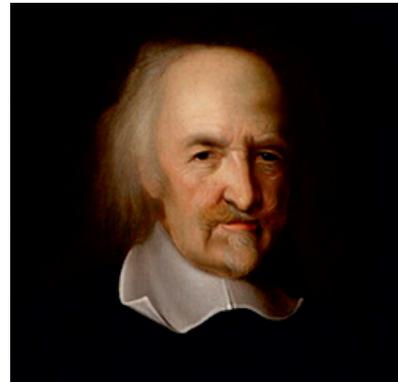


Reality Misunderstood

January 2024

I believe one of the great missteps of recent, modern life is the apparently innocent yet full embracing of reality TV. Do people really think they are watching something real, or are they wise enough to know the supposed reality they are watching is as staged as anything ever written and produced by the cunning artists of our age? The problem is that being in your own made-up movie and supposed reality show is the goal of a lot lonely and often angry people. My jaw dropped and my heart sank when I learned that the Hamas fighters who ravaged and maimed the lives of innocent people living in Israel on October 7 had made a video of much of the brutality. What was their motive? To be memorialized for an eternity, to be shining stars of their own show, and to destroy human life just like they do in many of today's movies? The fallenness and depravity of humankind is reaching new heights; and if we do not name and confront these obvious illnesses and atrocities in our society, they will continue to multiply, destroy, and consume our world.

When I attended college, I had not yet become a follower of Jesus. However, I was discovering at the time my deep interest in humankind and political philosophy. I remember pouring over the Enlightenment books of philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke, wrestling with what they had concluded was the true nature of humankind. I finally decided I agreed more with Hobbes than Rosseau - that the nature of humans was not naturally kind, generous, and loving, but rather more self-centered, in need of containment, though capable of exhibiting the other more desirable attributes given the right conditions. My spiritual and philosophical search continued



English Philosopher
Thomas Hobbes

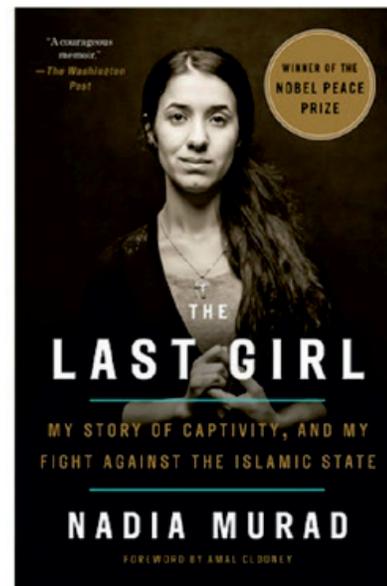
in the initial years after college; finally, and by God's grace, I began reading the Bible which eventually helped me find all the answers I had ever wanted to know and for which I was searching. With great relief and an indescribable peace, I concluded humankind, including my own life, was plagued by sin and was badly in need of redemption.

The video the Hamas warriors made included their rape of innocent, young women, some of whom were playfully attending a fun music festival in the desert with friends and family. Many of these women were attacked, corralled, raped, and then shot dead immediately afterwards – just like they do in some our most horrible movies today. According to this despicable theology and philosophy of Hamas, rape is not only a pleasurable and deserved act for these so-called warrior men, but it is also a way to punish forever the fathers, brothers, boyfriends, grandparents, uncles, and husbands of these women, bringing down a powerful shame and dishonor on their families which can never be untarnished or removed. In an instant, these

young men had become beasts, spreading terror, anger, and ongoing violence throughout the region. And now two-thirds of the people being killed in the relentless and retaliatory bombing in Gaza are women and children – equally innocent victims in the same bloody and tragic drama Hamas started. The depravity of humankind is again on full display for the world to see.

Today, violence is not only being expressed through monstrous, physical acts of killing and warfare, but also through anger-filled rhetoric, writings, and speeches worldwide. Suddenly, it seems acceptable for political leaders, artists, academics and athletes to threaten people with violent words seeking so-called justified revenge, ghosting, reputation destruction, and belittlement. Confrontational rhetoric has a way of seeping into the deepest recesses of our minds and souls awakening our fallen natures, calling us forth to hate, destroy, and even kill. If we are naïve about our fallen and depraved natures, we can begin to fool ourselves, often and dangerously, leading to tragic misunderstandings of reality.

One of my new heroes is a woman named Nadia Murad, a Yazidi who was captured and repeatedly raped and abused by the Islamic State (ISIS) during its rampage through Iraq and Syria not long ago. She wrote a book I highly recommend called, “The Last Girl”. Miraculously, Nadia escaped her captors in Mosul and eventually made her way to freedom in northern Iraq. Many of her Yazidi family members were either killed by cruel execution or raped and critically injured, physically, emotionally and mentally for life. In 2018, Nadia became a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate for her tireless work to end sexual violence as a weapon of war. Her cries for women worldwide need to be heard as never before.



I thought of Nadia this week as we celebrated the amazing work and ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Too few people know how profoundly Dr. King embraced and followed the Christian faith in everything he did or said. Most people do know, however, how masterfully Dr. King articulated and promoted the philosophy and power of non-violence and civil rights. But not enough people know how much Dr. King believed in the sinfulness of humankind and its need for the redemptive work of Christ. He once said, “Man is no helpless invalid left in the valley of total depravity until God pulls him out. Man is rather an upstanding human being whose vision has been impaired by the cataracts of sin and whose soul has been weakened by the virus of pride, but there is sufficient vision left for him to lift his eyes unto the hills, and there remains enough of God’s image for him to turn his weak and sin-battered life toward the Great Physician, the curer of the ravages of sin.”

The ultimate reality which any of us needs to discover and embrace is that we are sin-riddled people in need of a savior. Does our current world need any more evidence that sin is becoming dangerously normalized, spreading rapidly, untamed, and ruining many innocent lives? If madmen are running through mosques in New Zealand or shopping malls in Buffalo, New York, making movies of themselves killing innocent people with weaponry made for organized warfare and not adequately confronted, where will all this evil take us next? We need to stop this projector, arrest this bad movie, and confront what has clearly become the devil run wild gleefully in our world today.



In my own personal journey, at 26 years old, I finally was led to the following words which changed the trajectory of my life completely and led me into a life of ministry: "If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves, and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness." (1 John 1:8,9) When I read those words, I realized I had finally discovered ground zero for what makes humans tick, how sin makes us blind and mars the very fabric of our beings, hurting ourselves and others, but how God has provided an escape and freedom from these powerful clutches of sin. In the book of Romans, it says, "For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life; shedding his blood." (Romans 3:23-25a)

I have spent the last 22 years of my life supporting the work of Christians in the Middle East. In many cases Christians in the Middle East are a persecuted minority in need of great encouragement and support from the global church. In another sense they are some of the most dynamic, grace-filled followers of Christ I have ever known. They are bringing a new vitality to the global church, especially in the West where in many places the church is teetering dangerously. These Arab and Persian friends of mine are praying fervently for the Jewish and Muslim people in the Middle East to find Christ as their Lord and Savior, and thereby find peace for themselves and each other.

Peace is principally a matter of the heart. Most often, we need to find peace within ourselves before we can begin to find peace with others. Peace and strength come from grace; and there is no greater grace to be found than in Jesus Christ. Grace demands that we depart from believing we must deliver an "eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." It is only through God's grace and power that senseless cycles of violence can be broken.

I leave with you for all of us to remember one of the greatest benedictions ever written by the Apostle Paul; "See that no one pays back evil for evil, but always try to do good to each other and to all people. Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 5:15-18)