Three Thousand Saved

On Sinai, Pentecost, and How God's Enemies Are Made His Footstool

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The Family God Has Been Gathering

Over the last several weeks I have been talking about what it means to be the family of God. When God created humankind, the only time in the creation account he called something *not good* was when man was alone. He put the man to sleep, took from his side, and from his side made the woman. He brought them together. And when man came out of his sleep, he said:

"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Genesis 2:23).

Jesus picked up that line centuries later and said, *What God has joined together, let not man separate* (cf. Matthew 19:6). There is a constant theme through the Scriptures: God separates to bring back together, to produce children, to grow a family. Cain and Abel are separated, but the families keep growing. Tribes grow. By Genesis 10, you have seventy nations on the earth. And one of those nations decided it was the strongest on the planet, and on the plain of Shinar they built a tower to heaven: basically saying, *Y'all need to come and do it the way we are doing it. We're seventy, but we are the one*.

When God saw it, he confounded their language. The message in that confounding was clear: when humanity tries to pull itself together in its own power, the result is impressive but counterfeit. The true unity God was after would not be a single culture pressing everyone else

into its shape. It would be the blessing of one man, Abraham, whose seed would carry blessing back out to *all* the nations. The plan, from Genesis 12 onward, was to bless one through whom many would be blessed.

But even Abraham's descendants could not get their act together. After Sarah dies, Abraham marries Keturah and fathers a whole new round of children. Genesis 25 lists them, and that list reads like a *who's who* of Israel's enemies for the rest of the Old Testament. The blessed family itself fractured into rival lines. So by the time we reach Jesus (who, as Paul says in Galatians 3, is the *seed* of Abraham through whom the promise actually arrives) there is a deep and accumulated frustration in the story. Not even the blessings of God on the people of God have been able to lead them to do the right thing. Something is missing.

Mount Sinai

What is missing was visible from the very start. Remember Mount Sinai. God had brought Israel out of slavery, borne them on eagles' wings, and brought them to himself. And he had said:

"You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6).

Priests to the *world*. Israel was to mediate God's blessing back out to the seventy nations who had been scattered at Babel. That was the purpose. And to get them there, God came down on the mountain: fire on the summit, the mountain quaking, dust and cloud and thunder and the long sound of a trumpet. The whole theophany was so frightening that the people stood at a distance, and the writer of Hebrews tells us that even an animal that touched the base of the mountain would have to be put to death (Hebrews 12:20). God had chosen to make himself present, but he was still too holy and powerful for them to come near.

So they sent Moses up. He was gone for forty days. The people had been at Sinai a few days before he ascended, about fifty days from the Passover in Egypt. And while Moses was up the mountain, they grew restless and said to Aaron, *Make us gods that brought us out of Egypt.* So Aaron took their earrings, melted them in the fire, and made the golden calves. They sang and danced. As Moses came down, his face shining with the glory he had been in the presence of, he heard the noise and saw the worship. He broke the two tablets of stone. He destroyed the idol, ground it up, mixed it with water, and made them drink. And then:

> Then Moses stood in the entrance of the camp, and said, "Whoever is on the Lord's side; come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. And he said to them, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'Let every man put his sword on his side, and go in and out from entrance to entrance throughout the camp, and let every man kill his brother, every man his companion, and every man his neighbor.'" So the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And about three thousand men of the people fell that day. (Exodus 32:26–28)

Three thousand. Catalog that number for a second. The first Pentecost (that is what Sinai was, the *feast of weeks*, fifty days after Passover) ended with three thousand idolaters dead. The law was given on tables of stone, and Israel could not keep that law. Eventually they were carried away into Babylonian captivity. But during that captivity, two prophets began to say something new. Jeremiah:

> Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel . . . I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jeremiah 31:31, 33)

And Ezekiel:

> I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name's sake, which you have profaned among the nations . . . I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes. (Ezekiel 36:22, 26–27)

That is what was missing. Stone tablets had not been enough. A people of stone hearts could not be a kingdom of priests to the nations. There had to be a new heart, and a new Spirit, to make them into the people God had called them to be. *And then* the seventy nations could finally be reached.

Speech and Silence

Luke begins his Gospel watching that promise come into focus. There was a righteous priest named Zacharias, with an old wife named Elizabeth, and the whole righteous remnant of Israel was outside the temple praying for something, *anything*, to break. While Zacharias was inside the holy place offering incense, an angel appeared and announced that he would have a son who would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, and would turn the nation back with his words.

Zacharias doubted. He was old; his wife was old; the angel's announcement seemed impossible. And the angel's response was striking:

"But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time" (Luke 1:20).

Watch the pattern Luke is setting up. When doubt fills a heart, it produces *muteness*. Speechlessness. A doubting priest cannot be a priest to the nations because he has no words to speak. Hold that observation.

Now jump to Galilee. Mary discovers she is pregnant by the overshadowing of the Most High. The King of Israel is being formed inside her. She travels to her cousin Elizabeth's house, and as soon as Mary's greeting reaches Elizabeth's ears:

> And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:41–43)

Filled with the Holy Spirit, and she spoke. That is the pattern Luke is establishing. When the Spirit fills, the mouth opens. When doubt fills, the mouth closes. Two women at the start of Luke's Gospel are filled with the Spirit and prophesy, and one priest, righteous as he is, stands mute in the corner. Mary's own song picks up exactly the theme that the whole arc has been building toward:

"He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever" (Luke 1:54–55).

She knows what is happening. The boy in her womb and the boy in Elizabeth's womb are the *fulfillment of the promise to Abraham*. The blessing for all the nations of the world is at last beginning to land. Something powerful and embryonic, invisible to anyone without eyes of faith, is now growing in two ordinary wombs in two small towns.

And then John is born. The community gathers to circumcise him on the eighth day and assumes his name will be Zacharias after his father. Zacharias, still mute, asks for a writing tablet and writes: *His name is John.* And in that very moment of obedient speech, his tongue is loosed:

> Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying: "Blessed is the Lord God of Israel . . . to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:67, 77–79)

"To give light to those who sit in darkness." That is a quotation from Isaiah 9: the verse Matthew, in his own Gospel, locates in *Galilee of the Gentiles*. The Dayspring rising up in Israel was always meant to be a light to the Gentiles. The promise to Abraham (*in you and in your seed all the nations of the world shall be blessed* (Genesis 12:3, 22:18)) was at last about to be enacted.

Simeon at the Temple

In Luke 2, Mary and Joseph bring the eight-day-old baby Jesus to the temple to be circumcised. And waiting for them, without their knowing, is an old man named Simeon:

> And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple. (Luke 2:25–27)

Simeon takes the baby up into his arms and says:

> Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel. (Luke 2:29–32)

Simeon sees in the eight-day-old child what the whole rest of the Gospel will spend years unfolding: the Spirit of God is the *glory of Israel for the purpose of bringing light to the Gentiles*. The Consolation of Israel (Isaiah 40's *Comfort, comfort, My people*) is at last present in human flesh. The high places will be brought low, the low places lifted up, the path made straight, and a returning people will be given eagles' wings to fly home (Isaiah 40:1–5, 28–31). Simeon's eyes see it in a baby.

Jesus Filled With the Spirit

Now move to Luke 3. John the Baptist is preaching repentance at the Jordan. The religious leaders come out, and John calls them a brood of vipers. *Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?* And then; this is the line to watch:

"And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones" (Luke 3:8).

"From these stones." John is saying, You think you have a corner on God's blessing because you are Abraham's family? God can raise up children to Abraham out of rocks if he has to. And (wink, nod) he can also raise them up out of these Gentiles all around us. Praise God to all the Gentiles. Amen.

And then, remarkably, the religious leaders are not the only ones in the crowd. Listen to who else is there:

> So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So

> he said to them, “Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.” (Luke 3:10–14)

Three different groups (ordinary people, tax collectors, soldiers) all pricked in their hearts, all asking the same question: *What shall we do?* That question is going to come back at Pentecost from a different crowd. Hold onto it. And John answers each one specifically and then says:

> I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire. (Luke 3:16–17)

And then Jesus himself comes to be baptized:

> When all the people were baptized, it came to pass that Jesus also was baptized; and while He prayed, the heaven was opened. And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, “You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:21–22)

Notice when Luke gives Jesus’ genealogy. Matthew puts the genealogy at the very beginning of his Gospel (*Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob*, and so on) and stops at Abraham. Luke, with a different agenda, waits until right *after* the baptism to give the genealogy. And he gives it *backward*. Jesus, the son of Joseph, the son of Heli, all the way back, back, back. And listen to where Luke takes it:

> . . . the son of Abraham, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor . . . the son of Noah . . . the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch . . . the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God. (Luke 3:34–38, condensed)

Matthew stops at Abraham. Luke does not stop. He goes all the way back through Noah to Adam, *the son of God*. Luke is making sure you cannot miss it: this Jesus is not merely the king of the Jews descended from Abraham. He is the king of all the nations descended from Adam. *Every* people on the earth is in this lineage somewhere. The seventy nations of Genesis 10, all of them, find their king right here.

"The Spirit of the Lord Is Upon Me"

Now watch what happens when Jesus, *filled with the Spirit*, returns to his hometown synagogue:

"Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region. And He taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all" (Luke 4:14–15).

Filled with the Spirit, he returns *in power*, and he begins to *teach*. The Spirit produces speech. And he stands up in the synagogue and reads Isaiah 61:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18–19)

The Spirit on the suffering servant of Isaiah is now the Spirit that preaches *good news* to those held in the dark. I am not talking only about literal prisons. I am talking about the prisons of life: the darkness of our circumstances, the things that bind us, the way we were treated, our genetic makeup, the whole amalgam of pressures that leave us locked. Jesus came, through the gospel preached *by the Spirit*, to deliver us from those prisons. And the way *he* proclaimed the gospel is the way *we* proclaim it: through the Spirit.

And the Spirit is not just so that I can be a good little boy, though it is partly for that. The Spirit was given so we would have *mouths to speak* and *ears to hear*. Hold onto that. Why would God send his Son, and then send the Spirit on the Son so that the Son could send the Spirit on us? Because the deepest problem with humanity is *the sin of our words* and *the sin of closing our ears to people who are not like us*. The whole plan turns on words and hearing.

"Then He began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'" (Luke 4:21).

Acts 1, the Witness Begins to Cascade

Now jump to Acts 1. Jesus has resurrected, spent forty days teaching his disciples how the Scriptures had testified to his suffering and to the plan of God, and now gives his final words before the ascension:

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Witnesses. Cascading outward. Volume 1 of Luke's two-volume work, the Gospel, was *the acts of Jesus*. Volume 2, Acts, is *the acts of his disciples*. Both empowered by the same Spirit. And the disciples stay in Jerusalem another ten days. So how many days is this now? Fifty. The Feast of Weeks. The same feast that, at Sinai, had been the giving of the law on tables of stone.

Pentecost

Watch what God does to remake the world we live in. If you have grown up in a faith that looks to slay your brothers and sisters the way the Levites did at Sinai, *this is not what God is now doing*.

> 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. (Acts 2:1–2)

Here is Sinai again. Sound. Rumbling. Wind. The Hebrew word for *wind* is *ruach*: *spirit*. The same creative force that hovered over the chaotic waters in Genesis 1:2 is now filling the upper room. The old creation was created by the Spirit of God; the new creation is being created by the Spirit of God.

"Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them" (Acts 2:3).

Look at what has changed since Sinai. At Sinai, God was so holy that an animal who touched the base of the mountain would die. *Now*, God himself has descended on each person in the room. The dwelling place of God is no longer a tabernacle, no longer a temple, no longer a mountain. *It is humanity*. Isaiah 66 had seen it:

> Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? . . . But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word. (Isaiah 66:1–2)

This is now the dwelling place of God. *You are the temple of the Holy Spirit* (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:19). God has chosen not to be distant from us. The tent doors at Sinai rattled because God was so close. The upper room is shaking under his power because God has now come *into* the people themselves. Humanity has become a new living creature that can speak in the *true image* of God. We are now living images of God in his tabernacle, which is the world.

Think about idols for a moment. Idols face east. As soon as the sun comes up, the rays strike the idol's painted eyes and animate the image, at least in the worshiper's imagination. But

when the Spirit of God hits *you*, you are not a dumb idol with a mouth that cannot speak, eyes that cannot see, ears that cannot hear. You are a *living* image of God. When the Light from the East rises and strikes you, *boom*, you become his living image in the earth, with a mouth, with eyes, with ears, with hands, with feet. Be the image of God.

"And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:4–5).

Filled with the Spirit (like Jesus, like Mary, like Elizabeth, like Zacharias when his tongue was finally loosed) they began to *speak*. And devout men from every nation under heaven were in Jerusalem for the feast. Is that accidental?

"And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language" (Acts 2:6).

Confused. What does *Babel* mean in Hebrew? *Confusion*. At the Tower of Babel, the confusion was that people *could not understand* one another. At Pentecost, the confusion was that they *could* understand. *That* is the kind of confusion we want, the kind that arises not from the breakdown of communication but from its astonishing recovery. They were confused because they understood, perfectly, what these Galileans were saying, even though the Galileans had no business speaking those languages.

> Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya

> adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs, we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God." (Acts 2:7–11)

Another *table of nations*. Luke gives us a second Genesis 10 right here, the nations that had been scattered at Babel are now hearing the wonderful works of God in their own tongues. The scattering of Babel is being reversed not by erasing the languages but by *filling the languages*. Each people group hears the gospel in its own native sound.

And note the careful little wink to what is coming for the rest of Acts: *both Jews and proselytes*. Proselytes, Gentile converts to Judaism, are *already* in the room. The bridge from Israel to the nations is being walked across in front of us.

Drunk, or Speaking the Future

But there were others in the crowd:

> "Others mocking said, 'They are full of new wine'" (Acts 2:13).

Something happened to some of their ears; they could hear the glorifying words of God in their own tongue. Others heard only noise. *They are drunk.* And Peter, filled with the Spirit, stands up and gives the sense of what is happening:

> For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. 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 2:15–18)

Sons, daughters. Young, old. Menservants, maidservants. Every social class. *All flesh*. The Spirit is being poured out across the whole spectrum of humanity.

And note what kind of speech the Spirit produces. *They shall prophesy*. *Visions*. *Dreams*. The most powerful thing you can do for yourself or for someone else is to use language anchored in the *future* God is bringing, not in the past you cannot change. If we anchor our speech in what has been done to us, or what we did, we cannot breathe life into others, because we cannot breathe it into ourselves. The Spirit speaks new-creation language. The Spirit speaks the future.

Three Thousand Saved

Peter brings his sermon to its climax with a quotation from Psalm 110:

> "For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool."' Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." (Acts 2:34–36)

"Until I make Your enemies Your footstool." Watch what God does next. If your picture of how God deals with his enemies is the one we got at Sinai (*strap on your sword, kill the idolaters, three thousand fall*) then you have missed how the story has turned. If your vision of the judgment of God is that he leaves bloody carcasses in his trail, you have missed it by a country mile. I missed it for a long time. Many of us do.

"Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37).

There it is, *what shall we do?*, the same question the crowds had asked John the Baptist a few chapters earlier in Luke 3. The Spirit-filled Peter has done what a Levite at Sinai used to do with a sword: He has *pierced them through*. He has stabbed them at the heart. But the weapon is not a blade. It is a word. And the wound is not for killing; it is for *waking*.

> Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call." And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. (Acts 2:38–41)

Three thousand souls were added. Look at that number again. At Sinai, three thousand idolaters *fell* under the sword. At Pentecost, three thousand idolaters were *saved* by the Word. The very people who fifty days earlier had been crying, *Crucify Him, crucify Him* (many of them, that very crowd) are now asking, *What shall we do?* And Peter says: *Repent. Be baptized. Receive the Spirit.* And three thousand of them did. *That* is how God makes his enemies his footstool. They come and they become *children of God* through the Spirit, crying *Abba, Father* (cf. Romans 8:15). The enemies are still made the footstool: They are simply made the footstool *by conversion, not by death*.

That is why you want the Spirit. There is no newness of life without him. Pray over Scripture. Pray in the morning. Pray in the evening. If you need more from God, seek him. I cannot tell you how God will give it to you, or what your specific mission will be. Paul's mission was different from Peter's. But what I do know is this: when you open yourself up to the power of the Most High and let him rest on you, *something will be birthed in you*. Christ will be formed in you. As Paul says, you will become a new creation. The old things will pass away, and all things will become new. You will walk in newness of life. You will speak in new tongues. You will be the people God has anointed us to be.

Coda: On a Streetcar

One last image. Years ago there was a brother in our fellowship who had prayed and prayed for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It hadn't come. One day he was riding the streetcar and felt the Lord ask him: *If I could give it to you right here, on this streetcar, would you receive it?* He said, *Yes, Lord. Yes, I want it.* Right there on that streetcar, God filled his mouth with tongues no one else could understand, a private communion between him and God. The Spirit does not need a church building. He does not need a mountaintop. He does not need a temple. He needs a willing heart and an open mouth, and he can pour himself out anywhere, on Sinai, in an upper room, in a hometown synagogue, in a Roman prison, on a streetcar.

Be a witness. Let God start something in your life, and then for the rest of your days be his witness.