

The Sign of the Covenant Part 2: The Power of Symbols

By Peter Martin
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“Then He said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.” And he said, “Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?” “So He said to him, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. “And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. “Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. “But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates— “the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, “the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, “the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

-Genesis 15:7-19

As we have been discussing, the inauguration of the covenant between God and Abram foreshadows its ultimate fulfillment in the church’s covenant with Christ. It is for this reason that it is good for us to spend so much time meditating on its dynamics and implications for us. One odd element of this covenant is that although it has already been made, (God has already spelled out the specifics of His promise to Abram and Abram has already accepted this promise by faith), there remains one element of the covenant yet to be fulfilled, its sign. Abram wasn’t satisfied with a mere intellectual assent to the promise, he wanted to act out his faithfulness and to see God do the same. God’s willingness to assent to this request tells us a lot about the importance of signs and symbols in our faith, and can even help us understand Satan’s schemes of subverting the symbols of God to his own purposes.

The Purpose Of Signs

“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

-James 2:26

Since the relationship that the church has with God is based upon our faith and not our works, many Christians have struggled with the relation between faith and works; some have even set them at odds with one another. However, what James does in this passage is to show that the relationship between faith and works is the same as the relationship between the body and the soul. The way that God has chosen to shape mankind is not as the angels, (beings of pure spirit), nor as the animals, (beings of pure flesh), but instead he has made us as a combination of body and soul in which the body acts as the expression of the soul.

In the same way, our faith and our commitments need a mode of expression in the form of a sign, or a symbol. Since the ceremony that Abram uses as a sign is barbaric by modern standards, (as he is told to literally saw in half numerous animals in order to make an aisle of their corpses), we might question the necessity of this sign. Why couldn't God merely express the covenant with Abram verbally and have Abram assent verbally, why was there a need for this bloodshed? This also calls into question the entirety of the Old Covenant sacrificial system. Why is it that God demanded such bloody obedience to Him? Why couldn't He have simply asked for verbal confession of sin, or adoration of His goodness, why demand so much bloodshed?

The answer to this goes back to our unique creation. We are body and soul, therefore just as our original sin was not merely intellectual, but acted out and signified in the eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, so the redemptive work of God had to be acted out, signified, and represented in reappropriating the sign of the curse, namely death. And by God actually entering into the ceremony in Genesis 15:17, God sanctifies this ritual and shows that He is not just the God of spirit, but of flesh also. God then reaffirms this truth throughout the Bible by doing things like, filling the temple with his glory, (2 Chronicles 7:1-4), and ultimately entering into the creation in the incarnation (John 1:14), and maintaining His body in the resurrection. This means that the symbols that we use are not arbitrary and useless, but instead, they have vast meaning, and even power behind them.

The Power of Symbols

This truth explains man's seeming obsession with ceremony and symbols. For every important facet of life we have a plethora of rituals and ceremonies to celebrate it. From

birth announcements, graduation ceremonies, birthdays, engagements, wedding ceremonies, anniversaries, and even funerals, every important element of life carries with it an accompanying sign and ritual that enables us to act out the importance of the event. This universal human drive should reveal for us the reality that Scripture teaches. Since we are made body and soul, we long for ways to unify the experiences of our souls to the reality of our bodies, and symbols and ceremonies are the way that we do that.

In order to explain this concept further, let's think about the most basic symbol that we use every day, words. Although we can't remember it, there was a time in the beginning of our lives when we did not understand language. Even though an infant has consciousness and emotions, they lack any specific language that would allow them to express their thoughts in a recognizable way, and therefore they only communicate in cries. What this shows us is that symbols are the way that we take our internal thoughts and experiences and represent them outwardly, they are the unification of heaven (the world of spirit) and earth (the world of flesh). In fact, when we express our thoughts, often it helps us to understand them better.

Most of us have had the experience of either thinking through an issue in our own heads, or talking about an issue with another person, and coming to conclusions over time. This process of thinking and talking aren't necessarily providing us with new information, but by representing our thoughts through language, we begin to understand our own thoughts better. What this means for us practically, is that symbols have power because they help us represent our internal thoughts and experiences, and by doing so, it enables us to be understood by others and even by ourselves.

As stated before though, the fact that God literally enters into the sign of Abram's covenant shows that God has chosen to hallow the symbols and ceremonies of men and allow for these symbols to be the source of higher participation. Let's take the marriage ceremony as an example. When a man and woman choose to permanently commit themselves to one another, they express this desire in the wedding ceremony. The question is, what is the action that officially *marries* the couple? If all marriage is, is a commitment to one another, why perform a ceremony at all, why not just make an individual commitment to one another in private? And if the ceremony itself is what marries a couple, where does the ceremony get its power from, and could it still work if the couple wasn't committed to one another prior to the ceremony?

While these questions might give us pause nowadays, this type of question was one that was universally understood by people all over the world just a few centuries ago. Take this quote from the Westminster Confession, which was considered a very basic

confession of the Christian faith made just a few hundred years ago, on the topic of specific Christian ceremonies, namely sacraments:

“Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him: as also to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.

II. There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.”

-Westminster Confession of Faith

While the language in this quote might sound strange and complex to our modern ears, what is being expressed here was considered basic and straightforward at the time it was written down. Just like in the marriage ceremony, the church's sacraments, namely baptism and communion, are acted out representations of our faith that have real power within them. They are not merely arbitrary signs with no power, but instead the fact that they unite our faith to our bodies, they are potent symbols of our faith that have sealing power and even communicate divine realities to our earthly bodies. To drive this point home, here is the same point expressed by the 17th century theologian Matthew Henry:

“The Lord’s Supper is a sign, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, for such sacraments are designed to be. It is a parable to the eye; and in it God uses similitudes, as He did of old by His servants the prophets. In it Christ tells us earthly things, that thereby we may come to be more familiarly acquainted, and more warmly affected, with spiritual and heavenly things. In it Christ speaks to us in our own language and accommodates Himself to the capacities of our present state. Man consists of body and soul; and the soul admits impressions and exerts its power by the body. Here is an ordinance, therefore, that consists of body and soul too, wherein Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are—in the instituted elements of bread and wine—set before us and offered to us. We live in a world of sense, not yet in the world of spirits. Because we therefore find it hard to look above the things that are seen, we are directed in a sacrament to look through them to those things not seen that are represented by them.”

-Matthew Henry - “The Lord's Supper”

Based on this understanding, to answer our earlier question about marriage, it is the honest commitment of the couple, signified in the ceremony that actually *marries* them.

It isn't one or the other, it is both acting in tandem with one another that actually constitutes a binding union that even God recognizes.

“So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.”

-Matthew 19:6

This is off topic, but this is why it is such a strange debate within the church about whether baptism regenerates the Christian. Even formulating the question puts the sign at odds with faith, as opposed to allowing them to participate with one another. It is of course the faith that saves a person, but then this faith must be expressed by the sacrament in order to be fulfilled. As James puts it:

“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.”

-James 2:14-18

The Guarding of Symbols

This truth is also why God so jealousy protects His symbols. There are many passages that seem strange and superstitious to us modern people today that depict God literally striking people dead for disrespecting the signs of His covenants. Let's look at just two examples from the bible to show this. In 2 Samuel 6, King David has the Ark of the Covenant brought to Jerusalem. However, instead of carrying the Ark in the manner prescribed in the book of Exodus, he instead had the ark placed on a cart. When the oxen pulling the cart stumbled, a man named Uzza placed his hand on the Ark in order to steady it and was struck dead by God. Even David was perplexed by this event, and angered against God for killing this man. We would think that God would respect the heart behind the action, and not judge a man for simply failing to properly represent the symbol of the Ark.

Even in the New Testament, the apostle Paul suggests that some of the Corinthian church was enduring curses from God for not taking communion in a worthy manner:

“Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so

let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged."

-1 Corinthians 11:27-31

Just as God chose to walk through the symbol of Abram's covenant in Genesis 15, God has chosen to sanctify the signs of our covenant. This means that when we practice communion, when we go through baptism, and even when we do things like perform a marriage ceremony, God is present in a symbol that is practiced in a *worthy* manner. This means that the symbol of our faith becomes a mode of bodily participation with the heavenly realities that they signify. This is an incredible and wonderful truth that hollows our bodies and the actions of our faith. But, it also means that a corruption of the symbols would constitute a bodily participation with something sensual and demonic. We will talk more about this later on in this paper, but for now, it is important for us to understand why God so jealously guards His symbols and why they have so much significance for us.

The Neglect of Symbols

However, since we live in the modern west which has elevated individual reason above all else, we have fallen into the same error that the ancient Greeks did, which is the same error that James 2 was written to address. The ancient Greeks, primarily led by the teachings of Plato, elevated individual consciousness so much that they severed the bond between body and soul in their philosophy. They genuinely believed that these two things had no real union with one another and even believed that the afterlife would be one free from the body. This false belief infiltrated the early church in the form of the "gnostic heresy", and many chapters in the new testament were written to combat this false teaching.

Even so, in the modern west, this idea has experienced a bit of a resurgence and caused many people, even in the church, to neglect the power and importance of symbols. We have elevated the importance of "faith", (which we have taken to mean nothing more than an internal conviction), so much that works no longer have much of a role in how we view Christianity. This has caused many to neglect performing ceremonies like marriage, baptism, communion and even deny the importance of fighting sin and seeking to live a life of holiness unto God.

I do understand why the church has gone this way, since it was a response to the overly legalistic form of Christianity in the past that elevated the works so high that it ignored the importance of faith and even made our faith hypocritical, rote, and dead. However,

the result of this backlash is not a more centered church, but a church that has erred in the polar opposite direction. The result is that symbols and ceremony in general have gone by the wayside. Many couples are not getting married, but instead choosing to cohabitate long term with one another, people aren't going to church in person but instead choosing the convenience of online church services, and people are even rejecting in person work, opting for the remote work experience. All of these actions, though on the surface might seem disconnected, actually stem from this overall belief that the body and the soul need no unification.

But, this is not how God has designed us, and I think that the Covid pandemic proved this point to us. When the pandemic broke out in 2020, many world leaders casually made the decision to prohibit in person gatherings of all kinds. People were sequestered to their homes, kids were prevented from learning in the classroom, churches were shut down, and businesses transitioned to remote, online work. The going theory of the time was that, since most of what we do is online anyway, a full transition to online life would not be that damaging to us.

The results, I believe, speak for themselves. An argument could be made that this transition was the single most devastating event to the spiritual wellbeing of individuals and society at large that has ever been documented. Up until that point, the most devastating event that I had personally witnessed was the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11th 2001. But, as bad as that attack was, at least it had the effect of unifying our country, and actually resulted in increased social cohesion and a sharp drop in depression and anxiety. In contrast, the Covid pandemic precipitated an already divisive social landscape and made things infinitely worse. On top of this, the levels of depression and anxiety, globally, have never been worse.

These results proclaim the truth of the Bible. It is the symbols and rituals of our lives that provide us the means by which we can bodily participate with the divine. A world without symbols is a world without meaning.

"I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind."

-Ecclesiastes 1:14

The book of Ecclesiastes is all about a man who seeks ultimate meaning in the temporal world. But he finds that no action, no matter how great, can convey ultimate meaning to his life, and therefore he finds in himself only a gnawing emptiness. He gives the reason for his internal sense of meaninglessness in Ecclesiastes 3:11:

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.”

We are not just created as a mysterious union of body and soul, we are also created in the image of God, meaning that we were made to unify the temporal with the eternal, heaven and earth. This is why God entered His creation as a man, and maintains His resurrected body in heaven. He has truly placed eternity within our hearts, and therefore, we can only be satisfied by eternal meaning. The problem for the author of Ecclesiastes was that no earthly thing could carry eternal meaning, since all earthly things, no matter how grand or long standing, eventually end. This means that the only way that a person could find eternal meaning in the temporal is through an eternal sign. To use the quote from Matthew Henry again:

“Man consists of body and soul; and the soul admits impressions and exerts its power by the body. Here is an ordinance, therefore, that consists of body and soul too, wherein Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are—in the instituted elements of bread and wine—set before us and offered to us. We live in a world of sense, not yet in the world of spirits. Because we therefore find it hard to look above the things that are seen, we are directed in a sacrament to look through them to those things not seen that are represented by them.”

-Matthew Henry - “The Lord's Supper”

It is only through symbols and rituals that we can take the temporal actions of our body, and participate with heavenly reality. In the act of marriage, we take a relationship that is between two finite and mortal individuals, and we symbolize the union of the church and Christ. Everyone who participates in this symbol in a worthy manner, uses a temporal sign to communicate eternal realities to their soul.

“For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.”

-Ephesians 5:30-33

The same is true in the rhythms of work and rest. These may seem like carnal rituals, but in working within the creation of God, we are participating in God's act of creation, and representing the form of His creation in Genesis.

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.”

-Exodus 20:8-11

These higher symbols are what hollow even the most basic aspects of our lives and communicate to them transcendent, eternal meaning. But without the symbols, without these rituals and rhythms, our lives and all that is within them become nothing more than vanity and grasping at wind.

Satanic Perversion

“And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him.”

-Genesis 15:11-12

If all this is true, then it would make sense that one of the prime goals of Satan would be to pervert and denigrate the symbols of God, and this is exactly what we see him do throughout Scripture. In Genesis 15, Abram was called by God to sacrifice these animals and create an aisle with their bodies. This was to signify the effects of the curse, and therefore allowed God to foreshadow His eventual conquest of death by walking through the corpses, symbolically entering into death. However, before God can do this, this sign is almost polluted in the mind of Abram as he awaits God's appearance. Instead of this sign being one of hope, as the vultures swoop down to devour the carcasses, Abram sees this only as a sign of decay and death. This causes him to fear his own mortality, as well as fear for the fate of his offspring. But God is able to redeem this sign in two ways:

“Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. “And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. “Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. “But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch

that passed between those pieces. On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram...

-Genesis 15:13-18

God answers the fears of Abram by giving him an overview of the next several centuries that faced his offspring, and then by walking through the sacrifices in order to seal the covenant with Abram. By doing this, God redeemed the sign of the covenant and turned what was fearful to Abram into a sign of hope and providence. But keep in mind that before God did this, there was a danger of the symbol becoming perverted in the eyes of Abram.

"Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. "For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

-Genesis 3:4-5

This is one of the prime strategies of Satan. He takes the signs of God and seeks to pervert them in the eyes of man. Instead of Abram seeing the sacrificed animals as a sign of God's eternal faithfulness that even transcends death, Abram began to only see death. And earlier in the garden, the tree of knowledge of good and evil was a sign of the original covenant that God had with Adam and Eve. The tree signified man's absolute trust in God's character as the basis of good and evil. But Satan perverted the symbol and instead of it being a sign of man's faith in God, he made it a sign of God's lack of faith in man. He manipulated Eve into looking at the fruit as something good that God had withheld from her.

Satan does this again and again all throughout the history of God's people. This is why the people of God in Exodus 32 are tempted to use the gold that they received from the Egyptians, (which was a sign of God's faithfulness to them), in order to make the golden calf. Or why in 2 Kings 18 King Hezekiah has to destroy the bronze serpent that Moses made in the book of Numbers, (which was used by God to cure His people from serpents bites as a sign of the destructive nature of sin and God's commitment to heal them from their sins), because the people had turned it into an idol in the temple.

I could use more examples, but I think this proves the point. One of Satan's most destructive strategies is to profane the symbols of God. By doing this Satan accomplishes two goals, he usurps the authority of God, he obfuscates the intended symbol making it harder for the faithful to participate in it, and by doing this, he drives the people to either despair or wrath. In order to understand this strategy better, I wanted to take a look at the recent opening ceremony of the Paris Olympics.

Usurping God

“How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, You who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: ‘I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation On the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.’ Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, To the lowest depths of the Pit.”

Isaiah 14:12-15





As depicted above, part of the opening ceremony for the 2024 Paris Olympics had some performers put on a corrupted version of Da Vinci's painting of *The Last Supper*. While many Christians are angered by the display because they see it as a mockery of the Christian faith, I think the truth is far worse. In the passage from Isaiah 14, we are given a rare glimpse into the psyche of Satan. From this passage we see that Satan is not really a mocker but instead a usurper. He does not sit in heaven and make fun of the law of God, or insult the throne of God, but instead he incites a rebellion aimed at usurping the very throne of God. This makes Satan a far more dangerous being than we sometimes give him credit for. He is not a seething anarchist hell bent on destroying the works of God, Satan is actually sincere in his conviction that he deserves to rule instead of God.

Because of this conviction, Satan wants to pervert the symbols of God, not to mock God, but to "steal" the symbols of God in order to receive worship. As we talked about before, the symbols of God are the means by which we participate in divine worship in our bodies. If Satan can pervert the symbol, he can seek worship in the place of God. Let's look at Satan's last temptation of Christ in order to see this point more clearly:

"Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me."

-Matthew 4:8-9

Notice first that Satan's ultimate goal in these temptations is not to mock or humiliate Jesus but instead to receive worship from the Son of God. This is the madness of Satanic arrogance. Satan in his pride legitimately feels worthy of ultimate worship, even worship of Christ Himself. But secondly, Satan claims that he already possesses "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory..." This might sound strange because all the kingdoms of the world served different gods and had different religions, so how could Satan claim an equal ownership over all people groups? The answer is in this concept of perverting symbols. Although these differing religions had different symbols and rituals of worship, all of them were some form of perversion of the true symbols of God. Satan doesn't really care that much which perverted symbol man worships, as long as they are worshipping his symbols, he receives it as praise.

So, when someone is following the "spirit of Satan" they are not following the spirit of mockery, but the spirit of usurpation. That is why I don't think that those who put on this performance were mocking Christ, but instead seeking to take the place of Christ. The painting of *The Last Supper* is a beautiful, and faithful depiction of the spirit of Christ. Da Vinci elegantly shows Christ at the center of the symbol about to enter into His Kingdom, but not through a violent battle with the Romans, but instead by sacrificing Himself for the sins of His people. This is why the subject of the painting is not the feast itself, but instead the betrayal of Judas, who you can see in the shadows on Jesus' left hand side. This is a symbol of the power and majesty of Christ that Christians have worshiped and emulated long before Da Vinci ever depicted this image in his famous painting. We do not serve a God who demonstrated His ultimate power through slaying His foes, or through seeking His good above all else, but instead one who demonstrated His true majesty through sacrificing Himself for those whom He loved.

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

-Philippians 2:5-11

The Spirit of Self Worship

But the spirit of Satan is the spirit of self worship. Instead of having the image with the cross looming over it, it is a depiction of hedonistic self-indulgence. Supplanting Christ

and His apostles are a group of garishly, and sensually, dressed members of the LGBTQ community, (and a teenage girl, make of that what you will). It is also no mistake that the woman in the center (I mean no disrespect by this depiction) is an overweight woman with her cleavage showing. And in the center of their “feast” is not the communion elements depicting Jesus’ sacrifice, but instead a nude man, dressed as a strange incarnation of the Roman god Bacchus, singing an awful rendition of John Lennon’s already bad song “Imagine”. In this version though, we aren’t asked to merely imagine a world without religion, but instead a world in which nakedness is the supreme good that unifies us to one another in universal brotherhood. (If you mercifully missed this opening ceremony that has been subsequently scrubbed from the internet, believe me, it was even worse than I am describing).

The scary thing about this symbol is that I believe in the sincerity of those who participated in this performance. The highest image of their life, is not the self-sacrificing Son of God dying for their sins, but instead the image of pure, unadulterated hedonism that they displayed. We can actually know that this is the intended message of Satan, because when Jesus first announces His crucifixion to His disciples, He gets into this interchange with the apostle Peter:

“From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!” But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.” Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”

-Matthew 16:21-25

I don’t believe that Peter was legitimately possessed by Satan here, but he was expressing the spirit of Satan when he told Christ to avoid the cross in the name of self worship. When Christians are enraged at the image of the Olympics because it is mocking the painting of *The Last Supper*, I think they are missing the bigger point, and a larger victory that Satan has already won. This image is not a representation of Christian mockery, but a symbol that Satan has already corrupted the sign of the last supper in the conscience of our culture.

Beholding and Becoming

“Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.”

-James Joyce - "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man"

The above quote from the author James Joyce is an incredibly accurate statement about the power of the artist. Since symbols act as our primary means of representing our internal worlds to others, the artists of our culture uniquely form the symbols of our culture and therefore forge "the uncreated conscience" of their race. To put it another way, just as language is the primary way that we represent our thoughts to others at the individual level, the arts act as the language of the culture itself. And the symbols that the artists form, communicate the values, morals, and ideals of that particular culture.

This is a point that most Christians have failed to grasp for centuries, but one that we must remind ourselves of. The artist doesn't actually create conscience, meaning that they alone can't shape the culture. But they also aren't useless to the formation of the culture, since they are providing the symbols of their time. Instead, the successful artist is an active participant in their cultural moment, that is able to understand the time they live in and represent that consciousness in their art. Just as the thoughts of the infant are real, but can't be expressed, so a segment of the population that has no artists, is one that has no representation.

Our culture is moving so rapidly away from Christianity because the church has, largely, abandoned the arts. Since they failed to grasp this primary purpose of the arts, they saw the arts as another form of preaching our values, as opposed to a way of representing our consciousness. To put it another way, arts and culture work in tandem with one another. As a culture moves, the symbols of the culture change, then as the artists of the moment represent that movement in their art, the expression is understood, accepted, and moves even further in that same direction.

This is why the most popular images of the Renaissance were Christian. Many try to argue the hidden paganism of these artists, and maybe they are right, but ultimately the internal values of the artists don't matter, they are merely representing the images of their time, and the *time* of the Renaissance was Christian.

However, even though over the last century Christians made up the majority in the west Christian art has been lacking. Since Christians have seen art as a mechanism of preaching, the *images* of Christianity are not being represented in the west the way that they were in the Renaissance. This is incredibly dangerous because, as the Bible teaches us, we become what we behold:

"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord."

-2 Corinthians 3:18

The apostle Paul stated this point in the positive, that as we behold Christ, we become like Him, but this statement is universal and not only applicable to beholding God. Just as expressing my own internal thoughts through language has a consummating effect that grows my thoughts and develops them in more clarity, as the arts express the language of our culture, it also consummates these ideals in our consciences and builds internal clarity. Or to put it most simply, we become what we behold. Even if we go to church, we are not immune to the prevalence of these images. Since they are all around us, they are moving us whether we know it or not, to elevate, and emulate, certain morals and behaviors. Just as correct symbols allow for higher participation with God, corrupted symbols create lower participation with sin and death. So, while we should be angry about the image of the Olympics, it isn't because it is an image of mockery, but instead it is an image of usurpation. It shows us that our culture has elevated the image of hedonistic self-indulgence above the true message of self-sacrifice contained in the gospel.

Destroying Participation

“Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that is your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun.”

-Ecclesiastes 9:9

As bad as usurpation is, this strategy has another effect, it destroys participation with the true symbol. As stated before, symbols are not just means of expression, but also of participation. When someone beholds a correct symbol, they are given the ability to participate with that image and therefore find eternal meaning even in temporary actions. But, when Satan pollutes the image, some will participate with that new lower image, but many others will be turned away from the true image.

To use a simple example, I remember a few years ago a truly beautiful song was released called “Oceans (Where My Feet Will Fail)”. This song had profound lyrics, was sung by incredibly talented artists, and had beautiful accompanying music. For this reason, it acts as a symbol of worship. Christians can, in faith, participate with the eternal meanings of the song, and actually express true worship to God in singing this song to Him. More incredibly, what we see in the Scriptures is that God actually receives the sincere worship of His people. However, not too long after this song came out, a funny video emerged of a worship team singing this song, and, (in an admittedly

hilarious moment), the drummer decided to perform a gratuitous drum solo during one of the more somber moments of the song.

While this was a funny video, the “corruption” of the song tainted it for me and many others. To this day, when I listen to the song, although I desire to participate with the lyrics of the song, I find myself laughing at that ridiculous memory. While this is not an example of a truly Satanic perversion, I think it does still serve as an illustration for my point. When Satan taints an image in the imaginations of people, it can actually prevent us from participating with the higher image of God. To take a more insidious example, think about the sign of the rainbow. The rainbow is one of the most beautiful natural occurrences in creation, and it has profound symbolic importance in the Bible. This is why God uses the rainbow as a sign for Noah after the flood, and why certain celestial beings are seen “wearing” the rainbow as a sign. For millennia, the people of God have seen this as a sign of peace, and a sign of the true diversity that the message of God can produce.

However, since the LGBTQ movement has co-opted this sign and reduced it to be merely a sign of sexual diversity. For this reason, if someone were to see an image of a rainbow, their minds would immediately go to the LGBTQ movement, and not to the intended image of God. This means that the sign of the rainbow, for some, has become a symbol for lower participation in sexual perversion, but for many others, the higher participation that God intended has been cut off from us.

When we understand this, we can see that Satan has been operating in this way within our culture for years. All the way back in 1987 Andres Serrano debuted a blasphemous picture that he called *Piss Christ* where he submerged a crucifix in his own blood and urine. Then in 1996 a painting called *The Holy Virgin Mary* was made by Chris Ofili where he used smeared elephant dung and pornographic images on an image of the virgin Mary. While there are other examples, I will give just one more. In an article in *Cosmopolitan* magazine last year, an author named Arielle Domb describes a Satanic abortion ritual that is a clear perversion of communion:

“She listened with curiosity as the nurse described the optional ceremonial aspects of the Satanic abortion ritual: First, you find a quiet space. Bring a mirror if you can. Just before taking the medication, gaze at your reflection and focus on your personhood. Home in on your intent, your responsibility to you. Take a few deep, relaxing breaths. When you’re ready, read the following tenet aloud: One’s body is inviolable, subject to one’s own will alone. Take the medication and immediately afterward, recite, Beliefs should conform to one’s best scientific understanding of the world. One should take care never to distort scientific facts to fit one’s beliefs. Later, once your body expels the

aborted tissue, return to your reflection. Focus again on your personhood, your power in making this decision. Complete the ritual by reciting a personal affirmation: By my body, my blood; by my will, it is done.

-Arielle Domb - "The Satanic Abortion Clinic That's Pissed Off Pretty Much Everyone...and Might Beat the Bans Anyway"

The inversion here could not be more obvious. Instead of Jesus saying to His followers, "This is My body which is given for you..." (Luke 22:19) right before He offers Himself for others, the woman is instructed to recite the words "One's body is inviolable, subject to one's own will alone..." while staring at her own reflection and taking a pill that will kill her own child. Once again, we might be tempted to see this as mere mockery, but it isn't. It is a polluted image that will have the effect of usurping the true image of God for the image of self-worship. And even for those who do not engage in the Satanic image, these perverse images can easily taint the true image in the minds of those who are exposed to this.

And Satan has been busy over the years in successfully corrupting most images in our culture. The universities were built by Christians to be places where people could study the creation in greater detail, and thus come to know God through His handiwork. Now, the universities symbolize, for most people, the corruption of our elite and secular, progressive values. The great centers of artistic creation used to stand for the beauty of God and the expression of virtue and goodness, but now they stand for corrupt values and "edgy" ugliness.

Marriage used to be a symbol of God's eternal union to His people, it now is seen as a way of subjugating women, restricting sexual freedom, and, with the increase in failed marriage, broken homes and promises. Even holidays, once seen as a time to gather as a community and meditate on higher spiritual truths, have now been reduced to symbols of consumerism and licentiousness. I could go on and on, but I think you get the point. For every *true image* there is now a corrupted image that has taken its place in our cultures' imagination.

And unfortunately, the Christian response lately has been to continuously cede ground. "The symbols of holidays seem pagan, oh well, these things were pagan from the start, so we just won't celebrate." "School is teaching progressive, atheistic values, we just won't attend." "The Olympics want to display a corrupted image of Christianity, we just won't watch." But, since we derive so much meaning and cultural unity from symbols, one would expect that as the symbols are increasingly corrupted social cohesion would decrease, and feelings of nihilism and despair would increase. This is unfortunately exactly what we are witnessing in our culture right now.

With all the symbols of our culture twisted, we no longer share a language. One side of our culture sees the institutions as being corrupt and malicious, while the other side trusts them implicitly. We don't celebrate the same holidays, we don't value the same institutions, and we can't even agree on a moral vision for the future of our country. This is why it is so telling that both the current Trump and Harris presidential campaigns have branded their opponents "weird".

To some, this might seem like a schoolyard insult, but it actually isn't. The term "weird" insinuates a "normal", or an ideal. To call your opponent "weird" means that you think they represent an inversion of the ideal, a perversion of the norms that hold us together as a nation. It means we no longer share symbols as a nation, we are beholding fundamentally different images. This unfortunately means that one side has to be right and one side has to be wrong. As much as the peacemakers in our culture want to believe that societal cohesion can be achieved if we increase civil discourse, the reality is more dire than this, the moral vision of one side has to win in order to establish a new norm for our society. We derive meaning and *normalcy* from the symbols of our society. The norm can have extremes on both sides, but a society that can't agree on what the norm is, is one that has no central meaning or cohesion.

Nihilistic Self-Destruction

This reality is true for the individual as well. As a counselor, I have unfortunately seen a large increase in nihilistic thought in the younger people that I talk to. In general, even the young Christians, but especially young men, seem to be imbibing the message from Ecclesiastes. They feel a genuine apathy towards life in general and the statistics bear this out. In alarming numbers the new generation is failing to enter into a career, they aren't moving out of their parent's house, they aren't marrying, they aren't having kids, they have increased anxiety, depression, and a staggering number are committing suicide, either on purpose or in drug overdoses. (If you want to look at all these statistics visit <https://www.anxiousgeneration.com/research/notes-and-figures>). While there are numerous practical reasons for this increase, I would contest that the lack of symbols is high up.

Instead of seeing work as a means of participating with God's work of creation, they see it as a meaningless waste of time that is only necessary because they need money to live. Instead of seeing marriage as a participation in the divine image of God unifying Himself to the church, they see it as a broken institution that is more likely than not, to end in divorce. Instead of seeing having kids as a participation in the incarnation of the Son of God, in which life triumphs over death, they see the planet as overpopulated and believe that the world is so corrupt that it would be cruel to bring a child into the current

moment. Every symbol and source of meaning has been corrupted for this new generation, and so they live their lives in the veil of meaninglessness and we have allowed for this corruption in the name of tolerance. But I think that the Christian author Dorothy Sayers over eighty years ago gave us the best prediction of where this attitude would lead us:

“In the world it is called Tolerance, but in hell it is called Despair...the sin that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.”

-Dorothy Sayers

Recovering the Image

In order to fight against Satan’s strategy, we can’t be passive, we have to actively fight against his corruption so that we might recover the true images that he has marred. However, the way that we need to fight against Satan’s strategy is seeking after the true image, and not in directly attacking the corrupted image that Satan has set up. As stated before, some of the younger generation wants to participate with the corrupted image of Satan, some have been driven to nihilism by it, and still others have grown up in seething rage over the corruption of their culture.

The Wrath of Man

“...for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

-James 1:20

Once again, this tends to affect young men more than young women. But many young men are growing up in our hedonistic world and they are utterly disgusted by it. They are not willing to lay down and take the insult anymore, they have correctly diagnosed the rottenness of their culture and they are ready to do something about it. But they are not being moved by the beauty of God, instead they are only being moved by the ugliness of Satan’s corruption. As such, their nihilism is not a passive one that is merely preventing them from participating in the culture, it is a violent one that is making them want to attack and uproot the corrupted image.

The problem, as the above passage from James tells us, is that the wrath of man can’t actually produce the righteousness of God. Even if there is good reason to be angry, (the Bible does not condemn our anger), acting out of that anger won’t actually create anything positive. Revolutionary movements are usually fairly successful at tearing

down the structures around them, but they are never successful in building something better. Once again, we become what we behold, and if we are *beholding* personalities and influencers who do nothing more than rail against the unfairness of our current moment, talking about the failed economy, corporate greed, the horrible dating landscape, and so on, while they might be correct about what is wrong, the anger they are inciting can't actually fix the problem.

Meditate On These Things

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

-Philippians 4:8

A cause for encouragement in our current moment is to remember that Christianity did not rise out of a pure and just society. Christianity began in one of the most corrupt and wicked cultures to ever exist. Their culture was so corrupt that it tried and executed the Son of God, and then immediately turned their ire on the followers of Christ. But Christianity was ultimately successful in toppling Rome without waging a single battle against it. They were able to do this, not by meditating on all that Rome was doing wrong, (though they did understand the corruption of Rome and spoke against it), but instead by meditating on the beauty of God.

And in discovering the true image of God that filled every aspect of their lives, they were able to participate in His higher image even within the corrupted culture that they lived in. The early Christians understood that they didn't have to wait for Rome to change in order to find meaning and joy, they only needed to "see" the image of God in all that they did. By doing this, they began to shine forth the image of God, and through the beauty and courage of their conduct, their culture was transformed.

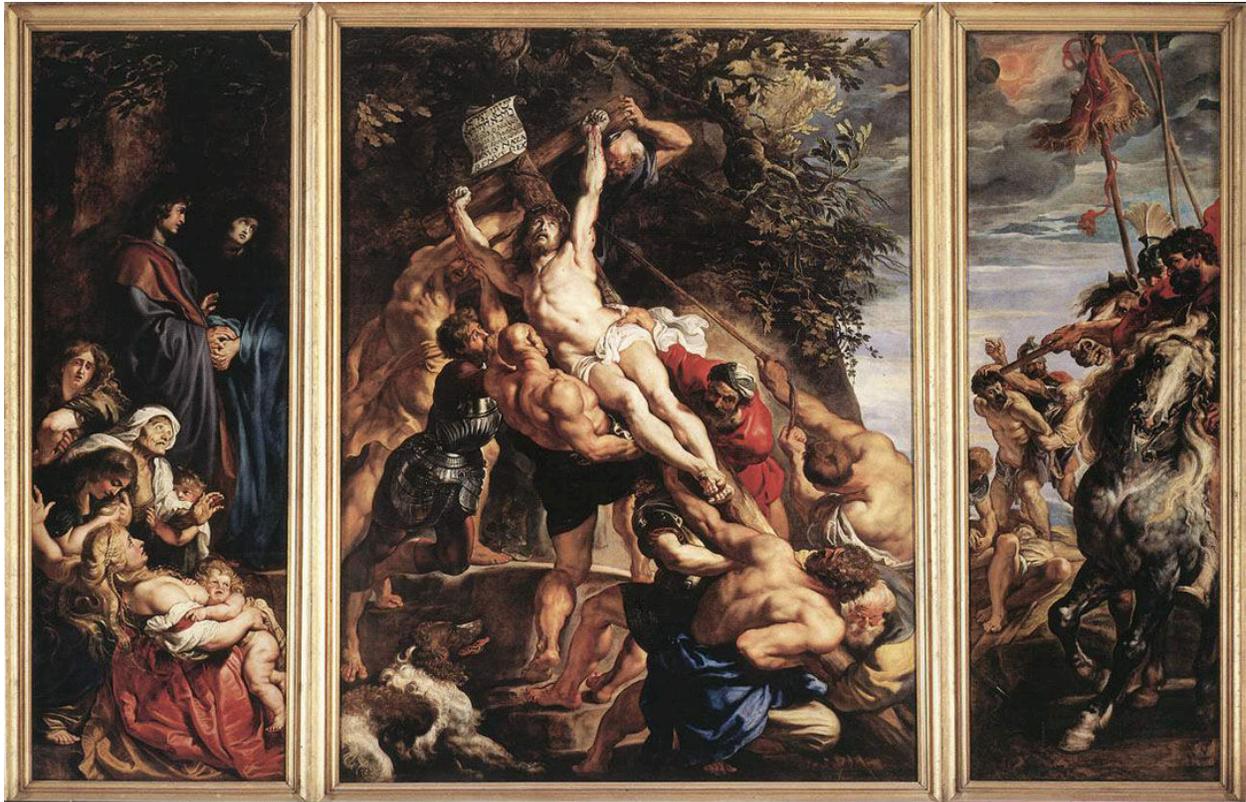
"But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."

-Colossians 3:14-17

In order to understand this better, let's take just three of the most popular images of the Renaissance period, *The Pieta*, *The Sistine Madonna*, and *The Elevation of the Cross*.







I want to quickly point out that even though the image of the specific *Pieta* I showed was made by Michaelangelo, *The Sistine Madonna* was made by Raffaello Sanzio and *The Elevation of the Cross* was made by Peter Rubens, these images were represented by numerous artists of the time, long preceding these gifted artists. Their versions are just the most famous. The reason why this is an important detail, is because these images were repeated images throughout the culture of the time, they were the images that people looked at as entertainment, they were the most famous works of art of their time and therefore, were the primary images that people (secular and Christian) were beholding.

The first thing I want to show about these paintings is how unbelievably beautiful they are. The end of all art is not to preach, but instead to be beautiful. We tend to forget that our God is not just the God of all truth, but He is also the God of all beauty. In art, form comes first, then comes function. Even apart from the godly message, the beauty of these images have moved countless people to consider the reality of transcendent beauty throughout the centuries. They move us to seek something higher that the beauty seems to be reflecting. If Christian art is to be successful, it must first aim at beauty, otherwise, even if the message is correct, no one will endeavor to “behold” it. This is also why secular art is waning right now. In their attempts to subvert the images

of God, they have become ugly and thankfully, less and less people are beholding their images as a result.

But now let's think about the content. These images have brought incredible hope to countless souls throughout the centuries because they display the reality of transcendent meaning even in suffering. By making the subject of all these images the Son of God, the image of the cross is looming over all of them, some more explicitly than others. But this doesn't detract from the beauty of these images, in some mystical way it highlights their majesty. What this communicated to the observers is that meaning is not necessarily found in living a life of ease, comfort, and prosperity. It shows the ugly truth of existence without flinching, that life is full of sacrifice and pain.

"Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it."

-Luke 9:23-24

Jesus taught His followers that they could "find" their lives through participating in His divine purposes. That even though life is filled with suffering, the Son of God has hollowed all existence through His coming. That now, even when we eat or drink, we can do so in a participation in the life of the Son of God. In the image of the virgin Mary, people have seen that having a child in this cruel world can have meaning. That even if the world will be vile and abusive to your child, it can't remove meaning from their existence. Many today don't have kids because of how twisted the world has become, but we forget that when Mary had Jesus, the world had become so corrupt that it crucified the Lord of Glory. But life triumphed over death, goodness over cruelty, beauty over ugliness.

The wonder of all these images is the presence of Mary within them. Even in the *Pieta* and *The Elevation of The Cross*, she is depicted in a state of serenity. This is not because she was some heartless mother that was untouched by the sufferings of her Son, but instead because she was a woman who offered up her Son to the purposes of God. At her best moments, she knew that her role was not to protect her Son from all harm, but instead to prepare Him to participate in the will of His Father.

The image of the strong woman today is either that of a powerful, successful, and promiscuous woman who has no kids, or a mother that has her kids under control. One who is so successful in her mothering, that her kids are protected from any potential harm, physical or emotional. Both of these images are inversions of the image of the virgin Mary. Mary is called blessed because in submitting to the will of God and offering

up her life, and the life of her child, to the will and purposes of God, the Son of God was brought into the world, and salvation came to all mankind.

Each parent has the opportunity to participate with this image. Now each child has the opportunity to participate in God's plan of redeeming the world. We raise our kids with intentionality and grace, but we do this in hope that their lives have the potential of making this world better, and that they can become vessels of the living God. We do this by being fully aware of the cruelty and danger of this world. We know that death is our final end, and we make peace with that and seek to make each remaining moment we have here matter so that our lives can be used to make the world less cruel and vindictive, that we can increasingly become a reflection of the redemptive work of God, even in our death.

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life in you.”

-2 Corinthians 4:7-12

Beholding these images made the people of that culture venerate every aspect of life. They saw meaning in all experiences, good and bad, and sought higher participation in all that they did. It was these beliefs that gave birth to all the wonderful institutions of learning, beauty, and politics that have been, tragically, polluted. They understood, like the early Christians, that even if you worked for a cruel master, there was meaning in work, even if your government was corrupt, there was meaning in government, even if your family broke apart, there was meaning in loving your family, even if you were persecuted, and sent to prison, you can find meaning in prison, and even if you are tortured and broken for your faith in the cruelty of this world, there is even meaning in dying well.

Meaning In Love

The serenity and purpose that Jesus and Mary have in these images is not given to them through indifference or hatred towards the cruelty of the world. Instead, they have this peace through love:

“Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.”

-John 13:1

It was Mary’s love, and trust, for her Son that enabled her to endure the greatest agony that any parent could ever experience, watching your child be brutally murdered, and still have peace. This is why I personally find the image of the *Pieta* to be the most beautiful image ever created by man. By depicting Mary holding the mangled body of her beloved Son, the image calls us to consider our greatest fear, and to find peace in loving God and trusting His purposes. And in the image of *The Elevation of The Cross*, Jesus is looking up to the glory of His Father even in the midst of His agony. He does this because of the great love that He had for His Father, and those that He was laying down His life for. If there is to be any consolation, any transcendent hope, any meaning that we can find in our suffering and fear, it is only going to be found in sincere love for God and others.

We unfortunately live in a historic moment where love is growing cold. People are becoming more isolated from friends and family and online interactions are taking up the majority of our lives. But, if we want to experience the hope that God intends for us, we will find it in no other place, than sincere love for others.

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.”

-1 John 4:7-12

To wrap up this paper, I wanted to look at a quote from Viktor Frankl, who, although he wasn’t a Christian, he did understand this principle better than most. Frankl survived two concentration camps during the Holocaust and wrote about his experiences in his incredible book “Man’s Search For Meaning” and in it he wrote this:

“The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief

moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way—an honorable way—in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, ‘The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.’

-Viktor Frankl - “Man’s Search For Meaning”

May we be Christians who find all our hope, all our meaning, and all our purpose in meditating on the supreme love of God, and by beholding His supreme glory, we might be transformed by Him to love others as He does.

“For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height— to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

-Ephesians 3:14-21