# A Chosen Race

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On the Reuniting of Joseph and Judah Through the Cross, the Restoration of Israel That Already Happened, and the New Humanity in the Temple Not Made With Hands

## The Worship Reflex

Humans worship. That much is observable from the briefest examination of our actual behavior. Even those who would deny they worship anything still spend Monday morning checking the box scores, making sure the quarterback is doing well, tracking the market or the standings or the celebrity feed. We have a natural reflex toward worship, and we love powerful representations of humanity. Go on YouTube sometime and watch the "humans are amazing" compilations: the parkour videos where people jump across impossible ravines, run up buildings, land on posts, perform feats of athletic precision that take your breath away. We are drawn to these displays because they momentarily relieve the constraint we feel in our actual daily lives.

And none of us seems to live up to what we believe to be true. That is the harder admission underneath the worship reflex. Practice what you preach; they always tell preachers that. But it is hard, for any human in this world, to practice what they actually believe to be true. As soon as I decide that I am going to start eating right and exercising, I find myself pulling up to the drive-through repeating to myself "grilled chicken salad and bottle of water, grilled chicken salad and bottle of water," and then ordering the number one combo and supersizing it.

There is a profound gap between our convictions and our actual conduct, and we know it, and the gap is one of the deeper sources of despair operating in the human condition.

And the level of despair in our present cultural moment seems to be off the charts. Despondency. Complete fatalistic weakness. The sense that the system or the machine or the universe is exerting more agency over our lives than we are exerting ourselves. And when human beings get to that fatalistic point, two things happen. Some collapse inward in self-destruction. Others gravitate outward toward something that feels more powerful than themselves, and hold onto that something with all their remaining strength. The worship reflex looks for an object, and an object is always found. The only question is which object the worship reflex lands on.

**Sin Crouching at the Door**

And this is not unique to our generation. Humanity has always lived with the same diagnostic. The blood of Abel was crying out from the ground because of what Cain had done to him. The very first generation born outside Eden produced the first homicide. And before that homicide, God had warned Cain about something operating just outside the threshold of his own interior life. Listen:

“If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it” (Genesis 4:7).

Sin is at the door like a crouching beast. Do not open the door, Cain. The beast is right there. It wants you. Its desire is for you. But you can rule over it. And Cain, like every one of us, could not help himself. He had to see what the beast looked like. He opened the door. The beast came in. And Abel’s blood ended up crying out from the ground.

That is classic humanity from the beginning. And the question every honest human being has to face is, what do we actually do with this diagnostic? Do we just wring our hands in

despair? Do we hunker down with the small circle of people we feel we can trust until they betray us too? Do we keep retreating until our world gets smaller and smaller and smaller, until eventually it shrinks to nothing? That is one option. Many of our contemporaries have chosen exactly that path. Smaller and smaller, until they functionally disappear.

Or do we recognize that the worship reflex was always pointing toward something specific, that the something-specific has actually appeared in history, and that we can cleave to him with whatever remains of our worship reflex and find ourselves, against all our expectations, gathered into something larger than the small life we had been clinging to?

## When All the Saints Begin

The worship songs we sing in our assembly point toward exactly this larger something. When the saints from all the nations begin to worship. That phrase carries a hopeful tone: an assumption that there is something we can do, that we can cleave to the One who is actually able to set everything right.

Do you not intuitively know that something is screwed up in this world? Of course you do. Everyone does. The intuitive recognition of brokenness is universal. The only people who deny it are the people in active denial.

And what we end up doing, if we are not careful, is finger-pointing at every institution. The church, all hypocrites over there. The government, all crooks and criminals. That nation or that race or that type of person. The executives: all greedy. The frontline laborers: all lazy. Everyone pointing fingers. Everyone looking for someone else to blame for the brokenness that is actually distributed across every one of us.

The fact is, we are all at fault. We are all Cain. We have all opened the door to the crouching beast. We have all given in to the patterns we knew were destructive at the moment

we were giving in to them. And the question of what we do with that universal fault is the question Christianity exists to answer.

We are not called to wring our hands and schlep through life with a little rain cloud over our heads, for those of you who recall the Flintstones character Schleprock. We are not called to a fatalistic stoicism that says “life has dealt you this blow, deal with it,” though there is something genuinely useful in stoicism’s practical realism for navigating the workaday world. We are called to something further. To a hope beyond this veil of tears that we are all currently inhabiting. To a Kingdom that has already arrived and that is gathering us, even now, into its work.

**Good News During the Long Silence**

One of the genuinely good things that emerged during the early COVID-19 pandemic was the actor John Krasinski’s video series Some Good News. Krasinski, best known for playing Jim in the American version of The Office, began recording short weekly videos from his home, sharing genuinely good stories from around the world during a period when the dominant news cycle was almost entirely bad. He featured ordinary acts of kindness, surprise reunions, small expressions of human goodness that the larger media moment was not amplifying. And what he produced gave millions of people, during a genuinely dark cultural moment, the small daily reminder that good was still happening in the world even when the surrounding noise was suggesting otherwise.

That instinct, to amplify good news during a long silence in which only bad news seems to be available, is itself a kingdom-instinct, whether or not the person amplifying it would describe it in those terms. And the kingdom of God is asking every one of us to operate with the same instinct on a sustained basis. Not as a one-off COVID-era video series. As a way of living

in the world. As people who carry good news into rooms that have been dominated by bad news for too long.

## The Call to Action

Somebody came into this world and took action. And he is calling all of us to take action with him. This is not a wring-our-hands-and-accept-what-is gospel. This is not a fatalistic surrender to the surrounding patterns. This is a call to action for every man, woman, and child on this planet.

If we will begin to gravitate toward the Lord, if we will reach out and take hold of him, something happens to us that we could not have produced ourselves. The worship-reflex finally lands on the right object, and the rest of our internal architecture begins to rearrange itself around the gravity of that object.

And here is something to notice carefully. You cannot reach out and take hold of the Lord without bumping into your brothers and sisters from every walk of life who are reaching out and taking hold of the same Lord. If they are gravitating toward him, and you are gravitating toward him, the geometry guarantees that you will encounter one another somewhere on the road. There is unity at the throne of grace. It is structural. It is not an additional achievement we have to construct on top of the gravitation. It is the natural consequence of multiple gravitations toward the same center.

That is what the saints-from-all-the-nations song is announcing. When the worship reflexes of millions of human beings finally land on the right object, the millions find one another in proximity to that object, and the unity that has been culturally impossible turns out to be ecclesiastically inevitable.

**The Pitiful Self Gets Quieted**

And something happens when we start to get out of our own self. I am one of the most pitiful people on the planet, by my own honest accounting. You would think, listening to me complain in moments of self-focus, that I was still making three twenty-five an hour at the feed store where I worked as a young man in southern California. I am, in fact, gainfully employed. I make decent money. People are reasonably kind to me. I have, by every objective measure, a good life. Stuart Smalley said it on Saturday Night Live: "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me." That is approximately my life on most days.

And yet, on any given week, I can find the one little thing that is irritating me, and let that one little thing wear me down across days. That is the self-focused interior, and it is not unique to me. It is the standard operating condition of most human beings when they have not been gathered into a larger story.

And the kingdom-medicine for the self-focused interior is to begin praying for someone else. When I begin to pray for your mother, something happens to my own internal weather about my own mother. When I begin to put your needs in front of the concerns I have been carrying, my own concerns reorganize themselves in proportion to a larger field. One of the best things about pastoring an assembly is that when I am tempted toward self-pity ("woe is me, woe is me") I almost always encounter, in the assembly, someone whose actual circumstances are heavier than mine. And the Lord whispers; it is your responsibility to bring something different to that person. Encourage them. Pray for them. And when you begin to encourage other people, you get encouraged yourself. You cannot help it. The encouragement-giving and the encouragement-receiving are not two separate transactions. They are the same transaction, viewed from two angles.

**Joseph and Judah**

And this brings me back to a thread I was working with on Sunday: the long story of Joseph and Judah, the two leading sons of Jacob who became, eventually, the two leading tribes of the divided nation of Israel. Joseph and Judah were the two strongest of the twelve sons. They were also, throughout Genesis, constantly in tension with one another. Judah's plan to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt. Joseph's later restraint when he had the power to take vengeance and chose reconciliation instead. The tense reconciliation scene in Genesis 45 where Joseph reveals himself to his brothers.

And then after Joseph and Judah were long gone and dead, their seeds, their descendants, continued the same tension across centuries. After the conquest of the promised land under Joshua, the tribes settled into the territory. The descendants of Joseph (through his sons Ephraim and Manasseh) settled in the north. The descendants of Judah settled in the south. And after Solomon's death, the kingdom split, ten northern tribes under Jeroboam (often called "Joseph" or "Ephraim" collectively, after the dominant northern tribe) and two southern tribes under Rehoboam, the kingdom called Judah. The split kingdom warred with itself for the next two centuries.

And the consequence of the long inter-tribal warfare was scattering. Listen to what Leviticus 26 had warned would happen if Israel did not keep covenant:

> But if you do not obey Me, and do not observe all these commandments . . . I will set My face against you, and you shall be defeated by your enemies. Those who hate you shall reign over you, and you shall flee when no one pursues you . . . I will send wild beasts among you, which shall rob you of your children, destroy your livestock, and make you few in number; and your highways shall be desolate. (Leviticus 26:14, 17, 22)

The four plagues of Leviticus 26 (sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts) are the four plagues that get replayed in Revelation 6 as the four horsemen of the apocalypse. And the sequence is causal. When war breaks out, people are too busy fighting to plant gardens, so harvests fail and famine sets in. When famine has persisted long enough, bodies become emaciated and immune systems collapse, so pestilence sweeps through populations weakened by hunger. And when populations have been reduced by sword, famine, and pestilence, the wild beasts move into the depopulated countryside. The four-fold sequence is not arbitrary divine punishment. It is the natural consequence of a society that has begun to war with itself rather than to keep covenant with its God.

And that is exactly the pattern that played out across the divided kingdom of Israel. The northern tribes, Joseph, were carried off into Assyrian captivity in roughly 722 BC. The southern tribes, Judah, were carried off into Babylonian captivity in waves between 597 and 586 BC. And the scattering was not a small thing. The descendants of Jacob ended up dispersed across the entire ancient Near East, from Persia in the east, across modern-day Iraq and Syria, into Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), and beyond.

To get a sense of the scale, imagine the contemporary news image we have all watched in recent times: hostages being taken from Israeli territory by Hamas during the October 2023 incursion, civilians being carried off into Gaza as captives. Now expand that image from a localized attack into a national-scale catastrophe. Imagine the entire population of an entire nation being taken captive and scattered, not into a single small holding area, but across thousands of miles of foreign territory, dispersed among multiple foreign powers, separated from their land and their temple and their covenant identity for generations. That is the scale of what

happened to Judah in the Babylonian captivity. And the question that haunts every prophet of the exile period is, how does that scattered population ever get gathered back together again?

## The Restoration Already Happened

And here is what I want to argue across the rest of this chapter, and as we continue working through Matthew over the coming weeks, I want you to hold this in mind. The restoration of Israel that the Old Testament prophets had announced has already happened. It happened in the body of Jesus Christ and through the assembly he gathered around himself. And you and I are part of that restoration.

A lot of contemporary Christians, with deep sincerity, are waiting for a future restoration of national Israel, for the temple to be rebuilt on the Temple Mount, for the political nation-state to be vindicated and exalted, for some sequence of end-times events that they believe is still ahead of us. I do not want to step on any toes. There are good and sincere Christians who read the prophetic texts that way. But I want to offer a different reading, which I believe is closer to what Matthew himself is trying to communicate.

When Jesus called twelve disciples around himself, this was the new Israel. Twelve apostles for twelve tribes. And when the 120 gathered in the upper room on the day of Pentecost, that was the new Israel gathered at a new Mount Sinai. And instead of the law being given on tablets of stone, as had happened with the original twelve tribes at the original Sinai, this new twelve-tribe community received the law written on their hearts, the very prophecy Jeremiah had announced:

> Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah . . . But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: 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)

That prophecy was fulfilled at Pentecost. Not deferred to a future eschaton. Fulfilled. The new covenant came into operation when the Spirit was poured out on the new twelve-tribe community gathered in the upper room. And from that moment forward, the restoration of Israel has been a present-tense reality, expanding outward across centuries as the new humanity is gathered from every nation.

**The Shepherds Who Scattered**

And Jeremiah's announcement of the new covenant in chapter 31 is set up by a stinging accusation against the existing religious leadership in Jeremiah 23:

> "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!" says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord God of Israel against the shepherds who feed My people: "You have scattered My flock, driven them away, and not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings," says the Lord. "But I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; and they shall be fruitful and increase. I will set up shepherds over them who will feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, nor shall they be lacking," says the Lord. "Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord, "that I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper, and execute judgment and righteousness in the earth." (Jeremiah 23:1–5)

Woe to the shepherds who scatter. Then, I will gather the remnant out of all the countries where they have been driven, and none of them shall be missing. Then, I will raise to David a Branch of righteousness; a King shall reign and prosper.

The Hebrew word translated “Branch” (tzemach) carries the sense of a sprout or a little shoot that comes up out of the base of a felled tree. The stump of David had been cut down. The Davidic monarchy had effectively ended with the Babylonian captivity. But the prophet was promising that a fresh shoot would arise from the stump: a descendant of David, rising up unexpectedly, who would reign as King and execute justice and righteousness in the land.

And the kind of justice this Branch-King would execute is not the get-what-you-deserve justice our contemporary culture defaults to. Sometimes we want that kind of justice for people who have wronged us. Lord, pour out Your bowls of wrath on them. Coals of fire on their heads, O God. We want it for them, but we do not want it for ourselves. We do not want anyone else praying those prayers over us. We want God’s grace and mercy for ourselves and his judgment for our enemies.

The justice God brings is different. It is a justice that recognizes that every one of us has been wronged, and every one of us has wronged. Judah and Joseph have wronged one another. They have dealt shrewdly with one another. They have taken counsel with enemies to undermine one another. And none of us is exempt from those same patterns. We all need a champion. We all need a Savior. We need somebody who could get through this world without the smell of sin on his garments. Somebody who would enter the fire with us and not get destroyed by it, somebody who would actually be the one to quench the fiery darts of the wicked. And we have him. The Lord is our righteousness; that is what Jeremiah says his name will be (Jeremiah 23:6).

## Pentecost Gathers the Scattered

And the proof that Jeremiah’s gathering-prophecy has begun to be fulfilled is in Acts 2. Listen carefully to what Luke records about who was present in Jerusalem at Pentecost:

> And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. 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 2:5–11)

Devout Jews from every nation under heaven. How did Jews end up dispersed across every nation under heaven? Because of the scattering Jeremiah had been warning about. The shepherds had scattered the flock. The flock had ended up in Parthia, Media, Elam, Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia Minor, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Cyrene, Rome, Crete, Arabia. And in the day of Pentecost, they were all gathered back to Jerusalem, and the new covenant was being inaugurated in the very moment of their gathering.

And if you take the list of nations in Acts 2:9–11 and run it back to Genesis 10 (the Table of Nations after the flood, listing the descendants of Noah’s three sons who spread across the post-flood world) you will find that the Acts 2 list deliberately echoes the Genesis 10 list. Everything that came out of the ark is essentially represented at Pentecost. Luke is signaling that what is happening on the day of Pentecost is the gathering-back-together of the entire post-flood human race, focused for one moment in Jerusalem and then dispersed back out, this time carrying the gospel rather than carrying the curse of Babel.

So Pentecost is doing two things simultaneously. It is fulfilling Jeremiah 23's promise to gather the scattered remnant of Israel. And it is reversing Genesis 11's scattering at Babel by gathering representatives of all the post-flood nations to hear one shared gospel in their own native languages. The gathering of Israel and the gathering of the nations are the same event, viewed from two angles.

**If This Is Israel, What Are We?**

And if all of this (the gathering of the twelve apostles, the upper-room gathering of the 120, the multinational Pentecost crowd) was the restoration of Israel, then what are we? Most of us in this room are not of Jewish descent. We are Gentiles. If the restoration already happened, where do we fit in?

And John gives us the answer at the very beginning of his Gospel:

"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 1:14).

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Greek verb translated "dwelt" (eskēnōsen) literally means "tabernacled" or "pitched his tent" among us. When the original twelve tribes came out of Egypt, they had a tabernacle that the twelve tribes surrounded as they wandered through the wilderness toward the promised land. The glory of God sat on top of that tabernacle: pillar of cloud by day, pillar of fire by night. Now in John 1:14, Jesus himself is the tabernacle in the earth. He is the place where God's presence dwells. He is the new center around which the new twelve-tribe community will gather.

And John makes the connection explicit a chapter later, in John 2, after Jesus performs the wine-from-water miracle at Cana of Galilee, which itself was a Messianic-fulfillment sign, because the prophets had announced that when the Messiah arrived, wine would flow as

plentifully as water (Amos 9:13; Joel 3:18). The Cana sign was Jesus signaling that he was, in fact, the promised one. And then in the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus says something that confuses his accusers:

> Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Then the Jews said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" But He was speaking of the temple of His body. (John 2:19–21)

He was speaking of the temple of his body. You are looking for the temple of God to be rebuilt? It was rebuilt in Jesus Christ. You are looking for the restoration of Israel? It was restored on the day of Pentecost when the twelve apostles and the 120 surrounded the new tabernacle, Christ raised to life and exalted to the Father's right hand, and the Spirit was poured out on them in fulfillment of Jeremiah 31. The temple-not-made-with-hands has already been built. The restoration has already happened. We are living inside the post-restoration world.

## The Two Sticks Become One

And Ezekiel had announced this in one of the most pictographic prophecies in the entire Old Testament. Ezekiel 37, which we are most familiar with for the valley-of-dry-bones vision in the first half of the chapter, concludes with a second symbolic prophecy that is just as significant:

> As for you, son of man, take a stick for yourself and write on it: 'For Judah and for the children of Israel, his companions.' Then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel, his companions.' Then join them one to another for yourself into one stick, and they will become one in your hand. (Ezekiel 37:16–17)

Two sticks. One for Judah. One for Joseph. Joined into a single stick in the prophet's hand. Ezekiel was prophesying that the two divided nations (the descendants of Judah and the

descendants of Joseph, broken apart by centuries of inter-tribal warfare and dispersed across the ancient Near East) would be reunified into a single staff in God's hand. God had been leaning on a broken stick in the earth. The descendants of Abraham had been a fractured instrument. Ezekiel was announcing that the fracture would be healed and the staff would be made whole.

And Paul, in Ephesians 2, takes Ezekiel's two-sticks image and expands it. Paul says that the reunification accomplished in Christ is not just between the two halves of Israel: Judah and Ephraim, the southern tribes and the northern tribes. The reunification is between all of Israel and all of the messed-up Gentile nations who had been historically outside the covenant household altogether:

> Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands, that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. (Ephesians 2:11–16)

Aliens from the commonwealth of Israel. Strangers from the covenants of promise. No hope. Without God in the world. That is Paul's diagnosis of the Gentile condition prior to Christ. And how many of us have felt that way at times? Strange. Separated. Alienated. Without hope.

Without God. Paul says; you were far off. But you have been brought near by the blood of Jesus Christ.

And what Christ has accomplished is the abolition of the middle wall of separation. The laws that separated Jews from Gentiles (primarily the dietary laws, the clothing distinctions, the festival regulations that marked Jewish identity as visibly distinct from surrounding nations) were abolished in Christ's body on the cross. Now, that does not mean the moral law was abolished. The Ten Commandments are still in operation. We are not now free to kill, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness. But the boundary-marking laws, the ones that separated people from each other along ethnic lines, were dissolved at the cross. And the dissolution served a purpose: to create, in Christ himself, one new man from the two. One new humanity. One temple. One household. One people.

## The One New Man

There is only one new man. The new man is Jesus Christ. And Jew or Gentile, when they find themselves in Jesus Christ, when they come and worship in that new temple Jesus raised up three days after Calvary; it does not matter that the physical temple in Jerusalem continued making sacrifices for forty more years after the resurrection. That physical temple had no efficacy after Jesus rose from the dead. The eternal temple had been established and exalted to the Father in the heavens. And as the people of God began to move into that eternal temple and worship there, new sacrifices were being made, sacrifices with a different kind of efficacy than the bulls and goats had ever carried.

The blood of bulls and goats had to be reapplied every year (Hebrews 10:1–4). The blood of Jesus, once and for all, gave us the power to become the people he has called us to be: a new humanity, not a touched-up version of the old humanity. And we are not looking for heroes

anymore. We have one hero. And he has called us to work with him in an amazing, unbelievable, subversive work in this world. To love people to death.

And let me say that more carefully. It is not love them to death. It is love them to your death. The cruciform pattern is not that we extract life from others by loving them aggressively. The cruciform pattern is that we lay down our own life for them, the way Christ laid down his life for us, and trust that the Father can multiply whatever life remains in the laying-down.

When you die for others (when you serve others in love, when you sacrifice for others) something life-giving happens to them. Watch the centurion at the foot of the cross. He had probably never had a serious conversation about the God of Israel in his life. He was a Roman occupier, stationed in a hostile province, doing the dirty work of imperial execution. And he watched Jesus die. And he said:

"So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, 'Truly this Man was the Son of God!'" (Mark 15:39).

Truly this Man was the Son of God. That is one of the first post-resurrection-grade confessions in any of the Gospel accounts, and it comes from a Gentile professional executioner who watched Jesus die. Alongside the thief on the cross who confessed Jesus as Lord before his own death (Luke 23:42), the centurion is among the very first witnesses to confess the crucified Jesus. The cruciform love had its effect on the people closest to the moment of self-giving.

And how many times have I behaved in a way that crucified the Lord again? Again and again across my life. But every time, what he says to me is the same word: come back. Recover yourself. One word away.

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

And once cleansed from all unrighteousness, we become something holy. Listen to how Paul concludes Ephesians 2:

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

A holy temple in the Lord. A dwelling place of God in the Spirit. We are not only the temple; we are the living stones being fitted together to constitute the temple. And the temple, as Revelation 21–22 will eventually announce, fills the entire earth. There is no temple in the New Jerusalem because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are themselves the temple (Revelation 21:22), and the dwelling-place stretches to encompass every dimension of the renewed creation.

## A Chosen Race, a Royal Priesthood

And Peter takes the same image and develops it further. *Listen to 1 Peter 1–2*:

> Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied. (1 Peter 1:1–2)

To the pilgrims of the Dispersion. Peter is writing to scattered believers across what is essentially the entirety of Asia Minor: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia. Almost the whole of modern-day Turkey. And he calls them elect exiles. The Greek word for “Dispersion” (diaspora) is the same word used in the Septuagint for the scattering of Israel. Peter is

deliberately echoing the language of the Old Testament Jewish dispersion and applying it to the multinational church of Jesus Christ scattered across the ancient world. The diaspora has been redefined. The scattered people of God are no longer principally the descendants of Abraham scattered across the Babylonian and Persian and Hellenistic empires. The scattered people of God are now the multinational community of believers being knit together across the Roman Empire and beyond.

> Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, 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 . . . 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. (1 Peter 2:4–5, 9)

A chosen generation. A royal priesthood. A holy nation. His own special people. Peter is taking language that, in Exodus 19:5–6, had been applied exclusively to Israel as a national entity, “you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people . . . you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” and Peter is now applying that same language to the multinational community of Jesus-followers scattered across the Roman world. The new humanity in Christ is the chosen generation, the royal priesthood, the holy nation: composed of every tribe, every language, every cultural background, knit together by the cross into a single people for God’s own possession.

We are a new race. That is the most jarring way Peter puts it. We have lost the old categorizations. There is neither male nor female, Paul says in Galatians 3:28, and that does not mean that sex disappears, but that sex-distinctions lose their primary importance within the

kingdom. Neither Jew nor Greek, and that does not mean that cultural heritage disappears, but that ethnic distinctions lose their primary importance. Neither slave nor free, and that does not mean that economic and social conditions disappear, but that economic-and-social hierarchies lose their primary importance. All of the previously-organizing categories lose their primary importance within the kingdom of God. A new race emerges that does not fit any of the inherited categories.

## A Different Kind of Priest

And the priesthood of this new race is genuinely different from the priesthoods of every other religion humans have invented. The priests of ancient Near Eastern religion, and frankly the priests of most religions throughout human history, have functioned as power-controlling, demigod-like figures who extracted from the people whatever the people had. Sacrifices, donations, obedience, time, sometimes children, sometimes life itself. The priesthood was a control mechanism, and the surrounding population was the controlled population. No wonder atheism has historically had an indictment against religion. For ten or twelve thousand years across most cultures, religion has functioned exactly as the indictment alleges, as a control mechanism for elites to extract from non-elites.

But when you find yourself in the kingdom of God, we do not need to beg, borrow, or steal from people. We do not need to demand. We do not need to make you feel bad in order to extract what we want from you. The priests of this kingdom are simply offering up prayers. Offering up love. Offering up life. That is the priesthood the New Testament describes.

You are not going to get rich doing this kind of priestly work. You are not going to get rich loving your neighbor. You might get your teeth kicked in. But I will tell you what, your priestly self-giving may lead to the salvation of your neighbor. When we live the life of justice

and righteousness that our King lived, when we bear our cross and go into this world the way Jesus told us to, “take up your cross and follow Me,” when we do that kind of thing, we are being part of redemptive history. The lives we come into contact with are actually being helped toward salvation by our cruciform self-giving. You do not know the lives you will affect for eternity just by living that life of grace toward others.

You will be surprised, on the other side of this present age, at the people who will say that one word you spoke to them, one ordinary act of kindness you did not think was significant, had a redemptive trajectory in their life that led them, eventually, into the kingdom of God. Do not underestimate the power of what you can do in this world just by living a life of grace toward others. Cruciform fidelity sustained across decades produces effects far larger than the individual moments add up to.

**Out of Darkness Into His Marvelous Light**

And let me close with what Peter calls the purpose of the priesthood. 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.

This pitiful world of darkness. This grip of darkness operating across our cultural moment. The despondency I named at the beginning of this chapter: the fatalism, the loss of agency, the worship-reflex landing on objects that cannot bear the weight of being worshiped. God is calling us out of all of it. And all we have to do is begin to move in a long, steady direction toward him. Over time, maybe over the course of an entire lifetime, we begin to shed the attributes of the kingdom of darkness, and we begin to put on the attributes of the kingdom of light. And before long, you realize that a transformation has taken place in your life. You are a

different person. A different kind of being in this world. Because you chose to leave the domain of darkness and begin to walk into the kingdom of his dear Son.

Let us take that step. Let us take action in that direction. And let us continue to walk in it, step by step, until the new humanity has been substantially formed in us and the cruciform love of Christ has become the natural reflex of our reorganized interior. And then, when we have been gathered together with brothers and sisters from every tribe, language, and nation, we will look around and find ourselves where Jeremiah and Ezekiel and the prophets had been pointing all along: inside the gathered remnant, inside the reunified staff, inside the new humanity, inside the temple-not-made-with-hands, inside the kingdom that has already arrived and is still arriving in us, day by day, for as long as we keep walking. Amen.