

"How Then Shall We Live?"
Proverbs 16:18,19
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August 13, 2023

Last week, Rose and I celebrated our 17th wedding anniversary by going on a date together. Now for us, a date usually consists of a movie followed by dinner at a nice restaurant somewhere. As we both wanted to see the new film "Oppenheimer" which opened to rave reviews, we headed over to our favorite theater to see the three-hour biopic on the father of the atom bomb. Not only were the performances outstanding and the scenes visually stunning, but I found myself still pondering what I felt was the movie's main message hours after we left the theater. But we'll get into that more a little later.

The film is based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography *American Prometheus* and it follows the story of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the brainy but tortured physicist who was selected to lead the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos, New Mexico during World War II- the super-secret government program to build the atomic bomb. It features an all-star cast including such well-known actors as Cillian Murphy in the title role, Matt Damon, Robert Downey Jr., Emily Blunt, Kenneth Branagh, Matthew Modine, Josh Hartnett, Gary Oldman, Casey Affleck, and more. The first part of the movie concerns Oppenheimer's rise among his scientific peers and their race to design and test the first atomic bomb; the second part tells the story of how he was cast aside by the government as a security risk when they found he was no longer useful to them. Directed by Christopher Nolan, the man who also directed such blockbusters as *The Dark Knight*, *Interstellar*, *Tenet*, and *Dunkirk*, he contends that Oppenheimer was the most important person who ever lived for by helping to usher in our current "Atomic Age," he changed the world in a way that no one had done before. Where some might argue the invention of the printing press or even the personal computer had a greater influence upon history, with the creation of the atomic bomb, he gave the world the power to ultimately DESTROY ITSELF if it would so choose.

We tend to characterize history as divided into two distinct eras- B.C. (or "Before Christ") and A.D. (Anno Domini or "After Christ"). The life and death of Jesus had SUCH a profound effect that the world could never be viewed the same afterwards. Well one could reasonably assert that a SIMILAR division could take place in MODERN history and that these two eras could be termed B.B. (or "Before the Bomb") and A.B. ("After the Bomb") for likewise, the world has never been the same SINCE. In the August 20, 1945 issue of TIME Magazine, the novelist turned journalist James Agee forecasted: "With the controlled splitting of the atom, humanity, already profoundly perplexed and disunified, was brought inescapably into a NEW age in which all thoughts and things were split and far from controlled." He saw this new age NOT as a time of what people DID, but of what was done TO THEM. Even Niels Bohr, the great Danish physicist who had helped determine the structure of the atom a quarter of a century earlier, admitted that a new age had dawned in which even the ultimate military defenses were rendered defenseless. The mere KNOWLEDGE that the bomb existed, even though located half a world away, was now enough to alter all political and military rules for good. In 1946, the poet W.H. Auden would give a name to it- he called it "the Age of Anxiety."

In the 78 years since that first bomb was detonated in the desert of New Mexico, there has been a proliferation of nuclear arsenals around the world with the explosive power of such weapons having grown a THOUSAND-FOLD. Where the US attack on Hiroshima and

Nagasaki left between 110,000 and 220,00 people dead and hundreds of thousands more who survived the bomb but suffered its effects, a SINGLE bomb can now obliterate MILLIONS of persons in just a matter of MOMENTS. Since the Cold War ended about thirty years ago, it seems fears of nuclear annihilation have taken a back seat to other concerns such as cyberattacks, infectious diseases, climate change, and now AI or artificial intelligence. However, with the current war between Russia and the Ukraine, Putin's ongoing threats to employ tactical nuclear weapons against the Ukrainians are reviving those fears once again.

For those of us who grew up attending school in the '50s and '60s, who can ever forget the backyard bomb shelters or the daily air raid drills that drove us under our desks or against hallway lockers in the event of an incoming nuclear attack. The anxiety was SO palpable that a single thirty-second television commercial became the most famous ad of all time by capitalizing upon that very fear. Shown just prior to the 1964 Presidential election, it was a scene of a young child in the foreground pulling the petals of a daisy, reciting the lyrics to "He loves me, he loves me not" while an atomic blast was detonated in the background. As a bright light fills the screen, the words "Johnson for President" appeared on the screen. Though televised only once, the message it sent was clear, a vote for Goldwater was a vote for nuclear war. Johnson went on to win the election by the greatest landslide in U.S. history.

Yes, the advent of the atomic age produced great changes, both inside us and out. It precipitated an arms race that over the years produced enough weapons to destroy the entire world many times over and cost American taxpayers trillions upon trillions of dollars, enough money to put every man, woman and child through four years of medical school by today's standards. Money that could have been better invested in our roads and bridges; schools, hospitals, and libraries; affordable housing and senior citizen centers, was poured into thousands upon thousands of intercontinental ballistic missiles, anti-ballistic missiles, submarine launched ballistic missiles, cruise missiles that could be launched from ships and planes, missiles with multiple warheads, and even multiple independently, targeted warheads. This kind of nuclear buildup has been fed by the myth that we needed enough missiles to demonstrate clear superiority over the Russians to deter an attack, which of course led people to ask that if we already had enough armaments to utterly destroy the Soviet Union once, why then did we need enough to destroy it a HUNDRED times over.

Now the purpose of this morning's sermon is NOT to debate whether Truman's decision to drop the two bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was defensible or not as I'll leave it up to the historians to figure that out. Neither is it to explain the horrors of nuclear warfare- I would hope that would already be apparent to us all. Nor is it to make the case that America or ANY nation should unilaterally give up their nuclear stockpiles- that we all know is simply a fantasy. I believe that the atomic age is here to stay and that we just have to learn to live with it and try to make it less threatening, if that is at all possible. On this anniversary month of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, I want to explore a theme inspired by this film by asking "In a world where we have arrogated such god-like powers for ourselves, how can we do more than just endure or survive in a world becoming increasingly hostile and more dangerous, and where the threat of ultimate destruction is just a red button away?" THAT'S what I'd like to address.

I mentioned at the outset that following the conclusion of the movie *Oppenheimer*, I spent some time dwelling on what I thought was the overriding theme of the film. I believe the lesson it provides us is the unlimited scope of "human pride" and how it remains the greatest

battle ANY OF US--Christian or non-Christian--can ever wage, a battle each of us is forced to contend with every moment of every day. If there is one word to describe what causes all war, it is the word "hubris" (or "pride"). Of the classic "seven deadly sins," pride heads the list, long considered the seed that gives birth to all the others. St. Augustine held that "pride is the BEGINNING of sin"- pride being the self-exaltation that results from building our lives around ourselves and our own interests rather than those of God. Pride is essentially a DENIAL of God and his authority, making OURSELVES "god" in his place. In the film's most famous scene, Oppenheimer is shown witnessing the detonation of the bomb and the enormous mushroom cloud it creates and then quoting from the Hindu scriptures, the Bhagavad Gita: "Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds." He is awed, not only by the overwhelming force generated by the bomb itself but NO LESS by the scientists themselves and their genius in creating the bomb in the FIRST PLACE!

Pride enters the picture when I treat my own self as ultimate, when I trust myself more than I trust GOD. At heart, it is to make ourselves direct competitors with God, a competition that man can NEVER win. Pride is thus the father of all lies, a form of self-deception that foolishly convinces us that the creature can dethrone the Creator. It is to fall for the same deception as Adam and Eve who BELIEVED the serpent when he told them that by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they would become like God. Pride is thus an attack upon the VERY PERSON OF GOD HIMSELF "attacking his integrity and his word" and God must respond by judging it as swiftly and decisively as he did his own people. As those familiar words from Proverbs warn us, "pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (16:18).

But pride is also so much MORE than an impulse that arises in the heart of an INDIVIDUAL who seeks to elevate him or herself above all others, it is also a COLLECTIVE impulse as demonstrated in the nations of this world as they continue to strive for more power and greater security. Our Christian faith gives us a lens to see the history of atomic research as much more than study and experimentation on what some would call the value-free technology of nuclear energy, but research on power for reasons of MORE power and MORE security. Like the forbidden fruit plucked from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we dared to pluck this piece of technology from the SAME tree because it would make US the wisest and most powerful of nations. The primary drive in the development of nuclear technology has never been simply to provide cheap energy but the unrestrained search for "power." This is what is so very dangerous: We are no longer capable of saying at any given moment, "ENOUGH ALREADY! We're stopping!" At any given moment, we have neither the criterion nor the motivation NOT to pursue to the nth degree everything that can satisfy our spirit of power.

Hubris taints us all, and war always gives us the excuse to legitimate it. Let's look first at the SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY: At Los Alamos, these were the crème de la crème, our country's intellectual elite, young men conscripted from our nation's best universities to invest their talents and energies in the creation of the greatest destroyer the world had ever known. To be chosen for this for project was not just a very heady experience, but it would inevitably ensure a lucrative future in a university of their choice were they to succeed. Who could resist such an offer as THAT! The movie demonstrates how few of them weighed the moral implications of their work. As one of the scientists described it, "It simply was not in the air. Our life was directed to do one thing and it was as though we'd been programmed to do that." Another said, "We were the heroes of our epic and there was no turning back."

In the book *Day One: Before Hiroshima and After*, Peter Wyden details the drama behind the bomb's creation. He breaks through the myths to reveal the doubts of men who made the bomb, the ignorance of those who were called upon to make the decision to use it, the fact that even those who had designed the weapon "did not know what it was" or guess what its fearsome after-effects would be. For me, the most disturbing passage in the book, one that becomes a central theme of the movie, recounts how in July of 1942, Dr. Edward Teller had developed a concern that the incredible amounts of heat produced by an exploding atom could possibly set off a multiple chain reaction of atomic explosions that would eventually engulf the world by setting the nitrogen in the atmosphere on fire. Oppenheimer had him put the mathematical projections on the blackboard and the group of young scientists studied it. Computing the probabilities that such total destruction could actually take place, it seemed to each of them a reasonable risk they would take. Thus, they went ahead with the project in good conscience. This is certainly one of the most disturbing parts of the story: that they would so willingly play dice with the future of the world in the interests of scientific curiosity, the HEIGHTH of intellectual arrogance.

There was also the hubris of the MILITARY who by the end of July already knew the war was lost for the Japanese. We certainly wanted to avoid the huge loss to American lives that would result by landing our troops on Japan's shores. But there was an ULTERIOR motive as well. Regardless of the huge casualty numbers incurred to Japanese civilians, this bomb would flex American military muscle in the world. It would clearly demonstrate to the Russians that after the war was over, they would HAVE to acquiesce to the U.S.'s demands to withdraw from areas they now held.

And then there was the hubris of the POLITICIANS. Gen. Leslie Groves, the Pentagon official who oversaw the Manhattan Project, told President Truman that two billion dollars had already been invested into it (the equivalent of \$26 billion in today's dollars) and if there was nothing to show for it, it would make certainly make FDR look bad and eventually lead to the greatest congressional investigation of all time. Said Groves afterwards, the President went along "like a little boy on a toboggan."

Until the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been dropped, very little soul searching or moral scrutiny had been conducted. Understandably, the urgency was to end the war as quickly and decisively with as little loss to American life as possible. Certainly nobody was more excited when the news was announced than those soldiers in the Pacific who lived in anticipation of the day they would have to invade Japan itself, my father--who spent four years stationed in the South Pacific--included. But for the inventors of this weapon of mass destruction, it didn't take long for the euphoria to wear off and the wider implications of their actions to take hold. Said Oppenheimer, "The physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose." That which had begun with abstractions and pure theory had now become a concrete reality. A collection of simple equations on a black chalkboard would after four years contribute to the deaths of over two hundred thousand Japanese civilians, including 250 allied prisoners of war. It would throw America into a protracted arms race eventually costing trillions of dollars and we would have to live for the next five decades with the threat of nuclear annihilation as a constant possibility.

Of course, once we developed the knowledge, there was no way we could ever UNLEARN it and with human nature being what it is, a nuclear future is ALWAYS going to be

with us. Experience has shown that effective weapons are never abandoned unless they become obsolete or are superseded by others of superior quality. Because a nation NOT possessing such weapons finds itself at the mercy of any country that DOES, we're going to continue to see rogue nations try to acquire or manufacture them themselves like Iran and North Korea. Thus, despite the various treaties and non-proliferation pacts among countries, nuclear weapons will CONTINUE to increase and be a threat as it creates a cycle of nuclear escalation which never ends until war breaks out and one country has destroyed the other or MORE LIKELY, they are BOTH incinerated.

Billy Graham once said years ago that human pride was the greatest evil to ever confront the modern world, a warning we Christians STILL need to hear. As crazy as it sounds, there are some Christians who advocate a FASTER, MORE INTENSE buildup, even with the end of the Cold War, for they believe to provoke a nuclear confrontation would only hasten the return of Christ. It seems Pogo the comic hedgehog was right when he said, "We have met the enemy and it is US." If BILLY GRAHAM is right, then it means that as persons of faith, we can never simply close our eyes to the issue and pretend that everything is going to be alright and take care of itself. As Kai Bird, one of the co-authors of *American Prometheus*, wrote in an op-ed for *The New York Times*:

Today, Vladimir Putin's not-so-veiled threats to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in the war in Ukraine are a stark reminder that we can never be complacent about living with nuclear weapons. Oppenheimer did not regret what he did at Los Alamos; he understood that you cannot stop curious human beings from discovering the physical world around them. One cannot halt the scientific quest, nor can one un-invent the atomic bomb. But Oppenheimer always believed that human beings could learn to regulate these technologies and integrate them into a sustainable and humane civilization. We can only hope he was right.

Friends, it seems to me that Oppenheimer's hope for a world in which nuclear weapons are contained and even regulated may be the best any of us can hope for. It becomes imperative that all nations, ESPECIALLY those who harbor such weapons, must never stop working to foster greater trust and understanding amongst themselves; that their leaders must never stop being reminded of just how destructive such weapons actually are; and that all nations must make sure that their nuclear stockpiles are safely protected and subjected to mutual verification. When you take it from the INTERNATIONAL down to the PERSONAL level, it means that most of us are going to have to learn to "live with the bomb," that is, we will all have to endure the stress and anxiety that accompanies such fear- a fear that not even any amount of drugs or alcohol will ever be able to silence or even alleviate.

To persons of FAITH, however, we can do more than just ENDURE such a fate. Jesus said to his disciples on the eve of his betrayal and arrest, "Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace the world cannot give, this is my gift to you" and years later, the Apostle Paul would instruct his young disciple Timothy with the words, "God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." Thus, in the face of such worldly threats, Christ offers us something one cannot obtain ANYWHERE ELSE- PEACE, HIS peace, a peace which St. Paul says passes all understanding; a peace based on the promise that regardless of how bad things may get, we can always depend upon his love and constant presence to get us through. And once we realize that peace IN OUR SOUL, it is then incumbent upon us to work towards greater peace IN THE WORLD by becoming peacemakers

OURSELVES, by being agents of reconciliation wherever we may be. As Jesus declared in his Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.” Thus, “if pride goes before the fall,” if arrogance and greed and fear and insecurity are the root causes of war, then only faith and humility and trust and compassion can serve as the roots of any kind of a TRUE and LASTING peace. Amen and amen.