



Minutes With Messiah

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CHIAROSCURO

What do Rembrandt, Caravaggio, and Vermeer have in common? These are three painters with very different styles. Two are from the Low Countries, but one is Italian. Nevertheless, they have in common that they are acknowledged masters of chiaroscuro. This is an Italian word (pronounced kyar-o-scu-ro) that means light-dark. Pre-renaissance paintings and drawings tended to be rather flat. Ancient Egyptian painting, for instance, tended to have no shadows and be drawn from two points of view (the body viewed from the front, but the head in profile) that gave rise to the phrase “walk like an Egyptian.” Chiaroscuro, on the other hand, may have a very dark background and the subject in brightness, as in Vermeer’s paintings. Or it may bring out the shadings within the subject of the painting, as in Rembrandt, who had a firm understanding of how shadows gave depth to his subjects. Chiaroscuro is, in fact, what makes paintings appear three-dimensional.

From the beginning of the Bible we get a view of God’s creation in chiaroscuro. Hardly does Genesis begin, but we get a passage that says, “And God divided the light from the darkness.” (Gen 1:4) That he saw that the light was good also begins the good/bad, light/dark contrast that is so familiar. Toward the end of the writing of scripture we continue to see this contrast. “He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now.” (1 Jn 2:9) In between these passages we get a steady, chiaroscuro view of humanity.

The book of Job, which some scholars believe to be the oldest part of the Bible, is replete with contrasts between light and darkness, often signifying good versus evil. “When I looked for good then evil came; and when I waited for light, there came darkness.” (Job 30:26) This is only one of a dozen verses where the light-darkness combination appears in the same verse. It is found in Isaiah only three fewer times.

This month’s issue is a little different than most in that it follows one theme throughout. Shadows have different meanings to different people. They also have different meanings in various contexts. It is those various contexts that I wanted to explore in this issue: shadow in art, the shadow of death, and shadow as protection from the heat.

Amos puts a slightly different perspective on the combination. Where Isaiah predicted the Messiah by saying darkness will be turned into light, Amos takes a position that what some think should be a day of light will be darkness instead.

Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord! To what end is it for you? The day of the Lord, is darkness, and not light.

The day of the Lord, in scripture, is any day of God’s judgement. Some people want God to come and bring judgement on their enemies. Amos says to be careful what you wish for; God’s day of judgement may turn out to be darkness for the one praying for it.

In Luke 11, Jesus continues the contrast. Speaking metaphorically of the eye, he says, “when thy eye is single, thy whole body is full of light; but when evil, thy body is full of darkness.” (Lk 11:34-36) We should view things that are in the light, not the darkness. One of the things that makes Vermeer’s *Girl with Pearl Earring* so striking is that we are drawn to the girl rather than the totally dark background.

John frequently points out that Jesus was, and claimed to be, the light. Compare, for instance one verse about Jesus and one about God, implying that Jesus was in nature God. “I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness.” (Jn 12:46) “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” (1 Jn 1:5)

The world may be seen in chiaroscuro, but not Jesus and God. We tend to see things as black and white, or in shades of grey. If we are in Christ, the darkness is covered by light. Without chiaroscuro modeling, we appear before God missing a dimension. That dimension that shades our interactions here is wickedness. In God we are all chiaro, and no scuro.

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SOMBRA DE MUERTE

In Albuquerque, New Mexico, the city is so dominated by Sandia Peak that a significant number of things are named after it. There are even some things (a school, a church) named “Sombra de Monte,” the shadow of the mountain. That is to be expected. People frequently speak of things being “in the shadow of” something, meaning near it. We speak of things being overshadowed by something, meaning that the other thing is so large in comparison, or the other person so prominent. The Bible even speaks of a shadow, but one that most of us don’t want to talk about: the shadow of death. Even the most-liked passage in the Bible speaks of the valley of the shadow of death.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. (Ps 23:4)

Some preachers speculate that David, in his shepherding duties, was familiar with a vale so deep that it was always dark at the bottom, and called it the valley of the shadow (possibly adding “of death”). It is likely that he was familiar with the book of Job, which uses the phrase, “the shadow of death,” nine times. A few hundred

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years later, that phrase was used to describe the territory in the far north of Israel, around the Sea of Galilee.

Nevertheless the dimness shall not be such as was in her vexation, when at the first he lightly afflicted the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, and afterward did more grievously afflict her by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, in Galilee of the nations. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. (Isa 9:1-2, quoted in Matt 4:15-16)

The book of Job

Whether or not David knew of geographical applications of the phrase, he used it in a more figurative way. Even so, many mistake his reference as being to death itself. Instead, he was speaking of the imminence of death, not the actual event.

Job had used the phrase apparently in both ways. Speaking of the day of his birth, he says, “Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it.” (Job 3:5) In a typical Jewish couplet, God equates the “gates of death” to the “doors of the shadow of death.” (Job 38:17) In another place, he says:

Are not my days few? cease then, and let me alone, that I may take comfort a little, Before I go whence I shall not return, even to the land of darkness and the shadow of death; A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness. (Job 10:20-22)

Yet, in a different place he seems to think of that shadow as something that comes while the person continues to live. “My face is foul with weeping, and on my eyelids is the shadow of death.” (Job 16:16) And again Job says of the wicked, “For the morning is to them even as the shadow of death: if one know them, they are in the terrors of the shadow of death.” This seems to indicate that the shadow of death can continue, rather than be a specific event.

David borrowed the phrase, perhaps, from Job. Whenever he uses it in the Psalms, however, it seems to be in the latter meaning. In Psalm 23, the sheep are not dying, but rather in peril of death. It is when death is imminent that we may fear its shadow.

For myself

On surveys about fear, death is consistently one of the top five things fear most. Although the order, and sometimes the nature, of fears varies between men and women, death is near the top for both. Those who sell burial plots or funeral plans know that people are generally loth to face the prospect of death, even when they think it may be years away. Although Elbert Hubbard said, “Don’t take life too seriously. You’ll never get out of it alive,” we all seem to hope we will live on earth forever.

For some people, death comes quickly. A car crash. A drive-by shooting. A massive heart attack. We consider those the lucky ones. They never walked through the valley of the shadow. They met death without warning. Clearly this is not what David is thinking of in Psalm 23.

Many others, however, walk through that valley. Some come out of it alive; others perhaps not. Fifty years ago you hardly heard anybody speak about the C-word—cancer. The incidence of cancerous diseases has increased so much that, at least in the United States, you would be hard pressed to find somebody that does not know somebody who has or has had cancer. It has become so

prevalent that we speak the word openly. Other diseases such as COPD or congestive heart failure hang the shadow of death over us every day. In one class of people, the military, the shadow is a constant companion when deployed, and barely recedes when at home. Even the existence of life insurance is evidence that each of us lives, to one extent or another, under the shadow of death.

Sometimes the fear of one's own death is because one loves the world so much. At other times it is the fear of what will happen to family or friends. The hard answer is what David proposes in Psalm 23: I will fear no evil. The point of the whole psalm is trust in God. Daily I will trust. When enemies come, I will trust. When in the shadow of death, I will trust. It is not an easy answer, because so many things distract. The devil tempts us with nice things that we don't want to give up. We can't see how God will work things out if we are gone. (Meaning, of course, that we believe God can't do anything without our input.) We don't believe that our loved ones have the ability to continue without us.

As the earlier quotation says, we are not going to get out of this alive. That means that anything the devil tempts us with here is only temporary, anyway. The Preacher, possibly Solomon, understood this.

Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity. (Eccl 2:18-19)

The worries about our families are more persistent; maybe even more so for men if they are the primary breadwinner. Will those who remain be able to make a living? Do they have the skills to pay the bills, negotiate with businesses, pump gas? Those who have spent time in the military rest a little easier, because the family may have had to do without them. Even so, the fear persists.

"I will fear no evil. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." Even if you don't trust a spouse or an executor, trust God. He has the tools to help. And he will use them; primarily for those who love him, but even for those who reject him. "Without your pushing them, the clouds roll by," Eliza Doolittle sang. And it is true. God was able to take care of things before you came along, and he has the power to continue without you. Just trust.

For others

Maybe one doesn't worry about his own death, but the shadow of death comes because of a loved one. For everyone dying a slow, diseased death, there are others who are going through the valley of the shadow of death because of them. For everyone in the military, or

fighting fires, or policing our streets, there are others who are walking through that valley. Sometimes the walk comes after a loved one has already died, suddenly or slowly. Sometimes the walk comes when a loved one lingers in seemingly unnecessary pain. For them the walk may be even harder, because they know they will still be around to grieve no matter the result.

In this sense, everyone takes a long walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Again, the answer is trust. And again the psalmist talks about it. "Then they cried unto the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them out of their distresses. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and brake their bands in sunder." (Ps 107:13-14)

Out of the valley

Isaiah, as previously noted, spoke of Galilee as the land of the shadow of death, perhaps because of its

For everyone dying a slow death, there are others who are going through the valley of the shadow because of them.

proximity to Assyria. Matthew says that was a prophecy of the Messiah. He says that Jesus did so much of his teaching away from Jerusalem in order to fulfil this prophecy. Even before Jesus was born, Zecharias prophesied that his son John would go before the one who would "give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death." (Lk 1:79)

Ultimately, we don't have to worry that God will take care of those we leave behind. God has provided the ultimate answer to the shadow of death. This life is temporary. Even if the ones we leave behind cannot take care of themselves, or we think we can't survive the death of a loved one, God has provided for eternity. Jesus died; but Jesus also rose! To those that trust God, through Jesus, the power of death has been broken. The light shines into the darkest places, and dispels the shadow.

One of the favorite chapters in the Bible is 1 Corinthians 15, the resurrection chapter. Paul ends that discussion, not speaking of the shadow of death, but of victory.

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 15:55-57)

IN THE SHADOWS

It started as a simple hike. Good boots, a canteen of water, a map and compass; what could go wrong. (Yes, before there was GPS people found their way by looking at a piece of paper.) He walked out of the hills and into the dry landscape. But somehow he got lost. All the landmarks looked the same; after all, when the only landmarks you have are low bushes you have difficulty distinguishing one from another. What do you do: third creosote to the left, then second mesquite to the north? At first it was just an annoyance. The hills were behind him; he could always turn around and go back. Soon, though, behind and in front, hills and desert were just words with no meaning. It was not yet noon, but the sun was high—and hot. Not a cloud in the sky. In fact, it was getting harder to know where sky ended and earth began. Preserve your water; only a sip at a time. I don't know where I am; does anybody know where I am? That sun. Always that sun. Oh, what I would do for just a little cloud over the sun. That mesquite bush; it is big enough to offer me a little shade. Please, any shade?

This may have been a hiker in the American Southwest. But it may have been, except for the types of vegetation, a wanderer in the Judean desert. When the sun is high and hot, any shadow is a relief. Maybe that is why David spoke of protective shadows.

Picture now the young David, tending sheep. You don't tend sheep in the city. You don't tend sheep where there is a lot of noise. He is out in the hills or the desert. (Yes, you can have grass in a desert.) While tending sheep, David has time to explore his surroundings. He has to know the threats. After all, he had to kill a lion and a

bear, and you don't do that if you aren't being watchful. As he observes, he sees a nest. On the nest is a mother bird, pinions outspread. She is protecting her nestlings. From the heat, from threats. The nestlings are safe when mother spreads her wings over them. So David starts writing a song.

My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness; and my mouth shall praise thee with joyful lips: When I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches. Because thou hast been my help, therefore in the shadow of thy wings will I rejoice. (Ps 63:5-7)

Years later, David has been in the service of King Saul. But Saul grew jealous and is now chasing David with murderous intent. David has to hide in his beloved wilderness. He chose the caves at Adullam, probably southwest of Jerusalem, as his refuge. While there, he remembered the birds, and he wrote another song.

Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee: yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast. I will cry unto God most high; unto God that performeth all things for me. He shall send from heaven, and save me from the reproach of him that would swallow me up. (Ps 57:1-3)

Shadows can mean many things. David saw nestlings in the shadow of their mother's wings, and he saw refuge. In the desert of trial and hardship, we can find shade. It is under God's wings. There we will be cool and safe.

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