Kanye and the King

Shaun Brauteseth 30 October 2019



It was June, 1934, and a young man was on an errand.

He was just twenty-three, but had already tasted enough alcohol and cigarettes to fill up two lifetimes. His parents were drunkards and his mother had drunk heavily while she was pregnant with him. When they were still toddlers, his parents would give him and his siblings alcohol and watch them stumble around for entertainment. He would light his mom's cigarettes and smoke some of them himself at an age when he should've been learning to speak and read.

He'd moved to a different state, Missouri, when his mother remarried, and there he'd created a bootleg distillery, making homemade liquor with her. His family was notorious in the small town they lived in. In fact, it later became known that some local church members, tired of the debauchery brought about by him and his mother, gathered and prayed that God would either run him out of town or save him. One of those prayers would soon be answered.

A Divine Errand

But at this moment, on a summer evening in 1934, he was on an errand. And his errand took him strolling past a country Methodist church where a meeting was underway. He was surprised to hear loud, enthusiastic singing, because he thought all church meetings were dull and lifeless. So

he went in. A woman dressed in white was on the small stage, speaking about the gospel. As he watched her speaking, he was transfixed. And he was afraid. As he later told it, he'd never seen anyone who looked so pure and he could hardly bear to look at her. He ended up wedging himself behind a stove pipe in the corner of the room, trying to hide. As she asked people to respond, he slipped out the back and went on his way.

But the next night he came back. He was haunted by what he'd seen the night before. The woman had spoken of the grace of God, of the gift of being made right with Him – that it was for all sinners, everybody, anybody. As he sat and listened again, his heart burned. He wanted this grace of God. He wanted this forgiveness. And so, when she invited people to raise their hands and be born again, his hand went up at the back of that small church building.

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The woman saw his hand, but her response wasn't excitement – it was dread. She knew who he was and was sure he'd come to the meeting to cause trouble, so she made it harder. Anyone who wanted to make a commitment to Jesus, she said, should stand. She closed her eyes and waited. When she opened them, he was standing. By now, she was getting very nervous. She had one option left – one more way to tell if this young man was serious or not. If you want to be born again, she said, make your way out of your seat and stand right here in the front. From the back she saw movement and then this young man, this troublemaker, this lifelong drunkard, this product of brokenness and sin, walked to the front, hat in hand, and stood in front of her.

Last chance to prove her wrong. 'Do you want to be born again?' she asked.

'Lady, that's what I'm here for!' he exclaimed.

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That broken young man went on to become one of the most widely-known healing evangelists of the 20th Century. His name was AA Allen, and history will remember him as both hugely anointed and hugely controversial. But more than anything, he was a living testimony of the power of God's grace working in a broken life.

Kanye's Journey

I've been thinking of the power of God's grace because of the startling recent events in the life of an equally unlikely candidate for a life transformation: Kanye West. For the uninitiated, West is a chart-topping, 140-million-album-selling, controversy-stirring, provocative and profoundly gifted rapper, singer, songwriter, producer, designer and entrepreneur who's been at the top of the industry both commercially and critically for the last fifteen years. Very few people have come close to the way he's dominated the cultural conversation during that time.

West has been outspoken, unhinged, vulgar and polarizing. He's made as many enemies as fans, and they're often the same people who switch between love for his music and repulsion at some of his antics. He's lived a life of excess in virtually every single way, and unfortunately he's invoked the name of Jesus almost from the start. Released late in 2004, his single 'Jesus Walks' was a discourse on faith that was unexpectedly embraced by mainstream radio, and yet West spent the next decade and a half living as though he answered to nobody except himself. His life wasn't a testimony to others – it was a damaging distortion of the truth.

And yet, the grace of God.

Sunday Services

In early January 2019, West began to hold weekly, invite-only gatherings that he called Sunday Services. The photos and reports were strange: The gatherings seemed part concert, part worship event, part celebrity motivational seminar, part exclusive hangout. It would seem obvious that many of the people gathered – perhaps even the majority – were not trying to serve God in any way.

The Sunday Services were confusing, featuring performances from artists who are clearly not Christian, as well as a host of songs from West's back catalogue. Someone would get up and speak for a few minutes about God's love, and then all the beautiful people would say amen and sing again.

And then things began to get interesting.

Transformation

Kanye West has declared that this year he was born again. This is a startling admission, because it means that he has understood that for all his invoking of God through his career, he wasn't actually surrendered to Him. At Howard University in Washington D.C. a week or two ago, he stood up and said, 'I'm not here for your entertainment. We're here to spread the gospel,' before opening up the Bible to Philippians 2. 'Excuse me if I mispronounce anything,' he said. 'I'm a recent convert. Means I got saved within this year.'

At his Sunday Services, short sermons are now delivered by Adam Tyson, a reformed pastor who could hardly be accused of simple motivational speaking. Incredibly, West is speaking about sin, the devil and transformation. His new album, which is about to be released, is called 'Jesus is King'.

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Possibly one of the strongest indicators that something genuine has happened is that West now regrets urging his wife, Kim Kardashian, to show off her body in public. In a very candid clip on her reality TV show, he says to her, 'You are my wife and it affects me when pictures are too sexy.' She responds that she's not on the same journey that he's on. 'Okay,' says West sadly.

Is this all real? Has Kanye West had a genuine born-again experience with the living God? It's difficult to say, but it seems clear that he's beginning to orientate his life around the gospel of Jesus, and it's incredible to witness. It's a reminder that God is always at work, calling; that His grace is extended to all sinners, everybody, anybody. Hollywood is a perilous place to take an uncompromising stand for Christianity, and West has a long and possibly lonely road to walk if he is really going to live a transformed life and still be part of the industry. But there's something here. There's something at work. Even if it takes some twists and turns, there are signs of God's grace. And when grace enters the picture, whether you're a rural alcoholic or Grammy-winning royalty, it changes you.

God's Grace

Of course, for every profession of faith there should be genuine, good fruit to back it up. And yet we'd miss something if we didn't rejoice in these signs of God being at work in the midst of the brokenness and chaos of sin. It should give us hope, courage and joy when someone – some complex, fallen human being like all of us – turns to Jesus to find life.

'We had to celebrate and be glad,' said the father of Jesus' parable to his responsible older son, 'because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' (Luke 15:32) In Matthew 20:15, the parable's landowner, who gave all his hired men the same pay regardless of their effort, expected them all to celebrate the fact that he was generous. We need to hear these words from Jesus again and again, and pay attention to how God is working in lives around the world, because we cannot make the mistake of downplaying the grace of God, the high price it cost Him, and the joy with which He gives it.

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Jesus extended grace to a repentant criminal only hours before they both died, and then to a traitorous friend a few days after He rose again. He did it with a murderer on his way to Damascus. He's done it through every age, in every century, every year, every single day, millions upon millions of times. 'Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude,' wrote John in Revelation 19:6, 'like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: 'Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns."

I'd like to think that in that great multitude we'll spot a former drunkard who became an unlikely evangelist, and maybe even a multi-millionaire rapper who found the grace of God.

And we'll praise Him all the more.