

Undone: a journey from fantasy to reality
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In the book of Isaiah, chapter six, we find an episode which unpacks for us the foundational realities of divine love. Here we find out who God is, who we are, and what a difference this awareness makes. Here we find that despite our ungodliness, God loves us. Here we find that this love for us equates to a plan for our life. In seeing ourselves as we really are before a perfect, all-knowing, all-powerful, and holy God, we are tempted to think we are done in once and for all. Yet, what Isaiah finds, and what we find, is that when we allow the truth about us to awaken us to reality, we are ready to stand before a forgiving God who is willing and able to make us new and usher us into a greater future.

The flood of relativism in our society attempts to drown us in the waters of apathy as it regards character and truth. The majority of us seek to determine our “own” truth depending upon the moment and our desire for comfort. Convinced of our own “goodness” we don’t want anyone to suggest to us that we are obligated to follow any moral standard which judges our actions. Isaiah, in stark contrast to this kind of philosophy, and a man of upstanding character, finds himself far short of the mark of godliness as He stands in the presence of a perfectly pure and loving God. His response? He is totally undone. He comes apart at the seams, and He cries out to God for a change of heart.

How ugly can it get?

There’s a joke about a jet that was flying from coast to coast during the middle of the night. *“Two hours into the flight the pilot’s voice came over the intercom: ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain speaking...currently we are flying at an altitude of 37,000 feet at a speed of 575 mph...I’m afraid we have some good news and some bad news...the bad news is we are lost—we have absolutely no idea where we are...but, the good news is we are making excellent time.”*

The joke has profound meaning in relation to our current moral landscape.

In America, half of all marriages end in divorce. Drug use and addiction in America is picking people off at an alarming rate. Physical abuse of women and children is beyond anything one could imagine. The abuse of power, position and privilege leads the headline news everyday. The emptiness and insufficiency of the quest for “more” as revealed in the struggles of celebrities fuels an industry of gossip so large that the tabloids gladly embrace the risks and lawsuits associated with publishing the intimate details of celebrity life. Around each of us everyday, lives are crumbling amidst insurmountable pressures.

In a society in which affluence, intellect, and entertainment are seemingly endless, how is it that so many of us are less than “happy”. How is it that so many who have so much rarely seem to have any true sense of fulfillment, peace, stability, and purpose?

I believe the answers to those questions are to be found in our view of reality. It seems to me that we have been duped. Intoxicated by the myth of more, we have put aside reason and turned to unbridled passion in hopes of a better life. Americans, and many around the world for that matter, have come to believe a lie. As has been said before, we have educated ourselves into imbecility, and amused ourselves into a boredom

of the soul. I would add that we have “loved” ourselves into a state of self-loathing. In looking for a life of pleasure we have found ourselves blind to the truth. In pursuit of the fast life we have drawn up lame. And in our quest for the “good life” we have found a bankruptcy of the spirit. Blake’s poem has special relevance here,

*This life’s dim Windows of the Soul
Distorts the Heavens from Pole to Pole
And leads you to believe a Lie
When you see with, not thro’, the Eye.*

In abandoning the biblical picture of reality, we choose to allow distortion to grow like a cancer in our hearts and minds. This truth is brought home by John Ortberg in his sermon *It all goes back in the box*, in which he speaks of the quest for “more”. The following is a quote from the sermon which captures, in vivid detail, the reality for many of us, and those we know well.

I read an article once that highlights this truth. The article was about a person, a famous person, and this is what it said about that person:

All he ever wanted was more. He wanted more money, so he parlayed inherited wealth into a billion dollar pile of assets. He wanted more fame so he broke into the Hollywood scene and soon became a film maker. He wanted more sexual pleasure, so he paid handsome sums to indulge his every sexual urge. He wanted more thrills, so he designed, built, and piloted the fastest aircraft in the world. He wanted more power so he secretly dealt political favors so skillfully that two presidents became his pawns. All he ever wanted was MORE. He was absolutely convinced that more would bring him true satisfaction.

Unfortunately, history shows otherwise. The article goes on to describe how this man went on to conclude his life. Emaciated, colorless, sunken chest, fingernails in grotesque inches long corkscrews, rotting black teeth, tumors, enumerable needle marks from his drug addiction, ...

Howard Hughes died, he writes, believing the MYTH OF MORE. He died a billionaire junkie. Insane by all reasonable standards.

Here is the question we need to consider: if Howard Hughes had pulled off one more deal, made one more movie, controlled one more president, indulged in one more sexual escapade, made one more billion—WOULD IT HAVE BEEN ENOUGH? When is it ever enough?

...SHE was the most adulated of women. Every woman envied her, every man wanted her. She had beauty, money, fame, and power—but she died alone, she died at her own hand. If Marilyn Monroe had starred in one more hit movie, been on one more magazine cover, had one more sexual relationship with a powerful man—WOULD IT HAVE BEEN ENOUGH?

The insightful questions which are aroused from the lives of Howard Hughes and Marilyn Monroe are the same questions which arise in our lives today. Mr. Hughes and Ms. Monroe both died believing the lie. They embraced the myth of more, and watched helplessly as the cancer of moral and spiritual distortion consumed their souls like a

ravenous disease. Perhaps you see this same thing happening in your life or in the life of someone close to you. What are we to do? What will you do?

Restoring Sight

In the story of Isaiah, as it is revealed in chapter six of the book bearing his name, we find the answer to our epidemic. Isaiah, a man of God, an oracle for God, a picture of uprightness and moral fortitude, stands before the God of Heaven and Earth, and he comes unglued. In contrast to the moral relativism of our day, Isaiah is under no illusion that he can chart his own course and construct his own morality as the situation arises. On the contrary, this purest of individuals, actually views himself (despite his formidable character) as falling woefully short of God's standard for living. The mark for evaluating himself is not the mood of the day or the spiritual fad of the moment. Rather, in contrast to "Christian America", a culture in which over 80% attest to embracing Christianity, while only 9% have an actual biblical understanding of the same, Isaiah finds his true north in the character of a holy and loving God. If we are ever to be whole (morally, spiritually, relationally, emotionally and psychologically) our starting point must be the same as that of Isaiah—an honest face to face with God.

The quest for "more" happiness, contentment, peace, relational harmony, and ultimate purpose in life begins, and ends, in the One True God from whom all good gifts flow. The difficulty is that the mood of our culture leads us to believe that we can find these things we value in places where they do not exist. Study after study has demonstrated this for decades now. As far back as 1978, for example, an important study conducted by the Princeton Religion Research Center and the Gallup Organization demonstrated the chasm that lies between a biblical view of reality and the American view of what is real. One question in the study assessed the agreement of respondents to the following suggestion, "Depending upon how much strength and character a person has, one can pretty well control what happens (eternally speaking)." Startlingly, and in contrast to the biblical view of reality, of all those polled, some 84% agreed with that premise. Further, of the un-churched group that was polled, again, 84% agreed. Strikingly, and sadly, of those "Christians" polled, again 84% agreed.

What this study bears out time and again as the results are surveyed is that the typical Christian view on life and reality in America is all too similar to that of those who have no Christian affiliation. It seems that the moral mood continues to drown us in this growing flood of relativism. Relativism, put simply, is the idea that all truths are equal and ultimate truth is up for grabs. Such a suggestion, though it makes absolutely no sense logically speaking, is the view of the day. It is the view which led the prodigal son in Luke 15 to abandon all the father had provided him as he set out on his quest for *more*, a pursuit which ended in a pigs sty.

In stark fashion, the Princeton survey brings this mood to light. Again, attempting to assess the Christian view from other views, the study asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following suggestion, "One should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of a church or synagogue." The numbers, once again, are telling. Of the total population polled 81% agreed with the statement. Of the un-churched respondents polled a robust 86% agreed. And, shockingly, of the churched community polled, a full 76% (more than two thirds) agreed that truth is found within oneself!

Is it any wonder that the lives of so many, who embrace one view on morality in one situation, and then another contradictory view of reality in another situation, find themselves amidst moral, relational, and emotional chaos?

Back to Isaiah's encounter with his God. What we see here as Isaiah comes face to face with a vision of true reality, is that even the best among us are defined by the ugliness of their condition apart from the restorative and cleansing work of God. This biblical episode reveals that ultimate truth does exist and that there is truly one benchmark for us to follow. Yet the story offers us so much more. In seeing ourselves as we are (hopeless apart from the work of God in our lives), and in viewing God as He really is, we also find a God who is for us. We find a God who is, while perfect and Holy, loving and full of grace. We find a God here who wants a relationship with those whom He has created, and He desires to see them become all that He intended them to become.

As Karl Barth has penned it,

God's deity is thus no prison in which He can exist only in and for Himself. It is rather His freedom to be in and for Himself but also with and for us, to assert but also to sacrifice Himself, to be wholly exalted but also completely humble, not only almighty but also almighty mercy, not only Lord but also servant, not only judge but also Himself the judged, not only man's eternal king but also his brother in time.

How good is good enough?

Like Isaiah, we do not hit the mark of total perfection. However, like Isaiah, we are called to look to God for our course of action in every situation. In pursuing the standard set for us by the One who loves us we find a fuller life. We cannot have any hope for sanity while living duplicitous lives just hoping somehow it will all pan out in the wash. God does not grade on a curve. He holds us all to the standard. Anything short of the mark demands the full wrath of God. This is as true for Hitler as it is for Mother Theresa. It is equally true for Howard Hughes and Billy Graham. It is true for all of us. There is no moral ladder we can scale which will make us "good enough" for God to accept us. Like Isaiah, we are all done in by our dilemma.

So what can we do? One thing. Like Isaiah, we must fall on our faces before God fully recognizing how weak, insufficient, deceived, and debased we are apart from Him, and ask for newness of life. This state of humility and abandonment of the cultural mood is what prepares us for the work of God in our heart and in our lives. This is the very course of action taken by Isaiah. He had seen the poll numbers and was able to confess, "I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips." Has there ever been a statement more applicable to our current cultural setting? Do you recognize that you too are unclean before God? Do you recognize just how far off the mark the wisdom our culture is in relation to God's truth? Are you desperate enough to ask God for His help?

If your life has become less than what you had hoped for in relationships, why don't you ask God to renew your vision? If the choices you have made had left you hurting and without the ability to sense a hopeful future, why don't you ask God to renew you? If things which you never could have imagined have happened to you and caused

you great heartache, why don't you ask God, through the person of Christ Jesus, to heal you? If, like the prodigal son, you have squandered years of your life believing the myth of more (more sex, money, thrill, power, ...), why not ask God, today, to correct the distortion and bring you back home to Him? It can happen.

The truth is you are not good enough to earn your way to God. You never will be. But it is also true that God desperately desires to make you new and He wants to offer you a hope and a future. You will only find that hope and future as you set your course in hot pursuit of Him and His teachings. Jesus was not just a great moral teacher. As He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life". Throw away the polls. Don't stay trapped in the moral tide of relativism. Try life Jesus' way and see if indeed you find life and that "more abundantly" as He promised.

What Isaiah found is what you will find if you are willing to see yourself as you are in light of who God is and what He is calling you to be. In the same instant in which this prophet of God owned up to His condition, God reached down and touched him, healed him, forgave him, and ushered him into a new future. The text tells us that God brought His touch. His touch brought healing, healing brought hope, and hope in turn brought the desire to move forward with the plans of God. This is what happens in our lives in the moment we trade in the way of the culture for the way of Christ. The transformation which takes place is captured vividly by Malcolm Muggeridge in his book *Jesus, The Man Who Lives*. He writes the following,

Suddenly, almost with a click, like a film coming into sync, everything has meaning, everything is real; and the meaning, the reality, shine out in every shape and sound and movement, in each and every manifestation of life, so that I want to cry out with the blind man to whom Jesus restored his sight: one thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see. How, I ask myself, could I have missed it before? How not have understood that the grey-silver light across the water, the cry of the sea-gulls and the sweep of their wings, everything on which my eyes rest and my ears hear, is telling me about God.

We all want this kind of life don't we? At the heart of all the mistakes we make lies the hunger to find "something more" in this life. What Howard Hughes was so desperately craving amidst his famously tragic life was what Isaiah found in turning to God: a true sense of *being* in a crazy world. In these crazy times and in this crazy life we are prone to believe the lie. Yet, if we would give God a chance we would discover that truth, biblical truth, as the scriptures suggest, is the light for our path, is more precious than fine gold, is sweeter than honey from the comb, is the pearl of great price, and the very thing that opens up life with clarity, brilliance and soul-charging electricity. As Chesterton has written,

This is the thrilling romance of Orthodoxy. People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There was never anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy. It is sanity: and to be sane is more dramatic than to be mad (with the passions of this world). Orthodoxy is the equilibrium of a man behind madly rushing horses, seeming to stoop this way and to sway that, yet in every attitude having the grace of statuary and the accuracy of arithmetic.

What a picture of the person remade for the purposes of God, living amidst a culture running astray and embracing every ideology imaginable!

Muggeridge continues this theme in his analysis of Blake's poem quoted earlier when he writes,

Thus Blake distinguishes between the fantasy that is seen with the eye and the truth that is seen through it. They are two clearly demarcated kingdoms; and passing from one to the other, from the kingdom of fantasy to the kingdom of reality, gives inexpressible delight. As when the sun comes out, and a dark landscape is suddenly glorified, all that was obscure becoming clear, all that was incomprehensible, comprehensible. Fantasy's joys and desires dissolve away, and in their place is one joy, one desire; one Oneness—God. In this kingdom of reality, Simone Weil tells us, nothing is so continually fresh and surprising, so full of sweet and perpetual ecstasy, as goodness; no desert so dreary, monotonous and boring as evil.

This is the message of Isaiah chapter 6. What we each find in passing from the land of distorted fantasy into the light of God's fantastic plan for life is an ecstasy so real that everything the culture offers us in exchange comes to be viewed for what it is—a lie, a false hope, a mirage.

I would like to implore you to consider your life. Remember, the definition of insanity is the craving for a new result while conducting yourself the same way you always have. Look at your track record. Look at your relationships. Look at your kids. Look at your emotional state. Consider your moral choices. Consider the results of your choices. Consider what your future might look like if you continue on the same path you are now on. Now look at yourself in the mirror, recognize who you are in light of God's standard, look up to God, ask for His intervention, and then go forward running toward the plans He has for you. I assure you, as you do this, as you choose to embrace truth, God-like love, and biblical wisdom, THE BEST IS YET TO COME.

What Isaiah found as his vision of God came full circle was life altering. He saw himself in need of a rescuer, he found matchless love, and found that his life actually meant something in the divine scheme of things. As the encounter was concluding, and on the heels of receiving God's forgiveness and healing, Isaiah finds his true north; Verse 8 brings it all together, "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us? And I said, "Here am I. Send me."

That is how it works, folks. We see God, see ourselves as we are, ask for grace and healing, God intervenes, we are grateful, He offers us purpose, and we run to the future He has for us.

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." Jeremiah 29:11

May God bless you, keep you, and make His face to shine upon you,

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