Seed for the Sower

On the Mystery of the Kingdom, the Stump That Remains, and the Story That Is Ours

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This Is My Story, This Is My Song

When we sing the great old hymn (this is my story, this is my song) we should hear it carefully. The message of the kingdom of God is not first an individual message. It applies to us individually, yes, but it begins as the story of a people God means to deliver. The personal salvation is a true part of it. It is not the whole of it. The story is bigger than each of us, and it is bigger than all of us put together. It is the story of God's mission to bless the nations through a chosen people, fulfilled in his Son, and now unfolding through us.

And the foundation of that mission was a promise. Listen to it again as Genesis 12 first records it:

> 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)

Read that final clause one more time. *In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.* The blessing that came to Abraham was *never* meant to stop with Abraham. It was meant to travel outward (to the seventy nations of Genesis 10, to every family on earth) through Abraham, through his seed, and ultimately through *the* Seed. Paul writes:

"Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16).

That single Seed is Jesus. And in him, *the original promise to Abraham is being fulfilled,* extending outward to the nations across every century since Pentecost. *This is our story.* If we will receive it, we are part of the people through whom the blessing is still going out.

Prophets, and the Wilderness Test

God did not leave the chosen people to figure it out on their own. He sent prophet after prophet after prophet, every one of them a sort of health check on the nation. *Where are you? How is the heart? Is the blessing still flowing outward, or has it stagnated in your hands?*

Look at how this unfolds in Exodus. The promise to Abraham included land, *this land I give to your descendants* (Genesis 12:7). And then, by Exodus 1, *Abraham's descendants are in Egypt, multiplying so rapidly that the Egyptians become afraid of them*. They have not yet entered the land of promise. They have entered Egypt, and Egypt has begun to enter *them*. So God raised up Moses, a man drawn out of the very water that should have killed him, and Moses came back as a prophet to deliver Israel from the oppressor and to lead them toward the land Abraham had been promised.

And the journey took *forty years* through the wilderness. Why forty years? Because *a little bit of Egypt had gotten into them, and it took forty years in the wilderness to get Egypt out of them*. The geographical journey from Goshen to Canaan could have been made in eleven days (Deuteronomy 1:2). The interior journey took the full forty. *The land was reached more quickly than the heart was reached.*

And after Moses came judges, kings, prophets, wise men, each sent by God to *correct* the trajectory of a people who kept drifting toward the visible powers of the world rather than the

invisible God who had called them. *They gravitated toward what they could see.* The methods of the surrounding kingdoms. The accumulation of wealth. The visible signs of strength. The pageantry of foreign religion. *And the prophets kept showing up to say: not that. Look here. Remember whose you are.*

"You Beat Some, You Stoned Some, You Killed Some"

And what did Israel do with the prophets? Jesus answered that question directly in one of the last parables he taught, the parable of the tenants in Matthew 21. Listen to the story:

> There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. (Matthew 21:33–36)

The landlord is *God*. The vineyard is *Israel*. The hedge and the tower are the city walls and the temple of Jerusalem. The vinedressers are *the leaders of the nation*. The servants are *the prophets*. And the harvest the landlord is looking for is *fruit*, the visible evidence that the people God called are *actually being a blessing to the nations* the way Abraham was promised they would be.

And the tenants beat the servants. Stoned others. Killed still others. And after a long history of mistreated messengers, the landowner finally sends his son:

> Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill

> him and seize his inheritance.' So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. (Matthew 21:37–39)

Notice the absurdity of the tenants' reasoning. *Let us kill him and seize the inheritance.* What planet do you have to live on to imagine that killing the landlord's son will result in *gaining* the landlord's property? It is the logic of *delusion*. Idolatry will delude us every time. It gets us thinking the strangest things, *that the death of the heir somehow transfers the inheritance to those who kill him*. It is not a coherent legal theory. It is the addled reasoning of people whose hearts have grown so dark that the obvious has become invisible to them. If a landlord finds his rental property occupied by squatters who have killed his son and buried him in the back garden, the landlord does not consider those squatters to be the new owners of the property. He considers them murderers. And he comes to deal with them as such.

Jesus then closes the parable with a quotation from Psalm 118:

> Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?
>
> Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder. (Matthew 21:42–44)

Now hold a small but striking detail. In Hebrew, the word for *stone* (*even*) and the word for *son* (*ben*) sound very much alike. They share consonants and assonance. *The stone the builders rejected is also the son the tenants rejected.* The wordplay was not accidental. Jesus had just told the parable of the rejected son, and he caps it with the psalm about the rejected stone. *Same rejection, same vindication, same eventual exaltation as the cornerstone of the building God is constructing.* And the kingdom is taken from those who would not bear fruit and *given to*

a nation that will. That nation, as we will see, is the church gathered out of every people, beginning with a remnant of restored Israel and spreading to the seventy nations of Abraham's promise.

"You Know Not What Spirit You Are Of"

Now here is the heart of what makes the kingdom of God different from every other kingdom in human history. We have not come into contact with something that does business the way the Gentile kingdoms do business.

Recall the moment in Luke 9 when Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem and the Samaritan village refuses to receive him:

> And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?" But He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them." (Luke 9:54–56)

James and John reach for the *Elijah precedent*. Elijah called down fire on the fifty soldiers (2 Kings 1:9–12); James and John want to call down fire on the Samaritan village. *And Jesus rebukes them.* Elijah was a venerated prophet of God, and even Elijah's calling-down-fire approach receives a kind of *censure* from Jesus here. *You do not know what spirit you are of.* The Spirit of the Son of Man does not call down fire on uncooperative villages. *He came to save lives, not destroy them.* The kingdom is operating under a different Spirit now.

And right after that, only a few chapters later, Matthew records the Mount of Transfiguration. *Both Elijah and Moses appear* on the mountain alongside Jesus. Peter, in his sleepy stupor and his ongoing assumption that Israel's story would play out by the old patterns,

immediately wants to memorialize the moment with *three tabernacles*. *And the Father's voice from the cloud cuts him off*:

"This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" (Matthew 17:5).

Hear Him. Not Moses. Not Elijah. *Hear Him.* And when Peter looks up after the thunder has faded, Moses and Elijah are gone. *Only Jesus is left.* John captures the same point at the close of his prologue:

"No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him" (John 1:18).

Moses declared the law, *a shadow of good things to come* (Hebrews 10:1). The prophets declared what they were sensing from God as they wrestled to discern what a healthy Israel might look like. *They were missing the full picture, because their picture was not yet big enough.* God was going to do something well beyond the boundaries of Israel, gathering Jew and Gentile around the cross of his Son. The prophets had glimpsed it. *Only the Son could declare it fully*. And he is now the one we are commanded to hear.

The Twelve, the One Hundred and Twenty, and the New Sinai

So look at how the kingdom finally begins. The Son sent by the Father is rejected by the tenants, *let us kill him and seize the inheritance*, and Jesus says: *the vineyard will be given to others who will bring forth the fruit*.

And surprise: the *others* turn out to be a band of *fishermen from Galilee*. The rejects of Jewish society. Inhabitants of Capernaum and the surrounding region, *not* of Jerusalem. Not part of the priestly aristocracy. Not graduates of the rabbinic schools. *Twelve very unlikely men*. And they are *the remnant*. They are *restored Israel in seed form*. The twelve disciples of Jesus stand

around him exactly the way the twelve tribes stood around the tabernacle in the wilderness. *Immanuel in the middle of twelve.*

And then on the day of Pentecost, the twelve become *one hundred and twenty*:

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

Why one hundred and twenty? Because the rabbinic *minyan*, the quorum of ten required for a synagogue gathering, was the symbolic *unit of completed community*. *Twelve tribes times ten quorum equals one hundred and twenty.* The upper room contained *restored Israel in completed form*. And what came down on them was the most extraordinary moment in the history of the people of God since Sinai itself.

Listen to how Luke describes it:

> When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. (Acts 2:1–3)

That description is Sinai language. At Sinai there had been thunder and lightning, fire on the mountain, the voice of God speaking out of the smoke (Exodus 19:16–19). And the law was inscribed on tablets of stone by the finger of God. Now at Pentecost, the same God comes down again, but the fire rests on the tongues of human beings, and the law is being inscribed on the fleshy tablets of their hearts. Same God. Same fire. Different inscription surface. Jeremiah 31:33's promise is being fulfilled in real time.

And the result of that Pentecost preaching was three thousand souls added that day (Acts 2:41). *Three thousand.* That number is also no accident. *Three thousand died* at Sinai when

Moses came down the mountain and found the people worshipping the golden calf (Exodus 32:28). *Three thousand were saved* at the inauguration of the new covenant. *The reversal is exact.* Same number. Opposite outcome. The old covenant's accounting of *three thousand under judgment* is overwritten by the new covenant's accounting of *three thousand under mercy*. We will take that, all day long, as a sign that the restoration of Israel has begun.

The Parable of the Sower

Now bring all of that as backdrop into Matthew 13, because the chapter that opens with the first great parable of Jesus is the chapter that explains what God has been doing across the entire history of Israel, and what he is doing in the kingdom that has come.

Listen to how Matthew sets the scene:

> On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. (Matthew 13:1–2)

Notice the phrase. *Jesus went out of the house.* The verb is the same verb that opens the parable: *behold, a sower went out to sow* (Matthew 13:3). *Jesus went out. The sower went out.* The verbal echo is deliberate. *Jesus is the sower.* He has not announced it yet. The parable's interpretation later in the chapter will not even include this detail explicitly. But the Greek of Matthew 13:1 and Matthew 13:3 *quietly hands the reader the key*: the One sitting in the boat preaching to the crowd on the beach is the One the parable is about. *Jesus is sowing as he speaks.*

And the parable itself:

> Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have

> much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear! (Matthew 13:3–9)

Why Parables: The Pattern From Daniel 2

Now here is a structural feature of Matthew 13 that most readers miss, and once you see it, you cannot unsee it. Jesus tells the parable in verses 3 through 9. Then he explains why he speaks in parables in verses 10 through 17. Then he interprets the parable in verses 18 through 23.

That is the same pattern Daniel uses in Daniel 2. Look at it carefully.

Nebuchadnezzar has a dream. He demands that his wise men interpret it, but he refuses to tell them what the dream was. If you are as wise as you claim, you can tell me both the dream and its interpretation. The wise men panic. No king has ever asked this of his servants. (And Nebuchadnezzar probably thinks: yes, and no king has caught onto your scam as quickly as I have.) He decrees that all the wise men of Babylon are to be killed.

Daniel intervenes. He asks for time. He prays with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And then he uses a phrase that becomes the key to the whole chapter:

“Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, for wisdom and might are His . . . He reveals deep and secret things; He knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with Him” (Daniel 2:20, 22).

God reveals mysteries. Daniel goes to the king and announces:

> The secret which the king has demanded, the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, and the soothsayers cannot declare to the king. But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. (Daniel 2:27–28)

Then Daniel *tells* the dream: the great image with the head of gold, the chest of silver, the belly of brass, the legs of iron, the feet of iron mixed with clay. *And then* he interprets it. *Tell the mystery. Tell the source (a God in heaven who reveals mysteries). Give the interpretation.* That is the structure.

And Nebuchadnezzar's response:

"The king answered Daniel, and said, 'Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, since you could reveal this secret'" (Daniel 2:47).

A revealer of mysteries. The exact Aramaic phrase. And what is the content of the mystery? The dream forecasts a succession of Gentile kingdoms (Babylon (gold), Medo-Persia (silver), Greece (brass), Rome (iron)) and a final composite of iron and clay. *And then*:

> And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever. (Daniel 2:44)

In the days of these kings, in the Roman period, God will set up a kingdom. Which is exactly when Jesus arrives. The Stone cut without hands strikes the image on the feet (its weakest point, the iron mixed with clay) and the image falls. And the Stone becomes a great mountain that fills the whole earth (Daniel 2:34–35).

And listen to Jesus' opening line in the Matthew 13 parable explanation:

"He answered and said to them, 'Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given'" (Matthew 13:11).

The mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. The same Aramaic / Greek lexicon Daniel used. The kingdom of heaven (cf. Daniel 2:44, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom). The mystery (musterion in Greek, the same term that translates Daniel's Aramaic raz). A revealer of mysteries. Jesus is positioning himself in direct verbal continuity with the Daniel 2 framework. He is the Stone cut without hands. The kingdom of heaven is the kingdom Daniel foresaw. And the method of revelation (parable first, structure-of-revelation second, interpretation third) is the same method Daniel used with Nebuchadnezzar.

Isaiah 6: The Stump That Remains

Then in the middle of Matthew 13's *why-parables* section, Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:

> And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.' (Matthew 13:14–15, quoting Isaiah 6:9–10)

Why Isaiah 6? Because Isaiah 6 contains the *commissioning of the prophet to a people who would not listen*. Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up, his train filling the temple, the seraphim crying *holy, holy, holy*. (We sing one of Christendom's most famous hymns from that very chapter.) Isaiah is told that his message will *harden* the hearts that are already hard, will *deafen* the ears that are already shut. And Isaiah asks the most poignant question in the prophets:

"Then I said, 'Lord, how long?' And He answered: 'Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant, the houses are without a man, the land is utterly desolate . . '" (Isaiah 6:11).

How long, Lord? That is the prophet's cry. *How long does this judgment last?* And the answer is: *until the desolation is full*. Until the land is empty. Until the cities are ruined. And *then*, and this is where the chapter pivots from desolation toward mercy:

"But yet a tenth will be in it, and will return and be for consuming, as a terebinth tree or as an oak, whose stump remains when it is cut down. So the holy seed shall be its stump" (Isaiah 6:13).

A tenth. That is the proportion Isaiah names. After the desolation, a remnant. A small remnant. *A tenth*: twelve out of one hundred and twenty, you might say. *Will the Lord, when he comes, find faith on the earth?* (cf. Luke 18:8). Yes, but not many. *A few. A remnant. A tenth.*

And then the most extraordinary image. The remnant is like the stump of a terebinth or oak tree that has been cut down. The tree is felled. The visible glory is gone. But the stump remains. And inside the stump is something the casual observer cannot see: the holy seed. The holy seed shall be its stump. From a stump that looks dead, life will rise again. From a remnant that looks defeated, a kingdom will grow that fills the earth. Daniel 2's mountain-filling Stone and Isaiah 6's stump-remaining holy seed are the same promise from two different angles.

"Look at the Stump"

And this is what the parable of the sower is *actually about*. *The history of Israel.* Read each soil against the history.

Some seed fell by the wayside, and the birds came and devoured them. The prophets' words fell on hard-packed hearts that could not receive them. The leaders heard. The leaders did

not understand. The birds (*the evil one*, in Jesus' interpretation (Matthew 13:19)) devoured the word before it could take root.

Some fell on stony places, sprang up quickly, then withered for lack of root. Times of revival, times of national repentance, that flared briefly under good kings and faded as soon as conditions grew difficult. The shallow soil could not sustain the seed when the sun rose.

Some fell among thorns, and the thorns choked them. The cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, the political ambitions of Israel's leaders, the foreign alliances and idolatries, *all of which choked out the prophetic word before it could bear fruit*.

But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: a hundredfold, sixty, thirty. The remnant. The faithful few. The tenth of Isaiah 6:13. The Galileans Jesus was gathering around himself. The good soil where the word would finally take root and produce the abundance the prophets had been promising all along.

And then notice what the parable of the sower is doing structurally. Jesus is telling the story of the prophets' rejection, but he is telling it in such a way that the rejection is not the final word. Some seed does fall on good ground. The kingdom is not going to peter out into nothing. The history of Israel is not the story of a beleaguered few who finally fail. It is the story of a stump that remains, a holy seed in the stump, and a sower who keeps sowing until the good ground produces a hundredfold, sixty, thirty.

Isaiah 55: God's Word Like Rain

And here is the prophetic vision Jesus is drawing on for the *abundance* side of the parable. Listen to Isaiah 55:

> Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He

> will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. ‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ says the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.’ (Isaiah 55:6–11)

Hold a few phrases. *Seed to the sower and bread to the eater.* That is the abundance God is producing. The good ground does not just produce *enough*; it produces *seed for the next round of sowing AND bread for present consumption*. Enough left over that the sower never runs out of seed. Enough for the table at the same time. *That is the surplus economics of the kingdom.* Pharaoh’s economics produced scarcity through hoarding; the kingdom’s economics produces abundance through sowing.

And the wider promise. God’s word, like rain, does not return to him empty. The word is the seed. The people who receive it are the good ground. The abundance that comes out is the crop. And the entire system is running on God’s initiative, not human effort. We do not generate the seed. We do not water the soil. We receive what comes from above, and we cooperate with what it does in us, and the harvest is God’s.

And Isaiah continues:

> For you shall go out with joy, and be led out with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress tree, and instead of the brier shall come up

> the myrtle tree; and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. (Isaiah 55:12–13)

All the trees of the field shall clap their hands. You and I are those trees. When the wind of the Spirit blows through the assembly, the trees are clapping their hands. *Instead of the thorn* (which had grown in the old, choked-out soil) *the cypress*. *Instead of the brier*: *the myrtle*. The cursed plants of the old creation give way to the cultivated trees of the new. *And it shall be to the Lord for a name.*

Read that final phrase carefully. For a name. The whole purpose of this is God's renown. Not ours. We are not going to stand before the throne and say look what I did, look how I made it here, look at my contribution to the cosmic accomplishment. No. Had it not been for the Lord on our side, where would we be? (Psalm 124:1–2). The kingdom is for God's name, and we are the trees through whom his name is being announced to the watching world. He acts for his name. He gives us a new heart for his name. He pours out his Spirit for the holiness of his name (cf. Ezekiel 36:22–27).

Why You Become What You Worship

Now back to why Jesus quotes Isaiah 6 in the middle of Matthew 13. Because Isaiah 6 is dealing with *idolatry as the root condition of Israel's hardness of heart*. And the diagnosis of idolatry is found one psalm at a time, but most precisely in Psalm 115:

> Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; eyes they have, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear; noses they have, but they do not smell; they have hands, but they do not handle; feet they have, but they do not walk . . . Those who make them are like them; so is everyone who trusts in them. (Psalm 115:4–8)

Those who make them become like them. That is the law of idolatry. *You become what you worship.* If you worship the gods that cannot see, you become unable to see. If you worship the gods that cannot hear, you become unable to hear. If you worship the gods that cannot speak, you become unable to speak the words that need to be spoken. If you worship the gods that cannot walk, you become unable to walk in the direction God has called you to walk.

That is the diagnosis Isaiah 6 names. The people Isaiah is sent to are *hearing but not understanding, seeing but not perceiving*, because their hearts have been shaped by what they have been worshipping. And the cure, the *touch of the coal from the altar to Isaiah's lips* (Isaiah 6:6–7), is also the pattern of the cure for everyone. *We need the holy coal applied to the parts of us that have grown idolatrous.* The lips that have been speaking the wrong words. The eyes that have been looking in the wrong direction. The ears that have grown deaf to the One we ought to be hearing. *The coal from the altar (meaning, the cleansing that flows from the cross) is the only remedy.*

And this connects directly to what Jesus does in his ministry. *Healing the blind. Healing the deaf. Healing the mute. Healing the lame.* Every healing miracle is, on one level, a reversal of the idolatry that had shaped the human person according to Psalm 115. *The Sower is restoring eyes, ears, mouths, and feet that idolatry had taken away*. Every blind man Jesus heals is a Psalm 115 idolater rescued from the disease his idolatry had given him.

"You Think You're Cut Off"

Now bring all of this home, because this is where the chapter finally lands for us. *Look at the stump.*

Are you the stump of something that was once flourishing and has been cut down? *Then the holy seed is in the stump.* That is what Isaiah 6:13 promised. The tree may look dead. The

visible glory may be gone. *Inside the stump, the seed is still alive*. And in God's timing, the stump will sprout, and the cypress will rise from where the thorn had been, and the myrtle will rise from where the brier was, and the field that looked desolate will, in time, clap its hands.

Do you look across the contemporary Western world and see a Christendom that has been so secularized it can no longer be the people God called it to be? *Look again.* You may be looking at a stump. *And the holy seed is in the stump.* The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is at work in even the most secularized soil. *Resurgence is possible.* The Spirit of life who indwells the people of God can quicken mortal bodies and mortal minds (Romans 8:11). *Something transformational can occur in the simplest people.* You think you are cut off? *Think again.* There is something God still wants to do, even now, even here.

And do not measure the kingdom by what you see today. *The kingdom that began with twelve fishermen had no visible reason to expect to become anything more.* No money. No platform. No political connections. No academic credentials. *Just twelve unlikely men gathered around a Rabbi who had been killed and raised*. By every external metric, the movement should have died within a generation. *Instead, by the time you reach the end of the first century, the gospel has gone into every major city of the Roman empire.* By the time you reach the fourth century, the Roman empire itself has knelt to the Crucified. By the time you reach the twenty-first century, the gospel is being preached in nearly every language that has ever been spoken. *The stump-and-holy-seed pattern is the actual pattern of the kingdom's growth across two thousand years.* Do not despise it now.

The Last Days Have Already Begun

And here is a small but consequential clarification. Peter, on the day of Pentecost, stood up to explain what was happening, and he reached back to the prophet Joel:

> But this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy.’ (Acts 2:16–18)

This is that. Peter says: the event you are witnessing (the upper-room Spirit-outpouring, the fire on the tongues, the multilingual proclamation) *is the fulfillment of Joel's promise of the last days*.

Now stop. *The last days.* When did the last days begin? They began at *Pentecost*. Not a thousand years from now. Not at some distant future moment. *Two thousand years ago.* We have been living in the last days since the upper room. The Spirit has been poured out on sons and daughters, young men and old men, servants and handmaidens. The most insignificant people in society now have the Spirit of the prophet dwelling within them. *The eschatological clock started running in Acts 2.* And we are now well into the long second act of the *last days*.

And this changes how we read the future restoration of Israel. The full restoration is *not* a future event we are waiting to see start. *Restoration began at Pentecost.* And when ethnic Israel finally turns to Messiah in the fullness Paul describes in Romans 11, *they will be turning into a restored Israel that has already been operating for two thousand years*, through the Gentile mission, through the church catholic, through the same indwelling Spirit who came down in Acts 2. *They will not be founding the restoration. They will be joining the restoration already in progress.* Come on, Israel. The water is fine.

Get Into the Story

So here is where we land. *This is our story.* We are part of the restored Israel of God. Peter writes to scattered Gentile believers across Asia Minor:

> But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy. (1 Peter 2:9–10)

Chosen generation. Royal priesthood. Holy nation. Special people. That is the *Exodus 19:5–6* vocational language, the vocation originally given to Israel at Sinai, *now applied directly to Gentile believers*. We have been grafted in. We are part of restored Israel. *You are a Jew,* Paul says, *who is one inwardly, by the circumcision of the heart, in the Spirit* (Romans 2:29). And we are also lively stones being built up into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5):

"You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

Living stones. Holy priesthood. Spiritual sacrifices. We are the temple. We are the priests. We are the sacrifices. We are the whole arrangement at once. Get into the story. The story Jesus has for you is the story of the kingdom that has come and is still coming. It is not a story that peters out. It is not a story of a beleaguered few who finally fail. It is the story of abundance (hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold) flowing out of the most unlikely soil.

And do not be surprised by who turns out to be on the inside of this story. *The roughest. The mind-you-those-that-would-have-been-far-away-from-God.* The people we would never have predicted. *People coming out of prison sentences with passion for God that puts the rest of us to shame.* People in halfway houses who consider the presence of Jesus in their daily

fellowship with their cellmate to be a deeper freedom than the legal freedom they will soon return to. *There are people who are bound in legal chains who are freer than some of us sitting in pews.* That is the kingdom's economy. *The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.*

So let us allow the King to bring us into the liberty he came to bring to *all those who all their lifetime were subject to bondage* (Hebrews 2:15). Let us put down the language that has kept us shackled. *That is the Irish in me. That is my anxiety. That is my depression. That is my genetic proclivity. That is my upbringing.* All of these have power in their place. *None of them has the power that the indwelling Spirit of the living God has.* There is something more powerful in this world today than your grandparents' genetics. There is something more powerful than your parents' nurturing or lack of nurturing. There is something more powerful than the spirit of the age, the *zeitgeist*, and the cultural pressure of your peer group. *There is something delivering, and it now dwells within us.*

"Let's Get Real"

A brother responded to this message after the service with a sharper version of what the chapter has been gesturing toward: *aren't you just tired of mediocrity? Aren't we sold on idols? How many hours have we wasted? How many hours have you wasted?* And the answer is: *too many*. We have all sold ourselves cheap. We have all spent ourselves on cisterns that hold no water. *But there is something real that can change our lives.* The kingdom is not the mediocrity we have settled for. *The kingdom is the abundance we were always invited into.*

So let us be done with mediocrity. *Let's get real.* Let's get some real stuff. The seed has been sown. The good ground exists. *The Sower is still sowing.* The Stone cut without hands is still becoming a mountain that fills the whole earth. *The stump still contains the holy seed.* The

hundredfold, the sixtyfold, the thirtyfold are still being produced in soil the world had given up on. *This is our story. Let's live into it.*

Be the good ground. Receive the word. Bear fruit: some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred. Be in the days of these kings when the God of heaven is setting up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed. Be the people through whom the blessing flows outward to the nations Abraham was promised. Be restored Israel (the lively stones, the royal priesthood, the holy nation) and let the kingdom that has already come find in you the soil it has been looking for all along.