Changing the Narrative

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Earlier this year, a quarterback for the Houston Texans football team, CJ Stroud, was interviewed after a playoff win. “CJ, your first playoff game in your first NFL season, and a record-setting performance for you,” said the presenter. “What does this moment mean?”

“I mean, it’s been amazing being in this city for as short as I’ve been,” he replied, “but the love that I’ve got, I’ve really just been doing it for Houston, man, the people back home.”

Except he didn’t actually say that.

In the interview, when asked what this moment of great success meant to him, he said this: “First and foremost I just want to give all glory and praise to my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. I mean, it’s been amazing being in this city for as short as I’ve been…” The broadcast network, NBC, didn’t want to include that part of the interview; the part to which CJ Stroud gave such significance that he placed it first, literally using the words “first and and foremost”. They simply cut it out.

When it was discovered that they had edited his answer as if he had never mentioned Jesus, the public backlash was swift and fierce. After all, this athlete was not just asked about his sport; he was asked his opinion on the meaning behind his personal achievement and had the right to say whatever was most meaningful to him. It was erased, however, not because he had said things

wrong, but because he had said the wrong things.

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When we think about the mainstream media in our generation, surely none of us believe that what we are being told is always objectively true. Rather, we see rampant bias, suppression of inconvenient opinions and outright hostility towards anything that resembles a fixed standard laid out by God. In fact, public trust in media institutions has probably never been lower than it is right now. The question is: do we have a parallel in the Word of God for what we are seeing around us right now? Has this happened before? The answer is yes.

In Numbers 13, the mobile nation of Israel was having a bit of a moment. They had been liberated from Egypt amidst catastrophic plagues; they had watched the chariots of one of the most fearful armies on earth sink to the sandy bottom of the Red Sea; they had followed Moses and Aaron and the pillars of cloud and fire; they had received their terms and conditions, the covenant, on tablets of stone; they had seen miracles and tasted manna; people had died for disobedience to the same God who had just set them free. There was a lot going on.

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And then, almost suddenly, they were at the edge of Canaan, the promised land. The journey on foot from Egypt takes little more than a week or two, but they walked for another four decades before they entered in. The reason for that delay, as many will know, was that when they were camped near the place God was giving to them, Moses sent twelve spies into the land to report on the people (Numbers 13:18), the land (verse 19), the soil, the trees, and to bring back some of the fruit (verse 20).

Unfortunately, we all know how the excursion ended.

After forty days the twelve spies returned, carrying a huge cluster of grapes with pomegranates and figs. The crop yield was promising, but the rest of the report sounded like this: “...the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large” (Numbers 13:28). It got progressively worse: “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are” (Numbers 13:31). By the end, all perspective had been lost by those who were sent in: “We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”

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Two men – Joshua and Caleb – had something different to say. They spoke with faith about entering the land. But the news from the other ten spies had already done too much damage. The people grumbled. They gave up. They spoke about stoning Joshua and Caleb. God became angry enough to destroy all the people, but Moses interceded for them, and God forgave their sin. His mercy was accompanied by a consequence, however: not one of the people who grumbled against Him would enter the land, ever. The entire nation – around a million people – would turn around and march back towards the Red Sea, and they would march until every one of them except Joshua and Caleb were dead. One bad report wiped out an entire generation.

Their story is told and re-told to this day, most often as a cautionary tale: don't be negative; don't give in to a lack of faith; believe God's promises; trust Him. Of course, these are all hugely important things to take from it, but surely there's something bigger – something that justifies the extremity of the judgment God pronounced on one million people. I think there is, and I think it speaks to the situation we are in today, where bad reports are waiting for us on every device and every screen. I don't believe the main problem was that the Israelites wavered in their faith; after all, Jesus helped people in that position, from Peter sinking beneath the water (Matthew 14:31) to the unnamed father struggling to believe as he pleaded for the deliverance of his son (Mark 9:24).

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No, the biggest problem was that the Israelites had a bad report delivered to them, a report that left God out entirely, and they allowed it to become their reality. Think about it. What the ten spies said was true: the people who lived in Canaan were powerful and the cities were fortified and large. Man for man, the inhabitants of the land were stronger than the Israelites. But God was a bigger reality than all of that. God had delivered them, God had fought for them, God had sent them. Crucially, those ten spies did not even mention God. That was their great sin.

This is not a cautionary tale against being pessimistic or seeing the glass as half-full, because you are not sent back into the desert for forty years for that. The problem was that ten men did not think God was worth including in their report, and they convinced one million people to think like them. They acted as though He did not exist and had not spoken clearly. They edited Him out, just like NBC edited Jesus out of CJ Stroud's interview. That's what made the report bad. Ten people sinned by giving news that was literally godless, but the entire nation sinned by embracing it without question.

> The media of our generation…is like the ten spies: full of bad reports, incomplete thoughts, and opinions devoid of eternal hope.

The media houses of our generation do not care about God. They are reporting events to us but have no interest in representing anything that God has said. They do not care about God or about truth, because God is the fixed point of all truth, and when you edit Him out, you're just left with your own version of whatever you think truth is. Also, when you refuse to glorify or thank God, you become unable to think straight (Romans 1:21), which accounts for most of what is making its way onto our screens and through our speakers. Why on earth would we give credibility to the thoughts of people who want nothing to do with the God we love? Why would we allow our cares, concerns and pathways of thought to be primarily placed in the hands of profit-driven entities that openly sneer at the very idea of the God of the Bible being taken seriously?

Smith Wigglesworth, the great British evangelist, famously would not let a newspaper into his house. He believed he should only read the Bible. Perhaps he was being a bit extreme, but perhaps it should be noted that he lived with more faith than just about anybody in the last hundred and fifty years. To be sure, being informed about the world is not sinful, but as the opening line of the first Psalm tells us, walking in step with the wicked, standing in the way of sinners and sitting in the seat of mockers is sinful. The media of our generation aggregates us and feeds us more and more of what we fear and what makes us angry. It taps into our worst instincts. It removes God and everything He has said. It is like the ten spies: full of bad reports, incomplete thoughts, and opinions devoid of eternal hope.

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We are God's people. We have been set free from Egypt, given clear direction, and are heading somewhere God has sent us. We cannot stop bad reports from trying to sway us, but we can decide to see them for what they are and simply stop paying so much attention to them.