

Seeing Through the Darkness

Understanding Your World:

Matthew 6:22-23, Romans 1:18-32
July 25, 2004

A man, filing a medical claim with his insurance company, was asked for more information. This was his response:

In block #3 of the accident reporting form, I put "poor planning" as the cause of my accident. You said in your letter that I should explain more and I trust that the following details are sufficient: I am a bricklayer by trade. On the day of the accident, I was working alone on the roof of a new six-story building. When I completed my work, I discovered that I had about 500 pounds of bricks left over. Rather than carry the bricks down by hand I decided to lower them in a barrel using a pulley. Securing the rope at the ground level, I went up to the roof, swung the barrel out and loaded the bricks into it. Then I went back to the ground and untied the rope, holding it tightly to insure a slow descent of the 500 pounds of bricks. You will note in block #11 of the accident reporting form that I weigh 135 pounds. Due to my surprise at being jerked off the ground so suddenly, I lost my presence of mind and forgot to let go of the rope. Needless to say, I proceeded at a rather rapid rate up the side of the building. In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel coming down. This explains the fractured scull and broken collarbone. Slowed only slightly, I continued my rapid ascent, not stopping until the fingers of my right hand were two knuckles deep into the pulley. Fortunately, by this time I had regained my presence of mind and was able to hold tightly to the rope in spite of my pain. At approximately the same time, however, the barrel of bricks hit the ground - and the bottom fell out of the barrel. Devoid of the weight of the bricks, the barrel now weighed approximately 50 pounds. I refer you again to my weight in block #11. As you might imagine, I began a rapid descent down the side of the building. In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel coming up. This accounts for the two fractured ankles and lacerations of my legs and lower body. The encounter with the barrel, slowed me enough to lessen my injuries when I fell onto the pile of bricks and fortunately, only three vertebrae were cracked. I am sorry to report, however, that as I lay there on the bricks in pain, unable to move, and watching the barrel six stories above - I again lost my presence of mind. I let go of the rope!

I hope your decision-making has not led to such a series of painful mishaps; however, we all have suffered from a chain of poor decisions. No doubt we are clueless to many of their consequences. There are two reasons. The first is that we are not God. Our field of vision does

not include all the physical and spiritual consequences. The chains of reactions are too large and wide for us to see everything affected by our actions, and none of us can see fully into the hearts of people and know how they are affected. The ushers of a South African church neither saw their sin nor the consequences of it, especially for the man they addressed and the future of India, when they asked a young lawyer named Mahatma Gandhi to move to the colored section of their church. Gandhi angrily walked out that day and world history unfolded in an entirely different way. The second reason we are ignorant is that we want to be. We don't want to see all the consequences of our actions. An enlightened vision may interfere with our passions and plans. It may rob us of the peace and confidence we carry.

The Bible speaks of God as light. The Apostle John wrote:

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. (1 John 1:5-6, NIV)

Jesus said:

Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God. (John 3:19-21, NIV)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, while addressing issues about money and our hearts, warned:

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness. (Matthew 6:22-23, NIV)

Jesus was not talking about people who are physically blind. He was addressing the eyes of our hearts. It is impossible to see and understand the world as it is when the eyes of our hearts are corrupted. Our vision becomes narrowed so that we see only the things that we want to see. We

ignore, dismiss, diminish or excuse the rest. As a result, we lose touch with reality. We don't see our separation from God or from others. We especially don't see the harm of our ways.

Do you think Jesus Christ was crucified because he was so loving and unselfish? Jesus was crucified because he was hated. Jesus said:

The world... hates me because I testify that what it does is evil. (John 7:7, NIV)

John the Baptist lost his head because he had given witness that the remarriage of Herodias to Herod violated Scripture. Methodist founder John Wesley was put out of and banned from English church after church because he witnessed to how religious people were living in and loving the darkness.

Jesus, John the Baptist and John Wesley all warned their contemporaries of judgment and were disliked as a result. However, they were not misfits. They were agents of light (Jesus being pure light). To understand this world, you must realize that love and judgment are complementary not adversaries. A world without judgment is horrendous. It is a place where victims multiply unabated and love does not win. God judges this world and the people of this world because God loves this world. God loves what he made and who he made.

To understand this world, you must realize that love and apathy are opposites, not love and anger. Often love is demonstrated by anger. We become angry when those we love are oppressed. Consequently, a God of holy love will also be a God of holy anger when there is oppression. God will be angry precisely because he loves us; and we need to see it.

As loving parents, we sometimes withhold judgment to give our children, either individually or as a group, time to repent. We often then issue warnings, which they might ignore. On occasion, we mediate a form of judgment so that they repent. My dad applied his board of education to my seat of learning. In some cases, that judgment only hardens hearts, and

the relationships deteriorate further. In some situations, we parents hand our children over to their sins so that they suffer the consequences and hopefully learn from them. In any case, we don't control them. Instead, we respond to their destructive behavior with whatever wisdom we possess. Of course, that assumes we are not reacting sinfully ourselves. A big assumption! In the judgment we give as parents, it is helpful for our children to see our anger as long as the anger is righteous. By seeing our anger, they see more clearly the immensity and impact of their destructive actions.

A God of love must also be a God of wrath, and a people who know his love must also know his wrath. That is especially important because God does not control us like robots. He made us and treats us as children with our own minds. Therefore to understand ourselves and this world and to act constructively we must recognize his anger.

The Bible gives us many snapshots of God's anger. Again, these snapshots with all their pain are not divorced from God's love. They are products of both God's love and wisdom as maker of us and this physical and spiritual universe we inhabit.

When the Apostle Paul sent a letter to the Christians in Rome before he arrived, he introduced himself and explained the good news he preached. In his first chapter, he wrote:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. (Romans 1:16, NIV)

Why does everyone need salvation? Because everyone sins and experiences God's anger and judgment. We are not only under the sentence of death as Moses writes in Psalm 90. We are handed over to the darkening and deceiving power of sin. Paul writes:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness. (Romans 1:18, NIV)

Paul describes some of the thinking that suppresses the truth and notes how our foolish hearts become darkened. He then lists in verse 24 the first act of judgment:

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to... (Romans 1:24, NIV)

Sexual impurity and idolatry are listed. God hands us over to be ruled by these actions that we sinfully desire so that we become sexually impure and worship gods of our liking. However, there are more consequences in the darkness that rules us, our families and communities. In verse 26, as a second act of judgment we are handed over to shameful lusts that dominate us and go against our created functions. Paul says that we receive in ourselves the penalty of our perversion, but he doesn't spell out what that all is. In verse 28, Paul points to a third act of holy anger and judgment as we dismiss the words of God. We are handed over to a depraved mind that with its perverse thinking plunges us into all kinds of destructive attitudes and actions. Our every thought serves the enemies of God and humanity.

Exactly because of this predicament, the good news of Jesus, who paid for our sins, calls us first to believe that news and then to repent of our sins. This is not merely a vague or general confession of sin. It is a call to acknowledge specific sins as we see how they violate God's word, and then turn from them. In some cases we do the opposite of the sin or offer restitution. In other cases, when we are stuck in some sin, we seek the help of Jesus by confessing our sins one to another and praying for one another so that we may be forgiven and healed.

There is a place for teaching and learning because a depraved or darkened mind needs renewal. However, without repentance and forgiveness, there is no renewal. We are not released from the powers that hold us nor the judgment mediated until we receive forgiveness.

For you, me, our community and world to understand this life, we must welcome the light that has dawned upon a people walking in darkness. Now what will you do?