The Eighth Day

Jubilee, Abundance, and the Light That Has No Evening

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A City Without Evening

If you have lived even five minutes in this life, you know that suffering is part of the human condition. But God has a plan, and his plan, as he states at the end of the book, is this:

"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

The atmosphere in which he is going to wipe those tears is a city: the New Jerusalem, the bride of Jesus Christ, come down from God out of heaven. God and the Lamb dwell in its midst, and there is no need for the sun, because the light of God's presence and the Lamb is what gives the city light. The city is so abundant that there are trees on both sides of the river of the water of life that proceeds from the throne of God and of the Lamb, and the leaves of those trees are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1–2). Those trees bear fruit year-round. There is no winter.

This is not just the world that *will* be. It was the world as it was *intended*. Look at the rhythm of Genesis 1. "And the evening and the morning were the first day." "The evening and the morning were the second day." And so on. There is darkness and there is light on every day of creation, until you reach the seventh. On the seventh day, in the opening verses of Genesis 2,

God rests from all his works. And it never says anything about evening. The seventh day is meant to be a day of perpetual light, of perpetual harvest, of God walking with his creation in the cool of an unending afternoon. The prophets keep reaching for it. Amos reaches for it. Moses anticipates it in the promise to Abraham of a land flowing with milk and honey, a land of bounty without end.

Cursed Is the Ground

That was meant to be unbroken: endless presence, endless bounty, endless walking together. But it was ruined. The land was cursed because of what we did:

> Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life." (Genesis 3:17)

Note the first thing: if you think your sin is private and affects no one but you, that goes against the grain of the text. "Cursed is the ground for your sake." The sin of humanity has repercussions far beyond what we can know. Human suffering is downstream of that sin, and it has been the history of mankind ever since. But that was not what was intended.

After Adam, after Cain and Abel, after Seth, after Noah, we just couldn't get it right. Noah came out of the flood, drank the fruit of the vine, and ended up naked, exposed as the kind of man who still needed to be covered by God. The problem of Adam was now the problem of Noah. Somehow the serpent had made it through the flood. So the flood didn't fix it.

Then come the seventy nations of Genesis 10, and they unite at Babel, and Genesis is making a point we need to feel. The only thing worse than a divided humanity is a humanity *unified in opposition to God*. So God confounds the language at Babel and scatters the nations across the earth.

And then he picks out one man and his wife, and he says: I will bless you, and in your seed all the nations of the world will be blessed. According to Paul in Galatians 3, that seed is Jesus Christ. The promise was no longer ultimately about land, though land mattered then. The land pointed to something greater, the inheritance of the Spirit who would make us all sons and daughters of God. That is Paul's great mystery: the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile at the cross is the mystery hidden from the foundations of the world (Ephesians 2).

Sabbaths and Jubilees

But the history of humanity is not a straight line. So Moses comes, and he gives all those laws at Sinai, and one of them is one of the most powerful, earth-shattering, mind-bending: particularly for those of us who love to roll up our sleeves, work hard, save up, and share only enough to feel good about ourselves while keeping the rest for our retirement. (My current goal, if I'm honest. "How long, O Lord, holy and true?")

In Leviticus 25, two words become decisive: *return* and *restore*. They become words of hope for Israel.

Here is how the law worked. When a Jew received an allotment of land in the promised land, that land where the curse was being lifted, every seventh year they were to let the ground lie fallow. They were not to harvest. They would trust God that the sixth year would yield enough to last them through the gleanings of the eighth. Imagine trusting God like that. Try it in America and see what kind of looks you get from your hardworking Western brothers and sisters. But how would you like to *work* six years and rest the seventh, watching the goodness of God carry you all the way through the eighth? That is what was being asked.

And there is more. Every seventh seventh year, the forty-ninth year going into the fiftieth, was a year of Jubilee. Here is what made the Jubilee year remarkable: if you had become

entangled in debt and had to give up your land in indebtedness, that land was *restored* to you in the fiftieth year. Returned. You could go back to the land of your fathers. No family would be perpetually in poverty. No one would go more than fifty years without the possibility of return. The land was not theirs anyway. They didn't own it. They held it in trust. God owned the land. They held everything in trust.

So the people could live with an open hand. They would trust God for the seventh year. Their animals rested too. Their servants rested too. Everyone around them rested. The whole community took its Sabbath together. That seventh day, that seventh year, that fiftieth year; those were days of light. Days of return. Days of gifts. Days of celebration.

The Four Beasts

Leviticus 26 follows directly. The first fourteen verses describe what happens if Israel keeps these commandments, and they read like a complete restoration of Eden. But from verse 14 to the end of the chapter, Moses describes the alternative. If you don't keep these commandments, four evils will come upon you: wild beasts, the sword, pestilence, and famine. The land will not give its yield. Everything we fear comes back.

Beasts. War. War means men are not cultivating the land, so famine follows. Famine creates problems in the body, so pestilence follows. These four plagues echo throughout Scripture, and the four horsemen of Revelation are reaching back to Leviticus 26.

But the point of the law was the *positive* version. These men and women were supposed to live with an open hand and an open heart toward those suffering in their community. If they did, they would exemplify the character of the God they served, a God of bounty on the seventh day, a God of rest, a God who restores those who are wringing their hands in suffering.

“Is This the Fast I Have Chosen?”

Centuries later, Isaiah looks at how Israel actually inhabited those laws and lets them have it:

> Yet they seek Me daily, and delight to know My ways, as a nation that did righteousness . . . ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?’ In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exploit all your laborers. Indeed you fast for strife and debate, and to strike with the fist of wickedness . . . Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and not hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isaiah 58:2–3, 6–7)

You pray. You fast. You wring your hands and look sorrowful as if you really cared what I think. That isn’t what you’re doing. The acceptable day of the Lord is *this*: that the bonds of wickedness be loosed, that the poor among you have bread, that you engage in relieving people of their suffering. Then your day will dawn:

> Then your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard . . . And those from among you shall build the old waste places; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; and you shall be called the Repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of Streets to Dwell In. (Isaiah 58:8, 12)

“Repairer of the Breach. Restorer of Streets.” The city and the social order get restored, through them. By doing what? By prayer? By fasting? By the rituals of religiosity they thought

were earning credit? No. Through *binding up the suffering of those most among them*. The fast God chooses is not less of self for the sake of self. It is less of self for the sake of others.

Snap. How did we get it so wrong? How is it that our rituals end up being about everything except meeting the needs of the suffering? Now, I am not saying it is universally that way. I am saying it *can be* that way, and it gets that way easily.

"Today This Scripture Is Fulfilled"

Isaiah does it again three chapters later. Same phrase. One word changed. "The acceptable *day* of the Lord" becomes "the acceptable *year* of the Lord":

> The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Isaiah 61:1–2)

"The acceptable year of the Lord" is the Jubilee year. The year of return. The year of restoration. And when Jesus comes out of the wilderness after his temptation, he walks into the synagogue, takes the scroll as his custom was, and reads exactly this verse. He shuts the scroll, hands it back, sits down, and the whole congregation is fixed on him.

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

Today. The Jubilee has come. People will be set free from poverty, from suffering, from disease, from all the things that had stuck to Israel when they should have been the blessing instead. The whole sick weight of human suffering had landed on them too. But here, in this body, in this voice, the Jubilee has arrived.

The Cross as Jubilee

So when we look at the cross, we cannot look at it merely as the place where my sins were forgiven and that's that. *So what?* That "so what" is what Isaiah was furious about in chapter 58. Forgiveness opens us into the *fast that God has chosen*: to recognize the suffering, and to engage in a suffering act ourselves as we give and pour ourselves out for others.

You know how hard it is to give up what you have gained: your harvest, your time, your money? To share it with someone else? It is hard. Mercy and restorative justice toward someone who hasn't earned them, faithfulness shown when faithfulness is not deserved; that is powerful. *That* is when the light shines. Jesus says it directly:

> You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden . . . Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13–14, 16)

Saltless rituals are sand. They are good for nothing if they are not coupled with works of mercy. The light shines when mercy moves. And that "city set on a hill" picks up Isaiah 2's vision of the nations streaming up to the house of the God of Jacob:

> "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." . . . They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. (Isaiah 2:3–4)

The weapons of war become harvesting tools. The war machine becomes the harvest machine. The kingdom of God is about restoring life, and the prophets had been anticipating it all along. No wonder we should exult with thanksgiving at what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Scarcity Is the Wisdom of This World

Psalm 112 has a striking line about the person who fears the Lord:

> He has dispersed abroad, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever; his horn will be exalted with honor . . . He will not be afraid of evil tidings; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord. (Psalm 112:9, 7)

"He will not be afraid of evil tidings." What is the first thing we do? We hear the news, and our hands clench. The market shudders, and we draw back. Some piece of bad economic news flashes across the screen, and a scarcity mindset takes hold. "I had better look out for myself. I'd better stuff my pockets and shut my hand." Meanwhile other people's pensions are exposed, but the scarcity mindset doesn't care. Scarcity is the wisdom of *this* world.

The wisdom of *God* says: let the ground lie fallow every seventh year. Give back the land after fifty years, so there is no poor among you. The wisdom of God says, with Solomon:

"Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days" (Ecclesiastes 11:1).

I don't know about you, I don't want to cast bread on the waters. I don't like soggy bread. But somehow when you think you're throwing good money after bad, somehow it comes home on every wave. I don't know everything Solomon meant by all that. He was wiser than I am. But I am going to take him at his word. We do not look to the wind and ask whether *now* is the right time to throw the seed. We just cast the seed, and we trust that God will bring back the bounty.

Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians: the wisdom of this world calls the cross of Jesus Christ foolishness, a stumbling block (1 Corinthians 1:23). But the cross says: *sacrifice yourself for the other. Give your life for others.* There is something in giving our life for another person that does work in us we cannot do for ourselves.

Out of the Safe Space

Here is what I know about myself. When I am under pressure, I want to retreat into my safe space. I bet I'm not the only one. But when I stay in the safe space too long, something starts to happen. Shadows form. Darkness creeps into the corners of my mind. "I need this to protect myself." So I draw back further. I guard. And in that very space of self-guarding, the shadows multiply.

But in the moments when I am tempted to draw back and instead step out into a vulnerable situation, something gets unlocked. There is more in the treasure house of God than I had anticipated. Something feeds me that I did not know was there.

That is exactly what happened with Jesus at the well in John 4. He is hungry. He sends his disciples into the city to buy bread. While they are gone, he meets a woman at the well, and they have a conversation about the great move of God that is about to happen. When the disciples come back with the bread, he tells them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know" (John 4:32). When we get out of ourselves, we step into the abundance of Jubilee, and we see what God will do.

There is no reason for anyone to feel debilitating loneliness. There is no reason for anyone to live in financial despair. There is no reason for anyone to hold a fear or a doubt that cannot be met by a community of believers in whom the character of God is manifesting. The light that is God begins to be light in us, and is shared with everyone else.

Be Almost Foolish

So believe one thing: that there is abundance in God. And then time, money, anything else this world considers a resource to be guarded tenaciously, be gratuitous with it. Be almost foolish in your giving.

Just a few verses below “let your light shine before men,” in the same chapter of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus walks straight into radical reconciliation, radical giving, radical forgiveness. “You have heard it said, do not murder . . .,” and he raises the bar to the heart. “You have heard it said, an eye for an eye . . .,” and he raises the bar to turning the other cheek and going the second mile. He keeps raising the bar because the kingdom is gratuitous. God is asking us to be gratuitous in our gifts to one another.

That is the eighth day breaking into the seventh. That is the Jubilee that has already begun. That is the city set on a hill, the river flowing from the throne, the leaves for the healing of the nations. And it begins, every time, in the open hand of someone who has decided to trust the abundance of God.