The Beautiful Name

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On Joseph the Just-and-Merciful Man, the Salvation of His People From Their Sins, and the Cost the Family Paid for the Name

The Door That Opens

Sometimes we hear songs in worship that bring us to a place where we aspire to do what God has called us to do. And those songs project an ideal picture of what the obedience looks like. And then, when you take that first step in the actual direction of what you have aspired to, you encounter the immediate impossibility of moving into that space. The road feels closed. The aspiration feels too large. The next step is not obvious.

But this is exactly the moment when the Lord shows up. And he sometimes does it through redirection that we could not have planned in advance. Listen to what happened to Paul in Acts 16:

> Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” (Acts 16:6–9)

They were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach in Asia. They tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. Paul’s inspiration had been to go east, into Asia Minor. He

attempted it. He kept attempting it. And he kept being prevented. We attempt and we attempt, and sometimes we do not understand why the door we expected to open keeps staying closed. And then comes the dream. A man of Macedonia. “Come over and help us.” And Macedonia was west of where Paul had been trying to go. It was the opposite direction. The door that opened was on the side of the building Paul had not been looking at.

And when Paul shows up in Macedonia, he does not even find a man. He finds a group of women praying down by the river on the Sabbath day (Acts 16:13). And the woman he encounters there (Lydia, a seller of purple) becomes the foundation of one of the most powerful early Christian churches in the New Testament. The church at Philippi, established in the household of a businesswoman who responded to Paul’s preaching. The Macedonian-man-in-the-dream led Paul to a Macedonian-woman-by-the-river, and the church that emerged was led by women.

God’s leading is sometimes like that. We attempt to go east. The Spirit redirects us west. We expect a man. We find a woman. We expect a synagogue. We find a riverside prayer-gathering. We expect the strong leader. We find a household of welcoming faith. And in retrospect we see that the redirection was always exactly what the kingdom needed, even when it bore no resemblance to what we had been attempting. So when our own attempts get blocked, when the east-door keeps staying closed, let us watch for the west-door we have not yet noticed. The Macedonia we did not plan for may be where the next church is going to be planted in our lives.

What a Beautiful Name

As I was praying and reading this morning, I kept coming back to the beautiful name that Matthew 1 introduces, the name Jesus, and what the name actually means and what it cost the

family that received it. We are going to walk through Matthew 1 carefully this morning, because the foundation Matthew is laying in this opening chapter shapes everything we are going to read across the rest of the Gospel.

Matthew opens with the genealogy of Jesus, which we have been working through for several weeks. Forty-two generations from Abraham to Jesus, organized into three sets of fourteen. And whenever Matthew breaks the pattern in this genealogy, whenever he inserts something unexpected into the regular "so-and-so begat so-and-so" rhythm, he is signaling something he wants us to notice carefully.

The most obvious pattern-breaks are the women he names: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba), and finally Mary. Each of these women carries some kind of scandalous backstory by the standards of the surrounding culture, and each was a Gentile or a foreigner or a woman caught up in irregular circumstances. And Matthew names them deliberately, because the line of the Messiah carries the marks of every irregularity that the people of God had been working through across centuries.

But there is one other place where Matthew breaks the pattern, and it is easy to miss. Twice in the genealogy, he mentions brothers. Watch this:

"Jacob begot Judah and his brothers" (Matthew 1:2).

"Josiah begot Jeconiah and his brothers about the time they were carried away to Babylon" (Matthew 1:11).

Two named figures with their brothers attached. Judah and his brothers. Jeconiah and his brothers. And then in the third set of fourteen, the pattern-mention of brothers does not appear at all. Matthew just says: "and Jacob begot Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus,

who is called Christ" (Matthew 1:16). No mention of brothers. Until you remember that the entire rest of the Gospel of Matthew is the story of how Jesus gathers his brothers around him.

The twelve apostles. The 120 in the upper room. The eventually-formed multi-ethnic church that Matthew 28's Great Commission is going to send to all the nations. These are Jesus's brothers: the ones he gathers in the manner Judah had his brothers and Jeconiah had his brothers, but on a scale that includes every nation of the surrounding world. And Hebrews 2 makes this connection explicit:

> For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren. (Hebrews 2:10–11)

He is not ashamed to call them brethren. That is the Hebrews 2 capstone to Matthew's deliberately unfinished genealogy pattern. Jesus is going to bring many sons and daughters to glory, and the genealogy's open-ended structure at Matthew 1:16 is hinting forward toward the brothers who are about to be gathered.

Wicked Kings in Our Family Tree

And another striking detail in the genealogy is how many of the kings listed were genuinely wicked. Listen to Matthew 1:10: "Hezekiah begot Manasseh." Hezekiah was one of the great reforming kings of Judah, but his son Manasseh was considered, by the Old Testament historians, the most wicked king who ever reigned in Judah (2 Kings 21:1–18). He shed innocent blood. He set up idols in the temple. He led Judah further from the Lord than any king before or after him. And his name is right there in the family tree of Jesus.

Do you have wicked kings in your family tree? Do you have ancestors whose patterns of behavior you would not want repeated in your own life or in your children's lives? Jesus has come, and he understands. The lineage he carries includes some of the worst figures the Old Testament could put on display. And he is not ashamed of any of them. He absorbed the family tree as it was, and made it the path through which his own redemptive work would proceed. That is grace at the genealogical level.

Engaged to Joseph

And now we come to Joseph. And I want to spend the rest of this chapter on Joseph, because Joseph is one of the most overlooked figures in the entire Christmas story, and he is, in some ways, the human-level pattern of what Jesus would later become. Listen to Matthew 1:18:

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18).

Mary was betrothed to Joseph. And this engagement was not what we mean by engagement in the twenty-first-century West. In the first-century Jewish context, betrothal was the formal binding of the marriage covenant. The families had gathered. The dowry had been paid. The two parties were as good as married for all legal and social purposes, but they were not yet living together, and the marriage had not yet been physically consummated. The betrothal period was a time of purification, separation, and preparation. The dowry-payment from Joseph's family to Mary's family had been made. The covenant was binding.

And in the middle of this betrothal period, Mary is found with child. Joseph does not know that the pregnancy is from the Holy Spirit. He has no immediate access to that explanation. And given that all the previous women named in the genealogy (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba) had carried some sort of scandal in their backgrounds, the natural human conclusion

for Joseph to draw would have been the obvious one. Someone else. Some failure of the betrothal-period chastity. Some irregularity that called the entire engagement into question.

Now imagine the conversation, if Mary tried to explain. Joseph, I am pregnant. By the Holy Spirit. I do not know about you, but "by the Holy Spirit" would not have settled the matter for most of us in Joseph's position. It would have taken more than a single sentence to land. It would have taken more than a dream to land for most of us. Are you sure?

A Just and Merciful Man

And what does Joseph do? Listen:

"Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly" (Matthew 1:19).

Being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. Hold this verse. There is so much going on in it.

First, Joseph is a just man. The Greek word here (dikaios) carries the full sense of righteousness, of being rightly aligned with God's law. And the law, in Deuteronomy 22:13–21, gave Joseph the right to expose Mary publicly for what would have appeared to be unfaithfulness during the betrothal period. He could have called witnesses. He could have made the case publicly. He could have recovered his dowry. The law was on his side.

Second, Joseph chose mercy over public exposure. He decided to put her away secretly. That meant he would not get his dowry back. He would not get the deposit recovered. He would bear the financial cost of the dissolution privately, with maybe two witnesses present to formalize the divorce, without explaining the situation publicly. Because if he had done it publicly, witnesses would have been called, the case would have been made, and Mary would

have been permanently marked as a publicly-shamed woman. Possibly worse, given the legal penalties available in Deuteronomy 22.

Joseph chose to bear the marks of this relationship rather than to mark Mary. He chose to absorb the financial loss rather than to recover it at the cost of her future. He chose mercy over the maximally-extended application of the law that the law itself permitted.

And here is the deep diagnostic. Our contemporary culture understands justice almost entirely in retributive terms. Someone is on death row; they are going to get justice. Someone has hurt us; we are going to seek justice. "Justice" in our cultural vocabulary almost always means the law applied to the maximum extent of its retributive reach. But Matthew uses the word "just" to describe a man who held the law in one hand and mercy in the other, and who chose to apply the law in the most merciful way the law itself permitted.

That is a different kind of justice than the contemporary cultural vocabulary recognizes. And it is the justice Jesus will later draw on himself when he interacts with the religious establishment of his own day. Listen to what Jesus quotes, twice, in Matthew's Gospel:

"But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Matthew 9:13).

"But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matthew 12:7).

I desire mercy and not sacrifice. Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 twice in the Gospel of Matthew. He must have considered it important. And I think what is probably happening here is that Mary and Joseph had the Hosea 6:6 verse essentially over their kitchen table. I desire mercy and not sacrifice. Hosea 6:6. That was the verse Joseph had lived out in his merciful divorce-decision. That was the verse Mary had received in her merciful spouse. And the message Jesus inherited

from the parental example of Joseph was the message he would later quote against the very religious establishment that had inherited the same Hosea verse but had not yet learned to live it. Joseph taught Jesus what mercy-instead-of-sacrifice actually looks like in concrete practice. And Jesus carried that lesson into his public ministry.

The Angel in the Dream

And while Joseph is considering all this, pondering it in the way that the Greek verb suggests, with the same kind of internal storm that the religious leaders later will be described as having when they ponder evil in their hearts against Jesus, the angel appears:

> But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus. (Matthew 1:20–25)

He will save His people from their sins. That is the meaning of the name Jesus: the Greek form of the Hebrew Yeshua, which itself means "the Lord saves." And the meaning of the name is what the rest of Matthew's Gospel is going to spend twenty-eight chapters unpacking. He shall save His people from their sins. Not from Rome. Not from Babylon. Not from Egypt. God's salvation is at a deeper level than the civil conditions we find ourselves under. He is saving us

from the power that has actually got its grip on us, the power Paul will later describe in Romans 7 as the law of sin in my members that brings me into captivity.

And the prophetic anchor is Isaiah 7:14: the virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. And the Hebrew name Immanuel itself means “God with us.” So the child is given two names simultaneously: Jesus (the Lord saves) and Immanuel (God with us). The two names function together as the chapter’s theological architecture. The God who saves is the God who is with us. The God who is with us is the God who saves. The two are not separable.

Not Just My Sins

And here is something I want every reader to notice carefully about His people. The angel does not say “He will save you from your sin” or “He will save individual sinners from their personal failures.” The angel says: “He will save His people from their sins.” That is national salvation. Collective salvation. The deliverance of an entire people from the collective pattern of sin that has been operating in their midst across centuries.

And then the rest of Matthew is going to expand the boundaries of “His people” beyond the natural Jewish lineage to include all the nations. Matthew 28’s Great Commission, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19), is the natural conclusion of what Matthew 1:21 had already announced. “His people” turns out to be every nation, every tribe, every tongue. The collective salvation is global.

That changes everything about how we read this verse. We tend to immediately default to individual interpretation, “He will save me from my sins.” And that is true. But it is not the whole story. The whole story is that he will save His people from their sins, and we are part of

His people, alongside everyone else from every other nation who has been gathered into the redemptive multinational household that the Great Commission was sent to assemble.

And Isaiah anticipates this multinational dimension explicitly. *Listen to Isaiah 42, where the Messianic servant is described*:

> Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. He will not cry out, nor raise His voice, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring forth justice for truth. (Isaiah 42:1–3)

He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. Not vengeance against the Gentiles, but justice to them. And the justice he brings is the same kind of justice Joseph practiced: the bruised reed will not be broken, the smoldering wick will not be quenched.

Are you a broken reed today? He is not going to snap you off and discard you as a blight on his field. Are you a smoldering wick? He is not going to quench you because your fire is not as bright as it should be. The God we serve and the Messiah he sent saw the broken reed and bound it up. Saw the smoldering wick and tended it back to flame. Joseph saw Mary, almost certainly weeping, expecting divorce. And he held the law in one hand and mercy in the other, and the result was that the broken reed was tended rather than snapped. Jesus learned this from his father, watching Joseph live out the very Isaiah 42 pattern Jesus would later embody in his public ministry.

The Family That Carried the Reproach

And let me say something about what Joseph and Mary actually paid in social currency to accept the angel's commission. It is not like Joseph could have explained the situation publicly

and had everyone accept the explanation. “My wife conceived by the Holy Spirit” was not a sentence that anyone in first-century Nazareth was going to accept at face value. And the family bore reproach across the entire thirty years of Jesus’s life before his public ministry began.

Decades later, in Matthew 13, when Jesus has begun to teach with authority in his hometown synagogue, the locals ask:

“Is this not the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this Man get all these things?” (Matthew 13:55–56).

Is this not the carpenter’s son? They knew the family. They had watched the family for thirty years. And the family carried, in the local social memory, the marks of an irregular beginning that nobody had ever quite forgotten.

And it surfaces explicitly in John 8, during one of Jesus’s confrontations with the religious establishment:

“Then they said to Him, ‘We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God’” (John 8:41).

We were not born of fornication. That is an ad hominem argument from the religious establishment against Jesus. They could not win the argument on the facts, so they reached for the social slur the family had carried since Mary’s pregnancy. And the slur had stuck for thirty-some years.

Joseph carried the proverbial scarlet letter through every step of the journey, from Nazareth down to Bethlehem for the taxation registration, through the flight into Egypt, through the return to Nazareth, through the long years of raising Jesus in a community that whispered about the family’s origin story. And Joseph and Mary continued in faith. They took the next step.

They bore the cross of social shame because they had received the divine commission and decided that the commission was worth what it cost them.

What Happens in Humble Places

Sometimes the elite of this world do not understand what happens in humble places. When ordinary believers in a small assembly give themselves to one another, share their hearts, expose what God is doing in them, walk vulnerably in front of one another, something profound is happening that the surrounding world cannot see and cannot account for.

When the Becky Farmers and the Mike Riddles of our world, the substantive testifying brothers and sisters in every faithful local assembly, get up and share what God has been doing in them, something happens that we cannot quite account for. They expose what God has been doing in their interior, and somehow that exposure projects onto the dark, locked parts of my soul. How many times have I left this room thinking (clamped down, locked in, not going to be delivered from this thing, not going to give it up) only to have the burden ripped from me by the simple words of someone who got up and testified to what God had done in them? And the same is happening in countless small assemblies around the world, where the kingdom-pattern of vulnerable mutual testimony is doing the same slow work of liberation, person by person, week by week.

This is what Joseph and Mary modeled long before there was an organized church. They modeled vulnerable family-level faith in the face of social shame. And every faithful small assembly across the centuries that followed has carried forward the same modeling. Vulnerable. Shame-bearing. Faithful. Persistent. Trusting that the kingdom-work happening in humble places is more significant than the kingdom-display happening in the centers of power.

Daniel's Seventy Weeks

And let me now move to a piece of Old Testament background that anchors the beautiful name in a longer prophetic arc. Daniel 9, which is one of the more difficult chapters in the entire Old Testament, but which is also one of the most pastorally important for understanding what Jesus came to accomplish. I will not go into all the detail this morning, but here is the core.

Daniel had been carried into Babylonian captivity as a young boy: taken out of his homeland, made a eunuch in the Babylonian court, but maintaining his faithfulness across the decades of his captivity. And in Daniel 9, he is reading the prophet Jeremiah, who had announced that the Babylonian exile would last seventy years (Jeremiah 25:11–12; 29:10). Daniel does the math. The seventy-year period is almost up. Something is about to happen.

And Daniel prays:

> We have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments . . . All Israel has transgressed Your law, and has departed so as not to obey Your voice; therefore the curse and the oath written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against Him . . . Yet we have not made our prayer before the Lord our God, that we might turn from our iniquities and understand Your truth. (Daniel 9:5, 11, 13)

All Israel has transgressed Your law. We have sinned. We have departed. And yet: we have not even made our prayer before the Lord our God, that we might turn from our iniquities and understand Your truth. That is the diagnosis. Israel had been carried away into captivity for their iniquities, and even in the captivity they had not yet substantively repented. The exile-discipline had not yet produced its intended fruit.

And while Daniel is praying, the angel Gabriel appears and delivers one of the most pivotal prophetic announcements in the entire Old Testament:

> Seventy weeks are determined for your people and for your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy. (Daniel 9:24)

Seventy weeks. Not seventy years. Seventy weeks of years, which is the Hebrew idiom for periods of seven years each, totaling 490 years. Gabriel is announcing that the long redemptive arc that will culminate in the actual finishing of transgression, the making of an end of sins, the reconciling for iniquity, the bringing in of everlasting righteousness, the anointing of the Most Holy, that arc is going to play out over the next 490 years. And Daniel goes on to specify:

> Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublesome times. And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself; and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. (Daniel 9:25–26)

From the command to rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, sixty-nine weeks (483 years). And then the Messiah is cut off, not for Himself. And the people of the coming prince destroy the city and the sanctuary. That is the arc Daniel 9 announces. The temple gets rebuilt within 49 years. The Messiah arrives 483 years later. The Messiah is cut off, killed, but not for his own sake. And then the temple gets destroyed again.

And that is exactly what happened. The temple was rebuilt under Ezra and Nehemiah. Read Haggai and Zechariah for the messianic-anticipation prophecies of that rebuild period. Roughly 483 years later, the Messiah arrived, and was cut off, in the death of Jesus, which became the atonement for the sins of the nation and beyond. And then in AD 70, the Roman armies under Titus destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. The whole prophetic arc Daniel 9 had announced unfolded historically across nearly five centuries.

And the point I want to draw from this is that the beautiful name, Jesus, is not just the name that addresses my individual sins, or even the sins of the nation of Israel. The beautiful name belongs to the historical fulfillment of a prophetic arc that Daniel had announced almost five hundred years before Jesus was born. The Father had been planning this redemptive moment for centuries. The angel's announcement to Joseph in Matthew 1:21 was the culmination of a sixty-nine-weeks-of-years arc that had been operating in the background of every previous generation. The beautiful name was not improvised. It was prepared.

Sin Against Nature

And let me add one more anchor before we close, a piece of contemporary medical history that connects to the Old Testament prophetic warning about Israel's iniquity-pattern leading to destruction. Have you ever heard of the Hippocratic Oath? It is the oath that doctors take. It comes from Hippocrates, the Greek physician of the fifth century BC who is often called the father of Western medicine.

Hippocrates said something that has rung true across the twenty-five centuries since he said it. He said: "Sin against nature leads to illness and death." He was referring to human bodies as "nature," and his observation was that practices that go against the design of the body produce illness and eventually death. That observation is two and a half millennia old, and modern

medicine keeps rediscovering its applications. The foods we eat. The substances we expose ourselves to. The patterns of stress, isolation, and disconnection we structure our lives around. All of them, when they sin against the design of the body, eventually produce illness and death. Hippocrates was right.

And the same principle operates at the level of national life. Israel's iniquity-pattern, as Daniel 9 was diagnosing, was leading inevitably to the destruction of the city and the sanctuary. Not because God was sitting up there deciding to knock the walls down. Because the actions themselves were going to produce that consequence. Sin-against-the-design-of-covenantal-faithfulness leads, sooner or later, to the destruction the prophets had been warning about for centuries.

And the same is true of every nation in every era, including our own. Every action our society takes that does not reach toward wholeness, life, and beauty, every step that does not stretch toward Jesus, leads us inevitably to something else. The arc bends in the direction we have been pointing it. We do not get to override the consequences of our own pattern of choices. Hippocrates knew this twenty-five centuries ago. Daniel knew it in the sixth century BC. And the contemporary witness of every healthy local assembly is still pointing toward the same diagnostic in our own day.

Great Faith Beyond Israel

And the beautiful name's universal reach gets demonstrated repeatedly across the Gospel of Matthew through specific Gentile encounters. *I will name two of them quickly.*

First, the Roman centurion in Matthew 8. He came to Jesus pleading for the healing of his servant. Jesus said; I will come and heal him. And the centurion said, no, no, Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. Just speak the word, and my servant will be healed.

I am a man under authority, and I know how authority works. I say to one soldier, go, and he goes. I say to another, come, and he comes. Just speak the word. And Jesus turned to his disciples and said:

"Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" (Matthew 8:10).

I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel. The first "great faith" commendation in Matthew's Gospel went to a Roman occupying officer.

Second, the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. She came pleading for the healing of her demon-possessed daughter. And Jesus said something hard, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs" (Matthew 15:26). And she did not give up. She said:

> And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." (Matthew 15:27–28)

Great is your faith. The second "great faith" commendation in Matthew went to a Canaanite woman, a foreign mother from the Phoenician coast whose humility-without-self-deprecation broke through what looked like a refusal. And Jesus then went up into the surrounding Gentile region and fed the four thousand (Matthew 15:32–39). He had fed the five thousand in the previous chapter: all Jews. Now he feeds the four thousand in Gentile territory. The pattern is being deliberately replicated. The beautiful name belongs to both audiences.

That is the multinational reach of the salvation announced in Matthew 1:21. He shall save His people from their sins. And His people turn out to be from every nation and tribe and tongue. Revelation 7's innumerable multitude is the eschatological consummation of the trajectory Matthew 1:21 had launched.

Peter on the Rooftop

And one more piece, before we close. The reach of the beautiful name to the Gentiles required a specific theological breakthrough in the early church, and the person who had to undergo the breakthrough was Peter. Listen to Acts 10:

> And he became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean." And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common." This was done three times. (Acts 10:10–16)

Three times. Peter, even after the resurrection, even after Pentecost, even after years of walking with the risen Christ; Peter still has to be shown the same vision three times before he gets it. And I am grateful for Peter, because he gives me hope. Every time the Lord says: Rob, this is the way I want you to walk. Take this step. Run into the darkness. Move here. Move there., I am asking, are You sure? Are You sure? One more dream. One more experience. One unusual move. What is wrong with us human beings? Sin runs deep. But grace runs deeper.

And Peter eventually gets it. He goes to the household of the Gentile centurion Cornelius. He preaches a sermon that is, frankly, almost as short as Jonah's seven-word message that had converted Nineveh. And while he is still preaching, the Holy Spirit falls on the Gentile household. They begin to speak in tongues. The praises of God go up. And Peter has to admit, these people are ready. The Spirit has confirmed it. The beautiful name belongs to them too.

That is the trajectory of the kingdom. Every time we think we have established a boundary (Jews and not Gentiles, our denomination and not theirs, our culture and not the other) the Spirit shows up in the place we have boundaried out, and we have to update our understanding to match what the Spirit has already done. Light has shone into the darkness. And the darker the place, the more powerful the contrast when the light arrives.

The Word That Heals

And one final scripture before I close. *Psalm 107,* a Psalm I have been working through this morning and which keeps surfacing in the chapter's pastoral conclusions:

> Fools, because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, were afflicted. Their soul abhorred all manner of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses. He sent His word and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions. (Psalm 107:17–20)

He sent His word and healed them. Pan-pharmikon, "every healing," is what the Greek of the Septuagint conveys. Every disease. Every pain. Some of the most egregious sufferings are the ones nobody else can see. The interior wounds. The relational fractures. The accumulated griefs. And the word can heal there. The word enters the ear, drops to the heart, and disperses itself to wherever the soul needs the healing.

Let God be the God he wants to be. We keep throwing him up there and making him an angry God who hates the political people we have decided to hate. Does God hate Democrats? Does God hate Republicans? Does God hate the leaders of foreign nations we have been taught to fear? No. God is at the edge of his seat reaching, almost begging for humanity's redemption.

He is not waiting for them to be down, for them to suffer just a little more before he will accept them. He is reaching toward them now, in this moment, in the manner he reached toward us.

When Stephen died in Acts 7, he looked up and saw, the Son of Man standing at the right hand of the Father (Acts 7:55–56). That is the only time in the New Testament that the Son of Man is seen standing. Everywhere else, he is seated at the Father's right hand (Psalm 110; Hebrews 1:3). But for Stephen, and I think for everyone Stephen was witnessing to in his dying breath, including a young Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus who would later become the Apostle Paul, the Son of Man stood. The Lord is not just standing for the righteous Stephens of the world. He is standing for every unrighteous soul going to the grave without repentance: saying, come on, do not take that to the grave with you. Turn now. There is still time. God help us. Help us find our voice. Fill us with breath, because without breath there is no witness. And go into the world as witnesses of him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). That is what the beautiful name was given for. And every one of us who has received it carries the commission forward into whatever Macedonias the Spirit is going to redirect us into next. Amen.