

A person is walking away from the viewer on a long, narrow path of snow that has been trampled. The path leads towards a range of snow-covered mountains in the distance. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The overall scene is desolate and vast.

WHY HOLINESS MATTERS

WE'VE LOST OUR WAY . . . BUT WE CAN FIND IT AGAIN

TYLER BRAUN

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TYLER BRAUN

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*No one loses their innocence.
It is either taken or given away willingly.*

—TIFFANY MADISON

Author, writer

1. INNOCENCE

I don't remember when, but at some point in middle or high school it became very clear that innocence wasn't cool. In order to be cool, boundaries had to be stretched and broken. Like playing quarters during lunch, or smoking after school, or sneaking over to a girl's house to spend the night with her.

Innocence wasn't just looked down upon at school, but also at church. As authenticity became a trendy goal for churches, the value of innocence decreased. The "Innocents" were the students who never skipped class, never cussed, never missed a Bible study, and certainly never stayed out late.

Most people today walk around wearing their "lack of innocence badge" with immense pride. Within the church itself, authenticity about our failings is now the highest prize

awarded for pastors or congregants—even if it means the pastor bleeds all over us. This lack of innocence means many have lived real life and they're better for it. After all, what would life be if we lived with a bunch of regrets?

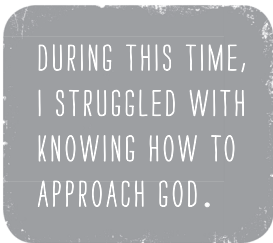
Growing up, I looked differently at the Innocents in the youth group at my church. I figured it was only a matter of time before real life blindsided them and they were left scrambling for help. As I grew older, innocence was a social death sentence. People either wanted to take advantage of them or make fun of them. To most people, living the life of an Innocent appeared boring.

During this time, I was always looking for whatever way I could to lose some of my sheltered, growing-up-in-a-Christian-home innocence. I wanted no part of the innocence my parents and my church had pushed for. Certainly I wasn't trying to sin, but I was looking to test the boundary between sinning and losing my innocence. As the oldest child in a pastor's home, I soon realized many people had an expectation that I would be a rebel, like popular singers Toni Braxton or Katy Perry. (Both are pastors' kids.) Parents usually teach their kids to first obey the rules and then love God, but my parents instilled in me a desire for God, which resulted in me obeying some helpful but not overly strict rules. I had seen the innocent and rules-based lives many of my Christian friends were living, and I wanted no part of that. Later, though, I came to see losing so much of my innocence as a major regret.

Many years ago, I found myself making decisions in various relationships that were based more on physical affection than on healthy relational choices. In these relationships I preferred

to rely on physical intimacy rather than having to engage the holes in my life. What I wanted was to love and be loved, but in the process I never allowed God's love to be enough—I was greedy for more.

As the oldest kid of a senior pastor who had memorized all the right Bible verses, I knew I was crossing lines that were not supposed to be crossed when I decided to attend some parties despite knowing I was throwing myself into compromising situations. This conscious decision to begin partying began the slow fade of my life into sin. Soon enough I was comfortable drinking enough to become drunk. And the fade didn't stop with the drinking and the parties either. I quickly found myself losing control in physically intimate moments with women. Once the momentum of physical affection begins it's almost impossible to stop. And suddenly, my virginity, something I had previously cherished as highly as anything I owned, was gone. Just like that.



DURING THIS TIME,
I STRUGGLED WITH
KNOWING HOW TO
APPROACH GOD.

During this time, I struggled with knowing how to approach God. I felt immense guilt, and I had no idea who to trust with these parts of my life. Deep inside of me was a calloused heart, raw from my own self-inflicted wounds. Part of me wanted to feel emotion and let God into my pain, but I had convinced myself that a holy God would only judge me for my mistakes.

With no one to turn to and sensing I couldn't go to God, I waged a battle within myself to determine what direction my life was going and what needed to change. At times the

intensity of this battle was unbearable. I became quite skilled in hiding the shame, not letting anyone close enough to see the battle I was waging within myself. I had to choose whether to be vulnerable with God and those around me, or to continue down the path I had started.

Years later, telling my future wife, Rose, about my mistakes in relationships was the hardest conversation I've ever had. She had so much purity and innocence to bring to our relationship, and I felt I had come with nothing to offer but the baggage of poor decisions in my past. It's easy to lose innocence in order to gain life experience, but it's a painful process to look back at that loss, allowing God to heal as only He can.

IN A CHRISTIAN CULTURE
THAT DOES NOT VALUE
INNOCENCE, IT IS NO WONDER
OUR GENERATION IS OFTEN
INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM THE
CULTURE AROUND IT.

I often wondered how I, of all people, willfully walked into all these traps. I was the worship leader guy with a Christian education whose dad was a pastor. I've wondered whether innocence and purity are even attainable in our culture today. Our churches and pastors think we just need to preach on purity more often. Or maybe we just need to tell people how much God hates sin, and then they'll avoid it. I don't think those are the answers, or at least they did not work for me. What I didn't value enough was the gift of purity to God and to my future wife. What I didn't value enough was innocence.

In a Christian culture that does not value innocence, it is no wonder our generation is often indistinguishable from the culture around it. We've simply been taught by our culture that

life experience is the most valuable thing a person can have.

When we first met, my friends thought of Rose (my future wife) as a good woman to marry, but not a fun woman to date. She had a reputation for being an innocent girl and when we first started dating I found out she had never kissed a guy. Imagine my fear of whether she would want to stick with me because of my past. For instance, on the wall of my Christian college dorm room, my roommates created a list of all the different girls I had pursued over the period of a few months. They called it “The Braun List.” There was a different girl listed for every week! Rose had her own emotional baggage from previous guys, but I was dragging a lot more weight than she was and it was obvious as we first started dating.

I second-guessed myself and constantly worried about whether my past was enough to push her away from me. One of the greatest gifts Rose gave me was her innocence. Her innocence was a constant, harsh reminder of all I had given up in order to lose mine.

Dating and marrying Rose showed me the other side of pursuing a life of innocence and the benefits definitely outweighed the supposed lack of life experience. Rose had a love for God that allowed her to worship Him freely, to pray with anticipation, and to love others without holding back.



The innocence I lost through life began to spill over in how I related with God and I began to approach God with an expectation that He would let me down. I had convinced myself that a holy God would be unwilling to have His best in mind for a person who walked down unholy paths. My sin

slowly convinced me that God could be holding out on me. Deep down, I believed God couldn't love me or be pleased with me. Whatever bright-colored glasses I saw the world through before had been replaced with a deep-gray filter. The age-old question of "how can a loving God cause so much pain?" has been felt and lived through my innocence lost. The combination of sinful behavior, and seeing God put me in seemingly impossible circumstances, convinced me for a time that God could not truly have my best in mind, and He certainly couldn't love me. I wouldn't deserve His love and He's proven He doesn't give His best to people like me.

As a kid, I enjoyed watching the TV show *Boy Meets World*. The main character in the show, Cory Matthews, had a best friend (Shawn) who grew up on what viewers always sensed as the other side of the train tracks. Shawn never had much; his mom left home when he was young and his dad had little involvement in his life. Being at Cory's house gave Shawn a nice break from the tough circumstances he was growing up in. Shawn was the kid who hardly paid attention in class, had a different fling with a girl on each episode, and had the mentality of every rule needing to be broken. No question, innocence was not something the writers of the show valued in the character of Shawn (though he was never shown as sexually involved). As Shawn grew older, he had a difficult time maintaining relationships with girls. His insecurity, lack of commitment, and no-regrets mentality meant Shawn walked away from relationships when they got difficult. He pushed girls away by his constant wavering in whether the relationship was worth the effort.

The lack of innocence in Shawn led him down a destructive

path that culminated in a scene when his dad left town and Shawn began a conversation with God out of desperation:

Don't blow me off, God. I never asked you for anything before and I never wanted to come to you like this, but don't take Turner [his teacher] away from me; he's not done yelling at me yet. God, you're not talking but I know you're here, so I'm gonna talk, and you can listen. . . . God, I don't wanna be empty inside anymore.¹

Shawn saw no value in innocence when he had it, and never realized what he gave up by losing it. The emptiness he felt inside and the question he had of whether God was truly listening to him or loving him came through the letdown of losing his innocence.

In many ways, I was like Shawn as I related to God. Deep down I was extremely insecure and viewed my life's experiences as the prime reason for why I wasn't close to God. I figured *He's the one who has let me down. He's the one who has acted as if He was never listening.* It was a lot easier to place the blame for my problems on God than myself. He was the one who didn't show up in my time of greatest need.

Rarely do we take the time to think through the repercussions of our actions. In losing innocence, I gained life experience, an awesome “lack-of-innocence badge,” possibly even a better understanding of how to handle difficult circumstances, but I never considered all I had given up in the process.

Those of us with an innocence lost “know” that God rarely answers our prayers on our time. We “know” God can't solve the problems we face or the past hurts we have. Our innocence

lost forces us to ignore the voice telling us we can come to God with our loss and pain. We're too hurt to let His love in.



I regularly endured the questions of whether I was going to become a pastor like my dad. I always answered with an emphatic “No!” because that was his life, not mine. College was my first opportunity to decide whether I wanted to go to church or if I even wanted to open my Bible or pray. In high school I had my parents and my youth pastor encouraging me weekly and sometimes daily to make it a priority. I had every intention of becoming more like Christ while at college, but ultimately I went the other direction. I finally had the freedom to do whatever I wanted to do. On the road of life, I now had the opportunity to run the roads how I wanted to, but the decisions I made put me down a path in my life where I no longer liked myself.

In pursuit of sin I had lost my innocence, my hope, and my relationship with God. I needed a new direction, but felt too lost to find my way.

FOR SAUL AND ME, THE
"DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL"
DESCRIBES A DIFFICULT
JOURNEY FROM SIN AND
TOWARD UNION WITH GOD.

So one night I decided to go for a run and took off toward the outskirts of the small town where I lived. I needed to get away and to clear my head. I preferred to run without music and lose myself in the empty space of the dark night. It gave me that freeing feeling that no one could see me, that I was all alone. I needed the empty road and the blackness to think and to feel, to seek God and to figure out whether I had messed up everything that I

called my life. I ran to the town's edge, wrapped inside the fog and mist, the flicker of city lights in the distance.

When I passed the grass fields and empty plots of farmland ready to be planted for the coming summer, I had a sense of God being near. No, I didn't hear an audible voice from heaven, but I sensed a glimpse of light out of the darkness of my life. I continued these runs out of a desperate need to hear from God. And I continued to listen.

A couple thousand years ago, a man named Saul, a well-respected Jewish leader, gained permission to travel to Damascus to hunt down the Christ followers. But as he made his way along the road he encountered Jesus and fell to the ground blind. He stayed blind for three days, inside a darkness, neither eating nor drinking, until Ananias came to him with instructions from God. Saint John of the Cross expressed a similar time in his life as the "dark night of the soul." For him and for Saul and for me, this darkness describes a difficult journey *from sin and toward* union with God. I needed to spend time in this darkness and allow God to work through my broken life because I couldn't begin to rebuild the pieces until I knew how far I'd walked into my sinful patterns.

I recognized this massive gap between God's holiness and my life. I had a newfound desire to understand the Father's majesty, power, and holiness, all things I had little desire for previously. Before, I had ignored the call God had on my life, choosing to pursue a life where I could call the shots and find my own enjoyment and fun. But now I heard anew God's call for me to be holy (1 Peter 1:16). It's an impossible calling, but its pursuit is how He shapes us to be more like His Son. I just

wanted to find my way back to the Holy One and His light.



To truly understand this calling to be holy, we must first understand the holiness of God. The holiness of God is central to His character. This holiness, this completeness, this action of being whole, is not something we can fully understand. People have been writing and debating for centuries about what it means that God is holy. First and foremost, holiness is not something from us—it is part of God and something only God can give. John puts strong emphasis on this in Revelation 15:4 saying, “Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy.” In her prayer after giving birth to Samuel, Hannah said, “There is no one holy like the Lord” (1 Samuel 2:2).

Truly, God’s holiness is something beyond us. Since none of us has met our Savior face-to-face, we have only small glimpses of the extent of God’s holiness.

First John 3:2 paints a picture of our time meeting God face-to-face being the time when we are made like Him. In essence, our lack of being like Him is our lack of knowing fully about Him (in a relational sense, not a scholastic sense). God says to Isaiah that His ways are not ours and our ways are not His (Isaiah 55:8–9). Paul says in Romans, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?’” (Romans 11:33–34). This is an important distinction for us. We do learn about who God is through His Word to us, but a gap exists between who God is and

who we are. We can discuss and describe the incredible color of tropical ocean waters, but we'll never know how bright the blue water is until we stand at the shore's edge ourselves. So it is with God: we can (and should) spend time exploring who God is and what He means for us, but who God is will always be difficult for us to quantify because He is not like us. Until we see Him face-to-face as fully sanctified people, our pursuit of His holiness becoming our own continues.

Many years ago a pastor asked me if I thought I could go without sinning and live perfectly for one minute. He then asked, if one minute were possible, if I could go one hour without sin. And of course, if it was possible to go one hour, then it must be possible to go one day living perfectly, without sin. The danger in this line of thinking is that if we could just try harder we could be like God. This is where the mystery of who God is—the otherness that He is in comparison to us—is vital in our understanding of God. The mystery of God's holiness has often been described in the Latin words *mysterium tremendum*, which depict God as the fearful or awe-full mystery.² Holiness, as the Bible describes God, shows that God is completely other, above our comprehension and beyond our imagination in an awe-inspiring way. We see this awe-full side of God in His interactions with Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, while some of the mystery of God is shown in His interactions with Moses in Exodus 3 and 33.

Holiness can't be discussed without looking at the text of Isaiah 6. Isaiah was a prophet to the nation of Israel, which means he was God's mouthpiece to wake up a nation to the purposes of God. Before beginning his prophetic ministry,

Isaiah receives a vision of God from God. It is a striking vision and provides the calling on Isaiah's life to be used as a prophet for God to the nation of Israel. The vision begins with him seeing angelic beings around the Lord who is seated on high. And the angels called out to one another saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3). The repetition of the word *holy* is not just for effect; it implies that God, in His holiness, is a perfect holiness.

Isaiah's response upon seeing this holy God is, "Woe to me! . . . I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty" (Isaiah 6:5). This is one of the most significant verses in the entire Bible because of Isaiah's recognition of depravity in himself after being in the presence of the Lord.

During my nighttime jogs I came to the slow realization of my depravity or lack of ability to do what I knew was right. Paul describes this similarly by saying, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" (Romans 7:15). The more I caught glimpses of God on those runs, the more I caught wind of my own failures. The holiness of God drove me further into recognition of my own depravity. This is not to say God wants to drive us into a depression where we feel sorry for ourselves. No, He wants us to see our need for Him through our complete ineptitude to do what is right. A professor of mine, Dr. Paul Metzger, describes our state of total depravity in a helpful and accessible way: "We are in a state of total desperation and dependence on God's mercy for forgiveness, cleansing, and new life."³

Isaiah's recognition of his own depravity comes from his vivid vision of God. We are driven to a place of dependence upon God by seeing and recognizing His holiness. In seeing God, Isaiah had seen how small he was and in coming closer to God we should also come to see how small we are.

Growing up in Minnesota I never had the opportunity to see the ocean until we moved to Oregon when I was ten years old. In our trip out to Oregon I had seen the Rocky Mountains for the first time. In Minnesota the only truly big thing is the corn in early fall. Seeing both the Rocky Mountains and the vast Pacific Ocean was a startling reminder of how small I really am. Getting even a small glimpse or vision of our holy God brings us to an awareness of our own depravity and smallness.

We often avoid thinking of God in this way because His holiness can often make us feel like failures as His power and perfection is something we'll never come close to attaining. We would prefer to avoid feeling worthless and in need of help, so rather than pursue God we run away from Him. His holiness is incredibly intimidating to us, especially because we've been taught holiness is found in perfect living. Despite our push against it, God absolutely wants us to be broken, having realized our failure and our need for Him. Isaiah's reaction to the vision of God (Isaiah 6) is a reminder that God's holiness should draw us closer to Him, not push us away. God worked mightily through Isaiah because Isaiah got to the place of brokenness where God could use him. The holiness of God should bring us to a place where we are humbly bowing beneath our holy God in recognition of our need for Him. We need His presence to infiltrate our lives in order for us to become like

Him.

Like Isaiah, we must choose when being confronted with a holy God. We can choose to humbly recognize our need for God or to turn from God into a pursuit of selfish sin. It's an important fork in the road—choosing one path or the other. One road leads to holiness, the other road leads to destruction.

In my loss of innocence, I chose the wrong road. Fortunately God still calls, and He still restores His children who are ready to turn back. God waits for us. Eventually He would restore me, just as He desires to bring you close to Him.