

Introduction

My best friend when I was growing up was my cousin Robin. He and I weren't the brightest bulbs in the pack, I admit, and did some things we shouldn't have. The word **“bonehead”** comes to mind when I think about some of those, especially this one. We played paratrooper by jumping off the roof of Robin's one story house with umbrellas. Needless to say, the outcome was eventually a bad one – a trip to the doctor's office for Robin. I still remember the question his mother asked when she found out what we did, **“What were you thinking?”** Our answer of course was, **“That the umbrellas would break our fall.”**

That action of ours illustrates what is the foundational question in human life – the one from which all other questions flow. Let's examine John 8:56-59, which teaches us what that is.

I Am

In verse 31, Jesus began speaking to a group of Jewish people who believed in Him but had not yet decided to follow Him. While what He said in verses 31-55 offended them, what He said in verses 56-59 set them off. Verse 59 records the outcome of it. They attempted to stone Him to death, but He was able to slip away to the temple instead.

So what did He say that infuriated these Jews to the point of killing Him? It started in verse 56. He stated that Abraham had a vision of the messianic kingdom He was establishing. The Jews took Him to mean that Abraham had actually seen Him and ridiculed Him for it in verse 57. It was absurd, they declared. After all, He was less than 50 years old and Abraham had lived 2000 years before. So how could Abraham have seen Him? Jesus then responded to the assertion of theirs that He had lived for less than 50 years, boldly proclaiming in verse 58, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.”**

That proclamation of His was the straw that broke the camel's back. It alluded to Exodus 3:14. In that verse, God revealed His name to

Moses. One of God's attributes is that He's self-existent. Unlike anything else that exists, He has the power of being within Himself. So, He chose a Hebrew word to be His name that expresses that attribute of His, *Yahweh*. That word is translated in Exodus 3:14, "**I am who I am,**" or as God Himself shortened it in the last line of the verse, "**I am.**" So, when Jesus said of Himself "**I am**" in verse 58, He was claiming, "**I am God.**" The Jews grasped that and tried to kill Him for saying it.

What Reality Is

Their reaction helps us grasp something about the words "**I am**" in Exodus 3:14 and John 8:58. They constitute the most dramatic statement in the entire Bible. The Hebrew and Greek words translated "**I am**" are forms of the verb "**to be.**" They express the idea of "**what is.**" They connote reality, in other words.

And that's what I want us to think about now – reality and what it is. I begin by defining it. Reality is what actually exists or is so. We classify it into a variety of categories: spiritual, psychological, physiological, social, financial, relational, educational, chemical, mathematical, and so on. Consider these examples: the triune God, the resurrection of Jesus, atoms, $1 + 1 = 2$, umbrellas don't break falls, nothing enters the mind without affecting it for good or evil, bad company corrupts good morals, to touch a person's body sexually is to touch his or her soul as well, words possess the power of penetration, and more. All of those are realities.

Illusion is the opposite of reality. Specifically, it's a mistake about what actually exists or is so. We think something is so but it isn't. Or we think something isn't so but it is. That is illusion.

Our culture, for instance, believes in and endorses what it calls "**casual sex.**" But consider the psychological reality I just mentioned. To touch a person's body sexually is to touch her or her soul as well. The fact is that all sex, even a one-night stand, has serious psychological implications. There's no such thing as casual sex. It's an illusion.

Know Reality

We now know what reality is, which leads us to the foundational question in human life, **“What is real?”** Contemplate that question and you’ll comprehend just how basic it is to human life.

One of you told me several months ago that you don’t eat white bread. You only eat wheat bread, because you’re diabetic. Even though you did it so quickly and naturally that you probably weren’t aware of it, you asked the question, **“What is real?”** and you answered it, **“White bread increases sugar levels more than wheat bread does.”**

That little anecdote makes a profound point. Whether we’re conscious of it or not, our greatest and most practical concern in life is what is real. We routinely, scores of times everyday, determine what is real and then think, feel, and act on the basis of that. We change the oil in our car every 3000-5000 miles, floss our teeth, drive the speed limit in Poland, and regularly read the Bible. In each of those life experiences and countless others, we’ve asked and answered the question, whether we realize it or not, **“What is real?”**

But did we answer it correctly? If we did, we know reality. We’re right about what is so. If we answered it incorrectly, we don’t know it. We’re mistaken about what is so, which is illusion.

Now, it’s absolutely imperative that we know reality and Calvin College professor Cornelius Platinga explains why. He wrote: **“Wisdom in Scripture is, broadly speaking, the knowledge of God’s world and the knack of fitting oneself into it. To be wise is to know reality and then accommodate yourself to it. Folly is a stubborn swimming against the stream of the universe . . . spitting into the wind . . . coloring outside the lines.”**

Notice two lines there: **“Wisdom is the knowledge of God’s world”** and **“To be wise is to know reality.”** They teach us that knowing reality is essential to living well. It’s so essential in fact that we’ll live poorly if we don’t. Mistakes about reality lead to diminishing and even devastating encounters with it. Robin’s sprained ankle and

doctor's visit is a vivid example of that. Things went poorly for him because he didn't know reality. They could have gone well if he did.

So, answer the question, "What is real" correctly. We know reality when we do. Everything that exists or is so has an order or nature that characterizes it. To know reality means to comprehend the substance of that order or nature. All of us are capable of doing that but it takes effort, serious effort, to do it. Specifically, we must do three things.

First, learn what the Bible says about reality. I say again what I've said a hundred times before. The Bible gives us the best information about the most important matters in human life. So we begin there and learn as much as we can about reality from it. I know, for instance, that to touch a person's property is to touch him or her, which compels me to respect people's property. I learned that reality from Exodus 22.

Second, we learn what "**people in the know**" say about reality. We choose good masters or teachers and learn as much as we can about reality from them. I know, for instance, the power of intention. I learned that life-defining reality from reading William Law's book *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.

And third, we learn what our own observations and experiences say about reality. We gather facts by analyzing the things we observe and experience. We then draw valid conclusions about reality by applying good logic to those facts. I know, for instance, that it's detrimental not to understand what we believe. I learned that reality from observing that most Christians die reluctantly and by analyzing why they do.

That then is how we know reality, which is essential to living well.

Accommodate Reality

But while it's essential, it isn't enough. We desperately need to grasp that. We must do more than know reality. Once we know it, we must then accommodate it. We must fit ourselves into it. That means that we act consistently with the order or nature of things. We live out the practical implications of that order or nature.

Accommodating reality stabilizes our lives and benefits us. Not accommodating it destabilizes our lives and harms us. Listen carefully to what I'm going to say. When what we desire and do conflicts with reality, sooner or later, reality always wins. That's a million dollar insight that we need to know and teach to our children. Sooner or later, reality always wins. So let's accommodate it. Let's fit ourselves into it.

Take this as an example of what I mean. Question – What is real? Answer - Society cannot stand and will not tolerate undisciplined people! If we don't discipline our children, someone else, likely many someone else's, eventually will. It may be a principal, professor, bully, employer, policeman, spouse, or neighbor, to name a few. The problem is they won't be as loving or kind as we would be in doing it. That is a fact. That is reality and all of us know it. But it isn't enough just to know it. We must accommodate it as well. We do that in several ways, one of which is to discipline our minor children. We reliably set consequences on their conduct in order to create character.

Now let's ponder what happens when we do and don't accommodate that reality. Our five year old does mean things and we punish him for them. He gets a spanking, a time out, an activity taken away, or a deduction from his allowance. He is now twenty-five and doesn't do mean things. He fits in nicely and society accepts him. Or our five year old does mean things and we don't punish him. We let him get away with it. And now he's twenty-five and does mean things and society punishes him. His employer fires him, a bully beats him up, a group kicks him out, a policeman arrests him, and on it goes.

The lesson is clear. Sooner or reality always wins. So, let's do two things. First, know reality by asking and answering, "**What is real?**" Second, once we know it, accommodate it – fit ourselves into it.

Jesus Is Real

That lesson has an ultimate application and it's to Jesus. Notice what Jesus did when He designated Himself "**I am**" in verse 58. It's

actually the boldest thing a person can do. He took the verb form that means **“to be”** and applied it to Himself. The stunning implication is this. There is a first answer to the foundational question in human life, **“What is real?”** That answer is, **“Jesus!”** That means that He is a totally unique and separate kind of reality. He is the dominant and superior reality of the universe – infinite and perfect in all things. Or more simply put, He is the great **“I am!”**

That’s the reality and now that we know it, we need to accommodate it. We need to fit ourselves into it.

Tragically, most people don’t. A.W. Tozer explains what they do instead: **“Sin has many manifestations but its essence is one. A moral being . . . sits on the throne of his own selfhood and from that elevated position declares, ‘I am.’”** That is a profound insight. Most people act in their everyday lives as if they, not Jesus, are the great **“I am,”** the dominant reality of the universe. They put **“I”** on the throne of their selfhood. They make having their own way, fulfilling their own desires, their rule of life. They’re living against reality when they do. The result is that they forfeit the condition of life that everyone wants and seeks – pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy.

Don’t be like most people. Accommodate the reality of Jesus instead. He is the great **“I am”** of the universe. So, we make Him the great **“I am”** of our persons and lives as well. We put Him on the throne of our selfhood. We make having His way, fulfilling His desires, as our rule of life. We’re accommodating reality when we do. The result is that we increasingly achieve the condition of life that everyone wants and seeks – pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy.

Conclusion

I close with an instructive observation by author Philip K. Dick, **“Reality is that, which when you stop believing in it, won’t go away.”** He’s right isn’t he. Reality doesn’t go away. So, let’s know and accommodate it. It will be well with our lives and soul if we do.