One Seed, All Nations

On the Plan God Has Been Working Since the Beginning

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What Is God's Plan?

There is something we can lose if we are not careful, surrounded as we are by the comfortable furniture of a long Christian tradition. We can come to a service, sing the songs, walk down to the altar, say the sinner's prayer, and walk back out, and be no more part of the plan God has been working since the beginning than we were when we walked in. So I want to spend this chapter asking the simplest question I can ask: *What is God's plan for humanity?* What is his big project? What is his game? What is he actually after?

Sometimes I think the language we use makes the Christian project seem more complicated than it needs to be. It is not entirely straightforward: we live thousands of years after the events that produced the Scriptures, and even the writers of those Scriptures lived thousands of years after the original promises were made. So there are layers and layers of distance between the moment God first started gathering humans to himself and the moment we are sitting here reading about it. But the project itself is plain enough, once we strip the layers back.

The Image Borne by Two

A few weeks ago I got struck again by the question of what even *makes* a human. The body, the breath of life God blew in, the combination that produced this strange and unpredictable creature that does not behave the way the rest of the created order behaves. We try

sometimes to talk about ourselves as just *one more beast of the field*, but we are the *most* unpredictable creatures on the earth. The cause of that unpredictability is the gift of *free will* God has given us as image-bearers.

Look at Genesis 1:

> 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. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it." (Genesis 1:26–28)

Read verse 27 again, *male and female He created them*. The image is borne by both. The image is *plural*. And the dominion is given to them together.

Then in Genesis 2, the writer zooms in for a closer look at what *male and female together* actually means. It is in this second chapter that we hear, for the first time in the whole creation account, the phrase *not good*. Every day God had said *it was good*. At the end of the sixth day he had doubled the word: *it was very good*. And then we get this:

"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).

God brings every animal before Adam, and Adam names them (Adam doing the work of dominion, classifying, recognizing) but no helper *comparable* to him is found among the animals. (Here is a small Hebrew curiosity: the Hebrew word for *dog* is *kelev*, which some hear as a conjunction of *like* and *heart*, "like the heart." I love dogs. But not even the dog corresponded sufficiently to the man to fix what was *not good*.)

The word *helper* there, *ezer*, appears twenty-one times in the Hebrew Scriptures. Twice in Genesis 2, referring to the woman. Three times referring to powerful nations that come to

Israel's aid in battle. And the other sixteen times, *ezer* is used of *God himself*; God as the helper of his people. So this is not the diminished sense of *helper* we hear in English, as in *the journeyman and his helper*. This is the *ezer* who comes alongside when there is a deficiency in the individual, and *makes up what is lacking*. *It is not good for man to be alone*, so God brings the strength of an *ezer* alongside, to give the man what he needs for the battles ahead.

And how does God do it? He puts the man into a deep sleep, and in the Hebrew, the imagery is closer to *tearing him in half* than to the gentle surgery the English suggests. Out of half, God forms the woman. Out of the other half remains the man. He creates two, and brings them back to one. Adam wakes up, sees what God has made, and 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 pattern. Out of that one-made-of-two come children: *be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth*. The blessing of God on us is that we would be *one*, and that our oneness would multiply and fill the earth. The plan of God was that the world would be filled with humans living in fellowship with him.

It Is Not Good to Be Alone

Notice the principle. *It is not good for man to be alone.* It is not good for *families* to be alone. It is not good for *tribes* to be alone. It is not good for *nations* to be alone. We have a slogan in the United States: *one nation under God, indivisible*. But long before our founding fathers said that over us, *God* was saying: *all nations under God, indivisible*. Because we all

came out of Adam. The plan of God is that we would fill the earth, but not as a scattering of suspicious strangers. As a single family under one Father.

How did God know that it was not good for man to be alone? Because *God himself* did not want to be alone. God wanted fellowship. God wanted communion. Out of the everlasting abundance of his own *agape*, God placed his love on humans and said, *Do your thing (live, multiply, fill the earth) but love each other*.

The First Family Breaks

And then the first family breaks. Before the sin, Adam and Eve were naked and not ashamed. The moment sin entered, walls went up. They covered themselves. They guarded their bodies and their words. Transparency and vulnerability, that ability to be seen, only collapses when there is *fear* about the other. And when God asked Adam what he had done, Adam said, *the woman You gave me*. When God asked Eve what she had done, she said, *the serpent*. The blame began to circulate before they even left the garden. The one flesh became two enemies.

But God made a promise in that very scene. *The seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent* (cf. Genesis 3:15). So when Eve had her firstborn, she named him Cain and said, *I have gotten a man from the Lord*. *He's the one. He's the serpent-crusher.* And then Cain killed his brother Abel.

So the husband-and-wife oneness was broken in the garden. Now brother-against-brother enmity erupts in the very next generation. A few chapters later, Lamech takes the disintegration a step further: he marries two wives (one flesh torn open again), and when a stranger offends him, he kills the stranger and brags about it in a song. By Genesis 6, *violence has filled the earth,* and that violence is the specific reason God gives for sending the flood. The enmity between brothers got so out of control that the whole creation had to be reset.

Babel and the Scattering

Noah's family comes out of the ark (God blesses them again with the same blessing: *be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth* (Genesis 9:1)) and the seventy nations of Genesis 10 spread out across the world. But the seventy nations did not actually *spread*. They stopped at a place called Shinar:

> And the whole earth had one language and one speech . . . And they said, "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 11:1, 4)

"Let us make a name for ourselves," the exact opposite of what God had said. Be fruitful and fill the earth, God had said. Let us stay right here and make a name for ourselves, Babel said. Our oneness, our unity, our culture is the best on the planet; let's draw everybody into it.

It is no accident that the word *Shinar* appears in only one other Old Testament context: the first chapter of Daniel, where the powerful culture of Babylon takes the children of Israel into captivity and tries to inculturate them into the Babylonian way of being. *Shinar* is shorthand throughout Scripture for the culture that elevates itself and demands everyone else conform. And the unity Babel was building was not the unity God was calling for. God was calling for unity in *him* through the Spirit, not unity in a tower or a name.

So God scattered them. Languages were confused. The nations dispersed across the earth. And at the end of the eleventh chapter, with humanity divided and scattered, we meet an old man named Abram and his barren wife Sarah. They are in Ur of the Chaldees: Babylonian territory. Old. Childless. Unimpressive.

And God speaks:

> Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:1–3)

In you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. God repeats it a few chapters later, *in you, all the nations shall be blessed* (Genesis 18:18). The plan that began with one couple in a garden, and that had failed every time it tried to recover unity (through Cain and Abel, through Noah, through Babel) God is now restarting through *one family*. One man. One promise. Out of which all the families of the earth will be brought back together.

The Faithful Family That Cannot Be Faithful

And what is one of the first things Abraham does after the promise? He goes down into Egypt and *lies to Pharaoh* about his wife. Pharaoh gives him cattle, land, servants. Abraham becomes wealthy through the deception. *He is not blessing the nations. The nations are blessing him*, and he is making them complicit in his lie. He does it again later with Abimelech (Genesis 20). Same script. Same wealth. Same broken witness.

Has that ever happened to you? You hear what God wants you to be. You believe the promise. And then you find that you cannot quite manage to *be* the person the promise requires. The miracle of Abraham's story is not that he was always faithful. *He wasn't.* The miracle is that *God kept coming back*. Every time Abraham failed, God reappeared with the same promise: *In you and in your seed, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

And the unfaithfulness did not stop with Abraham. The whole rest of Genesis is a procession of broken family stories. Cain and Abel was not the last fight. Isaac and Ishmael. Jacob and Esau. Joseph and his brothers. The author of Genesis is showing us, story after story,

that *even the blessed family cannot get along*. As a matter of fact, there is no pain in this world like the pain of a *family member* who has hurt you. So Abraham's descendants knew exactly what the rest of us, the Gentile nations, were going through. We had all been spread out. We were all foreigners somewhere. None of us, in our own families and tribes, had figured out how to live together.

The One Seed

But somehow, through Abraham's line, God was going to do what no family in Genesis had managed to do. Look at how Paul reads this story in Galatians 3:

"Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16).

Paul is doing something subtle here. In Hebrew, just as in English, the word *seed* can be either singular or plural, "a seed" (one) or "seed" (a whole bag of it). The Jewish rabbis of Paul's day generally read "seed" in Genesis as plural, the *seed* of Abraham was the whole nation of Israel descended from him. Paul takes the singular reading. *Seed*, Paul says, refers to *one*, and that one is Christ.

Why does that matter? Because if the seed is Christ, then the *blessing of all the nations* depends on *one faithful person*, not on the cumulative faithfulness of all of Abraham's biological descendants, which has manifestly *not* worked. Abraham was not faithful. Moses was not faithful. The kings were not faithful. The prophets warned, and Israel went into exile. *But one was faithful.* One stayed on the Father's bosom and heard his heartbeat and did what he saw the Father doing, all the way to the cross.

And from that one faithful seed, when sown, comes the whole harvest. A grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, and brings forth much fruit. The one seed, sown, produces a multinational, multilingual, multicultural family. Listen to where Paul goes:

> For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26–29)

"You are all *one* in Christ Jesus." The pattern that has been running through Scripture since Genesis 2 (*one, then two, then one again*) finds its final culmination here. All the categories that normally divide us (*Jew or Greek* (ethnicity), *slave or free* (social and economic status), *male or female* (gender)) get folded back into a deeper unity. Not erased. *Folded together.* And if you are Christ's, you are *Abraham's seed*, the genealogy reckons through faith, not through genetics. The blessing of Abraham has fallen on a congregation of Gentile farmers and laborers in a Roman colony at the edge of empire. *What a surprise.*

On the Cross, the Blessing of the Curse

And how did this seed produce all those Gentile children of Abraham? By hanging on a tree. *Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree* (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13). On the very instrument of the curse, the seed of Abraham *spoke blessing*.

> Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:13–14)

On the cross they hurled accusations at him. *King of the Jews, come down from there. Save Yourself.* The two on the road to Emmaus said it sadly afterward: *We thought it was He who would redeem Israel* (Luke 24:21). They had no idea what was being accomplished. They thought he was supposed to be the *Redeemer of Israel*. He was, but more. He was the Redeemer through whom *all the nations* would be redeemed. Jew and Gentile stood at the foot of the cross. The Roman centurion stood there with the Jewish scribes. And from the cross came the words that broke open the dividing wall: *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do* (Luke 23:34). The enmity between Jew and Gentile, Paul tells us in Ephesians 2, was reconciled *in the body of Christ broken on the tree*.

The Bag of Seed

If you have ever bought grass seed, you know you do not go down to the store and buy *one* grass seed. You buy a fifty-pound bag, you put it in the spreader, and you walk the yard, scattering. And from that scattering, in a few weeks, comes the lush green you wanted. That is the plan for humanity. *The great Casting of Seed.* The one faithful seed, Christ, is sown into the earth at the cross. He dies. He rises. He pours out the Spirit. And from the scattering of that *one* into the soil of every nation, a vast green expanse of new-creation humanity comes up: Jews, Gentiles, slaves, free, male, female, every shade of human story brought together as the children of Abraham.

Despite the fact that our biological ability to reproduce ourselves is limited (we have one or two or six children, and then we die, and the family line tapers) God is doing something different with this one Seed. The yield is innumerable.

The Innumerable Multitude

Look at how Revelation 7 stages the same point. John is hearing the number of those who are sealed: *one hundred forty-four thousand*, twelve thousand from each tribe of Israel. The numbering is military language. In Numbers, this is how Israel counts its troops before battle. *Twelve thousand from Judah, twelve thousand from Reuben, twelve thousand from Gad, from Asher, from Naphtali, from Manasseh, from Simeon, from Levi, from Issachar, from Zebulun, from Joseph, from Benjamin.* (Revelation 7:5–8) The reader can feel the army being mustered. *These* are the twelve thousand per tribe who are going to win the day. *These* are the military elite who will overthrow the dragon and the beast and the false prophet.

But watch what John hears, and then what he sees. John *hears* the number, one hundred forty-four thousand. He hears it. And then:

> After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9–10)

John *heard* one hundred forty-four thousand. John *saw* a *great multitude which no one could number*. The same move he made with the lion and the lamb: *I heard a voice say, the lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed, and I turned to look, and I saw a slain Lamb* (Revelation 5:5–6). The thing announced as the muster of Israel turns out, when seen, to be *all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues*. Not one hundred forty-four thousand. *Innumerable.* The 144,000 is the *redeemed of Israel*; the great multitude is the *redeemed of every nation*. The blessing of Abraham has come home to its full intent.

Bring Your Own Glory

And when the bride comes down (the New Jerusalem, descending out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband) listen to who she is made of:

> And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it . . . They shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it. (Revelation 21:24, 26)

Each one of you has a glory to bring into the kingdom of God. The New Jerusalem is built up of new-creation people who carry their own particular glory: the glory of the people-group, the tongue, the kindred, the family God has put them into. It is not a contrived, forced single culture. It is the unique culture of every tribe brought to the foot of the throne, and laid down as a gift.

So when people come into this assembly, I do not want them to think they have to imitate *my* culture. I am Southern. I am from a particular family. I have my own peculiarities. *Wipe my style from your mind.* Bring the unique culture God brought you up through. Your family. Your tribe. Your kindred. Your language. The thousand generations of epigenetic inheritance, the hurt and the trouble and the victory, that God built into your DNA and brought to this room today. Bring *that*, and let the Spirit of God work on it here. Watch what happens when God can have a people who operate together in love *because they have chosen one another*, not because they were pressed into a single mold.

Let's do that. Join God in his great project. Find the most unlikely person in your workplace this week and have lunch with them. People are hurting all around us. They walk into our workspaces every day. We can be healing to them. We can be blessing to them. *Be fruitful,*

multiply, and fill the earth, with people who know the One Seed under whose shadow all the nations have been gathered home.