

Eighty-eight year old Field Marshal Montgomery had a bad night in February 1976, not long before he died. His housekeeper, alarmed, rang an old friend who had been one of his battalion commanders, and when the friend came over and asked what the matter was, Montgomery said, “I’ve got to go meet God, and explain all those men I killed at Alamein.”

Francis Spufford, who tells this story, believes guilt is often an instrument of self-discovery, telling us a new thing about parts of ourselves which other people may have praised to the skies—and praised rightly. Remarkably, the guilt that troubled Montgomery in that cold, dark February night, arose out of one of his great military virtues.

Montgomery had had flaws as a general. He was monstrously vain, he antagonized almost everyone he ever had to deal with as an equal, and sometimes his plans miscarried, as at Arnhem. But, he didn’t, ever, waste his soldiers’ lives.

He was a spectacularly good general for a democracy having an emergency, because he knew how to turn conscripted citizens into effective components of an army, and then, having done that, went on treating them as precious and valuable. He knew this about himself; he was proud of it; and until the very last moment of his life, he had been morally comfortable with himself as a result.

At the second battle of El Alamein in October-November 1942, his strategy had been as frugal as the situation allowed. The Eighth Army, which he just took over, was only half trained by his standards. The opposing Afrika Korps excelled at battle maneuvers beyond the abilities of the Eighth Army. Montgomery settled on a battle of attrition, with his own soldiers advancing through minefields to engage the enemy within their defensive positions.

He did not waste lives, but he spent them. His victory cost 13,500 casualties (dead and wounded combined) among 220,000 Allied soldiers on the battlefield. Alamein was bloody, but it was minimally so compared to the all-hours slaughterhouse operating at Stalingrad at the same time. Above all, his strategy worked. The lives he sacrificed, he sacrificed to a purpose.

So what had he noticed in the small hours of his bad night? Spufford believes it was something about the individual fates of the individual bodies of those he had sent forward through the mines. Though the necessities of battle remained the same, he had stopped seeing necessity as a complete justification.

You could do what must be done, and do it as well as possible, and it would still be the case that locally, body by body, the consequences were cruel and sad, and left the fabric of the world tattered and blood streaked where an individual postman failed to go home to Carmarthen, or a tall schoolteacher was wept over in Adelaide.

Spufford thinks Bernard Montgomery was frightened in February 1976, because he had understood that even necessary actions could contribute to the miserable sum of the human

propensity to screw things up. He made a real discovery at the very end of his life. His fear, that night, was a sign of something in him growing, at almost the last possible moment.

His biography doesn't record what his friend said to him. Hopefully, whatever it was, it reassured him. Hopefully, too, his friend took him seriously enough not to dismiss his fear. Taking his fear seriously is a part of taking him seriously. It's part of letting his actions have weight. It's part of letting him be real enough to be worth loving.

God's judgment, writes Paul Holmer, will not necessarily be our condemnation, but it will certainly be the utter and complete truth about us. If we have done nothing to vanquish the darkness within, if we have never sought the light and truth about ourselves, we will be utterly disqualified to hear it on that awesome day.

But if we are ready for the light—by willing it, by not being content with the darkness, by seeking forgiveness—then the small chaos that is our life will become a cosmos in which God, who is light, wins over darkness, and we can begin to walk in the light as he is in the light.

*For the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing so deep as to separate soul and spirit, both joints and marrow, and is a discerner of a heart's reflections and thoughts; and there is no creature not manifest before him, but all things are naked and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we are accountable.*

Accountable. The word is enough to make us wonder, again, whether there is a God, and whether dead people go to meet him. Can we prove any of this? What kind of proof would satisfy you? Jesus said not even someone returning from the dead with breaking news will persuade us, if we do not listen to Moses and the prophets.

Spufford returned to the Christian faith after twenty-odd years of atheism because the elaborated structure of meaning it builds, the story it tells, explains reality more justly, more profoundly, more scrupulously and plausibly than any of the alternatives. I concur.

Absent accountability, life is chaos and meaningless. Just as we are not free from the laws that govern nature—I can't defy gravity by jumping out of an airplane without a parachute—so we are not free from the moral law within. Guilt is the ground we hit when we act selfishly, irresponsibly. It is also the ground we hit when we do what is necessary and that necessity entails immeasurable suffering.

In the dark hours of the night, the discerner of our heart's reflections and thoughts, the one to whom we are accountable, reveals us to ourselves. We are laid bare, naked, made manifest. As frightening as this may be, welcoming these rays of light dispels the darkness within and we come to know ourselves as we are known by the Love that brought us into being and will not let us go.

*Therefore, having a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us cling to the confession. For we have a high priest who is not incapable of suffering along with our weaknesses, but rather one who has been tested in all things like us, without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and may find grace for help in due season.*