Worship: The Cry of God for His People
Just Thinking is a teaching resource of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries and exists to engender thoughtful engagement with apologetics, Scripture, and the whole of life.

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HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

IT WAS EARLY SEPTEMBER. We had just missed the wildflowers in Tuolumne Meadows; they had gone to seed only a couple of weeks earlier. Yosemite’s Bridalveil Fall was now nearly a trickle compared to its mighty rush in May. And then there were the seemingly endless switchbacks climbing upwards, upwards through the forest. Lugging a heavy backpack and tent, I focused on pushing through while spurring on my companion who wondered why we had planned this strenuous seven-mile hike to a campsite above 10,000 feet. But outside the forest we were greeted by alpines lakes, sweeping green meadows, rocky peaks, and the occasional call of pikas and marmots. I had rarely experienced such utter beauty in one place.

Naturalist John Muir was enthralled with Yosemite, saying it was “full of God’s thoughts.” In his 1889 Atlantic Monthly article “The Yosemite National Park,” he described the area as “Benevolent, solemn, fateful, pervaded with divine light, every landscape glows like a countenance hallowed in eternal repose; and every one of its living creatures, clad in flesh and leaves, and every crystal of its rocks, whether on the surface shining in the sun or buried miles deep in what we call darkness, is throbbing and pulsing with the heartbeats of God.”

We arrived at our destination just before sunset exhausted yet “throbbing and pulsing” with joy. Nevertheless, when darkness descended, trepidation taunted me. The becalming pastoral blue and green landscape was no longer visible. Other groups were camping nearby, but I had never trekked this far into the wilderness.

Then slowly, one by one it seemed, star upon star illuminated our surroundings. Minutes later—could it be? I lay on the ground in awe as I watched the white brush of the Milky Way paint the night sky. Never had I seen such a glorious display of our galaxy with my own eyes.

Our amazing universe beckons us to look beyond our earthly existence. It radiates what the late sociologist Peter Berger called “signals of transcendence”—it hints of order and invokes wonder and play. The Milky Way whispered that night of a galaxy far beyond anything I could imagine. It was in the sky above my own backyard, too, but hidden in plain sight by streetlights and well-lit neighborhoods. (Nathan Rittenhouse discusses the subtle effects of light pollution in his creative article that follows.)
Our transfixed delight in awe intimates that we long to connect to something beyond ourselves, whether we look up to the heavens or the phones below our noses. We want to belong, to know, and be known. Surely, this search for transcendence—or arguably, for love—motivates the direction of our lives.

Whether we look up to the heavens or the phones below our noses, we long to connect to something beyond ourselves: to belong, to know, and be known.

God cries out through the ancient prophets to look to Him, “the Maker of heaven and earth ... he remains faithful forever” (Psalm 146:6). “Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens,” God exclaims through Isaiah, “Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing” (Isaiah 40:26). Who is this God? He is the One who “heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit” (Psalm 147:3-5).

Even the stars bespeak the wonder of God and the wideness of his love. God tells Abraham (here called Abram) in Genesis 15:5, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.... So shall your offspring be.” Centuries later He gives the apostle John a heavenly glimpse of Abraham’s blessing fulfilled beyond measure: “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9). Who is this Lamb? “I am the Root and the Offspring of David,” says Jesus, “and the bright Morning Star” (Revelation 22:16).

The articles in this issue converge here: the Maker of heaven and earth created us to worship Him, to reflect the radiance of his glory, and to enjoy Him forever. How amazing! Yet how often we live as practical atheists, even as God’s people, with our hearts and minds far from our Creator. God is to us like the Milky Way, right where we are but hidden in plain sight.

However, we need not go to the mountains and wilderness to find Him. Whether we know it or not, God is present in our suburbs and our prison cells, in our cities and our hospital rooms, whispering to each of us, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13). Who are those who find Him? “Those who are wise [who] shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever” (Daniel 12:3).

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INCOMPREHENSIBLY BRIGHT

By Nathan Rittenhouse
When was the last time that you saw the Milky Way? We live on a planet that has a stellar view of the night sky. Our historical records show us that from our earliest drawings and writings, we humans have been gazing into the infinite expanse above our heads and pondering our own significance.

Even though we all should be able to peer into the depths above us, there is actually a good chance that you have not clearly seen the night sky for quite some time. There are reasons for this. The first is that many people live in places that have enough smog to block their view of anything beyond what we have made. The second reason is that most of our time is spent bent forward consuming digital material on our devices rather than leaning back to enjoy the grandeur that transcends us. The third and final reason is the problem of proximity. The reason that most of us do not have a clear view of the stars is light pollution. We simply cannot see into the heavens because of all of the light that is constantly around us. Very few of us are ever in total darkness because there is always a light somewhere nearby or in our pocket.

This is all a bit silly. Just think: there are thousands of visible stars above my head that are incomprehensibly bright. And yet, I cannot see them because of the streetlamp eighteen feet above my head that is a negligible fraction of a single star’s brilliance! There is a world of untold splendor twinkling above my head that is a negligible fraction of a single star’s brilliance! There is a world of untold splendor twinkling above my head that is incomprehensibly bright. And yet, I cannot see the reflection of this beauty because of the dim glow of my phone. My inability to see this beauty is not because of the brilliance of its light; rather, it is because of my proximity to lesser lights.

The greater lights do not impose. They beckon our attention from a distance, but that means that they are often pushed to the margins of my thoughts by the little lights of life. This is light pollution.

We wouldn’t blame the indiscernibility of the greater lights on their distance. That would also be silly. It is actually a great blessing to live at a great distance from a star. If we were much closer to our nearest star, the sun, we would burn up in its all-consuming fire. I like to see the sun but would never want to travel there. It would cause too much pain.

People often ask, “Why isn’t God more obvious?” It could be smog. It could be sin. It could be that the byproducts of the brokenness we have produced in this world block our view of anything beyond what we have made. It could be that most of our time is spent bent forward distracting ourselves with the problems of our day rather than leaning back to ponder if there is a Grand One who transcends us and solves problems. It could be the problem of proximity. The majesty of an all-powerful God shines forth in creation and upon our hearts but fades out in the little lights of things that beckon us to worship them.

This is all a bit absurd. Just think: there is an all-powerful God who is the foundation of love and who loves eternally, and yet I cannot see this God because of little loves in my proximity that function at a negligible fraction of divine love. There is an all-knowing, eternal God who desires for me to know Him as God, but I cannot grasp this idea and so God seems distant because God isn’t provable within my definition of knowledge.

The Eternal Light, the One that specializes in creating order out of chaos, does not impose immediately. God calls for our unforced attention, but God’s voice is often pushed to the margins of my thoughts by the chaos of my life. This is light pollution.

It is actually a great short-term blessing to live at a great distance from a holy God. If we were much closer, we would likely burn up in the all-consuming, incomprehensibly bright light of God’s holiness. I like to look at God, but I hesitate to want to be with God. It would cause too much pain. And yet, it seems that I was made both to “be with” and to want to “be known.”

The problem of proximity is twofold. I cannot see clearly when I’m only close to little lights, and I cannot live if I am too close to a big light. For me to truly live, either God must come to me in a form that I can handle, or God must do something to me to enable me to withstand his presence. However, it could be both. After all, “that which our hands have touched” also said, “I am the light of the world.”

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WORSHIP: THE CRY OF GOD FOR HIS PEOPLE

By Ravi Zacharias
When my family and I lived in England some years ago, a terrible wind storm hit the country. Thousands of trees were felled that night. The trees were massive, but their roots were unbelievably shallow. Friends told us that the water level below the soil in England is so close to the surface that the roots do not have to penetrate very deep to find their nourishment. As a result, the roots stay shallow. Even though the trees are massive and sturdy on the outside, the first major storm uproots them with very little resistance offered.

What instruction is contained in that illustration! It is not sufficient to have roots; our roots must go deep. As followers of Christ, how does one build a root system that can weather the storms of life? I believe the answer is contained in worship, for it is the consummate answer to the cries of the human heart and what God seeks in us.

God’s words through the prophets Hosea and Malachi were a heartrending plea to the people to take a hard look at how worship had lost its worth. The entire prophecy of Malachi has only fifty-five verses. But if this book was taken to heart by each believer, it could be one of the most revolutionary changes ever to take place in our thinking. Through these prophets we discover six components needed for worship.

**WHAT WORSHIP REQUIRES**

**First,** we cannot worship God without love. God says in Malachi 1:2, “‘I have loved you.’ But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’” This pattern of dialogue punctuates the book, and the people’s mindset is hard to fathom. Imagine the audacity of a chosen people to ask, “In what way have you loved us?”

I know of no better way to convey how unthinkable this response is than to consider the story of Hosea. Here God’s love is illustrated in the most graphic terms. God commanded Hosea to love a woman named Gomer who ultimately deserted him and added shame to her betrayal by selling herself into prostitution. Out of this marriage came three children. The first was a son who God told Hosea to name Jezreel, meaning “judgment.” The memory evoked in the Hebrew mind when the word “Jezreel” was used was of a day of reckoning—and a dreadful one at that.

As followers of Christ, how does one build a root system that can weather the storms of life? I believe the answer is contained in worship, for it is the consummate answer to the cries of the human heart and what God seeks in us.

Hosea’s second child was a girl whom God said to name Lo-ruhamah, which meant “no more mercy.” The nation had lived so long off the abundance of God’s grace that there was no more mercy left for them. Even love can only go so far without prostituting itself in the process. Hosea’s third was a boy and God said to call him Lo-Ammi, which meant “not my people.” God, in strongly worded terms, was saying “I disown you.”

Imagine the mood in that home of Judgment, No More Mercy, and Not My People. Every time one of them was beckoned, there was a harsh reminder of spiritual adultery in the land. “Judgment, come to dinner.” “No More Mercy, clean up your room.” “Not My People, finish your homework.” But the worst pain in that home had to be the pain within Hosea’s heart. For him, the message God gave him was not just a sermon chastising the people and calling them back to God. He now knew better than anyone else
what God was saying about love thwarted. His wife had left him to rot in the dreadful world of selling herself to strangers for the love of money. He stared at his motherless children and nursed his heart that was broken from an unrequited love. The struggle gave way to an inevitable question: “How long do I keep loving her?”

It was only a matter of time before the question moved outside the parsonage into the streets of the city where Hosea preached. A prophet of God who preached holiness was living with a wife who was a prostitute. Picture this scene for a moment. A group of worshippers are walking to the place where they are to gather. They happen to pass by the brothel where the losers and the lost hang out, one of whom derisively shouts out to the throng headed to hear Hosea’s message, “When you see him, tell him for me that some of us have bought his wife’s services and delighted in it. We are standing in line for more.”

Much shaken by this distasteful reality, somebody dares to broach the subject with Hosea and says, “Please tell us. How can a holy man like you be married to an adulterous woman like that?” Hosea is silent for several moments and then says: “I have been waiting for you to ask. And I will be glad to tell you how easy it is to love a woman like that if you will first explain to me how a holy God can love an adulterous nation like us?”

If Hosea’s silence before he answered was but for a few moments, the silence of the questioners must have seemed like an eternity. How could a people have missed that kind of a love? Right from the beginning, God had reminded them that his love for them was not based upon the nation’s size or strength or particular credit. It was completely an unmerited love, poured out without measure on a people who squandered it. God could have given that privileged status to Greece. But He did not. He could have given it to Rome or to Babylon, but He did not. He looked at this tiny little nation, laughed at by Greece, bullied by Rome, enslaved by Babylon, and said, “You alone have I loved of all the nations of the earth” (Amos 3:2). His lovingkindness was shed upon them, though undeserving.

Such love seems scandalous—a love that loves the wantonly dissolute. A love that wills to love, though spurned. In Hosea, this is the point worth remembering: God’s rejected love, so flagrantly abused, was given the odious parallel of a woman who had left her husband to a life of prostitution. And yet she remained loved by him. That was the heart of Hosea’s message.

One recalls the words of the prophet Isaiah through whom God said to his people, “What more could I have done for you that I have not already done?” (Isaiah 5:4). If God could have said that centuries before the cross, we can only wonder what He would want to ask this world that has rejected Him even after the cross. What does one say to a heart that does not recognize love even in its supreme sacrifice? This raw expression of love was carried all the way to the cross.

It was a profound awakening within me when I realized that God wants us to understand not just the doctrinal fact of his love but also its emotional intensity. Love is not only a word describing commitment; it is also a concept that engenders feeling. Theologians have debated about the nature of God’s feelings, and whether or not He has them. Yet I sincerely doubt God would have chosen the explicit imagery that He did if it were not for his heart to come through in such an utterance, “I have loved you.”

This was the double tragedy of Israel. God said to them, “I love you.” Yet in their failure to recognize that love, they had also failed to see what they had lost. They did not in the process of rejecting God’s love make God less than God. They made themselves less than they were meant to be. We cannot worship without love, which means the emotions are an intrinsic part of worship.
Second, we cannot worship God without giving honor. God makes a second charge: “A son honors his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” ...But you ask, “How have we shown contempt for your name?” (Malachi 1:6).

In the Hindi language, the word for father is Pita. The word for mother is Mata. You do not call your father Pita or your mother Mata, even though those are the correct words. You always add the suffix, jee. You call your father Pita-jee and your mother Mata-jee, because jee denotes respect and reverence. The closest parallel in the West would be in the Southern United States where a son calls his father, Sir, and his mother, Ma’am. Daddy and Mommy are terms of endearment. The one who is nearest is also revered. In contemporary application, what God is really saying to his people is, “You call me Daddy, where is the Sir?”

When the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, which he did once a year, he had to enter backwards, for he could not come “face to face” with God. When Uzzah, well-intentioned, reached out to steady the Ark of the Covenant, God gave the people a dramatic reminder that He was not to be handled as if He were a common thing. His presence was represented in the Ark of the Covenant.

This concept of honor and reverence is an extremely difficult one, especially in North America where social distinctions are removed. The breakdown of social barriers is a good thing, but there are some distinctions that ought never to be erased to the extent that legitimate respect is lost, such as with parent/child, teacher/student, and youth/old age. When these are lost, something of life’s direction has been lost for all of us. The greatest difference, of course, is between God and us, his creation. When that distinction is lost along with reverence, the greatest of all relationships dies.

Worship at its core is the giving of all that is your best to God. This cannot be done without sacrifice.

Third, we cannot worship without sacrifice. God introduces this component in his response to their belligerent question, “How have we defiled you?” He answers, “By saying that the Lord’s table is contemptible. When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that
not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” (Malachi 1:7-8).

When I was a young boy, I was asked if I would be willing to play Joseph in the Nativity mime one Christmas. I arrived at the church early, and at the altar I saw a silver bowl with wafers in it. Having very little knowledge of what this could be, I took a handful of those wafers and enjoyed them as I admired all the great art and statuary in that fine cathedral. Suddenly the vicar appeared. I politely greeted him and continued my enjoyment of the biscuits in hand. He stopped, stared, and quite out of control, shouted, “What are you doing?” As surprised by his outburst as he was at my activity, I said, “I am Joseph in the Nativity mime.” That evidently was not what he was asking. “What is that in your hand?” he demanded. As he stared me down from head to toe, he could see that there were more in my pocket. I received the most incomprehensible tongue-lashing to which I had ever been subjected. The word that he kept repeating was “sacrilege.” I chose never to check out its meaning for I was sure this was the end of the line for me, having done something I did not even know how to pronounce.

Years later, I could not help but chuckle when I was reading G. Campbell Morgan’s definition of sacrilege. He said that it is normally defined as taking something that belongs to God and using it profanely, such as in the book of Daniel when Belshazzar took the vessels in the temple and used it for his night of carousing and blasphemy. That was a sacrilegious use. But sacrilege, said Morgan, does not only consist of such profane use. In its worst form it consists of taking something and giving it to God when it means absolutely nothing to you.¹

That was the charge God brought against his people when He said, “When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong?” Worship at its core is the giving of all that is your best to God. This cannot be done without sacrifice. If we were to pause only for a few moments and take stock, we would see how close we all come to sacrilege each day. Do we give God the best of our time? Do we give Him the best of our energies? Do we give Him the best of our thinking? Do we give Him the best of our wealth? Or does the world get our best and God merely the leftovers?

Fourth, we cannot worship God with a wrong motive. The Lord Almighty cries out, “Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you...and I will accept no offering from your hands” (Malachi 1:10).

So much in the temple had become a show. Everything seemed to point to how impressive one’s religious performance and duties appeared. But deep inside, the heart was so far away from God. Any time we find a blend of power and ceremony with the need for inward purity, there is a great risk that the latter will suffer. The monotony of repetition and the seduction of power are two extremely potent forces. That is what makes the whole concept of staying fresh in one’s study and efforts so necessary.

At least figuratively speaking, the heart is the seat of the soul. That is, our inclinations, our passions, and our desires are true intimations in matters of the spirit. They are wordless expressions of true commitment. As the old song said, “Your lips are so near, but where is your heart?” That is precisely what God is asking in spiritual expression. Their comings and goings in the temple were very obvious, but their hearts were far away.

Fifth, we cannot worship God without instruction in the truth. He calls upon the priests and takes them to task. “For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the
Lord Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth” (Malachi 2:7).

Is there a clearer mandate and a more sobering trust than this: to instruct people in the knowledge of God so that they might worship Him not only in spirit but also in truth? Worship can be erroneous in form, and we may at times make those errors in form. But the great danger before us is not the errors in form as much as it is in the corruption of substance. Observe the next time when the emotions run wild and pause to ask the all-important question: Is this merely a distortion in ceremony, or is this plundering the very nature of God? So often immodesty and disorder have taken over and expression has been given license. How unsettling and confusing it has become to Christendom at large, to say nothing of the skeptic. In the days when God gave priestly instructions, He warned that if there was even a callus on a priest’s hand, then he should refrain from his duties until the callus was gone, for no distraction ought to attend the concentration of the worshipper. How far have we strayed from such injunctions. Worship is not for the glory of men and women; it is for the glory of God.

Sixth, we cannot worship God without obedience. The specific point that God makes is utterly surprising:

Another thing you do: You flood the Lord’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, “Why?” It is because the Lord is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth. (Malachi 2:13-15)

God went back into their homes and asked them to take honest note of the broken promises that husbands had made to their wives and that wives had made to their husbands. He brought the tragedy of a nation that had lost its relationship with God right down to the marital vow. How important this must have been for Him to incorporate it into his closing words.

Worship can be erroneous in form, and we may at times make those errors in form. But the great danger before us is not the errors in form as much as it is in the corruption of substance.

In the old English usage, the marriage vow declared: “With my body I thee worship.” This pledged an unqualified exclusiveness in consummating love. God says, “You have broken those vows and betrayed the wife of your youth.” In other words, worship had collapsed through a disobedient lifestyle, which fed into the sanctity of the home and that returned as hypocritical worship. Of all the unexpected themes that one could have encountered in Malachi when God was talking about worship, this theme of keeping one’s marital vows would have been the least expected. Yet this is precisely what God has dealt with at length.

Worship in disarray leads all the way back to the home in broken covenants. If the word that we have committed to God Himself is not honored, what motivation is there to honor our word to our husbands or wives? The domino effect then sets in, and ungodly offspring are raised when
vows are broken. God said that it grieved Him much to see the loss of the children trapped in a situation with broken commitments. This is a sobering thought and painful to reflect upon.

THE MOST POWERFUL EVANGEL

Years ago, I read a definition of worship that to this day rings with clear and magnificent terms. The definition comes from the famed archbishop William Temple:

Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness, nourishment of mind by His truth, purifying of imagination by His beauty, opening of the heart to His love, and submission of will to His purpose. All this gathered up in adoration is the greatest of all expressions of which we are capable.²

In short, worship is what binds all of life together and gives it a single focus. Conscience. Mind. Imagination. Heart. Will. Each is knit together in worship. Here love, reverence, sacrifice, motive, truth, and obedience are harnessed before the One who made us, who alone can bring unity in the diversity with which He has fashioned us.

I am convinced that if worship is practiced with integrity, it may be the most powerful evangel for our postmodern culture. Being in the presence of fellow believers in worship is a restorer of spiritual hope. We so underestimate the power of a people in one mind and with one commitment. Even a prayer can touch a hungry heart and rescue it in a treacherous time.

My colleagues and I were in a country dominated for decades by Marxism. We were invited to a dinner with skeptics—essentially atheists. The evening was full of questions, and as the night wore on, the questions began to go in circles. Finally, I asked if we could pray with them and for their country. After silence and an obvious hesitancy, one said, “Of course.” So we did just that—we prayed. In this historic room with memories of secular power on the walls, the prayer brought a sobering silence that we were all in the presence of someone greater. When we finished, every eye was moist. They said nothing but emotion was written on their faces. The next day one of them said to me, “We stayed up most of the night talking further. Then I went back to my room and gave my life to Jesus Christ.”


Over the years I have discovered that praying with people can sometimes do more for them than preaching to them. Prayer gave them a taste of what worship is. Their hearts had never experienced it. Worship and prayer draw the heart away from one’s own dependence to leaning on the sovereign God. To a person in need, pat answers don’t change the mind; worship does.

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Can fish live out of water?
Now before your thoughts run wild, catapulting you in a thousand different directions, let me tell you where I am going with this. Water, to fish, is not merely the space it occupies; fish live in water. The fish, however, if it were asked to, would struggle to describe the wetness of water. You will agree with me that the fish might not even be fully cognizant of why it can flourish only in water, or how precious water is to it, and so on. That notwithstanding, to take “water” lightly, or to forgo it, can mean only one thing for fish: Death.

What is true for fish is true for us, humans, as well. So, take a moment and consider what is essential for human flourishing; what do humans live in?

Pardon me for throwing you so quickly into the deep end. My point is simply this: When we take what we live in—what gives us life—for granted, we become our own undertakers.

To be clear, I am not talking about merely the physical environment we find ourselves in. I am talking about the very core of what makes us human. I am talking about our relationship with each other, and ultimately with God. I am keenly aware that today, many find God talk “pastoral,” “personal,” and “unfit for public consumption.” Those who do not believe in the existence of God might even find this assertion that human flourishing depends ultimately on our relationship with God absurd. Hence, the necessity for this prescript. I ask that you give me a fair hearing. Take a good hard look at my hand as I lay my cards on the table. I am not neutral on the subject—I cannot be.
YOUR WORLDVIEW MATTERS

It is often said: We must learn to keep our personal views—and by that most people mean “faith”—to ourselves (and by that we mean “private”) when we engage in the public space. I find that deeply unsettling on many levels.

First, it assumes that humans can thrive while living compartmental-ized lives. Nothing could be further from the truth. No one likes to be isolated, or to be with a two-faced hypocrite. Yet when we are encouraged to keep our personal convictions private that is exactly what we are forcing ourselves into—an environment of isolation and pretense.

Human beings, irrespective of how else we might think of ourselves, are relational creatures and, by virtue of being relational, we thrive in an environment of transparent trust, not in a culture of suspicion and deceit.

Secondly, and more critically, speaking of points of view, is there such a point of view as nobody’s point of view? I doubt it. We all hold to a basic set of beliefs about the most important issues of life (irrespective of what we deem as important), and we use it as a pair of glasses to understand and evaluate reality. This framework forms the fundamental perspective from which we address every issue of life and constitutes our worldview.

THE WATER WE LIVE IN

Take a close look at your worldview (as close a look as you can) and your faith. You will realize that your worldview and faith in God (or not) together shape what you pursue and how you do so. And therein lies the problem. Unless we are prepared to examine our assumptions and beliefs, and test their validity, our pursuits often end up becoming our problems. Progress in the wrong direction is not progress. It’s regress. And sometimes regression does more damage than merely setting us back; it could take us to a point of no return.

The negativity with which some view faith in God today is not without reason. Think about the sea of humanity that has been put to the sword in the name of faith in God down through the ages. Humans are not designed to thrive in strife, and so the appeal to do away with the notion of God gathered steam. It came to a tipping point in the eighteenth century, which was dubbed the Age of Reason, but strangely did not change a thing. As a matter of fact, the violence and bloodshed only increased. And for all the progress humans were making, humanity was not any the better.

As humans, just as much as we do not do well in strife, we also do not do well as cosmic orphans either—we need God. This raises a simple question: What will it take for humans to flourish?

I could answer that question in one word: Love. Just as water is to fish, so love is to a human being. Love is at the heart of what makes us human, and we would suffer irreparable damage if love were blotted out of the human experience. So central is love to human flourishing that it demands both our utmost attention and thoughtful explanation. And love ought to be the lynchpin that holds our worldview and our faith in God together.

Love is uniquely human—it is at the core of humanity and is intrinsic to human nature. Therefore, love cannot be explained away as the end result of an evolutionary process, or merely as a temporal or transactional necessity. My contention is that for love to be intrinsic, it has to be invested into humanity from without, not merely actualized from within—and this is why our worldview and our faith matter.
Let me try and bring these strands together now. Humans, as I mentioned earlier, are relational beings with love as the epicenter. Our relationship with each other, and ultimately with God, must be founded on love. This leads me to consider the first thing that the Bible says about humanity with great care:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

(Genesis 1:26-27)

The biblical worldview of humanity is a being in relationship—with God, each other, and all of nature. A relationship that is conceived, crafted, cradled, and consummated in love. Since human beings are creatures of love, made in the image and likeness of God, knowing the God of love and the love of God deserves our utmost attention.

THE SYMPHONY OF DIVINE LOVE

Unfortunately, in our day, the love of God has been reduced to a divine disposition that makes us feel good and gives us what we want. Many understand God’s love as his favorable disposition, with no strings attached. But the idea that God’s love is indiscriminately unconditional is an unreflective position. That’s the nature of objects and ideas, or an immoral person, not a holy God.

You can speak of abstract ideas or inanimate objects as being dispassionate, or unconditional, in their relationship with other objects or ideas. Think about a chair for example. It “allows” people to sit on it not because it wants to, but because it is designed to. The chair does not discriminate against whoever sits on it; it remains dispassionately available to be sat upon. But persons, unlike ideas or objects, are volitional beings. They choose!

God is not an idea or an object. God is a personal, relational being. Moreover, it does not make sense to speak of God’s love if God were an idea or an object, does it? God’s love involves God’s choosing to love. God’s unconditional love for every man, woman, and child without a care for our moral condition does not sit well with the notion that God is good. A God who chooses to be indifferent towards our moral condition and to be uninvolved in mending the mess is not nonjudgmental and good, but immoral.

Herein lies our challenge. Will God sacrifice his holiness at the altar of his love, will He remain aloof, or is there another way? The sheer magnitude of the question should cause us to pause and reconsider “unconditional” as the only epithet of divine love. Surely, discipline is as much an expression of divine love as benevolence because God is good, is it not?

Is it not reasonable, then, to consider the love of God as a symphony of his benevolence and his justness? That is at the heart of what we read in the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets. And most certainly what we hear from Jesus:

The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation. (Numbers 14:18)

For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you. (Psalm 86:5)

“Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. (Joel 2:12-13)

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:16-21; cf. Isaiah 61:1-2)

This, then, is where we should beg in, and linger a while, if we are to understand and appropriate the love of God—an appreciation for the symphony of divine love.

**THE DANGER OF GENERALIZATIONS**

I was barely ten when I was stung by a scorpion while playing in my neighbor’s garden. At that age, spending every waking moment playing was very important to me, but then pain reordered priorities. The pain was unbearable, so I made my way back home, reluctantly.

Upon hearing what happened, my mother promptly took me to the doctor who lived a few blocks from our home. The doctor examined the puncture marks and gave me an injection. It did not take very long before I threw up all I had for tea. It was blue! The doctor pronounced me “safe” and said there was nothing to worry about as this kind of reaction was common to most cases with insect bites. Glad that things were now okay, my mother and I went back home.

But as time went by, my condition grew worse. My strength started failing. I was shivering, and my body became cold as ice. Just about then, providentially, our neighbor (in whose house I was stung) came to visit—she too happened to be a doctor, a pediatrician. The minute she took my hand and felt my pulse, she knew I was close to death. She organized for me to be rushed to the hospital where she worked. I reached the hospital almost dead, falling off my father’s shoulders as he carried me, with hardly a pulse. I remained in that condition through the night. It was not until the wee hours of the next morning that I was really safe, to the relief of my parents who watched over me and prayed through the night.

I tell you this story to underscore the fact that generalizations are not only unhelpful but also can be very dangerous. If confusing symptoms caused by a scorpion sting with an insect bite could have such severe consequences for a little boy, how much more severe will the consequences for all of humanity be when we erroneously generalize the love of God, confusing our expectations for truth?

God is love. No matter which God you believe in, the divine being, if there is one, is love. At least that is the word on the street. Now, that is a noble notion, but it becomes problematic when we examine the notion in light of different religious beliefs. How can God be love when at the heart of deism is an uninvolved being? Or in pantheism (even Buddhism), God is a non-personal entity? Or in Islam, God is the absolutely other, an utterly transcendent being? One could speak of the
ultimate reality, or God, of these religions differently as a form of power, or a pathway, or a principle—even the principle of love. But to speak of all of them equally as love is a misunderstanding. How can the uninvolved, or nonpersonal, or absolutely other love?

This is not to dismiss out of court the claim that all religions do teach us to love one another. That may well be, and to the best of my knowledge they do to varying degrees. But that, however, does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that all religions speak of God equally as love. To sketch every portrait of God or the ultimate reality using the same brush, namely “love,” is to ignore the essential uniqueness of the different world religions.

Divine love is the subject matter of the Bible. By that I mean in the Judeo-Christian worldview, God is described as love. The unique portrayal of God as love in the Bible, however, does not insulate the Christian from committing the same error. Far too often, the love of God, despite being the subject matter of countless sermons and the cornerstone of numerous promises and prayers, is reduced to one word: unconditional. It is a generalization we will do well to avoid.

In one sense, the love of God can be spoken of meaningfully as “unconditional.” God’s deep love for humanity does not depend on human invocation or action. God’s love for the world (John 3:16) is an overflow of his love for Himself (John 17:24). Self-love, when it comes to God, is not a narcissistic self-obsession because of who God is. God is Triune: Three co-equal persons and one eternal being. As Father, Son, and Spirit, God is simultaneously the supreme lover and beloved. His self-love is an unceasing “pouring out” of self by each person of the Trinity into the other two. God is, in that sense, entirely self-effacing, and this perpetual other-centeredness of the Triune God makes his love unconditional. It is the overflow of this unreserved love that we see in everything God does unaided—for example.

We also see the same kind of love expressed in God’s providence: “he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). We must not, however, quickly conclude that God’s love is always and only unconditional. What would that say about God’s morality? Does God not care about justice? Evidently, the notion that God’s love is only “unconditional” is fraught with problems.

We live in a culture that gives primacy to how we feel over everything else—even truth. This affects not only how we think but also how we live. We will slowly, but surely, become less tolerant of a God who is not favorably disposed towards us. This is evidenced in the ease with which people speak about the love of God offering guarantees and encouraging expectations without adequate reflection on the purpose of that love or his expectations.

When God is reduced to a figment of my imagination, then—and possibly only then—will He be a God without expectations of me. Seldom does the life I imagine for myself come with expectations of myself. It paints a pretty picture where everything, and everyone, is always (and only) for me. That is not the God we see unveiled in the Bible. In it we behold a God who is love and, at the same time, uncompromisingly righteous. God is holy; God is love.
God’s holiness and his love are not two different expressions of God, but they are both equally part of his nature. We have the privilege to throw ourselves at his mercy, appeal to his kindness, trust in his steadfast love. But we are not at liberty to choose who God will be. We will do well to resist the urge to conclude that the judge of all the earth would treat the wicked and the godly alike (Genesis 18:25). Moreover, to love without expectations or boundaries is to set up the one being loved for self-destruction.

God’s love is not meant to hurt or harm, but to prosper. The question is not whether God loves, but how and why He loves. The more we appreciate the diverse ways in which God expresses his love, the more we—like enjoying the way different instruments work together to form a symphony—will be able to understand his love and live as those dearly and deeply loved by God. The challenge, then, is to think about God and his love biblically, and to respond to the symphony of divine love appropriately.

When we say God is love, or that God loves humans, we are making assertions. The question is, are these assertions anchored in a worldview, or is it wishful thinking?

**GOD OF LOVE?**

I vividly remember sitting across the table from a Vietnamese scientist in Hanoi the year I graduated from Bible school. We were discussing two subjects I love—biology and theology—over dinner. Discussing biology was easy, but theology, not so much. We held to very different views of who God is. She disagreed with me the most on the idea of “divine love.” Why would God love?

She was more than puzzled with the idea; she disapproved of it.

I was waxing eloquent about the love of God and the cross of Jesus Christ. I even quoted the Christian’s go-to verse to describe divine love: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son... ” (John 3:16). But it did not impress my conversation partner. She shut me up by simply saying, “That is not fair.” Being a Theravada Buddhist, she found it unfair that someone else would be expected to pay the price for her “wrongs.” Her objection was not without reason. According to her worldview, self-effort was central to her liberation, happiness, and well-being.

She has a point. Love does not increase the chances of our survival (by natural selection), nor does caring for ones whose woes in this life are the result of the *karma* of their previous birth change their ultimate destiny. It might change ours, provided it helps acquire “good” karma for ourselves. But none of this explains human love, much less divine love, does it? Especially when you recognize that love is volitional—love involves the genuine act of the will, freely.

You can see why it is outlandish to suggest that matter, energy, or illusion “chooses.” Gravity does not choose to act; it just does. Choice, unlike mechanical function, depends on the one making the choice—the subject. Because love at its core is volitional—love involves the genuine act of the will, freely.

This is not to suggest that people from these different worldviews and religious backgrounds are unloving or incapable of love. It is only to point out that love is not the irreducible minimum of any worldview, save one. Even within theistic worldviews, the notion of divine favor unaided by human praise, petition, or penance is a strange idea.
Love is a mystery, and the mystery of divine love is magnified infinitely when we ask the question, why would God love? Surely, the survival of the Almighty is not contingent on us. God is uncaused, self-existent, and eternal. Moreover, God is unchanging, which means good (or bad) karma does not, or at least should not, affect divinity. It is not just my Vietnamese friend or Buddhism in general; outside of the Judeo-Christian faith, no other religion speaks of a God who is love.

I say this to also raise an important question, a question we should all pause and consider. Why, irrespective of our diverse identities or backgrounds, do humans love? What are we?

**WHAT ARE WE?**

There are many ways one could answer the question of what it means to be human. And to be clear, ideas have consequences; for as we think, so we live.

Take, for example, the naturalist. For the naturalist (or the atheist), nature is all there is. Therefore, appealing to the supernatural to explain human existence or essence is a mindless endeavor. Humans, the naturalist would argue, are a product of a long evolutionary process. There is only a slight (but significant) modification in the genetic makeup of our nearest cousins—the apes. As a matter of fact, humans share almost 99 percent of their DNA material with chimpanzees!

Yet, this tiny bit of unshared DNA makes a world of difference—a difference that cannot be explained by reducing humans beings to biological machines, or the human will and emotion to mere chemical reactions. Naturalistic explanations strip humanity of what makes us human. Devoid of a soul, humans would be rendered heartless—without thought, affection, or intention. In a naturalistic worldview, human beings, no matter how complex and capable, can be nothing more than chanced creatures, mere mannequins in motion.

Naturalism reduces human life—identity and worth—to the days lived between the womb and the tomb and what is acquired or accomplished. Yet not every nontheistic system blurs the distinctions between humans and other life forms nor limits human worth to what is done under the sun. Confucianism (especially that of Mencius) is founded on the assertion that a thinking, compassionate heart sets humans apart from animals. Mencius was a follower and disciple of Confucius, and easily the most influential figure in Confucian thought.

Confucius believed in human potential. He taught that all humans are fundamentally the same, and are extremely malleable—capable of immense good or unspeakable evil. It is true that Confucius did not qualify whether this nature was essentially good or evil; he did not set out to write a treatise on human nature. Confucius was chiefly concerned with human actions. “Benevolence,” according to Confucianism, is at the heart of what makes us human. While desire is common to all, it is how we think and choose to act that makes us human. However, Confucianism, like other Eastern worldviews, does not describe what humans are; it merely prescribes how humans ought to live.

According to Hinduism, humans, like all other entities—divine or demonic, animate or inanimate—are lower level manifestations of the ultimate (and only reality) *Brahman*. *Brahman* (not to be confused with the deity of creation, *Brahma*) is inexpressible and entirely other from anything open to us through our sense experience. At the same time, *Brahman* is in everything, the ultimate reality, or the only truly real. All life emanates from *Brahman*.

The notion that you are not what you see, but rather what you do not see, undergirds Hinduism’s discourse on what it means to be human. *Atman*, or the ultimate self, therefore is not what I am
but of what I am a part. In reality, the individual does not exist. The disconnect-ed self or ego (ahamkara) is what we most readily identify with; it is expressed in the form of our body, social standing, etc. One must be careful, therefore, not to be obsessed with self.

Buddhism, in a similar vein, teaches that there is no self (anatma). Everything is transitory. There is nothing fixed, permanent, or unchanging. The goal, therefore, of human existence is Moksha (salvation) or Nirvana. Nirvana, which literally means “nothing,” actually implies nakedness in the sense that there is no further distinctive as individual. The individual becomes the enlightened one as he or she merges with the ultimate in non-differentiated oneness.

Pantheistic and nontheistic systems do not really address the question of what it means to be human. But monotheistic faiths describe humans as created beings. That, however, does not mean the different monotheistic faiths share the same view on what it means to be human. The Islamic view of humans is instrumental whereas the Judeo-Christian worldview presents humans with intrinsic worth. Although the Quran uses a language similar to that of the Bible in describing humans as created beings, the two texts describe what it means to be a created being in very different terms. God, in Islamic theology, is entirely transcendent, and hence there is no essential relationship between the Creator God and the created human. The supreme attribute of Allah is “greatness.” It naturally follows that in Islam, humans as created beings are functional representatives (Khalifas) of God on earth. Consequentially, liberties are not absolute nor do humans have real freedom. Human identity is etched in human function and duty, the supreme duty being submission to divine will.

However, the Bible, in sharp contrast, declares that humans are created with real freedom and true liberty. The supreme attribute of the God of the Bible is love. It follows, therefore, that humans are creatures created in love to love. True love is contingent on true freedom. Humans are not mere agents submitting to and executing divine will (as in Islam) or suffused with divinity (as in Hinduism) but are created Imago-Dei, in the image of God.

What does it mean to be created in the image of God?

Consider this: Nature is governed by (natural) laws, not by desires, plans, or purposes. Creatures are governed by instincts, not wishes, wants, or dreams. Humans alone (in all of creation) are able to imagine, desire, plan, and pursue dreams. Humans are part of nature and are creatures, but we are also much more than that. We are beings with a particular makeup. Humans are moral, religious, relational beings with the power to choose. Essential to being human, I believe, is the intertwining of our cognition, emotion, and volition, endowing us with the unique ability to exercise creative and moral action, and a social and religious disposition. In other words, humans are intelligent, intentional, codependent (social-moral-religious) persons—not accidental, independent entities—who care for each other and for the world under their care.

The Bible describes humans as being intentionally created!

The Bible asks the question “What is man?” five times. And with the exception of Hebrews 2:6-8, where the person in question is Jesus Christ, in every other instance humans are revealed as being intentionally created by an intelligent, loving Creator (see Job 7:17-18; 15:14; Psalm 8:4-5; and Psalm 144:3-4).

Christianity (and Judaism for that matter) affirms that human beings, male and female alike, are created in the image of God. This alone, above all, is why all humans irrespective of ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, socioeconomic standing,
literacy, ability—even the unborn—have intrinsic worth. Every human being is invested with dignity and is unique. We are valuable for who we are; that is how we were created.

Similar to the way a ray of light is formed by the convergence of seven colors, at least five aspects converge in the making of a human being. I am here not referring to the aspects or composition of what makes us human (the body, soul, spirit), but rather the dimensions that reflect that we are created in the image of God. These dimensions are:

1. **Rational dimension**  
   (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:20, 22-24; Psalm 8:8-9)
2. **Social dimension**  
   (Genesis 2:18, 23; 3:6-8; 4:1)
3. **Ecological dimension**  
   (Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8:4-8)
4. **Moral dimension**  
   (Genesis 2:17, 25; 3:7; Ecclesiastes 7:29)
5. **Spiritual dimension**  
   (Genesis 3:8,10)

These five dimensions—rational, moral, social, ecological and spiritual—are, at their core, relational. In that sense, humans are essentially “relational creatures,” and love holds them together. Morality, rationality, knowledge, freedom, spirituality, creation care, and social responsibility are all expressions of human love. As moral beings, humans possess a moral conscience and make moral decisions. We express guilt and self-restraint and celebrate good. We have a moral perception of self and God, and pursue wholesome lives in communities.

As rational beings, we seek to know and understand the world around us, and as religious beings, we seek to know God the best way we know how. The human quest to know God is not merely a cognitive exercise. Humans long to love, to express their devotion to God. Above all, as free, volitional beings, humans have the power to choose and make choices according to personal preferences. The view that humans are moral, religious, relational beings with the power to choose is uniquely biblical—a truth beautifully expressed in Psalm 8.

**SEEING GOD THROUGH THE IMAGE OF GOD**

Now, if humans are created in the image of God and his likeness, what are we to make of God? If relationships are the bedrock of what it means to be human, then it stands to reason that the source of humanity must be a being in relationship, a being in love. A word of caution before I continue. We are created in God’s image. He is the truth to which we must conform. If we fail to hold unswervingly to this truth, we will run the risk of remaking God in accordance with our inclinations.

God is love. Twice the apostle John categorically states that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). Love is God’s nature. Love is not merely a friendly persona He projects, Love is in essence who God is. That God is love is one of the most sublime, uplifting, and reassuring truths ever announced to humanity. God will always act in love because He cannot do otherwise. Love is the way He is. And knowing God’s love is the key to a well-balanced, satisfying life of peace, productivity, and power.
God’s engagement with his people, Israel, is a testament to this truth that God is love. In the book of Ezra, we read: “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel” (Ezra 3:11). The books Ezra and Nehemiah record the last events, chronologically, in the Old Testament period, an era more commonly referred to as “post-exilic.”

God had originally brought Israel out of the slave markets of Egypt during the Exodus. Israel was chosen by God to be a holy nation, a royal priesthood (see Exodus 19:3-6). Yet only a few centuries later, God declares through Isaiah and Jeremiah that his people have forgotten Him and who they are (see Isaiah 1:2-6 and Jeremiah 2:1-13).

As we reflect on the history of the people of God as it comes to us in the pages of Holy Scripture, we discover the truth that God’s love is unlike anything we know. We humans are fatally forgetful; but God is eternally faithful. Our love is self-serving; God’s is self-giving. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. The God of the Bible is a God who loves humans with an everlasting love. It should come as no surprise then that God would say this to a rebellious people: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you” (Jeremiah 31:3).

The apostle Paul puts it this way, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23-24). Love involves action. It is chiefly expressed in the giving of oneself for the good of another, so it always demands an object.

When we talk about love, we are suggesting that there is more than one person involved. There must be at least two—the one who loves and the one who is loved. This raises an important question. If God has always been love and love demands an object, who did God love before He created angels or humankind? The more you think through the question, the more you appreciate why, outside the Judeo-Christian worldview, God is not described as love.

God is not contingent on anything other than Himself to be who He is. This was beautifully expressed in Jesus’s prayer. He helped us catch a glimpse of the love that existed between the persons of the triune Godhead from eternity past when He prayed, “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24).

God is complete and sufficient in and of Himself. He did not need to create other beings in order to express his love. God perfectly expressed his triune love as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in divine communion from all eternity.

Creation is an act of divine love! Our love is often selfish and demanding. We ask, “Why did God create humans if He knew that we would sin, and our sin would bring unimaginable misery for all?” The answer is love! God created us free, in spite of the real possibility of sin, in his image to love.

Love is contingent on freedom. Where there is no freedom, there can be no true love. For freedom to be real, one must be able to choose between real options (which require real consequences). This means intrinsic to what makes true love possible is also what makes rebellion possible—the freedom to choose. So, if we were to ask what explains all the mess we see in the world, the answer involves freedom.

It is interesting to see how the different worldviews frame the fundamental human predicament, and what they offer as a remedy. Confucianism sees the fundamental problem as chaos; hence, the solution it has to offer is social order.
Hinduism sees the fundamental problem as distraction and ignorance, and it proposes ways and means to overcome distraction (do our duty, overcome ignorance, and realize our divine status). Buddhism sees the problem as suffering and presents a way to be awakened and become enlightened. In Islam, the problem is human pride, and the solution is submission. In the Judeo-Christian worldview, sin is much more than wrongdoing. It is separation from God. The solution is that we return to love; we return to God.

The creation narrative points us to a God who created humans in love in spite of knowing that creating them in his image would come at great cost to Himself. True love does not seek its own. It seeks the good of the one being loved. God’s continuing engagement with an estranged world should make it amply plain that God loves us in spite of ourselves. Not because of what we are or what we do. Divine love offers a lifeline to the world trapped in feigning to be what it is not. We no longer need to pretend to be what we are not to be loved. God loves us. It is his nature to love.

God’s love is pure. Because He is love, He gives. Jesus said God gives good things to those who ask Him (Matthew 7:11). James went so far as to say that every good gift finds its source in God (James 1:17). Since God is love, we can expect Him to give fully and freely of Himself, and that is what we see in the Bible as the supreme act of divine love: “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

Most people expect God (if they grant there is such a being) to be benevolent, caring, and involved in human affairs for human good. However, not every worldview speaks of God as love. This should alert us to the danger that lies lurking in the shadows. We are prone to nurture expectations of how God should behave because of what we have imagined God to be. Is it any wonder that a vast majority of people who believe in God are disappointed with God?

God is love, and love is the nature of persons. At the heart of knowing another person is revelation. Unless the persons we seek to know reveal themselves to us, we will be hopelessly consigned to assumptions and speculations. However, with revelation, we can know them for who they truly are. The same is true of God.

God has progressively revealed Himself in the Bible. Paying attention, then, to the biblical portrayal of who God is guards us against faulty expectations, false promises, and fake gods. Moreover, it helps us grow in our appreciation of divine love for all its worth:

> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8)

A question worth thinking through is, “Who, or what, is the source of your understanding of divine love, and how does that compare with what we see in the Bible?”

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I WILL ALWAYS remember the heat. It felt like I had entered an inferno and there was no escape. I was eighteen years old at the time, and this was my first trip to the beautiful country of Tanzania. It was my first time outside the western hemisphere. I thought I knew heat and humidity, but I was proven wrong as soon as I stepped off the plane in Dar es Salaam, one of Tanzania’s major cities. It was then that I experienced a scorching kind of heat.

After arriving in Dar es Salaam, I then traveled through the gorgeous countryside to visit other towns. On one overnight train journey, I took the top bunk in a small train cabin while a friend took the bottom bunk. Exhausted from the travel up until that point, I fell asleep while it was still dusk. At approximately 2:30 in the morning, I was sharply awakened by a violent convulsing of the train. To understand something of that experience, imagine yourself riding an extremely bumpy roller coaster. Then picture someone grabbing hold of you while you are buckled in your seat and shaking you incessantly for the rest of the ride. That was what this shocking jolt felt like.
What made the experience even more disorientating was that it happened in utter darkness. I remember not even being able to see my hand in front of my face. And if the darkness and the shaking were not enough, I then heard a crowd of stomping feet running down the hallway outside my cabin and loud shouting and chanting in Swahili, a language I did not understand. I began sweating from the anxiety. The darkness and chaos of the moment was palpable.

When I think back to that unforgettable train journey, I am thankful that I had a good friend with me on the trip. He and I spent those early morning hours and the rest of the day praying to God for protection. We found out later in the day that there were different mechanical malfunctions in the middle of the night that caused the train to shake back and forth at a rapid pace.

Two words that aptly describe that frightful night for me are darkness and chaos. These two words are unwelcomed yet very real companions to the human experience. They are also found throughout the Bible and carry rich meaning in the Judeo-Christian faith tradition. We learn of these two realities on the first pages of Scripture:

_In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters._ (Genesis 1:1-2)

“Darkness” and “water” are two realities introduced in the very beginning of the creation story—and two realities which the original listeners needed to face. It is helpful to remember that for the early listeners of Genesis, the language of “the waters” signified chaos. For the Jewish mind, water was a place of death, disorder, and destruction.

In his book _Out of the Depths_, the late Old Testament professor Bernhard Anderson takes us into the ancient Jewish mindset:

Israel inherited a picture of the universe that depicted the world as surrounded on every hand by “the waters of chaos” which, at the time of creation, the Creator subdued and pushed back in order to give creatures space in which to live and to perform their God-given tasks. The earth is portrayed as a kind of island, suspended over the waters of the “deep,” within which is located Sheol, the kingdom of death.¹

Israel understood that the waters of the deep represented chaos. Yet it is into this watery chaos that God performs his creative power. Genesis tells us that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” The waters indeed have formidable power, but even this power answers to Yahweh. In verse 7 of Genesis 1, Yahweh commands the water to be separate from the sky. The water obeys Yahweh’s command.

If we enter into the Ancient Near Eastern mindset for this reading, I wonder if there would be a sense of shock for the early listeners. “The sea takes its orders from this God?” I hear some saying. What we see in Genesis 1 is a raw explanation of reality and a full-on demonstration of the power, wonder, and glory of God. Yahweh is the one true God and chaos will bow to Him.

Earlier this year, I was in a country far from my home in the United States. After speaking to a group of university students, one student came to me and said, “Do you believe that we will see peace in our country this year?” I knew very well that his country had endured great turmoil and instability in recent years. Through a translator, I simply said that his question was far beyond my skill or ability to predict. He appreciated my response but kept pressing me on the question. After listening to him further, I looked at him and said, “In this world, God does not promise societal peace or peace specific
to a geographical area. But He does assure us of His peace in our hearts—this is a peace that lives inside us irrespective of peaceful situations or times of turmoil.” We continued to have a meaningful and spirited conversation around this topic for several minutes.

After leaving that event, I soon realized that the words I shared with that student were words that I needed to hear. All of a sudden, I came to realize that I had unknowingly deemed certain circumstances in the world and in my life as simply beyond God’s reach. I still believed that God was in control of the world, but there were parts of my Christian faith that had accepted defeat. Certain events in my life had transpired in a way that I did not expect or anticipate; these events made me feel that it was not just my plan that had been defeated. I began to believe that God’s power had been defeated. After having this conversation with this student, God was reminding me through my very own lips that He ruled over everything, even the places of chaos and darkness in this world. I realized afresh that even in the places bereft of hope, He was still there and He was still active. Whether it be the turmoil and tension in different societies or the chaos that we feel inside our hearts at times, God was reminding me that He rules over it all.

I find it so hugely encouraging that Christianity acknowledges that the darkness and chaos we experience in life are real. We see that in the life of Israel, the Scriptures, and throughout the history of Christianity. But we also see that darkness and chaos do not have the last say. The chaotic power of the watery depths does not overpower Israel’s God. Not even the power of darkness can out-muscle Yahweh. The Psalmist writes that even when he was convinced that the darkness would cover him, and the light about him be night, a new reality breaks through: “Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you” (Psalm 139:11). Interestingly, darkness in the biblical world “is associated with the primeval ocean covered in darkness (see Gen 1:2; Job 38:8-9) and is usually seen as a negative power of chaos threatening life and human existence.”

But just as we see from Yahweh’s rule over the darkness and chaos in the creation account of Genesis, the psalmist dramatically states here that Israel’s God “transforms darkness to light, chaos to order, death to life.” The sheer immensity of God’s power in the words of the psalmist bring me great comfort. It is a comfort that becomes lost in wonder and a wonder that leads to worship.

One of the most beautiful and compelling things about the Christian faith is that it does not hide the complexity of life nor its scars. The stories from the Bible tell the stories of God, people, and events without suppressing the truth and unwieldy power of darkness and chaos in life. But that’s not where the drama ends! Gratefully, the grand story of Scripture points us to a loving God who responds to our call in darkness and chaos.

I think back to that train journey in Tanzania. Since that trip there have been times of darkness and chaos in life that I have witnessed up close and from afar. But I take courage knowing that even in darkness, God’s light and love can break through—that even in the fiercest moments of chaos, God’s peace makes its home in me. To echo the words of Francis Schaeffer, “God is there and He is not silent.”

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3 Ibid.
By Ravi Zacharias

Love, the Supreme Expression

As Christians, we speak often of God’s love, yet the idea that God loves us can easily become merely a theoretical statement. I am convinced that even if this truth sinks in, the significance of it seems to wear off with time. We forget the immensity of the truth that God loves us just as we are, in the frailty and the struggle with which we live.

Understanding God’s love must more than inform the mind; it must stir the heart with emotion. That is the understanding that overflows in worship of God and love for others.

Years ago, J.H. Oldham wrote in his book Life Is Commitment, “There are some things in life, and they may be the most important things, that we cannot know by research or reflection, but only by committing ourselves. We must dare in order to know. Life is full of situations to which I can respond not with part of myself but only with commitment of my whole being.”

And committing ourselves, I would add, is the essential component of loving God, which in turn overflows in worship. What commitment costs determines what it brings. Only a commitment lived out understands what love means.

Love, even after generations of pondering, still remains one of the most powerful but elusive experiences. We talk about it, we sing about it, we make movies about it, but oftentimes it remains in the realm of the desired but inexperienced. We may write a book on the laws of love, but even there it seems to be so little expressed.

Love is greater than any law. The whole Law, given at first to Moses, came in about 613 precepts. These revealed the parameters in which God prescribed authentic worship as we love and serve Him. One cannot but be overwhelmed by the sheer weight of obligation. About half a century later David, in Psalm 15, takes these 613 and reduces them to about eleven. Two centuries later, Isaiah shrinks them to six. Micah takes those six and summarizes them into three. Jesus reduces them to two—and both have love at their core.

It is interesting to see how the apostle Paul, who well understood what faith meant and what the law meant, ended his majestic chapter in 1 Corinthians 13. The great expressions of the truly spiritual life, he said, are faith, hope, and love. But the greatest expression, he said—even greater than faith, the final precept that Habakkuk taught, even greater than the law that Moses taught—is love, which summarizes the gospel in the incarnation of our Lord. But let us never forget that Jesus fulfilled the law because its precepts were true. Jesus was faithful to the Father’s mission. But both law and faith
were subsumed by the incredible expression of God’s love.

Paul’s entire treatment is to show how love expresses itself, not how love is enjoyed (see 1 Corinthians 13). That’s how love draws in both law and faith. You can observe the law without loving it. You can have faith in someone without loving them. But when faith and law are bound by the skin of love, they all find their fulfillment. That supreme expression is in the heart’s devotion to God.

Jesus also took that hunger of the heart and combined it with the demands of the Law. The greatest commandment, he said, is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and strength and soul and mind and your neighbors as yourselves. On this [precept],” he said, “hang all the Law and the Prophets” (see Matthew 22:37–40). Everything in the two Testaments that points to the moral also points to the supremacy of knowing God’s love, the key to unlocking life’s treasure.

Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength is worship at its core—and a powerful expression to our neighbors of God’s love for them. Love is the greatest expression because it reflects the greatest being and is the greatest call in our relationship to God and our fellow human being. Without it, we are reduced to mere law, and in that state, faith is lost as well.

Today in Corinth, carved in front of a small church are the words of 1 Corinthians 13. It sits at the bottom of a hill. At the top of the hill is the Temple of Aphrodite. The contrast in the two loves tells us why the world is the way it is today.

May we hear his loving voice and find the splendor of his love.

Warm Regards,

Ravi
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