

THE FACE OF GOD

By Rev. Donald L. Rose

A place in ancient Israel was called “the face of God.” It was so named by Jacob, for there he wrestled with an angel and exclaimed that he had seen God face to face. (Genesis 32:30).

Jacob had another stunning experience when in trepidation he met the twin brother whom he had wronged years before. Expecting to be confronted with anger, he beheld an expression of compassion and forgiveness. Relieved, he said to his brother, “I have seen your face as though I had seen the face of God” (Genesis 33:10).

The Hebrew word for “face” is plural, as if it were saying, “I have seen your faces.” Think about that plural. There is a wide range of emotions, and the face is the outward display of their abundance.

In the story of Cain and Abel, God asks Cain why his faces have fallen (Genesis 4:6). The face is where one can read what is going on within a human being. Think of the face as a finely tuned and highly complex organ of the body. There are organs whose vessels and fibers enable them to perform specific vital functions. Theological Emanuel Swedenborg points out that the face has been designed for a sophisticated purpose. Although the face is a physical thing, it is wonderfully connected and attuned to realities that are definitely not physical. You want to see love? You want to see regret, yearning, sympathy, the whole range of inner feelings? Look at the face.

You and I are not our bodies. We are human beings, conglomerates of virtues, affections and thoughts. And when we are sincere, those inner things may be discerned in our faces. A child’s face touches our feelings, because that face is in a special way in touch with the God who created us. Jesus said not to despise one of these little ones, for they are in the presence of angels—angels who continually behold “the face” of the heavenly Father. (Matthew 18:10).

There is a “fact” (if that’s the right word) about human faces which Swedenborg held to be of great significance. He repeatedly observes in his books that throughout all creation no two human faces are exactly alike. Can we grasp this? If it is so, says Swedenborg, the faces bespeak the very infinity of God. “This infinite variety would be impossible except from an infinity in God the Creator” (True Christian Religion, paragraph 32). The variety in distinctly different faces portrays a far greater complexity of variety in human minds.

Several times in the Bible when we read of God’s “presence,” the original word is “faces.” For example in Isaiah 63: “The Angel of His presence (faces) saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them and bore them and carried them all the days of old.”

When Moses contemplated the epic journey leading to the promised land, God said, “My presence (faces) will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Exodus 33:14). Moses replied, “If Your faces do not go with us, do not bring us up from hence.”

As each one of us contemplates the path we have yet to walk, we cherish the words: “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord cause His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

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