

April 19, 1981
Easter Sunday
Norman S. Ream

LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

My mother always claimed that there was a bit of Scotch in my ancestral background. I would be proud and happy if that were correct but it may account for a rash action on my part just a few weeks ago. I received in the mail, along with a host of other ads and requests for donations, a solicitation from the Library of Science. The Library of Science turns out to be a bookclub dealing with books (as you might suspect) on science and related subjects. The enclosed "come-on" promised me that if I would become a member and order at least 4 books a year I could be the recipient, among other advantages, of a copy of the one-volume addition of Funk and Wagnall's Encyclopedia of Science for a mere \$5.00. I could not resist. I succumbed to the blandishments and I enrolled.

As far as quantity is concerned I certainly got my money's worth. The only difficulty is that I find very little in this book I can understand. In the many years since my graduation from college I have fallen woefully behind in my knowledge of the subjects covered in this volume.

But then I ordered my first book of the month. Its title intrigued me. Written by a British astrophysicist, it is entitled Genesis. It therefore appealed to two of my deep interests, the Bible and astronomy, the book being subtitled, The Origins of Man and the Universe.

Again, unfortunately, the book discusses those origins in scientific terms often difficult for me to comprehend. But I comfort myself with the thought that both volumes will look impressive on the living-room coffee table.

II

All of that by way of introduction to this sermon on the subject of "Lights and Shadows". I wish to share with you two quotations from the book, Genesis.

"... Before the Big Bang of creation, there wasn't even any empty space. Space and time, as well as matter and energy, were created in that 'explosion', and there was no 'outside' for the exploding universe to explode into..."

And then this;

"The flow of time as we know it also began with the Big Bang so that it may be literally meaningless to ask what happened 'before' the Big Bang--perhaps there was no 'before'!"

It is interesting, is it not, to speculate on what happened before anything happened? Here, I think, with accuracy, we may state that it all does indeed boggle the mind.

Long after the Big Bang, about 5000 million years ago, the Solar System of which our little earth is a part, was formed. On that earth, in that Solar System, man appeared about a half-million years ago.

The Big Bang of science corresponds, it seems to me, with the opening words of the biblical book of Genesis which tells us that in the beginning there was darkness, and then God spoke; "'Let there be light,' and there was light."

The billions of suns in the universe are the light which God created, and where God did not create light there is darkness. The light is a manifestation of God's presence in our universe. The light is the source of all life that exists and where there is darkness there is no life. Where there is darkness there are not even any shadows. But consider this, where there is enough light, there too, there are no shadows.

Some people suffer from fear of the dark. But spiritually speaking nearly all of us have some fear of the dark, for the darkness is that which we cannot understand or comprehend. There are shadows in all our lives where we have been unable to comprehend and understand what is happening to us and why. Pain, sorrow, loneliness, frustration, all of these are shadows in our lives, lives which were meant to be filled with light.

Those men and women who are able to see and appreciate a sunset do not fear the coming of night. They know that soon there will be the splendor of the stars. Often when I have been out in the open country I have found a spot where I can clearly see all of the unencumbered western horizon and then I have waited patiently for the sun to sink.

The sunsets, you know, vary remarkably. Some are very plain, almost ordinary. Others, however, blaze with light and beauty, lifting the soul, inspiring one's whole being. Gradually, however, the darkness descends and as it comes one can cast his eyes toward the southern sky and look for the first spark of light, usually a planet; Mars, Jupiter or Saturn. Slowly, as darkness continues to descend, one can see a star here, and lo, there is one there, and one begins to count; 10, 15, 20, until the lights appear so rapidly one cannot keep up with them. And finally there are hundreds, and then as the Milky Way appears, thousands of them.

As I begin to see the darkness penetrated by the light, small and insignificant though those dots of light may be, I begin to find a new hope in the order and in the beauty, and in the significance of it all, and I am forced to say, "This could not be if God was not." And then the spiritual shadows of life begin to melt away.

III

In light of all that you and I now know about our universe, which is relatively very little, and in spite of the greatness of the Creator whose majesty and power we see manifested anew in our world everyday,

we humans, even we Christians, still seem sore troubled by one shadow in particular--the shadow of death. For many of us walking through that valley seems the ultimate tragedy in life and the final disaster. The question which Paul put to King Agrippa so long ago is still relevant however:

"Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?"

It seems very natural to me, especially when I read the words of a scientist like Wernher Von Braun:

"Science has found that nothing can disappear without a trace. Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Now if God applies this fundamental principle to the most minute and insignificant parts of the universe, doesn't it make sense to assume that he applies it also to the masterpiece of his creation--the human spirit? I think it does, and everything science has taught me--and continues to teach me--strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death."

Again, in the words of Paul:

"Behold, I show you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed... Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory.'"

It is surely the Christian belief, a belief grounded on faith to be sure, that life is eternal and that, therefore, death can be no more than a small incident in that eternal life. But it is an incident that transforms our existence from the physical into the spiritual. Or to put it another way, death releases the real life within us, which is the spiritual, from its captivity within the physical. Death is not darkness and shadow, but a full and complete entrance into the light of God.

I fully believe Jesus was alive to his disciples following Easter morning. I can see no alternative to that reality. There is no other explanation for what they were able to do, no other explanation for the sweeping victory of the Christian faith over a pagan world.

Paul once more is the spokesman:

"For the same God who said, 'Out of darkness light shall shine', has caused his life to shine within us to give the light of revelation--the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

A witness who appeared at the Nuremburg war crime trials following World War II told of a group of civilians living for a time in graves. It was the only place where they could hide. He told of a woman in a nearby grave who gave birth to a baby under those terrible wartime conditions. An 80-year-old grave digger assisted. At the birth cry of the babe the old man shouted, "Great God, have you sent a new messiah? Who but a messiah can be born in a grave?"

This is the assurance of Easter. Out of the grave comes life-- new, rich, eternal, spiritual life for all who know the God of life. But do not think it is a gift to be thrust upon us worthy or unworthy. You cannot find any evidence for that in the New Testament. It is the consequence of a life well lived, a fight well fought, a fellowship of trust and obedience in Him who is the author of life.

Each member of the human race, in time
Owes God a death, however it may come.
Someday in the middle of a laugh
I hope he summons me!
I know I'll feel
The comfort of his precious rod and staff
Wherever I may be.
And if I kneel
Before his presence asking for his love,
I know I'll get forgiveness for my sins
Before I feel his warm and gentle shove
Into the greater life.

At that moment the final false shadow in my life will have been dispersed by the great light of God's love.