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God, What is Your Reply: To a World Disconnected?

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In the first days after the birth of the church, Luke writes ACTS 2:42-47 *“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”*

I was going to say “A really obnoxious person is one who spends so much time talking about himself that you can’t talk about yourself. ☺”. I was going to talk about the Prudential Ad that says “Be Your Own Rock”. And the T-Shirt that says “I’m my own role model.”

And I was going to say how those are just signs (funny ones, at that) that point to how self-absorbed we are...but that doesn’t hit home enough. Remember – this Ultimate Reality Series is God’s Reply to our very **WORLDVIEW**. Like a fish who doesn’t know what water is because water is the lens through which it sees basic reality, **our SELF-FOCUS has impacted how we think, how we see ourselves, and how we live.** (Did I leave someone out – like **HOW WE RELATE TO GOD?!)** That’s the first blank in your notes. **Our SELF-FOCUS has impacted how we think, how we see ourselves, and how we live.**

Even in Christian worship. Do you know what letter has the most entries in the song list index? The letter “I”. Listen to the titles of these songs: (Praise choruses AND hymns)

I am Thine, O Lord.

I Believe in Jesus

I Can See

I Could Sing of Your Love Forever

I Exalt Thee

I Give My All

I Give You My Heart

I Have Decided

I Love Thy Kingdom Lord

I Love You Lord

I Need You More

I See the Lord

I Stand in Awe

I Walk by Faith

I Will Call Upon the Lord

I Will Celebrate

I Will Enter His Gates

I Will Magnify

I Will Sing Praise

I Will Sing Unto the Lord

I Will Worship

I Would be True

I'd Rather Have Jesus

I'm a-gonna Sing Sing Sing

In My Life Lord be Glorified

It's Me, It's Me, O Lord

Some of those are my favorites! (I'd say the "I's" Have It.) Our preoccupation with self ripples through every area of our culture: how we do business, how we teach, how we parent, how we vote, how we marry, how we think about faith. IN A SUPREME act of self-reliance, we decide for God what is true about him and his intentions for us.

Take the horrible tragedy of the Tsunami. Some people see the dead bodies on TV and say "If there is a God, surely He would have stopped this. It happened, so there must not be one." But the tsunami does not disprove the existence of the God of the Bible. It only disproves the existence of the kind of god we make up for ourselves.

Lots of folks say "The God I worship would never punish anyone." Or "The God I believe in doesn't care how I get my physical or sexual needs met or how we worship or how we live our lives. My God is not so judgmental."

Well, that God does not exist. The image of a nice deity who looks benignly down from heaven, wanting us all just to have a nice day, is a wish-fulfillment. Fiction, based on our self-absorbed focus.

Self- has become the modifier of choice: Self-esteem, self-image, self-actualization, self-concept, self-help, and self-service are all newcomers to our language. Flying solo is so much a part of life in America that we don't realize how novel this condition is.

History lesson: In the 14th Century we began *trading spaces* with God. Europe rediscovered the ancient humanistic writings of the Greeks and Romans. Since the Renaissance, the individual, more than God, more than the community, matters most. You see the gradual shift in the art and the writings of the time. 300 years later, during the Enlightenment, with the rise of democracy, humanism became a belief: Humanity's belief in humanity – we had optimism! Progress! Reason! And freedom! – And it became contagious. We were now out from under the oppressive thumb of God, free to do as we saw fit. We can now live for ourselves. People's responsibilities were shifted with people's rights – individual rights. In the 1800s, Romanticism said the same thing. Remember American Lit? Emerson, Thoreau, and Walt Whitman said "I have no need of others. I have everything within me that I need. My heart is the final authority."

Enter the 1900s, and the Self-Esteem movement with 4 supreme values: self-understanding, self-acceptance, self-expression, self-fulfillment. We have our hierarchy of needs and self-concern. Personal-wellbeing crept further into the church and God returns as the servant of the individual, existing for our happiness. That's what drives me. Expressing myself. Feeling good about myself.

THE REAL RESULTS OF OUR SELF-FOCUS? We think "I'm all the **COMPANY** I need." We experience little meaningful contact with others. In surveys conducted among Americans today the great need is: "I don't even know my neighbors". America is a land of islands. Disconnected and alone. We resort to virtual communities – with all the anonymity and autonomy we want, with all the benefits and none of the mess.

I don't want others telling me what to do or how to do it. I want it my way. I can mind my OWN business. A preoccupation with my self limits my relationships. If we're always wondering why people act toward us the way they do, we can't be free in responding to them. Why did she do that? What does he want now? Why did he look at me that way? Preoccupation with ourselves will make us helpless.

Who we are is negotiable. We select a lifestyle as though we're picking out a pair of shoes. We go shopping for a look, a style that suits us and even makes a statement. This is the land of fresh starts. If we can up and leave our family, our job, or our spouse, why not ourselves? WE can leave the old self behind and adopt a new and improved one. We pick and choose the "me" we want to be. Despite what the ultimate reality is.

I want what I want when I want it. My self-focus breeds a preoccupation with pleasure. What makes me happy is by definition right and worthwhile. It's the greatest good. The pursuit (or purchase) of happiness is not only one of our inalienable rights; it is also our favorite free time activity. (Never mind that half my trouble comes from wanting my own way – and the other half comes from having it).

It means I avoid pain and seek pleasure. That's the normal and acceptable way of doing business for most of us: if it feels good. Not if it IS good or right or sensitive or appropriate. We've come to a place where there is almost an obligation to do what we want to do. Another T-Shirt said: "Galileo was wrong. The universe DOES revolve around me." *Well, duh. Apart from God, what else CAN it revolve around?*

GOD WHAT IS YOUR REPLY? God says: **Depend on me. Let me be in Control.** The pride that keeps us "on our own" stands in the way is at odds with God's calling. God says a life wrapped up in yourself is no life at all. No one can be subject to two kings at the same time. (Dads – have you ever been in charge of the kids and wanted to get something else done at the same time? Nothing is more frustrating. What do you have to do? You have to make a choice – either figure your stuff will get done some other time, or let the kids watch TV.) Jesus is saying "You can't have 2 agendas." If you do, you'll be frustrated, and you'll either bite someone's head off or make a poor choice like shirk your job as a parent and turn the kid over to the media's mindset. SO – what do you do? Look to God:

God replies: Only in Me can you be truly FREE. How many of you have mastered the art of looking like we were concerned for someone else, but in the end really only cared about ourselves? And all the junk in our lives that we use to *prove* our freedom (to ourselves and others) winds up making us a slave to it – whether it is stuff, alcohol, drugs, our work, vacations, or even just attitudes. Coming to Christ means we **relinquish control to God.** Jesus said "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.*" Luke 9:23-24. You and I start denying ourselves when we pray "I am bound by my desire to serve myself. Change me Lord. Help me focus on You and others."

Remember the Purpose Driven Life? "IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions." God says "I made you for ME!" You are a part of My great design."

SO...How do we respond to God's reply?

First, think differently. Let God take care of your life: needs, rights, and identity. The reason for our existence: Not for getting our needs met. It's true God does meet our needs, but when we're made right with Christ, we experience a measure of fulfillment and satisfaction we've never known before.

Lay down our rights. "*You are not your own. You were bought at a price.*" 1 Cor. 6:19-20. God calls us to gladly receive all He has for us, rather than be insistent, self-assertive, ready to sue God if things don't go our way. Sometimes it means that old King James' term "long-suffering." We will never realize how loved we are until we realize how small we are.

This next one is huge: Let God take care of our identity, because when you do, you look at ALL people differently. When our #1 source of identity is God, then other people are no longer means to our ends. We deeply need to be affirmed and accepted. But when we get how great God's love for us is, that love delivers us from the need to use others to meet our needs. **We don't have to rely on those around us for our sense of worth,** or for meeting those deep needs that are beyond another human's ability to reach. All the love we need, all the acceptance and security we need, comes from above. "*God demonstrates his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" Rom. 5:8.

When that's right, you can **let OTHER PEOPLE in.** Once we have found our well-being in Christ's love for us, we do have the freedom to love and serve others openly. Only then is it possible to "*do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.*" (Phil. 2:3).

Relationships between believers are supposed to be different, with interwoven lives of mutual support. Our responsibility as Christians is "*to spur one another on toward love and good deeds.*" (Heb. 10:24). We cannot come to Christ and isolate ourselves from the church family. That's why you need to be part of a small group – whether a support group, growth group, or ministry team.

An Accurate view of humanity. The self-esteem movement and therapeutic approach are built on a positive optimistic view of humanity, but this view is misplaced confidence.

There IS something absolutely amazing about people – a captivating dignity and creativity and resourcefulness. This comes from being made in the *image of God.* (Gen. 1:26). But we get in trouble when we forget the second half of the creation story: that man and woman rebelled against God and we're now stained and wracked with sin. No part of us is unaffected. "*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" Rom. 3:23. We don't have it within us to lift ourselves

out of the muck that we've shoveled ourselves into. Our culture wants to push us inward. But Christianity, aware of the bankruptcy of our inner resources, pushes us outward. Psalm 103:4 *"It's the Lord who redeems our lives from the pit."*

Finally, let God REDEFINE your pleasure and pain. As pleasure seeking individualists, we need to realize something that seems to make no sense: Not all pleasure is good, and not all pain is bad. Much of what gives us pleasure *is* bad. Because of the second half of the creation, we often find pleasure down all the wrong paths – and the results? Death, brokenness, and isolation. At the same time, much that gives us pain is actually for our own good. He uses our struggles with sin, our losses, and our hardships in two main ways: to deepen our faith and develop our character. *"We also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."* (Rom 5:3-5)

With pleasure and pain, as with everything else, God redefines the categories. Ultimately, real pleasure is found in doing what God calls us to, and pain in ignoring his constraints and doing only what we want to do. *"Make me walk along the path of your commands; for that is where happiness is found."* (Psalm 119:35).

What is missing in most people's conception of God is that He doesn't just look down from heaven on the human condition. But He joins it. The Second Person of the Trinity became human. God Himself suffered hunger, poverty, and physical pain. He Himself died unfairly in the prime of life. More than that, in a miracle as big as the creation, He took upon Himself the sin, guilt, loneliness, and afflictions of the world. He atoned for them all in His death on the cross.

Jesus explained that senseless disasters, like the fall of the tower in Siloam, are not due to the sins of the victims, and yet such horrible things should awake us to our condition and drive us to repentance. And to those who cannot help but ask, "Where is God in the midst of all of this suffering?" Jesus told us where He would be: hidden in our suffering neighbors. So how can we choose to remain self-absorbed any longer? We cannot try to be alone anymore.