A Kingdom That Cannot Be Shaken

On Gratitude, the Throne With Wheels, and the Saints Who Receive the Dominion

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Receiving a Kingdom

A brother in our assembly read aloud earlier from Hebrews 12, and the verses he quoted set the table for everything I want to walk through this morning. Listen to the passage in the Legacy Standard Bible rendering:

"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe" (Hebrews 12:28, LSB).

Notice the verb. *We are receiving.* Continuous. Present tense. The day we became faithful Christians we did not receive *all* the things; *we began* to receive a kingdom that we are still receiving. There is a journey we are on. We come into the kingdom by faith, but we *receive* the kingdom day by day across a lifetime of trust.

One of the brothers testified earlier this morning about that very journey, how gratitude to God had become the power he needed to overcome the things that were trying to keep him in bondage. *That is what receiving the kingdom looks like in real life.* Not a single dramatic transfer from darkness to light, but a sustained discovery that gratitude itself is the doorway through which the kingdom enters us, day after day.

And the response, according to Hebrews 12:28, is *gratitude as acceptable service offered with reverence and awe*. Hold those two words: *reverence* and *awe*. We do not talk about reverence and awe much anymore. We hardly *feel* awe anymore. Movie graphics have so overstimulated our visual centers that the natural mechanisms by which awe used to come to us have been worn dull. *But there is a different kind of awe*, the kind Isaiah felt, that does not depend on visual stimulation. It depends on seeing what cannot otherwise be seen.

Isaiah's Hair-Pulling Year

Look at Isaiah's experience in chapter 6. The year King Uzziah died was one of those *hair-pulling* years for Israel. Uzziah had been a righteous king. Under him things had held together. And then he died, and Isaiah is sitting there wondering *what now?* Some of us know exactly what that feels like. The anchor person in our life passes; the political moment shifts; the bottom drops out of some sustaining arrangement. *What now?*

And in that moment, the heavens open:

> In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" (Isaiah 6:1–3)

The *train of His robe filled the temple.* Think about how trains have been depicted throughout history. In imperial coronations and royal weddings the *length of the train* signaled the *weight of the glory*. A queen or princess with the longest train had the most resources to spend on the procession. The princes and princesses of England still walk down aisles with trains long enough to require attendants. *Now picture* the train of *the throne of God*. Not extending

behind him along an aisle. Not draping across the steps of a building. *Filling the temple.* The garment of his glory pouring across every surface of the holy place. Isaiah sees what no human eye is supposed to see.

And what is the first response of the seer? Awe, yes, but awe paired immediately with a sense of his own inadequacy:

> So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." (Isaiah 6:5)

Unclean. That is what overwhelming holiness reveals in us. Not by accusation, but by contrast. The cleaner the standard, the more visible the spots. Isaiah does not need the angels to *point out* his uncleanness. The mere sight of the King reveals it.

And then notice the remedy. Isaiah does not have an arm long enough to reach the altar himself. He cannot purify himself. *The arm has to come from the altar to him*:

> Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged." (Isaiah 6:6–7)

The coal comes from the *altar*, from the place of sacrifice. The cleansing of the prophet's lips is enacted by a fire that has already been kindled by an atoning sacrifice. And the moment the coal touches him, *he has words to speak that he did not have before*. *Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?*, and Isaiah, who had been undone moments before, can now answer: *Here am I; send me* (Isaiah 6:8).

That is the pattern of what happens to a person when the heavens open. The same Isaiah who was pulling his hair out at the political collapse of his country sees the train of God filling

the temple, gets touched by a coal from the altar, and walks out of the chapter with words and a vocation he did not have before. *Nothing in the political situation has changed.* Wicked kings are still about to arise. Enemies are still about to attack from every side. *But something has changed in Isaiah*, and that change carries him through forty years of difficult prophetic ministry.

The Image of God and the Other Origin Story

And here is where I want to step sideways for a moment, because what we are talking about (the human being's status before God, our cleansing, our dignity) is exactly the territory where two ancient origin stories diverge sharply.

The ancient Near Eastern creation stories (the *Enuma Elish*, the Atrahasis epic, the Babylonian myths) described the origin of human beings this way: the gods were hungry and tired of doing their own work. They complained. The chief gods killed the most troublesome of the lesser gods, mixed his blood with clay, and shaped human beings out of the mixture. *Humans were made to be slaves to the gods.* Created from the blood of a murdered god, formed to do the work the gods refused to do themselves. *That* is the anthropology of the ancient Near Eastern world.

Now hear how Scripture frames the same question:

> Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion . . ." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:26–27)

"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

The word *breath* in Genesis 2:7 is the Hebrew *ruach*, the same word translated *spirit* throughout the Old Testament. In Greek it becomes *pneuma*, the same word used for *the Holy*

Spirit. So when Genesis 2:7 says *God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life*, the text is saying something theologically dense: *God breathed his own Spirit into the man*.

Hold the contrast. In the Mesopotamian story, human beings are made of the blood of a murdered god to serve as slaves. In the Hebrew story, human beings are made of the dust of the earth and breathed full of God's Spirit to serve as vice-regents of God's dominion. The anthropology is opposite. Slave versus image-bearer. Forced labor versus delegated dominion. Conscripted by violence versus commissioned by breath.

This matters because the *ancient* anthropology has never really gone away. The domain of darkness in our day still wants to recruit human beings as slaves. It dresses up the recruitment in modern clothes (productivity, performance, anxiety, perfectionism, the endless accumulation of credentials and possessions) but the underlying logic is the same. *You exist to produce. You exist to satisfy the appetite of something larger than yourself. You exist to be consumed.* That is the dominion of darkness still operating in our age.

And the kingdom of light is not just another version of the same logic. The kingdom of light fundamentally inverts the relationship. You exist because you are loved. You exist as a bearer of God's image. You exist to receive and to give the same breath that animated you in the beginning. That is why Paul says:

"He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love" (Colossians 1:13).

Delivered is the language of liberation from slavery. *Conveyed* is the language of translation from one dominion to another. We have not switched masters; we have *changed kingdoms*. And in this kingdom, our status is not *slave*. It is *son*.

Pharaoh on the Far Shore

But here is the thing that takes us by surprise. Even after we have crossed out of slavery, the voice of the old dominion does not stop calling us back.

Look at Paul's language in Romans 6:

> What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:1–4)

Paul is using the Red Sea image. Down into the waters of baptism, like Israel down into the Red Sea. Up on the other side, like Israel up on the other shore. But notice what happens on the far shore. Pharaoh's army is dead in the sea. The chains of slavery have been broken. And yet: Pharaoh himself, the spiritual logic of the old dominion, is still standing on the far shore yelling across the water: Come back. Get back to work. Get back in your chains.

Every time you feel that pull on your soul to return to the old loops, the old compulsions, the old ways of being; *that is Pharaoh on the far shore*. The army is drowned. *The voice is still calling.* And the temptation to obey the voice can be intense. We do it all the time. We say it ourselves: *put the shackles back on my feet so I can't dance*. *Just part of human nature*, we tell ourselves. But God has delivered us from that nature. And the way we resist Pharaoh's voice from the far shore is *not* by force of will but by *receiving*, day by day, the kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Maybe It's Me

And here is something the prophets had to teach Israel slowly across the centuries. *Israel had spent centuries thinking the enemy was always the foreign nation.* The Egyptians, then the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Medes, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans. *Always the outsider*. The bad guy was always *over there*. But the prophets began to introduce (gradually, gently, painfully) a different note. *Maybe the enemy is not only outside us.* Maybe the redemption that is most needed is not deliverance from the foreign army but deliverance from the corruption inside the elect nation itself.

Micah catches this perfectly when he says:

"Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? . . . He will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:18–19).

Look at what Micah is doing. He is reusing the Exodus deliverance image, the sea, but the thing that gets cast into the sea is no longer the *Egyptian army*. *It is our own sins.* The next great deliverance is going to be *interior*. The next sea-drowning is not the enemy out there; it is the *iniquity* God is going to remove from his own people.

That is one of the most important moves in the entire Old Testament. *The enemy is also inside.* And the spiritual maturity of the people of God is measured partly by their willingness to *stop blaming the foreign nation* and *start praying*, as the old spiritual put it, *not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer*. The redemption we most need is the redemption from the dragon's logic that has gotten inside us, not just the redemption from the empire that surrounds us.

The Dragon and the Beast

And what is *the dragon*? Revelation 13 tells us:

"So they worshiped the dragon who gave authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?'" (Revelation 13:4).

The beast we *see* (political power, cultural pressure, economic compulsion, social conformity) *is animated by the dragon*. The dragon is the older, deeper power. The beast is what the dragon wears in any given century.

And this is where the ancient Near Eastern background helps us read Scripture better. The *Enuma Elish* describes how the chief Babylonian god *Marduk* killed *Tiamat,* the sea-monster goddess of chaos, and split her body in half to make the heavens and the earth. *That was the Mesopotamian creation story.* The cosmos was carved out of the corpse of a slain monster.

But that is not how Scripture says creation came to be. In Genesis 1, *the Spirit of God hovers over the waters and speaks order into existence*. No corpse. No monster's body. No sword. Creation comes by *word*.

And here is the punchline. The dragon-monster of Revelation does not get slain with sword and spear either. The dragon gets slain by sacrificial love. The dragon gets slain by the cross of Jesus Christ. When Jesus from the cross says, Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do (Luke 23:34), that is the death blow to the dragon. That is the moment when the older monster's logic is broken. Forgiveness, not retaliation, is the spear that opens the dragon's side.

And once the dragon takes that death blow, all the dragon's cultural, economic, social, religious tentacles begin (slowly, methodically) to be extracted from the body of humanity. *The dragon is dead; the tentacles are still being pulled.* That is the time we are living in. And the

more we give our minds over, day by day, line upon line, precept upon precept, to the breath of God, the more powerful a resistance forms in us against the dark forces of this world. *I will be a slave no longer.* That is the cry the kingdom puts in the throat of the freed son.

Daniel 7: The Throne With Wheels

Now let me take you to Daniel 7, because this is the chapter the New Testament writers reach back to more often than almost any other. It is alluded to dozens of times across the Gospels and Revelation. And the chapter follows immediately on the heels of Daniel 6, the chapter every Sunday school child knows by heart.

In Daniel 6, Daniel is praying three times a day with his window open toward Jerusalem: despite living in Babylonian captivity, despite the temple of Jerusalem being a pile of rubble, despite a king's decree that no one shall pray to any god but the king himself. Daniel keeps the window open and keeps praying anyway. That is *faith under occupation*. He is praying toward a city that has been destroyed, trusting the promises of a God whose temple has been burned to the ground. And his enemies use the decree to get him thrown into the lion's den.

And the lions, in the famous story, do not touch him. *The king who reluctantly threw him in cannot sleep all night.* In the morning, he hurries to the den, and Daniel is alive. The faithfulness of the praying captive in the den of beasts becomes the *paradigm* for the whole rest of the book. *Daniel 6 is the personal story; Daniel 7 is the cosmic version of the same story.*

Look at how Daniel 7 opens. Daniel has a vision of *four terrible beasts* rising out of the sea: winged lions, leopards with multiple heads, beasts with iron teeth, beasts with horns that speak boastful things. These beasts are the imperial powers that will rule Daniel's people across the next centuries. *Beasts always devour righteous people.* The Levitical curse of Leviticus 26

had said: *if you do not keep covenant, I will send beasts into the land that will devour you*. The beasts of Daniel 7 are the institutional crystallization of exactly that warning.

And just when the vision is at its most terrifying, the camera pans up:

> I watched till thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame, its wheels a burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth from before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, and the books were opened. (Daniel 7:9–10)

Stop on a detail. *His throne had wheels.* Ezekiel's vision of God's chariot-throne (Ezekiel 1) also had wheels. Why would a throne have wheels? *Because this God is not idle.* The wheels are a signal of *speed and direction*. God is rapidly moving toward setting up his kingdom. He is not sitting in a stationary seat while the beasts of the earth churn through history. *He is on the move.*

And then comes the figure who walks into the throne room from outside:

> I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13–14)

One like the Son of Man. That is the title Jesus uses for himself more often than any other in the Gospels. He is reading himself into *this specific verse*. The Son of Man comes to the Ancient of Days and *receives* the kingdom. *All peoples, nations, and languages* serve him. Not

just Jews. *All peoples.* The dominion is *everlasting*: unlike the beasts, whose dominions are taken away in their seasons.

The Kingdom Given to the Saints

And then comes the move that is easy to miss in Daniel 7:

"But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, even forever and ever" (Daniel 7:18).

Watch the chain of transmission. The Ancient of Days gives the kingdom to the Son of Man. The Son of Man gives the kingdom to the saints of the Most High. The saints receive the kingdom and possess it forever. Three steps. God → Son → saints. And the saints, having received the kingdom, possess it forever, even forever and ever.

And the beast continues to wage war against the saints: Daniel 7:21 says so explicitly: *the same horn was making war against the saints, and prevailing against them, until the Ancient of Days came*. The receipt of the kingdom by the saints does not mean the war stops. It means the war is taking place *inside* a kingdom that has already been definitively given. We are not waiting to *win*; we are walking out the war in the assurance that the *court has already ruled* (Daniel 7:22):

". . . until the Ancient of Days came, and a judgment was made in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came for the saints to possess the kingdom" (Daniel 7:22).

The court has ruled in favor of the saints. The verdict is in. The execution of the verdict is what the rest of history is about. And the war continues to be *real* and to *wear us down*: verse 25 says the horn shall *speak words against the Most High and persecute the saints of the Most High, and shall intend to change times and law*. The beasts will speak. The beasts will wear us down. *Do not give up.* Do not accommodate. The fighting we do is not flesh-and-blood fighting;

the weapons of our warfare are spiritual, manifested on our knees. *Wear-down is part of the war. Verdict-in-favor is the kingdom's already-settled outcome.*

And the final word of Daniel 7 is:

> Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him. (Daniel 7:27)

The greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. All of it. Not a small remnant rescued at the last moment. The greatness of the kingdoms. The whole inheritance. Given to the saints. Receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, exactly as Hebrews 12:28 says. Daniel saw it. Hebrews names it. We are receiving it now.

Take up Your Cross

And now bring it all the way home to Matthew 16, because Jesus is reading Daniel 7 directly when he turns to his disciples after Peter's confession:

> Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom." (Matthew 16:24–28)

Notice how the passage opens with take up your cross and closes with the Son of Man coming in His kingdom. The two are bound together. The cross is the means by which the Son of Man receives the kingdom Daniel 7 promised. The cross is not an interruption of the kingdom's arrival; the cross is the mechanism of it.

And what Jesus says here is genuinely a paradox. *Whoever wants to save his life will lose it. Whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.* The natural human response is *fight, flight, freeze, fawn*, preserve the life at all costs. Jesus is saying: *those preservation instincts will cost you the life you are trying to save*. If you fear something and want to run from it, *do the thing anyway*, because the fear is what saves the life that needs to be lost. *Fawning* before someone you fear preserves your life. *Fighting* someone you fear preserves your life. *Fleeing* preserves your life. *The kingdom asks for none of those responses.* The kingdom asks for the cross.

And when later Jesus is on trial before Pilate, you can see exactly what *take up your cross and follow Me* looks like. He stands before the council with *total authority* and says almost nothing. He answers no question put to him merely to defend himself. When Pilate says *don't you know I have the authority to release you or to crucify you?*, Jesus answers: *you would have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above* (John 19:11). *Every authority that looks impressive in this world is derived authority*, granted by the One who is seated on the throne with wheels. The kingdom Jesus is *receiving* in that very moment, by being silent before his accusers, is the kingdom Daniel saw being given to the Son of Man.

And then comes the line that lands the entire chapter:

"Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (Matthew 16:28).

Some of you standing here will not die before you see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom. That promise was fulfilled, in part at the Transfiguration just a few verses later (Matthew 17), in part at the resurrection, and most decisively at Pentecost when the Spirit was poured out on the upper room. *The Son of Man came in his kingdom.* The disciples saw it. They received it. They began to walk in it.

All Authority

And then look at the closing words of Matthew's Gospel. After the resurrection, Jesus appears to the eleven on the mountain in Galilee, and says:

> All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . . (Matthew 28:18–19)

All authority. That is Daniel 7:14 ringing in Jesus' own words after the resurrection. *To Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him.* Jesus is announcing that the Daniel 7 vision is *now fulfilled in him*. The Son of Man has received the kingdom from the Ancient of Days. The court has ruled. And the next move belongs to *the saints*. *Go. Disciple the nations.* The kingdom that was given to the Son of Man is now being given to the saints who follow him, and the saints' commission is to extend the dominion of the kingdom of light into every nation.

And every demonic and beastly power has been *named* in this transfer. The disciples in Luke 10 came back marveling that *even the demons are subject to us in Your name* (Luke 10:17). That marvel is now ours. *We have been given authority over the kingdom of darkness*, over the idolatry that has blinded us, over the addictions that have made us lame, over the systemic patterns of human enslavement that the dragon dresses up in each new century. *The beast still*

wages war against the saints (Daniel 7:21 / Revelation 13:7). *And the saints still receive the kingdom* (Daniel 7:18). Both are true at once.

Belief and Action

The problem with the church in the West has been that we have turned the kingdom into *belief alone*. Some sort of mental assent that *God is and that he sent his Son, maybe, I don't know,* and then no follow-through. *Empowered action* is what the kingdom asks for. One translator titled the book of Acts *The Young Church in Action*. That is the right title. The Spirit came in the upper room. The disciples spoke. The lame walked. The blind saw. Three thousand were saved. *Action followed receiving.*

And what so often blocks the action is *fear*, the same preservation instinct that Jesus warned about in Matthew 16. *Whoever wants to save his life will lose it.* If we cannot lay down our preservation instinct, we cannot receive the kingdom whose chief verb is *give*. Fear and the kingdom do not occupy the same heart at the same time. *Perfect love casts out fear* (1 John 4:18), and what perfect love casts out is exactly the preservation instinct that has been preventing us from acting on what we have received.

One at a Time

And here is how the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord. Not by ecclesial seizure of political power. Not by Christian dominance of cultural institutions. *One at a time.* Revelation 11:15 promises that *the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ*. The means by which that becoming happens is the same means Jesus modeled and the saints carry forward: *gratitude that opens the heart, the breath of God that animates the body, action that follows the receiving*. One person at a time.

One brother delivered from bondage. One sister who has discovered that *I exalt You* is not a word she fully understands but is a posture she fully feels. One older preacher you have known for decades who has stood faithfully at the throne for a lifetime. One unlikely face in the back row whose conversion will surprise you when you see who they become. *That is how the kingdom comes.* Not by program. Not by political vote. Not by ecclesial machinery. *Heart by heart, breath by breath, witness by witness, until the saints of the Most High possess the kingdom forever.*

And here is what I want to leave you with. Someday, in the kingdom that is being received, we will look around and see who is there, and we will be staggered. That one. And that one. And that one I was certain would never be saved. We will say to one another: Oh, look at him now. Look at her now. I left the scene too soon; I should have stayed to see what God did with that life. And the Father will say: Yes. Look. This is what I was doing the whole time.

That is for them. And it is also for you and me. Every one of us, get up tomorrow morning. If you fail today, get up tomorrow. Get up with the power and authority of the kingdom. With the words of Jesus ringing in your heart. All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go. That is the commission. That is the kingdom we are receiving. That is what gratitude with reverence and awe looks like, walked out into Monday morning.

Praise God. We serve an amazing God. And when we get glimpses of him, everything begins to feel like it is going to work out. Everything begins to feel like it is going to be okay. Because it is.