The Manner of God

On David, Goliath, Golgotha, and the Power Displayed in Weakness

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Foolish Things to Confound the Wise

Paul, finishing a long argument in 1 Corinthians 1, declares who God is *relative to what the world has expected God to be like*:

> For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty . . . that no flesh should glory in His presence. (1 Corinthians 1:26–29)

And earlier in the chapter:

"*. . .* but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness" (1 Corinthians 1:23).

Think about that. The cross of Jesus is a *stumbling block* to the Jews, what kind of Messiah is *executed* by Rome?, and *foolishness* to the Greeks, what kind of God displays his strength through dying? And yet the manner God chose to display his power to the world was *through the weakness of his king*. God's holy arm, the *bared arm* of strength, turns out, in Isaiah 53, to be displayed in a *rejected, weak, persecuted* servant.

Pause on this. It is a powerful undoing of everything we are tempted to be confident in. The psalmist puts it this way:

"He does not delight in the strength of the horse; He takes no pleasure in the legs of a man. The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His mercy" (Psalm 147:10–11).

The psalmist is not saying men's legs are ugly. He is saying *that is where the strength of a man bears up his burden*, and yet that is not where our true strength comes from. Our strength comes from a God whose *manner of being* is to display power through weakness.

Paul pleaded with the Lord to take away some infirmity in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet him. You would think the messenger of Satan was trying to thwart the gospel. And yet what does the Lord say?

"And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Look at the paradox. The emissaries of Satan sent to weaken Paul's message become the *triumphal chariot* God uses to display power in Paul's life. Poor Satan: every weapon he reaches for, God turns into a victory in this world. That bears thinking about.

Everyone Acts Out of a Righteous Mind

How do we navigate this in our own day? We can read Scripture and gather verses that give us a perspective here and a perspective there, and that might embolden us to act in some way. But it can be hard, particularly in an age that has become as complex as ours, to know what a *just war* looks like, or what *peace through strength* means, or how a slogan that contains real truth can also get twisted into something less than truth.

I have been turning this over since last night, when news of violence overseas and division in our own cities was on every screen. Here is something worth holding: *everyone is operating out of a righteous mind*. Absolutely everyone. Everyone believes they have the facts on their side. Everyone interprets the situation through what they take to be the right framework. Outside of God, of course, there is no *true* righteousness, Christ's mind is the only mind that gives us the right manner of thinking. But within the limits of being human, almost no one acts maliciously. Only the genuine sociopath acts with no sense of right and wrong. Everyone else, even the people we are most certain are *wrong*, believes themselves to be in the right. *My experience and my education have led me to believe this is the correct way to act.* That is the engine of human behavior on every side of every conflict.

And we in the church are not members of the old creation, acting out of the righteousness of our *old* minds, the old man locked in a spiral of sin and deceit. The serpent's bite has gone through the bloodstream of all of humanity, producing a delirium of self-confident righteousness that clouds judgment and makes every thought slightly tainted. *How do we get out of that?* We die. We allow the old man to perish with his deeds, and we let the new man, the new creation, take effect.

Paul says it in Ephesians:

> . . . having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth, in Him. (Ephesians 1:9–10)

All things are being united through new creation. When we allow ourselves to become part of that new creation, when we bring every thought and act under the scrutiny of new-

creation eyes and a heart renewed by the Holy Spirit, when the stony heart has been removed and the fleshly heart put in (Ezekiel 36:26), when the laws of God are written on our inner parts, *then* we evaluate everything differently.

David and the Champion of the Philistines

Look at the story of David. David was a man after God's own heart. He was on the back side of the desert, the seventh son of Jesse, protecting the sheep. When a bear came, he killed the bear. When a lion came, he killed the lion. He was a man who acted in defense of the defenseless: He had a heart to protect because he was concerned about the weak members of his father's house, his sheep.

Then his father sent him to take provisions to his brothers at the battle line, and the most famous Old Testament confrontation unfolds. You do not even have to be a Christian to know this story. Goliath of Gath (a Philistine champion, a devotee of Dagon the fish-god, big, scary, plated head to toe in armor) stands out on the field shouting his challenge: *Come out and fight me. I'll feed you to the birds.* And David, who has just shown up with bread for his brothers, says:

"For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (1 Samuel 17:26).

David runs out onto that field. And here is the line that matters in the live moment:

"Then all this assembly shall know that the Lord does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's, and He will give you into our hands" (1 Samuel 17:47).

The Lord does not save with sword and spear. This is what David got right. The sword and spear, for David, are precisely *not* where his confidence rests. He picks up a sling. He puts a stone in it. One throw, and Goliath falls. David runs to him, pulls the giant's own sword from its

sheath, and cuts off his head. And then, this is the *hutzpah* of a young king-in-waiting, David carries Goliath's head to Jerusalem itself, where the city is still inhabited by the Jebusites (not yet conquered by Israel), and plants it on a stake outside the gates. He is, in effect, putting the Jebusites on notice. *I'm coming back for you*.

Who are the Jebusites? They are whoever the unfortified places in your life are: whoever or whatever you have not yet been able to get past, anything still thwarting you from receiving all the promises of God. The Jebusites are whatever in your life is still preventing the fullness of what God wants for you. David, fresh from Goliath, has marked the next campaign.

A King Who Asks Before He Fights

It takes another twelve or fifteen years before David is finally crowned king over all Israel. Now look at the heart of this king who has been crowned. Before he goes out to battle, he *prays*:

"So David inquired of the Lord, saying, 'Shall I go up against the Philistines? Will You deliver them into my hand?' And the Lord said to David, 'Go up, for I will doubtless deliver the Philistines into your hand'" (2 Samuel 5:19).

It is not a foregone conclusion. David does not assume that because he is king and has an army, the king-and-army calculus is sufficient. He asks. And God answers, and David goes up, and the Philistines flee, leaving their idols behind on the field (2 Samuel 5:21). The reversal is exact: earlier in 1 Samuel, when the Israelites had presumed on the ark of God in battle, the Philistines had won and *Israel* had fled, leaving the ark itself behind. Now David comes on the scene and *the Philistines flee*, leaving their idols. Their gods are publicly shamed.

But the Philistines muster again and come back up. And what does David do? He *asks again*. He does not assume that yesterday's victory licenses today's action:

> Therefore David inquired of the Lord, and He said, "You shall not go up; circle around behind them, and come upon them in front of the mulberry trees. And it shall be, when you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the mulberry trees, then you shall advance quickly. For then the Lord will go out before you to strike the camp of the Philistines." (2 Samuel 5:23–24)

Even with the command to go, David must wait for the wind in the mulberry trees. *That* is the king after God's own heart. He inquires. He listens. He waits for the timing of the Spirit. He does not presume.

A Bloody Man Cannot Build the House

Now look at 2 Samuel 7. David has finally settled into his palace of cedar. He looks out at the simple tent that houses the ark of God, and he says to the prophet Nathan, *I live in a house of cedar; the ark of God dwells in a tent. I want to build a house for the Lord.* Nathan initially says, *Sounds like a good idea; go do it* (2 Samuel 7:2–3). But that night, God speaks to Nathan:

> Go and tell My servant David . . . 'The Lord tells you that He will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son.' (2 Samuel 7:5, 11–14)

Solomon, whose name means *peaceful*, will build the house. The 2 Samuel 7 chapter does not explicitly say *why* David himself cannot build it. But 1 Chronicles 22 tells us, in David's own words:

> My son, as for me, it was in my mind to build a house to the name of the Lord my God; but the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'You have shed much blood and have made

> great wars; you shall not build a house for My name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in My sight.' (1 Chronicles 22:7–8)

There it is. *You are a bloody man. A man of war.* The imagery of the house of God could not be built by the same hands that had been the instrument of bloodshed, because the house of God was meant to be a *place of peace*. The temple of God represented the Garden of Eden, that paradise east of the world where God walked with man in the cool of the day. Almost every religion preserves some memory of that garden: Shangri-La, the Elysian Fields, paradise. The deep memory is universal: *we all know, somewhere in our DNA, that what we are experiencing out here is not right.* The brokenness of humanity, the delusions filling our minds, the incongruence between what we believe is right and what we actually do, all of it testifies to a paradise we have lost and a paradise we want.

Have you ever said *this is the right way* and then done the opposite? Have you ever violated your own principle of right and wrong? Or is it just me? *We all do this.* And underneath the recognition that something is off lies the deeper recognition that there *is* something that is right, and that the right thing is this paradise of God. When God walked with man in the cool of the day. When the breeze blew through the trees. When Adam and Eve labored in the garden, tending and keeping, naming the animals.

Isaiah pictures the new creation as exactly that, even animal violence undone:

> The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them . . .
>
> They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain. (Isaiah 11:6, 9)

The lion will lick the lamb without the saliva glands kicking off. The child will play over the adder's den unbitten. Whatever you are in this picture, lion or lamb, imagine a society where

all of that is working together. Imagine people of diverse backgrounds in our biggest cities, transformed by new creation, sitting down with one another. *That* is the aspiration of the kingdom.

But the founding king of that kingdom (David, the man after God's own heart) *is violent*. And he cannot build the house. He cannot build the paradise. Because the paradise represents *God's dwelling place*, and our God is a God of peace.

"In This Place I Will Give Peace"

Listen to Haggai, prophesying after the exile when the people have returned and are rebuilding:

> "According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remains among you; do not fear!" For thus says the Lord of hosts: "Once more (it is a little while) I will shake heaven and earth, the sea and dry land; and I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory," says the Lord of hosts. "The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine," says the Lord of hosts. "The glory of this latter temple shall be greater than the former," says the Lord of hosts. "And in this place I will give peace," says the Lord of hosts. (Haggai 2:5–9)

In this place I will give peace. The house of God represents the peace in which God created the cosmos in the first place. The temple is a localized space of that peace. When the people had broken covenant, when they had become men of violence (and look at what Jeremiah records of how they treated *him*, the prophet who came with God's word: They were chanting *the temple, the temple, the temple* even as they beat the prophet), God would not allow the place of peace to be managed by men of violence. The temple represented *the people*. If the people were not peace, the place could not be peace.

So God permitted the temple's destruction. Then, after the captivity, he raised up a second temple, and Haggai promises that the glory of the *latter* temple will be greater than the former. And the verse that lands the promise is *In this place I will give peace*.

The Power Displayed in the Resurrection

Now look at how Paul, writing centuries later in Ephesians, names *the power* by which God achieves all of this. Listen to what God's mighty power *actually accomplishes*:

> . . . what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:19–23)

Look at how Paul defines *the power of God*. Not by *sword and spear*, not by mustering an army and crushing the resistance. The power of God is *displayed in the death and resurrection of Jesus*. The power that put every principality and power under his feet is the power that raised him *from the cross*. That is the manner of God.

And some might read "every principality and power under his feet" as the *annihilation* of the principalities. But pause there. Most of us in this room are not Jews. We are descended from the very nations and dominions who once snubbed their nose at the God of Israel. We were once aligned with the principalities that are now being put under Christ's feet. And yet his exaltation has not been *our annihilation*. It has been our *gathering*. We came, and we bowed the knee, and he brought us in, and we became part of his body.

Paul continues that exact thread into Ephesians 2:

> Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands, that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity. (Ephesians 2:11–15)

"For He Himself is our peace." *He is our peace.* Who has made both Jew and Gentile *one*, and broken down, in his own flesh, the dividing wall of hostility. We cannot kick each other in the shins as long as we are surrounding the cross of Jesus Christ. You cannot look up into the bloody face of Jesus, into the nail-scarred hands, into the bleeding side, and at the same moment turn and kick your brother. *You cannot do it.* He is our peace, and his ongoing work through new creation is to continue reconciling everything into one.

The Manifold Wisdom of God

Look at Ephesians 3:

> To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Ephesians 3:8–11)

"Less than the least of all the saints." That is the posture. I would love to see leaders in pulpits and political offices and classrooms and homes have a *race to the bottom* of self-assessment, instead of the race to the top we usually witness. *I am the very least.* The man who wrote those words had once been Saul, who held the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen. *Who are you, Saul, that kicks against the goads?* (*Who are you, Lord, that I am persecuting?*) *I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting* (cf. Acts 9:4–5). When we kill our brother or sister, *we are killing Jesus*. When we participate in the destruction of one of God's creatures, we are kicking against the goads of the kingdom.

And listen to the *purpose* Paul gives for the church's existence. *The manifold wisdom of God* (*poikilos* in Greek, *many-folded, multi-colored*) is to be made known *through the church* to the *principalities and powers in the heavenly places*. Some read this as the principalities and powers learning that their *time is up* and they are about to be destroyed. But what if Paul is saying something more astonishing? What if the *redemption* of the principalities and powers is also in view? Why would our demonstration of Christ's peace be *made known to* the rulers and authorities if not for *their* sake as well as ours? Paul finishes the same paragraph:

"Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory" (Ephesians 3:13).

Do not lose heart over what I am suffering for you, Paul says, *which is your glory*. The biggest risk we take as peacemakers is that bad people will do bad things to us. The biggest *reward* we wager is the potential redemption, even of the powers themselves. When Jew and Gentile come together around the cross, the principalities and powers look in, and *something* may turn in them. That is the audacious hope Paul names. The manifold wisdom of God is made known to the powers *for their possible reformation*.

Two Kings, Two Triumphal Entries

Remember David at the Jebusite gates with Goliath's head on a stake; *I'm coming back for you*. When David finally did come back to take Jerusalem, the Jebusites mocked him: *Even the blind and the lame can defend these walls from you.* David took the city anyway, and decreed in response that the blind and the lame would *never* enter the temple precincts. *Because you made that claim, the blind and the lame are forever barred* (cf. 2 Samuel 5:6–8).

Now watch what happens when the *true* King of kings comes to Jerusalem for his triumphal entry. Matthew 21. Jesus rides in on a donkey, not a war horse. He goes to the temple, overturns the tables of the money changers, and drives them out:

> And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of thieves." Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. (Matthew 21:13–14)

Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them. The exact category of people David had once banned from entry. Two kings. Two triumphal entries. Two utterly different manners. David's manner: *the blind and the lame are forever excluded.* Christ's manner: *the blind and the lame come into my house, and I heal them.* And then he says (exactly as David's son Solomon had said, but now claiming it directly) *my house shall be called a house of prayer.*

Golgotha

And then the manner of God is displayed most fully. They take Jesus, they mock him as king, they crown him with thorns, they drape him in a purple robe, they beat him and spit on his face. They lead him out of Jerusalem. On the way, they compel a man of Cyrene named Simon

to carry the cross. And the place where they finally lead him has a name that ought to give us pause:

"And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull" (Mark 15:22).

Golgotha. The Place of the Skull. Hold the name next to *Goliath of Gath*. The new David is led to a place named for a skull, and there he dies. But this David does not bring the head of his enemy to the gates of his city as a threat. He does not declare that any class of people will be forever excluded from his presence. Looking down from the cross, he says:

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34).

That is the manner of God. And the power of God is displayed *in that very moment* of apparent powerlessness, and confirmed when God raises him from the dead and seats him at his right hand.

Lively Stones, the New Temple, the New Bride

Paul ends Ephesians 2 with the image of a new temple being built:

> Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19–22)

The peace Christ brings between Jew and Gentile *builds the new temple*. He is the cornerstone. The apostles and prophets are the foundation. You and I, joined stone to stone (despite our backgrounds, reconciled to one another through the grace and peace of Jesus)

become the new temple. The Davidic son could not build the house with bloody hands. The Pauline church builds it with reconciled hands.

And then in Revelation 21, the new temple becomes a city, a *bride* adorned for her husband:

> Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying." (Revelation 21:2–4)

Suffering is part of life. But suffering with no redemptive power is just sad. Suffering that *brings reconciliation and redemption*; that is power. The suffering of Christ is our redemption. And the city John sees is the inheritance of those who walked the same path.

And John notes something striking about the city's geography:

"Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there)" (Revelation 21:25).

The gates are never closed. Anyone may come in. *Always assume positive intent*, the saying goes, and the geography of the New Jerusalem is built on exactly that posture. The gates stay open.

And the dimensions of the city John records cover *the entire known world* of his day. The city becomes the temple. The world becomes the temple. The work of the bride (what the church went through in suffering, the exaltation of the beast, the wearing down of the saints) *that* is the path to the redemption of the world. The only bunker-busting bomb I am proud of is the one God

sent, the one that went down to the depths and preached to the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:19), and they found deliverance, and they came out, and they became something different. They were no longer lions and vipers; they became new people. That is the world God is creating through his church.

The Mind of Christ

So everything I have said in this chapter is not an opinion about what *political action* we should take globally. It is an *attitude of heart* for the individual members of the body. *Can we have the heart of Jesus?* When he had been finally rejected the week before his crucifixion, he wept over the city:

> O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate. (Matthew 23:37–38)

Any desolation that comes to this world ought to be mixed with the *tears* of the saints of God. We pray. The power of God in our hands is *praise and prayer*. And it should always be raining down grace and peace from us into the world.

When that grace cannot be found, when those who live by the sword end up dying by the sword, our hearts should *break* for them. We should grieve that we did not make it to them in time. That our voices were not heard. That the peace of God did not yet reign in the way it will, at the end of the age, reign over all. *All things will be culminated in him.* This world will be covered with peace and grace because of what the church is doing, *because* we hold to the head, *because* the mind that controls us is the mind of Christ, *because* the manner of action that dominates us is the manner of God, who *gave* because of love.

Can we do that? Can we give because of love? Can we let the Spirit of God, breathed into our hearts at our own individual Pentecost, that light and that fire, be a word of peace to this world? May God give us the grace.