

ASH WEDNESDAY

Isaiah 58:1-12

### **The Upside of Downside**

Plagiarize.

That's a good first step, if you're looking for success.

But if writing is not your thing, you can always lie to Congress,  
run over revelers with your SUV, practice mail and wire fraud  
or work for the mob and whack a few guys.

The point is, the step toward fame and a financial fortune  
is to do something bad. Then, get caught.

Next, make the national news.

Temporarily face dishonor, disgrace and infamy.

Give interviews. Tell all. Say you're sorry — or not.

Grant more interviews. Wait five minutes.

Get contract offers from publishers, movie moguls,  
TV or radio stations.

Find yourself quickly restored to society.

Last of all — make oodles of money.

**This pattern is the new scenario for success, American-style!**

Mark Cuban, owner of the Dallas Mavericks,  
once commenting on the Kobe Bryant case,  
was quoted as saying, ***“From a business perspective,  
It’s great for the NBA. It’s reality television,  
people love train wreck television, and you hate to admit it,  
but that is the truth, that’s the reality today.”***

Perhaps he has a point.

- **Jayson Blair**, the sullied reporter of The New York Times,  
is writing a book, looking for a publisher  
and trying to sign a movie deal  
with the man who brought us TV’s A Current Affair.
- **Stephen Glass**, the shamed writer for the New Republic,  
is out hawking his book on a six-figure deal  
and awaiting the production of his movie.
- **Mike Barnicle**, defender of the little guy for the Boston Globe,  
accused of plagiarism and fabrication,

now writes for the New York Daily News as a columnist  
and is an occasional TV pundit.

- NYC publicist, **Lizzie Grubman**, mowed down 16 people  
with her SUV and is back at work, more successful than ever.  
Notoriety brought her clients.

- **R. Foster Winans**, a tarnished reporter for The Wall Street Journal,  
was convicted of mail and wire fraud charges —  
stemming from insider trading.

Today he says he's a successful ghostwriter  
and his book about his own case was a best seller.

- **Monica Lewinsky** hosts or hosted a reality TV show on Fox.

- **Col. Oliver North**, convicted (then overturned)  
obfuscator in the Iran/Contra scandal,  
has his own successful all-rant radio show.

As does the presidentially pardoned **G. Gordon Liddy**,  
formerly of Watergate.

The publicist has become the priest.

Redemption just isn't what it used to be.

It's like Jayson Blair said after being caught,

***"It's all going to work out for me."***

No more sackcloth and ashes.

No more social banishment.

No more shamefaced skulking about, head-hanging  
or head-banging.

No more losing everything, then working  
as shelf stocker in Walmart for the rest of your life.

No more scarlet letters (Isaiah 1:18).

In the 21st century, **Hester Prynne**, anti-heroine of the novel  
**The Scarlet Letter**, set in 1642, would not be ashamed.

Instead, she would write a tell-all best seller.

**Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale**, her secret lover,  
would immediately confess, lose his pulpit,  
pay child support for Pearle (their daughter),  
then rise to fortune and fame by founding his own church.

These days redemption is cheap, and being disgraced isn't so bad.

In any case, shame is unfashionable.

Shame is caused by the consciousness of our guilt,  
by the awareness of our impropriety — this feels bad.

People don't want to feel bad about themselves,  
at least not for very long,  
especially, when there's money to be made.

Shame has no status.

It used to be that feeling bad about ourselves  
for having committed a crime or a sin  
held a poignant redemptive quality. Not anymore.

Of course, shame didn't seem to have much status  
back in Isaiah's day either.

We are a people who want to feel good about ourselves  
even after doing wrong.

Our cultural story includes the gospel tale of the **Prodigal Son**.

The son did wrong. He suffered.

He was redeemed through suffering (Luke 15:11-32).

We prefer to skip the middle part and head right to the party.

According to USA Today, what little suffering or shame

there is these days, is wickedly foreshortened.

A person transgresses. He or She is caught,

briefly chastised and redeemed — all in five minutes.

Nobody leaves home as Hester Prynne did.

There's no social exile.

No more mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.

No penance.

The five-minute redemption might work for a quick fix,

and it obviously may be profitable, but it doesn't satisfy God.

The people of Isaiah's day had troubles:

oppressing the workers, letting the hungry starve,

letting the unclothed stay naked,

avoiding familial responsibilities

and generally supporting injustice through inaction,

all while going through the motions of faith,

then wondering why there was no restoration.

Their hearts weren't into it.

They performed the rites, but only because they thought doing so would cause God to help them.

In other words, they sought redemption because they thought it would be profitable for them.

Sound familiar? For them, as for us, redemption had become a tool, a means to an end. Like us, the Israelites just wanted to feel good about themselves without doing the real work.

Our five minutes to redemption and success isn't so different from their version; it's just a quicker trip.

Our suspicion is — the guilty don't mean it when they apologize. It's too painless and too fast.

It's as if it is just a way to get out of trouble and get on with life.

The Israelites' version of redemption involved sackcloth, ashes and fasting. But it never changed their behavior, and they couldn't figure out why God was angry with them.

Why do we fast, the Israelites asked, but you do not see?

Why do we humble ourselves and you don't notice? (Isaiah 58:3).

The answer is: They didn't make changes in behaviors that mattered.

God sees the shallow heart for what it is,  
even when we humans miss the signals.

Real justice didn't matter to the Israelites.

Real reform wasn't important.

All that mattered was the profit, not the prophet.

God didn't want their sackcloth. God had no use for their ashes,  
their false humility, their quarreling or their fighting.

What God wanted was genuine repentance, genuine remorse,  
genuine reform. Then there would be genuine restoration.

It's what we need. It's simple.

Redemption and restoration in the eyes of God

don't come without culpability and penance.

Culpability is saying, I did it. I'm sorry. I mean it.

Penance — or suffering — means, ***“I feel your pain — really.”***



I am really sorry. I really mean it.

It may be as simple as feeling shame, or remorse,  
or making right, the wrong committed,  
or paying an appropriate price.

God told the Israelites what was needed — help the poor,  
free those in bondage, give food to the hungry  
and clothes to the naked.

These are acts of true repentance.

These are acts of faith that arise only from a heart  
that has turned around to face God.

Turning around to face God — that is what repentance really is.

Turn from darkness, turn to the light — that's repentance.

Do these things, says God, and there will be restoration.

Do these things, says the prophet, and God will guide you continually,  
and satisfy all your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong; and you shall be like  
a watered garden, like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail (Isaiah 58:11).

Do these things and life will be good.

The liars, cheaters, plagiarizers, stealers

and even the hit men should be forgiven, if they repent,

if they turn to face God, if they make amends.

To show this, they must first restructure their lives.

If they show with their lives, they have mended their ways,

then, certainly, justice demands their restoration.

The same is true for us, even if our crimes are small,

even if our sins are barely noticed.

Jesus said to the woman, ***“Neither do I condemn you.***

***Go on your way and from now on do not sin”*** (John 8:11).

God is merciful and will forgive us our many sins,

just as we forgive those who sin against us.

Of this we are assured,

but forgiveness and restoration can come about

only when there is repentance (Matthew 6:14).

When there is repentance, evidenced by shame,  
or sincere apology, or actual remorse,  
then there will be heartfelt forgiveness and restoration,  
for the infamous and for us.

With or without a book deal. Amen.

**Source:**

Puente, Maria. "Disgrace, dishonor, infamy: They're not so bad anymore." USA Today, May 22, 2003, 1D-2D.