



# *Minutes With Messiah*

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## *Shadows in the Evening*

Did you ever wait until late in the afternoon to play “shadow tag” because they were too short around noon-time? When you were a kid, did you ever look at your shadow of an evening and think, “I’d like to be that tall.” (Do short people of any age do that?) We know that who we are is not defined by our shadow, but sometimes we look at shadows and judge the threat by them, rather than the size of the person.

Numbers 13 and 14 give the account of the spies who were sent into Canaan after the exodus from Egypt. The spies brought back fruit of the land, including a cluster of grapes that had to be carried on a pole between two men. They showed the congregation of Israel how fruitful the land was. Yet when Caleb said, “Let us go up and take the land,” ten of the other eleven spies balked. Their evil report of the land was:

The land, through which we have gone to search it, is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof; and all the people that we saw in it are men of a great stature. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight. (Num 13:32-33)

Tradition says that God had arranged that wherever the spies went, numbers of the inhabitants died. Thus the people were too busy burying their dead to notice the spies in their midst. The ten spies didn’t understand why there were multiple funerals everywhere they went. They believed that the funerals they saw must be the norm, and reported that the land “eats up its inhabitants.” They thought that the land must be unhealthy, and that God must be leading them into a dangerous land, in spite of the evidence of the fruit.

At the same time, they point to the fruit as evidence that the land must produce giants. After all, look at the size of the fruit.

But the argument that really hit home was that they had seen the people of the land and “all the people were of great stature.” They concluded that “we were in our own sight as grasshoppers.” They add that they must have had the same stature in the sight of the inhabitants, perhaps because they had not even been noticed.

What is significant here is their perception of themselves. No matter how tall the people were, they were probably about the size of their later descendant Goliath. Even in his sight David was a boy, but certainly not a grasshopper. The spies exaggerated the size of the inhabitants, as if they were judging them by their evening shadows.

How often do we do the same thing? Do we look at a problem and judge it by its shadow? Do we worry about how we perceive our problems, and not about the reality of the problems themselves? As a result of the perception of the spies, Israel spent forty years in the wilderness. As we approach our problems, is our worry condemning us to the wilderness, or do we say with Caleb, “Let us go up and take it.”

Many of our problems are real. They might be giants. Or they might just be shadows in the evening.

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# Kicking Cactus

What kind of fool goes around kicking cactus while wearing canvas shoes? Might that not be the same as the pitcher who got mad and slammed his fist (of his pitching hand) into a brick wall? Is there any greater picture of frustration? Yet in the Bible we read of one who was out kicking cactus. Well, sort of.

When the Lord confronts Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus he says, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.” (Acts 26: 14) While the word “pricks” can mean insect stings or, in this case, a metal cattle prod, here in the American Southwest it conjures up the picture of someone kicking the cactus. An exercise in frustration.

The picture Jesus actually presents is just as frustrating, and also just as South west. Cattle are notoriously stubborn. They go where they want, when they want. When I was growing up we were familiar with electric prods to get them to move where we wanted them to go. In previous years people used sharpened metal prods. Whether using electric or metal, rule one is that you don’t stand behind the cow to prod it. If you do, plan on a long hospital stay because the cow’s first reaction is to kick—backwards. He is kicking “against” or in reaction to the prick. After the goad is applied a few times and kicking doesn’t do any good, she finally decides to move away from the prick. Then you have her going where you want her to go.

Jesus essentially called Saul a stubborn cow. Saul was a prominent rabbi, trained in the scriptures by one of the

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three greatest rabbis of his generation, and perhaps of all time. He should have been able to recognize Messiah when he came on the scene. Instead he “kicked up his heels” by persecuting the followers of Messiah. Jesus told him this was worthless effort. He knew where to go, but refused. Instead the goad was trying to move him

to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power

of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. (Acts 26:16-18)

But Paul may not be the only stubborn cow Jesus ever met. Perhaps we meet different breeds of such cattle every day. Maybe we meet them because we are them.

There are many ways people kick the cactus. I would like to look at just a few.

## Denying God's Existence

This certainly wasn’t Saul/Paul’s problem, but there are many who get pricked by God’s goad daily and still kick up against His existence. If “the fool has said in his heart ‘there is no God’” (Ps 14:1; 53:1), then there appear to be a lot of fools around.

God has not hidden himself. He is not hiding in heaven and keeping away from his creation. Paul told the Athenians, “he is not very far from every one of us.” The same man pointed out to the Roman brethren (Romans 1:20-21):

For the invisible things of him, even his eternal power and Godhead, from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

The pricks are all around us. The psalmist of Psalm 139:14 knew this. All he had to do was to look in a mirror to say “I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works.” I don’t think I need to detail the argument for God’s existence based on the idea that such wonderful design demands a designer.

Science is limited in that it can not explain the first cause. That is, if we evolved from a primordial ooze, where did the ooze come from? If the ooze came from a subatomic soup, where did the soup come from? Ultimately science must end and faith take over.

God tells us, “Here I am. Stop kicking against the pricks. Believe in me.”

## Denying God's Word

It’s an old and time-honored practice; if you don’t like the message, shoot the messenger. In this case, if you don’t want to obey God’s word, try to prove that it isn’t from God. That seems to be the practice of

scholars and common men for at least the past two centuries.

Did you know that the book of Deuteronomy doesn't date back to the entry into Canaan after the Exodus? At least according to some scholars (in what is called the "Documentary Hypothesis") the book that was "found" by the priests during the reign of Josiah (2 Kings 22), which is commonly held to have been the book of Deuteronomy, was actually written at that time by the priests. They objected to the people going away from them to other gods, and taking their offerings with them; they had to present a book of the Law that supposedly went back to the beginning of the nation. So they wrote what they wanted the people to believe and said it was a lost book of Moses.

Did you know that the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel were actually written after the Babylonian Captivity, because they prophesy very specifically when that captivity would end? After all, nobody could have known that the captivity would last specifically seventy years, so that must have been written after the fact. And Daniel must have actually been written three hundred years after it claims, because it tells of Alexander the Great and his four generals. Nobody could have known about that as early as 500 BC.

The latest fad appears to be that Paul perverted what Jesus intended for the church to be, so reject the writings of Paul and go back to the gospels only. The argument, as I understand it, is that Jesus primarily taught love, and therefore would not reject anyone. Paul taught that only Christians would be saved, and is therefore excluding some of those Jesus would accept. This, of course, ignores that it was Jesus who said, "No man comes to the Father but by me." (Jn 14:6) It ignores that Peter said (Acts 4:12), "neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." It ignores Paul's preaching that anyone could come to Christ, Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.

Every time anyone preaches the gospel, it is a goad to those who refuse to believe. As Paul said,

But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men." (1 Cor 1L 23-25)

Instead they choose to kick at the pricks. They attempt to deny the message rather than obey it.

### **Denying God's Justice**

Those who reject Paul's writings as stated above also kick against the prick of God's justice. They

aren't the only ones. Many the people who use the phrase, "If your God is a God of love ... ." They usually end it with something like "How could he condemn so many people to Hell?" If God is love, the theory goes, he would accept everyone regardless of how they tried to get to him. If they approached him in the form of Allah of the Muslims or as the Buddha, how could he reject them? Of course the logical extension, usually not expressed, is that the worshippers in the temples of Corinth who consorted with the temple prostitutes were only trying in their way to reach God, so adultery is not always a sin. In fact, a loving God would not reckon anything a sin.

This is not love. Love says that people must learn right from wrong, love from selfishness. To fail to

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punish sin shows a lack of love, rather than universal love.

Even more, justice is a component of love. If God tells me that something is a sin and that I must not do it or be punished, can he overlook that in someone else and be showing me love? If adultery is a sin for Christians, Jews, and Muslims but not for the Romans, God is showing partiality, not love.

If I live the way God prescribes then I expect to be rewarded as God promised. If He told me that sin receives punishment, and another commits sin, justice demands that person receive punishment. But love also demands it. How could God say he loves me if he fails to follow through on his promises to me? Love "rejoices not in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth." (1 Cor 13:6)

God has given us law. We see it in practice every day. We count on it. Yet when it comes to God's law, we expect Him to ignore his own nature. That is kicking against the pricks.

God wants us to follow him. God begs us to follow him. He puts the choice to us daily. If anyone chooses to continue to fight God, I know some places near Carlsbad, New Mexico, where I can find some good prickly pear, ocotillo, and barrel cactus. I'll show you where and take your shoes. Then you can kick the cactus to your hearts content. It can't hurt any worse than rejecting God.

# The Big I

The big thing in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for the past year, and for a year yet to come, has been the reconstruction of the “Big I,” the Intersection (with a big I) of Interstate Highway 40 and Interstate Highway 25. Before the construction started, approximately 260,000 vehicles passed through the intersection each day. Needless to say, construction has caused problems, with traffic slowing for up to a mile and a half going into the construction area each direction. When construction ends next year it will make the daily commute a lot easier, but for now the Big I is a problem.

In truth, though, the “Big I” is causing problems around the world. No, not the highway Big I in Albuquerque. The Big I in each of us. The one that says, like William Earnest Henley wrote (and as quoted by Timothy McVeigh before his execution), “I am the master of my fate:/ I am the captain of my soul.”

The Big I, me, causes problems because I am limited in knowledge. Can I read other people’s thoughts? Can I see what is to be tomorrow, or ten days or ten years from now? Without that knowledge, I can not make reasonable decisions on my own. That is what God seems to be saying to Job in the chapters 38-41. Questions like the following are designed to deflate the Big I. “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?” (38:1) “Hast thou commanded the morning since thy days; and caused the dayspring to know his place?” (38:12) “Who provideth for the raven his food?” (38:41) “Hast thou given the horse strength?” (39:19) “Hast thou an arm like God? or canst thou thunder with a voice like him?” (40:9) If we can

not answer these questions about creation, how can we pretend to control our own lives?

Jeremiah proclaimed, “It is not in man who walks to direct his steps.” (Jer 10:23) We can walk, but without one to direct us, we walk aimlessly. When we count on ourselves, or others, for direction we are like the blind led by the blind. Jesus said both would end up in the ditch. (Lk 6:39)

Perhaps the best example in scripture of the Big I is found in Luke 12:16-21, often called the parable of the rich fool. A rich man is blessed by God with an abundant crop. His reaction reeks of the Big I.

And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.

You can count the times he says “I” (and don’t miss the two “you’s” that are really hidden Big “I’s”). (The total is 8.) Jesus calls him covetous and a “fool.” All because of the Big I.

If you are driving through Albuquerque before June of 2002, slow down and be cautious of the “Big I.” But even if you aren’t going to be in Albuquerque, be especially careful. The other Big I is even more dangerous. We should avoid it altogether.

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