

THE FAVORITE TEXT OF FAMOUS PEOPLE - Wernher von Braun
“Galaxies, God And Little Ole’ Me”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

PSM. 57:5

Shortly after the Russians launched their first Sputnik they made an interesting observation. The satellite had hardly achieved an orbit when they released a statement to the effect that,

“Man has invaded the heavens and God was nowhere to be found.”

As far as, the Soviets were concerned, Sputnik had knocked him out of the firmament!

I suppose there were some who agreed with them, and not all of these are untutored peasants. But one man did *not* agree. His name? Dr. Wernher von Braun. His job? Head of our Army’s Ballistic Missile Agency. As a result of this man’s scientific wizardry, and that of those who collaborated with him, the United States succeeded in orbiting her own earth satellite months ahead of schedule. Since then, this extraordinary man and his team have enjoyed numerous successful space shots.

It was following one such firing that Dr. von Braun wrote this letter:

“Dear Dr. Lavender,

I have your kind letter inviting me to send you a note regarding the particular verse or passage of the Bible which has been most helpful or challenging to me. I submit the following,

‘Be thou exalted, O God, above the heaven; let thy glory be above all the earth’ (Psalm 57:5).

“I feel the universal validity of God’s law, on earth and other worlds, is expressed in this passage. Space travelers will not trespass on forbidden regions when they set foot on other worlds, but will be in God’s realm wherever they go.”

Thank you very much for your kind letter and interest.

Sincerely yours,

Wernher von Braun”

“Man has invaded the heavens and God was nowhere to be found!”

“Space travelers will not trespass on forbidden regions when they set foot on other worlds, but will be in God’s realm wherever they go.”

Here, clearly etched, are the alternate and conflicting conclusions of the two great ideologies vying for our allegiance. On the one hand, atheistic communism saying, “Man is supreme.” On the other, theistic democracy responding, “The Lord God omnipotent reigneth.”

Which is true? Some will say, the former. And they have much apparent evidence to support their contention. The sight of satellites beeping their way through the heavens has knocked many of our childish, anthropomorphic ideas of God into a cocked hat.

But there are others, and I number myself among them, who argue that instead of knocking God out of his heaven, man’s first faint foraging into space has fortified the revelations of the Christian faith. It is our conviction that man’s first halting efforts have reenforced, and made clearer, the truth of God’s greatness and the wonder of his creative power.

We are told, that before the saintly biologist, Louis Agassiz, began a new experiment he would always pause before his classroom and say,

“We are about to ask God a question.”

If we finger the fringes of infinity with that frame of mind, seeking, as the great astronomer Kepler suggested, to “think God’s thoughts after him,” our rapidly expanding knowledge of the worlds among which we live, will also lead to a fuller understanding of the Great Planner who brought them into existence.

All of this is not without its hazards, however. The new discoveries and powers science has won for us sometimes raise more questions than they solve. For instance, much of what has taken

place recently has contributed to an uneasy feeling of God's far-offness. As I said, in this weeks Advance,

“It does something to one's sense of identity with God when he reads of satellites going into orbit around the sun, and stars which are billions of light years away. It makes a fellow feel awfully insignificant when he hears of millions of suns, each so immense he could bore a hole in the top of any one of them, and pour a thousand suns the size of ours into it with room to spare.”

Our puny little earthbound minds are paralyzed by the thought of it, for now we know our world is just a tiny little speck of cosmic dust occupying what Dr. Harlow Shapley of Harvard University calls,

“A very undistinguished location in a faint spiral arm of a quite ordinary galaxy.”

At the very moment we are achieving, for the first time, power to probe beyond our planet into the unknown realms outside its atmosphere, we are also discovering how very, very small we are compared to the vast immensities of life.

Under the steady bombardment of these incredible facts about the universe in which we live, there is an inevitable undercutting of the idea that God could really care about “little ole' us” and our petty concerns.

“Among so many can he care?” we ask. “Can special love be everywhere?”

The answer scripture gives is, yes! But before we can have any personal assurance this is so, we must bring our concept of our God up-to-date. Indeed, we are in for some serious trouble if our understanding of God, and who he is, does not expand with our growing knowledge of the universe and what it is.

Many people have updated their ideas of science and medicine, but are still in the dark ages theologically. They have revised their thoughts about airplanes and agriculture. They wouldn't think of doing business in an old-fashioned cracker-barrel grocery store. Or heating their homes

with a potbelly stove. But they persist in trying to live life with ideas of God which are just as outdated and unsatisfactory as a Stanley Steamer. Then they wonder why it is that God seems so remote, and has so little aid to offer them.

If, in this conflict between theism and atheism, we are to have “a reason for the hope that is within us” -- and I mean a sound, defensible reason -- one which will stand up under careful scrutiny, we must get rid of many of our immature ideas of God. Ideas which make him little more than a glorified man.

Such a God will not satisfy our own deep need. Nor will he withstand the sly and the clever onslaughts of those who would abolish them. This means, among other things, we must cease thinking of God as being “up there somewhere” in space. God is spirit, and spirit does not dwell in space. Space has to do with matter. Spirit is independent of matter.

As A.W. Tozer observes,

“We must not think of God as being spatially near or remote. God is not here nor there, but carries here *and* there in his heart. Space is not infinite, as some have thought; God is infinite. And, in his infinitude, he swallows up all of space.”

“Do I not fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord” (Jer. 23:24).

Perhaps it will help to think of space as an empty bucket. Plunge it into the ocean and immediately the ocean fills it, and surround it. In a similar way, God fills and surrounds the universe, so that it does not contain him, he contains it. As the Bible declares,

“Behold, the heaven, and the heaven of heavens, cannot contain thee”
(I Kings 8:27).

God is not contained, he contains. His center is everywhere and his boundaries are nowhere. For

him there is no elsewhere. There is only an eternal here.

Furthermore, we must rule out the concept of time as having anything to do with God. Unlike our life, *his* life does not consist of one moment followed by another. For him there is no past or future. There is only an eternal now.

In his little gem of a book, Beyond Personality, C. S. Lewis illustrates it this way,

“If a million people were praying to God at 10:30 tonight, he wouldn’t have to listen to them all in that one little snippet of time we call ten-thirty.

Ten-thirty, and every other moment from the beginning of time, is always the present for him. If you like to put it that way, he has all eternity to listen to the split second prayer put up by a pilot as his plane crashes in flames.”

Or, to come at it another way, also suggested by Lewis, here is a man writing a book. One of his characters is called Mary. In the course of the novel he writes,

“Just then the telephone rang. Mary put down the book she was reading, and picked up the receiver.”

He might sit for three or four hours and think steadily about Mary. In fact, he could think about her as if she were the only character in his book. He could do so as long as he pleased, and this is the important part, the hours he spent in thinking about her, and being exclusively concerned about her, would not appear in her time, the imaginary time of the novel, at all.

Now this is just an illustration, and any illustration can be pushed too far. But at least it gives us a wee glimpse of the real truth about God. As Lewis says,

“God is not hurried along in the time stream of this universe any more than an author is hurried along in the imaginary time of his novel. God has infinite time and attention to spare for each of us. He doesn’t deal with us en masse. You are as much alone with him as if you were the only being he ever created. And when Christ died, he died for you individually just as

if you had been the only individual in the whole wide world.”

When we are mature enough in our thinking of God to rule out the ideas of space and time as relating to him, *then* we are free to accept the fact that God could be, *and is*, concerned about us and the details of our existence.

A moment ago I spoke about the sheer immensity of our universe. We must not forget, however, that its boundlessness is not all up and out. It is also down and in. There is a vastness which can be seen only through a telescope. There is also a vastness which can be seen only through a microscope. And the laws which govern *both* of these realms are equally dependable!

God’s creative genius was, and is, concerned about the grandeur of the universe. The great and majestic rolling stars. He is also concerned about the minutiae of life. The tiny unseen atoms out of which it is all constructed.

“Even the hairs of your head are numbered,” Jesus said.

Or to state it less poetically,

“Nothing is too small to be of concern to God.”

J. Wallace Hamilton tells the story of a little boy who asked his mother if he could go outside and play catch with God. When she asked, “How?” He said, “I throw the ball up and God throws it back.” Dr. Hamilton goes on to say,

“It is always safe to throw a ball into the air because, vast as the creation is, busy as the law of gravity must be holding up the great spheres, it won’t neglect the little spheres or let them fall off into space. Tremendous as the energy of the sun is, warming the just and the unjust, it never gets too busy to overlook a little seed in the garden that is praying hard to be a flower.”

Nor is there any possibility that these infinities of God can be exhausted. One night last summer, I was sitting under my favorite pine tree up at “Shorewood Acres,” our Northwoods summer

home. It was breathlessly clear that evening. The sky was a velvet curtain studded with a “zillion” stars. The glory of that indescribable splendor was reflected in the water, giving me a sense of being surrounded by a vast and luminous universe of light. As I sat there entranced by the quiet beauty of it all, I remembered the observation Dr. Robert Andrews Millikan made on a similar occasion,

“If all the world were enjoying this beauty, that fact would not detract one particle from the brilliancy of the moon. So it is with God, if all the world drew on him for peace, help, strength and harmony in their lives, they would not diminish by one iota God’s boundless and allsufficient supply.”

Oh the wonder of it all! At this very moment, you and I and a few billion other creatures on earth, are in the center of, and are being held securely by the power of gravity. We are all drawing from it, and relying on it, with each gesture and step. Yet that power is not taxed, nor is it diminished at all.

At this very moment, you and I and millions more like us, are in the center of, and are being held by, the love of God. We are drawing from it, and relying on it, countless times a day. Yet that love is not exhausted, nor is it drained at all.

It must have been the glory of that knowledge which caused the hymn writer to say,

“I know not where his islands lift,
Their fronded palms in air.
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.”

But how do we make contact with so great a God? How do finite people do business with the infinite? By laying hold of his “near end.” That hither part of him through which he literally touches us.

The last time I was over on the coast I had opportunity to do, once again, what I often did as a lad in college. For the briefest part of one afternoon, I trudged along the sands of the blue Pacific. My, what wonderful memories those rolling waves washed back into my consciousness. Now I am acquainted with that great body of water, but I do not know *all* of the Pacific Ocean. I hardly know even the smallest part of it. I have driven along its coast from Canada to Mexico, but I have never sailed it to the south where it washes the sands of a thousands islands. I have never followed it to the north where it plunges beneath the polar ice pack. I have never traveled it to the west where it eventually spills into the China Sea. There is so much of that great ocean which is not known to me. But I know the Pacific, for it has a near end! And I have bathed in it, sailed over it, and been thrilled by it.

It is thus with God. He is so great that, in His vastness, we can only glimpse a little of his glory. And sometimes what we see tends to frighten us. But God has a “near end” that touches us and can be touched by us. That “near end” of God is Jesus Christ! And when we see God in *him*, when we accept what Harold Cooke Phillips calls, “the Christ-likeness of God,” and believe the Eternal God -- creator and sustainer of this incredible universe -- is as kind, tender, forgiving and good as Jesus, *then* we are not frightened by his greatness any more.

We are captivated by his love. We know that among the galaxy there is the possibility of a connection -- in fact, an intimate, personal *relationship* -- between God and little ole’ me! And we are prepared to say with the Psalmist,

“My Lord and my God, in whom I trust.
Be thou exalted, O God, above the heavens;
Let thy glory be above all the earth.”

And, let that glory be revealed in, and by, and through me!