It Was Not Good

On the One Vocation Running From Adam to the Open Tomb

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Don’t Think It Strange

There is a verse from 1 Peter that opens this whole conversation:

> Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. (1 Peter 4:12–13)

Whenever we go through trials, the first thing most of us reach for is *why me, Lord?* That seems to be near the surface of human nature. But Peter says: *don’t think it strange.* And then he turns the suffering inside out: *rejoice, to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings.* Paul makes the same paradoxical turn in 2 Corinthians 1:

> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God . . . And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation. (2 Corinthians 1:3–4, 7)

Look at this strange ripple. God sends his Son. The Son suffers and dies. The writer of Hebrews tells us this means our Lord *understands* what it is to be tried and to suffer; he is now

an advocate who pleads our cases with full knowledge of what we are walking through (Hebrews 4:15). Then we, as humans on the receiving end of that mercy, are *consoled* in our suffering by the very God who has shared in it, and the consolation does not stop with us. We are asked to take what we have received and pass it along to others who are suffering.

It is one of the most beautiful ripples of God's love. Compassion comes from him, lands on us in our suffering, transforms us, and then flows outward through us to others. We become agents of the very mercy that has been shown to us. Every one of us has *somebody at our gate*. Every one of us has someone to whom we can be the conduit of grace. That ripple is not a small thing. It is the work the whole book of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, has been describing.

The Vocation That Began in a Garden

To see that work in its proper scope, we have to go back to the very beginning.

> Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion . . ." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:26–27)

The word translated *man* in most English Bibles is *humankind*: a collective noun. And then verse 27 falls into a small poem. *In the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.* The image of God in the earth is borne by humanity *together*. In the New Testament this gets revealed as the body of Christ: We are, according to Romans 8, conformed to the image of the one Son, and we together are the image of God in the world.

And what is the work of the image? *Dominion.*

> Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1:28)

We do not have wings, but the birds, who are kings of the air, are given to our dominion. We can barely swim, but the fish, who are kings of the sea, are given to our dominion. We are not the fastest or the strongest beasts on the earth, but the lion, the king of the jungle, is given to our dominion. The image is not lodged in our basic creaturely attributes. *All* creatures have the breath of life. All creatures have eyes and ears and locomotion. What humans have that the other creatures do not is *a mandate to rule and to take accountability for the world*. That accountability *is* the image. When you read the prophets describing God anthropomorphically (God's eyes, God's nose, God's mouth, God's hand) that is not where the image lives. The image lives in the *vocation*. *Think king and queen.* We are kings and queens of the earth, given the task of imaging God into creation.

The First Not Good

Move into Genesis 2 and watch what God does. He forms the man out of the dust of the earth and breathes into his nostrils the breath of life:

"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

This earthling (this little gumby figure, this animated lump of clay) once was a green slab of nothing. You and I were the same. And it is amazing what God formed in the earth. But the breath of God animates the clay for the work he has called us to.

At the end of chapter 1 he had said *it was very good*. Day after day he kept saying *good, good, good*. Now in chapter 2, for the first time, God says something else:

"And the Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him'" (Genesis 2:18).

It is not good for man to be alone. And notice how God resolves the problem. He does not snap his fingers and produce a partner. He brings every animal of the field and every bird of the air to the man, and Adam names them: Adam doing the work of dominion, classifying, *recognizing*. And in the act of naming the animals two by two, Adam discovers that none of them is a counterpart to him. The other creatures all have partners. He alone does not. It is almost as though God lets Adam *arrive* at the not-good through the work of recognition. He does not pronounce a verdict over Adam's head; he lets Adam feel the absence.

Then God puts Adam into a deep sleep. The Hebrew word is one used elsewhere when God puts prophets into a deep sleep before giving them prophetic words. Adam is functioning here as a prophet, receiving a revelation in unconsciousness. And what God does next is more dramatic than most English translations let on. The word usually rendered *rib* is actually ambiguous in Hebrew; every other time it appears, it means *side*, as in *the side of a river*. The image is not a small bone delicately removed; it is closer to *God tearing the man in half*. Out of one side, the woman is formed.

Adam wakes up. He sees what God has made. And he breaks into the first poem in the Bible:

> This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Genesis 2:23–24)

One, then two, then one again. That is the architecture of the moment. God declares that aloneness is *not good*. He tears the one in half. Adam sees the woman and knows that she is what was missing. And they come back together as one flesh. That is the pattern.

If you will believe me, *the entire Bible is about this one move*. God takes the many and brings them back to one. He wants to gather all things together in him. Division and separation (whether in the individual home between husband and wife, between parents and children, in tribes and cities and nations) runs against the deep grain of God's purpose. There is a driving force at work in this world, the presence of God bending everything toward gathering. That is the whole book.

The Tower and the Two Unities

Now watch what happens when humans try to do the gathering on their own terms. By Genesis 11, after the flood, all the nations are speaking one language and saying this to each other:

"Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4).

Lest we be scattered. But God had said the opposite. Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. The blessing was to spread out, to be scattered as image-bearers across the whole creation. Babel says no. Let us not be scattered. Let us make a name for ourselves. Let us press everyone into the same shape.

So there are two unities. There is *Babylonian* unity: the unity of coercion, of one culture imposing itself on the others, of fear keeping everyone in line. And there is the unity God has called us to, *free-will unity from the heart*. No one will ever be compelled into the kingdom

through fear of hell, judgment, or death. Nobody is going to be fear-intimidated or coerced into loving God. The coerced unity of Babel produces a tower; the free-will unity of God produces a family. Adam waking from his sleep does not announce, *Here is how it's going to be in my house, woman.* He sees a counterpart, recognizes her as bone of his bone, and the two come together by mutual recognition. That is the model.

That word *helper*, *ezer* in Hebrew, that God uses for the woman in Genesis 2:18 is used twenty-one times in the Hebrew Bible. Twice it refers to the woman. Three times it refers to a powerful nation that comes to Israel's aid in war. And the other sixteen times, *ezer* refers to *God himself*: God as the helper of his people, the one who comes alongside when there is a deficiency and supplies what is needed. So the first instance of the *ezer* in the human story, a wife in the garden, is a small picture of the great pattern that runs through all of Scripture. When we are alone and not-good, God brings *help*. Sometimes that help comes through another human. Sometimes it comes through a nation. And ultimately it comes through God himself, who in Christ comes alongside to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Jesus said it himself just before the cross:

"It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you" (John 16:7).

The Helper. The Greek word is *paraklētos*, the one who comes alongside, who teaches, who guides into places we would never have gone alone. The *ezer* of Genesis 2 is now the Paraclete of John 16. This is the help we are looking for.

Tend and Keep

Genesis 2 has one more detail to attend to:

"Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it" (Genesis 2:15).

To tend and to keep. Those two Hebrew verbs together appear in only one other context in the Pentateuch: They are the verbs used for what the *priests* do in the tabernacle. Adam and Eve in the garden are not just farmers. They are priests in a sanctuary. And the tabernacle itself, when it is built later, is decorated as a *garden*: animals embroidered on the walls, trees worked into the tapestry, the seven-branched candlestick like a tree of life, the table of showbread piled with abundance. The tabernacle was Eden, miniaturized. And the priests went in and *tended and kept* it, just as Adam and Eve had done in the original.

So in Genesis 2, the vocations come together. Adam and Eve are *king and queen* of the creation. They are *prophet and prophetess*, receiving God's words and naming what they see. They are *priest and priestess*, tending and keeping the sanctuary. The whole image-bearing project is here in seed form.

The First Clothing

And then everything goes wrong. The serpent deceives them, they eat, and:

"Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings" (Genesis 3:7).

Up to this point, they had been *naked and not ashamed*. Now they cover themselves. Here is the universal pattern of the fall: the first instinct of humans aware of their guilt is *to clothe themselves*. To put up a guard. To establish protection. To stop being seen. There is no transparency, no openness, no vulnerability.

Think about how dramatic that would be if we lived this way literally. If we all showed up on a Sunday morning with nothing on, we would be deeply uncomfortable, and rightly so; I

am not advocating for that. But *figuratively* we are called to that kind of vulnerability before God and before one another. The fall produces mask-wearers, hiders, people who clothe themselves emotionally and relationally to obscure who they really are. We become opaque to each other and to ourselves. We protect. We guard. We perform.

And then God speaks the consequences of the fall:

"To the woman He said: 'I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; in pain you shall bring forth children; your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you'" (Genesis 3:16).

That last clause, *and he shall rule over you*, is part of the *curse*. It is not how it was meant to be. In Genesis 1, *both* the man and the woman were given dominion. The next time the word *rule* appears after Genesis 1 is right here in Genesis 3, not over creation, but over each other. The original dominion was shared; the fallen dominion is contested. The first relationship the curse breaks is the one closest to us. The person we have chosen to love the most is now the person across whom we will most contest power.

Brother Against Brother

And then the very next chapter, the curse spreads outward from the marriage to the next ring of human relation. Cain rises in jealousy against his brother Abel. And listen to the warning God gives Cain before the murder happens:

"If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it" (Genesis 4:7).

Look at the construction. *Sin's desire is for you, but you should rule over it.* That is the *identical grammatical pattern* God just used to Eve: *your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you*. Genesis is drawing a direct parallel. The contested rule of husband-and-

wife in Genesis 3 is mirrored, one chapter later, by the contested rule of brother-and-sin in Genesis 4. The same fracture, in two registers. And Cain loses the contest. Sin's desire pounces. He takes his brother out into the field, and Mosaic law later picks up exactly this: *anything done in the field is premeditated*; the field is where intent gets carried out where there are no witnesses. Cain murders Abel in the field, and the second fracture of human relation is complete.

And the violence escalates. Lamech, a few generations later, kills a man who has merely *offended* him, and then composes a boasting song about his violence:

"For I have killed a man for wounding me, even a young man for hurting me. If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold" (Genesis 4:23–24).

From husband-and-wife to brother-and-brother to *stranger-killed-for-an-insult*. The fracture spreads outward in concentric rings until, by Genesis 6, the whole creation is consumed:

"The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence" (Genesis 6:11).

Judgment Could Not Solve It

God's first response to the violence is judgment. The flood. The whole creation reset. Noah and his family alone preserved through the waters. And what is striking, almost troubling, is what happens *after* the flood. The same violence reasserts itself. The same divisions return. The seventy nations come out of Noah's three sons and immediately scatter into hostility. By Genesis 11 we are back at Babel. *Judgment did not solve the violence problem.* The flood did not solve the sex problem. The flood did not solve the dominance problem. The devil somehow came through the waters intact, and the human heart on the dry side of the flood was no different than the human heart on the wet side.

So God tries a different approach. He says, in effect: *I am going to try a different tack. I love humanity too much to leave them with judgment as the only word. I am going to bless.* And he calls Abram and his barren wife Sarai out of Ur of the Chaldees and says:

"I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:2–3).

From that point on, the engine of the story is *blessing*, not judgment. Through one family, the broken families will come back. Through one nation, the scattered nations will come home. Abraham himself begins to live out the vocation almost immediately: blessing the cities around him, fighting to rescue Lot from kings, refusing the spoils of war, treating the Hittites who sell him a burial plot with extraordinary courtesy. Blessing is the new mode.

The New Adam in the Garden

Now look at how the whole arc resolves. There is one verse in a song the congregation was singing earlier this morning that struck me: *the Messiah was alone, buried in Joseph's tomb*. Hold that line.

Jesus on the cross (bones not broken, in fulfillment of the Passover lamb) has his side pierced by a Roman soldier (John 19:34). And out of his side flow *blood and water*. John takes care to record this; the same two elements (blood and water) appear in John 3 as the marks of the new birth ("unless one is born of water and the Spirit"). The whole imagery is unmistakable: *Adam asleep, his side opened, life flowing out, his counterpart formed*. The new Adam goes into a deep sleep on the cross. His side is opened. Blood and water flow out. Three days later he comes out of the borrowed tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, into a *garden*.

"Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb" (John 19:41).

And whom does he meet first in the garden? *Mary*. Alone. Weeping. And in her grief she *supposes him to be the gardener* (John 20:15). The Gospel writers are not subtle about the parallels they are drawing. *Adam in the garden tending and keeping it; the new Adam in a new garden, mistaken for the gardener.* The new Adam, having gone into the deep sleep of the cross, having had his side opened, comes out of the sleep to meet his counterpart in a garden.

And what does Jesus say to Mary?

> Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'" (John 20:17)

"Do not cling to me yet. I have not yet ascended. *But go.*" The counterpart in the garden is sent out as the first witness of the resurrection, the first preacher of the gospel. And the deeper pattern, *the new Adam no longer alone*, is launched in that moment. Fifty days later at Pentecost, he pours out his Spirit on a hundred and twenty gathered in Jerusalem. And what happens? People from *every nation under heaven* (Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Cretans, Arabs) hear the wonderful works of God spoken in their *own languages*. The Tower of Babel is being undone, syllable by syllable. The curse of confused tongues is being lifted. The animosity between people groups that has run from Cain and Abel through Lamech through Babel through all of human history, *is being undone in Christ*.

Kings and Priests From Every Nation

And listen to where it all lands. In Revelation 5, the elders before the throne sing a new song:

> You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,

and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth.

(Revelation 5:9–10)

Kings and priests. The exact vocation given to Adam and Eve in Eden. *From every tribe and tongue and people and nation.* The blessing of Abraham finally home, scattered through every people group on earth, gathered before the throne. And what they were given in the beginning, to be kings (dominion) and priests (tending and keeping the sanctuary), they are now given again in fullness.

This is the fulfillment of what God was doing with Adam and Eve in the garden. The image of God in the earth was always meant to be carried by a *people*: a multinational, multilingual, multicultural body. As we begin to *be* that body of Christ, the compilation of what Christ is in the world, the powers themselves become subject to what God is doing in the earth. The redemption of the world comes when we put away enmity. When the swords get beaten into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks (Isaiah 2:4). When the contested dominion that came from the fall is replaced by the shared dominion that was always meant to be the gift of the image.

Coda: All Things in Christ

So when we sing songs about the Messiah alone on the cross, alone in the tomb, let us hear the verse the Gospels add to the song. *He is no longer alone.* He came out of the tomb to find his counterpart in a garden, and he poured out his Spirit fifty days later on every nation under heaven, and he is gathering a body to himself that no one can number, drawn out of every tribe and tongue. The aloneness of the cross has become the togetherness of Pentecost has become the great multitude of Revelation.

If we will go into this world using the right words over ourselves (*child of God*, *king*, *queen*, *priest*) if we will live as image-bearers of the One whose image we were created to carry, *something will begin to happen*. The world will be changed because of it. If we will open ourselves with compassion, break ourselves open for one another, the ripple of consolation that began in the cross will run through us into every gate we sit at.

Paul ends 1 Corinthians 15 with the deepest summary the New Testament gives of the whole vocation:

"Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father . . . that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:24, 28).

All things in Christ, and Christ in God. That is the unity God is calling us to. That is the *not good* of Genesis 2 finally and fully resolved. That is where every aloneness (Adam's, Israel's, Christ's in Gethsemane, yours, mine) is finally taken up into the togetherness for which the whole creation was made.