Between the Times

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On the D at the End of All of Us, Abraham's Blessing, and the Restored Israel of God

The D at the End

The kingdom of God enters where the needs are. That is its characteristic. When the Pharisees acted around Jesus as though they had no need of him, Jesus responded with a piece of devastating irony:

"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Mark 2:17).

And the reality of it is, *whether we have been diagnosed or not, there is a D at the end of all of us*. Some of us have been formally diagnosed: ADHD, OCD, OCPD, GAD, PTSD, you name the acronym. The clinical world has a long list of D's. But the deeper truth is that *every human person walks with some kind of D embedded in them*. A dysfunction. A disorder. A disposition that is not what it was supposed to be. *If there were not something there, the problems of humanity would have been solved long before Jesus walked into the world.* There would have been no need for him to come. The cross would be a peculiar historical artifact rather than the hinge of human salvation.

Jesus came *precisely* because the D is real and universal. He came as the Physician to a planet of patients. And in his first recorded sermon, he announced his mission in exactly those terms.

The Sermon He Stopped Halfway Through

Luke decided that the *first* message he was going to record from Jesus' lips was the sermon Jesus preached in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth. Listen to it:

> So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. (Luke 4:16–20)

Now, I do not know about your tolerance for sermons, but in the modern church most of us tolerate about thirty minutes of preaching before we start glancing at our watches. Back then it was an *all-day affair*. Get ready, hold onto your seat. (And by the way, *they all stood while the teacher sat*. Some days I think we ought to reverse that order in the modern church. The seated teacher, the standing congregation. I would last about six minutes that way.) The synagogue would stand for hours and hours while the rabbis taught.

So Jesus opens the scroll of Isaiah to chapter 61. He reads. *And then he stops.* Right in the middle of the passage. Anyone who knew Isaiah 61, which was everyone in the synagogue, would have known *exactly where Jesus stopped*. He stopped right before what came next. Look at the very next line in Isaiah 61:

". . . to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God . . " (Isaiah 61:2).

Jesus reads through *the acceptable year of the Lord*, and stops. He does *not* read *the day of vengeance of our God*. He rolls up the scroll and gives it back. *That* is the half he leaves out. The half about Israel being made the head and the nations the tail. The half about the teeth of the wicked being broken. The triumphalist consolation everyone in that synagogue had been waiting for him to read.

And then he sits down. And every eye is on him. *What is he going to say next?* And he opens his mouth:

"And He began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'" (Luke 4:21).

That single sentence creates chaos in the synagogue for the next several minutes. People are looking at one another. *Isn't this the carpenter's son?* (Luke 4:22). *Who does he think he is?* And the deeper question they did not quite voice but were certainly feeling: *why did he stop where he stopped? Why did he leave out the day of vengeance?*

Two Stories About Foreigners

And Jesus, sensing exactly what they are feeling, does something even more provocative. *He tells them two stories about how Elijah and Elisha had ministered to Gentiles.*

> But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. (Luke 4:25–27)

Read that very carefully. *Many widows were in Israel during the famine.* God did not send Elijah to any of them. He sent Elijah to a *Gentile* widow in Sidon. *Many lepers were in Israel in Elisha's day.* God did not send Elisha to heal any of them. He sent Elisha to heal *Naaman the Syrian,* a *Gentile* general from a hostile foreign power.

Jesus is *retelling* the story of Israel from the angle of Elijah and Elisha, and the angle he chooses is the *one detail* in their ministries that points outward to the nations rather than inward to Israel. *Everything that the lives of Elijah and Elisha were pointing toward, the hope of Israel itself, was about to be fulfilled in Jesus.* And that fulfillment was *not going to stop at Israel's borders*. It was going to trickle outward into the world the way it was supposed to all along.

The crowd in the synagogue understood exactly what he was saying. *And it enraged them*:

> So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. (Luke 4:28–29)

The first sermon Luke records ended with the congregation trying to throw the preacher off a cliff. Why? Because Jesus had quoted Isaiah's *good news to the captives* sermon and then pointed out that *the captives God had always been planning to liberate were not only the Israelite captives, but the captive nations as well*. The gospel was always going to be cosmic. The Pharisees of Nazareth had hoped it would be tribal. The collision of those two expectations was so violent it nearly killed Jesus before his public ministry had properly begun.

Abraham's Promise

Why was Jesus' move so theologically necessary? Because the *gospel to the nations* is not a New Testament innovation. *It was the original promise to Abraham*.

Go back to Genesis. The book opens with creation, falls quickly into the corruption of humanity, and lands at the flood. Noah and his sons survive. The flood washes the violence away. *And what does Noah do as soon as the waters recede?* He plants a vineyard, gets drunk, and is exposed naked in his tent. *The same pattern that took down Adam (eat the fruit, realize the nakedness) takes down Noah after the flood is over.* The flood did not fix the D. The D made it through the flood.

And after Noah, his sons spread out across the earth. Genesis 10, *the Table of Nations*, lists *seventy nations* that descended from the three sons of Noah. (Whether the count is precisely seventy or merely seventy as a *number signifying completeness* depends on how strictly you count, but Israel loved round symbolic numbers. *Seventy nations* is the standard reckoning.) These seventy nations, broken and chaotic and corrupted from Noah's drunken slip in the tent forward, are now scattered across the face of the earth.

And in Genesis 11, *Babel*, the great human attempt to climb back to God by collective ambition, is scattered into the linguistic confusion that defines human history from that point forward.

And in Genesis 12, into this scattered seventy-nation mess, God calls *one man*:

> Now the Lord had said to Abram: "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)

Read that last clause very carefully: *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*. The *seventy nations* of Genesis 10, all of them, are in view in Genesis 12:3. *Abraham is being*

chosen not as the end of God's blessing but as the channel of it. He is going to be blessed *so that, through him, the nations may be blessed*. The mission to the nations is *original* to the call of Abraham. It is not a New Testament afterthought.

And here is how Paul reads Genesis 12 in Galatians 3. The promise was made *to Abraham and to his seed*. The Hebrew word *zera*, like the English word *seed*, has ambiguous number; it can be singular or collective. Most of Israel had read the promise *collectively*: *in you and in your descendants, your plural seed, all the nations shall be blessed*. Paul reads it *singularly*:

"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).

The seed is singular. The seed is Christ. And in Christ, the seventy nations of Genesis 10 receive the blessing originally promised in Genesis 12. The mission was always cosmic. Israel was always meant to be the channel, not the terminus. And when Jesus stood up in the synagogue at Nazareth and pointed to the Gentile widow at Zarephath and the Syrian general Naaman, he was reading Isaiah 61 in light of Genesis 12, the way it had always been meant to be read.

The Reapplication of the Chains

Now follow what happens to the Abrahamic blessing as it moves through history, because the pattern is sobering. *The chains are so easily reapplied.*

Abraham is blessed. His grandchildren grow into a clan. The clan moves to Egypt in the wisdom of Joseph, a man whose imprisonment, rather than defining him, *became the tool of his exaltation*. Joseph in his prison chains did not allow the imprisonment to define him. He kept operating as God had intended him to operate. *The deficiency, the condition, became the very*

mechanism God used to save not only Joseph but a generation. He interpreted the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker. He was then summoned to interpret Pharaoh's dream. *The Egyptian empire was saved through the wisdom of one Hebrew prisoner whose imprisonment was not the end of his story.*

And the seventy souls of Jacob's family went down to Egypt and multiplied. They filled the land. And then the chains were *reapplied*. The descendants of the man whose wisdom saved Egypt became *the slaves of Egypt*. The salvation was forgotten. The oppression returned. *The big D, Domination, found new ways to bind the people who had once been the source of blessing.*

And God raised up Moses. *Drawn out* is what his name means. Moses went into the wilderness, turned aside at the burning bush, heard the voice of God, and went back to Pharaoh with the most magnificent line of defiance in the Hebrew Bible: *Let my son go* (Exodus 4:23).

We need to declare with a little more defiance. Defy the chains. God's image-bearing humanity is both masculine and feminine, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them (Genesis 1:27). The dominion God has given his image-bearers is both. There are times for the more conventionally feminine virtues: nurture, swaddling, support, holding, loving the wounded close. And there are also times for the more conventionally masculine virtues: defiance, breaking the teeth of the enemy, standing in the face of the oppressor and saying, "let my son go." The enemy is not a person. The enemy is a power, a presence, that dominates this world. As Paul says:

"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

And the weapons of our warfare against that power are not flesh and blood weapons. *They are spiritual.* Prayer. Fasting. Praise. Bombarding heaven on behalf of those who are being bound. Jesus uses exactly this language when his disciples cannot cast out a demon: *this kind does not come out except by prayer and fasting* (Matthew 17:21). *There are some things that have brought this nation and this world under their powerful grip that will not come out except by prayer and fasting.* That is how the teeth of the oppressor get broken.

Signs and Wonders Will Not Get It Done

Now follow what happens after the Exodus. Moses leads Israel through the Red Sea. They walk through the parted waters. They watch Pharaoh's army drowned behind them. They follow the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. They arrive at Mount Sinai. And at Sinai, God speaks the most magnificent vocation any people on earth has ever received:

> You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all the people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:4–6)

A kingdom of priests. Notice the vocation. Israel is not chosen to be God's *favorites*. Israel is chosen to be God's *priests, for all the earth is Mine*. The whole earth belongs to God. Israel is chosen *out of* the whole earth to stand *on behalf of* the whole earth. The vocation is exactly the Abrahamic vocation. The blessing flows in, so that the blessing may flow out.

And what happens? *Israel comes into the promised land, and the D is still there.* They have seen the plagues. They have walked through the Red Sea. They have eaten manna from heaven for forty years. They have followed a literal pillar of fire across the wilderness. *Signs and wonders will not get it done.* And I am sorry for the Pentecostals reading this, because we love a

good sign and a good wonder. But signs alone will not deliver you. *You will still be filled with pedophiles and thieves and reprobates if your community has signs and wonders without a transformed heart.* Do not point your finger across the street at the Catholics and think you are immune to all that. Do not look across town at the Baptists or the Methodists or the Presbyterians or the non-denominationals. *It is everywhere.* Sin and disease and brokenness are everywhere. And we needed a Savior who could do what signs and wonders could not.

That is why Jeremiah, looking ahead, spoke of a covenant that would be different in kind from the Sinai covenant:

> Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt . . . I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jeremiah 31:31–33)

Not on tables of stone. *On the heart.* Not from outside. *From inside.* The D was deep enough that no external commandment could reach it. *Something inside the human person had to be made new*. That is why Paul speaks of *new creation* (2 Corinthians 5:17) and why Jesus speaks of *being born again* (John 3:3). The D is so deeply embedded in our humanity that we *can feel it at three years old*. The anxious chemistry, the broken patterns of our family of origin, the inheritance of the fall; they are at work in us before we are old enough to recognize them. *That is why God calls for new creation. Nothing less will do.*

The Algorithmic D

And let me say something about a *new layer* of the D that has come into the world in our generation. *There is now a power that knows your particular D better than you do.*

We live in an age of advanced algorithms. You scroll through a feed, and every time you scroll, *your little D is touched*. Your particular anxieties, your particular hungers, your particular weaknesses, your particular hooks, *all of them are being measured by the system you are scrolling through*. And the algorithm sorts the content so that *what comes next is precisely calibrated to keep you scrolling*. The system has learned what stops your thumb. It has learned what catches your eye. It has learned what makes you angry, what makes you envious, what makes you afraid. *All you have to do is pause for just a second, and the algorithm goes: I know about that. I know about you.*

This is *the big D, Domination, wearing twenty-first-century clothes*. It is the same power that dominated Pharaoh's Egypt and Babylon's empire and Rome's legions. It is not new. *But it has new tools.* It can now reach into your living room. It can now reach into your bedroom. It can now reach into your three-year-old's hands. It can reach into the dinner table conversation that should have been free of it. And it tunes its content to your D with a precision Pharaoh would have envied.

And what does the algorithmic D do to us? It makes us feel inadequate as we scroll through the curated highlight reels of other people's lives. Look how fast that guy runs. How does a fifty-six-year-old do that? Look how perfectly her kids are dressed. Look how composed her dinner-table is on a Wednesday after work. And we look up from the screen at our actual children, who look like feral creatures by comparison, and we feel like lame moms, lame dads, the worst version of every parent who ever lived. The algorithm has done its work. The big D has tied into our little D and exacerbated the problem.

And the new heart God gives us is the *only* thing that can interrupt the algorithmic D. The Spirit-shaped life inside us is the only counter-pull strong enough to withstand the curated pull of

the feed. *Without the new heart, the algorithm wins.* With the new heart, with the Spirit-trained interior compass that knows what the algorithm cannot calibrate to, we have a chance to lift our eyes from the screen and remember who we are.

Defy the Chains

I want to share something personal. In a season of my life when I was working in an office, I had a daily lunch-hour rhythm I have not been able to recover since. I would go out to my car at lunchtime. I would get my Bible. I would read for a stretch. I would listen to something edifying. I would make notes. I would meditate on the Lord. And then I would go back into the office refreshed for the afternoon. *That was the rhythm*. And the rhythm *worked*. It set a center inside me that the rest of the day did not displace.

Do you know what I do at lunch now? I sit on conference calls all day long. There is no quiet hour. There is no parking-lot-Bible-time. There is no scheduled space for the Spirit to interrupt the algorithmic noise. *The world's mechanism, the big D, wants more and more of our attention.* It does not want one open hour. It does not want one quiet drive. It does not want one walk without earbuds. *Because it knows that one open hour is enough for God to speak.*

So *defy the chains*. Find the open hour. Take the walk without the phone. Park in the car at lunch. Open the book. *Resist the power that wants to dominate you with noise.* If you are strong enough today to do that, do it on behalf of someone weaker who cannot yet. If you have a praise on your heart today, lift it, because someone in the room with you needs to hear it. *Bombard heaven. Pray. Fast. Praise. These are the weapons of warfare against the big D.*

Jesus said about a particular child bound by Satan: *this kind does not come out except by prayer and fasting* (Matthew 17:21). Our children are bound today by drug addiction, by anxiety, by depression, by adversity, by patterns of family inheritance that have crushed three generations

before this one. *That is not coming out without prayer and fasting.* Counseling matters. Medicine in its place matters. Community matters. *But the binding spirits do not come out by counseling alone.* The disciples could not cast out the spirit because their prayer life was thin. *Don't let yours be thin.*

Restored Israel

Now bring it all home. *Why did Jesus pick twelve disciples?* He could have picked seven: a great Jewish number, the number of completion. He could have picked seventy, the number of the nations of Genesis 10. He picked *twelve*. Why? *Because twelve is the number of the tribes of Israel.* Jesus, with twelve disciples gathered around him, *is restored Israel in seed form*. He is *Immanuel, God with us*, standing in the middle of the twelve tribes the way the tabernacle once stood in the middle of the wilderness camp.

And watch what happens at Pentecost. The Jewish rabbinic tradition required a *quorum of ten*, a *minyan*, for a proper synagogue gathering. Ten was the symbolic number of a viable community. *Twelve times ten is one hundred and twenty.* And what does Acts 1:15 record?

"And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty) . . " (Acts 1:15).

One hundred and twenty in the upper room. That number is not accidental. Twelve tribes multiplied by ten, the quorum number, equals one hundred and twenty. The early church gathered for Pentecost was, in the deepest sense, restored Israel in completed form. And what came down upon them, the fire on the tongues of Acts 2:3, was the new-covenant counterpart to the fire on the mountain at Sinai.

Read the parallel carefully. At Sinai, the law was given on tables of stone, in fire that burned on top of a mountain, while the people stood at a distance terrified. *On Pentecost, the law*

was given in fire that rested directly on the tongues of God's people, while the people stood with one another in joy. Same God. Same fire. Different inscription surface. *The Sinai fire wrote on stone. The Pentecost fire wrote on hearts.* Exactly what Jeremiah 31 had promised.

And here is the secret I want you to grasp. *Do not look for restored Israel in the future.* The restoration has already happened. *Israel was restored two thousand years ago.* When Jesus gathered the twelve, that was restored Israel in nucleus. When the one hundred and twenty were gathered in the upper room and the fire came on their tongues, that was restored Israel in fullness. And from that moment forward, the restored Israel of God has been *expanding outward into the seventy nations* exactly as Abraham was promised in Genesis 12:3. *The plot of the entire Bible has been operating without interruption since Pentecost*. The Gentile mission is not a Plan B after the Jews rejected the Messiah. *It is the Plan A that was always being unfolded from Abraham forward.*

And Paul makes this explicit in Romans:

> For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter. (Romans 2:28–29)

The circumcision of the heart is the mark of the true Israelite. The covenant identity has been internalized. And every Gentile believer who has been baptized into Christ has been grafted into the same olive tree (Romans 11:17) and is now part of the restored Israel that walked out of the upper room with fire on its tongues. *We are Israel.* That is the deepest meaning of the New Testament's *the Israel of God* phrase in Galatians 6:16. *We are not a replacement for Israel; we are the continuation of restored Israel in the Spirit, opened to the seventy nations exactly as Abraham was promised.*

Between the Times

And here is where we live. *Between the times.* The kingdom has come. The kingdom is also still coming. Pentecost has happened. The full restoration of all things has not yet happened. *We live in the overlap of the two ages.*

That is why we sometimes see the blessing and sometimes see the cursing. Why we sometimes see deliverance and sometimes still see chains. Why we sometimes glimpse the new heavens and new earth and other days find ourselves back in the middle of the old patterns. *We are between the times.* And the work of the people of God in the *between* is to *embody the kingdom that has come* while *praying for the kingdom that is still coming*. Both at once.

Look at how the book of Acts *ends*. Paul is in Rome, the very center of the Gentile empire, and he is in prison. *The last image Luke gives us is Paul in prison in Rome*. And the book *just stops*. There is no triumphant conclusion. No martyrdom scene. No release. *The story is left open*. And I think Luke is asking, by the very shape of his ending: *Who is picking up the story from here? Who carries the mission of the restored Israel forward into the rest of the seventy nations?*

It is us. We are the next chapter of Acts. We are the people who live in the overlap. We are the priests of the restored Israel who carry the Abrahamic blessing forward into the world Pentecost opened. And our work is the same work Paul was doing from his prison cell in Rome: *preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him* (Acts 28:31). The mission goes on. The prison walls do not stop it. The empire does not stop it. *We pick up the story.*

Tears Wiped Away

And here is what we have to hold on to in the between-times, when the tears are heavy. Isaiah and John saw it both:

"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind" (Isaiah 65:17).

"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

Have you borne tears this week? Have you suffered alongside members of your community who have been bearing more than they can carry? God will wipe away every tear from your eyes. Not yet. Someday. And until then, the only weapon we have is the spiritual one, prayer, praise, supplication, the new heart standing up in defiance against the algorithmic D that has crept into the cracks of every life.

Joseph in his prison chains. Paul and Silas in their prison cell at midnight, singing hymns until the walls came down (Acts 16:25–26). Jesus on the cross, *preaching deliverance to the captives*, including the criminal on the cross beside him who heard the gospel from a dying mouth and entered paradise that very day (Luke 23:43). *Circumstances do not dictate the outcome of a life given to God.* Birth, conditions, disabilities, family of origin, wealth or lack of it, Jew or Gentile, male or female, *all of those have been obliterated in the kingdom of God*. They no longer determine. *Christ obliterates the distinctions and makes everything that makes you who you are usable in the kingdom of God.*

That is the great promise of Ephesians 2:10: We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. The D that

you carry has not disqualified you. In Christ, it has been transmuted into the very tool God will use to make you a blessing to the nations. Joseph's prison chains became the mechanism of his exaltation. Your particular condition, surrendered to Christ, becomes the mechanism through which the kingdom flows out of you to the next person who needs it.

So join the restoration. *Join restored Israel*. Take up the spiritual weapons. Defy the chains. Refuse the algorithmic D. Pray and fast and praise. Find the open hour. Bear the infirmities of the weak when you are strong. And trust that the One who began this story in Genesis 12 is going to complete it through every one of us who has been grafted into the Seed who is Christ.

We are between the times. The kingdom has come. The kingdom is still coming. And the work of the between is the work of every restored Israelite: to be a blessing, through whom all the nations of the earth shall yet be blessed.