

Job 23:8-9

“If I go forward, he is not there;  
or backward, I cannot perceive him;  
on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;  
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.”

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When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

Do you see a person you like? An accumulation of talents and achievements; of evolution, wisdom and knowledge? Or do you see only the imperfections? The scars? The guilt? The grief and regret? When you look in the mirror, do you see others staring back at you? Your boss, your family, your friends, your enemies? And can you only see their words and projections cast about you? Or, when you look in the mirror, can you actually see you? The real you? The true unadulterated you? And, if you can actually see you, this real you, can you also then see God? The One who first created and guided you, the One who stands with and by you still? The One who abides within you now and even forever more?

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In the natural world, the mark of self-awareness is the ability to recognize oneself in a reflection. Not a projection, or a fabrication, but a true representation of one's real identity.

Who here has ever swam with dolphins before? At like one of those resorts? (me too). Fun, right? Well please, for the love of God, never do it again! The subject matter of the Academy-Award winning documentary “The Cove” deals with the capture and captivity of dolphins used and abused for our recreation. It is a harrowing experience for the viewer, but more, of course, for the dolphins. There is this scene off the coast of Japan where you can hear the excruciating wailing, their dying bitter complaint, as they are stolen from their families, captured, killed, and transported off to the West.

A bit later in a different scene, one of these dolphins, suffering alone in a tank at SeaWorld, catches a glimpse of himself in a mirror, reflected off the water, the glass, and the cage. And in this harsh yet true reflection, he begins to dance. He swims in diagonals and crosses, belly up, belly down, enamored with himself. Despite the depravity and the master's pole, somehow, inexplicably, there was yet dancing, even if just for a moment. For in confronting himself, his true self, even in that horrible condition, this dolphin yet found comfort.

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You know, for years I would reference the television show LOST and I would use it as my go-to transitional analogy, but LOST is now so far down the list of my favorites, well, let's just stop talking about it altogether, ok? But now, Westworld... on HBO... you all need to watch this thing! It's impossible to describe it in brief, so I won't bother, but what I will say here is this: there's this crucial symbol/concept that runs throughout the first two seasons. It's called The Maze. Guided by her creator's voice, one of the main characters is lead on a journey inward toward revelation. The Maze is built for her and others like her so that if successful at finding its center, they could escape from the programs otherwise governing their every thought and action; they could become self-aware, encounter autonomy, and discover their own true voice within. It is later explained that the key to unlocking this discovery is the process of suffering. *Suffering*. That to suffer removes the veil, the superficial, the conditioned response, and leads to a real and raw meeting with one's own consciousness; with who one really is and what one truly feels at their innermost and authentic core.

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But, do you think that's true? I mean, in real life, beyond the script? I mean, unless you're someone truly extraordinary, most who suffer don't want things to get any rawer than they already are, right? For it's often that rawness that leads into even greater despair rather than say an epiphany or a centered release for that matter (again, unless you're someone extraordinary, and actually, I think there are several people here who would fit that bill).

But for most, when that suffering comes, so do those mechanisms of distraction. I've been there. My wife's been there. And I bet you have been there too. We turn on the TV for hours. We pour that wine glass by glass, and then by another glass after that. We scroll through social media on a loop. We like this photo and that photo hoping that maybe she will like ours in return. We fill every moment of silence with as much noise as possible. And we do everything we possibly can except to address what's really going on. Who we have been and who we are now. And instead of confronting our true self, and healing from the deep within, we just add more and more gook to the surface such that we become a walking distortion. A mirage. Here, there, and perpetually not.

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Now there was a rich man who once met Christ. It is said he had lived an exemplary life. He had followed all of the commandments and as far we can tell harmed not a soul. But, there was still one thing he lacked: nothing. He lacked nothing. After asking Jesus how he might enter the Kingdom of God and inherit eternal life, Jesus challenges him to sell his possessions. He refuses, becomes disgruntled, and then separates from Christ. This *man* walks away from *Christ*. From God. See, he didn't want to suffer loss. He didn't want to own nothing. He didn't want to take the risk, and live for something deeper, for something more, while having somethings less. No, he wanted everything, to own everything he already had and to add to everything he hadn't but without giving anything in return. And in doing so, he was sent away with everything he came with and yet nothing at all at that.

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Now there was another man named Job. And this guy lost everything. His kids, his animals, his livelihood. I mean, everything. He even lost his composure. For he contended not only with his wife and best friends, but he also contended with God. With God! And he didn't just contend, oh no, he complained. He argued. He got angry. He basically did everything short of curse God and die.

But isn't it ironic? For unlike the rich man, who had everything, who found himself face to face with God in Christ, and yet choose to leave him ... here we have Job, a man who lost everything, who couldn't find God anywhere in any cardinal direction, and yet chose to never depart from his faith in God at all. Unlike the rich man who wanted nothing more than a superficial and easy answer, Job wanted nothing at all to do with the simplistic and chose instead the difficult path of a desperate and raw encounter with God, even bitterly questioning the very point of Divinity and life itself. And knowing how the story ends, hint: God apologizes and blesses Job with a double portion... One might say that in order to find what you seek, to find yourself, you must first lose what you seek, to lose (,) yourself.

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Now, it would surely be monstrous to defend the position that somehow God authors our suffering or demands our losing, all so that we can later gain, become wiser, and even stronger than before. Yes, that would be monstrous indeed, especially when considering how arbitrary and wicked so much of death truly is.

Just this past week another high school friend of mine died. Maurice Boatwright. Aged 37. He died in a car accident on his way home from work. They think it happened as he was swerving to avoid a deer. A deer. The stupidest thing. Maurice had spent the last decade working with underprivileged kids at a local YMCA. And just this past year he celebrated the birth of his first child. His baby girl. His whole Facebook feed was nothing but her, his daughter. And like that, he's gone.

So no, I do not confess that God is behind our suffering. But I do believe that God is yet somehow there, deep within those who are left suffering, abiding and working within us as we try to struggle our way out from the pit.

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*Why do you call me good, Christ asks? Only God is good, he says.* And in that goodness, God came down to live as us. As a human. To be tested and to suffer as we have. So that in Christ we might know God, and, so that in Jesus, God might better know us. So my friends, know that your suffering and indeed your entire being does not live nor die in isolation. No, you might not always spot God forward, backward, left or right, but check again there at the center. For there, within, I promise (I think) God always is.

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Now if, here at the end, you say, *well what about me, Reverend? I don't suffer. I look around and say, you know what, I have it pretty good. Does that mean I can't fully know myself or God for that matter?*

Well sisters and brothers, so often there are questions that don't have easy answers. But the message is the same nonetheless. Approach the throne of amazing grace with boldness. With boldness! Be raw. Be authentic. Don't just go at your life or your faith superficially. Don't just fill all the gaps with noise and shallow blather. But go deeper. Contend, argue, curse even (if you must). Have all of this matter enough that you get angry about it. Joyous about it. Passionate about it. Enlivened about it. For only then when it has depth, when it takes hold of the core of all that makes you, you, will you find your way to the center of the labyrinth, encountering your true self, and the Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer who was, is, and will ever be with you.

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For indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before God no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we all must render an account.

Hebrews 4:12-13