

WRESTLING WITH EXISTENCE A Devotional Meditation from

Genesis 6:9-11:32; Isaiah 54:1-55:5; Proverbs 29:18; Luke 17:26-30

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Some of the best memories I have of my father are the times he took me to the opera. Usually these were productions by our hometown artists, such as the Birmingham Civic Opera, or one of the local colleges. They may not have gained critical acclaim on the level of the great international companies, but each performance cultivated in me an appreciation of the fine arts. My favorites were the Italian operas by Verdi, Puccini, and Mozart. Whether comedies or tragedies, they resonated with my spirit and expanded my exposure to the heights and depths of the human experience.

German opera was another matter. I had only seen one: *Tannhäuser*, by Richard Wagner. The music by itself is inspiring, but I found Wagner's rendition of the story tedious and hard to endure. Yet I still liked Wagner's music, and I hoped to see others of his works. An opportunity arose when, during my first tour of duty in Germany, I attended a performance of *Parsifal*, Wagner's interpretation of Sir Percival's story from the King Arthur legend. It was a world class performance at the famous opera hall in Wagner's hometown of Bayreuth, but, sadly, I enjoyed it less than the performance of *Tannhäuser* by our little opera company in Alabama.

Some days later, when telling a fellow music lover about my experience, I wondered aloud why I liked Italian opera much better than German. He said, "The soul is already in Italian opera. In German opera they're still looking for the soul."

I think he is right. The German operas I know – most of which are by Richard Wagner – are masterful, stirring works, but they are tedious and uncomfortable. The power and grandeur of Wagner's music cannot disguise the fact that his characters wrestle with the meaning of their existence. The Italians, however, engage us at a deep level, whether by laughter or sorrow. Their characters don't have to answer the question of why they are alive, but rather try to move as best they can through the life they have been given.

This is more than simply a question of artistic interpretation. Wagner's music reflects the ideas he shared with his friend Friedrich Nietzsche. That's the Nietzsche who promoted the idea that God is dead, that the superior human is the one who overcomes traditional values and restrictions, and the notion that that which does not kill us makes us stronger. Such ideas can be very dangerous when they inspire people to remake the world to their own liking, even at the expense of enslaving or destroying others. This point



This postage stamp issued by the Third Reich in 1933 is one example of the influence on Hitler's Germany of Richard Wagner's music and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche incorporated in Wagner's music. ([Alois Kolb for the Reichspost of the German Empire, via Wikimedia Commons.](#))

crashes into our own reality when we realize that Nietzsche's ideas and Wagner's music provided considerable inspiration to Adolf Hitler and to the Nazi movement he led.

That's the contemporary manifestation of this existential wrestling. It's been part of our story from the beginning, as we can see in the careers of Napoleon, Caesar Augustus, Alexander the Great, and every tyrant going back to Nimrod. Having no satisfaction or peace with the realities of life as they know it, such people seek to change reality to suit their own preferences. The people cast off all restraint and plunge headlong into pursuit of satisfaction – and of their own doom.

That's what happened in the days of Noah:

Then *ADONAI* saw that the wickedness of humankind was great on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil all the time. So *ADONAI* regretted that He made humankind on the earth, and His heart was deeply pained. So *ADONAI* said, "I will wipe out humankind, whom I have created, from the face of the ground, from humankind to livestock, crawling things and the flying creatures of the sky, because I regret that I made them. . . The end of all flesh is coming before Me, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. Behold, I am about to bring ruin upon them along with the land."

Genesis 6:5-7, 13 TLV

How is the earth filled with violence? That's easy to understand. If every person is trying to remake the world in his or her own image, then there will be conflict. Before long, the stronger overpower the weak, the weak band together to strike back against the strong, and a deadly dance commences in which the participants lay down their humanity and adopt the nature of beasts. This is the heart of the existential wrestling in Wagner's characters and Nietzsche's philosophy. Not content with obeying their Creator and cultivating the garden of earth as He intended, they desperately seek for any alternative to meaning in life, or abandon any pursuit of meaning and simply run after power over themselves, their environment, and other people.

No wonder our Creator was sorry He made us. His grief at our condition is the same grief of a parent who realizes there is no further point pleading with a rebellious child. They must be left to their own devices, hopefully to learn by hard experience why there are rules and boundaries. If they will not learn, then the tragedy is theirs, but the grief is shared by all who love them.

Human parents experience this process over a few generational cycles, but God has experienced it with every generation of humans since He made us. Loving parents long to bring their wayward children back into their embrace, but their means of doing so are limited. The child must make her own decisions. If we force her to do the right thing, then we embrace the same violent beast spirit that has possessed the cruelest genocidal maniacs, starting with Satan himself. This is where we find another link with our Creator: He cannot compel obedience either, because He desires loving, thinking children, not soulless automatons.

The tragedy for us all is when our Creator comes to the end of His striving with us. Noah and his family experienced such a tragedy, and such a grief. How long did the cries of the condemned come to their ears as the ark of their salvation floated on the rising

waters of judgment? What hope did they have other than the Creator's word that they would survive? What moved them to build anew when the waters receded, desperately seeking to reconstruct humanity on a better foundation than what they had left?

And what grief pierced them to the heart when they saw Nimrod reestablish the beast society of violence at Babylon, the place he called the gateway of the gods?

Nimrod picked up the mantel of rebellion that had come into existence at Eden and has passed down through every generation to this present one. Every oppressor wears it, whether the dictator who authors genocide, or the mother who manipulates her children into doing her will throughout their lives. That is why our Messiah said that the Day of the Lord's final judgment will be like the days of Noah, when everyone was so busy with the activities of life that they took no notice of their imminent doom.

There is an escape, of course. In Isaiah, God says to His covenant nation of Israel:

For this is like the waters of Noah to Me: for as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more cover the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you, nor will I rebuke you. Though the mountains depart and the hills be shaken, My love will not depart from you, nor will My covenant of peace be shaken, says *ADONAI* who has compassion on you.

Isaiah 54:9-10 TLV

This is a promise made to the children of Abraham, which is why all who identify with the Messiah Who came through Abraham's line are adopted into his family.

Ultimately our fate, and the fate of our world, rests on a question of identity. Our God says we are His sons and daughters, made in His image to be the expression of Himself in the universe He made. We can embrace that identity and move through life, with all it's joys and sorrows, in ways that honor Him, or we can reject that identity and try to wrestle some other meaning out of our existence. There is pain either way, but only one choice brings peace.