

The Dark Side of the Moon

How long has it been since you heard words like these from the pulpit? *“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, ... for our God is a consuming fire.”* (Heb. 10:31; 12:29)? *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body. Therefore, knowing the fear/terror of the Lord, we persuade men.”* (2 Cor. 5:10-11).

The moon with its soft illumination has been romanticized in many love songs. That might have brought love and kisses, but who ever sang about the other face of the moon – the dark side? It is ignored because it does not fit our blissful preoccupations.

Last week’s essay pointed out that all the beautiful and inspiring things of nature do not actually reveal the love of God. In nature it seems that every pleasant and productive thing has an opposite that is undesirable and destructive also, as we illustrated. It is like the beautiful and inspiring mountains which sometimes kill individuals and cities by snow slides, land slides, and catastrophic eruptions.

Regardless of the type of our music, we have always sung songs praising God for his love, goodness, and majesty though they were interspersed among songs of petition, aspiration, confession, hope, and exhortation. In the last quarter century, with the emphasis on the grace and goodness of God, our singing has been more a litany of praise. Our songs and sermons express little fear, confession, or insecurity because of our sinfulness, and urgency of preparation for judgment. God is made to be a one-sided character whose nature is only love and goodness. In order to jar us back into reality, let us look into the other face of God.

Our first picture of God is in the creation account of Genesis. It is thrilling until the first man and woman disobeyed God. As a consequence of one infraction God has allowed the billions of their descendants to suffer and die. Actually, that is not clearly taught in the creation account and, as I recall, no OT prophet ever attributed man’s condition to Adam’s sin. In the drama of Job in which the cause of pain and suffering were explored, no blame was directed to Adam and Eve. But Paul developed some theological conclusions relating to them.

If God is all-knowing and almighty, then he surely knew before he created man that he would become corrupt. Then because of that sinfulness he later destroyed all mankind – men, women, children, infants – except for Noah’s family. That destruction was in retribution rather than a purifying of mankind, for most of humanity has lived in sin since that event.

Throughout the old covenant history, we see a nationalistic God who avenged the enemies of Israel, often taking the lives of innocent children. Praising God for destroying their enemies was a sort of self-congratulation. They saw the loving face of God while the vanquished saw an awesomely cruel image. Even some of the words of praise we sing now with uplifted hands are from the psalms of praise for God’s blessings on national Israel in defeating their enemies in battle.

Jesus came as savior of the world yet there was no thought that all of the world would be saved. Very early he urged, *“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few”* (Matt. 7:13-14). Need I review all the passages that reveal that most of the inhabitants of this earth will die in their sins? We can sing “Christ’s love has set me free” but most of the world is yet in sin. We can sing in self-congratulation “God is so good, he’s so good to me” while thousands, even millions, of children are suffering miserable disease and starvation.

Did Jesus not come in great power through the Roman army and bring extreme suffering and dissolution of the earthly kingdom in the destruction of Jerusalem which he had predicted in the Olivet discourse? And for you who are futurists, do you not expect him to return and lead a physical army in destroying the enemies? If so, will the ones being destroyed perceive the face of a prince of peace or of an avenger?

God has manifested himself in a fleshly form whose giving of himself offers grace to us all. Those who accept his grace see God as a loving personality. They no longer serve God out of fear – unless they fall away from that grace. All people do not accept the grace offered. Should they fear? Shouldn’t all our response be to love rather than fear? That is our popular message nowadays, but that is more fanciful than practiced. Let’s take a glance at some specific situations.

When King David had sinned so grievously in adultery, murder, and deception, Nathan was sent to him. Did Nathan start telling him about how much God loved him? No, he first had to convict him of his sin and cause him to see how wretched he was in the eyes of his God. Did he become fearful of God? Conviction of sin brings fear.

On Pentecost, Peter did not start telling of the love of God in sending Jesus, that Jesus wanted them to be baptized, and that they should express their love by being baptized. Rather, he declared, *“.. this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men”* (Acts 2:23). He further shocked them, urging, *“Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified”* (2:36). Being cut to the heart in awesome fright, they cried out in desperation, *“What shall we do?”* It was then that Jesus became the Good News for them. After learning of and accepting God’s grace they then became happy.

After the earthquake released the prisoners in the jail in Philippi, the jailor *“.. called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, ‘Men, what must I do to be saved?’”* (Acts 16:29-30). After he and his family submitted to baptism in order to receive God’s grace, they were happy.

When Paul had the rare opportunity to speak to the governor, Felix, he did not start telling him how much God loved him but *“As he argued about justice and self-control and future judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, ‘Go away for the present; when I have opportunity I will summon you.’”* (Acts 24:25). Jesus had promised that the Spirit would *“convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment”* (John 16:8).

Looking back through the years of my ministry, I have never had a person to “come forward” explaining that he or she wanted to confess Christ and be baptized because God

loved him or her. And none said they obeyed the gospel to show their love to God and Christ. Most all of them expressed or demonstrated happiness resulting from their obedience. It was because of relief from their sins and their fearful consequences.

My guess is that you will admit that your obedience to the gospel was motivated more by fear than by love. That did not make it less effective. My guess is that also you now trust in the grace of God so that you do not live in fear and apprehension. Further, my guess is that you share my profound respect for such passages as this one: *“For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay.’ And again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (Heb. 10:26-31).

Believers can take great comfort and assurance in such passages as Hebrews 9:23-28. Man had an appointment with death and judgment, but Jesus filled those appointments for us giving us confidence that we never have to face either appointment any more. But that does not answer our questions about the dark side. The majority will not accept that grace. That being true, can we rest assured that “God is in control and will work all things for good”? Some seek an answer in the teachings of universal salvation. But if all persons will be saved unconditionally eventually, the question still remains as to why God would let evil with its miseries and death prevail until a final judgment? So, the dark side is still a mystery which we cannot explain in our finite wisdom. We must trust where we cannot see. The crescent moon may leave the major surface in darkness, but we can enjoy the moon anyway.

When we mention problematic issues and ask open-ended questions like these, we may expect warnings against asking questions that may destroy faith. Thinking people ask those questions, however, and are turned off by the happy ignorance of those who refuse even to consider the questions. If we refuse to ask hard questions, it may be due to lack of faith. Faith is purified by honest doubt. Long ago, Goethe observed, “We know accurately only when we know little; with knowledge doubt increases.” “I respect faith, but doubt is what gets you an education,” Wilson Mizner would add. And Tennyson sharpens the thought with, “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.”

I hope to add more next week. []

(Cecil Hook: September 2005)

Talkin’ Texas: These names of communities express the brighter side: Eden, Joy, Comfort, Happy, Blessing, and Prosper.