Outcry, the Worst Negotiator

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From Tablets of Stone to Tablets of the Heart

God promised, through Jeremiah, that he would put his Spirit within his people and write his laws upon their hearts, and that this would cause them to walk in his ways. Why did this matter? God was not throwing away his plan despite Israel's faithlessness. Because of that faithlessness, the Babylonian Empire had come in and stripped them from the land God had promised, carrying them into captivity. But God was not done with the plan. He is constantly working out how to take people who do not always get it right and keep working with them. A little more grace. One more pull back. We're going to try this again.

And he recognizes that laws written on tablets of stone do not always supply the power to act the way we need to act. Action is motivated from the inside. Jesus said:

> There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man . . . For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts . . . (Mark 7:15, 21)

That is where evil comes from, from inside. So the place God had to do his work was the heart.

This is the mystery Paul writes about in Ephesians 3: a mystery hidden from the foundation of the world, now being unraveled in this thing called the church. Why the church? Why bring this thing about? God was revealing something he had been hiding from the ages: that

the redemptive power of Christ's sacrifice, entering the lives of Israel and then the Gentiles they influenced, would form a people who would represent God to the world in a way he had not been fully represented before. And that was done through the Spirit: Spirit, Spirit, Spirit. The Spirit promised in Jeremiah 31:

"I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33).

Deuteronomy 30 says something similar. The heart had to be changed, and the heart is changed by the presence of God, no longer dwelling out there in temples made with hands, but resting on us. As Isaiah says:

> The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? . . . but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word. (Isaiah 66:1–2)

The mystery God revealed in the church is that he would come and dwell in Gentile and Jew alike and create a proper representation of himself in the earth. That dwelling place would be people. Looping back to Ephesians 2: You are built up a spiritual house, with Christ Jesus as the chief cornerstone. The temple that you are is a temple that continues to grow. That is what you are part of.

The Gospel Preached Beforehand to Abraham

This is not new. Paul says in Galatians 3 that what was happening in Abraham (when God said to him, "In you, Abraham, and in your seed, all the nations of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3)) was the gospel preached beforehand. The good news is not merely that you get forgiveness of sin and you get to go to heaven when you die. That is true. But the good news is

that every man, woman, and child on this planet has an opportunity to become a child of God and receive his grace, his mercy, his abiding presence.

Paul goes on to say in Galatians 3 that the promise made to Abraham is the Holy Spirit you have received as believers. Isn't that powerful? And then:

"And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29).

So we have inherited something from Abraham: an inheritance of a promise. And that promise is, in you and in your seed all the nations of the world will be blessed. I will bless you (in parentheses, with the Holy Spirit) and in you all the nations of the world will be blessed, because you are going to take what has been given to you and give it to others.

Shall I Hide From Abraham What I Am Doing?

Look at Genesis 18. Genesis 18 and 19 are among the most harrowing chapters in the Bible, and we have to enter them, because this is the gospel beforehand. We have to rethink, first, who our God is and what he is all about, and then what that means for how God is revealing himself to us through his Son.

Genesis 17 closes with God calling Abraham to circumcision. He is 100 years old. His son Ishmael is 13. Isaac has not yet been born. The promise that in him all the nations of the world would be blessed was made when he was 75. Now he is 100, and he has rather messed it up. He has Ishmael, maybe that will work. Abraham is 100, his wife is 90, and chapter 17 ends with him wondering, will it really happen for me?

Then, in chapter 18, God comes down with two angelic beings. They look like men who like to eat. So Sarah makes some food, and they are sitting. I don't know what your angels look like, but most of the time the ones in Scripture look like people who want to eat. Then, in verse

16, the men rise from there and look toward Sodom, and Abraham goes with them to send them on their way. Notice the hospitality: Abraham invited them in, made them food, showed grace.

And the Lord says, almost to himself:

"Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?" (Genesis 18:17–18).

Is there anything I should hide from him? When God wants to bless you, he shares with you a knowledge of what he is doing. As members of the body of Christ, of course, we don't all have the same function (1 Corinthians 12). God will reveal something to you he is not revealing to me. Together, we have a fuller revelation of God, but we need each other to receive it.

Then God says, in effect: I have known him; I have chosen him, I have elected him. Before Abraham could do one thing to demonstrate faithfulness, God chose him. He was simply living in Ur of the Chaldees, down where all the Babel people lived. Somehow, in Babylon, he was reaching out to God, or God saw something. I don't know what God saw. Maybe Abraham was doing nothing. Maybe God simply spoke to him out of the graciousness of his own heart and called him into this land. And now Abraham has spent twenty-five years seeking his promises, not necessarily seeing them fulfilled.

Why does God choose Abraham? Why does he choose you?

"For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice" (Genesis 18:19, NKJV).

Righteousness and Justice as Action

In the West, we have made righteousness and justice into something theoretical: the things on the page in our law books, the things our minds work on. That is not the righteousness and justice the Hebrew Scriptures are talking about. The Hebrew Scriptures never present righteousness and justice as theoretical ideas. They are always coupled with action: setting things right, restoring, making whole. Never theoretical. Always active.

And notice the structure of the verse. On one side: God's choice. On the other side: the fulfillment of that choice, blessing to the nations. In the middle: doing righteously and justly. If we do not live the way of the Lord before the people of this world, they will not be converted. God wants to use us as ambassadors of Christ, saying to a world separated from God, "Be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20). He wants us to be a righteous, just people standing in this world and advocating for it.

Later, in Exodus 19, God says:

"I have . . . brought you unto myself. Now therefore . . . ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation . . . for all the earth is mine" (Exodus 19:4–6).

All the earth is his, but we are called to be priests to the world, saying to it, "Be reconciled to God." Israel was called to that because Abraham was called to that. And so are we.

Outcry

We do not have to wait for an answer on what active righteousness and justice looks like in God's mind. Verse 20:

> Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous;
>
> I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know. (Genesis 18:20–21)

In Hebrew, that verse does not begin with “And the Lord said.” It begins with the word that the translators move further into the sentence: outcry.

Feel the weight of that word landing on the Jewish mind, right after God has said the way of the Lord is to do righteousness and justice so that all the promises made to Abraham may be fulfilled. The next word out of God’s mouth is outcry.

That Hebrew word is the same word God uses in Exodus 3, when Moses turns aside to see the burning bush: “I have seen the oppression . . . and I have heard their outcry” (Exodus 3:7). It is the word used in Deuteronomy 22 for a woman raped in a field with no one to help her, who cries out and is not heard. It is the cry for help from people who have no power, when something is coming against them and oppressing them in an unrelenting way.

The righteousness and the justice God has called the children of Abraham, the seed of Abraham, to fulfill is to step in and take action when there is a cry for help like that.

The Worst Negotiator in the World

In case you think God does not want to answer prayers, in case you think God does not want to act on behalf of the suffering, watch what happens next.

Abraham says to the Lord, “What about it? What if there are fifty righteous in this city? Will you destroy the city for fifty righteous? Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

Now, I am not much of a horse trader. If I go down to a guy selling a car, and he says, “This is my grandma’s car, I don’t want to part with it. It’s $2,500. It has such sentimental value, but I need the money”: I’ll say, “I’ll give you $2,750.” I’m not the best negotiator in the world. But you go down to the bargain days when everyone has their stuff out on tables, and somebody is selling something for $100. You say, “I’ll give you $50.” And they say, “$90.” You say, “$60.” “Eighty.” “Seventy.” “Okay, we’ll settle on seventy-five.” That is how negotiations go.

The seller has the power, because they have the goods you want, and you negotiate to somewhere in the middle. It was no different in Abraham's day. They would haggle.

Look at the character of the God we serve. Abraham says, "Will you take fifty? Will you destroy the city for fifty?" And God says, "Yes." Yes, too easy. Hold on. Did I say destroy? I mean save. Would you save the city for fifty? Yes.

Abraham realizes he has left money on the table. What about forty-five? Forty? He goes down in smaller increments now, not wanting to get too greedy. Forty-five. Forty. Thirty. Twenty. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. God, the worst negotiator in the world. But when it comes to human life, when it comes to saving people, he is all in. His is a justice of restoration. His is a righteousness that wants to see things set right. That is the God we serve.

Lot's Vexed Soul: When Righteousness Is Not Enough

Unfortunately, when we get to Genesis 19, we see what God found. When those same two men whom Abraham had received with hospitality arrived at the city, the text says every man of the city came to the door and demanded those men. Not one man, outside of Lot, showed hospitality. Not one man in that city. Every man had been turned over to wickedness, to idolatry.

Peter says that Lot's soul was vexed by the filthy conversation of the wicked (2 Peter 2:7–8). His righteousness was not enough to overpower it. What God wants is for us to come in with a righteous conversation. It is the righteous conversation of the holy that will actually transform the wicked. But when a city becomes so base, so given over to idolatry, that even a righteous soul like Lot's is vexed within him, the harvest cannot be brought in by that one soul alone.

What we are called to be is a holy people sharing the gospel (the good news, the word of God we have received) laying aside filthiness and the overflowing of wickedness, and not being hearers of the word only, but doers (James 1:21–22).

James: The Religion That Counts

How easy it would be to hear the words of Abraham and set them aside: "Well, that's nice." To hear the words of Christ and say, "That has a good ring to it." But when the time comes to put faith into action, it is faith.

James asks what true religion is. There is religion that is useless: the unbridled tongue of religiosity, a tongue that speaks the right things but offers no action to meet the words being spoken. That, James says, is religion that is useless (James 1:26).

"Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27).

Then James moves into chapter 2. Notice, in the first part of chapter 2, what is being described is not, on its face, evil. A man comes in with gold rings and fine apparel, and you say, "Sit here in this good place." In our culture today, we know that is wrong. We know it because we have had two thousand years of the influence of Christ on the planet, and even non-Christians sense the wrongness of partiality.

But in the Roman Empire, treating a wealthy visitor well was a matter of survival. A wealthy man could be a patron. In a church that was suffering and on the run, anyone with wealth who walked in could be a help to that fellowship. The early Christians were being tempted to show deference to the wealthy. And James says: whoa. The culture may say it is fine. The thing at your workplace tomorrow that the culture says is fine, an internal whoa rises within you. This is dishonoring to a human spirit. This is the crushing of a soul. It may be legal, it may

be socially acceptable, but in the kingdom of God it is not. And God will ask us to go against those social norms to make sure that soul is taken care of.

James even uses the word in verse 6:

"Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by which ye are called?" (James 2:6–7).

Look ahead to James 5: "Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl . . . Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth" (James 5:1, 4). These were day laborers. They needed that money at the end of the day to buy food for the day. They were crying out to the Lord. The rich knew the poor could not take them to court: could not pay for it, could not collect. It was systemic oppression. And God says, weep and howl.

Whenever we show favoritism, whenever we fail to recognize every man, woman, and child as a soul God wants to deliver from their cry, we violate the royal law (James 2:8): "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Jesus said this command and the command to love God with all your heart are the commands on which all other commands hang.

The Prayer Hands Emoji

Then James presses in:

> What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? (James 2:14–16)

"Be warmed and filled": that's a prayer. What good does that do? Tell me: you say to me, "I'm naked, I'm thirsty, I'm hungry, I'm destitute, I have no clothes." And I have a closet full. And I say, "I'm praying for you, brother." What does that do?

I have spent a lot of my years going prayer-hands emoji. I am not going to send a prayer-hands emoji to you unless I am actually praying for you. And even then: what good is it, if the faith of the children of Abraham does not couple itself with actual acts of righteousness and justice? The people of this world will speak against what God says he is doing in our lives. If God is truly not transforming us, let us not claim it. If we are not going to be different from the world, let us not open our mouths and blaspheme God. That is what Israel was doing when God delivered them into Babylonian captivity: "the temple, the temple, the temple," while God's holy name was profaned among the Gentiles because of how they lived.

But God is doing something in people when he raises up righteousness and justice. When his people lift holy hands, prayer-hands emoji, those prayers go up, and they are immediately followed by acts of faith and grace and mercy that reach the target. Not just praying "be warmed and filled." What is the profit in that?

Think of the parable in Matthew 25. A man goes on a long journey and entrusts his goods to his servants: five talents to one, one to another. The one who took the one buried it. He did nothing with it. When the master returned, he said, "Could you not at least have put it with the bankers, that I might have gained something on the resources I gave you, you unprofitable servant?"

Every child of Abraham who claims the promises of Abraham and the promises of Jesus could one day stand and say, "Lord, Lord, did we not cast out demons in your name? In your name did we not do many mighty works?" And he could say, "Depart from me, you workers of

iniquity, I never knew you." Is it possible we could claim something with our mouths and our actions while, in our hearts, the reality of our lives is so far from what God wants that we are not representing him in righteousness and justice?

As Close as the Bedroom Down the Hall

My God, the conviction of this message has been weighing on me for weeks. When I begin to think of our commission to be a blessing to the world, and how often I retreat into something else.

We might think we have to move heaven and earth, that we have to go into foreign evangelism, and some of us will be called to that. But for most of us, the outcry is as close as the bedroom down the hall. It is our children. It is our aging parents. It is somebody in our workplace. We can have our feelers out: is there an outcry here? Do we need to do something? Can the Spirit of God move us to take action for the people in need right next to us?

This is the whole thrust of James's words. He opens with, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations" (James 1:2). He is calling people under the crushing weight of trial to get out of themselves and help others, because God knows that the way we get out of our own pit is when we begin to help others through theirs. Somehow, when we are pulling our brother out of the pit, we get pulled out of the pit ourselves. What a powerful thing.

A Lifetime of Showing Belief

Let me close on James 2:21:

> Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was

imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. (James 2:21–24)

That moment on the altar was Genesis 22. Abraham was 137. Isaac was 37. But the scripture James quotes (Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness) is from Genesis 15. Abraham was 85 at that point. He has Isaac when he is 100, and offers him at 137. So roughly fifty-two years have passed between the believing and the offering.

And in those years, Abraham was attempting to understand God, attempting to live for God, taking actions that were sometimes incomplete. By the time he climbs Moriah, he has come to know the God who tried to save Sodom. He knows this God will not allow the promised son to die. The writer of Hebrews tells us Abraham believed God was able to raise Isaac from the dead, even from the dead (Hebrews 11:19). His faith was that strong.

So James is saying: if we truly believe, it will be a lifetime of showing that belief by taking action, of showing God we believe.

And just in case you think this is only about men, or only about people on the religious inside:

“Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (James 2:25–26).

Let us be the people God has called us to be. He has called us. He has given us the Spirit. And the Spirit is not given merely so we can feel good, feel clean, feel elevated, though it does that. The Spirit, John 16 says, is the Spirit of truth, given to guide us into all truth, so that we might know how to act in every situation of outcry that comes our way.

Let us be that kind of people.