

The Shining Face of God

2 Corinthians 4: 1-6

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Gerrit Scott Dawson**

I love how much children think about God. I love that they ask questions without a filter. They don't yet know that we adults have agreed not to ask some questions that we just can't answer. So they just fire away. A girl asked me last Sunday, "Who made God?" I told her to ask her father! Not really. I said she'd asked a great question and that there are lots of questions like that one. Questions without answers. Such as, "Is God strong enough to create a rock so big even he couldn't lift it?" Or, "If you try to imagine nothing, what color is it? And if it's black, isn't that something?" I realized she didn't really want a philosophical discussion or more questions. She just wanted the answer. But that question can't really be answered, I said, so we say, "There was nothing before God. He just always has been."

I know that's only half-satisfying. But it's the truth. Before anything was made, there was God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And God is eternal. The Triune God always has been. That's where we start. With God as the one who has always been and always will be. And by the way, there's only one alternative to that view. There's only one other place to start. And that's to say that matter, or energy, always has been. It has no beginning. It just always was. Either there was always energy/matter. Or before energy/matter, there was God, something eternal that brought it all into being. There's just a level of mystery even the most hardened atheist has to deal with. Why is there something and not nothing? What was before there was something? Or why has something always been? To believe in God is to realize, with the wisdom of the ages, that this universe is not self-explanatory. The universe is not self-generating. It screams out Design. It appears to have an order and a purpose that is beyond itself. It is rational and reasoned to surmise that the universe has not always been. We have a Creator. And only our Creator is eternal.

Once upon a time, before there was time, the Father spoke the world into being. Through his Word, he brought creation into existence. By his Spirit he shaped the world he had made according to his design. "Let there be light," God said, "And there was light." God brought all things into being out of nonbeing. Out of nothing, God made something. It happened by the power of his Word.

Scientists today postulate a Big Bang, a massively explosive event by which the universe we know began, as energy and matter rapidly expanded from the point of concussion. Now explanations of the universe's origins change continually through the centuries. Christ's people need to be careful never to get too wedded to one cosmology that holds present sway in a particular culture. But it's always nice when a current theory uses terms so compatible with Biblical language. Let there be light and there was light. This was the explosion out of nothing, light and energy instantly, rapidly expanding. That's a mighty act of creation.

It is that kind of act that is required to get the natural human heart to grasp who Jesus Christ is. God must create something out of nothing. If I am to see that the man Jesus of Nazareth is the eternal Son of God come to us as a man, then God must enable me to see that. And it takes the same power he used to create the universe to get a spiritually dead, hard-hearted, sinner like me to see that truth. John Knox said it with passion:

For by nature we are so dead, blind, and perverse,
That neither can we feel when we are pricked,
See the light when it shines,
Nor assent to the will of God when it is revealed,
Unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus
Quickens that which is dead,
Removes the darkness from our minds,
And bows our stubborn hearts to the obedience of his blessed will.¹

If you and I know that Jesus Christ is Lord of the universe and the Savior of sinners, it's because God has done an act of creation in our hearts. If we know in our bones that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, that's because God has made it known to us. We are the recipients of a supernatural act of creation inside our minds and hearts.

Paul wrote, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ" (vs. 8). To see in Jesus God our Savior means an act of second creation has occurred within us. Natural man does not see in Jesus of Nazareth the Creator and Redeemer of the cosmos. We may see a unique teacher, a political revolutionary, a humble and misunderstood carpenter, or even a wonder worker. But unaided, we will not believe that a man is actually God in the flesh. That a single person could bear the sins of the world. That a crucified corpse could rise from the dead. To see requires a work of the Holy Spirit to create belief in us.

Perhaps this morning, when you consider Jesus, your soul cries out with the apostle Thomas, “My Lord and my God!” Perhaps when you imagine Jesus on the cross, you feel moved to say like the thief crucified next to him, “Remember me!” Perhaps when you think of Jesus as you move through the perils of these days, you say like Peter sinking in the waves, “Lord, save!” If so, rejoice. That is evidence that God is at work in you. You have been created anew. Life has arisen from spiritual death. Light has shone in the darkness. A lost sheep has been gathered home. You did not make this up. It is making you. Even now. And if this is so, then there is nothing in this world to fear. Ultimately, no shame can shame you before his presence. No worries come true can undo you. Your worst fears realized cannot separate you from him. If you know him, it’s because of his act in your life, You belong to him because he wants you to belong to him. He has taken you to himself and at the deepest levels, no matter what happens next, all is well.

But it is not yet the case with every person. Paul is quite clear that not all who hear of Jesus come to know him as Lord, friend, brother and savior. Wherever he went, Paul spoke of Jesus with an open proclamation of the truth: this Jesus, whom we crucified, God has made both Lord and Christ. The man who died rose from the dead. He is the one by whom God will judge the world. He is the one who saves those who trust in him. This is, of course, the most wonderful news in the world. God exists. God made you. And though the world has gone wrong, and each person has done wrong, God sent us a savior. He came into the world to save sinners. He will set all things right. And this redeemer is Jesus. That’s the most wonderful announcement ever made.

But no matter how clearly he proclaimed the good news, not everyone believed. Some got downright hostile. I don’t want there to be a god. I want to be my own god. I resent being told I have sin. I want to always be right if I am true to myself. I don’t want to be saved. I want to determine my own fate. I don’t want the world to be changed according to some divine will. I want humanity to shape the world the way we think is best. Don’t impose your savior on me!

For anyone who has tried to live without God long enough to crash into your own misery, you might wonder why people persist so long in hating the good news. Paul has a forthright answer. “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case, the god of this world has blinded the eyes of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” The god of this world has blinded the eyes of unbelievers. We have an enemy. There is a power at work in the world to

keep people from seeing the reality of Christ. There is a delusional field set up to keep looking down, looking only at this moment, as if this world is all there is.

It is a power that works through distraction. And failing distraction, it works through outrage.

- Suddenly, we enter national upheaval over monuments that have gone largely ignored for decades and focus all our attention there. Meanwhile, we never dare speak of the real issues dividing us over race. We don't speak of our fears; we don't confront fatherlessness; we don't admit our stereotyping; we don't deal honestly with either racial guilt or racial anger. We're distracted.
- We have enormous anxiety and disputes over so-called bathroom laws that would never be enforceable anyway. But we say almost nothing about the idol of personal choice, and the destructive power of giving children too much power of choice. We say nothing of the scandal of parents giving their single-digit aged children choice about their gender, as if that's the road to fulfillment. We're in a delusion.
- Our science reveals ever more clearly the astounding beauty of human life from the moment of conception. But we tenure professors like the one at Princeton who asserts with a straight face that a fetus only has moral rights if the mother decides to let it live. A delusional field about the "right to choose" puts us in collusion with dehumanizing our unborn. And we wonder why we don't better value the least and the less in our culture.

This power works through distraction whenever possible. But failing distraction open hostility follows. In a so-called free society, you know there are things you may not question if you want to keep your job, your position or your television show. Opposition is met with swift, sure retribution.

And so the gospel is, as it always has been, seditious to the world order. It is revolutionary, for the Lordship of Christ calls into question the sovereignty of emperors and the financial markets. The gospel challenges the achievements of the powerful, the helplessness of the underclass, the choices of consumers, and the arrogance of the elite. It calls us to more and we resist.

The god of this world continues to create a delusional field that blinds unbelievers. And mesmerizes Christians as well. We are drowsy in our prosperous

land, drugged by the perfumed smoke coming from all our devices and distractions.

C.S. Lewis vividly evoked this reality in one of his later Narnia stories. In the book, *The Silver Chair*, several citizens of the magical land of Narnia become imprisoned by an evil witch. She keeps them in an underground chamber. The room is lit by only one dim lamp. The air is fetid and the floor only cold stone. The children and creatures try to remember Narnia: sunshine and green grass, starlight and fresh air. But the witch keeps hypnotizing them with the idea that this underland is all there is. She ridicules their ideas about Narnia. She mocks them for being childish to suppose there could actually be some fantasy world with a great cat called Aslan. She gets them to repeat hypnotically, “There is no sun. There never was a sun.” All that exists is the cave and the dimness and the witch.

But just before they are lost completely, a creature named Puddleglum steps forward. Fighting against drowsiness, he goes over to the fireplace and stamps his great foot into the flames. The pain of the fire clears his head. He begins to come back to his senses. Puddleglum speaks,

Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that’s a funny thing when you come to think about it. We’re just babies making up a game, if you’re right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow. That’s why I’m going to stand by the play world. I’m on Aslan’s side even if there isn’t any Aslan to lead it.²

It can sound like the silliest fairy tale: That God made the world and loved it so much he stepped into it as the man Jesus in order to redeem everything. It can sound so naïve to say in a cynical world that God is love, and that underneath all things the love of God flows and will prevail. It can sound so absurd to say that Jesus got up from the dead and so he is the King of all kings.

But as Lewis’ friend J.R.R Tolkien said, “There is no story men would rather find true” than the gospel. No better story has ever been told. Is it just a play-world? Maybe so. But the gospel has inspired people to lay down their lives for strangers. It has given people hope in the darkest hours. It has led us to sing at

the grave, to forgive those who hurt us and to reconcile with enemies. No other story has ever inspired more people to do more good than this gospel message.

We cannot prove that it's true. We cannot overcome the blindness of those caught in the delusional field of the world. Just like we could not make ourselves see or make our own hard hearts believe. Only God can do that. That's why we are called to pray. To wield the weapon of intercession. Lord, save. Lord open the eyes of hearts. Your kingdom come amidst the delusion of the world's kingdom. Your will be done amidst the madness of our self-will.

We pray. And, like Paul, we proclaim. The Spirit has to open spiritual eyes and unstop deaf ears. But he does it as the gospel is shared. God works as we bear witness to what the Lord has done in us. He works as we offer to pray for others when they share their pain. He works as we speak the gospel story of Jesus who came to save sinners. He works as we share how God called us out of darkness in to his marvelous his light.

If you know Christ, rejoice. A marvelous act of second creation has occurred. The God who said 'Let light shine out of the darkness' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ. If you don't know Christ, ask yourself in this moment, "Is he creating faith in me right now? Is he shining his light and opening my eyes? Will I cooperate with this work?" And if you know this, pray. Pray that others would have their eyes opened. And be available to share the story. In this way you will know the double joy of seeing God create faith out of doubt, seeing God bring out of death everlasting life.

¹ John Knox, *The Scots' Confession*, chp. 12.

² C.S. Lewis *The Silver Chair*, New York: Macmillan Books, 1953, chp. Xii.