The Lion Who Is a Lamb

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On the Ten Healings, the Binding of the Strong Man, and the Vocation We Were Made For

Salvation Diluted

Something has happened, potentially over the years, to the word *salvation*. We have diluted the idea down to *a set of words we might say*, or *a claim of believing in God*, and then we have left it at that. We let salvation be a *mental assent* and stop pressing it to translate into anything beyond. *That is not what the biblical word salvation means.* Not historically. Not in the Old Testament's framing. Not in the New Testament's framing either.

When we sing about *the deliverer* in our worship, the song carries a long history. *Salvation came to Israel when they were bound in slavery to the Egyptians.* That is the *paradigm* the biblical writers used to describe what salvation actually is: *deliverance from a real captivity, into a real freedom, for the purpose of a real vocation*. And the Israelites needed *a deliverer to come*. They needed Moses. They needed his rod raised in the air. They needed the ten plagues. They needed the angel of the Lord camping around them on the night of Passover. They needed the parting of the Red Sea. *Salvation came as physical deliverance from a physical oppressor, accomplished by the God who fights for his people.*

And Pharaoh's response across the whole sequence was *hardening*. The plagues fell, one after another. Pharaoh's heart would soften momentarily, and then it would harden again.

Sometimes the text says God hardened Pharaoh's heart; sometimes it says Pharaoh hardened his own heart. Both are true. They are two sides of the same coin. *When God's signs land on us, we have a choice. Receive and soften, or resist and harden.* The same encounter with God can become either deliverance or further bondage, depending on the response.

And finally, after the tenth plague, the children of Israel were sent away. They camped at the Red Sea. *And Pharaoh's heart hardened one more time*, and he pursued them. *The Israelites feared.* They had just seen ten plagues fall on their oppressors, and they still feared the moment the army appeared on the horizon. Moses stood with his rod in the air. The wind blew. The sea parted. Israel walked across on dry ground. *Pharaoh and his armies rushed down into the seabed and the waters came back over them.* That is the foundational Old Testament narrative of salvation. *Deliverance from a real oppressor into a real freedom for a real vocation*. Not a mental assent. *An action taken by a faithful God on behalf of a captive people.*

The Sea God Subdues

And the sea-imagery goes all the way back to the opening of the Bible. Listen to Genesis 1:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:1–2).

Darkness on the face of the deep. The Hebrew word for *the deep* is *tehom*, and it carries the connotation of *chaotic, uncreated waters*. The starting state of creation in Genesis 1 is *dark, chaotic, watery, formless*. And the *Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters*: preparing to bring order out of the chaos, light out of the darkness, dry land out of the deep.

This matters because the ancient Near Eastern faiths that surrounded Israel had their own creation stories about *the chaos waters and the gods*. *The gods*, in those stories, *subdued the chaos by force*: defeating sea-monsters, splitting their bodies, fashioning the cosmos out of the divine corpses. And then *the gods got hungry*. They needed sustenance. And so they had to create someone to do their food-gathering for them. *They took the god who was complaining the most about having to gather his own food*, killed him, mixed his blood with clay, and *fashioned man from the bloody mud as a slave to the gods*. That is the anthropology of the ancient Near East. *Humanity exists to be a slave-caste serving the gods' appetite.*

Now read Moses's counter-narrative in Genesis 1. No combat with chaos-monsters. No corpse-fashioning. No bloody mud. Just God speaking, and creation arising in response. Light. Sky. Land. Vegetation. Sun and moon. Sea-creatures. Land-animals. And finally, on the sixth day, humanity:

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

Not slaves. Image-bearers. Not created to feed hungry gods. Created to exercise dominion in God's name over the creation. Male and female, sharing the same image-bearing vocation. Moses is deliberately writing against the surrounding anthropology. The Genesis creation account is a polemic. The slave-god myth was the established religious cosmology of the cultures Israel had just been delivered from. And Moses is announcing that the God of Israel is not that kind of god, and the human is not that kind of creature, and the cosmos is not that kind of place.

A King-Priest in a Garden-Sanctuary

And the vocation given to the image-bearer is specific. Listen to Genesis 2:

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

Tend and keep. Two Hebrew verbs: avad and shamar. And here is what is striking. Those exact two verbs together later become the verbs Moses uses for the work of the priests in the tabernacle (Numbers 3:7–8; 8:26). The garden was the first sanctuary. The human was the first priest. Tend-and-keep was the priestly vocation.

And the king-priest-prophet framework runs throughout. As I have said elsewhere in these messages, God created humanity with three offices folded into one calling. Kingship, let them have dominion. Priesthood, tend and keep the garden-sanctuary. Prophetic word-bearing: tell every subsequent generation, as they were fruitful and multiplied, of the commands God has given. Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, not principally as a biological-reproductive program, but to populate the earth with image-bearers who would carry the king-priest-prophet vocation outward into every corner of creation.

And the temple Israel later built was understood, in the symbolic logic of the Old Testament, to *represent the entire cosmos that God had created*. The outer court was the visible world. The Holy Place was the heavens. The Holy of Holies was the very throne-room of God. *The temple was a microcosm. And the priestly vocation was the cosmic vocation of humanity in compressed form*. Tend and keep the sanctuary. Tend and keep the cosmos. *Same work, same office, scaled up and scaled down.*

And listen to what God says about this through Isaiah:

> Thus says the Lord: "Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? . . . But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word." (Isaiah 66:1–2)

Heaven is My throne. Earth is My footstool. God does not need a temple-building. The whole cosmos is already the temple. And what he is looking for is not a structure but a person, one who is poor and contrite and trembling at his word. That kind of person becomes the new sanctuary in which God comes to dwell. That was always the goal from the beginning: that God would dwell with humanity, and humanity would tend and keep the dwelling.

The Serpent and the Forgotten Vocation

And the vocation was *thwarted in the garden by the serpent*. The first parents chose the dragon's mimetic template over the Creator's. They reached for what was not theirs to take. They listened to a counter-voice. *And the deformation began*. The king-priest-prophet vocation got submerged under the inherited noise of generation upon generation.

And the deformation scaled up. Ezekiel calls Pharaoh, the imperial form of the same deforming power, *the great dragon that lies in the midst of his rivers* (Ezekiel 29:3). *Same serpent, scaled up to imperial proportions*. The thing that had whispered to Eve in the garden was now the empire that enslaved Israel. The voice had grown into a kingdom. And the kingdom had to be broken before the image-bearers could be restored to their vocation.

So God raised up Moses. *Drawn out of the water that should have killed him*, sent back to confront the imperial dragon. The plagues fell. The angel of the Lord passed over. The Red Sea opened. *Israel walked out, and Pharaoh's armies were drowned*. And what was the first thing the redeemed people did on the far shore?

"Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord, and spoke, saying: 'I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea!'" (Exodus 15:1).

A song of liberation. The redeemed sing. That is the response of the saved. *Not mental assent. Singing. Walking out into the wilderness behind the pillar of cloud*, away from the predictability of Egyptian society, into a season of trust where the food would come daily and not weekly, where the water would come from rocks, where God himself would shepherd them across territory they had never crossed before.

And, predictably, the faithless ones complained almost immediately. Why did you bring us out here to die? Didn't we have enough graves in Egypt? But the faithful ones followed Moses into the wilderness, because they had trusted what they had seen God do at the Red Sea, and they were willing to trust what they had not yet seen God do across the desert.

And at Mount Sinai, God restored the vocation. He spoke through Moses:

> 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 19:5–6)

A kingdom of priests. That is the vocation Adam had been given in the garden, reissued at Sinai to a delivered people. The whole earth was God's; Israel was chosen as priests on behalf of the whole earth. The Abrahamic blessing was being reissued in covenantal form. In Abraham, all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:3), and Israel was the channel through which that blessing was supposed to flow.

And what did Israel forget? The vocation. Across the centuries that followed Sinai, Israel forgot that the calling was to be a blessing to the surrounding nations, and instead Israel kept

taking on the nature and attitudes of the surrounding nations. The current ran the wrong direction. Instead of the blessing flowing outward from Israel into the seventy nations, the idolatry of the seventy nations flowed inward into Israel. And generation after generation of prophets had to stand up and call Israel back to a vocation Israel had laid down. That is the long, painful pattern of the Old Testament.

Idols and the Disabilities They Produce

And here is what idolatry does to its devotees. Listen to Psalm 115:

> Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; eyes they have, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear; noses they have, but they do not smell; they have hands, but they do not handle; feet they have, but they do not walk; nor do they mutter through their throat. Those who make them are like them; so is everyone who trusts in them. (Psalm 115:4–8)

Those who make them are like them. You become what you worship. If you worship a god with eyes that cannot see, you become unable to see. If you worship a god with ears that cannot hear, you become unable to hear. If you worship a god with a mouth that cannot speak, you become unable to speak. If you worship a god with feet that cannot walk, you become unable to walk in the direction you were created to walk.

And in the ancient Near East, the way this worked liturgically was through *incantation*. The priest would build the idol, and then he would *call down the spirit of the god* into the idol through ritual invocation. The idol became the location at which the worshipper communed with the spirit. *And the spirit, drawn into the idol, then began to shape its worshippers in its own deforming image*.

Now, *we do not literally do that today*. We do not have stone idols on pedestals with priests chanting incantations over them. *Yet we absolutely do this.* Each of us has gods. You know what mine are. I know what yours probably are. They are the things I bow down to. They are the things I fear losing. Most of the fear in my life is related to one of the gods in my life. Trace the fear and you will find the idol. Trace the idol and you will find the deforming spirit that is shaping you into its own image. *Same logic as Psalm 115. Different package.*

And here is what God means to do. He means to send his King, his Messiah, to break the power of the gods we have been worshipping. Exactly as he sent Moses to break the power that had enslaved Israel for four hundred and thirty years. We have to be saved so that we can be free to do the job God called us to do. The reason we need to be delivered is so we can take up our vocation again. When we are bound by the domination of idolatry, the political and economic and cultural forces of this age that subtly demand our worship, we cannot operate as the kings and priests and prophets God created us to be.

And let me say something carefully about *culture* and *politics* and *economics*. *None of these things is bad in itself.* There is a real role for civic engagement, for economic activity, for political voice. We are given voices to speak to all of these things. *When companies dominate their employees, someone needs to speak to that.* When governments oppress the vulnerable, someone needs to speak to that. When the natural world is degraded by toxic indifference, someone needs to speak to that. *But every one of these legitimate concerns can itself descend into idolatry*, and we have to be aware of the line.

How does that descent happen? We speak to power, and then power asks us to sit at its table. And before we have noticed the shift, we are sitting at the table, and the people we used to advocate for are now the people we are positioned above. The voice of advocacy becomes the

voice of dominance. That is how good causes corrupt themselves. The pattern is observable. It happens in every century.

But not in the kingdom of God. Because the kingdom of God's signature event is not the seizure of the throne but the death on the cross. The King of the universe was lifted up not on a throne but on an instrument of imperial execution. And what flowed out of his pierced side was not the blood of conquest but the blood and water of new creation. That is the kingdom's strange military doctrine. Power exercised through self-emptying. Dominion exercised through sacrificial love. Authority exercised through service. The pattern is repeatable because the pattern is the King's pattern.

Born of Water and Spirit

And listen to what John records about the moment of Jesus' death:

"But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out" (John 19:34).

Blood and water. John takes care to record both. And the same Gospel had opened, three chapters earlier, with Nicodemus asking how a man can enter the kingdom of God:

"Jesus answered, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God'" (John 3:5).

Born of water and Spirit. And on the cross, water and blood flowed from the pierced side of Jesus. The new creation, the new humanity, is being birthed from the side of the new Adam, exactly as the first Eve was birthed from the side of the first Adam who had been put to sleep in the garden (Genesis 2:21). Adam was put to sleep; Eve came from his side. Jesus was put to death; the church came from his side. Same pattern. New creation.

And Paul puts the result of this directly:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

New creation. Old things passed away. All things made new. This is the kingdom Jesus came to inaugurate. And we (the people who have been born of water and Spirit, who have come from the pierced side of the second Adam) are the citizens of that new creation. We have been called to serve alongside the new Adam in the work he came to do. The healing. The cleansing. The raising. The casting out. The giving. The tending and keeping of the new garden as it spreads outward into every corner of the old world.

New Creation You Cannot See From the Outside

And here is the pastoral honesty I want to land before we go further. *When we look around, we still see chaos.* We still see disease. We still see sin and upset people and anger and violence and wrath and all the rest of it. *How do we see new creation in a world that still looks like the old one?*

One of the brothers in our assembly has not changed dramatically on the outside since the day he chose to accept Jesus as his King and Ruler and Lord. *You can't see anything different on the outside* of him than what existed before. He is a little older, *that happens to all of us*. He has cut his hair a bit, *which is a change, but not a substantively spiritual one*. The big visible difference would be invisible to a stranger walking into our service for the first time.

But you can see something on the inside. If you have known him for years, you can see the change. He is not a slave to what he used to be a slave to. He is not deformed by what he used to be deformed by. The Psalm 115 idolatry-disabilities have been undone in him, one by one, over a slow patient work of the Spirit. New creation that is not yet visible to the casual

observer is nevertheless absolutely real in him. That is what new creation looks like in the present age. Real. Often interior. Often slow. But real.

And that is what we are looking for, and what we are extending, as the priesthood Jesus has called us into. The casual observer's metric of new creation will always miss what is actually happening. The Spirit's metric is different. And the Spirit is keeping accurate count of the slow patient work he is doing in every life that has come to Christ.

Matthew's Ten Healings, Twelve People

Now bring all of this as backdrop into the central exegetical move of this chapter. *Matthew 8 through 12 is the deliberate, carefully constructed Matthean narrative of a new Exodus*. And the way Matthew has organized it should make every careful reader sit up.

Matthew records twelve people healed in ten episodes across chapters 8 through 12. Twelve people. Ten episodes. Both numbers carry deliberate Mosaic weight. The ten episodes correspond to the ten plagues Moses brought against Egypt in Exodus 7–12. The twelve people healed correspond to the twelve tribes of Israel, the people Moses delivered through those plagues.

Walk through the episodes briefly:

Episode 1: Jesus cleanses the leper (Matthew 8:1–4). One healing.

Episode 2: Jesus heals the centurion's servant from a distance (Matthew 8:5–13). One healing.

Episode 3: Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14–15). One healing.

Episode 4: Jesus calms the storm on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:23–27). The storm-stilling itself is not a healing in the strict sense, *but it is a deliverance from the chaos waters*,

which is the same Exodus-Red-Sea pattern in a different key. *Many scholars include this as a healing in the broader sense, the deliverance of the disciples from the threat of the sea*.

Episode 5: Jesus delivers the two demon-possessed men of the Gadarenes (Matthew 8:28–34). Two people healed in one episode.

Episode 6: Jesus heals the paralyzed man (Matthew 9:1–8). One healing.

Episode 7: Jesus raises the daughter of the ruler (Matthew 9:18–26). And while he is on the way, *Jesus heals the woman with the issue of blood* (Matthew 9:20–22). *Two people healed in one episode.*

Episode 8: Jesus heals the two blind men (Matthew 9:27–31). Two people healed in one episode.

Episode 9: Jesus heals the demon-possessed mute man (Matthew 9:32–34). One healing.

Episode 10: Jesus heals the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:9–14). One healing.

Total: ten episodes. Twelve people. The mathematics is not coincidence. Matthew is deliberately constructing a Mosaic narrative. The ten plagues of Moses have become the ten healings of Jesus. The twelve tribes delivered by Moses have become the twelve people healed by Jesus. Matthew is announcing that a new Exodus is happening, but the form of the new Exodus is different from the form of the old one.

Where Moses smote, Jesus heals. Where Moses brought destruction on the oppressor through ten escalating judgments, Jesus brings restoration to the oppressed through ten episodes of healing. The structural parallel is exact. The substantive difference is total. The old Exodus broke the oppressor by destroying him. The new Exodus breaks the oppressor by healing the

oppressed out from under his power. Same liberation. Different method. Same God. Different age. Different kind of king.

The Calming of the Storm

Look at one episode in detail, because it carries the Red Sea echo most directly. *Matthew 8:23–27, the calming of the storm*:

> Now when He got into a boat, His disciples followed Him. And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But He was asleep. Then His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" But He said to them, "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. So the men marveled, saying, "Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?" (Matthew 8:23–27)

Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him? The disciples are asking the right question, and the answer is hiding in their own Old Testament. Only God commands the sea. Only the Spirit who hovered over the face of the waters in Genesis 1 has authority to rebuke the chaos-waters into submission. The God who parted the Red Sea for Moses is the same God now sleeping in the back of a fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee. And when he wakes, the same voice that spoke at the beginning (let there be light, let the waters be gathered into one place, let dry land appear) speaks again, and the chaos yields, and there is a great calm.

Hold the symbolic weight. The disciples were in a boat. The chaos-waters threatened to swallow them. The One in the boat with them spoke creation-order into the chaos, and the chaos yielded. That is the kingdom's pattern. We are in the boat with him. The chaos-waters of our times threaten to swallow us. The One in the boat with us still has authority over the chaos. And

when we cry out (Lord, save us, we are perishing) the chaos still yields to the voice of the One who first spoke it into being.

The Gadarene Demoniacs and the Drowned Legion

And the next episode is even more theologically loaded. Matthew 8:28–34, the demon-possessed men of the Gadarenes:

> When He had come to the other side, to the country of the Gergesenes, there met Him two demon-possessed men, coming out of the tombs, exceedingly fierce, so that no one could pass that way. And suddenly they cried out, saying, "What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?" Now a good way off from them there was a herd of many swine feeding. So the demons begged Him, saying, "If You cast us out, permit us to go away into the herd of swine." And He said to them, "Go." So when they had come out, they went into the herd of swine. And suddenly the whole herd of swine ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and perished in the water. (Matthew 8:28–32)

Several details to notice. Exceedingly fierce. The word translated fierce (chalepoi) carries the sense of violent, dangerous, aggressive. Hold that, because violence is the recurring symptom of the deformed humanity Genesis describes. Violence filled the earth before the flood (Genesis 6:11). Sex and violence were the reasons the flood came on the earth: the deformation of Genesis 6's sons of God taking whatever wives they wanted, and the earth filled with violence as a result. Post-flood, the same pattern reasserted itself at Babel: self-exalted humanity gathering in the plain of Shinar, refusing to be scattered, building a tower to make a name for itself, exactly as Adam had reached for what was not his to grasp. Exalted humanity. Self-righteous religion. Sex. Violence. Pick your poison. The deformation is the same; only the packaging changes.

And the demons recognize Jesus. *What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God?* The Jewish idiom, *what have we to do with You*, means something like *we have nothing in common; we belong to different orders entirely*. The demons have correctly identified the One in front of them. And they ask the question that gives us a crucial detail of biblical eschatology:

"Have You come here to torment us before the time?" (Matthew 8:29).

Before the time. There is a *time* when the demonic powers will be brought to final accounting. The demons know this. They know they have a deadline. *And they are afraid Jesus has arrived early, ahead of the appointed deadline, to deal with them now*. Hold that as a thread of pastoral hope. *There is a time when the tormenting of our lives (the chaos, the troubled seas, the unsettled inheritance) will come to an end*. There is a time when *chaos is overtaken by creation*, and the One who first spoke *let there be* speaks the same word into our particular lives, and the green grass and the fruitful fields and the birds singing come into being where there had been desolation. *That time is real.* The demons know about it. *And we should know about it too, and live in confident hope of its coming.*

And then the most striking moment of the episode:

"And suddenly the whole herd of swine ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and perished in the water" (Matthew 8:32).

The whole herd ran violently down into the sea and perished in the water. Now where have we seen a legion of opposing forces rushing madly down into the sea and perishing in the water? Pharaoh's army. The Red Sea. The deliberate echo could not be more precise. Mark's parallel account (Mark 5:9) makes the military identification explicit: the demons called themselves Legion, for we are many. A legion was a specific Roman military unit of about six thousand soldiers. The demons identify themselves as a Roman army. And then the army-of-

demons-in-pigs rushes down into the sea and is drowned exactly as Pharaoh's army was drowned. Matthew is showing us that the new Exodus is now happening through Jesus. The same God who drowned Pharaoh's legion in the Red Sea is now drowning the demonic legion in the Sea of Galilee. Same pattern. New territory. Same victory.

And the people who live by the sword still die by the sword. That is just the iron law of the violent-imperial way of being. The legion of demons asked for the pigs as their refuge. The pigs ran themselves to destruction. Imperial violence carries its own death-sentence built into its operating logic. Live by force, perish by force (cf. Matthew 26:52). That is true at the individual scale and at the imperial scale. The new Exodus does not bring its own violence to the dragon's territory. The dragon's violence destroys itself when confronted by the One whose authority over the chaos-waters is original.

The Strong Man Bound

And the climactic exposition of what Jesus is doing across the ten episodes comes when Matthew 12 records the Pharisees attributing his exorcisms to Satan. Listen to Jesus' response:

> How can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad. (Matthew 12:29–30)

Binding the strong man. That is what Jesus is doing across the entire arc of Matthew 8–12. Every healing is a small binding of the strong man. Every demon cast out, every leper cleansed, every paralyzed limb restored, every dead daughter raised, every bleeding woman healed, every blind eye opened, each of these is a small entry into the strong man's house and a small plundering of his goods. The strong man is the deforming power that has been ruling the lives of those bound by his rule. Every healing announces that the strong man is being bound,

and the people he had been holding captive are being plundered back out of his house into their original vocation as image-bearing kings and priests of God.

And this is what God wants to do for *us*. *Bind the strong men of our lives.* Bind the pharaohs that have taken up residence in us: whatever those pharaohs are, in their many disguises. *When the pharaohs in us are bound, we are free to become what God has called us to be*. The vocation is restored. The kingship is restored. The priesthood is restored. The prophetic word-bearing is restored. *We can do, finally, the work we were always made to do*, because the deforming power that had been keeping us off-task is bound.

Revelation 5: The Lion Who Is a Lamb

And the chapter's climactic image comes from Revelation 5, because what John saw in the vision crystallizes the whole pattern Matthew has been narrating. Listen:

> And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals. Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?" And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it. So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it. But one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals." (Revelation 5:1–5)

The Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed. That is the announcement. And John, hearing the announcement, turns to see *the conquering Lion* who has prevailed. But what does he actually see when he turns?

"And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain . . " (Revelation 5:6).

A Lamb as though it had been slain. The Lion the elder announces turns out, when John actually looks, to be a Lamb that has been killed. That is one of the most extraordinary moments in the entire book of Revelation. The conquering Messiah is the executed Messiah. The Lion who has prevailed is the Lamb who was slain. The strength of the kingdom is the death of the King.

And look at what the Lamb has:

". . . having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth" (Revelation 5:6).

Seven horns. In biblical symbolism, horns are power. Seven horns: complete, total power. No weakness. Seven eyes. All-seeing wisdom. No blindness. The Lamb who was slain is the all-powerful, all-seeing Lord of the cosmos. The vocation of the new humanity that the Lamb has called us into is not a vocation of retreat and weakness and apologetic faith. It is a powerful voice in the world. We speak to the political powers, the economic powers, the social powers of our age. We speak back against the demonic oppression that has been ruling. And the more we use that voice, the more we take action, the more authority we have to affect the world around us. The Lamb's seven horns are extended into the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth. That is the Lamb's army. And we are part of it.

The Innumerable Multitude

And the same Revelation does something striking in chapter 7. John hears *a number being announced*:

"And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed . . " (Revelation 7:4).

One hundred and forty-four thousand. Twelve tribes times twelve thousand each. And the number itself carries military weight in the Old Testament background, the numbering of Israel in the Old Testament was almost always the military census of fighting men aged twenty to fifty. So when John hears one hundred and forty-four thousand being numbered tribe by tribe, the expectation is being set up that he is about to see a military army.

And then John turns to see:

> 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)

A great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues. The pattern in Revelation 5 is repeated in Revelation 7. What John hears is one thing. What he sees is different. The military army of one hundred and forty-four thousand turns out, when John actually looks, to be an innumerable, multi-ethnic, peace-bearing crowd holding palm branches and singing salvation. The army of God is not a fighting army. It is a worshipping army. And its weapon is the new song of new creation.

And the chapter goes on:

> These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. (Revelation 7:14–15)

Washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The robes were washed by participating in the Lamb's pattern: the Lion who is a Lamb, the King who reigns through death and resurrection rather than through imperial conquest. The trouble we go through in this present age, the suffering we endure in our small daily crosses; that is the washing of our robes. The faithfulness we maintain in the midst of trouble is the means by which the robes become white. Our warring is not in vain. Our warring is the washing.

The Harp and the Bowl

And one more detail from Revelation 5. The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fall down before the Lamb, *each having a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints* (Revelation 5:8). *Harps and bowls.* That is what the worshipping army carries. *Praise and prayer.* No swords. *Praise and prayer.*

And we have been given the same equipment. *We have been given a harp.* It is right here. We have been given a bowl. The bowl is full of the incense of our prayers, which the elders and the living creatures are *lifting up to God before his throne*. The image is that our actual prayers (the ones we have prayed quietly in the dark, the ones we have whispered in cars and bedrooms and hospital waiting rooms) *are being collected as incense in golden bowls at the very throne of God*. Nothing is wasted. *Every prayer is being saved up*, and at the right moment, every one of them will figure into the song of new creation that the innumerable multitude is even now learning to sing.

All we have to do is praise. Lift up our harps. Lift up our prayers. And the powers of this world will tremble at the cacophony of voices, *from every nation under heaven, raised together in unity, singing the new song of new creation*. That harmony is what the dragon fears. *That harmony is what the dragon cannot reproduce*. The dragon can produce uniformity by force. *The*

dragon cannot produce unity through love. Only the Lamb can do that. And only the Lamb's people, gathered from every tribe and tongue and nation, can sing the new song the Lamb has taught them.

Religious Bondage and the Self-Righteous Off-Ramp

And let me be honest about how this lands in my own life. I was raised in church. I grew up with a silver spoon, spiritually: born into a family where the gospel was preached, the Bible was read, and the disciplines of faith were modeled from my earliest memory. And I had to be delivered from religious bondage as much as someone else might need to be delivered from drug addiction or violence or worldly entanglement.

I remember being seventeen years old, driving down an off-ramp in Upland, California. I had been *making strides spiritually*. Bad habits were falling off me. I was reading the Bible voraciously. *Low-altitude rats, the small habitual sins that had been clinging to my life, were dying off,* as a brother in our tradition used to put it. And I remember pulling down the off-ramp and saying, internally, with complete sincerity: *Lord, what else do I have to overcome? I'm perfect now. This is great.*

Seventeen years old. Already convinced of my own righteousness. The Spirit, in his patience, had to spend the next several decades undoing exactly that conviction. Self-righteousness is its own form of religious bondage, and possibly the harder form to be delivered from. Drug addiction at least announces itself. Self-righteousness pretends to be sanctification. It takes a long time, and a lot of grace, to learn to see the difference.

And by God's mercy I have been delivered, *am being delivered,* from that. The deliverance has come through years of being humbled by the actual size of my own remaining failures, the actual depth of my own continuing need, and the actual generosity of God's

continuing love. *Every category of person needs deliverance.* The obviously broken. The respectably religious. *Especially* the respectably religious, because their bondage is the most camouflaged and the hardest to recognize. Even those who have called on the name of the King of the universe can still be operating, decades later, on a self-righteous script the Spirit has been patiently dismantling from the inside out.

The Vocation Restored

And so we come to the closing pastoral landing. Our salvation is not principally words we speak once and then leave on a shelf. Our salvation is deliverance into a vocation we were always made to live. Kings and priests. A royal priesthood, as Peter says (1 Peter 2:9). Lights of the world, salt of the earth, as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:13–14). Ambassadors of reconciliation, as Paul said (2 Corinthians 5:20). Co-laborers with God, as Paul also said (1 Corinthians 3:9). Tend-and-keepers of the new garden God is planting through us into the surrounding world.

And the new garden has trees of life on either side of the river (Revelation 22:2). Twelve trees. Producing fruit every month. Not seasonal. Periodic, every month, the fruit comes forth. And the leaves are for the healing of the nations. That is the kingdom in its final consummated form. And the life we are called to live now is the in-season fruit-production life in advance of that consummation. Every month, fruit. Every season, healing leaves for the nations. Constant, generous, in-season-and-out-of-season fruit-bearing for the benefit of others.

So let us stop waiting for *the plexiglass paradise* in some distant future. *That is the new creation God is producing now, in us, through us, by his Spirit working in his image-bearers, doing the kingdom work he restored us to do*. The deliverance is real. *The vocation is real.* The

fruit is real. The healing of the nations is real, in small daily increments, through every life that has been brought from death to life by the Lamb who was slain.

When we find our vocation, *the things of earth grow strangely dim*. Not because they no longer matter, but because we have found the thing that matters most. *We do not have to repress sin. We just have to get along with the task of doing the kingdom work*. And when we are doing the kingdom work, the deforming patterns that had been ruling us *fall away from us almost without our noticing*. The Spirit handles them on the side, while we are looking at the work he has put in front of us. That is the slow ordinary grace of Christian formation. *The vocation is the cure for the disease the vocation is the cure for*.

Let us lead. Let us minister. Let us serve. Let us tend and keep the new garden God is growing through us. The Lamb who was slain is the Lion who has prevailed. The harps and bowls are in our hands. Lift them up. Sing the new song. And watch what God will do with that.