The Stone Cut Without Hands

On the Foolishness of God and the Mercy That Looks Like Weakness

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Looking Through a Pinhole

I want you to begin by thinking of your own life as anything but a straight line. The typical condition of humanity is not stability. It's instability: sand, uncertainty, layers of doubt that every one of us faces as we move through life. There is a healthy reason for the doubt and the poor decision-making: We are limited. We can only know what we know.

I was raised by a hardworking man with a fund of old hillbilly witticisms, and there is real wisdom in those, but it only takes you so far. Then I dropped out of school, took a construction job in Southern California, and decided to marry my wife on seventy-five dollars a day, no PTO. I didn't know what I didn't know. I was just going through life with the tools I had been given. Then someone gave me a leg up at a job where I worked alongside men and women with educations and life experiences different from mine (atheist, secular Jewish, and Christian colleagues all in the same room) and I started to figure out a few more things, and to do the best I could with the tools I had been given.

But the longer I have lived, the more I realize my life has been lived through a filter. A filter of my experiences, my education, the people who have shaped me. And when you set the size of that filter against the infinite body of what could be known, what I actually know is like a single pinhole of light in a vast universe of galaxies.

So when I am talking to you, and I am saying “here’s how I see it, here’s how I’ve experienced it,” and you are coming at it from your own experience and your own pinhole, sometimes those don’t line up, do they? That’s why disagreement exists. We live in the so-called information age, and somehow we still come to different conclusions about what is true and what is false. How is that possible? Because we filter even facts. Even things that ought to be concrete and irrefutable, we filter through our own life and brokenness, and we come to different conclusions.

Then we decide it would be a good idea to get married, to join our life with another person’s life. That’s a journey. Then we have children. They will be obedient, of course. When my first two were born, my wife and I were attending homeschool conventions before our kids were even old enough to attend, reading every parenting book I could find. I thought to myself, “You know what? I’m going to write a book on parenting.” Praise God I never wrote that book. The greatest indictment of my life would have been to write that book at that time in my life.

You have to live. You have to *see* a thing or two before you know a thing or two. And even now, my limited understanding of all the things that are needed to navigate this insane life is just fractional. That is why we need the body. That is why there is something called the body of Jesus Christ, and why each member supplies something to the rest. Together, something begins to happen that cannot happen when we are by ourselves.

Pulling the Covers Over Your Head

And when we go through challenging times, when we go through winter seasons, the classic response is to retreat. I know it is for me. My default response is, “Shut the front door. Pull the covers over my head. Let the world pass me by.” That doesn’t get it done.

I have a revulsion to anything that feels negative, because I tend to gravitate toward what we pessimists like to call realism. In a public setting I conjure up every positive thing I can, I know it's my job to encourage and bring joy and to point people toward a life of great possibility. But personally, left to myself, I see the dark side of the moon. I see the dark clouds in the silver lining. I walk into a meeting at the office and I'm scanning the room: I know what they're thinking. I know where their minds are. And then I start conjuring up things that may not even be true, because I cannot actually know what they're thinking, and I build narratives that lead me to act in ways that nobody else is operating from.

At fifty-seven, here is the one thing I know about people: They are thinking about me a lot less than I think they are. After I get done speaking, I sometimes want to slink home because I think I know what everyone is thinking. They aren't thinking about me at all.

A Time for Everything

With that frame, listen to Ecclesiastes 3:

> To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to gain, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1–8)

Look at all those negative words. Die, pluck up, kill, break down, weep, mourn, cast away, refrain from embracing, lose, throw away, tear, keep silent, hate, war. None of us wants

any of that. We like the columns on the other side: born, plant, heal, build up, laugh, dance, gather, embrace, gain, keep, sew, speak, love, peace. Lord, I hate even thinking about the negative column.

But the realities of our lives say every one of us has gone through something. Someone has cast us away. Someone has plucked us up. Someone has gone to war with us, and we, in response, have probably done the same to others a time or two ourselves. Then comes verse 11:

"He has made everything beautiful in its time" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Somehow, in my limited capacity to understand how God is working in my life, through the evil that exists in this world and through the good, I begin to see that *both* good and evil can be impostors when it comes to what I really need. When I look at the good things and the evil things in my life as impostors to a steadier, hope-filled, love-filled, mercy-filled abiding with God no matter what my circumstances hold, when I treat both columns as impostors and recognize that somehow God can put all of it into the blender of life and produce *beauty*, then, as Isaiah says, beauty for ashes (Isaiah 61:3). That is the life of holding everything in an open hand and trusting that God's grace will see us through.

Steadfast Love Endures Forever

Psalm 118 is the foundational word for both the good times and the bad. On the night of Passover, the Hallel psalms, Psalms 113 through 118, were sung together. It is very possible that Jesus and his disciples sang Psalm 118 the night before the cross, on the way out into the garden. Picture that. He's about to be betrayed by a close friend, sweat drops as it were of blood, find himself taken prisoner, falsely accused, marched through a kangaroo court, and crucified the next day. And the words on his lips are these:

> Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever. Let Israel now say, “His mercy endures forever.” Let the house of Aaron now say, “His mercy endures forever.” Let those who fear the Lord now say, “His mercy endures forever.” (Psalm 118:1–4)

That word “mercy” in the Hebrew is *hesed*. It means more than mercy. It is the love that is bound by covenant, that does not let go of the one God is in relationship with. God is in relationship with us *through covenant*, and he binds himself to us in this steadfast, abiding, merciful love. The English language can’t quite hold what that one Hebrew word carries.

So Israel can say *hesed* endures forever. The house of Aaron can say *hesed* endures forever. All those who fear the Lord can say *hesed* endures forever. And so the next verse:

“I called on the Lord in distress; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place” (Psalm 118:5).

Why do I call on him in distress? Because he has made covenant with me, and he is a steadfast, merciful lover who keeps covenant when I am in distress. That is the kind of God we serve.

And it is not transactional. The world is transactional: quid pro quo. I go into the office, I put in my time, I work hard, I take some abuse (sometimes I pretend to take more abuse than I do, and cry about it), and a check comes every two weeks whether I need it or not. If I underperform, I get fired. The world runs on a ledger. God does not.

Justice, Mercy, Humility

Micah preached into a generation that had grown fat and rich on the system, forgetting the weak and the marginalized in their communities. God says, “I have been holding the

Assyrians at bay, but they are coming. There will be a troublous time." But Micah, like all the prophets, never sends trouble without a hopeful hook at the end.

In Micah 6, God calls the mountains and the earth as witnesses: "Have I broken covenant with Israel, or have they broken covenant with Me? Did I not save them in the wilderness? Did I not fulfill My promises?" And then comes the people's response, in the voice of someone trying to figure out what to bring before such a God:

> With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (Micah 6:6–7)

There is a tendency to think we have to bring our A game, to bring all that heavy lifting before the Lord, to ramp up the sacrifices to ten thousand rams. But God is not transactional like that. The world is. Micah's answer comes in the very next verse:

"He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

"Love mercy." That word *mercy* in Micah 6:8 is the same Hebrew word, *hesed*, that we just saw in Psalm 118. God is saying: I don't want more sacrifices. I want you to embody the character you have already seen in Me. The actions I have taken toward you in salvation and deliverance: embody them. Share them with others. Justice, mercy, humility, walking humbly with your God: those are the rails.

The Stone Cut Without Hands

Jesus, when he wants to teach what the kingdom looks like, gives us the kingdom's character. Matthew 4:23 sets the context:

"And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people" (Matthew 4:23).

That phrase, "the gospel of the kingdom," sends us back to Daniel 2. If you want some homework, go remind yourself of Daniel 2. King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream and won't tell his magicians and wise men what it is, either he has forgotten it, or he is testing them. Daniel finally comes and says, "There is a God in heaven who reveals secrets." And he describes Nebuchadnezzar's dream: a great image with a head of gold, chest of silver, belly of bronze, legs of iron, feet of iron and clay.

Daniel says: you, O king, are that head of gold. Other kingdoms will follow you, each declining in strength and value. "But," Daniel continues:

> You watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces . . . And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. (Daniel 2:34–35)
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> And then the line that anchors everything:
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> And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever. (Daniel 2:44)

Look at the symbolism of that image. Gold, silver, bronze: money, exchange, stored value. Iron, instruments of war. Clay, the foundational material of bricks and cities. Everything the world prizes. And then some random stone, hewn out of the side of a mountain by no human hand, comes and strikes the whole structure at the feet, and the stone becomes a great mountain that fills the earth.

The strength, the wisdom, the wealth, the war machinery of the world, all of it crumbles. And the thing that seemed to be of no account becomes the thing that fills the entire earth. That stone is Christ. We are still talking about that kingdom two thousand years later. Handel picked up Revelation 11, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ," and put it in *Messiah*. The kingdom that shall never be destroyed.

The Beatitudes as Be-Attitudes

So when Jesus comes preaching this kingdom and gathers a crowd around him on a mountain, he is playing the role of Moses. But instead of tablets of stone, he speaks words into the heart. He gives us the *be-attitudes*, the attitudes of God himself:

> Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3–10)

Try those out in the boardroom. "Blessed are the meek." "Blessed are the merciful." Look at the characteristics; they are paradoxical relative to what we have learned through life experience. We have learned dog-eat-dog. We have learned survival of the fittest, and Darwin didn't help; he gave us a justification for our animal instincts. *If you're not Type A, you're not the material for the work.* If you can't concentrate ten hours, if your learning patterns don't fit the university system, then this is what you end up with: blue collar guys, white collar guys. We pass judgment immediately based on contrived frameworks of high and low.

Sabbath in a Coke-Fueled World

I have been wondering lately whether the way we work, the way we have organized our days and our weeks, is itself the problem. There is a time and a season for everything. We were meant to plant and to harvest. And in between, we were meant to *rest*. We were meant to have a moment to think, to sleep in, to contemplate God, to build relationships, instead of the manic, pell-mell push to produce more and more in a consumptive, overly productive world.

If you're not producing today, that means starvation tomorrow, and so we just do it and do it and do it. We introduce AI and threaten everyone with reduced staffing. I have been caught up in the whole thing. I wonder what would happen if we just followed the seasons. Gave ourselves a moment to rest. What would it look like to breathe a little? My calendar runs twelve to fifteen meetings a day, back to back, parallel-tasked the whole time, answering email so I don't have to work until seven o'clock at night closing the loops. We should not have to live this way. And we shouldn't judge other people for being unable to live this way.

How many of us are jacked up on coffee and Coke and caffeine to meet the expectations of a world that constantly demands more? And here Jesus says: *poor in spirit. Meek. Peacemakers.*

Micah was talking about *restorers*, and the justice he names is restorative. It restores what is broken. That takes time. To get into the life of someone who is broken and draw them out of brokenness takes patience. Covenant love and mercy aren't quick. We don't like that. We forget where we ourselves were hewn from. We forget that we were just a stone cut out of the mountain without hands. We forget the work God did in us, and so we hold back mercy from the people who most need it.

Life is a life of seasons, of ebbs and flows. There are times when we are feeling victorious enough to write books on parenting. And there are other times when we are standing still, saying, “My God, I have no idea what I’m doing. Help me. Who is sufficient for these things?” And in those moments we need people to come alongside us with mercy, not judgment.

The Foolishness of God

Listen to Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:

> For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.” Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. (1 Corinthians 1:18–21)

The mercy and sacrificial love of Christ is foolishness to those who reject it. But it is the way of the kingdom of God. All the patterns of life we have been handed by our culture, our media, our business structures, our political structures, they seem so wise and so obvious that we end up not just adopting them but *sanctifying* them. We sanctify our political processes. We sanctify our economic processes. We sanctify our business leaders. We make those things right, and we make everything else wrong.

My generation was all about arrogant independence: roll up your sleeves, knock it out, don’t lay your head down until the last task is done, because by God you’ll be judged for being lazy. There is a younger generation looking back at the last hundred years and seeing

generational flaws and saying, “I am not going to give myself over to that.” Yes, the pendulum has swung, but maybe there is something to be said for a little more equilibrium.

Should we have a Sabbath? Should we take some time? My day yesterday started in the dark and didn’t stop until the dark, and as I laid my head down, I was still thinking of a dozen things that needed to be done. What kind of slavery is that? That I think righteousness is to work until I’m at the frayed edge, and my watch is the one telling me I had a high-stress day. “Why do I have to depend on a watch to tell me my biometrics are off?” My wife has been telling me that every weekend for thirty-five years. The watch is just confirming what she has already said.

Paul keeps going:

> Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:22–25)

Christ takes both suffering and blessing, both columns of Ecclesiastes 3, and somehow makes everything beautiful in its time. The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

> For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty. (1 Corinthians 1:26–27)

If you and I keep thinking we have to grasp for the strength of this world, the wisdom of this world, in order to be saved, we are dead wrong. I have experienced the wrongness. My

insecurity at what I knew drove me back to get my bachelor's degree. Drove me back to get my MBA. I'm not decrying education in the slightest. But that particular pursuit was rooted in insecurity, and in the felt conviction that God could not do for me what I needed done. I put myself through a great deal of striving to be accepted in the wisdom of this world. And the whole time, what God had for me was right there. How much may I have passed over because I did not trust him?

Clean Hands, Pure Heart

There is a psalm that says, "Trust not in the strength of the legs of a man." That is not where our strength comes from.

"Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart" (Psalm 24:3–4).

Clean hands and a pure heart. We were singing about that earlier today. It is unsettling to the world, but it is the wisdom of God, and it is our mandate. As we gaze upon him, we become like him, merciful, just, humble. Let's be that people.

And let me close honest with you. This was a message to me today. I have a big week ahead of me. I have to be that humble person. I have to be that faithful person. The stone that the world counts as nothing was cut without human hands, and it filled the earth. The kingdom that shall never be destroyed runs on covenant mercy that the world calls weakness. Let's let that mercy run through us.