

## **“The Writer Sneaks Onstage”**

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Third of four reflections on our Human Nature

Psalm 139

February 24, 2019

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Please click [here](#) to read the Scripture.

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Shakespeare said it:

*All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players. . . .<sup>1</sup>*

Imagine we *are* living our lives as actors on the stage. Not *merely* players, though. We've been given wonderful parts to perform. We get to be . . . us!

We started with this a couple weeks ago.

- The Playwright makes us as flesh-and-blood, physical, biological creatures;
- We are not the Playwright, yet we are designed to reflect the Playwright within the play.
- The Playwright sets us on a stage.
- The Playwright puts us among swarms of other creations.
- The Playwright places us within a plot.
- The Playwright plans for us to improvise within this plot, developing our characters and scenes together.

This is all so very good! We are written, wonderfully!

II

How are we doing at this? Your role of being you? My role of being me?

We heard Shakespeare. Then there is Oscar Wilde. “*The world is a stage,*” he wrote, “*but the play is badly cast.*”<sup>2</sup>

We are wonderfully written, and free to improvise. We have a way of scribbling all over the script, mis-ordering the pages, crumpling it, tearing it and tossing it. We have a way of messing with each other's parts. Often we don't mean to. Sometimes we are mean enough to.

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<sup>1</sup> *As You Like It* 2.7.138f.

<sup>2</sup> *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* (London: James r. Osgood, McIlvain and Co, 1891), 19. “Actors are so fortunate. They can choose whether they will appear in tragedy or in comedy, whether they will suffer or make merry, laugh or shed tears. But in real life it is different. Most men and women are forced to perform parts for which they have no qualifications. Our Guildensterns play Hamlet for us, and our Hamlets have to jest like Prince Hal. The world is a stage, but the play is badly cast.”

So we are all wonderfully written. Isn't there also good reason to think we've lost the plot, somewhere between the Writer's pen and our performance? We mess up. We are messed up. Stuff happens, terrible stuff, stuff that's hard to see fitting into any good story.

A tragedy! Except a "tragedy" is a play written to go wrong, on purpose. Shakespeare started off knowing Romeo and Juliet would get finished off. I saw Hamlet a few years ago. It ends with nearly everyone dead, but in a satisfying way. Tragedies finish wrong in a way that feels right. That's why people pay to see them.

This story we've become part of, and part of making, it's not this way on purpose by the Writer's design. It's wonderfully written. Though tattered and torn, it is still wonderfully written. The Writer's marvellous hand is still all over it.

Was Oscar Wilde right? Is it the cast: you, me and everyone? We make it, not a tragedy, but a catastrophe.

How long until the Writer shuts us down?

### III

Where do actors go when their show is cancelled?

*Sheol.*

Did you notice this word in the psalm? *Sheol*. It's about death.

The Bible's picture of what happens to people when they die evolves through its pages.<sup>3</sup> This psalm is from a time when people realized that, when someone dies, something of them goes to some other reality. They called it "*Sheol*." In *Sheol*, the dead had an existence, but not much of one. *Sheol* had no presence of God, no hope of getting out, just silence and darkness. *Sheol* was not hell, but certainly not heavenly. And get this . . . they thought everyone went there. Everyone! Good, bad and indifferent. *Sheol* was everyone's destiny.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In the early days of God's People, they thought very little of it. The best you could hope for was to live long, be buried peacefully by your children with the bones of your ancestors who'd gone before you, and be remembered well. That was it, with little worry about "life after death." Fleming Rutledge rightly observes that "few Christians today (or Jews either, for that matter) fully comprehend the Old Testament's thoroughgoing renunciation of all speculation about life after death. The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 399. This is a remarkable contrast with other Ancient Near Eastern civilizations that were quite death-concerned, even death-obsessed (Egypt being a prime example).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 399f.

From Jesus and the New Testament we get paradise and resurrection (for the righteous) and damnation and hell (for the wicked). Much better than *Sheol*. Or, worse. Even then, the Bible says very little about any of this.

Back to the psalm. It assumes all actors — all of us — will end up stuck in *Sheol*.

But then it gives us this. To God it says:

*Where can I go from Your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from Your presence? . . .  
if I make my bed in **Sheol**, You are there.*

*Sheol* is the bleakest, most hopeless, tangled and messed up reality imaginable. Even in *Sheol*, God is.

*Sheol* is where all storylines just stop, unresolved. It's where all plots break off, with the last pages ripped out. It's where all actors are crumpled and washed out, wandering around waiting for nothing to happen.

Except in *Sheol* —even in *Sheol!*— the Writer is at work, still writing. And more!

#### IV

It is the most astonishing plot-twist imaginable. (Maybe the second-most astonishing) The Writer came onto the stage, in person, as one of the characters.

Yes the Writer, nothing like us, chose to become flesh and blood as we are; chose to be knit together in a mother's womb as we are; for love of us, became wrapped in skin like us; to rescue our story, walked among us.

You know who this is. Jesus.

He was mostly unnoticed. He is the Star of the show, yet he was content to be in the background. To all appearances he was a minor part of the supporting cast, way down in the credits, far from the red carpet.

Why? He shows how to live the plot we've lost. He shows us how to do improv well. He shows us how to act, how to be for one another and for God, how to love. He calls us out when we've gone wrong, and he calls us to follow him back into the good story, the Writer's story, and always with love.

The spotlight shines elsewhere. Do you know who does see him and is drawn to him? The other no-names. The other extras. The others otherwise forgotten.

This seems to be how the Writer works: in the background, in the wings, backstage

even.

God the Writer has written this character Jesus, who is God the Writer, into the play. Apparently the Writer sees great value in directing, and correcting, and getting us right from within the story, instead of yelling from off-stage. He just sort-of sneaked in.

V

Then, the Writer killed off his own character.

Actually, it's we other actors who did it. That's how twisted our plot's become, and us within it. We executed the Writer. The Writer knew it would happen! And let us do it! The only One who was getting it right, and could get us right . . . we booed and hissed off the stage to hell! Or, *Sheol*.

It turns out, that is precisely where the Writer needed to go.

So this disaster of an actor I am, when I fly away and flee from God . . . when I make my bed in the place of the dead . . . when I am stoking the fires of my own destruction . . . when I'm in my own personal *Sheol* . . . there, God is. Jesus is. And where God is, it can be *Sheol* no more.<sup>5</sup>

V

This is the heart of the Good News of Jesus. I am desperate for it.

When it comes to acting my life, I am pretty messed up. Acting lessons will not fix me. Yes, we do need Jesus to show us how to live, how to live as God is wonderfully writing us to live. No matter how much we know though, we can't pull it off. The problem is deeper than knowledge. In the depths of our souls, we are a mess. We need to be broken. The problem is, being broken would be the end of us.

The Writer came to us as a character in the story, Jesus, and let us break him. He became broken for us, all the way to *Sheol*. He went, so we won't. He broke, so we won't. The Star of the show snuck in and was booed off stage, so now we can finally act.

Oscar Wilde was making a great point, but he was wrong. You are perfectly cast. You can perform the life God is wonderfully writing you for, now and forever, because of Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> In Christian tradition, this is called "the Harrowing of Hell." See Rutledge, 395-461.