Come Unto Me

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On the Reed Shaken in the Wind, the Cities That Would Have Repented, and the Yoke That Is Easy

A Bible by My Father's Chair

The visitor in our service this morning told stories of people whose lives had been changed by happening across a Bible, in a motel drawer, a doctor's office waiting room, a friend's home. *My own story is similar.* And it was not really a happening.

I was seventeen years old. I was alone in the house one Saturday morning, in southern California, trying to find my way as a young man who had not yet learned what direction his life was supposed to take. It was raining, which in southern California is rare enough that the rain itself felt like an event. *My father's Bible was sitting by his chair.* I picked it up. I opened it. I started reading at Genesis 12. *And before I put the Bible down, I had read through the fiftieth chapter of Genesis*. Thirty-nine chapters of the patriarchal narratives (the call of Abraham, the binding of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, the long sojourn into Egypt) in one rainy Saturday morning.

Something happened to me during that reading. The story of the promise made to Abraham, *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed* (Genesis 12:3), caught me. The classic struggle between brothers, generation after generation, caught me. And ultimately *God's ability to deliver them, despite themselves*, caught me. That morning is where my journey with

God started. *I was seventeen.* I have had ups and downs in my life, as everyone does. But Isaiah's promise has held:

"Wisdom and knowledge will be the stability of your times, and the strength of salvation; the fear of the Lord is His treasure" (Isaiah 33:6).

Wisdom and knowledge will be the stability of your times. I have felt my salvation strengthened, decade after decade, by the words I have continued to read out of this book. And one of the abiding gospel-realities is that *this book is still on the table by someone's chair somewhere this morning*, waiting to be picked up by a seventeen-year-old who has not yet had his Saturday-morning encounter. Every Bible quietly placed in a motel drawer, every Bible left on a hospital nightstand, every Bible passed from a grandparent to a grandchild, *every one of them is a small open door*. The Spirit knows how to use small open doors.

The Jubilee Israel Never Practiced

And here is something the visitor's testimony reminded me of about the *content* of what God built into his covenant with Israel. Listen to the Jubilee laws of Leviticus 25:

> And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you; and each of you shall return to his possession, and each of you shall return to his family. (Leviticus 25:10)

Every fiftieth year, *the year of Jubilee*, debts were to be cancelled. Slaves were to be freed. Land sold under economic pressure was to revert to its original family. *The cumulative inequalities of fifty years of normal economic life were to be reset.* No family in Israel was to become permanently landless. No family was to be permanently enslaved to debt. *The covenant had a built-in mechanism for periodic restoration of the entire community.*

And one of the most sobering things you find when you read the historical and prophetic record of Israel is that *Israel never actually practiced the Jubilee*. Not in any sustained way that left a meaningful historical record. The Levitical command was on the books. *The implementation, generation after generation, never happened.* That is probably why the prophets kept standing up across centuries (Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) and pointing back at the Mosaic covenant and saying you took this oath. The book was sprinkled with blood. The people were sprinkled with blood. You committed to this. And yet the forgiveness and the giving-back built into the covenant has never been practiced.

Remember the moment Moses sealed the covenant in Exodus 24:

"And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, 'This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words'" (Exodus 24:8).

The blood was sprinkled on the book and on the people. Together they became people of the book. There was something written in there that they were committing to, and they kept committing to the parts they liked while never quite getting around to the parts about Jubilee and forgiveness and giving-back. The chosen people kept the rituals and skipped the restorations. The prophets kept showing up to remind them. It is one of the deepest patterns of the Old Testament.

And the underlying point of the Jubilee was simple. *God did not want anyone in his kingdom to become a permanently landless pauper.* He wanted every family to have what was rightfully theirs as part of the people of God. The Jubilee was the covenant's *anti-stagnation* device, preventing the gradual concentration of wealth in a few hands while the rest of the community fell into permanent dependency. *It was God's economic doctrine, and Israel never installed it.*

Whole Earth, Holy Priesthood

And then look at how Exodus 19 expands the vocation. Not only was Israel God's chosen people, *the whole earth was his too*. Israel was simply being asked to be *a particular instrument* through which the whole earth would be reached:

> 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)

For all the earth is Mine. Israel was not chosen as God's favorites. Israel was chosen as God's priests, for all the earth is Mine. The whole earth already belonged to God; he chose Israel out of the whole earth to stand on behalf of the whole earth. Israel was supposed to go into the surrounding nations and teach them through the word what the kingdom of God was actually like. This is how gracious our God is. He grabbed a wandering Aramean named Abraham and showed unbelievable favor on him.

Notice what God had done before he called Abraham. He had seen what happened in *the flood*. The cataclysmic judgment of Genesis 6–9 had not led to the repentance or sinlessness of humanity. The flood had produced Noah, yes, but it had also produced *Ham's mockery* of his drunken father, *Babel's collective rebellion*, the rapid degradation of the post-flood family of nations. *Judgment by water did not get it done.* The hard reset of the flood revealed that *the problem with humanity could not be solved by destroying the wicked*, because the survivors carried the same disease into the new world.

So God tried something different. *I am going to bless this one man and his family, and in his seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.* That is the Genesis 12 strategy. Not judgment-by-water but *blessing-flowing-outward*. The river of mercy that begins in one

wandering Aramean and widens, generation by generation, until it reaches every family in the seventy nations of Genesis 10. *That* is the strategy. And Israel was supposed to be the channel.

Big-G God, Little-g Gods

And the visitor's testimony made another sharp point. *The world is full of little-g gods*. Local deities. Tribal idols. Patron spirits of cities and crafts and seasonal cycles. *Big-G God is something else entirely*: the One Creator of heaven and earth, the One who breathed life into dust, the One whose blessing was meant to flow outward through Abraham to every family of the earth.

And here is the painful side note. *Christians have sometimes turned big-G God into a little-g god by the things we have thought were super important.* We can elevate cultural priorities, political agendas, economic policies, particular cultural styles, and think that *those things* are going to solve the problem of the world. They will not. They cannot. *They are too small to bear the weight of the human crisis.* When we put our hope in them, we minimize the God we are claiming to serve. We turn the One who blessed Abraham into a tribal deity whose principal interest is whether our particular party wins the next election cycle. *That is the reduction of big-G God to little-g god, and it is one of the besetting failures of contemporary Christianity in the West.*

The remedy is not abandoning all engagement with culture or politics or economic life. The remedy is *putting those things back into their proper scale*. They are real, finite human projects with real but finite stakes. *They are not the kingdom.* They are not where salvation comes from. They are not where ultimate trust belongs. *Big-G God is bigger than every little-g god the surrounding culture is asking us to serve*, and the people of the kingdom keep that distinction clear, week after week, generation after generation.

Matthew 11: The Burden of That Generation

Now bring all of that as backdrop into Matthew 11, because Matthew 11 is the chapter in which Jesus answers a question from John the Baptist that the burden of Israel's whole generation was sitting underneath.

Matthew 11 opens with John in Herod's prison. He had been arrested for publicly denouncing Herod's marriage to his brother's wife. And from prison, John sends his disciples to Jesus with a single question:

"And he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, 'Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?'" (Matthew 11:2–3).

Are You the Coming One? That question carries the *whole weight* of Israel's expectation. The Coming One was supposed to be the Messiah who would *break the yoke* of foreign domination. The prophets had spoken across centuries about *judgment on the oppressing empires*: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome. The book of Daniel had walked through them in succession. *Each one was supposed to get its comeuppance.* And Israel was sitting under Rome, wondering when the Messiah would come and break Rome's teeth the way the prophets had promised every previous oppressor would be broken.

And from John's perspective in Herod's cell, the question carried a particular sting. Herod represented exactly the kind of compromise-with-Rome corruption that the Messiah was supposed to overthrow. *If the Messiah is here, why am I still in prison? When does the deliverance start? When does Rome's yoke come off our necks?* These were not idle questions. They were the questions of a man whose whole prophetic mission had been *to prepare the way of the Lord*, and who was now sitting in a tyrant's dungeon wondering whether he had pointed at the right man.

Tell John What You See

And Jesus' answer is one of the most pastorally generous moments in the Gospels:

> Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me." (Matthew 11:4–6)

Notice what Jesus is doing. He does not directly answer John's question. He does not say yes, I am the Coming One or no, look for another. He sends back a list of works. And the list is a deliberate composite of two prophetic passages.

First, Isaiah 35:

> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. (Isaiah 35:5–6)

This was the prophetic anticipation that the Messiah's coming would be marked by the *reversal of the maladies of idolatry*. Recall Psalm 115: *those who make idols become like them; eyes that cannot see, ears that cannot hear, mouths that cannot speak, feet that cannot walk*. The nation had been worshipping idols and had taken on the idols' disabilities. *The Messiah's mission was to undo those disabilities.* And Jesus, in the list he sends back to John, is saying *Isaiah 35 is happening right now: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the dumb sing*. The Garden of Eden is being restored in the persons of the previously-blind, the previously-deaf, the previously-lame.

Second, Isaiah 61:

> The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound . . . (Isaiah 61:1)

This is the passage Jesus had read in the synagogue at Nazareth, the sermon that nearly got him thrown off a cliff (Luke 4:16–30). *The poor have the gospel preached to them.* That is the Isaiah 61 line. And Jesus had told the Nazareth synagogue: *today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*. The reaction had been violent because the Nazareth synagogue had not yet understood that *the captives the Messiah was coming to free were not principally Israel held by Rome, but every captive heart held by sin*.

So when Jesus sends back to John the composite list, Isaiah 35 plus Isaiah 61, he is saying: yes, John, I am the Coming One. The kingdom is here. The prophetic anticipations are being fulfilled in real time. But the captivity I have come to break is not principally Rome's yoke. It is the deeper captivity that has Israel in its grip and is wearing the same disabilities your idolatry produced. And the poor, the ones you and your generation thought were furthest from the kingdom, are receiving the gospel first.

And he closes with what may be one of the kindest sentences in the Gospels:

> "And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me" (Matthew 11:6).

Blessed is the one who is not offended because of Me. It is a tender acknowledgment. I know my Messiahship looks different from what you expected, John. I know it would have been simpler if I had come to break Rome's teeth the way you and the others anticipated. But blessed are you if you can receive me as I actually am, rather than insisting that I conform to the image you have been holding. And John (who had years to think about this, sitting in his cell) apparently received the answer. He went to his death without further public protest. The

composite list was enough. He could die. Herod could do his worst. The kingdom was real and the Coming One had come, even if the form of the coming differed from the script.

The Reed Shaken in the Wind

And after John's disciples leave, Jesus turns to the crowds and asks them a question:

> As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet." (Matthew 11:7–9)

Three questions, each one sharper than the last. A reed shaken by the wind? A man clothed in soft garments? A prophet? And here is a detail that brings the first question into sharper focus. Herod Antipas, the very ruler who had imprisoned John, minted coins that featured a reed on the reverse side. The reed appears to have been a symbol of Herod's territory of Galilee, with its lake and its marshy reed-beds. Jesus is asking the crowd: did you go out into the wilderness to see another reed? Another Herod-figure? Another aristocrat who would bring you under another form of subservience? The answer is implicit. No. You did not go out to the wilderness to see another reed on another coin. You went out to see a prophet, and more than a prophet.

And in the same passage, Jesus identifies John as *Elijah*:

"For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Matthew 11:13–15).

He is Elijah. The Malachi 4 promise, *I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord,* has been fulfilled in John. *The forerunner has come.*

And the kingdom is therefore close at hand. *He who has ears to hear, let him hear.* The implicit question is: *will you have ears?* The Pharisees and Sadderdees and religious leaders of that day were certainly *offended* by Jesus, but the crowds, and the seventeen-year-olds opening their fathers' Bibles on rainy Saturday mornings, and the broken-hearted and the bruised reeds and the smoldering wicks, *had ears to hear*. And to those ears, the kingdom was opening.

Korazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum

Now Jesus pivots to a difficult section. He starts naming the cities of Galilee where most of his ministry has happened, and where the response has been hardness rather than repentance:

> Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you." (Matthew 11:20–24)

Hold the geographic weight of this. Chorazin. Bethsaida. Capernaum. These were the towns where Jesus had performed ten miracle clusters across Matthew 8 through 12, healing twelve different people by my count, a deliberate Matthean echo of the ten plagues of Egypt and the twelve tribes of Israel. More of Jesus' attention had landed on these three Galilean towns than on any other geographic region during his ministry. And the response had been hardness. Not repentance. Continued normal religious life as though nothing had happened.

And Jesus compares them, painfully, to *Tyre and Sidon and Sodom*. *Tyre and Sidon* were the Phoenician coastal cities historically denounced by the prophets for their corruption (Isaiah 23, Ezekiel 26–28, Amos 1:9–10) and were, in the popular Jewish imagination, *paradigms of pagan wickedness*. *Sodom* was the city of Genesis 19, destroyed by fire and sulfur for its inhospitality and cruelty. *Three of the most notorious cities in the Hebrew prophetic imagination*. And Jesus says: *if my works had been done there, they would have repented*. Tyre and Sidon would have put on sackcloth and ashes. Sodom would still be standing today. *The cities Israel had reckoned as paradigms of pagan rejection would have responded better than the cities where Jesus had actually preached.*

That is a devastating comparison. It is also one of the kindest readings of the cities Israel had assumed were beyond redemption. Jesus is saying that the door to Tyre and to Sidon and even to Sodom would have opened under the right preaching. The hardness was not in the city. The hardness was wherever the hardness happened to settle. And the hardness in Jesus' day had landed disproportionately on the very towns most exposed to his ministry.

"More Tolerable in the Day of Judgment"

Now I want to stay with one phrase for a moment, because it carries a piece of theological substance many readers slip past. Jesus says: *it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you*. *More tolerable.*

Stop on that. *Isn't that strange?* If the judgment of the unrepentant is uniform fiery eternal punishment, what would *more tolerable* even mean? Are we to imagine differential temperature settings in the unending fire: some at five hundred degrees Celsius, some at seven hundred and twenty? *That cannot be what the text is saying.* The phrase *more tolerable in the day of judgment* implies a *graduated divine assessment*, that the judgment of God is

proportioned to the opportunity each person received and to the response that person made to it. Tyre and Sidon, who never heard the Galilean preaching, will be assessed more leniently than the Capernaum which heard it weekly and dismissed it. *The judgment is not uniform. It is just.*

> And the same theological principle is at work in Paul's appeal before Festus and Agrippa:
>
> And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers . . . For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead? (Acts 26:6, 7–8)
>
> And Jesus himself anchors the substance in John 5:
>
> Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth: those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. (John 5:28–29)

All who are in the graves will hear His voice. Both classes, those raised to life and those raised to judgment, *hear the same voice*. And the judgment that follows is *just*, calibrated to the actual response each person made to the actual light each person was given. *The justice of God is precise.* It is neither uniformly harsh nor uniformly lenient. It is *true*. And what the *more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon* line tells us is that *God knows precisely what opportunity each city had and precisely how each city responded, and his judgment will reflect both with perfect accuracy*. There will be no city, and no person, who is judged more severely than the light they received warranted. *That is the comfort and the seriousness of the doctrine at once.*

"Are You Tyre? Are You Sodom?"

And here is where this lands pastorally. *Are you feeling under judgment today?* Are you a *Tyre*, a person whose past has been notorious enough that the religious world has written you off as beyond reclamation? Are you a *Sidon*, known for compromises you cannot quite reverse? Are

you a *Sodom*, carrying the kind of history that makes religious people whisper when you walk into a room? *Hear what Jesus says about Tyre and Sidon and Sodom*. *They would have repented under the right preaching*. The door to them is not closed. *The door to you is not closed*. The hardness of the heart is not a function of the history of the city. It is a function of the response the heart makes when the light arrives at its window. *And the light is arriving at your window today.*

That is what happened to me at seventeen, in southern California, in my father's living room, on a rainy Saturday morning. The light arrived through the pages of Genesis 12. *I could have been a Capernaum.* I could have heard it and dismissed it the way Capernaum had dismissed it. *Something in me, by grace, opened.* The voice of the Son of God spoke through the words on the page, and the dead heart heard, and the dead heart *began to live*. As Jesus said: *the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice* (John 5:28). The hour was already on me in that living room. *And the hour is on you today*, wherever you are reading this. *Are you Tyre? Are you Sidon? Are you Sodom?* It does not matter. *The door is open.* The voice is speaking. The light is arriving. *Listen, and live.*

The Hope of the Resurrection

And the deeper truth underneath all of this is the *hope of the resurrection*. Paul, on trial for his life before the Roman governor, named the hope of the resurrection as the actual ground of his courage:

"And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers . . . For this hope I am accused by the Jews" (Acts 26:6–7).

The hope of the resurrection is why we are here today. It is why I crack this book open every week. It is why I tell the story of the rainy Saturday morning in southern California to anyone who will listen. *Something entered my life that morning that gave me hope it could not be*

given any other way. Hope that the brokenness of my situation was not the final word. Hope that there was a God in heaven who could redeem what I had been carrying. Hope that I did not have to be what I had been on track to become.

If we will listen to the voice of the Son of God, we will hear. And those who hear, will live. That is the promise of John 5:25. Not principally in the future, though there is a future dimension, but starting right now, in the present moment, in the rainy living room, in the motel drawer where a Gideon Bible has been waiting for the right reader, in the hospital nightstand where someone is about to discover that the book they have been ignoring for a lifetime has been speaking all along. The voice has been speaking. The voice is still speaking. And the dead who hear it will live.

Come Unto Me

And the chapter ends with one of the most beloved invitations in the entire New Testament:

> Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light. (Matthew 11:28–30)

Hold every clause of that invitation, because it is calibrated to the chapter that preceded it. Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden: That is, all you who have been carrying the burden of unfulfilled messianic expectation, all you who have been carrying the weight of Roman occupation, all you who have been carrying the failures of an Israel that never installed Jubilee, all you who have been carrying the disabilities of your own idolatries. Come to Me. The invitation is wide enough to include every burden the chapter has named.

And I will give you rest. Not principally future eschatological rest, *though there is a future dimension, but Sabbath rest available now*. The wholeness of creation that the Sabbath was always pointing toward, recovered in the present moment for anyone who will come.

Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart. The yoke is the yoke of *discipleship under a particular kind of rabbi*. In first-century Judaism, a rabbi's *yoke* was the rabbi's particular way of interpreting and applying Torah, the specific configuration of the Mosaic law each rabbi taught his disciples to live by. *Every rabbi had his own yoke.* And here is Jesus saying, *take my yoke. Learn from me.* And the distinguishing mark of his yoke is *that he is gentle and lowly in heart*. Not harsh. Not the kind of religious teacher who multiplied burdens on his disciples. *Gentle. Lowly. Easy.* The yoke fit for the people whose backs had been broken by every other yoke they had carried.

And you will find rest for your souls. Not just rest for the body. Rest for the soul. The deepest part of you, set down at last from the labor you have been doing to earn your standing, your acceptance, your significance, your peace. Come to Me. I will carry the weight. The yoke that fits you finally fits because the One who fashioned it knows the actual shape of your shoulders.

How the Kingdom Is Actually Built

And this last passage is the key to understanding how the kingdom is actually built. It is not built on beating up your enemies. It is not built on breaking the teeth of the oppressors. It is not built on watching judgment fall and being delivered from oppressive systems. Many great and wonderful saints of God have lived under oppression their entire lives and never seen it lifted in their lifetimes. That happens. It is part of what it means to live in an oppressive world. The kingdom does not promise the removal of every oppression in the present age. What it promises

is that the One who carries the yoke alongside you knows exactly how heavy the yoke is, and is bearing it with you.

And here is the kingdom's strange counter-practice: power is subverted by meekness. Jesus had said earlier in the Sermon on the Mount: if a Roman soldier compels you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two (Matthew 5:41). That is the kingdom's countercultural move. You are done with the legal mile, the soldier says, put my pack down. And the disciple of Christ says: no, I am not done. I am taking it the second mile. The soldier is bewildered. What are you talking about? And the answer is: in the face of evil, good is the powerful force that will unsettle it. Not tit for tat. Not blow for blow. Not eye for eye and tooth for tooth, because eye for eye eventually leaves the whole world blind, and tooth for tooth eventually leaves the whole world toothless. Mercy. Grace. Subverting evil by doing good. That is the kingdom's military doctrine.

And the people who actually build the kingdom are the people who carry the second mile, who take the easy yoke of the gentle Rabbi, who find rest for their souls in the One whose heart is meek and lowly, and who then, from that rest, walk back into the surrounding world as bearers of a peace the surrounding world cannot generate for itself. That is the kingdom God blessed Abraham to bring. That is the kingdom Israel was meant to extend. That is the kingdom the Coming One has come to inaugurate. That is the kingdom whose door swung open for me at seventeen on a rainy Saturday morning. And that is the kingdom whose door is open for every Tyre and every Sidon and every Sodom who has heard the voice of the Son of God and is willing to come.