

Divine Ecstasy
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What comes to mind when I ask you to think about ecstasy? The English dictionary tells us that ecstasy means an exalted state of feeling, rapture or extreme delight. If you are like most adults, you may associate ecstasy with sex. That seems to be the predominate connection in our society. As a whole, the culture seeks ecstatic experience, whether sexual, psycho pharmaceutical or experiential. We want to have more, so much more that the experience will carry us away. We are thrill seekers.

Did you know that the English word ecstasy comes from a Greek word ekstasis? The Greek root means, “to remove out of its place”. It comes from the combined words ek (out of) and stasis (stationary). Isn’t that exactly what we want when we seek ecstasy? We want to leave behind some state and be moved into another place. We want something – sex, drugs, extreme sports, art, music – to take us away from our ordinary lives and transport us into the super-sensitive, mind altering realm of the amazing. We don’t want to feel just ordinary. We want to feel “really alive”.

Men who witnessed the actions of Yeshua were also transported out of themselves. They experienced ekstasis. But their experience led to something quite different than the super-reality that we seek, as we shall see.

In the fifth chapter of Luke, there is a well-known story about healing a man who was crippled. Yeshua’s reputation was spreading across the countryside. People crowded around him no matter where he went. On this particular day, Yeshua was teaching in a house near Galilee. Luke tells us that several Pharisees and doctors of the Jewish law were present, listening and observing. Some men came to the house carrying their friend who was crippled and could not walk. They knew about Yeshua’s demonstrations of healing and they knew that if they could only get to Yeshua, their friend might walk again. But they were in for a surprise.

Imagine the scene for yourself:

Asa looked up from his stretcher at the four friends who were carrying him. Joab, on the right, had been his friend since childhood. He could still remember the games they played in the back of his father’s bakery, before the accident that left his crippled for life. Elam and Amnon, his cousins, were never far away after the fall. They always seemed to cheer him up no matter how much his back ached. Now he saw the sweat running down their arms as they struggled through the dusty street. Levi, the last of the four, reminded Asa of himself before God took away his ability to walk. Maybe fifteen, Asa guessed. He was

the son of a neighbor of Joab who immediately volunteered to help when Joab thought of the idea. The four of them had carried Asa for nearly two miles. Now the destination was almost in site.

“Look at all the people!” exclaimed Levi. “I’ve never seen so many here.”

He was right. As soon as they turned the street corner, the front of the house where Yeshua was teaching became a mass of humanity, pushing, shoving, straining to see and hear what was happening.

“Put the bed down”, said Joab. The four men lowered the cot to the ground. Levi was glad for the break. Already his hands were blistered and the weight made his shoulders ache. He wiped sweat from his forehead.

“Look, you go up through the crowd and see if we can get in there”, Joab said to Elam. “See if someone will help us get to the house”. Elam moved off toward the house, squeezing his way between people. “How’re you doing?” Joab asked Asa, looking down on the man stretched out on the cot.

“OK, I guess. You know, you don’t have to do this. I don’t expect it. I don’t see how we can get through all these people.”

“We’ve come this far. We’re not going to give up on you, not now. I know that if we can just get to the Teacher, he will heal you. I saw him heal that man in Capernaum. I saw it with my own eyes. I’m telling you, all he did was speak and the man was healed. I know he can heal you. We just have to get to him”.

Asa and the others knew that Joab was adamant. Nothing was going to stop him from getting his life-long friend in front of Yeshua. But how?

Elam was coming back. “There’s no way,” he said. “The crowd is so thick that I couldn’t even get to the door. I had to shout to a boy sitting in the window. He told me that inside there are a bunch of rabbis and Pharisees. They aren’t letting anyone else in”.

“We could wait here”, Levi suggested. “He’s got to come out sometime.”

“No!” It was Joab again. “We might not get close even then. When he comes out, the crowd will go nuts. Everyone will push forward. We might miss our chance. There’s got to be another way.” The four men sat on the ground, surrounding their friend. “All this way”, thought Joab. “All this way carrying him and now, right at the end, stopped dead.” He leaned back on the stone wall, his mind reeling.

Joash suddenly jumped up. “I know. I know how we can do it. We can get him through the roof!”

“What?”

“The roof. The roof. Look, we can go around the back and use the outside stairs to the roof. Every house around here has storage on the roof. We’ll go up there and pull away the tiles. Then we can lower Asa’s cot right into the room. Who’s going to stop us?”

“He’s right. This house is just like mine. There is a small hole in the center that is surrounded by tiles. We can just pull them up and make it bigger. It’ll work.” Levi blurted out.

“OK, we need some rope.” Joab’s mind was in full gear now. “Elam, go back down the street and get some rope from the stable we passed. Levi, check out the back stairs. Amnon and I will carry Asa back to the corner and around the back of the house. We’ll meet there. Let’s go.”

Half an hour later, the discussion between Yeshua and the rabbis was suddenly interrupted when loud noises on the roof turned into falling tiles clattering to the floor. Four faces soon peered into the open space in the ceiling. Then a cot came through the hole, being lowered gently toward Yeshua.

“Yeshua”, shouted Joab. “This is our friend Asa. Help him, please.”

Asa’s cot came to rest. The four faces stared down from above as Yeshua moved toward the crippled man.

Asa looked into Yeshua’s face. Compassion, concern and something else. Yeshua looked up. Joab, Levi, Elam and Amnon peered into the room. The Son of Man saw their hope,

beamed from heaven through human eyes. Luke adds the rest: “And seeing their faith, he said to him, “Man, your sins have been forgiven.””

“What did he just say?” the rabbi whispered to the Pharisee on his left. “Did I hear what I think I heard?”

“Yes, I heard it too. Blasphemy, utter blasphemy. Who does he think he is?”

“He can’t do that. He isn’t allowed.”

“We’ve got him this time. Now he’s really stepped over the line”.

Yeshua turned to the religious zealots. “Why are you calculating such thoughts?” he asked them all. “What do you suppose is easier, to say, “Your sins have been forgiven” or to say “Rise up and walk”.

He paused, just enough to let the question sink in. “But now I’ll show you so you will know that the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins”. Yeshua stopped. The room was as quiet as a tomb. Every eye was riveted on him. He turned to Asa. He raised his hand and looked right into Asa’s eyes.

“Listen to me. Get up, pick up your cot, and go home.” It was like a thunderbolt on a perfectly quiet night. His voice was so strong, so completely confident that it shook the stone walls. Asa knew without any hesitation that he could do exactly what Yeshua asked. He stood up. The crowded room gasped all together. He picked up his cot and rolled up the ropes. The rabbis and Pharisees were so shocked their mouths hung open like dead fish. Asa put the cot under his arm and walked out of the house. From the rooftop there were shouts of joy, exclamations of praise to God and a clatter of feet running to the back stairs. The crowd at the door melted away, clearing a path for the once crippled man who was now striding confidently to meet his friends. The whole place was in an uproar.

Now comes the word we want to understand. Luke 5:26 says, “And ekstasis seized them all and they began glorifying God, and they were filled with fear, . . .” In English Bibles, we find the words “amazement took hold of them”. But that isn’t quite right, is it? It’s not

just that they were “overwhelmed with wonder” (the definition of “amaze”). We need to recall the true Greek idea here. Ekstasis indicates that they were “moved out of place”, that they were suddenly and unexpectedly ushered into something that took them to a place they never expected to be. They were “beside themselves” in shock and awe. Why does Luke choose this word? Why doesn’t Luke just say that they were “amazed” or “excited” or “surprised”? The answer is found in the next part of this verse – “they were filled with fear”. Did you notice that? Did you say to yourself, “Why were these people filled with fear when they had just seen a great demonstration of God’s power?” “What made them afraid?” Were the same people who experienced ekstasis the ones who were afraid?

There were two kinds of people at the house. On the roof were the ones who hoped beyond hope that God would see their pain and sorrow and heal their friend. In the room were the ones who hoped that they would undermine the popularity of Yeshua and show that Yeshua was a religious heretic. Now, relive the dynamics of this event. Yeshua stands among those who think that they have a handle on God. They know the theology. They know the Scriptures. They know the commentaries. They know the rituals. In their thoughts, God is just exactly like they think He is. They have God in a box. This man Yeshua is calling their entire structure of religion into question. He espouses a different view of God. A view that is not traditional, not orthodox and not to their liking. So, they come along to debate. “We’ve got all the answers. We know how you should act. We know what you should believe. Let’s test this man out and see if he fits.”

Suddenly something happens. Yeshua is confronted with a paralytic.

I can imagine what the scribes thought when they saw that. “Well, it’s pretty clear that the reason this man is paralyzed is because he is a sinner. God punishes sinners. Bad things happen to people who don’t obey God. How else can you explain it? God rewards the good and punishes the bad. If something bad happens to you, it’s because you did something wrong and God is going to judge you.”

Then Yeshua forgives the man’s sins.

WHAT! You’ve got to be kidding! How can any man presume to do what only God can do? The tragedy of this man’s life is the result of being punished by God. How can Yeshua think that he has any right at all to take away God’s judgment?

There are two breaches of protocol here. Both are very upsetting to the religious majority. One of the most important beliefs of the Jews was that God judges sin. God punishes those who sin and rewards those who do good, and He enforces these punishments in

ways that no man can resist. This idea is inseparable from the Jewish conception of the Law. If a man is being punished, and all evil that occurs in a man's life is a sign of punishment, then by logical deduction, it must be the case that sin is involved. The problem for the Jews is even deeper than this. In this world it often appeared that evil acts were not punished. Since it was impossible that God would allow evil without judgment, this could only mean that God would judge such evil acts and assess divine retribution in the future. Therefore, every man would stand in front of God the Judge and face possible wrath. Since a single sin could cause anyone to fall into the hands of a wrathful God, no Jew could ever be certain that at the last moment of life they would not make a mistake that would propel them into everlasting torment. There simply was no certainty about life at all. Is it any wonder that the Pharisees were meticulous about keeping every letter of the Law? They lived every day of their lives in fear that if they should die they would face God's punishment for some sin they had forgotten. Life was a vise, squeezing the Jew between his wish to remain in God's good graces and his need to live in a world that presented nothing but moral traps.

When Yeshua said to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", he said something that no orthodox Jew could have ever come to believe. Yeshua told this man that God would not punish him. Yeshua told this man that his eternal destiny was secure. This was not only blasphemy but preposterous. The reason that the Pharisees were so incensed was that in their view only God was capable of providing this certainty and only when you were dead. Even more inflammatory was the fact that Yeshua said this to a man who was obviously suffering from God's own punishment for sin. The man was crippled. God must be punishing his sins. So, how could he be forgiven?

In addition to this theological objection, Yeshua violated every ritual protocol in his dealing with this man. For the Jew, it was simply impossible to draw near to God unless ritual purification rites were performed. Only in a state of religious cleanliness could man approach the Holy Lord of the Universe. To approach God without first observing the explicitly required rituals was to invite immediate displeasure and potentially immediate fatal consequences. Jewish history demonstrated this. But Yeshua did none of this. He did not observe ritual cleansing or water purification. He did not follow the appropriate sequence of prayers. And the worst offense of all was that he was in the presence of deformity – the paralytic – an obvious source of uncleanness.

When Yeshua said, "Your sins are forgiven", he challenged everything that the Pharisees believed. Everything. The character and nature of God. The role of God as Judge. The relationship between judgment and sin. The function of ritual purity. The concept of God's utter holiness. It was simply impossible for these men to hear the words that Yeshua spoke and not consider him a raving madman, completely outside of the will of the Almighty God.

Then Yeshua did something that destroyed their world. He healed the cripple. Ekstasis. Everything out of order. Everything upside-down. An intellectual roller coaster. A spiritual abyss. One minute I have God right where I want Him. The next minute everything that I thought I knew (and had control over) is a jumbled mess. A theological earthquake. My oh-so-perfect solutions to what God can and can't do are suddenly shaken apart. My ordered beliefs about who God is and what He like, what my world is all about, what I can know – blown away. I am pushed out of myself into a place I can't even imagine. Everything is upset. I'm going to throw up!

The men on the roof understood. God was wonderful. God was powerful. God was incredible. Praise God. Glory to God. God could do anything. Look at Asa! He just got up and walked! Hallelujah!

But the scribes and Pharisees had a different reaction. What is happening to my world? How can I believe what I just saw? No, it can't be true! It has to be a trick. I know what God does, and He doesn't do things like this! God can't be like this. He just can't!

For the men on the roof, ekstasis led to eucharistos, the Greek word for "thanksgiving" (we find it in "Eucharist" – the thanksgiving meal). But for the Pharisees, ekstasis led to phobos – fear. They were suddenly afraid that everything that they thought they knew about God was not true. The fear of being wrong. The fear of being humiliated. The fear of being embarrassed, disgraced. What should have been unbridled joy became unrelenting fear.

This has to stop. This man must be killed. This is truth too terrible to allow.

"NO, Yeshua. Go away. Don't upset my beliefs. I like them just the way they are. I don't want to think that God might do things I can't understand or don't approve. God has to play by my rules. I want to be right, to be looked up to, to be honored, to be respected."

Divine ecstasy is ready to carry you away. Divine ecstasy can seize you and transport you to a place that you never imagined. It can turn your apple cart upside down. And when it does, when God completely surprises you, you can do one of two things – you can shout praises and say thanksgivings, or you can run for cover. Are you ready to let God upset your life? Are you ready to wake up each morning in anticipation that God will surprise you today? Can you hardly contain yourself waiting for God to completely mix up your expectations? The men on the roof knew that if they could only get into His presence, anything could happen. The men in the room thought that they had God walled in. What about you? Are you on the roof or in the room?