

When You Hear Marching in the Tops of the Trees

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to the childlike

Introduction:

God is more human than we are. He is more normal, more mundane. I mean, I'm always looking up at the skies when it comes to God, and pondering those truths about his ways being higher than ours, his thoughts not our thoughts. But I forget, I overlook, I miss the deep truths of God's design of mankind and this world. He forged voice, thought, strategy, cause and effect, time, choice, motive. He does not manipulate these things, but he designed them. And he works within them. We see this start to finish in the Scriptures. We see these traits in God himself – hence the design in us as his *'image'*. (Genesis 1:27) We see emotions, intention, God's will – much like our will – and God's will thwarted, much like ours.

Why would this surprise us? Has not the world come forth from God himself? Was he not the Designer and Creator of all these variables and mechanisms and cogs and wheels? Am I looking up into the skies sometimes when I should be looking at tracks in the dust? Am I straining my ears to hear God when he is speaking through my spouse? Am I waiting on a sign when I could just draw straws?¹

'Consider carefully how you listen.' (Luke 8:18)

¹ ***'They nominated two men... then they prayed... then they cast lots. The lot fell to Matthias, so he was added to the eleven apostles.'***
(Acts 1:23-26)

1. This Far and No Further

Let's consider this event between Jesus and Peter:

'Jesus began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet..."

(John 13:5-10)

Jesus was not washing their feet because their feet were unclean. He was washing their feet to demonstrate that if he, Lord of all, can serve us, we can and must serve one another. (vs.1-17)

So when Jesus said that only the feet needed washing, well, he was really just toning Peter down for the moment, while Jesus was mid-demonstration. Peter was missing the point, and getting all religious. Jesus said something deep, indicating that his washing was the only way to

be part of him. Instead of hearing this, pondering this, Peter jumped to add to it: *'Then, Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!'*

What impacts me about this story, this event, is what I think of as *'this-far-and-no-further'*. It is a type of principle that I see often in Scripture. It is not so much the physical, practical principle, but the spiritual one at work in many things that God does.

Here Jesus is saying, the feet only. Jesus is saying that his work, his message, is in just this act, not an extension of it, no need to make more of it. The voice of Jesus in this moment, the fulness of his message, is in only what he is doing. If we make more of it – i.e. start washing the hands and head as well – we miss the message of Christ. We have covered it up with lots of religion and extra activity. It is in there somewhere, maybe, but buried by our noise and extras.

I've done this in my own life, too. The Lord says, *'Spend time with me.'* So one day I put time aside, sit with the Lord, read his Word. In this moment, this space, I taste his presence and joy. I'm excited about this so now I make a schedule (*at this time every day...*) I make a routine (*this chair, one chapter of the Bible, a worship song, a journal entry...*) This is my set 'Quiet Time'. A few days go by and soon this time with the Lord has become a chore. Something I'm not on top

of, and feeling a bit guilty about. Something I'm now trying to do in order to have done, so I don't feel bad or pressure the rest of the day...

What happened here? Well, something real, something spiritual, became religious. In a sense it became an idol, and encasing. The spirit then left the place, and we were left with an empty shell. Joy gone. Jesus calls us to spend time with him, but never called us to determine and lock ourselves into a 'quiet time' system. He did not ask that of us. He asked for our presence, our time, like any real relationship. He asked for us in **'spirit and truth'**, not in routine and 'discipline'.

'Jesus said, 'The time has come when you will not worship me on this mountain [or church building] nor in Jerusalem [a particular nation]... God is Spirit, and his true worshippers will worship him in spirit and truth.' (John 4:24)

Of course routine and discipline can be good things even in our spiritual lives, but only if they stay a distant second to their purpose – i.e. to know and love God. If knowing and loving God are pure and present and powerful, then there is no need to even discuss principles such as routine and discipline. Adam and Eve in the Paradise Garden had no disciplines or routines put on them regarding their relationship with God. God simply showed up and walked with

them in the cool of the day. And not every minute of the day, either. He left them alone sometimes to just live and enjoy Eden.²

I have put many religious restrictions on myself when God was not asking that of me. These became burdensome, means of pride and failure in quick succession. God asks for my heart. He asks for me to 'stop', not 'go'. He asks for me to be childlike and humble, not warrior-like and intense. He asks me to be faithful in secret, not prolific in my journaling.

'Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.' (Matthew 6:18)

We must remember that God is Spirit, and his reach is to our heart, our spirit. Jesus took all sin, and all rules and regulations, on his own person, his own body, and put them to death. He wanted to not only forgive us of our sin, but liberate us from the code of sin, the Law.

'Christ himself is our peace... setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.' (Ephesians 2:14-15)

No rule saves, it only reveals sin. Paul is explicit about this.

'No one will be declared righteous by the

² Genesis 3:8-9

works of the law; rather through the law we become conscious of our sin. (Romans 3:20)

Do rules matter? Of course. But let us dive deeper! We have known the blood the Christ!

We are admonished as people of Christ to contend for this spiritual freedom that cuts across the spirit of legalism. Christ broke us free from the spirit of the Law (and it is 'spiritual', according to Romans 7:14), and set us free in his own Spirit. And then we are charged with this:

'It was for freedom that Christ has set you free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yolk of slavery.' (Galatians 5:1)

Are you enslaved to some rules and regulations? Self-imposed, or maybe from misunderstanding the fulness of the release of Christ? Maybe you still feel bound by some Old Testament principles, or the Sabbath? Ponder this passage carefully, and ask Jesus in faith to pour over you the Spirit of Grace that he died for.³

'Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious

³ It is also important to read carefully and critically through Galatians. Note Galatians 2:14. The ***'truth of the gospel'*** is something that overrides even the Old Testament command of circumcision. We must enter into this freedom! (see 1 Corinthians 7:19)

festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

***Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.'* (Colossians 2:16-23)**

2. Strategy

‘The Lord answered, “Do not go straight up, but circle around behind them and attack them in front of the poplar trees. As soon as you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the poplar trees, move quickly, because that will mean the Lord has gone out in front of you to strike the army.”

(2 Samuel 5:23-24)

David enquires of God about going to fight the Philistines. God communicates a very specific strategy. It is tactical. It is time sensitive. It feels and looks a lot like a human strategy. The difference is that this strategy has come from God.

What impacts me here is that God strategizes. God gives people strategies. David could have thought up a plan, but instead he asked God for a plan. And God gave him a plan.

Now, I could hit the pause button here and start questioning, thinking. I could say, *‘Why did God not just send a plague and wipe the Philistines out, as he did in other instances?’* or I might ask, *‘If God knew how to defeat the Philistines, and how to communicate this to David, why did God not just use that same power to muddle the minds of the Philistines, or convince them to not attack David in the first place?’*

So I have a choice, as a thinking man: Do I speak, do I question God with all my wisdom? Or rather do I listen, do I note that God did give David strategy when he asked humbly for it, and God might give me strategy if I ask humbly for it?

‘Where is the wise person? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?’

(1 Corinthians 1:20)

We can either choose to watch, listen, learn, or to question and philosophize. I’m not here saying that honest questioning is a bad thing. I am assuming the reader understands the difference. We see clearly in Scripture – and in our own hearts and minds – honest inquiry and wise consideration, versus prideful questioning and foolish reasoning. Just because we can think, or a question occurs to us, does not mean we are thinking rightly, nor that the question is a wise one.

We must always remember that the picture of ‘The Fall’ – when sin and death entered the world – is depicted by ‘knowledge’. In other words, we ate from the tree of knowledge, thinking it elevated us, empowered us, made us superior, when in fact it reduced us to ashes. This story, this lesson, this history, pivots on the tree of knowledge.⁴

⁴ Genesis 2:17

And for this reason, yes, we ‘think’, we question, we consider, but always understand our minds to be compromised. We understand our thinking to be a space where sin itself made its entry into our soul. And when it comes to the truths of God, the revelation of Christ, we are told to order things in this way:

‘We take captive our thoughts and make them subject to Christ.’ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5)

We don’t subject Jesus to the paltry analysis of our broken and immoral minds. No, rather, we submit our broken and immoral minds to the light of Jesus. We press our thinking through the furnace of his revelation, not the other way round.

In the case of the strategy and communication we see from God – both to David, and to us on a daily basis – we do the same. We don’t question and point and doubt and philosophize; rather we note, we learn, we absorb, and in faith we step closer and whisper, *‘God, lead me in this.’*

‘Let no one deceive you through fine-sounding arguments... let no one take you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.’

(Colossians 2:4,8)

Sometimes I am too prideful to accept ‘strategy’

from God. Not intentionally, but it is pride that is at work. You see, if I sense guidance from God that looks human, ordinary, shrewd, strategic, I tend to fear. I fear the work it will involve, because I'm lazy. I fear the humble nature of it, because it might be on a lower level or two. And I fear the lack of approval from people, who may not see and say that I am a blessed man.

There is a time to hold our head high and charge the giant, as did David. But there is a time to duck and dive, even feign madness for safety, as did David. At both times David was in step with the Spirit. He just was never too proud for whatever strategy God laid before him. If God said stand strong and fight, he did. If God said flee in the night, he did.⁵

We see the same in the life of Jesus. There were times he sensed pressure, and he stood up and stood others down. But there were times that danger was in the air, and Jesus strategically avoided it:

'Jesus did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill him.' (John 7:1)

God is not too proud or lofty to whisper strategy to us. The question is, are we too proud to follow his lead?

⁵ 1 & 2 Samuel

Are we, like David, enquiring for his guidance?
Are we asking?

3. Spiritual Realm

‘What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness...’

(1 Corinthians 2:12-14)

As a believer in Jesus, a follower of Jesus, I am in another realm, another world. It is as simple as that. On the one hand I live normal life – *work, play, relationships, money and matters.* But on the other hand I live eternal life – *sin, forgiveness, healing, God, Jesus Christ, death, heaven and hell.*

As a Christian I am seeing things differently. I am seeing through spiritual eyes, and I am seeing a completely different life mission to that of simply a nice retirement. I am seeing souls, eternity, Jesus and his story and his call.

So when a neighbor tells me he is having dreams about dying, well, this means something different to me as a Christian than it might mean to someone else. Why? Because I believe that God may be prompting this man through dreams

to consider his mortality, and his relationship with God.

‘Remember your Creator before the flesh returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.’

(Ecclesiastes 12:7)

The Scripture at the start of this section – 1 Corinthians 2:12-14 – is an important truth about you, your vision, your realms. As a Christian, with the Holy Spirit within you,⁶ you have another language. You speak Spirit-taught words. You meet a person here in this life, but with your gaze on another life.

My neighbor might only see bad dreams and dark thoughts, and feel he needs more positivity in his life. Whereas I might hear from the Spirit that he needs to know the gospel of Jesus Christ, that there is real sin and darkness that might be pressing in on his soul. No positive thinking has power against sin and evil. Only God through Jesus has power to break that curse, and ultimately to break out of the tomb. Here I would be explaining a ***‘spiritual reality with Spirit-taught words.’***

Now, when I share this with my neighbor, as the

⁶ ***‘You also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.’*** (Eph. 1:13)

Spirit leads, he may or may not see what I see. He may, as the passage says, consider it **'foolishness'**. To consider Christ foolishness will result in not accepting Christ. That is everyone's choice to make.

However, and what I am really trying to share in this section, is the freedom I have found personally in knowing, in accepting, that as a Christian I do operate in two realms. This is laid out for me clearly in this passage, but also in the whole Bible. Jesus was constantly telling parables and even explicitly saying that some people were seeing truth, and some were not.

'Jesus said, 'Seeing they do not see, hearing they do not hear, for they have closed their eyes... But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.'
(Matthew 13:13-16)

Of course as Christians we can get it wrong, we do all the time. As we navigate two realms we can over-spiritualize something, and we can under-spiritualize something. Just like we grow in body and mind in life, so too we grow in spirit and understanding in Christ. As we grow, we see more clearly, understand more fully. We are all on a journey of growth. But know this, in Christ you are a citizen of another place, of heaven itself. And for this reason you are living a split reality, speaking two languages, seeing beyond the horizon.

'Our citizenship is in heaven.'
(Philippians 3:20)

4. Pressing In

'A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly."

Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

"Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.'

(Matthew 15:21-28)

Jesus called the lady a dog. There is no other way to break this down. He did. Now we know Jesus loved her as much as he loved anyone. No favorites with Christ, with God.⁷ However, in this moment, Jesus put to her the views of the world about her. The views of the disciples about her. They were saying, ***'Send her away!'***

⁷ 2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4; Matthew 18:14

This woman saw through it. She saw through the words of Jesus to the Spirit of God. She pressed in. She pressed past his own words, and refused to believe they were *his* heart towards her. She contradicted Jesus. There is no other way to break this down. She did. He said something was not right to do. She said, ***'Yes it is, Lord.'***

This is one of the most dramatic stories for me in the New Testament. It shatters my paradigms and my assumptions about God. And look at what Jesus did here! He honored her, commended her, gave her the desire of her heart!

What was going on? Everyone present except Jesus and the lady were in the wrong. The traditions were wrong, the disciples were wrong, honestly even me, the reader, finds it hard to enter in and actually be present in the moment. Hard words, confusing words, and yet this lady and Jesus were beyond all others in a place of Spirit. She was right. She believed and saw Christ for who he was. And she knew his heart of love. She asked, she pressed in against surface winds, and she received.

In this moment, only this lady and Jesus were on the same page. Only she was in touch with what the Spirit of God was truly saying, truly doing. Part of her test was to not heed the words and even the spirit of Jesus' own disciples. They were wrong.

This challenges me. Do I know Christ like she knew Christ? Do I come to Christ and ask for what I want, what I need, like she did?

5. Like a Child

‘The Lord said, ‘I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.’ Samuel was angry, and he cried out to the Lord all that night.’

(1 Samuel 15:11)

God made us in his image. (Genesis 1:27) And our most pure season in this short sprint of a life is when we are children. For this reason Jesus said,

‘Anyone who sins against one of these little ones, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.’

(Matthew 18:6)

And also,

‘See to it that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.’ (Matthew 18:10)

God made us in his image, and children are closest to that image. In fact, Jesus admonishes us to strive backwards to be childlike if we want to enter the kingdom of God:

‘Unless you change and become like a child

you cannot enter the kingdom of God.'

(Matthew 18:3)

So when I read a teaching about God being immovable, unchanging, well, I think of God in his deliberate, adult mode. A type of determined God behaving in a way that is necessary to discipline unruly people. However, when I read about God changing his mind, regretting something he did, something he had hoped would be better, well, I think of a childlike God. I think of a pure being that believed the very best of a person, but was let down.

And so where I have both teachings about the same God, well, I reach for the one that is more childlike, because that is what Jesus told us we should be.

God regretted that he had made Saul king. It was genuine. It was deep and cutting, and his truest prophet, Samuel, cried all night because of it. If Saul had obeyed God, history would have gone differently.

'You have done a foolish thing,' Samuel said to Saul. "You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time.' (1 Samuel 13:13)

I have two choices here. First option: I can sit back and question the sovereignty of God,

asking things like, *'If God knows all things, did he not know that Saul would let him down? And if so...?'* Or maybe, *'If God had wanted to stop Saul from doing what he did, he could have; so he must have allowed it, it was the will of God, because nothing can happen outside his will...'*

Alternatively, I can take captive my thoughts – thoughts imbued by sin and the tree of knowledge – and submit them to Christ. I can look on what God did, what he said, and allow this truth to sink into my soul, saturate my mind. I can command my thinking to work within the bounds of God's revelation here, and put my questions and philosophies on the back shelf.

If God has revealed something, and said something about who he is, this I need to know. This is truth. If my questions distract from this they must be outside of truth, swirling in the darkness like chaff in the wind. Our wisdom rendered foolishness by God himself.

God regretted. Because of Saul's choices, God changed course. Jesus, too, wept over Jerusalem and said things could have been different:

'Jesus looked over the city and wept and said, 'If you had only known this day what would bring you peace! But now it is hidden from your eyes...' (Luke 19:42)

Jesus calls me to be like a child, and he, too, is pure like a child. He weeps with me. He cares about what I want, what I ask for. He cares about how I feel. He wants me to take good paths, make good choices. He is tender of heart towards me. He came to earth to look for me and to be with me.

‘Jesus said, ‘I have come to seek and save the lost.’ (Luke 19:10)

God calls me to be like a child, and the purest expression of God is like a child. I can approach him.

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‘Jesus said, ‘Unless you change and become like a child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.’ (Matthew 18:3)