Short of the Glory of God: Human Nature in *Lord of the Flies*

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What does it mean to be human? In the 1954 novel *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding gives a dark, unsettling answer. Golding’s story strands a group of English boys on a tropical island and shows what could happen when all the things that normally keep people in line, like civilization, rules, and duty, are gone. The short answer—it’s not pretty.

**The Setting**

Golding tells us precious little about the boys, who range in age from six to twelve, as they stumble across the beach. They are dazed survivors of a plane crash. The reader spends the most time with four characters. Ralph is fair and tall, a natural, but reluctant, leader. Piggy is an orphan, raised by his aunt. He is short and stubby and wears thick spectacles. Jack, the red head, comes with a position. He leads a choir, the only group that pre-dates the crash. These boys march onto the scene, organized, with Jack as their head. Simon is slight, has black hair, and follows along at first as part of Jack’s choir. Simon is shy and insecure, but he grows stronger.

To their credit, the boys realize quickly they need to organize. They learn they are the only humans around, and they are not sure if, or how soon, a rescue might happen. Food, shelter, fresh water, and a signal fire for ships and planes, whether around by accident or design, are all pressing needs. But nothing can be accomplished individually. Given the new reali-
ty, they collapse into a democracy. Though Jack volunteers himself to lead, Ralph is eventually chosen as “chief” by a vote.

The first decisions are simple. Ralph decides Jack and his choir should start and mind a fire. Ralph and the others attempt to build shelters, while young boys carry water. The boys struggle against the elements and grow tired of fruit. Jack’s choir transforms into a hunting party in search of feral hogs. Their efforts are aided by Jack’s large, sharp knife, which he proudly displays. The ingredients for survival, and perhaps a thriving settlement, are present: natural resources, a system of authority, and plenty of work to be done. Instead, the story turns toward the darkest corners of human nature. The fragile community dissolves into strife, violence, and inhumanity.

**Checks on Human Nature Dissolve**

Like cars on a highway, the boys arrived at the island with guardrails in place. They carried not just civilization, but *English* civilization. As Jack says early in the story, “after all, we’re not savages. We’re English, and the English are best at everything.” When these children, in their time and place, think of England, they think of the culture that defined the British Empire, which spanned the globe. They think of themselves not as savages, but as people who civilize savages. There is more than a whiff of superiority in Jack’s statement, an expectation that things will be fine simply because of the heritage they carry. For Golding, none of this matters. Away from English soil, the boys shed their proper school uniforms and the civilization they represent. On an island where the Union Jack never waved, savagery lurks within the heart of a literal choirboy who should know better. When events spiral out of control, Ralph confronts a tribe transformed, with boys wearing blood as warpaint. “Are we savages or what?” he cries.

Piggy arrives with a firm grip on “Auntie’s rules.” Ralph claims they need rules to get things done. Jack says, “we’ll have rules!” and when those rules are broken, “Wacco!” In *Lord of the Flies*, an orderly group of children are suffering a catastrophe. As they grapple with how to respond, they begin with guidelines for behavior. Every society, from the simplest tribe
far removed from “modern” civilization to a sprawling nation that covers a continent, requires some clear standards. There must be expectations. In the book, the first, and simplest rule revolves around the conch shell. Ralph blows the shell to call the boys together in assembly. As they meet, and try to make decisions, whoever holds the conch gets to speak. While there is initial tussling over it, the symbolism of the shell’s authority stands, but not for long. Eventually, the shell is destroyed, along with every meaningful restraint on the boys’ behavior. Rules are not enough to deter corruption.

Jack is always more excited about enforcing rules than following them. He assumes leadership of a splinter tribe, not because he is chosen, but because he is fierce and frightening. The process of the hunt, and the glee found in killing wild boars, changes Jack. Rules are no longer determined collectively. Liberated from structure, Jack’s word becomes the law, and the biggest, strongest boys threaten and intimidate anyone who resists. Jack’s hunters steal Piggy’s glasses, leaving him blind. As he finds the courage to confront Jack, Piggy knows instinctively there are no more rules. He appeals instead to what is “right.” Finally, he targets self-interest. “Which is better, law and rescue, or hunting and breaking things up?” Piggy’s words are uttered moments before one of the great cruelties of the book, an act that demonstrates Jack’s ultimate power over his tribe. He summons the boys to kill, and they oblige.

The desire to be rescued galvanizes the boys early. Their best hope is to start and keep a fire burning. Initially, the boys take this duty seriously, not only for selfish reasons, but for the good of the community. The surest path home is simple, even if it is unlikely. Jack’s hunters manage the fire. The group can share responsibilities by rotating tasks. Some gather wood, others keep watch, and everyone else can rest. Duty is most effective and easily achieved when it is commonly understood. Social pressure, sometimes subtle, encourages people to embrace duties though they may be difficult. Parents feel a duty to care for their children, while later in life, those same children feel a responsibility to care for those parents. Police officers must protect the vulnerable. Walking down a clean school hallway, a teacher or student may feel the duty to bend down and pick up a random scrap of trash on the floor. In Lord of the Flies, the collective duty to tend
the fire erodes. The hunters let it burn out because they are hungry for meat. As the tribe fractures, there aren’t enough boys to keep the flame lit. Ralph understands the importance of the duty as he confronts the rogues. “The fire’s the most important thing. Without the fire we can’t be rescued. I’d like to put on war-paint and be a savage. But we must keep the fire burning.” Ralph’s arguments are ineffective because the boys are no longer motivated by duty but live to satisfy their lust for blood and meat.

**Yes, There Is a Monster**

Throughout the story, the small boys chatter and worry about a beast on the island. They fear rustling leaves and the blowing wind; they read malevolence into every movement. Later, even the bigger boys convince themselves they have seen a horrid brute out to kill them. Of all the boys, only Simon changes for the better on the island. He discovers his voice and learns to assert himself. He serves others even when it is dangerous. As the beast grows in the boys’ imagination, Simon sees the truth. He understands there are monsters on the island, but they are not beasts from the land, sea, or air. “What I mean is…maybe it’s only us.” At that moment, Simon is trying, says Golding, “to express mankind’s essential illness.”

Human beings, the Bible tells us, are, unlike any other part of creation, made in God’s image. He looked upon his creation, including Adam and Eve, and called it good (Gen. 1:26-31). But we know the human story only begins there. In the Garden of Eden, God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Eve, tempted by the serpent, disobeys God, and Adam soon follows her into sin. Through sin, toil, pain, and death become part of the human condition (Gen. 3). The Apostle Paul tells us that because of Adam’s sin, we too were “made sinners” (Rom. 5:19). This sin stains everyone, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Sin takes many forms, from the white lie to murder, and it cannot be avoided. *Lord of the Flies* reminds us that our “essential illness” can be found even among small, seemingly innocent children. Marooned in paradise, where food and water are abundant, they just have a few rules to follow. Soon, it becomes obvious that like us, the boys are in dire need of rescue. Like all human beings, they cannot save themselves.
William Golding, the author of *Lord of the Flies*, was in the Royal Navy in World War II. He served on a destroyer and was part of the Normandy invasion of June 6, 1944. Golding commanded a landing craft. Golding saw, in the face of war, the best and the worst of humans: good and evil, bravery and cruelty. *Lord of the Flies* demonstrates the same thing. There is ingenuity as the boys use Piggy’s glasses to start a fire, and bravery when Simon tries to persuade them the only monster on the island is found in their own hearts. There is also horror and gore as blood is spilled and death is celebrated. Human nature is complicated. Still in God’s image, we are capable of majestic deeds, but riddled with sin, we are also capable of great wickedness. Many things prevent us from being as evil as we might be, even in our daily lives. Civilization, rules or laws, and duty are just some of those things, and we should be thankful whenever we find these medicines to manage our “essential illness.”