

MAN'S SINFUL NATURE
Isaiah 64:6, Romans 3:9-23
By Raymond White

No other book is as pessimistic about human nature as the bible. And that is a hard sell, when you think about it. If any writer today submitted such a glum book to a publisher for serious consideration, it would be trashed immediately.

We don't want to hear how bad we are but how good we are. We want to be encouraged, have our egos stroked, we want compliments.

But the bible message is exactly the opposite. So why then is the bible still the world's number one best seller since its core message is so condemning? Probably because we know it's true. And guilt ridden as we are, we want to escape our natures. It simply won't do for a well intended psychologist to assure us that we're okay when we know better. We don't want approval, we want escape.

But how do we escape? The only escape available anywhere is the escape offered to us from the very book that condemns us. And that is the book's appeal.

Why do we believe the bible? Because no one would have written such a book to garner popularity. Therefore it must be true because, from beginning to end, it was written with such reluctance and self-condemnation that it is impossible for anyone to have made it up. That fact alone makes the bible reek with integrity. There is no other possible reason why it would have been written other than to reluctantly report the truth. And truth, harsh truth, with no ulterior motive in mind, is refreshing.

And so, for your reading pleasure, or pain, I present to you the pessimistic bible.

[1] GENERAL CONDEMNATION

Let's begin with those verses that condemn humanity collectively, the whole human race.

Job 14:4 *Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one.*

1 Kings 8:46 *If they sin against thee, (for there is no man that sinneth not)...*

2 Chronicles 6:36 *If they sin against thee, (for there is no man which sinneth not)*

Psalms 14:2 *The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. :3* *They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.*

This verse is very emphatic and very harsh: *no, not one*. This is an intentional condemnation of the whole human race. But then how are we to understand what immediately follows?

Psalms 14:5 *There were they in great fear: for God is in the generation of the righteous. 15:2* *He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart.*

What “righteous” is he talking about? He just said there are *none that doeth good*, so how are there any righteous?

The bible wants to have it both ways: no one is righteous, but the righteous speak the truth. How can that be? Either we should just accept that the bible flip-flops and try not to be theological absolutists, or we can try to harmonize the two sides with something like this: People are both good and bad. Every righteous person has an unrighteous streak, and draws both God’s praise and God’s ire at the same time. Sounds like our own kids, doesn’t it? And there’s this Mother Goose poem: “There was a little girl and she had a little curl right in the middle of her forehead. When she was good, she was very, very good, but when she was bad she was horrid.” That’s the whole human race.

It’s the “horrid” part that occupies our attention now. Let’s continue.

***Psalms 53:1** ...there is none that doeth good. **:2** God looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, that did seek God. **:3** Every one of them is gone back: they are altogether become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.*

***Ecclesiastes 7:20** For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.*

***Ecclesiastes 7:22** For oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth that thou thyself likewise hast cursed others.*

Not only are we guilty, but in our heart we know we are guilty. So we might as well admit it. So we are not only guilty but guilt-ridden as well.

***Ecclesiastes 9:3** ...the heart of the sons of men is full of evil...*

- ☛ ***Isaiah 64:6** But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.*

It’s not that we don’t have righteousness, it’s that our righteousness, however good and well intended, is at best suspect. Everything we do that we might call righteous is motivated by some self-serving purpose. That God accepts anything we do we can only attribute to his far reaching love.

***Jeremiah 17:9** The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?*

***Daniel 4:35** And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing.*

Finally then, Paul takes all this Jewish negativity, roles it all together into the opening of his Book of Romans, and condemns us all universally. Then, from that basis, he points to Christ as our only hope for escape.

Romans 3:9 ...we have before proved both Jews and gentiles, that they are under sin. **:10** As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: **:11** There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. **:12** They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. **:13** Their throat is an open sepulcher; with their tongues they have used deceit; their poison of asps is under their lips: **:14** Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: **:15** Their feet are swift to shed blood: **:16** Destruction and misery are in their ways: **:17** And the way of peace have they not know. **:18** There is no fear of God before their eyes. **:19** Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. **:20** Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight...**:23** For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

Wow! That's a pretty ugly picture and it pretty much sums up what we really are. We, the whole human race, are a bad lot.

For my Mormon readers, I'll add these Mormon verses. Everyone else can ignore them of course. But I need to include them because Mormons have a general dislike of all things negative, and tend to accept such things only from their own scriptures.

Mosiah 2:21 ...if ye should serve him with all your whole souls yet ye would be unprofitable servants. **:24** ...if ye do [obey him] he doth immediately bless you; and therefore he hath paid you. And ye are still indebted unto him, and are, and will be, forever and ever; therefore, of what have ye to boast?

Mosiah 3:19 For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam...

Mosiah 4:5 For behold, if the knowledge of the goodness of God at this time has awakened you to a sense of your nothingness, and your worthless and fallen state.

Moses 1:10 ...Moses did again receive his natural strength like unto man; and he said unto himself: Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed.

[2] SPECIFIC CONDEMNATION

We tend to want to distribute everyone into either of two camps: good and bad. And so when God condemns people, we want to say, "Well, yes. But God means bad people. There are genuinely good people and he doesn't mean them."

I wish that were true. The problem is that those we think of as righteous have a different opinion of themselves, especially when they find themselves in the presence of the holy God. So, for the record, here are those verses (that I have found) about "good" people, the best that the human race has to offer, and how they feel about themselves. This is the varsity team, and they come up short.

Genesis 32:10 *I [Jacob] am not worthy of the least of all mercies...*

Job 42:6 *Wherefore I [Job] abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.*

Isaiah 6:5 *Then said I [Isaiah], Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for my mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.*

Daniel 9:20 *And whiles I [Daniel] was speaking, and praying, and confessing my sin... 10:8 ...there remained no strength in me for my comeliness was turned into corruption...*

Luke 5:8 *When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*

Romans 4:2 *For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. :3 For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. [Abraham's faith, not his works, made him righteous.]*

Revelation 1:17 *And when I [John] saw him, I fell at his feet as dead.*

And that is how really good men feel about themselves when they have to face God. The best defense then that you offer to God is not, "God, look how good I am," but rather, "God, forgive me."

And that's the way of it, from the very beginning.

Hebrews 11:4 *By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous ...*

Abel offered a sin (blood) offering. Cain offered a boasting (vegetable) offering. And how ironic this switch is: the wicked Cain says, "I'm good," while the righteous Abel says, "I'm wicked and need forgiveness." And it's been so ever since.

[3] POST-CONVERSION

But, you might argue, we used to be bad, but now we are converted Christians. Surely we are good now, aren't we? I hate to disappoint again but the scriptures never allow us to get comfortable with our present righteousness. And since I want to make the point most strongly to my Mormon readers, I'll offer up the Mormon verses that make just this point.

Mosiah 4:11 *...if ye have...received a remission of your sins...ye should remember and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your*

own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures...

Alma 38:14 *Do not say: O God, I thank thee that we are better than our brethren; but rather say: O Lord, forgive my unworthiness, and remember my brethren in mercy — yea, acknowledge your unworthiness before God at all times.*

3 Nephi 28:29 *...there was a change wrought upon them [the Three Nephites] insomuch that Satan could have no power over them, that he could not tempt them.*

This last verse I've included because it makes a stunning point; namely, these three Nephites, who undoubtedly were the best of the best and that's why they were chosen, were changed so that Satan could have no power over them. Which necessarily means that before they were changed, Satan *did* have power over them. And they were the best. So what does that say about us?

The upshot of all this is that just because you are a converted Christian and more determined to live a right life doesn't elevate you to a position of thinking that now you are finally a good person. Not before God, you're not.

I know it's a conundrum. But frankly, I wouldn't really feel all that secure if I had to think of myself as "good" in order to think that God will accept me. Because I'm never sure what "good" God has in mind. Which rung of the goodness ladder does God expect us to reach before we can believe that we are good enough? That's the problem. There is no such rung. If absolute perfection is the goal then we've already lost. Not only because we have already sinned, but because we, each of us, already know that perfection is an unachievable goal. That is the very reason we turn to Christ and not to anyone else.

[4] HOW DO WE ESCAPE?

Since getting better and better is not the escape route, there must be another. And there is. Let us begin with my most favorite verse in the Bible. It is my favorite because it unravels a lot of the conundrum.

Romans 8:1 *There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.*

This verse says a lot. It is the balance between works and grace, and you don't have to think of yourself as a "good" person, whatever that means.

What does it mean to be "in Christ"? That's not really the right question, it's too big a question. The right question is merely, how do you know that you're in Christ? And the answer is if you are walking not after the flesh but after the Spirit. In other words, it is the *holy walk* that matters, *not the holy arrival!* And that is all the difference in the world. I may not be allowed to think of myself as "good" but I can certainly think of myself as "getting better." And that is what "walk after the spirit" means.

Once we understand that, then we can overcome our fear of God and replace it with boldness.

Hebrews 4:16 *Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace in time of need. 10:19* *Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus*

1 John 4:17 *Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment...*

And, after all, isn't that what we want? Boldness? The right and the privilege to believe that God has accepted us even with all our flaws?

[5] BUT WHAT ABOUT OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS?

Sorry again. Your righteousness won't do. You have to get someone else's righteousness. But fortunately for us, someone else's righteousness is available.

Romans 10:3 *For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.*

It is not our righteousness that we should be offering to God to secure a place in heaven. We need something else.

Philippians 3:9 *And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.*

It is God's righteousness we ought to seek, because only with his righteousness can we be "good" enough.

Now, for my Mormon readers who may still doubt this, I will offer these Mormon scriptures to you.

Alma 24:10 *...he hath forgiven us of those our many sins...and taken away the guilt from our hearts, through the merits of his Son.*

Helaman 14:13 *And if ye believe on his name ye will repent of all your sins, that thereby ye may have a remission of the through his merits.*

☛ **Moroni 6:4** *And after they had been received unto baptism...and cleansed by the power of the Holy Ghost...relying alone upon the merits of Christ, who was the author and the finisher of their faith.*

This last verse is wonderfully powerful. Focus on the word "alone."

After repenting and being baptized and turning to the right life, even then we dare not present to God our own merits and say, "See how good I am" as Cain did. No. That would be a fool's defense. But rather, after all the good we imagine we've done, we turn

to God and pled our cause on the merits of Christ only, and offer no other defense. That's what the word "alone" means.

D&C 38:4 ...I am Christ, and in mine own name, by the virtue of the blood which I have spilt, have I pleaded before the Father for them.

Even Christ knows that pleading our merits is hopeless. He won't do it. If Jesus said to God, "Look how good that person is," and he pointed to you, you'd lose. Jesus knows that, so he doesn't even try. Instead he pleads for you and me with his own merits, and that persuades God.

[6] AFTER ALL YOU CAN DO

But what about this verse?

2 Nephi 25:23 It is by grace that we are saved after all that we can do.

So we have to work real hard and be real good so that we can *earn* grace? That makes no sense and is self contradictory. The problem is you can't do all that you can do. Is visiting your home teaching family once a month "all that you can do"? No? Maybe you should visit them twice a month. Is that "all that you can do"? How about every day, 30 days every month? Heck, why don't you just move in with them? I have no idea what "all you can do" means and neither do you, and neither, I think, did Nephi. Righteousness has a fuzzy edge, and how close you are to it, you can never be certain.

Remember too that Nephi is a B.C. prophet, a contemporary of Jeremiah who, like all prophets of that early era, struggled to understand how salvation was possible when righteousness was so elusive and grace was a thing of a far future dream.

1 Peter 1:10 Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophecied of that grace that should come to you. :11 Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it was testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. :12 Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into.

In other words, the prophets of old received revelation about the future Christ, his atonement, and the resulting grace, and *didn't understand their own prophecies* so that they had to study them like anyone else and never really understood them.

So for Nephi to say "after all you can do," truth is, he really didn't understand the full meaning of his own prophecies, nor the unattainableness of his "after all you can do."

Unless, that is, we allow those words to have its second natural meaning.

Words are very often ambiguous having two or more possible meanings that are consistent with the context. In this verse another meaning is possible.

“After all that you can do” does not necessarily mean a threshold goal of righteousness that you *must* reach before you *qualify* for grace, which is the common (and absurd) understanding. The words could just as well mean “after you have struggled with it.” After you have tried to be righteous, failed again and again, and finally come to realize that your righteousness is an unattainable goal, *then* you will finally get it. Then you will finally understand that you have to turn away from trying to justify yourself and turn towards Christ to find that justification, that “merit” (*Moroni 6:4*). “After all that you can do” does *not* mean or even suggest that you have reached righteousness, it means that you have *not* reached righteousness and *now you know it!* Therefore, turn to grace.

But still, of course, struggle to “do all that you can do” whatever that means. Always remember that grace is not a license to sin as Paul repeatedly reminds us of. But that’s a subject for another writing.

[7] CONCLUSION

I know it’s disconcerting to learn that you can never be good enough to earn heaven. We would prefer a connect-the-dots play book: do this, do that, and you’re in. The problem is, not only does God tell us we fall short and will always fall short, but we know in our own hearts that we fall short. That’s the dilemma, knowing we can never achieve what we must achieve: personal righteousness. It’s like grabbing bubbles which burst the moment we touch them. That’s why Peter said —

Acts 15:10 ...which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear.

And this has been the human condition from the very beginning. Cain and Abel both faced this dilemma and responded two different ways. The righteous Abel brought an offering to God that confessed his sins. But the wicked Cain brought an offering that extolled his virtues, “See my fruits? Aren’t they great?” And it has been so ever since. The righteous never see themselves as righteous because they don’t dare. And the wicked always see themselves as righteous. So the righteous, as we call them, look for a different escape and find it in Christ. And the wicked are stuck in their self-aggrandizing delusion.

The message of Christianity is two-fold. First, Jesus died and resurrected. That event *is* Christianity. And second, all people have fallen short and have failed to achieve righteousness. We failed because it’s our nature to fail. However, God has allowed Christ to substitute his righteousness for our own and thus we become saved citizens of heaven after all.

Although at first it may seem disconcerting that we have fallen short and cannot achieve the goal we seek, it is not disconcerting at all. Actually, it is unburdening. Isn’t it better to be allowed to return home because a loving parent wants you rather than because you’ve earned it as a reward, like rent? Speaking for myself, I’d much prefer God giving from his love rather than me earning and collecting on a debt. God owes me nothing yet gives me everything. Of that, I am sure.