

Outer Darkness, and Related Matters

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ‘For many are called, but few are chosen’” (Matthew 22:11-14). We’ve discussed this parable in Sunday School previously. In my view, the man is saved, because he’s there at the wedding feast, which I believe refers to the millennial Kingdom. But he’s not properly attired. He’s not fit to participate in the kingdom, perhaps because of indifference to serving Christ during his life on earth. The “wedding clothes” may represent fruit that Christ expects us to bear for Him. But where is “outer darkness”? It must be a real place, because Jesus used real reference points in His parables to teach lessons of a more abstract or spiritual nature. It’s not another term for hell.

In Genesis 1:1 we read, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” These are real places with finite dimensions, that is, with boundaries. There are three heavens: The first is our atmosphere, where the birds fly and clouds float. Beyond that is the second, what we call “space,” where the sun, moon and stars are. And beyond that is the third, God’s abode, a place invisible to us that He created for Himself. It’s His dwelling place, where He has a throne. The earth is the place He created for us to dwell in. So all creation comprises these real places in space that God created that previously didn’t exist. So, What’s outside? What’s beyond these created places, beyond the boundaries? I’m suggesting, outer darkness. A place where the saved who didn’t serve Christ, who didn’t obey Christ, who didn’t care about God’s will, have to wait out the Millennium.

“The fool hath said in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Psalm 14:1). There’s no excuse for anyone not to have fervent zeal for the Lord. God is the greatest reality there is. We all, *everyone*, should be faithfully and lovingly serving Him and experiencing Him daily. God made us expressly for the purpose of being in relationship with Him and with the necessary capacities for that purpose. We were created to be with God, to know Him, to enjoy Him, and to be like Him – *not* to be independent of Him. Even though our minds and hearts are darkened by a sin nature, a few minutes of thought should be enough to compel not only belief in God’s existence, but intense and enduring love for Him.

Chinese philosophers of ancient times reasoned (correctly, according to Psalm 19:4) that there must be a sovereign God who controls all that exists, and they called Him *ShangDi* (“the Ruler of the Universe”). Pre-Christian Greek philosophers such as Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Empedocles and Heraclitus, who likewise had no Scripture, reasoned that an infinitely great, eternally existent, transcendent Being was the uncaused Cause of all that there is. From the law of causation, they reasoned that a very great effect, all the physical world, had to have been brought into existence by an even greater Cause. A creator/sustainer God therefore must exist.

Humans all have an immaterial aspect to their being. If we were only material beings, there’d be no possibility for personal relationships, just as stones and rocks don’t have relationships with each other. We have for example free will, consciousness, and moral awareness. And we have the extraordinary capacity to think. Thoughts aren’t things, they’re more than molecules in motion. Matter can’t *think*. These immaterial aspects of humanity had to have come from outside the material, physical world. So an immaterial transcendent Being must be their source. And as there’s this immaterial aspect to our being, and as death brings the material aspect to an end, we should conclude that the immaterial part of us (let’s call it a “soul”) continues to exist after death of the body. All these immaterial components of humanity give the lie to naturalism (the supposition that only matter exists, and nothing else).

But humans have something else that requires explanation: We do evil. In the world we live in, for life to be meaningful, there must be some resolution to that problem. And as we have free will and moral awareness, then we’re accountable to the Author of morality for how we choose to live. So post-mortem judgment looms. This means unless the Creator in goodness takes the initiative to have mercy, we’re all lost. And something else: *Why* would the infinitely transcendent immaterial Being have brought humanity into existence? As the creator Being is immaterial, by analogy we humans all have an immaterial aspect. So there must be a purposeful explanation for our lives, and that would, again by analogy, have to be social. We’re evidently meant to be in personal relationship with our Creator. And if that’s so, our Creator, because He’s immaterial, would have communicated His existence and His purposes to us in a clear and truthful way.

Rational thought inescapably leads to the conclusion that God exists, and that the Bible is His self-revelation. And if we knew the immense, Creator God exists, nothing would supplant the place He should occupy in our affections and life. A fool says, There is no God. Whoever professes to believe in God but lives as if there is no God, is also a fool.

“God is love” (1 John 4:8). Why in the world would the Apostle John write this phrase? He certainly knows that God isn’t defined by love. He knows that God is also holy, and righteous, and just, and humble, and a lot more. Yet we have this text, which people in America have widely adopted as a kind of slogan for God. So we have a pervasive belief in universal salvation because . . . hey, you know, God is love. He sends no one to hell. No need for evangelistic outreach. And we have church people living as they please, without reference to the Scriptures, because, of course, God is love, and He loves us unconditionally.

True, God loves us. He loves us with a transcendent love, something we mortals know nothing of. So God brings into existence those who He knows will, when grown up, rebel against Him. He providentially supplies all that His beloved humans need: fresh air, water, and food. Some of His creatures have had their lives doubly blessed with peace and prosperity. In love, God allows us to go on breathing and with heartbeat even though we’re steeped in atheism or idolatry (or worse). He has endowed us with the “image of God,” a dignity that excels anything else in creation. He has graciously provided all that we need for our eternal salvation from condemnation, available even to those who reject the Son and despise the cross. For sure, God is love. But this isn’t what John has in mind writing this phrase.

We’ve almost totally missed why John wrote this. The First Epistle of John explains what it means to believe in Christ. As God is love, so believers are to love. We express in our lives the very same kind of transcending love as God has. If we’re in Christ, we love too. Do others have opinions, or values, or beliefs that differ from ours? So what. We love them with God’s kind of self-sacrificing, super-generous, giving kind of love. Are others ugly in speech or behavior? We love them anyway. Do others deliberately harm us? Curse us? Hate us? We love them anyway. We love not just our family members, or those in our particular local church, but everyone, just as God loves everyone. Regardless the cost.

Fifty years ago, 34-year-old Sheila Cassidy left England and a career as a surgeon to serve Christ with her life full-time. She went to Chile in South America to enter a certain nunnery there. Her intent? To love others as Christ loved her. While there she encountered a political activist wounded by gunshot. So she treated him with her surgical skills, aware that doing so would incur the wrath of Chile’s Pinochet government. As expected, she was arrested, and then tortured. Horribly tortured, in ways I cannot describe here. What they did to her was ghastly. Yet, she wrote later in “Audacity to Believe” (1977), she wouldn’t betray her revolutionary principle, the most devastating of Christ’s commandments: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If we’re a believer, the same way that God loves, we’re to love, regardless the risk.

“To him who overcomes . . .” (Revelation 2:7,11,17, 26 and 3:5,12, and 21). Seven times in these two chapters Christ offers salvation blessings to those who “overcome.” Seven times! Jesus needs to hammer something exceedingly important into our heads because we’re too dense to get it otherwise. God has put here at the very end of His Bible these radical, compelling words: We’re to be an “overcomer.” He expects it of us. Evidently not all church-goers are overcomers, because why else would Jesus specifically identify these individual persons as those who receive salvation blessing? The texts say, “To *him*,” not “to them” or “to all of you.” These are personal appeals for individuals in the church to aspire to be an overcomer.

What does it mean, to overcome? Jesus tells us, **“just as I overcame . . .”** (3:21). Jesus overcame temptation by Satan. He overcame fleshly desires. And He overcame death and all evil by voluntarily submitting to it because an agonizing death on a cross was His Father’s will. Jesus perfectly obeyed His Father. So God gave Him victory. To “overcome” means to gain victory in some conflict. The demand here is that we experience victory by obediently and determinedly submitting to God’s will as revealed in His Word, whatever sacrifice it may involve, and even if it means death results.

This isn’t abstract theology, it’s the very essence of Christianity. Christianity is Christ Jesus living His resurrected, victorious life in us. It’s the exalted Son repeating His work on Earth – through us, with us, in us. Christianity isn’t just passively attending church on Sundays and believing in Christ in order to be in heaven some day. That’s a parody of biblical Christianity. If we’re a believer we’re involved in a fierce struggle, a conflict against sin and the world and its lusts, against a host of temptations and demonic influences, against fleshly desires, and against the ungodly values, beliefs, lies and ideas that formed our character before we came to Christ. We must overcome all the ways that pride, greed, laziness and selfishness are expressed. And if persecutions come, we’re to remain faithful no matter what it costs. We’re to be victorious over all these, just as Jesus was victorious over the battle that was uniquely His. We’re to be like Christ and do as Christ did by absorbing the Word of God and then faithfully, daily, living out the Word in the power of the Spirit. Hey! *Seven times!* This is not an option.

Conclusion: Salvation is a gift, freely available to all. But it’s a stewardship, and our responsibility is to be faithful.