

The Gospel is piercing the Darkness

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Our darkened culture has mainstreamed the lie in Eden, calling it ‘science’.

Science, or what passes as science, claims to be able to explain nearly all phenomena, and as such, desperately wants the role of inspiring awe, wonder, and trust. Can you imagine a more fitting ‘Golden Calf’ for our age? Consider that the natural man, with his assumed autonomy (a delusional worldview), was created with a hunger to behold God’s glory. Thus, since his creational identity, or *telos* (goal or design) is one of beholding glory, in his unregenerate state he will bring his hunger for glory to created things instead of to his Creator. Scripture warns that whatever we worship instead of God, we will serve and ultimately be subjugated by it (Rom 1:22-25ff.).

Popular culture shoves Christianity’s truth claims into a subjective, private, upper story category, and considers those claims divorced from reality. We are continually slammed with this dualism—namely that our religion is merely a private, esoteric preference, and not a faithful, authoritative explanation of the real world. That’s central to the current form of darkness. For, in the futile thinking of the unbeliever, mankind is regarded as self-determined, and existing in an impersonal cosmos. This worldview of philosophic naturalism is assumed by our culture. It’s built upon the unbeliever’s heart commitments expressed in his anti-God assumptions. One of which is that he has cooperated with ‘mother earth’ or ‘cosmic chance’ to obtain a slice of existence all his own. Thus he is ‘free’ to establish his own personal ethic based upon his perceived set of ruling desires. This is reminiscent of a gospel conversation I had with my teenage neighbor: when I was explaining sin and righteousness, he interjected, “I just sort of do my own thing.” In other words, he prefers that God would leave him alone, and because he is not a great sinner, he owes God nothing.

Fallen man stakes ownership of his little collection of mammon, and thinks he is free of any lasting consequences of his decisions. He is like the man in Luke 12:15-21 who toiled with barely a pause, and planned to build larger barns. But, at the height of his ambition, his eternal soul was required of him. The great lie of naturalism is that you own yourself. It’s the great mirage of personal ownership that says: *you and your stuff are really yours through self-creation and self-propagation*. What a massive shock it will be to come to the realization that God owns everything, including the right to your own thoughts and motives. The majority of humanity will come to know who God is by way of eternal judgment, “and then they will know that I am the Lord” (see Ezek 5:13; 7:9; 18:4; 22:22). Believers need a regular ‘tune up’ to the truth

of God's relationship to, and ownership of the cosmos. "The heavens are Yours, the earth also is Yours; the world and all it contains, You have founded them" (Ps 89:11).

We live immersed in a radically man-centered philosophical climate that may 'allow' Christ to be Lord of the private expression of Christianity, but NOT Lord of the cosmos, Lord of history, Lord of all. For, our humanist, postmodern world worships the creation itself as *self-originating, self-sustaining* (self-existent), and *self-defining*. Thus, the unbeliever credits the universe as the source of his origin. He bows to the cosmos as his creator. One of my seminary classmates wrote a paper he titled, "What we cannot, not know." The thesis of his paper was drawn from Romans chapter one, namely that God's revelation of Himself in creation and conscience is so undeniably clear and indelible, that the natural man must continually studiously suppress the knowledge of God in order to escape facing God's witness to man. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Rom 1:18-21). As a parallel theme, another paper was titled, "Why we cannot, not worship." In other words, since our creational identity is that of a worshipper, we are always ready and eager to express ourselves as enthusiastic spectators of what we regard as excellent. By the grace of God in the gospel believers have received the saving work of regeneration by the Spirit which has restored our ability to be true worshippers of Yahweh (Jn 4:23-24).

Since you are created to worship, if you are not daily warming your heart at the hearth of God's majesty, holiness, love, grace, and righteousness revealed in Christ, then you will most certainly take your chilly heart to the hearth of this world. Why? 'You cannot, not worship'! Our Lord so often sets forth that all-consuming paradigm of *the spiritual inverse proportion*. In other words to the degree you fear God, you will not fear man. "I, even I, am He who comforts you. Who are you that you are afraid of man who dies and of the son of man who is made like grass, that you have forgotten the Lord your Maker, Who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth . . ." (Is 51:12-13a). If you are building on the rock of Christ's word, then you won't be building on sand (Mt 7:24-27). If you are loving God, then you won't love this world (1 Jn 2:15-16). If you are laying up treasure in heaven, then

you won't weary yourself seeking treasure here (Mt 6:19-21). If you are gathering souls with Christ, then you won't be scattering souls from Him (Mt 12:20). If you are seeking first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, then you won't be obsessed with, or apprehensive about, earthly security (Mt 6:25-34). If you are loving your enemies, then you won't be hating them and seeking your own vengeance (Mt 5:43-48). If you are seeking glory from God, then you won't be dependent upon the glory and approval of man (Jn 5:44). The list just goes on and on in regard to the nature of true spirituality expressed antithetically in inverse proportions. These inverse proportions are like a teeter totter, when God is up, man is down, and vice versa.

Those who love this present world with its darkness (Jn 3:19-21) will pass away with it (1 Jn 2:15-17). If you study the book of Revelation, you'll grasp the fact that during the tribulation, angels armed with bowls of plagues will be sent out as God's 'sheriffs' to enforce His eviction notice (Rev 16:8-17). For, the incredibly modest 'rent' of thanksgiving and praise to God Almighty Creator has not been paid. Year after year a world full of scoffers and rebels have lived 'rent free'. But, we ought to note that every impenitent person and fallen angel resents living for God's glory, and is thus an enemy of God and His glory. If a person is not a true worshipper of God, as J. C. Ryle has said, then there will be absolutely nothing for that individual to do in heaven. Thus, "there was no place found for them (Rev 20:11). God will conduct a 'clean sweep' of all 'stumbling blocks' (Mt 13:41) that have no usefulness in His Kingdom.

The spirit rulers (demons) of this present darkness (Eph 6:12) have taken men captive through philosophy (Col 2:8). These deceptive philosophies major in the abandonment of the biblical doctrine of man (the doctrine of anthropology). In regard to these empty ideologies, psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a system known as the *hierarchy of needs*. Moving up his pyramid of needs from the bottom, or foundational need: first, physical needs, then safety, then love and belonging, then esteem, then self-actualization (pursuit of the authentic self). 100 plus years of man-centered psychology have deeply affected the West. What has been lost is the biblical doctrines of God and of man. According to Holy Scripture, the *real you* is known by what you worship and serve. "Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone *as* slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?" (Rom 6:16). But, according to secular psychology, the *real you* is found in the unrestrained particular cravings of self. This apostate anthropology which passes itself off as 'behavioral science', is proliferated by humanist psychology—the tragedy being that it justifies self-worship as normal, healthy, and desirable. Is it any wonder then that within this

system, sin is justified? *After all, aren't folks merely attempting to get their needs met?* Nearly every TV program and movie promotes a worldview based upon this assumption that 'seeking to meet one's perceived needs' is not sin.

Psychology helped darken the darkness. Psychology did not 'make' the natural man as self-centered as he is, but it did alter the West's anthropology into its present humanist form—thereby normalizing a self-oriented and self-determined life—regarding it as 'healthy'. The unquestioned personal philosophy of our age is: *be true to yourself, even when being 'true' involves sexual perversion and gender anarchy.* That sentiment is precisely the 'self-actualization' at the top of Maslow's pyramid. Self as the focal point of life is our culture's unquestioned apex of existence. For in our present age, it is considered, wise, sophisticated, and even scientific to owe unquestioned loyalty to self. But, according to God's Word, to be a lover of self instead of a lover of God unleashes a veritable avalanche of sins: "For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. . ." (2 Tim 3:2-4). Like two 'book ends', the terms: "*lovers of self,*" and, "*rather than lovers of God,*" sit on either end of this catalog of egregious sins.

This 'new anthropology' (psychologically defended self-love) prides itself on weighing every imaginable obligation against self-fulfillment. As a bitter consequence, it is filled with aversion toward bending the knee to the authority of God Almighty. For, the holy God of the Bible threatens the impenitent sinner with eternal damnation. "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Lu 13:5). And such an absolute claim of justice upon sinners is considered the very epitome of a *conflict of interest* (a departure from what one considers personal good)—even though according to Scripture, self-love leads to death. But, the postmodern unbeliever, armed with his Maslowian perspective of the sovereignty of self, reasons: *why on earth should I accept a set of truth claims which assert that in my present state, I deserve eternal misery in fire and brimstone? I can hardly think of a more graphic conflict of interest than a religious system that teaches that! And, even more, supposedly my only way out of this deplorable destiny is to bow before the ire of this offended deity.*

This self-oriented reasoning described above touches a related soul-damning error embraced by this present darkness, namely that all offense, trauma of soul, loss of esteem, and all perceived interruption of personal well-being is detrimental, and to be assiduously avoided. This Maslowian influence is strikingly recognizable in modern (Evangelical) evangelism. In which the claims of Christianity must allow the

unbeliever to establish the ‘rules of engagement’—namely that the desire to come to God is based on seeking fulfillment and change through *personal* growth. Anything negative, and thus withering to self-esteem, such as iniquity, repentance, judgment, and the wrath to come is viewed as antagonistic to the goal of self-fulfillment. Thus, whatever devastates the sinner’s self-concept is viewed as an unnecessary ‘road block’ to bringing people to Christ. Consequently we see more and more evangelical leaders (in the interest of being non-offensive) questioning the need to speak out against immodesty, homosexuality, greed, fornication, and sexual perversity.

This present darkness makes offending others a crime. Every year, new laws are legislated by Western nations which make offending another person unlawful. This touches a central nerve in one of psychology’s biggest deceptions, namely that suffering (including emotional suffering, or experiencing a perceived offense—so called ‘micro-aggressions’) is regarded as ‘sin’ or infinitely worse than sin since it upsets the ‘hierarchy of needs’ pyramid. Man in his inverted thinking has replaced God. He surmises, it is no longer a holy God that defines sin as lawlessness, and that which opposes God’s character, but instead it is autonomous man who is the one who is offended! Reasoning thusly (according to secular psychology), man’s cravings are what defines his nature; anything that denies his longings is viewed as an attack upon his own personhood. This is the recycled Edenic view of independence—namely, *God is withholding your best, therefore sinning to ‘get one’s needs met’ is justified.* Man has determined to place himself in the judgment seat, displacing God as absolute arbiter of truth. How vile this is, for when man takes the Creator’s throne and crown for himself, he is setting himself up as an abomination that justly requires desolation.

How did the tectonic plates of worldview shift so violently that the *Self* came to be regarded as the inviolable holy of holies? Every Christian evangelist worth his salt realizes that the crux of the issue is this: is the focal point of reality self, or God? Or, who defines sin and suffering? Is it God, or self? Where and how was this philosophy of *self as focal point* birthed? Answer: the devil’s original self-deception produced a race of self-loving humans who have subscribed to the evil one’s own self-worshipping mindset. “How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, you who have weakened the nations! But you said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. ‘I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’ Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit” (Is 14:12-14). Sinners, in their love of darkness (loving self and sin), are acting in

accordance with the devil, the 'god of this world', the 'prince of the power of the air', "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience" (Eph 2:1-2).

Holy Scripture alone has the power to describe the scope and magnitude of the sin disaster. Consider the piercing power of the gospel in the face of psychology's assumptions. For, the gospel places self-love (2 Tim 3:2) on the cross, crucifying it vicariously in the sufferings of our blessed Substitute (Rom 8:3), and calling for its 'death sentence' to be applied and carried out daily in the believer's cross-bearing and self-denial (Mt 16:24). Consider the contrast in Jesus' words with today's therapeutic '*we're all ok*' approach to doing church. "And calling the crowd to Him with His disciples, He said to them, 'If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels'" (Mk 8:34–38). Notice three things in Jesus' gospel offer. First, the *death of a self-directed life*. Next, the pinnacle of what is at stake: *the forfeiture of one's own eternal soul*. And finally, the natural man's anticipated response: embarrassment at: 1) the prospect of proclaiming a Savior who would slay the imagined sovereignty of self, and who would require such complete loyalty, and, 2) of a Bible that would dare speak of absolutes considered hostile to man's need of esteem. No wonder why so many church practitioners today shrink from calling their congregants to turn from the idolatry of self and its ambitious dictates of self-interest!

Our Lord's description of true discipleship is graphic and bloody. For, in this imagery of death to self, Jesus gives us a picture of a condemned man forced to demonstrate his submission to Rome by bearing his own cross to the place of his own execution. To take up one's cross was to demonstrate publicly one's obedience to the authority against which he had previously rebelled. Taking up one's own cross then is the active ongoing acknowledgement of God's claims over self's claims. To take up one's cross is *to revolt against the revolt* (that primordial revolt being Adam's rebellion). Yet today, Jesus is rarely preached as preeminent Lord of the cosmos. He is rarely proclaimed in a posture of fear and trembling, as sovereign Prophet, Priest and King—Owner of one's possessions, sovereign over one's wife and children, over one's affections, interests, vocation, hobbies and even over one's own soul. Yet, for the

apostle Paul, trembling was the appropriate demeanor when proclaiming his crucified and risen Lord. “For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God” (1 Cor 2:2-4). Jesus is more often portrayed as Lord over one’s unseen spirituality but rarely depicted as absolute Lord and Owner of all—from the Milky Way, down to the ‘molecular level’ in which the believer is utterly obligated to take every thought captive in obedience to Christ (2 Cor 10:5).

Only the power of the cross of Christ applied enables former rebels to revolt against the original revolt in Eden (Rom 6:11-13). Paul could say of the power of the cross, “But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14). It is a matchless miracle by the infinite power of Christ, when a self-focused creature becomes a God-focused creature (2 Cor 5:17-18; Eph 1:19-21); and when a self-pleasing being becomes a God-pleasing being (2 Cor 5:9). Popular culture has been relentlessly stalking the church. And, when we were not on watch, the creeping heresy of *selfism* slipped in through the back door. Today the evangelical church seems enthralled with methods, marketing techniques, and bigger-than-life personalities. Biblical principles are preached with the overlapping gauze of self-improvement (2 Tim 4:4-4). The central truth of the character of God has been eclipsed by what is considered ‘practical’. The preaching of the necessity of true repentance, self-denial, and cross-bearing has given way to pithy platitudes fragrantly tintured in self-help advice. The human potential movement is the wolf at the gate eager to ravage the flock; and, that works-reliant, self-advancing movement doesn’t mind if its deception of human potential is disguised with Christian terminology. In fact, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a self-oriented grid which fits all too nicely within today’s indulgent religious life! In this climate, humans have an obese sense of self-importance.

Wherever the darkness encroaches, God, transcendent in holiness shrinks to a ‘god-concept,’ employed to fulfill a role of therapeutic helpfulness. Helpfulness has eclipsed holiness. A domesticated, ‘beck and call’ god has replaced the holy, transcendent God of the Scriptures who commands our reverential fear, and who “does what He pleases” (Ps 115:3). Like an infestation of mice, the therapeutic has been nibbling away at theology. Ecclesiastical engineers have bartered for methods in place of majesty. Pragmatism has replaced a proper biblical ecclesiology. Managers have streamlined the gospel—trimming off the hard edges to make it more palatable.

Where is the awe, trauma, wonder, and reverential fear produced by the true knowledge of God? Where is the heart-pounding message of the horrific dilemma of the unsaved man, and of the sins that are sinking him into hell? Where is the smallness and insignificance of man? The Apostle Paul speaks of the boundless true riches of Christ which ought to fill the believer's affections (Eph 3:8-9). But, modern Christianity speaks as if those riches were locked in time, tucked away and dated as if historic museum artifacts on a shelf (all but irrelevant to modern man's needs).

We are the ones who have changed, God has not changed. Answers to the darkness will evade us if we do not know why embracing self at the center is a satanic worldview—a worldview traceable to its source, Lucifer. Proper diagnosis is helpful, yet treating the symptoms alone will fall short of addressing the root cause. The holy, terrifying, sovereign, majestic God of the universe has spoken. This must be the entry point if we are to be cured of our loss of transcendence. The awe, wonder, radiant light, and delight of God Himself must be our animating cause, or our lives will degenerate into duty and performance. In the absence of His grandeur and splendor, we are left with an outward, respectable Christianity—but in reality, it's but a harvest of husks, of dead religious activity. Without a big God and a small man, perspective becomes warped. Scripture puts temporal glory in its place: "All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls off, but the word of the Lord endures forever" (1 Pet 1:24). Without heart religion, spiritual blindness becomes the acceptable norm—a 'carnage of the eyes' that have lost the savor for the sight of the glory of the Lord (2 Cor 3:18). And, instead have become occupied with things of earth. "For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is *their* appetite, and *whose* glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things" (Phil 3:18-19).

The life of the Christian is to be fueled by a regular sight and savor for the glory of God; an affection that necessarily turns daily upon an appetite for His glory. Jesus said, "Whoever eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, has eternal life" (Jn 6:51-54). That is the glory of Christ as *Source Person* in the life of the believer. A car won't run without fuel; it can be dragged by a tow strap, but it was not made for such things. Like a car's need of fuel to run, so the new creature in Christ needs a daily fresh sight of God's glory to fuel his life. Our way back to a soul-thrilling, entranced vision of God will be greatly assisted if we 'soak in the Psalms' and in the Prophets with a view to having our worship, and our broken cosmology healed. As one pastor remarked, "Read and reread the book of Isaiah until you begin to grasp the majesty of God."