



May 29, 2005

The Human Equation
Colossians 1:11-20

Introduction: The Truth Is Out

The truth is out, the tale is told, and the last puzzle pieces are in place: now we know the secret identity of the master villain Darth Sidious; now we know that Chewbacca and the other Wookiees have a planet of their own; now we know that after a fateful dual with Obi-Wan Kenobi, Anakin Skywalker—having turned his back on the noble Jedi cause—falls into a molten pit and emerges as Darth Vader; now we know that *Star Wars*' Episode III: *Revenge of the Sith*—the sequel to Episode II and the prequel to Episode IV—careened through space to a record-breaking first-night box office of 50 million dollars.

But do we know why? Why this insatiable passion for Star Wars?

Among all the possible answers of million of viewers, I have my own modest explanation. While I haven't spoken to George Lucas about it—although I fully intend to once he's back down to earth again—the one unidentified thread that runs throughout all six *Star Wars* episodes is the **search for significance**. At the very foundation of all the various themes of the series—such as, good vs. evil, love vs. hatred, light vs. dark, power and misuse of it, treachery, villainy, selfless sacrifice for causes greater than the individual—the one common characteristic of intergalactic voyages is the **search for significance** in a vast universe of universes with no known boundaries. Though spaceships travel faster than the speed of light, no one in any episode has ever reached the edge of the cosmos.

What could possibly be the **significance** of a race of human beings so miniscule in an immeasurable universe that defies conclusive quantification?

Search for Significance

In Space

The Psalmist's word reverberate throughout the heavenly spheres:

O Lord, our Lord,
How majestic is thy name in all the earth! ...
When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
what are human beings that thou art mindful of them,
*and mortals that thou dost care for them?*¹

It is reported that the star Betelgeuse, which forms the right shoulder of the constellation

Orion, is 400 million times larger than our sun. How unimportant we seem!—like ants to an Everest—inhabiting a world that is but a miniscule entity in a vast, endless, silent space. The universal dilemma is that we can't seem to find meaning in this incomprehensible context; we are universally lonely and perpetually engaged in a search for significance.

The seventeenth century French philosopher Blaise Pascal lamented: *The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me*² . . . *When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces which I am ignorant and which know not me, I am frightened and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? (and for what purpose?) By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me?*³ “The remembrance of a guest that tarrieth but a day.”⁴

Pascal's ponderous search for significance resulted from the controversial shift in how we perceived our universe. Until the middle of the sixteenth century, the Ptolemaic System of astronomy held full sway in scientific circles, and man (generic term) was the center of his universe: the sun, moon, planets and stars revolved around the earth.

The sixteenth century Copernican Revolution—which postulated that the earth revolved around the sun—*overturned the medieval world-view . . . and contributed to the decline of humanism and the degradation of man, since it swept man out of his majestic position at the center of the universe and reduced him to a mere particle of dust in an endless cosmic machine.*⁵ So long as we were in the center of the universe we had meaning.

What Copernicus theorized in 1543 Galileo in the same century with his improved telescope actually demonstrated: the earth revolves around the sun and human beings are **not** the center of the universe. Hence Pascal's intense search for significance!— *who has put me here and for what purpose? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me?* I am as a guest that tarrieth but a day. Or as another poet has

decried: *I am a stranger and afraid in a world (universe) I have not made.*⁶

Leaving us with poignant echoing in empty space: Is there anyone in this vast universe who values me? Is there anyone who cares for me? Is there anyone to touch me at the heart?

On Earth

We need not be lost in space to feel insignificant. Irrelevance occurs to us here . . . on earth, in a *world which lies before us like a land of dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new . . . and yet, a world where at times we seem to be here as on a darkling plain, swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight*⁷

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain — and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
*I have been one acquainted with the night.*⁸

Whom do you see when you look down the saddest city lane?

I see those who are acquainted with the night, feeling alone, insignificant, irrelevant, redundant, trivial:

The poet himself apparently in a broken relationship with someone who, crying out, interrupted, did not call him back or say *goodbye*. I see others in broken relationships: marriages gone awry, friendships disintegrated, parents and children alienated, all feeling alone, insignificant, irrelevant, redundant, trivial, posing the questions: Is there anyone on this dark earth who values me? Is there anyone who cares for me? Is there anyone to touch me at the heart?

When I look down that saddest city lane, I see those who are dying of cancer, AIDS, and other dreaded diseases, from whom life is ebbing away. I see children abused in their innocence, shattered in their homes, neglected by parents, feeling alone, insignificant, irrelevant, redundant, trivial, posing the questions: Is there anyone on this dark earth who values me? Is there anyone who cares for me? Is there anyone to touch me at the heart?

When I look down that saddest city lane, I see bodies strewn about by war, some of them heroic in their self-sacrifice, those who sought to bring freedom to the oppressed. I see tens of thousands of refugees, who have fled violence and deprivation in their own countries only to meet violence and deprivation in refugee camps, seeking a little place in the world to call their own and to live free, but, instead, feeling alone, insignificant, irrelevant, redundant, trivial, posing the questions: Is there anyone on this dark earth who values me? Is there anyone who cares for me? Is there anyone to touch me at the heart?

When I look down the saddest city lane, I see you and me, reflected in the glow of that *one solitary light against the sky*, mirrored in the moonlight, for we too have known broken relationships; we too have tasted the bitterness of loss: parents, children, loved ones in war; and in that loss feeling alone, insignificant, irrelevant, redundant, trivial, posing the questions: Is there anyone

on this dark earth who values me? Is there anyone who cares for me? Is there anyone to touch me at the heart?

Transition

One evening last week our daughter Emily came into the study at our home and said she had an essay question for her American Literature course. Would I like to hear it? I said yes. Question: *what insight can literary texts produced in America's past bring to the examination of the contemporary American experience?* What do you think? I stood there silently for a minute and then said, "Could you please repeat the question?"

She reread the question: *what insight can literary texts produced in America's past bring to the examination of the contemporary American experience?*

Once again I stood there quietly, this time wondering whatever became of the good ole standard essay questions, such as *What did you do on your summer vacation?* If I recall correctly, I wrote my twenty-five page high school senior thesis on *What I saw at the Boston Museum last Summer*. I then said, "Good luck, honey!" and left her in the study to compose. The next morning she left a copy of her essay on my desk before she went off to school. She had cited three tragic figures in three American novels who forfeited their own pure personal passions in order to chase after the American dream of wealth and fame and to meet the expectations of others to achieve socially defined "success."

After I had read the essay, I finally realized the full import of the question, and I'd like to reframe the question for our purposes this morning: *what insight can Pauline texts produced in the Church's past bring to the examination of the contemporary human experience?*

In other words, what does this ancient biblical text of the Apostle Paul have to say to us today?

Source of Significance

Colossians 1 contains Paul's claim for the Cosmic Christ, who is Lord of the universe.

*He (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible*⁹. . . This is the pre-existent Christ, who existed before time with the Father (who created everything through him) and with the Holy Spirit (who passed over the face of the deep prior to creation.)

Doesn't this sound familiar? The author of John's gospel writes upon the same theme: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God (the pre-existent Christ); all things were made through him (the Cosmic Christ), and without him was not anything made that was made (the Lord of the Universe)*.¹⁰

John goes on to attest to the incarnation of this Cosmic Christ into the finite world: . . . *and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us* . . .¹¹

Incarnation. Look at this incredible, mysterious phenomenon: the pre-existent, Cosmic Christ, Lord of the universe **through** whom the endless, vast, immeasurable universe was created takes on flesh and comes into the world, walks the dark roads in the dark nights, who himself becomes acquainted with the night, who himself—as the first-born of all creation –travels down the saddest city lanes, who himself as the image of the invisible God takes on our humanity to make God’s love visible and real to us, who by his death, resurrection, and ascension says **yes** to our question *Is there anyone who values me?* says **yes** to our question *Is there anyone who cares for me?* says **yes** to our question *Is there anyone to touch me at the heart?*

The divine Son of God—in whom *all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*¹²– takes on the contemporary human experience and teaches us **the significance of human love**; the divine Son of God, Lord of the universe, the very Source of our significance, through whom God *has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins*,¹³ in whom we are delivered from the darkness of our insignificance and through whom the light of our risen humanity is assured.

According to Copernicus, we have lost our place at the center of God’s universe (apparently a place we never had), but according to Paul, we have been given a place at the center of God’s kingdom, God’s love, God’s eternity . . . indeed at the center of the Godhead with the risen and ascended form of risen humanity—the image of the invisible God in whom all the fullness of God is pleased to dwell.

The Human Equation

One evening Antoinette Wyke took her seven-year-old daughter to the Morehead Planetarium and Science Center located at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. As they leaned back in their cushioned seats and as the room darkened, there soon unfolded before them a panoramic sky of spectacular brilliance and infinite complexity: planets in our solar system whirled with breathtaking speed around the sun; the Milky Way appeared in its unparalleled luminosity; eighty-eight graphic constellations marked off the divisions of the heavens, constellations such as the Charioteer, Cassiopeia, Orion, Pegasus, the Archer, Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, and Taurus the Bull, which contained the magnificent clusters of stars known as the Pleiades and the Hyades. At the conclusion of that cosmic spectacle, mother and daughter left the planetarium and moved into the night, thick darkness surrounding them. Antoinette Wyke looked up into the heavens and beheld with her naked eye the same overpowering splendor she had witnessed in the theatre. She was immediately struck by her insignificance as one infinitesimal dot on a tiny planet in a remote corner of the universe. In that unbearable recognition, her previous sense of well-being was dramatically reduced to an irrefutable sensation of futility. She too could have cried out: *Who has put me here? (and for what purpose?)* I am as “a guest that tarrieth but a day.”

But then, moving slowly through the darkness, Wyke’s seven-year-old daughter reached for her mother’s hand, which she instinctively found in an instant. Ah, thought Wyke, here is the answer to the human equation, which contains the essential **component of love**.

Conclusion: Love Someone

When you feel alone in the silence of the vast, endless universe, searching for significance; when you feel alone in the dark night of your soul or in a dark night on a dark road upon a dark earth: find someone to love or love **well** someone you already love; and touch someone you love at the heart.

God does! and that someone is you.

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29 May 2005

Notes

(Endnotes)

¹ Psalm 8:1, 3-4

² Blaise Pascal
(1623-1662)

,
Pensées,
Section III, 206

³ Ibid, 205

⁴ The Wisdom of Solomon 5:15

⁵ Edward McNall Burns,
Western Civilizations: Their History and Their Cultures,
pp. 359-360

⁶ A. E. Housman

⁷ Matthew Arnold,
Dover Beach, stanza 4

⁸ Robert Frost,
Acquainted with the Night

⁹ Colossians 1:15

¹⁰ John 1:1-3

¹¹ John 1:14

¹² Colossians 1:19

¹³ Colossians 1:13-14

