

Hello my family of Grace. This is my fifth time in the pulpit in 3 years, and that might be too frequent for my writing speed. I am not continuing the series on Romans, this is a momentary diversion. I have written the most about lessons that I myself have learned, or am currently learning, and this is the lesson that has been working on me this year.

It starts with a question: Why do so many testimonies involve rock bottom?

It is such a common theme, how someone was out of options and at the end of their rope when they called out and were saved. So why is that?

I think the very short answer is God gives us what we ask for. When we ask for distance from Him, for independence, He grants it; and it is not a good place to be. When we are broken, we stop asking for our own way and ask for His help, and He grants it.

But that is not enough. Such a short and simple answer is unsatisfying for such a weighty question. What more is there to learn from this? When life is falling apart, you are at the end of your rope, out of resources and options, what is it about that that produces salvation?

To better understand our question, let us borrow a technique from mathematicians. We can more clearly see the scope of our question by looking at the inverse. So what is the opposite of a desperate rock bottom salvation? Someone rich and comfortable and not going to heaven.

We find one of those in Matthew 19, and if you don't have a Bible you should be able to find one under a chair in front of you. Take it as a gift, because everyone should have free access to God's word. If you do have a Bible but forgot to bring it, it would be nice of you to only borrow this one under the chair and leave it for someone without.

Matthew 19:21-24

21 "If you want to be perfect," Jesus said to him, "go, sell your belongings and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

22 When the young man heard that, he went away grieving, because he had many possessions.

23 Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

That verse 21 is not a sweeping declaration of earthly possessions being wicked, it is pointing out this rich young man's heart issue. He had much, and he loved his possessions more than God. Related to that, the persona that is typical to one with abundance is a persona that struggles to see God because of the abundance piled around them. This truth about human nature is revealed in

Proverbs 18:11 CSB

The wealth of the rich is his fortified city; in his imagination it is like a high wall.

A rich man feels safe and secure, and who looks for a savior when they are already safe? Sometimes it takes until we hit rock bottom, out of our own options, before we turn to God and accept one of His options. Before you ask to be saved, you must realize you need saving. That is why evangelical tools like the Roman Road and the Master's Way start with proving the need for a savior.

That led me to think, when we are "broken" and turn for help, what breaks? I am still me on the other side, my "ego" in the psychological use of the word remains. So, when life is piled on top of you and you are pressed to the breaking point, what breaks?

Our pride and self-reliance.

It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven, because a rich man still has his pride and self-reliance. You can't get into heaven relying on your own ability. It is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:9) If you relied on yourself and achieved it, you would boast about that accomplishment which would deprive God of His due glory.

That is the broad strokes to the answer of my starting question. We've looked at the question, found an opposite example that reveals more of the motivation, and I could end there and let us all contemplate these things. But then, as I chewed on it, I found more connected to it. And this is where the lesson started hitting home.

The passage read to us this morning from Isaiah 6 is helpful, because it is an example of brokenness without the rock bottom setup. This will help us look more purely at the mechanics of what is going on here.

But first, a little piece of Bible trivia. This is the only reference to Seraphim in the scriptures, implying that this is all they do. Seraphim means "the fiery ones" and it is possible they were created solely to praise God, constantly.

Alright, now look at the sequence of actions in Isaiah 6

1. I saw God.
2. Angels were proclaiming His praise, as an ongoing thing
3. I said woe is me.

There is no act of judgment, or pronouncement, or any back-and-forth. I saw; I broke. Brokenness is a natural reaction to understanding your spiritual situation.

Seeing God forces irrefutable knowing of your debts and deficits. Then that true understanding, of debt and the price paid, makes brokenness. How much should God pay for me? I don't deserve it, I can't repay it. I will not be able to fill the value. Why did He bother?

Until it moves beyond a sterile and academic knowledge, and becomes understanding, you do not feel the weight of it. And some of us, many, maybe even most, needed our physical life to mirror that state of impotence, of lacking, of defeat before we could comprehend our spiritual state.

But brokenness is only a step in the process, it is not where everything ends. There is still a "me" after it. But we're not ready for "after" yet. I found three things in this passage of Isaiah 6 that break. If you are looking for the three points in the sermon, here they are.

1. I am a man of unclean lips - I know my failings - My pride breaks
2. Among a people of unclean lips - my cultural identity - My mask breaks
3. Here I am, send me. - Your plans and not mine. - My plan breaks

Let's start with pride. There is much to be said about pride. As many of you have heard, Pride cometh before a fall. In newer vernacular (Prov11:2)

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." is a saying used, quoted, and paralleled in Psalm 138:6; Proverbs 3:34; Proverbs 29:23; Matthew 23:12; Luke 1:52; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5 and many others. I am convinced it was a popular idiom.

Example of a parallel thought:

Matthew 23:12 Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Fantasy and mythology get hung up on the idea of the seven deadly sins, of which Pride is first because he would not let anyone else stand in front of him. They are deadly because they shape whole lifestyles around themselves. Pride has to be stoked and fed, it will demand things to be done for its own sake, or avoided as hazardous.

Pride is about how good you yourself are, and when you more than know your own sin, but acknowledge it and feel its crushing weight, pride no longer has a leg to stand on. When you hit rock bottom, you are forced to admit that you are not good enough, you cannot escape with your own power because it is inadequate. This is also your spiritual state! You could never do enough to reach the perfection required to enter heaven under your own power.

This is where a rich man struggles. They will say "heaven sounds like a good deal, I will say the words and get that insurance policy for the afterlife" and then keep on living with nothing actually changed. They do not have the insecurity, the vulnerability, that accompanies the understanding of the situation. This truth is HARD.

Rev 10:10 the truth of God is sweet in the mouth but bitter in the stomach

This is a difficult truth to internalize, and it is not fun.

Brokenness is a critical step in the salvation process. To quote an old dead guy, "Till sin is bitter, Christ will not be sweet" - Thomas Watson, 1600s.

Shed your pride, reject your self reliance. Do not try to hold any of your achievements next to the redemptive work of Christ. Christ did it all, and *all* of it was something you never could do. Right now you are probably thinking I would use that other passage in Isaiah, where it says our righteous acts are like filthy rags. But no, I want to use the Psalms.

Psalm 147:10-11 speaking of God

10 He is not impressed by the strength of a horse; he does not value the power of a warrior.

11 The Lord values those who fear him, those who put their hope in his faithful love.

If God takes no pleasure in the might of men, why should I? Why should I praise, boast about, or admire human accomplishment? That is a bit harsh of wording, but essentially man has no achievement equal to the redemptive work of Christ.

When you really, finally know God, you know how far out of your reach the whole thing is. Pride withers and dies, clawing at your identity and definition of self until the end. That is a painful process, and can even involve a bit of existential crisis as you try to pick up the pieces of who you say you are.

This leads us straight into the second thing, our masks. Why is Isaiah mentioning the people he lives among as part of his failing? Because people try to fit in with the people around them. You have made some composition to present to others, the aspects of self that you want other people to know you by, and you present those when you are in public. We all want to be accepted, acknowledged, included. Peer pressure is almost a natural law in human nature, because of how much we fear rejection. The fear of public speaking is more common than the fear of death, because being rejected by the masses is worse than death. Death *can* be scary, being shunned definitely is. So, people build masks out of their life experiences, masks to put on when we are in certain social settings to help us fit in.

[construct a trophy wall, with resume, and carry it around stage]

See this? This is me. This is how I want you to know me. These are the points of my life that I am proud of, and I've built this to be extra wide so you can't see the mess that I am trying to hide. I don't want to be some flat person, a cardboard character. So I need to keep adding things to this to make me look more rounded. I have a life, see? I'm successful and accomplished, be impressed at me. I have stuff like you have stuff, so we have that in common and can be friends. As I build this facade up, my social armor, it gets heavier to cart around. I become burdened with holding this up, keeping straight which details I've shared with who, because this mask is not me. It is a lie composed of chunks of my pride. This is the identity that I admit to in public, this is who I want to be, and all that mess behind me doesn't exist.

But then, when your pride crumbles, what happens to this construct? It crashes down too. This was my social armor, and I was so afraid of you finding a chink in it. I was so stressed and burdened carrying it around. Now I am freed of that burden. Now let me reintroduce myself: Hi, I'm Mike and I'm a mess. A bad day at work sends me into despair and existential crisis because people will find out that I am useless and my life will implode and I will be left alone. I am a mess. Or another way to say it: I am a complete idiot. But my future is incredibly bright and anyone can get in on this.

When you see the reality of your need, and your pride is blasted away, it puts cracks in your masks as well. Your identity is shaken, and so the performance you put on to hide parts of yourself and emphasize others parts, also crumbles. But with that, the fear **NEEDS** to crumble as well.

If you want to be more connected to some one, be more real with them. Open up, be honest. Stop propping up that false image of you and be open and true with one another.

James 5:16

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

You are only as sick as your secrets.

Colossians 3:13

bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

So you must forgive! In such a manner you also must act. How much of your junk did God forgive? All. So you must do for each other.

How many of you know the buddy system? You probably used it when you were a kid: pick a buddy and stick with them for the entire field trip. No one should be alone during the outing. Soldiers will do a similar thing, have a battle buddy who helps check your gear and watch your back so that you are safer. You need a buddy; just one to start. You need someone who knows your darkest crevices and is still your friend, and will hold you accountable if you are slipping back into them. One is needed, two is good, and I would have serious trouble holding this level of commitment with more than 3 people. But find one person you trust, or one person you choose to start trusting to this degree, and be completely open with them. Break your mask, and show the real you.

This is what safety looks like. Our leadership has talked about a place where anyone can grow, and how that requires the Gospel, plus safety, plus time. This is what safety looks like, knowing you can be a mess and still be let in the building. Knowing that “therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Jesus” and seeing it acted out in this place. If some one is pouring out their heart, lancing their spiritual wounds and getting the pus and gunk out so they can start healing? Let he among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone. I know I cant claim that.

1 John 1:10 If we say, “We have not sinned,” we make God a liar, and his word is not in us. Because God has said “all have sinned and fall short.”

This is a safe place, where we are all on equal footing.

And because these are lessons that God is teaching me, He makes them personal. I'm finding that the less mask I have, the less scared I am. If I present something as a part of my identity, then that something is a risk to me. If I call myself a software engineer, and then I lose my job, what am I now? If I call myself an artist, and then I get carpal tunnel and cannot hold a brush, what am I now? If I call myself a child of God, nothing can touch that, so I fear nothing. As your

pride crumbles away, these points that you have made your identity out of also crumble away, until only God remains.

Point 2 and a half - our God takes personal action. I just want to point out, this is probably worth a whole sermon in itself, but God does something very specific here. Isaiah says his failing is unclean lips, and the angel takes a coal from the altar where atonement is made and touches it to his lips to cleanse him. God fixes the specific issue that Isaiah brings up. Doubting Thomas says he cannot believe until he sticks his finger in the nail hole on Jesus' wrist. Jesus shows up and says "here Thomas, stick your finger in." Our God is a personal God willing to take personal action to bolster faith in each of us. He wants a personal relationship with you and will make it personal to get that. He wants your identity to be in Him, and He is willing to carve away anything that you are holding between Him and your heart. So be careful what you cling to.

Third, our plan breaks. All through life people are asking you what your plan is. What do you want to be when you grow up? Where will you go to school, what will you major in? What is your five year plan? Your next career move? Do you want fries with that? Making plans is not a bad thing, it is part of life. But as they say, if you want to hear God laugh then tell Him your plans. We keep making plans, though, because we can't move forward if we do not know which way we are going. And anything is better than sitting still, right?

Proverbs 3:

5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding;

6 in all your ways know Him, and He will make your paths straight.

Another translation I have read says "dedicate your plans to Him"

Here I am. Send me. Not "Here I am, and here is my 5 year plan of evangelism" but "Here I am, I will do whatever you put before me". And as God points out to me, it's not "Here I am, ready for my act of service to be back in the sound booth where my embarrassing difficulty with names doesn't matter because they are all on labels in front of me." He answered me "We can start there" and next thing I know I'm up front. Not part of my plans. Lord, let your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

When I was in college, I heard a sermon about Jonah titled "God wants to ruin your life". The main idea was that we can make whatever plans we want, but expect them to be completely derailed when we brush against God's plan. Jonah received word that he should go to Nineveh, and let those wicked people know it is time to repent. He didn't want Nineveh to be saved, so he booked passage on a ship heading in the opposite direction. God retrieved him by means of a large storm and a large fish, and deposited Jonah back on the shore. Jonah had a good thing going, he was recognized as a prophet of God and had respect and all that in his community. His plan did not involve God's plan, so his got wrecked.

I'm not saying sit and passively wait for divine instruction on how to tie your shoes. For our limited selves to do life, we have to make plans and try to follow them. I am saying leave vagaries in your plan so God can adjust it as you need. Expect things to change.

James 4:13-16

13 Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will travel to such and such a city and spend a year there and do business and make a profit." 14 Yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring—what your life will be! For you are like vapor that appears for a little while, then vanishes.

15 Instead, you should say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." 16 But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

Here it comes full circle. To presume that your plan will instruct God's action is arrogance, hubris, dangerously prideful. We do not have God's perspective. There is a way that seems right to a person because of the limited scope of their perception, but it ends in death.

Proverbs 14:12 There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death.

So, three things we have seen that break when we are saved: pride, mask, and plan. Let's go back and look at Isaiah 6 again. Specifically, the sequence of actions again.

I saw God. God is praised always. I broke. God provided a solution. I'll move where He tells me.

This is the full dip and climb. The path of realizing that you can't, then God steps in and says I CAN. Then you say please and thank you and follow the next couple steps. He wants to tell you that you are loved immensely. That you are specifically crafted for His glorious purpose.

Let go of your pride. Let go of the fake walls you hold between you and those around you. Loosen your grip on your plans for life, so that you say "if the Lord wills" instead of "I certainly will".

This is a scary change. People want control, and admitting that you are not the one steering the world is admitting that you do not have that control.

That's okay. Trust that God holds your future right where He knows you need to be.

Jeremiah 31:17-22

There is hope for your future," says the Lord. "Your children will come again to their own land. I have heard Israel saying, 'You disciplined me severely, like a calf that needs training for the yoke. Turn me again to you and restore me, for you alone are the Lord my God. I turned away from God, but then I was sorry. I kicked myself for my stupidity! I was thoroughly ashamed of all I did in my younger days.' "Is not Israel still my son, my darling child?" says the Lord. "I often have to punish him, but I still love him. That's why I long for him and surely will have mercy on him. Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Mark well the path by which you came. Come back again, my virgin Israel; return to your towns here. How long will you wander, my wayward daughter? For the Lord will cause something new to happen— Israel will embrace her God."

Jeremiah 31:17-22 NLT

Dane Ortlund wrote an excellent book, *Gentle and Lowly*. It goes through the Bible and pulls out points where God says "this is my heart's posture, this is why I do things" and shows that mercy is foremost in God's works. Here is a quote:

“Christ does not get flustered and frustrated when we come to him for fresh forgiveness, for renewed pardon, with distress and need and emptiness. That's the whole point. It's what he came to heal.”

Psalms 34:18 HCSB

The Lord is near the brokenhearted; He saves those crushed in spirit.

We break, and the cracks drain us out. Then we come to God with emptiness and need, and He provides for that need. A lot of wants may go unsatisfied, but God provides what you need.

Psalms 32:1-2 NLT

Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight! Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of guilt, whose lives are lived in complete honesty!

If we are honest, we are sinners. We are wrong, and need to acknowledge that before we can be helped. We have to break our pride and our mask and those little lies that we have built our shining self image on. I must, you must, throw the golden idol of self out of your heart. Then we can hand our broken pieces to God and see the artwork He creates when He glues us back together. Each one of us, a masterwork.

2 Corinthians 7:9-10 ESV

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

Brokenness as I have used the word here is that godly grief, that conviction from the Spirit letting you know that you are wrong and that God is waiting for you to accept His solution to that problem. And whatever state your life is in, whatever mess you have, you can bring it to Him. Just come as you are, no preparation needed.

In the process of writing and refining this sermon, I became very aware of the word “broken”. It has stood out to me loudly when I hear it. So when Jesus instructs us about communion and says “this is my body, broken for you” it got my attention.

1 Corinthians 11:23-24

23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Brokenness is such a critical step in shedding our old selves and getting closer to him, and even in this step He has gone before us. Jesus was broken, on the cross, in payment of our debts, to mend the relationship between God and man. He was broken to bring us back together. And we follow His command to remember that through this act of communion.

Now, to be clear, there is nothing special about this bread. We have both gluten free and gluten full varieties here, and neither is the more holy choice. The bread is a reminder, a symbol, of the greater truth about the price paid. You don't have to be a member here at Grace to participate with us, only a believer. If you have not accepted Christ, this could be your first communion. Maybe you feel like you are breaking inside right now, like you finally realized the pressure and now you are crumbling. You can freely admit “Jesus I need you, save me” and join this family right now. If you are not ready for that, this is a safe place, and there is no pressure or judgment from me.

I take this broken piece of bread and eat it as a symbol, proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes.

1 Corinthians 11:25 In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Jesus says this cup represents his blood. We use simple grape juice because, again, this is a symbol reminding me of the work already done and the material itself is not the point. Blood was required, as the old testament explains to us.

Leviticus 17:11

11 For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have appointed it to you to make atonement on the altar for your lives, since it is the lifeblood that makes atonement.

This cup represents the blood that was paid to make atonement. I drink this cup to proclaim that his blood has made my atonement. Drink with me.