

Halloween and the Uncanny

By

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Plundering the Egyptians

“Now the children of Israel had done according to the word of Moses, and they had asked from the Egyptians articles of silver, articles of gold, and clothing. And the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they granted them what they requested. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.”

-Exodus 12:35-36

As we get closer to Halloween, I thought it would be a good idea to take a look at this holiday from the lens of a particular Christian practice illustrated in the passage above. At this point in the book of Exodus, God has unleashed all ten plagues on the nation of Egypt and the Israelites are ready to leave their captivity. As they are let go, God gives them a command to take clothes and precious metals from the Egyptians as “payment” for their years of slavery. However, there was another important reason why God had the Israelites take these articles, and that is for the material to build the tabernacle in the wilderness.

Another important detail that we can easily miss is the purpose of these articles to the Egyptians. In pagan cultures, the jewelry and precious metal that the people possessed would almost exclusively have ritualistic importance, and some of it would almost definitely be in the shape of the idols. The intent of God was that the people would eventually melt these idols down and refine this material into a form that could be used to worship Him, and most of it was used towards this purpose. However, some of this material was unfortunately used to construct an idol in the form of a golden calf in Exodus 32. This story shaped a principle that helped the early Christians navigate their purpose in the ancient, mostly pagan, world that they lived in.

They sincerely believed that the ministry of Christ could actually “refine” much of the pagan world and “shape” it into a form that was suitable for the worship of God. Just like the gold that the Israelites plundered, the issue wasn’t the gold itself, but the “form” that the gold was shaped into. The pagan cultures, although they were wrong about many things, they did still contain much truth within them that spoke of the natural truths of God. The apostle Paul put it this way:

“...for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them)...”

-Romans 2:14-15

Even though the ancient pagans did not have access to the direct revelation of God contained in the Scriptures, they did have access to God's revelation through nature. While this wasn't enough to bring them into a relationship with God, it was enough for them to develop cultures, practices, and symbols that contained a lot of truth and reflected a lot of God's divine pattern. Remember also that the first major controversy of the church, (which they debated passionately in Acts 15), was whether or not to convert the gentiles into Judaism in order to then convert them to Christianity. The decision of the counsel was to forbid certain pagan practices of sexual immorality and consuming meat with blood still in it, but other than that, to leave the cultures of the gentiles intact, though imbued with Christ.

However, they also kept in mind that some of the Egyptian treasure was formed into another idol. This means first, that not everything taught by pagans can be properly refined, there are some pagan practices and beliefs that stand against the truths contained in Scripture and so they had to be destroyed. Take for instance an incident in Ephesus recorded for us in Acts 19:

“Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.”

-Acts 19:19-20

Here, the pagans who converted to Christianity knew that their sorcery represented a way of thinking that was completely contrary to the message of the gospel and therefore could not be “refined” and needed to be burned. The second principle we get from the story in Exodus is that even the things that can be refined must be diligently repurposed before Christians participate in them. Take for instance the issue of Greek philosophy in the church at Corinth:

“And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive

words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

-1 Corinthians 2:1-5

We know from other passages that Paul was certainly not opposed to quoting Greek philosophers, (like he does in Acts 17), nor is he completely opposed to using eloquent language, (Paul's innate brilliance is clearly demonstrated in all of his letters), only that for the newly converted Greeks, (who had not yet wrestled with the mysteries of the Christian faith, nor understood the divine power of God that interacts with reality), they were not ready to properly “refine” human wisdom and use it to the glory of God.

Instead, they were more inclined to pervert the gospel through their philosophy which is where the first major Christian heresy, “gnosticism”, came from. This was not a totally pagan idea, but instead it was an unholy mixture of Christian theology and Greek philosophy. We do see later Christians try their best to “refine” Greek philosophy and bring it into submission to Christ, some were more successful than others, but ultimately I hope the point is clear that when Christians practice this discipline well, our faith can be bettered, but when it is practiced poorly we can produce new heresies.

When I say that our faith is “bettered” I don't mean this in a trivial way either. The gospel went out into every culture on the earth, and since the New Testament does not contain an ethnic element to it, (like the Old Testament), Christianity ultimately “refined” the cultures that it went into. This is why true Christianity around the world will have a center built on common faith in core doctrines, but will also have unique and rich traditions that differ greatly, and emphasize unique elements of Christ and the gospel.

Refining Holidays

This concept is true of holidays in general. It is a false claim that Christians simply “took over” pagan holidays as many people falsely believe today, but it is true that Christians recognized truth in the symbols and practices of the early pagans and created their own holidays that also employed some of these same symbols, repurposed in a way that honored the true and living God and not pagan deities. Let's take Easter as an example. We know with absolute certainty that Christ was crucified and raised during the feast of Passover which takes place in the spring. Though the pagans weren't privy to this reality, they did notice a pattern within nature itself that prepared them for the concept of resurrection. The ancient pagans witnessed, every year, a cycle of death and resurrection in the surrounding environment and so they created myths that spoke of deities that underwent a type of death in the winter and a type of resurrection in the spring.

They then accompanied these beliefs with symbols that also spoke of this death and resurrection, like eggs and rabbits. While the pagans were unaware of God's eventual plan of sending His Son to die for our sins and then for Him to rise again from the grave, they were aware of a pattern of reality that prepared them for the gospel message. Because of this, the early Christians didn't want to simply throw out all of these symbols, but repurpose them for the glory of God. In other words, they heartily condemned the pagan beliefs, but they simultaneously helped the pagans understand symbols of their beliefs that pointed to the truth of the gospel. Look at how Paul practices this in Acts 17 when he speaks to the Athenians:

"Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; "for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.

Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands."

-Acts 17:22-24

The Greeks had a pantheon of gods that all emerged from the natural order. Because of this, they did not have an account of where the natural order came from. In order to fill this gap they invented an "unknown god" who they symbolically worshiped. Instead of tearing down this altar, Paul instead shows that the symbol of the "unknown god" that they worshiped pointed to the true and living God revealed in Scripture. He expertly condemns the underlying presumptions of the Greeks, while also using their symbols to preach the gospel. This was a mode of evangelism utilized by the early Christians that was very effective and, as I stated before, created holidays that served the true and living God.

Since there are no holidays prescribed for Christians in the way that there are holidays prescribed for the Jews, Christians were free to create holidays within their given cultures. These holidays then spread through European expansion, but the holidays themselves grew up in particular cultures and became occasions of worship for Christians around the world. While we are not commanded to celebrate any holiday, there is an underlying wisdom in celebrating seasons to the glory of God. Mankind naturally wants to celebrate and so we have festivals and "holy days" that usually demarcate a time of transition, like the transition of winter to spring, fall to winter, or the new year. Doing this creates social cohesion, but it also helps us to celebrate certain facets of reality in a symbolic fashion. Like Easter, we are not commanded to celebrate it, but I believe it does benefit Christians to take a day at least one day a year and

meditate on the reality of the resurrection and to make ourselves more aware of the symbols that represent this reality that fill nature.

Which leads to the interesting topic of Halloween. Many Christians today see Halloween as a purely pagan holiday that Christians have no business celebrating. Now it is true that Halloween contains pagan symbols that I will explain as we go, but these symbols are not beyond “refining”. Also, Halloween is a unique holiday that is actually not pagan. Many Christians today try to associate it with other pagan fall festivals, but these attempts always fall short of providing actual evidence that these holidays served as the basis for Halloween. Instead, Halloween, (or “All Hallows Eve”) was a Christian holiday that arose from the Christian west and has subsequently been taken over by a post Christian culture. In other words, Halloween is not an example of Christians foolishly taking over a pagan holiday, but instead Halloween, in its current form, is a result of secular and pagan westerners taking over a Christian holiday.

As stated before, Christians have no mandate to celebrate any holiday:

“One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.”

-Romans 14:5

However, if we choose to celebrate a holiday, we should do so with a clear conscience that is aimed at honoring God:

“He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.”

-Romans 14:6

This means that a Christian is free to celebrate a holiday, but if they do so they have to be intentional about celebrating a holiday unto Christ. So in this paper I will be pointing out the symbols of Halloween and how we as Christians can “refine” these symbols in subjection to Christ and honor God on this day.

Saul and Halloween

In order to do this, I wanted to go through a biblical story that I believe illustrates the elements of Halloween very well and that is the story of Saul calling up the ghost of Samuel towards the end of his life.

“Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had lamented for him and buried him in Ramah, in his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the spiritists out of the land. Then the Philistines gathered together, and came and encamped at Shunem. So Saul gathered all Israel together, and they encamped at Gilboa. When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by the prophets. Then Saul said to his servants, “Find me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her.” And his servants said to him, “In fact, there is a woman who is a medium at En Dor.” So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes, and he went, and two men with him; and they came to the woman by night. And he said, “Please conduct a seance for me, and bring up for me the one I shall name to you.” Then the woman said to him, “Look, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the spiritists from the land. Why then do you lay a snare for my life, to cause me to die?” And Saul swore to her by the LORD, saying, “As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing.” Then the woman said, “Whom shall I bring up for you?” And he said, “Bring up Samuel for me.” When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman spoke to Saul, saying, “Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!” And the king said to her, “Do not be afraid. What did you see?” And the woman said to Saul, “I saw a spirit ascending out of the earth.” So he said to her, “What is his form?” And she said, “An old man is coming up, and he is covered with a mantle.” And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground and bowed down. Now Samuel said to Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” And Saul answered, “I am deeply distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God has departed from me and does not answer me anymore, neither by prophets nor by dreams. Therefore I have called you, that you may reveal to me what I should do.” Then Samuel said: “So why do you ask me, seeing the LORD has departed from you and has become your enemy? “And the LORD has done for Himself as He spoke by me. For the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, David. “Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD nor execute His fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day. “Moreover the LORD will also deliver Israel with you into the hand of the Philistines. And tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also deliver the army of Israel into the hand of the Philistines.” Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, and was dreadfully afraid because of the words of Samuel. And there was no strength in him, for he had eaten no food all day or all night.”

-1 Samuel 28:3-20

This story always sparks a lot of debate amongst Christians as to what exactly is happening here. Did Samuel actually return from the grave to talk to Saul, or was this a

demon impersonating Samuel. Which leads to more discussions about ghosts and other things. For the purposes of this paper, I will side step these more debatable elements and instead focus on the symbols present in this story that serve as the basis for the symbols of Halloween itself. This doesn't mean that this story *creates* the symbols of Halloween, only that it illustrates them in a really concise way. So we will take three elements of this story that are all celebrated during Halloween, inversion, the celebration of the unknown, and the loss of identity.

The End of a Cycle

“Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had lamented for him and buried him in Ramah, in his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the spiritists out of the land. Then the Philistines gathered together, and came and encamped at Shunem. So Saul gathered all Israel together, and they encamped at Gilboa.”

-1 Samuel 28:3-5

The primary thing that fall holidays do is celebrate the end of a cycle. If you think about it from the perspective of an agrarian culture, which is often hard for us modern people to do, the fall represented the end of the crop cycle. All the planting and harvesting was done, and now the fall ushered in the “death” of the fields that would persist until the following spring. Because of this, many fall holidays focus on the concept of death, or the end of a particular cycle. This is why the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, is celebrated in the fall and not the winter like us. This is what is expressed in the story above.

When a “world” ends, we are confronted with the concept of the unknown or a meditation on death or mortality. Since the above story is about the end of a cycle it contains all the symbols of Halloween. Saul was the first king of Israel, but, because he violated his role as the king, God rejected him and had already appointed David as the new king. Even though God had done this, Saul had tried to hold onto power. But, with the invasion of the Philistines, Saul was facing an existential threat to his reign, and the nation of Israel in general. And, if you read a couple passages later, Saul and his sons were murdered by the Philistines, and David preserved the nation, eventually becoming king.

This also represents the end of the “judges” who ruled Israel since the end of the book of Joshua. These “judges” were an interesting type of ruler that God utilized in the beginning of the nation of Israel. They functioned as a type of king and prophet for the nation and were only raised up during a time of crisis. With Samuel's death, this class of rulers had come to an end, and now kings ruled over Israel. When Saul is confronted

with his own mortality, he scrambles to find answers from a familiar source, Samuel. But since Samuel was dead, he had to use illicit means to “talk” to him which is why he employs the services of a witch, or necromancer.

All Saints Day

Ancient man used to “celebrate” this concept through dark imagery, and riotous parties in order to signify the truth that all things eventually come to an end. We can’t deny the existence of death, whether that means the death of a person or a society, and so it made sense for ancient man to bring this concept to the front of their minds in the form of a festival. Early Christians didn’t get rid of this type of festival, but instead repurposed it into a Christian ideal. Since we have the hope of the resurrection, Christians think about death differently than the ancient pagans. While Christians acknowledge the grief that death produces, we also recognize that death is a transition from this fallen world into the world to come. This produces a lot of hope and encouragement.

In order to celebrate this concept, Christians began celebrating a day called “All Saints Day” on November 2nd, where they would celebrate Christ’s victory over the grave and meditate on the lives of the saints who had lived their lives well. This was a beautiful time of recollecting “heroes” of the faith and reminding ourselves that this life is transient, growing our desire to live for eternal things and not temporal things.

“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

-1 Timothy 4:6-8

Over time though, false beliefs started to creep up into the church and these changed the trajectory of this holiday. The belief in question is the idea of purgatory. I won’t get into all the ins and outs of this belief, but to give it an overly simplistic summary, “purgatory” was believed to be the place where Christians went who were faithful to God, but not faithful enough to make it to heaven. Perhaps they hadn’t done enough penance, or they hadn’t been to church enough, or they committed sins right before they died. These things wouldn’t send someone to Hell, but it would make their soul “unfit” for heaven. So, Christians came up with the unbiblical concept of purgatory, or a place in which the evil of your soul could be “purged” by God and eventually you could make it up to heaven. In order to celebrate Christians who were in this state, Christians began celebrating them on November 1st and took this day to pray for the dead and offer “indulgences” (a form of payment to the Catholic church that could shorten their

time in purgatory). And October 31st became the eve of these days, originally called “All Hallows Eve”.

This is an aside, but the clear perversion constituted in the idea of purgatory and especially in the idea of indulgences, where Christians were extorted by the Catholic church into “paying down” the sentence of their loved ones by giving money to the Catholic Church was the reason why Martin Luther intentionally nailed up his famous 95 theses “protesting” the Roman church on October 31st.

Even though there was some perversion in the creation of this holiday, I think that its formation was not totally wrong. When we think about it, this holiday acts as a mirror for Easter. In celebrating Easter, (though Catholics have a much longer celebration beginning with 40 days of lent and then moving through all of “Holy Week”), the culmination of the holiday really takes place over the course of three days. This would be “Good Friday” where we remember the crucifixion, “Holy Saturday” when we remember Jesus going into the grave, and “Easter Sunday” where we celebrate Jesus rising from the dead.

This is why it makes sense to me that in the fall Christians would be compelled to make a “mirror” holiday in which they celebrate the fate of man for three days. The first day, October 31st, we would solemnly remember the reality of death, November 1st we remember the reality that “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8), and then on November 2nd, we remember the hope of the resurrection and the perseverance of the saints. So, like Easter Sunday it would be a three day celebration beginning with solemn remembrance, and ending with a beautiful celebration of the resurrection and eternal life.

Inversion

“These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.”

-Acts 17:6

Because Halloween represents the end of a cycle, in many ways it represents a day of inversion. To understand this symbol, think about a ferris wheel. As it completes its cycle, what was up becomes down, and what was down becomes up. In the same way, when a cycle comes to an end, everything gets inverted. For fall festivals, the live crops die, the heat turns to cold, the animals who were out go into hibernation, and so on. We see this same idea at the end of kingdoms as well.

In the above story, Saul’s kingdom is coming to an end. As a result the story is inverted. The king of God is rejected by God and goes to a medium (which his own law

condemned), in disguise and calls up the ghost of a prophet who gives Saul a legitimate prophecy that condemns him as opposed to giving him hope. Then the witch ends up sacrificing an animal and cooking it for Saul to eat. As you can hopefully see, this whole story is a parody of itself, good has become evil, what is condemned is what is sought, the king is dressed as a commoner, and a woman devoted to death saves the life of the king. But then, reality reasserts itself. Saul, who had been rejected by God, is killed, and David, the rightful king, takes his throne.

Because ancient man understood this concept, they had festivals that celebrated the end of a cycle through a day of inversion. There were feasts like Saturnalia in the winter, the “Feast of Fools” at the start of the new year, and “carnival” in the spring. During these days, everything becomes inverted. People wear masks and garish costumes, women who are conservative dress provocatively, men who are well mannered get drunk and become lewd, order is replaced with chaos, and peace is replaced with reverie.

Even the Jews have a day like this called “Purim” in the spring. This day celebrates Esther and the triumph of God’s people over Haman. This story also represents an inversion. The heroine of the story is in disguise, in that her husband does not know she is Jewish, the villain of the story is praised, and the people of God are almost exterminated. However, at the end of the story, everything that is upside down flips right side up. Esther reveals herself, Haman is hanged on the very instrument he constructed to kill Mordecai (Esther’s uncle), Mordecai is honored, and those who try to kill the Jews are killed by the Jews. As such, the feast of Purim uses a lot of the symbols that I mentioned above. The people wear costumes, people get drunk, there are raucous parties and lewdness that permeates a, usually, conservative group of people.

However, when the day ends, like in the story of Esther, what was once inverted is set right. The men and women sober up, they put away their costumes, and they seek to honor God again. Even in the west where carnival is still celebrated around the world, (in American it is called “Mardis Gras”) these riotous parties always happen on the Tuesday before “Ash Wednesday”, which is the start of 40 days of lent prior to Easter in the Catholic tradition.

This makes sense since the story of the cross is the ultimate “inverted” event in history. God is condemned by “holy men”, the signs of mockery become prophetic (the Romans dressing him in a robe and nailing a sign above His cross that reads “the king of the Jews”), the people of God reject their Messiah while a Roman centurion and a thief recognize His divinity, His followers flee, and the sun is blotted out. But then everything is set right, the crown of thorns becomes the crown of glory, the King of glory comes out

of the tomb, and the ones who fled become the chief proponents of the gospel of salvation.

This is what "Carnival" is literally supposed to represent. "Carnival" is a conjunction of two words, "carne", meaning "meat", and "levare", which means to "put away". In other words, the celebration of "carnival" literally means to put away meat which was a common item to fast from during lent. "Mardis Gras" literally means "fat Tuesday" which precedes "Ash Wednesday". So, at the end of a cycle, things invert, and then they are brought back into order by God.

It shouldn't take much of an imagination to see that Halloween follows this same pattern. People dress in costumes, there are riotous parties, women dress provocatively, innocent children dress as devils and threaten "tricks" if they don't get "treats", people "dress" their homes with images of death and evil, and so on. So while I think it would be wrong for individual Christians to participate in this inversion, what can we "celebrate" in the midst of this night of inversion?

Christian Celebration

What the Christian remembers is that this day of inversion is actually a revelation of what is under the surface. Unfortunately, we live in a world that is still fallen and given over to the dominion of the wicked one.

"...whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them."

-2 Corinthians 4:4

What this means is that while Christians can make this world better through our influence as "salt" and "light", until Jesus returns, no matter how much light we shine, there will always be shadow. Not only this, but we remember that our bodies are also given over to sin and death. This doesn't mean that a Christian lives in bondage to sin, we should always be walking forward in sincere repentance for the wrong that we do, but this side of heaven, we will always have to do battle with the perversion of our flesh.

"For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish."

-Galatians 5:17

We also remember that our bodies are condemned to death. Even if Christ has offered eternal life for those who believe in Him, we are still subject to the reality of death, and it isn't a bad thing for us to soberly consider this reality.

“For all our days have passed away in Your wrath; We finish our years like a sigh. The days of our lives are seventy years; And if by reason of strength they are eighty years, Yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; For it is soon cut off, and we fly away. Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath. So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom.”

Psalm 90:9-12

However, we should also remember on this day of inversion, that the world will be set right by our great God and Savior:

“And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.”

-1 John 2:17

This is why I think that Halloween, in many ways, signifies where we are at in the western world. We have largely denied God, which means that we still have to reckon with death, which is why we still celebrate Halloween, but we don't celebrate life, which is why we don't celebrate "All Saints Day". This is particularly strange since Halloween was just supposed to be the "Eve" of All Saints Day and has supplanted it as the only celebration. Because of this, we have greatly sped up our eventual collapse and live in a world of inversion. Gender has been inverted, sexuality has been inverted, morality has been inverted, criminals are being pardoned and innocence is being punished, the "fools" of our culture (comedians like Joe Rogan and Russel Brand) are trusted to bring us truth, and the "wise" of our culture (universities and "experts") are now giving us lies.

While Christians should be doing their best to make our current world as right as it possibly can be, our ultimate hope that we should remind ourselves of is what the apostle John says above, "the world is passing away, and the lust of it..." What has been temporarily turned upside down by the sin of man, will be ultimately turned right side up by the righteousness of God.

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.”

-Titus 2:11-14

A Celebration of Mystery

“And he said, “Bring up Samuel for me.” When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman spoke to Saul, saying, “Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!” And the king said to her, “Do not be afraid. What did you see?” And the woman said to Saul, “I saw a spirit ascending out of the earth.” So he said to her, “What is his form?” And she said, “An old man is coming up, and he is covered with a mantle.” And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground and bowed down. Now Samuel said to Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” And Saul answered, “I am deeply distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God has departed from me and does not answer me anymore, neither by prophets nor by dreams. Therefore I have called you, that you may reveal to me what I should do.”

-1 Samuel 28:11-15

When most people think about Halloween they tend to think about fear or terror. While this isn't wrong, there is much more to it than that. What Halloween actually “celebrates” is the “strange” or the “unknown”. What we tend to forget, is that these two concepts actually coincide with one another. In other words, what we most fear is what most evades our knowledge. In the above story, Saul is driven to a desperate plea because he is confronted with an issue that he doesn't know how to solve. The Philistines have surrounded Israel with overwhelming numbers and Saul doesn't know how he can overcome them, this lack of understanding drives him to a state of dread.

When you think about Halloween decor, or even modern horror movies, this is what is displayed to us. In movies, the “monster” always comes from “the deep”, or from outer space, the haunting ghost comes from the “great beyond” or Hell, and in the scariest movies, the monster is never fully shown. What our minds can't comprehend is what is most terrifying to us. This is why the symbolism of Halloween are things like ghosts and skeletons, (which represent death), demons, goblins, and killers (which represent evil), witches (which represent the supernatural), and, in a more modern innovation, there are things like Frankenstein's monster (which represent man's hubris breeding monsters through trying to control nature in science.)

Pagan feasts had similar symbols because what they were actually celebrating were the limits of our knowledge. It was a sober recognition that no matter how advanced we become, there will always be things that go beyond our understanding, and these things will always make us afraid. This concept has been called “the uncanny” by many recent authors. The sense of the uncanny is a sense of unsettling mystery. It is being confronted by a form of reality that you have no way of understanding or overcoming.

This includes fear, but it is different than the kind of fear that we get from a known element versus an unknown. This is how C.S. Lewis put it in his book “The Problem of Pain”:

“In all developed religion we find three strands or elements, and in Christianity one more. The first of these is what Professor Otto calls the experience of the Numinous. Those who have not met this term may be introduced to it by the following device. Suppose you were told there was a tiger in the next room: you would know that you were in danger and would probably feel fear. But if you were told “there is a ghost in the next room”, and believed it, you would feel, indeed, what is often called fear, but of a different kind. It would not be based on the knowledge of danger, for no one is primarily afraid of what a ghost may do to him; but of the mere fact that it is a ghost. It is “uncanny” rather than dangerous, and the special kind of fear it excites may be called dread.”

-C.S. Lewis - “The Problem of Pain”

While this statement was made specifically about the “uncanny” feeling that we get from “ghosts”, (which is what makes 1 Samuel 28 an “uncanny” story) but this same feeling tickles our spines when we contemplate evil, the supernatural, or death itself. This experience with “the uncanny” has driven men to speculate about the things that they don’t understand. They have populated their world with wild tales and superstitious beliefs in order to provide some grounding to this sensation of otherworldly awe.

Even Christians have fallen into this same pattern and developed extra-biblical beliefs about demons, evil, death, and have even created superstitions of their own in order to avoid such things (think historically about garlic to ward off vampires and the ringing of church bells to ward off demons, but even today there are so-called “deliverance” ministries designed to ward off “demonic oppression” and many other interesting practices). And as scientific as our present age might consider itself, we too have our own superstitions that many of us saw on full display during the societal response to Covid.

This is also why, weirdly, the symbol of the clown shows up both in spring and fall festivals, however in inverted forms. In the spring, the clown shows up in his true form. The “clown”, (or the “fool” or the “comedian”) represents the “the stranger” who mocks the absurdity of his own world. This is why clowns are dressed in satirical gowns that make them look foolish. They then play pranks on the crowd, and satirize normal life through ridicule. But since the clown is always the ultimate butt of their own jokes, this is seen as comedic and good fun.

However, on Halloween the clown shows up in a more nefarious form. Instead of making us laugh, the clown makes us afraid. In the spring, when the cycle is turning from death to life, the clown shows us the funny parts of life and amuses us even in misfortune, but when the cycle turns from life to death, the clown mocks our misfortune and even our demise. Instead of making us laugh, the clown turns us to existential dread and terror, not only of our own mortality, but the clown makes a nihilistic mockery of our very existence by trivializing life itself.

However, since we live in an increasingly upside down world, many have taken to calling our current culture “clown world”. This means that our culture has become a satire of itself. I briefly alluded to this before, but this is why we are seeing the strange phenomenon of the symbol of the “clown” bringing us truth instead of entertainment. In a normal world, the clown is a mocker and makes fun of the excesses of their own society. But in an upside down world, by criticizing the limitations of our world and mocking its excesses, the clown turns from amusing to prophetic. There is more I could say about that, but for the purposes of this paper, I will leave that point there.

But, this doesn't mean all comedy is now holy in our upside down world. The reason why the symbol of the clown is showing up in a more and more demonic sense is because in an upside down world, when a clown becomes a “court jester” to the upside down kingdom, their role becomes that much more wicked. In this case, instead of calling out the excesses of those in power, the clown trivializes the wickedness that is being practiced by those in power, mocks the oppression of the righteous, and pacifies those who are perishing from reckoning with their plight.

“If the dead do not rise, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!”
-1 Corinthians 15:32

Godly Fear

“Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and depart from evil.”
-Proverbs 3:7

The reason why we experience this “uncanny” feeling is because we live in a world that we know very little about. There are so many things out there that are outside of our control, and so many elements of the world to come that we know frighteningly little about. This sensation is not supposed to drive us to despair, nor to find a “clown” who will make light of this reality. Instead, we are supposed to humble ourselves in light of what we don't know, and submit ourselves wholly to the love and sovereignty of the God who does know.

The gravity of the gospel is also central to our peace. While the Christian life will be filled with mystery, that will cause us worry and uncertainty, the message that we get from the resurrection is that the ultimate source of dread, our mortality, is answered for us by One who has also died. We don't have to take the words of someone who is just as blind as we are, we trust the Word who became flesh, the One who went into the grave and emerged victorious. So while it is good for us on Halloween to stand in awe of the things that we don't know, we also should be able to face our dread in the ultimate assurance that we get from the truth of the resurrection.

“For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty.”

-2 Peter 1: 16

This is again why we need to celebrate Halloween as the “Eve” of All Saints Day. To celebrate death and the uncanny, without celebrating the assurance of eternal life is to fill your world with darkness and despair without ever seeing the rising sun. Since our culture has rejected God we have become a culture of death that misses the true joys and beauty of life. We don't live in light of the resurrection, but instead we live in the shadow of death. Even though Christians are not supposed to do this, symbolically, when we neglect the celebration of Resurrection and eternal hope, we neglect to fill ourselves with hope after experiencing fear and dread on Halloween.

A Loss of Identity

“So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes, and he went, and two men with him; and they came to the woman by night.”

-1 Samuel 28:8

Another interesting symbol present in these festivals are costumes. In carnival they wear masks and in Halloween and Purim they wear costumes. Symbolically, wearing a disguise or costume constitutes a loss of identity. In the above story, Saul, who was once God's chosen king for the nation of Israel has lost his way. In the beginning of his story, Saul was a legitimately good king. But over time, he lost himself and instead of fighting for God, he rejected the limitations of his role in 1 Samuel 13, he rejected the counsel of God in 1 Samuel 15, and in his frustration in losing his kingship to David he hunts down God's anointed and even murders a town of priests for aiding David in 1 Samuel 22.

He has so lost himself in his vanity and pride that he breaks his own command by going to a necromancer and has to disguise himself in order to do it. As stated before, while

this story doesn't provide a precedent for the practices in Halloween, it does reveal a common pattern understood by our ancestors. The pattern that is revealed for us here is the relationship between costume and identity. While most people treat costumes as a form of pure entertainment, in order to wrap this paper up I wanted to talk about a couple nefarious purposes for costume and then we will talk about the true purpose for costume that Christians can emulate.

Embodying Fear

"Now, I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."

-The Bhagavad-Gita

One way that people can use masks in an inverted way is to embody what they fear. I think the movie that best expresses this truth, though they present it in a somewhat positive light, is the Christopher Nolan film "Batman Begins". In Nolan's interpretation of Batman, Bruce Wayne has a phobia of bats that he developed as a child when he fell into a bat infested pit. When he grows up and decides to take on the corruption of his city he makes a decision to dress up like a bat. When he is questioned about this decision by his servant Alfred he responds like this:

"Bats frighten me. It's time my enemies shared my dread."

-Bruce Wayne - "Batman Begins"

Since bats became the symbol of his dread, as a means of overcoming that dread, Bruce decides to wear around his fears as a costume and terrify others with it. Since he does this specifically to terrorize villains, he is seen more as a hero than a bully, but even the movie shows that this decision didn't actually help him overcome his fear. Later on in the film, the villain the Scarecrow hits him with a fear toxin, and when his fears manifest, he is surrounded by bats.

For most people though, the reason why they dress up in terrifying costumes is a more "bullying" form of what Batman expresses. They are wearing their fears around as a costume in an attempt to overcome their own fear and to have fun with scaring other people with what they dread. While I don't think this is often a very dangerous form of misusing costumes, it sometimes can be. When someone wears their fears around like a costume, they can "lose themselves" in their performance and start to actually embody the elements of their terror.

A simple example of this actually comes from the beginnings of the modern dress-up traditions in this country. In the late 1800's, early 1900's, kids would almost exclusively wear the garb of ghouls and monsters and actually terrorize their neighborhoods with

pranks. Many of these pranks were harmless fun, but some of this mischief-making actually turned violent and destructive. One of the reasons why the modern “trick or treat” formula became popular is that adults realized how destructive these “tricks” were and offered kids “treats” to spare their homes. As I said, much of this was harmless fun, but in dabbling with this practice, it is easy for someone to genuinely “lose themselves” in what they are doing and act-out in ways that they would never do otherwise.

Indulgence and the Shadow

“Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he'll tell you the truth.”

-Oscar Wilde

Which leads to another point, the relationship between masks and indulgence. Another reason for the riotous activities associated with these fall and spring festivals is the anonymity produced by wearing a mask. Saul feels comfortable breaking his own commandment only because he is hiding his identity, just as Esther feels safe in the palace of the very kingdom that had condemned the Jews to death only because her identity was unknown.

“But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, “that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.”

-Matthew 6:3-4

As Christians we are supposed to do the right thing in order to honor our Father who “sees in secret...” but this is a high calling that we fulfill only in our best moments. For the most part, what causes us to do the right thing is the knowledge of consequences. This doesn't mean that all of our behavior is ultimately selfish, only that there will be a good deal of selfishness mixed in with our genuine altruism and love. This also means that if we are provided with anonymity, we tend to devolve into the worst version of ourselves.

This darker part of our personalities was coined “the shadow” by the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. Jung believed that a person constructs a public facing identity that allows for them to express their ideal self. However, no matter how sophisticated and good this outward facing self might be, there would always be a “shadow”. This would represent the dark parts of our personality that don't quite fit into our ideal selves, and maybe even elements of our personality that we aren't even aware of. If we are “good” we tend to hide these elements, sometimes even from ourselves. The only time when the “shadow” emerges is when we are either in an anonymous situation, or when we are

around those who are most committed to us. This is unfortunately why our closest friends and family members are exposed to the worst parts of our personality.

This concept also applies to the society as a whole. A “moral” culture creates an ideal of citizenry that they hoist up and they seek to exclude all others. But this also creates a “shadow” element of the population. The “shadow” element are all the people and lifestyles that don’t fit into the center of morality. This would be the institutions of “sin” in a given society like gambling houses, brothels, drug dealers, porn shops, and so on. Jung also believed that the more outwardly “righteous” a society, or individual, became, the more vast the “shadow” self would become and the more oppressive the ideal would become.

Take the culture that we are introduced to during Jesus’ day. The Pharisees represented the absolute ideal of moral living. Jesus even used the Pharisees as the ideals of moral excellence when He said:

“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

-Matthew 5:20

While Jesus acknowledges that even the Pharisees didn’t measure up to God’s righteousness, He still uses them as an example of the religious ideal. However, the “shadow” is prominent within the gospel accounts. No matter how “righteous” these men seemed, the “shadow” in the society was clear. There were many demon possessed within the society, corruption had permeated the temple system, prostitution was clearly an issue, and tax collectors continued to rise up from the Jewish people. The Pharisees had not “cured” the darkness of their society, they had merely grown the shadow of their culture, and created an outward ideal that barred these people from seeking a road of repentance. The matter gets even worse when we look at the Pharisees themselves, look at how Jesus describes them:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. “Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

-Matthew 23:27-28

They wore goodness and righteousness like a mask that hid the true corruption of their hearts. They had not become truly good men, they had merely created a facade that hid

their corruption from the world. All that it takes to break this facade is a little bit of anonymity. This is why the Bible speaks against “the night”.

“You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night.”

-1 Thessalonians 5:5-7

In the story of King Saul it is significant that he goes to the medium at night, and it is also significant that Jesus is arrested at night. The darkness that we fear because it hides “the unknown” and “the uncanny” can also be useful to us in providing cover for our indulgence. When these festivals happen at night, and people are allowed to wear masks, the true decadence that is hidden in the heart of man comes to the surface and runs wild. So while the night is going, the parties persist, but when the sun rises the next day, the masks go away and men sober up for the next part of the festival.

This is why I said that even though the Pagan practice was bad, at least it had an “off valve”. Meaning that when the night of indulgence came to an end, there was always another ritual that forced men to sober up and end the night of reverie and the Christians kept these “shut off valves” in the form of the Holy days that followed. Carnival was followed by “Ash Wednesday” and Halloween used to have “All Saints Day”, but now, there is no end to the anonymity and the indulgence.

In our modern culture we live mostly anonymous lives. We go to work with strangers, we go to church with strangers, we drive with strangers, our neighbors are strangers, and we spend much of our time online in amazing tools of anonymity and carefully curated visions of our ideal selves. Even one of our most popular cities, Las Vegas, has as a slogan “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.” To put it more simply, we don’t need Halloween as a day of masks, we live in a world with so many anonymous spaces that every day can be a Carnival.

To make matters even worse, in our attempt to erase “the shadow” we have attempted to erase shame from our culture. So instead of condemning the indulgence of the flesh, we are seeking to parade it around and celebrate it. However, this doesn’t erase the shadow, it only makes it darker. What we failed to realize is that, while a moral center necessarily leaves room for a “shadow” element of society, what we have found is that even the fringe of our society has a fringe. By celebrating the darker parts of our nature, we have now been exposed to the genuine dark parts of our society that most of us never knew existed.

Just to give one quick example of this, take the LGBTQ movement. When I was growing up, everyone was aware of the gay lifestyle, but we weren't really privy to everything happening in that corner of our world. Homosexuality was mostly tolerated when I was a kid, but there was still shame attached to it, and therefore, it wasn't that mainstream. But as I got older this lifestyle was portrayed more and more prominently, and then the fringes of that society suddenly became mainstream. For people living in the LGBTQ culture, transgenderism was well known even back in the 80's, but most people did not know what that was in the 90's or even the mid 2000's. It wasn't until very recently that this idea has become noticed, and then just as quickly, mainstream. When you normalize the margins, you aren't ridding the culture of shame, you are simply creating even darker shadows.

The same is true for the individual. If you normalize indulgent behavior in a person, that doesn't make them a "better" person. It merely normalizes some behavior and creates darker shadows in the margin of that new normal. What days like Halloween were supposed to communicate to people is that there are always going to be margins in our society, and even in our own souls that escape the "light". While these things can't be eradicated, they should be regulated and hemmed in as best as we can. To put it another way, as bad as tyrannical purity might be, chaotic indulgence might be worse.

The Garb of the Priest

"So you shall speak to all who are gifted artisans, whom I have filled with the spirit of wisdom, that they may make Aaron's garments, to consecrate him, that he may minister to Me as priest. "And these are the garments which they shall make: a breastplate, an ephod, a robe, a skillfully woven tunic, a turban, and a sash. So they shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons, that he may minister to Me as priest."

-Exodus 28:3-4

There was another form of "costume" that we are introduced to in the Bible, the vestments of a priest. The priest was called to wear garments that were ornate and symbolic of God's holiness and righteousness. However, even though the priest was flawed and in many ways unworthy of the symbols that they wore, this was not an example of a facade, instead it was both aspirational, as well as revelatory of a divine reality.

"Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him. And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?" Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel. Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before

Him, saying, "Take away the filthy garments from him." And to him He said, "See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes." And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head, and they put the clothes on him. And the Angel of the LORD stood by."

-Zechariah 3:1-5

Even though our own righteousness is not enough to make us right with God, and our sinful behavior has "clothed" us in filthy garments, God has clothed us with His divine grace and given us the righteousness of His Son that we might stand before Him both in the humility of our sin, but the exaltation of His forgiveness. When a Christian fully understands this concept, they can rightly understand the symbol of "masks".

It is true that on days like Halloween the "mask" of society slips a little bit and the darkness hiding in the shadows comes out. But this is supposed to have an affect on the Christian that I think is illustrated very well by the Apostle Paul:

"...that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness."

-Ephesians 4:22-24

Using the imagery of "costume" Paul tells us to "put off" the "old man" and to "put on" the "new man". Paul recognizes that the dark part of man, which he calls the "old man", or in other places "the flesh", persists even after someone is saved. We can't be totally rid of this nature, just as society can't be totally rid of the dark elements at the fringes of our culture. But, we can make the choice to put these things off, meaning that we make the conscious choice to actively fight these behaviors and submit ourselves to Christ in seeking holiness. This also includes "putting on" the "new man". Meaning that even though we do have a dark nature that grows corrupt, our good behavior isn't a pure facade either. Meaning that we do actually have a nature that was made in God's image, and through the work of Christ, is being restored. This means that our desire to live in a righteous manner is not a deception, but instead it is in many ways more real than our desires to do bad.

What this also does for us is to remember that our true nature is the one made in God's image. When Paul says that the "old man" "grows corrupt", he is not just talking about it getting worse, he is also speaking of its "decay". He makes this point more explicit in Romans 7 when he calls this a "body of death". While the old man is powerful and wicked, it is also fading away and isn't our true selves. Mankind began in a perfected

state with God, and will end in a perfected state through Christ, it is our corrupt nature that is a novelty that will be destroyed.

This means that on Halloween, a Christian should remind ourselves of this truth. The real “mask” in our society is not the goodness, but the evil. The goodness will remain and be perfected, while the evil will be destroyed. When Christians choose to dress their kids up in aspirational costumes, like superheroes and princesses, we aren’t creating a hypocritical facade, but instead we are speaking of a genuine reality of perfection that God is already bringing to fruition. Even when a Christian meditates on the decadence of Halloween, we remember soberly that this darkness genuinely exists in our society as well as in ourselves. We are not to be puffed up with the same arrogance of the Pharisees that moved them to arrogant hypocrisy, that only cleaned “the outside” while leaving “the inside” untouched.

We should soberly remember our need for Christ and daily seek His help to actually be transformed from the inside out through repentance and faith. Even in falling short and indulgence, we remember that:

“...a righteous man may fall seven times And rise again, But the wicked shall fall by calamity.”

-Proverbs 24:16

The process of genuine sanctification is long and arduous, but it is also joyous and grace filled. This is why Halloween must be followed by All Saints Day. As we meditate on the reality of sin and darkness, and recall the truth that unrepentant men can genuinely take on the demeanor and behavior of the demonic during Halloween. This should cause us to keep in mind how fragile our identity is. It is so simple to lose sight of who we intend to be and slowly slip into the indulgences of our flesh. Just as Saul began as a good king and devolved into wickedness, so we can easily be brought under the sway and power of our flesh. This makes it invaluable to follow that up by remembering the work and power of the Holy Spirit to transform us into our new identity in Christ. We do this by recalling the faithful saints of the past. These men and women were far from perfect, but their lives speak of the power of God’s grace to genuinely transform someone’s life, and the beautiful hope of the resurrection.

“And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.

Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us. Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

-Hebrews 11:32-40, 12:1-2