The Foolishness of the Cross

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On the Brazen Serpent Lifted Up, the Greeks Who Came to See Jesus, and the Weakness That Confounds the World

It Has to Be True Because It's so Crazy

It has to be true because it's so crazy. Think about what we sing about. If the death of Jesus had happened in the twenty-first century rather than the first, we would be singing about the beauty of the electric chair. Or what a wonder the lethal injection was. Does that sound stupid? Does that sound weird? Of course it does. And yet that is exactly what we do every Sunday morning when we sing about the cross. We sing songs of love and triumph and redemption about an instrument of imperial execution. No one would write a love song about an electric chair. And nothing tells us more clearly that something genuinely strange has happened in human history than that the most-sung-about object in the entire global Christian movement is a Roman execution device.

What a paradox. God's weakness is so disruptive to humankind that what the Greeks called *foolishness* and the Jews called *a stumbling block* has become the central image of the largest religious movement in human history. Paul names the strangeness exactly:

> For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God . . . For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks

> foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:18, 22–25)

Stumbling block to the Jews. Foolishness to the Greeks. The power and wisdom of God to those who are called. That is the chapter's diagnostic. Hold all three categories in your mind as we walk through what God has done.

The Louvre and the Marble Bodies

I once had the opportunity to visit the Louvre with my wife. If you have never been, the Louvre is the great museum in Paris that houses some of the finest classical statuary in the world. And as you walk through its galleries, you see *one statue after another of what the Greeks and the Romans thought a perfect human being looked like*. *Muscles. Beauty. Power.* Perfect proportions chiseled into marble and granite by craftsmen who had spent their lifetimes studying the human form.

And what you see in that statuary is what the Greeks thought was the ideal representation of humanity. Heroic bodies. Warriors. Conquerors. Gods. What you do not see in that statuary is anything resembling a thin Jewish carpenter dying on a Roman execution device. That image would have been incomprehensible to the sculptors of the Louvre. The power of military force, the beauty of physical perfection, the dominance of the conqueror; these were the things that got their juices flowing. The cross was not in their visual vocabulary at all.

That is what Paul is up against when he writes *we preach Christ crucified, to the Greeks foolishness*. The Greeks were not looking for a suffering savior. *They were looking for a hero.* And the figure on the cross did not fit the hero-template at any point. *He was the opposite of the hero-template at every point.* Weak rather than strong. Defeated rather than victorious. Dying

rather than conquering. *Everything the Greek imagination prized in its statuary was negated by the figure on the cross*.

Cursed Is Anyone Who Hangs on a Tree

And the Jewish stumbling-block was even sharper than the Greek foolishness, because *the Mosaic law itself* had a specific verdict on anyone executed by hanging from wood:

> . . . his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God. (Deuteronomy 21:23)

Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree. That was the Mosaic verdict. The Messiah was supposed to come and break the teeth of the nations. He was supposed to take over and take charge. He was supposed to give Israel the opportunity to be the head and not the tail (Deuteronomy 28:13). He was supposed to demonstrate the power of God in the earth in unmistakable terms. That was the Jewish expectation of the Messiah, woven into centuries of prophetic anticipation and synagogue-prayer.

And then the Messiah came, and he was hung on a tree. Cursed by the verdict of the Mosaic law itself. That was the stumbling block. Everything the Jewish imagination had been holding as the form of messianic deliverance was completely upended by the actual form deliverance took. The Messiah took the curse onto himself rather than removing it from them. He absorbed the verdict rather than imposing it on Israel's enemies. And the Jewish imagination, formed by centuries of expecting the conquering Messiah, could not bend itself around the picture of a Messiah who let himself be cursed for his own people's sake.

Try That in a Small Town

And let me say something honest about how this lands in the contemporary cultural moment, because the temptation to want the wrong kind of power is *every bit as alive in 2024 as it was in 30 A.D. I am being honest about my own internal life here.*

There are songs in our current cultural moment (martial, defiant, small-town-pride anthems) that feel right when I hear them. Something rises up in my spirit. I feel a flush of yeah, that's how you handle people who come in trying to push us around. And that feeling is the dragon's feeling. It is not the Lamb's feeling. It is exactly the same feeling that animated the Jewish messianic expectation of the Messiah will break the teeth of the oppressors. It is exactly the same feeling that animated the Greek statuary of the perfect warrior body. The cultural packaging shifts. The underlying feeling does not.

And it goes further back than the present cultural moment. Rob Massey, 1987. I was nineteen years old, feeling pretty froggy, as my dad used to say. I had spent the weekend with the boys I had grown up with, binge-watching the 1984 film Red Dawn. By the end of that weekend I was ready to take on the world. Wolverines. The film's premise, a band of high-school students forming an armed resistance against a foreign invasion of the American heartland, worked on the nineteen-year-old me in exactly the way Paul Robertson and the Greek sculptors of the Louvre would have recognized as the timeless human appetite for heroic violence. The cultural form was contemporary. The underlying appetite was ancient.

That feels right, doesn't it? The defiance feels right. The willingness to take up arms in defense of what we love feels right. And that is exactly the problem. Because the kingdom of God does not operate that way. The kingdom of God we have been singing about for the last hour in this service operates differently. If we really, really, really believe what we sing, then

something has to happen in us. We have to embrace the cross. We have to embrace the path Jesus walked. And that path is an unusual one for the King of the universe to have trodden.

The Whole Tragic Story

And when I am sitting in worship singing about the cross, my mind goes all the way back to the beginning, because the whole tragic story of human deformation begins so early. *Let me walk you through it quickly.*

The garden. The first parents are running around naked in the garden, and no one feels any shame (Genesis 2:25). Then the serpent comes. *Sin breaks out.* And the God who walks in the garden in the cool of the day comes looking:

"And the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:9).

Where are you, Adam? Hold that question, because if God is looking for you, that is the definition of lost. The Bible's whole sweep is contained in that opening question. God walks through history looking for his image-bearers who have hidden themselves from him. And the question echoes, Where are you?, through every subsequent chapter of human history.

And Adam's response is to *blame*:

"Then the man said, 'The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate'" (Genesis 3:12).

The woman You gave me. Two blame-shifts in one sentence. The woman did it. And You gave her to me, so really, You are responsible. That is the first recorded human response to being caught, accuse the gift-giver of giving a faulty gift. And the gift God had given was good, good. Notice that across Genesis 1, God pronounces each day good. Light: good. Sky: good. Land and vegetation: good. Sun and moon: good. Sea creatures and birds: good. Land animals: good. And then on the sixth day, after Adam has named all the animals and discovered that there

is no counterpart for him, God puts Adam to sleep, pierces his side, takes something out, and forms a woman. And when Adam wakes, the text shifts. Everything else was good. Woman was good, good. Twice-emphasized goodness. And then in the garden, Adam looks at this twice-good gift and tells God: this woman You gave me is the one who got me into trouble.

And it escalates from there. The sons of Adam kill each other. The earth fills with violence:

"The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth" (Genesis 6:11–12).

Violence filled the earth. And God's response was the flood. *Noah, build me a boat. A hundred-year project.* And imagine being Noah for the better part of a century: building an enormous wooden vessel inland, while the skies remained clear, while neighbors mocked, while the project's plausibility shrank as each rainless decade passed. *It takes faith to hold on when things are not looking clear*. Fifty years in, seventy-five years in, a hundred years in, *just keep building*. That is the discipline of the believer through every long stretch of unclarity in the life of faith. *Keep building. The skies are clearing. The rain is coming.*

And the flood came. And Noah came out the other side, and the human deformation reasserted itself almost immediately. Through Noah's sons. Through the violence of subsequent generations. Through Babel, where self-exalted humanity gathered in the plain of Shinar to refuse the divine commission to fill the earth, and instead built a tower to make a name for themselves, lest they be scattered (Genesis 11:4). Same Adam-grasping. Different packaging. The flood had not changed the underlying condition. God realized, if I may speak that way, that judgment was not going to get this done.

The Strategy of Blessing

So God tried something else. He called *one wandering Aramean named Abraham*:

> I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:2–3)

In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. That is the strategy of blessing. Judgment had not produced the repentance God was after. Blessing might. The river that begins in Abraham widens, generation by generation, until it reaches every family of the earth. That is the long arc of God's strategy from Genesis 12 forward. Not destruction of the wicked. Blessing flowing outward through the chosen instrument until the whole earth is reached.

And let me say something pastorally important here. People are not rejecting the God who was revealed to us through Jesus Christ. They are rejecting the representation of God that people have given them, that churches have given them. The church has shown such an ugly face on God across the centuries that many of our neighbors are convinced God is a tyrant who needs to be placated. Like the gods of the ancient world. We are going to sacrifice a chicken. That didn't work; let's sacrifice a goat. The goat didn't work; let's sacrifice a bull. The bull didn't work; let's sacrifice the firstborn son. That escalation toward greater sacrifice was the actual liturgical logic of many surrounding ancient religions. And the church has at times absorbed that escalation-logic into our reading of the cross. God was so angry. He needed to be placated. The cross is where his wrath finally landed on a victim big enough to absorb it.

That is not what happened on the cross. God's wrath was not the thing demonstrated at Calvary. The cross was the sin of humanity against the rejecting of the grace and goodness of God. It was the human race saying no to the Son who had come bearing the Father's love. God

absorbed the rejection. He did not perpetrate the punishment. The cross is the place where God said yes to humanity while humanity was saying no to God. Not the place where an angry deity finally found a victim big enough to satisfy his wrath.

The Lamb's Blood on the Doorpost

And Israel kept struggling to figure this God out. The promise to Abraham, *out of his seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed*, sat on the family for centuries while the slavery in Egypt dragged on. And finally, after four hundred and thirty years of bondage, *God by a mighty hand delivered them*.

But notice how he delivered them. Moses tried first to deliver in his own strength, killing an Egyptian guard who was brutalizing one of his Hebrew brothers (Exodus 2:11–15). That deliverance was rejected by his own people and earned Moses forty years in the wilderness. When Moses finally returned to Pharaoh's court, he came in weakness. I am slow of speech. I do not have the power. He stood before the Lord of armies with only a staff in his hand. Forty years of wilderness had taught Moses something the impulsive prince of Egypt had not known. Deliverance does not come through the impulsive striking-down of one's enemies. It comes through the long patient obedience of the one who shows up with a staff and waits for God to act.

And Pharaoh's response was the response of every imperial power across every century. *Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice?* (Exodus 5:2). *I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go.* Pharaoh was so self-absorbed, his own power so present to his own mind, that *he could not imagine a God strong enough to extract his slave-nation from his grasp*. That is the imperial pathology. *The strongman cannot conceive of a power greater than his own*, because doing so would dismantle the entire identity-architecture on which his strongman-ness has been built.

And what did the children of Israel do to get themselves out of Egypt? Almost nothing. They believed the word of Moses. They slaughtered a lamb. They painted its blood on their doorposts. And they ate the lamb at night. And in the morning they received their deliverance (Exodus 12). They did nothing to earn it. They did nothing to fight for it. They believed, they obeyed, they sheltered behind the blood, and they ate. That was the entire program. The deliverance was the mercy of God, executed by the mighty hand of God, not anything Israel had earned through her own military exertion.

Sometimes we can be in the grip of slaveries we did not choose and cannot break free of. I do not know what your slavery is, and you do not know what mine is. We are all captives to something, at one stage or another of our lives. And what I know, what the Exodus story teaches us, is that something powerfully happens when we just believe the word of God. Slaughter the lamb. Paint the blood. Eat. Shelter. Wait for morning. That is the entire human contribution. The rest is God's work. I do not know why the death of a lamb and the blood painted on a doorpost gave Israel deliverance that night. But I know that it happened.

The Brazen Serpent

And the story keeps going. Israel walked out. Pharaoh's armies were drowned. The wilderness years began. And within a few weeks the redeemed people were already grumbling. No water. No food. Why did you bring us out here to die? It was so much better when we were in slavery. That is the standard human response to wilderness even when wilderness is the consequence of being delivered from a worse bondage. We forget the bondage almost immediately and remember only the comforts of the place we were enslaved.

So God gave them *manna*: bread from heaven, falling every morning, gathered before the sun grew hot. And they ate it for years. *And eventually they grumbled about that too*:

"And the people spoke against God and against Moses: 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread'" (Numbers 21:5).

Our soul loathes this worthless bread. That is one of the most damning lines in the Old Testament. Bread falling out of the sky every morning, fresh and free, requiring nothing but the gathering. And the people's response is loathing. They could no longer see the miracle that was happening directly in front of them every day.

And let me be honest: we do this too. We can go through life long enough, become hardened enough, jaded enough by suffering and disappointment, that we lose the ability to see the miracles God is performing right in front of us. I dig myself out of that hole every single week. I am not exempt from the manna-loathing pattern. Neither are you. Neither is anyone. It is the standard human spiritual disease. Receive the grace of God for so long that you stop recognizing the grace of God as grace, and then complain that the grace is not enough.

And God's response to the grumbling was striking. He sent *fiery serpents* among the people. The serpents bit them. People began to die. *And the people came to Moses and said, We have sinned*. Moses prayed. And God told Moses to do something strange:

> Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived. (Numbers 21:8–9)

Make an image of the very thing that is killing you. Lift it up on a pole. And tell the people that whoever looks at it in faith will be healed. That is one of the strangest healings in the Old Testament. God instructs Moses to fashion an image of the very plague that is striking the

people down, and uses that image as the means of healing. The remedy is shaped exactly like the disease.

And the people who would work their way to the edge of their tents, despite the venom of the serpent coursing through their veins, and look at the bronze serpent up on the pole; they were healed. They received life. And in the same way that Israel later kept the bronze serpent for centuries (until they started worshipping it, and King Hezekiah finally destroyed it as an idol: 2 Kings 18:4), Israel kept the memory of that healing as a foundational image of how God delivers.

What gave us life last week, we sometimes try to build a permanent shrine to. The faith of our grandparents, the faith of their great-great-grandparents, the faith of the first-century Jewish-Christian house-churches, the faith of the contemporary Chinese house-churches today, *each looked different in its specific liturgical form*. *Let us not build a shrine to the form. Let us hold onto the One the form points to.* The bronze serpent eventually had to be destroyed by Hezekiah because Israel had begun to worship the means rather than the One the means pointed to. *That pattern is repeatable.* It is worth watching for in our own assemblies.

Daniel's Vision

And the prophetic anticipation kept pointing forward to a different kind of deliverance. Daniel had a vision: a young man taken captive into Babylon, surrounded by foreign powers, watching kingdom after kingdom rise and fall, and seeing in vision a final establishment of God's kingdom:

> I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion,

> which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13–14)

One like the Son of Man. Coming on clouds. Receiving an everlasting kingdom. That is what Israel was holding onto across the centuries between Daniel and Jesus. A Son of Man figure who would be lifted up to glory and given dominion over all the nations. The expectation was exaltation. Throne-room enthronement. Universal authority handed over by the Ancient of Days. That was the picture in Israel's imagination.

And the Son of Man passage goes further. The same Daniel 7 vision sees the Son of Man, having received the kingdom, *turn and give the kingdom to the saints of the Most High*:

"But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever" (Daniel 7:18).

The Son of Man receives the kingdom and then shares it with the saints. That is the longer arc of Daniel's vision. The image-bearers, who had been forced out of their vocation by the deformation that began in Genesis 3, *are restored to their vocation through their incorporation into the Son of Man's kingdom*. The king-priest-prophet vocation comes back online. The saints reign with the Son of Man. *That is the picture Daniel was holding.*

The Word Became Flesh

And then, into all of that expectation, *the Word came*. Listen to John's opening:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it . . . And the Word

became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1–5, 14)

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Greek verb translated dwelt (eskēnōsen) literally means tabernacled, pitched his tent among us. The Word who had spoken creation into being now took on flesh and pitched his tent in the middle of the human encampment. Just like Moses' tabernacle pitched in the middle of the camp of Israel, the Word now pitched his own tabernacle of flesh in the middle of the human family.

And notice the deliberate echo of Numbers 21 in John's framing. The Word became flesh, like the brazen serpent fashioned in the image of what was killing the people, lifted up so that those who looked might live. Same pattern. The remedy is shaped like the disease. The Word, who could have remained pure spirit beyond the human predicament, takes on flesh, the very thing that is dying, so that the flesh which is dying might be healed by looking at him. The fashioning of the remedy in the shape of the disease is the gospel's signature.

And John the Baptist saw Jesus walking and announced it directly:

"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29).

The Lamb of God. Not the lion. Not the warrior. The Lamb. John's mind goes back to the Passover lamb whose blood on the doorposts had delivered Israel from Egypt. This is the Lamb whose blood will deliver the whole world. And the trajectory is set from the opening of the Gospel. Jesus is the Lamb. The deliverance will come through his blood on the cosmic doorpost. And John recognized it at first sight.

My Time Has Not yet Come

And John's Gospel has a striking pattern. *Multiple times across the early chapters, Jesus says, my time has not yet come*. At the wedding at Cana, when his mother pressed him toward his first sign:

"Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come'" (John 2:4).

And then again, when his brothers urged him to go to Jerusalem to make his ministry public:

"Then Jesus said to them, 'My time has not yet come, but your time is always ready'" (John 7:6).

And again, the temple guards sent to arrest him could not lay hands on him *because His hour had not yet come* (John 7:30). And again at the treasury (John 8:20). *My time. My hour. Not yet. Not yet. Not yet.* Across multiple chapters.

And then in John 12, *something changes*. The Pharisees, watching the crowds gather around Jesus after the raising of Lazarus, lament to each other:

"The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, 'You see that you are accomplishing nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him!'" (John 12:19).

Look, the world has gone after Him. That word *world* is striking, because it telegraphs what is coming. The Pharisees mean it ruefully; *we have lost control of the message*. *But John, recording the line, lets the irony do its theological work*. The *world* really has begun to come to Jesus. And what comes next in the chapter confirms it:

“Now there were certain Greeks among those who came up to worship at the feast. Then they came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him, saying, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus’” (John 12:20–21).

Greeks. Came to see Jesus. Gentiles approaching the Jewish festival, asking to be introduced to the Galilean rabbi everyone has been talking about. And when Philip and Andrew bring word of the Greeks’ inquiry to Jesus, the answer Jesus gives is electric:

“But Jesus answered them, saying, ‘The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified’” (John 12:23).

The hour has come. For the first time in John’s Gospel. Not yet. Not yet. Not yet, and now: now. What triggers the shift from not yet to now? The Greeks coming. When the nations begin to seek Jesus, the appointed hour of his glorification has arrived. The Abrahamic promise, in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed, is beginning to come into focus, and the Son of Man’s appointed hour for the work of cosmic deliverance is now.

Unless a Grain of Wheat Falls

And the form the *glorification* will take is described immediately by Jesus himself:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain” (John 12:24).

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. That is the kingdom’s signature paradox. The grain that refuses to die remains one grain forever. The grain that allows itself to fall into the ground and die produces an entire head of wheat with many grains. Death is the gateway to multiplication. That is the deepest pattern of how God’s kingdom operates.

And the Son of Man's glorification, which Jesus has just announced has arrived with the coming of the Greeks, is going to take the form of a grain falling into the ground. Daniel saw the Son of Man being lifted up to receive a kingdom. Jesus is now revealing that the lifting-up happens through being lifted up on a cross. The exaltation and the execution are the same act. The throne is the cross. The crown is the crown of thorns. The glory is the dying.

And Jesus links this directly to the brazen serpent we walked through earlier. Listen to what he had told Nicodemus several chapters earlier:

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:14–15).

As Moses lifted up the serpent, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. The Numbers 21 image and the Daniel 7 image are fused in this one verse. Numbers 21's brazen serpent, lifted up so that the bitten could look and live. Daniel 7's Son of Man, lifted up to glory. Jesus fuses the two prophetic images and announces that the same lifting-up accomplishes both. The execution is the exaltation. The cross is the throne. The dying is the glorification. The remedy is in the shape of the disease.

And then the most famous verse in the Bible follows immediately:

> For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. (John 3:16–17)

God so loved the world. That is the framing. Not God so hated the world that he had to find a victim big enough to absorb his wrath. God so loved the world that he gave. The gift came out of love. The Son went to the cross because love sent him there, not because wrath required a

victim. Jesus did not come to condemn the world. The world was already under condemnation. The serpent's bite had been working through humanity since the garden. Jesus came as the remedy lifted up in the shape of the disease, so that anyone who looked could be healed.

The Judgment of the World

And here is what Jesus says next in John 12, *the climax of the chapter*:

> "Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name." Then a voice came from heaven, saying, "I have both glorified it and will glorify it again." Therefore the people who stood by and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to Him." Jesus answered and said, "This voice did not come because of Me, but for your sake. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself." This He said, signifying by what death He would die. (John 12:27–33)

Hold every clause of this passage. Now is the judgment of this world. That is what happens at the cross. Not the judgment of the saved, who are spared from the world's condemnation by being drawn to the lifted-up Son. The judgment of the world itself, the entire deforming system whose ruler is being cast out. Now the ruler of this world will be cast out. That is the Christus Victor reading of the cross in its clearest Johannine form. The cross is the moment when the principality and power that has been ruling the world through fear and violence is dethroned. Not by superior force. By love that absorbs the violence without returning it.

And the means by which the ruler is cast out: I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself. Lifted up, exalted, on the cross. And the draw is all peoples, not just Israel. The Greeks coming was the signal. The Son of Man's lifting up is going to gather, from every

tribe and tongue and people and nation, an innumerable multitude into the embrace of the Lamb who was slain.

And the chapter's diagnostic for us is sharp. When we walk under spiritual condemnation, we are not serving the right God. We were already under condemnation; that was the serpent's bite that had been working through the human race since Genesis 3. The voice in our ear that keeps whispering hath God said?, that voice is still operating in us until we look at the One who was lifted up. The remedy is the looking. Not the striving. Not the moral perfectionism. Not the religious performance. The looking. Lift your eyes to the One who was lifted up. And the venom of the serpent's bite (the accusing voice, the deforming pattern, the inherited curse from millennia of human deformation) begins to be neutralized by the gaze.

Swords Into Plowshares

And Jesus's deliverance is going to take a shape that the world's imagination has never been able to predict. Listen to Isaiah 2, the passage Jesus is implicitly invoking when he says *I will draw all peoples to Myself*:

> Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. (Isaiah 2:2–4)

Hold the trajectory. The nations come. The Lord teaches them his ways. They walk in his paths. He judges between them and rebukes them. And the rebuke produces not their destruction but their disarmament. They beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. The weapons of war are reforged into instruments of cultivation. That is the kingdom's signature outcome.

We love that line about God rebuking the nations. That feels right, doesn't it? We love it because we hear it as God will rebuke our enemies. But notice what the rebuke actually produces in the nations. They beat their swords into plowshares. The rebuke is not destructive but transformative. The same nations whose weapons were once turned against Israel become the nations whose tools are turned toward the harvest. That is what the kingdom does to its former enemies. It does not annihilate them. It re-purposes them. And the saints, who had been waiting for the destruction of their enemies, find themselves instead working in the fields alongside their former enemies, now turned co-laborers in the harvest God is bringing in.

The harvest is plenteous and the laborers are few (Matthew 9:37). So Jesus gathers a few disciples and tells them to pray that the God of heaven sends forth laborers into the field (Matthew 9:38). Our job is not to go into that field with swords and spears. Our job is to go out with pruning hooks and harvesting instruments. God has been raining for the last two thousand years on the fields of the just and the unjust. And he is calling us into collaboration with him in the harvest. Not into combat with his enemies. Into harvest with his Spirit.

Walking Toward the Father's House

And so the chapter ends with the pastoral landing that the whole arc has been building toward. *Are you a child of light?* Have you acknowledged the God of heaven? Are you working your way toward the kingdom of light? *Of course there are fits and starts.* Of course you take

side roads. Of course you find yourself in the *Sloughs of Despair*, as Bunyan called them. Of course you find yourself in *little mini-domains of darkness* that you cannot, for a season, find the exit from. *That is part of the actual journey.*

And then you dust yourself off and you come back. Because you know one thing, the same thing the prodigal son finally knew at the bottom of his far-country wandering:

"How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father . . " (Luke 15:17–18).

In my father's house, even the servants have more to eat. The servants are well-clothed. The light from the father's house is shining out. Don't you see it? Get yourself up. You don't even have a change of clothes. Just walk with the stinking clothes you have on back toward the father's house. Just begin the walk. That is the entire human contribution, the turning toward home. And the father takes care of the rest.

And the gospel's punchline is not the father waits for the son to make it all the way home. The father runs out to meet him:

"But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

The father had been sitting at the window, watching the road, for the entire duration of the son's wandering. And the moment the son appeared on the horizon, the father ran. Just take a step toward him. Begin to walk toward him. He will take care of the rest. He begins to run and pursue you. He brings you into the house. He washes you. He clothes you with his robe. He puts the ring on your finger. He kills the fatted calf. And you do not have to kill the fatted calf for him. That is the gospel's distinction from every other religious system in history. You are not the one who has to make the sacrifice. He is. And he has already made it. The fatted calf has already

been killed, two thousand years ago, on a Roman cross. You do not have to worry about the mouth of hell sucking you up. God is the one acting in this whole drama. He is killing the fatted calf, not you. It is not your sacrifice. It is his. And you and I simply participate in the sacrifice his Son already made.

Who Has Believed Our Report?

And let me close the chapter with the Isaiah passage that captures all of this in concentrated form. *Isaiah 53.* The passage that has been read across so many Christian gatherings for so many centuries that it sometimes loses the shock of its content. *Read it again, slowly, with the chapter we have just walked through in mind*:

> Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:1–5)

Who has believed our report? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? This is exactly the same question John raises in John 12. The world had not believed the report. The Greek imagination at the Louvre had not believed it. The Jewish imagination of the conquering Messiah had not believed it. The Roman imperial imagination had not believed it. The report was

incredible. It still is incredible. That the arm of the Lord, the divine instrument of cosmic deliverance, would be a thin Jewish carpenter growing up as a tender plant out of dry ground.

He has no form or comeliness. No Greek statuary perfection. *No beauty that we should desire Him.* He was not a Hollywood star. He was not the warrior the imagination of every age has insisted the deliverer must be. *He was despised and rejected by men. A Man of sorrows. Acquainted with grief.* And we hid our faces from him. *We did not esteem him.*

And yet, surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. The thing we did not recognize while it was happening was the deliverance taking place. We thought he was being stricken by God. We thought he was being smitten and afflicted because he deserved it. But he was being wounded for our transgressions. Bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement for our peace was on him. And by his stripes we are healed.

Every word of that prophecy fulfilled in the figure on the cross. Every word of it written seven hundred years before the figure on the cross was nailed to it. And the report is still as incredible today as it was when Isaiah wrote it. That God's deliverance came in the form of weakness. That God's power is the foolishness Paul spoke of, the stumbling block the Jews stumbled over, the cross the Greeks could not fit into their marble. And that the weakness of God is stronger than men.

All we like sheep have gone astray (Isaiah 53:6). Not some of us. All of us. Every single person who has ever lived. And the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all. That is the gospel. That is what God has done. That is the report we have been given to carry into a world that does not yet believe it. May we believe it ourselves. May we hold onto it through every fit and start of our long walk home. And may the Father, sitting at the window, see us coming and run.