

God's delight: "The Lord make his face shine upon you"

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [November 1, 2003](#) issue

I have always been fascinated by the phrase “the Lord make his face shine upon you.” God’s blessing, God’s protection, God’s peace, God’s grace—all part of that same benediction—are great goods, and if I had to choose between them and God’s shining face, I might well opt for them. But God’s shining face outdoes them all. For God’s blessing, protection, peace and grace concern things that we possess, do and suffer, while God’s shining face concerns our very being. It stands for God’s sheer delight that we exist and live before him. Yet I rarely “see” God’s face shining upon me, and given that I am an inveterate sinner, it is not easy to know exactly why God’s face should shine on me.

I know what I am missing. Our second son, Aaron, is a sweet little boy who loves to cuddle, to the point of hugging hardwood floors if his parents are not conveniently around. When I pick him up, he buries his head into my shoulder and holds tight around my neck. Then he suddenly lifts his head and looks me straight in the eyes, his face beaming with delight, and says “Tata” (Croatian for “daddy”) for no other reason than that I am with him.

Aaron delights in me because he does not remember my transgressions against him and does not know in advance what will happen. But could we imagine God as a child, in blissful forgetfulness of what was and naïve ignorance of what is to come? What would happen to Aaron’s shining face if, when he looked me in the eyes, he could remember a big daddy hand pulling him away from the joy of scattering plant dirt all over our oriental rugs? What if he could, somewhere in the future, catch a glimpse of daddy’s mighty frustration descending upon him for no reason other than that he happened to be there? Unlike Aaron, God knows past, present and future, and his gaze penetrates below surfaces to the dark chambers of our deceitful hearts. We are all sinners. How then can God delight in us?

Am I forgetting that God is love? No, I am not. God loves all prodigal daughters and sons, notwithstanding their ever-present sin against God and neighbors. But is this love that delights? It is the kind of love committed to the well-being of the beloved, love that suffers pain at the beloved's journey into the far country, love that wants the beloved to return as a true lover. Would it not be *wrong* for God to delight even in the wrongdoer? Is not distance between us and God—even terror of God—appropriate as long as we remain prodigals? Is this not what the prophet Isaiah felt when he exclaimed, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips . . . yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”?

Why is it that we think that God should delight in us when we act—and in an important sense also *are*—contrary to God as the source of all goodness, truth and beauty? Is not longing for God's shining face just an echo of the infantile desire to be affirmed no matter what—a desire so pervasive in our culture that we cannot imagine how anyone could disapprove of something we do and still love us? Should we not rather live content with God's frowning face, knowing well that God's condemnation of sin is a form God's love must take if the sinner is to be redeemed? Should we not grow up, face the truth about ourselves, learn to live with God's disapproval, and find comfort in God's love out of which this disapproval is born? God's shining face would then be a promise for the world to come, where God would have nothing to disapprove of and one would rest in God's eternal delight.

But that can be only partly right. The priestly benediction is given for the here and now, not for the then and there. It speaks of a God who can make God's face shine on people in the midst of the darkness of their sin. But how can that be? How can God's face shine on a sinful creature? Miracle of miracles, it turns out that God is not completely unlike my son in the moment when his face shines upon mine. What does the forgiving God do with our sins? Here is what the scripture says: God covers them, God disperses them like mist, God puts them behind his back, God hides them, God forgets them. As Søren Kierkegaard puts it: “The one who loves forgives in this way: he forgives, he forgets, he blots out the sin, in love he turns toward the one he forgives; but when he turns toward him, he of course cannot see what is lying behind his back.”

Difficulties abound. Is it possible for the all-knowing God not to see certain things? How can God both see so as to condemn sin, and not see so as to delight in the forgiven one? Can God switch off realms of knowledge at will? These are tough philosophical and theological questions with no easy answers. This is no place to

enter the debate, but I can make one general suggestion. If you have a notion of God that precludes the shining of God's face on a sinner, you should give up that notion of God in favor of God's shining face. Provided, of course, that you want to worship the God of Abraham.

A blessing for those who agree and disagree with me about God's forgetting: "The Lord make his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace."