

THE HORROR OF THE HEAVENS

Toward the end of C.S. Lewis' "Till We Have Faces," his reworking of a Greek myth, Orual looks into a mirror and sees not her own face but the face of an evil god.

"I am Ungit," she wailed. She later reflected, "That ruinous face was mine. I was ... that all-devouring womblike, yet barren, thing." If her domain was a web, she was "the swollen spider, squat at its center, gorged with men's stolen lives."¹ She came to a new understanding of what she had been doing, and she was horrified.

Jeremiah held a mirror up to the faces of the people of his day in order to show them what they were doing so that they, like Orual, might be horrified. Like all of us, the people of Israel felt a deep need within them, but they decided that other gods, not the Lord, would better meet their need. If we have made a similar choice, the message from the Lord to us, through the prophet Jeremiah, is this: Be horrified that we have forsaken the true love of the Lord to seek the false love offered by other gods. Listen to the voice of the Lord as he addresses the people of Israel in Jeremiah 2:9-13:

*"Therefore I bring charges against you again," declares the LORD.
"And I will bring charges against your children's children.
Cross over to the coasts of Kittim and look,
send to Kedar and observe closely;
see if there has ever been anything like this:
Has a nation ever changed its gods?
(Yet they are not gods at all.)
But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols.
Be appalled at this, O heavens,
and shudder with great horror," declares the LORD.
"My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me,
the spring of living water,
and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water."*

We're thirsty

The Lord says his people have dug their own cisterns in order to satisfy their thirst. Thirst is a metaphor for desire. The deep need that the people of Israel felt within them, the deep need that all people feel within them, is comparable to thirst. People desire more than water—more than food, clothing and shelter. Quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, Jesus said, "Man does not live on bread alone" (Matthew 4:4). He also said, "Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?" (Matthew 6:25, New American Standard Bible.)

What, then, are we thirsty for? At the core of our being, what we are most thirsty for is relationship. We want to be in a relationship in which we are desired, pursued and cherished; in which we are understood and accepted; in which we are considered capable

and worthy of trust; in which we are inspired to adventure and greatness. If you listen closely to your heart, you will hear this cry. It's a cry for love.

Occasionally I make it a point to sit alone by myself. At first, I don't read anything, watch anything or listen to anything. I don't even pray. I just sit. Usually, it doesn't take long before I am feeling that powerful, mysterious, overwhelming ache in my soul—what C. S. Lewis calls “the incommunicable and unappeasable want.” I do this because I know I must feel my thirst in its raw form, apart from all the things I do to satisfy it.

To say we are thirsty for love is to say we are thirsty for God, who is love (1 John 4:16). David was well-acquainted with thirst for God. He wrote in Psalm 63:1:

*My soul thirsts for you,
my body yearns for you,
in a dry and weary land
where there is no water.*

He also wrote in Psalm 143:6:

*I spread out my hands to you;
my soul longs for you like a parched land.*

Our souls cry out for the love of God as a parched land for rain. He is the spring of living water who offers to satisfy that thirst.

Digging cisterns

Yet the Lord says that his people have forsaken him and have dug their own cisterns. Why would the Lord's people—why would we—forsake him? Why do we leave the spring of living water? It has to do with trust. Can we trust the Lord to satisfy our thirst? We have no control over his love, and we don't have to earn it. We don't like trusting things like that. We are afraid to bring our thirst to the spring of living water. Sure, it looks as if it's yielding cool, refreshing water. But we might have a few questions about it. “Where is the water coming from? How do I know it will continue? Does it have to spew forth so wildly? They say this water isn't going to cost me anything, but I've also heard that there's no such thing as a free cup of living water. All in all, this spring cannot be trusted.” So like the Israelites of old, we take our thirst elsewhere. The Lord compares the pursuit of other gods to digging cisterns. Digging a cistern, then, is a method we devise to satisfy the thirst in our souls.

Jesus told a story of two sons (Luke 15:11-32). One son ran away from his father and indulged himself. The other son stayed home and performed his duties. Neither wanted anything to do with his father. One was lost outside his father's house; the other was lost inside. One chose indulgence, the other chose performance. Our choices for satisfying our thirst break down along similar lines. Some of us tend to choose indulgence. Some of us tend to choose performance. We hope indulgence in some illicit experience will give us the living water we crave. We hope that performance of responsibilities will earn us the living water we deserve.

When we choose to satisfy our desires through indulgence, we're looking for a feeling, a buzz. We're looking for something that causes our soul to rise up and shout for joy. We find it, or think we will, in the stock market, Nordstrom, Ben and Jerry's, Jack Daniels, cocaine, pornography, an affair—or at the very least an active fantasy life. Whatever our drug, it often becomes an addiction, because indulgence never delivers what it promises, and we always end up begging for more.

When we choose to satisfy our desires through performance, we're looking for acceptance, applause, love. We're looking for someone somewhere to rise up and say, "You're OK." We're terrified of even one negative remark in a sea of positive feedback. We work hard. We crave accomplishment, success and achievement. We take the performance ethic with us everywhere—into the home, where we seek to be the consummate parents; into the workplace, where we do what must be done and then some; and into relationships, in which we seek to put our best foot forward all the time. Performance often leads to perfectionism, because no performance ever wins enough applause. So we work harder and harder, attempting to avoid that one mistake that would plummet us to our doom.

In Silicon Valley, work has become a god. Cultural observer Jonathon Keats writes:

A recent study shows that only 26 percent of Silicon Valley citizens, compared with 70 percent nationally, are involved in a traditional religion—not surprising when you consider that the average workday for an engineer at a start-up can stretch to 36 hours. After all, participation in a religion is an all-or-nothing business—a binary decision. Members give everything they have to the collective; in exchange, the collective makes them everything they are. How natural then that, according to San Jose State anthropologist Charles Darrah, "People have faith that their work is valuable ... that it's good." The language Darrah uses has more in common with Jesus Christ than with Louis Rukeyser.²

Keats also writes:

Silicon Valley has always been in the business of rewiring our days, but the real revolution is not as specific as Windows NT, not limited to the Internet. It doesn't run on batteries. The real revolution is internal, still in beta. Once it launches, your whole life will be reconfigured. Whether you live in San Francisco, Watsonville, or Peoria, you will adopt the high-tech subculture itself. Call it Life 2.0.

You will never work again. You will never play. In fact, forget every distinction you've ever made, and while you're at it, reset your PalmPilot. Call yourself different if you'd like, but realize that more than half the population of Silicon Valley immigrated from elsewhere—and they're converts already. In fact, the closest thing the world has ever seen to the coming revolution is the oldest civilizing force of all: religion. Let us pray.³

We have bowed down before the altar of the almighty silicon chip. We have given it the best part of ourselves, hoping that it will let us sip from its sacred pool. We've gone so far into performance that performance has become indulgence. The workplace is where we go to get our buzz. Silicon Valley attracts and now breeds performers. There is a

mindset here, a culture, a collective way of thinking and living. Even if you're not in high-tech, you can feel it.

Henri Nouwen writes in his book "The Return of the Prodigal Son":

Yet over and over again I have left home. I have fled the hands of blessing and run off to faraway places searching for love! This is the great tragedy of my life and of the lives of so many I meet on my journey. Somehow I have become deaf to the voice that calls me the Beloved, have left the only place where I can hear that voice, and have gone off desperately hoping that I would find somewhere else what I could no longer find at home.

At first this sounds simply unbelievable. Why should I leave the place where all I need to hear can be heard? The more I think about this question, the more I realize that the true voice of love is a very soft and gentle voice speaking to me in the most hidden places of my being. It is not a boisterous voice, forcing itself on me and demanding attention. ...

But there are many other voices, voices that are loud, full of promises and very seductive. These voices say, "Go out and prove that you are worth something." Soon after Jesus had heard the voice calling him the Beloved, he was led to the desert to hear those other voices. They told him to prove that he was worth love in being successful, popular, and powerful. Those same voices are not unfamiliar to me. They are always there and, always, they reach into those inner places where I question my own goodness and doubt my self-worth. They suggest that I am not going to be loved without my having earned it through determined efforts and hard work. They want me to prove to myself and others that I am worth being loved, and they keep pushing me to do everything possible to gain acceptance. They deny loudly that love is a totally free gift. I leave home every time I lose faith in the voice that calls me the Beloved and follow the voices that offer a great variety of ways to win the love I so much desire.⁴

In other words, he digs cisterns.

The obvious problem with digging cisterns is that it doesn't work. Our cisterns do not do what we want them to do. They do not satisfy our thirst. They are "broken cisterns that cannot hold water." We forsake the living God and trust that indulgence or performance will satisfy us, but those cisterns are broken. They leak. All they leave us with when the water is gone are addictions and obsessions. So we hit the road again, find a nice spot in the desert and start digging. This time it will be different, we say. Better construction. Better transportation system. No leaks.

Pascal said, "Human beings are peculiar in that they pursue ends they know will bring them no satisfaction, gorge themselves with food that cannot nourish and with pleasures that cannot please."

We decided that God could not be trusted. Experience begins to tell us that our cisterns can't be trusted, either. Now we're really in a bind. We can't find anything that satisfies our thirst. When thirst is ignited but unquenched, the feelings of disappointment can be intense. Of course, we can be disappointed only if we want something in the first place. So we try to cut off disappointment at its root. If the need can't be met, there's only one thing left to do: Kill the need. Kill the desire. Call desire evil. Fear it. Apologize for it. Atone for it. Kill your heart!

In the movie “The Shawshank Redemption,” Andy Dufresne, a prisoner, begins to talk about hope, but his friend Red admonishes him: “Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It’s got no use on the inside. You’d better get used to that idea.”⁵ Hope is dangerous because it can disappoint. Better not to hope, we think. Better not to want anything. Better not to thirst.

It is important to note that the Lord does not bring charges against his people because of their thirst. He brings charges against them because of how they are satisfying their thirst. Desire is good. If you don’t want something more than food, clothing and shelter, you are not human. God created us with thirst. Don’t kill it. Eventually, if you pay attention to it, the thirst in your soul will lead you to the spring of living water.

Observe the other nations

The Lord tells his people to observe the other nations from Kittim to Kedar, from the far west to the far east. They don’t change gods, even though their gods are not gods—even though they are broken cisterns. The nations keep worshiping the same gods. The Lord is saying that the pagans are more faithful to false gods than Israel is to the true God.

Cross over to the local bar and look at the spectacle of men and women desperately seeking companionship. Send to a local start-up and observe the hours that are being demanded of some people there. Cross over to eBay and look at the things people are buying. Send to the local cafe and observe what they’re talking about over breakfast there. If you watch closely, what you’ll see is worship. They worship faithfully, bellying up to the same cistern to quench their thirst time after time. They stick to their gods, even though they are not gods. Sometimes they trust their gods more than we trust our God, even though their gods are false and our God is real. Sometimes they’ll do more for a lie than we will for the truth.

Be appalled and shudder

This is an appalling, even horrifying, state of affairs. Therefore the Lord brings charges against Israel. In his courtroom he calls on the heavens, which have a panoramic view of the human drama, to testify against his people:

*“Be appalled at this, O heavens,
and shudder with great horror,” declares the LORD.*

Forsaking the Lord for broken cisterns is a tragedy of cosmic proportions. So if we have forsaken the Lord, the spring of living water, to dig our own cisterns, what should we do? Listen to what the Lord asks the heavens to do and do the same: Be appalled, and shudder with great horror.

C. S. Lewis writes of a time when he shuddered like the heavens:

For the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me: a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was legion.”⁶

A story of our lives

In this passage, Jeremiah gives us a story of what some of us have done with our lives. Listen and see if this is your story: In the middle of the desert, you're standing next to a spring. It yields water of amazing quality. When you drink from it, the water quenches some deep thirst within you. But as time goes by, you begin to question the trustworthiness of the spring. You decide that the only person you can trust to satisfy your thirst is yourself. So you leave the spring. You travel for many miles until you find a spot to dig your cistern. Digging this thing is a lot of work, but your thirst spurs you on. When you finish digging, you're ready for the water. Now you have to find a source of water and somehow get the water from its source to the cistern. That takes more work. As you drink from your cistern, the water level decreases, so you have to continually return to the source and transport more water. Then your cistern springs some leaks. Now you have to work feverishly not only to transport water but to plug the leaks. Your work can't keep pace with your need, and the water level continues to drop. The water seeps into the desert sand. And you're left with nothing in the desert—parched and exhausted, cracked and dry, as barren as the desert itself, dying of thirst next to your broken cistern.

This is where the prophet leaves us—dying of thirst next to our broken cisterns. In the next chapter we will hear from another Prophet. He will stand up and cry out, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.” If his cry is to resonate with us, we must first feel the thirst that resides in our souls. We must shudder with great horror that we have forsaken the spring of living water to dig our own cisterns. And we must begin to say with David,

*My soul thirsts for you,
my body yearns for you,
in a dry and weary land
where there is no water.*

Questions

1. How would you describe the thirst in your soul?
2. How have you sought to satisfy that thirst?
3. How have your attempts to satisfy your thirst failed you?
4. Have you ever sought not to satisfy your thirst but to kill it? If so, how?
5. Reflect on the tragedy of digging broken cisterns that can hold no water.

Scott Grant / 2006

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¹ C.S. Lewis, "Till We Have Faces," © 1956 by C.S. Lewis PTE Limited, Harcourt Brace and Co., San Diego, New York, London. P. 276

² Jonathan Keats, "It's The End Of Work As We Know It," © 1998 by San Francisco Magazine. P. 45.

³ Ibid, Pp. 47-48.

⁴ Henri J.M. Nouwen, "The Return of the Prodigal Son," © 1992 by Henri J.M. Nouwen, Image Books, New York, N.Y. Pp 39-40.

⁵ "The Shawshank Redemption," © 1994 Castlerock Entertainment.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, "Surprised by Joy," © 1955 by C.S. Lewis PTE Limited, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, San Diego, New York, London. P. 226.