left the island, the 19th of December, as I found by the ship’s account, in the year 1686, after I had been upon it eight-and-twenty years, two months, and nineteen days; being delivered from this second captivity the same day of the month that I first made my escape in the long-boat from among the Moors of Salle. In this vessel, after a long voyage, I arrived in England in the 11th of June, in the year 1687, having been thirty-five years absent.”

***Suggested Readings:***

**Daniel Defoe: Robinson Crusoe**   
  
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**Robinson Crusoe (Wikipedia)** [**https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robinson\_Crusoe**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robinson_Crusoe)