

Rochelle
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DISABILITY & Evangelism



THE GOOD NEWS OF THE FULLNESS
OF GOD'S KINGDOM



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God's Mission, Our Mandates

I STILL REMEMBER THE FEELING of intense obligation mixed with fear the Sunday night I walked into what was affectionately called Wilson's Chapel. A student from a local Bible college was offering an evangelism course at our church, and a sense of duty that I was supposed to "save people" led this introverted thirteen-year-old girl to spend the five o'clock hour before Sunday evening service in our church's old sanctuary learning how to be an evangelist. Only three or four people showed up (one of those being my older brother), and for the next four weeks, we worked through an evangelism curriculum that essentially taught us how to share the Romans Road with random strangers, with the goal of getting them to accept Jesus on the spot.¹

I loved Jesus. I had believed in him my whole life. I wanted nothing more than to follow him and help others to follow him. But I became profoundly terrified by this approach to evangelism, and this made me feel guilty. *I know I'm supposed to do this, but I just can't!* When I sifted through my conflicted feelings, I latched onto a thought. *Maybe evangelism isn't my spiritual gift!* This thought quickly took root, and I was able to push my guilt to the background and focus on other gifts I might have. I soon concluded that I would embrace gifts of kindness, prayer, and helps and leave the work of evangelism to others. I never

¹The Romans Road is an evangelism strategy that uses five key verses from the book of Romans to walk people through a basic salvation message. By presenting each verse, the evangelist can help listeners understand that they are sinners (Rom 3:23) who are separated from God and in need of rescue (Rom 6:23), that God has made the way of that rescue through Jesus (Rom 5:8), that we can respond to God's rescue by confession and belief (Rom 10:9-13), and that when we do, God will surely save us (Rom 10:13).

once stopped to consider that maybe I didn't fully understand evangelism or the many ways in which believers could participate willingly and joyfully in it.

I hear similar versions of this story from many people. With every new group of master's students in my school's Evangelism and Leadership and Ministry Leadership programs, I ask, "How many of you have the gift of evangelism?" Without fail, I never get more than one hand raised, and often it is none. When I make the case from Scripture that every Christian is called to participate in evangelism, the fear in the room gets palpable. Why is this?

The problem for many of us is that we have a reduced gospel. We emphasize that all people are sinful and headed to hell with no way to stop this trajectory on our own. We introduce Jesus as the one who steps into our place, taking our punishment and changing our destination to heaven. All we have to do is accept what Jesus has done and receive him as Lord and Savior of our lives. But this only tells a small portion of the story and, quite frankly, pulls Jesus' story out of context. For those hearing this message, they may wonder, *Who is Jesus, and why does he matter? What do I really gain by accepting this message? How does this really change the mess I'm in right now, the questions I have, the problems I see in the world? If Jesus is only good for helping me escape this world, then how and why do this world and my life really matter?* Ultimately people may ask, "How is this good news?"

And yet, when being introduced to Jesus, it *should* be good news. Mark opens his gospel by saying, "Here begins the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God" (Mk 1:1). This opening line tells us several things. First, the good news is a story. It is not merely a set of propositions or truths. Second, it is a story about a particular person who lived in a particular time and is connected to a particular history. Third, this person is a man named Jesus who is connected to a people and history in which he is seen not just as the ultimate fulfillment of their expectations but also the ultimate answer for the world: This Jesus is Messiah and Son of God. This opening line sends us in two directions.

The first direction is backward into the past. Mark immediately situates this good-news story of Jesus within the Old Testament and the story of Israel. He notes that Isaiah prophesied about someone preparing the way for the Messiah, and Mark says this person Isaiah was talking about is none other than Jesus' cousin John the Baptist, who preaches repentance to prepare people for Jesus. When Jesus walks by one day, John the Baptist points to him as the one "who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not even worthy to stoop down like a slave and untie the straps of his sandals" (Mk 1:7). John the Baptist baptizes Jesus, and immediately the heavens split open, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove, and God's voice booms from heaven "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy" (Mk 1:9-11). In this dramatic, action-packed opening, Mark makes the important point that Jesus doesn't just appear out of thin air. He is a historical figure who is deeply connected to a story that has long been in the making.

The second direction Mark sends us is forward into the future. For the rest of his Gospel, Mark tells not only the story of how Jesus fulfills the story begun in the Old Testament but why this ultimately is good news for Israel, for the people in Jesus' immediate context, for us, and for all who come after us. Every story in Mark points to Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of God's story and the promises God made about how God would fix a world that was created as good but had fallen into disarray because of disobedience. Jesus announces that the kingdom of God the Israelites had longed for is near (Mk 1:15). Jesus demonstrates his power as King and Priest by healing the sick, casting out demons, ruling over nature, and raising the dead. Jesus becomes the ultimate Prophet, denouncing the empty, legalistic rituals of the religious and announcing the fruits of hearts made new by his Spirit: fruits such as servanthood, love of God and neighbor, holiness, inclusion, sacrifice, and justice. Jesus becomes Savior of all, enacting God's justice against sin through his own death and inaugurating God's kingdom through his resurrection.

When you put these two trajectories together, you get a comprehensive *from-creation-to-new-creation story* that is good news from beginning to end or, more accurately, from eternity to eternity. The good news is the

story of God and his work in the world, ultimately fulfilled through the person of Jesus Christ. It is a good-news story that makes sense of our world and brings help, wholeness, answers, and hope to the messes we are in, the questions we have, the problems we see in the world, and the need we have for our lives and the world to matter. When we go back and look at the whole story, from Genesis to Revelation, we see clearly that God is on mission, and we are invited into that mission in two grand and interrelated ways.

GOD'S MISSION

When we adopted our son, he received no fewer than five different children's Bibles as welcome gifts. These types of kid-edition Bibles didn't exist when I was born. My first Bible, a King James Version, was considered a kid's Bible simply because the front cover had a picture of Jesus with a group of children and the text included illustrations of popular stories. Most of the children's Bibles my son received summarize main stories of the Bible with easy prose and colorful pictures. What I observed about these Bibles is similar to what I've observed about how I was taught the Bible as a kid: They tell different happenings of the Bible as individual, self-contained stories but fail to connect the dots and discuss how these stories fit together in a bigger, more comprehensive narrative. Kids learn about Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Daniel but rarely know why these stories matter or how they fit together.

What is different about the Bible my son loves the most is that it doesn't hit all the Bible's highlights. Instead, it relays the big story of God's mission and work in the world. While I wish the people in the illustrations were brown and not white, and while I do want him and his sister to learn individual stories, what I love about my children's continual reading of this Bible is that they are learning to read the Bible missionally, as a big story of God, and not as isolated, "cool" stories of almost mythical heroes. With as many times as they have read *The Big Picture Story Bible*, I am convinced my children have a better grasp on missional theology than most adults in the church!²

²David R. Helm, *The Big Picture Story Bible* (Crossway, 2004).

Reading Scripture missionally pushes us to see the Bible as a cohesive story and focuses our attention on the God around whom the story centers. Genesis opens, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1), and Revelation 22 describes a new heavens and earth ruled by “the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (Rev 22:13). In the middle, we follow God’s “universal will and plan for his creation” as he seeks to make himself known to the people he has created and as he works to restore a creation that unravels in the aftermath of his people’s rebellion.³ This storied way of reading Scripture pulls us into a drama that, like any good story, has a good beginning that is corrupted by a problem and a good ending that showcases how the long struggle to overcome the conflict successfully resolves what is broken and leads to an even better future.⁴

There are many ways we can break up this drama. William Dyrness sees five acts, Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen six.⁵ Scott Moreau, Gary Corwin, and Gary McGee count seven, as does Christopher Wright, but even they split the seven acts differently.⁶ What holds all these visions of Scripture’s drama together is a baseline of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. This simplified way of splicing the text gives us the foundation and the latitude to draw out key anchor points within the grand narrative. Let us consider briefly what each part conveys.

In the first act, creation, we are introduced to the main characters of God’s drama. We start with the God over all gods and unlike any other god, who is powerful and good and who creates everything that exists as a good extension of himself. He creates for his own pleasure, by his own power, and for his own purposes. Every creative act is seen as good until God gets to day six. On this day he forms man and woman and invests

³Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss with Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Baker Academic, 2010), 58.

⁴Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2014); Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Great Story and the Great Commission: Participating in the Biblical Drama of Mission* (Baker Academic, 2023), 3.

⁵William A. Dyrness, *Let the Earth Rejoice! A Biblical Theology of Holistic Mission* (Crossway, 1983); Bartholomew and Goheen, *Drama of Scripture*.

⁶A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2020); Wright, *Great Story and the Great Commission*.

his very image in them through his own life-giving breath. This creative climax results in the pronouncement of “very good” (Gen 1:31). The week ends on day seven with God resting from all his work (Gen 2:2).

If only the very good were enough. God birthed his creation out of unbridled love and with the desire that we would love him back wholeheartedly, but in act two, our tempter creeps into the garden hissing half-truths that birth doubts. “Did God really say?” (Gen 3:1). The whole garden is before them, and only one tree holds limits (Gen 2:16-17). But that one question followed by a declaration that essentially says, “God’s just withholding power from you!” (Gen 3:5) leads Adam and Eve to view limitation as something bad. They didn’t need to eat the fruit to “become like God.” They had been made in God’s image and were already God’s imprint in the world (Gen 1:26-27). But somehow this truth doesn’t prevail. It is limitation that becomes the concern, and with that, Eve reaches out, takes, eats, and gives. Adam reaches out, takes, and eats. And both immediately hide themselves in shame (Gen 3:6-7).

The consequences of this terrible act were swift and broad. God had created with the intent that all of creation would experience a shalom—a peace—that was all-consuming. It was not, as we think today, merely an absence of war, but rather a fullness of life, harmony, and things as they should be. People were to flourish as creatures. People were to flourish in relationship with one another. People were to help the world flourish. This was so because people were to live in the world as God’s imprint.

The choice Adam and Eve make mars all this. In doubting God’s word, they introduce distrust and disharmony into the world. Sin brings consequences: painful reproduction, difficult cultivation of the soil, and contentious relationships (Gen 3:16-19). The very things God imprinted his very good creation to do—be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and care for creation—those are still on the docket, but they are now complicated by difficulty, dismay, disruption, and death.

The amazing thing, however, is that the story isn’t all bad news on this fateful day. In the midst of God revealing the consequences of sin, God inaugurates the third act—redemption—by announcing that a solution is coming. One day Eve’s seed will crush the serpent (Gen 3:15). What God announces this day is an ultimate solution but not an immediate

one. Through generation after generation, over the span of millennia, God continues to showcase his kingdom and his plan through particular moments and people of history. He covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, Israel, and David to be his set-apart people, not for their own sake but for his own sake. They are to mediate God's presence to the world and draw the world to God in worship (Ex 19:5-6), but, like their first ancestors, they cannot. They are captive to sin and cannot free themselves or those around them from the consequences of sin.

Then one day, as promised, God determines the time is right to enter his world as part of his creation—birthed from the womb of a virgin teenager—a fully God, fully human person (Gal 4:4). This baby is none other than the one announced by Mark as Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God (Mk 1:1). As Word become flesh (Jn 1:14), Jesus grows in both wisdom and stature (Lk 2:52) to become a renowned teacher and healer, loved by many and hated by the religious. Through his teachings and miracles, Jesus always has his face pointed toward Jerusalem and his ultimate purpose. As the second Adam (1 Cor 15:45), the greater Moses (Heb 3:1-6), the eternal Davidic king (Acts 2:29-36) from the line of Abraham (Mt 1:1), Jesus comes to break sin, to restore lives, to bring justice, and to enable flourishing (Acts 4:14-20). He does this by taking on the weight of the world's sin and the consequences for the world's sin: He willingly dies at the hands of the religious leaders and is crucified (Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34; 14:12-15:47).

His death, however, is not an end. It is a beginning. As he predicted, he rises from the dead three days later, forever breaking the power of sin and our enslavement to its consequences, and writes the new future: a new creation in which God's judgments will deal the final blow to Satan sin, and death, and God's life will sustain his new people, called out from every tribe, nation, language, and tongue (Rev 7:9) as they dwell in a new city with a new garden, from which flows a river with the water of life (Rev 21-22). In this new future, God finds his home among his people, and his presence forever dissolves death, sorrow, crying, and pain as he makes all things new (Rev 21:3-5).

This final act, new creation, has an interesting position because it overlaps with the act of redemption. Israel's Scriptures had long foretold

that one day God's kingdom would prevail. One day God would rule his people with justice and joy, infusing his creation with life and shalom (e.g., Mic 4). It was future. It was distant. When it came, a new age would dawn. But before his death, Jesus announces that God's kingdom is near and at hand. After his resurrection, the apostles wrestle with the implications of Jesus' life and conclude that their eschatology, their view about the end, needs adjustment. God's timeline wasn't strictly linear: creation to fall to redemption to new creation. Resurrection signaled the inbreaking of new creation into the present. The new age was already underway, even if the present time had not fully run its course. A day was coming when God would decisively bring about the fullness of his kingdom, but until that day, God's kingdom could be realized in small ways in the world, through the new people of God identified by their allegiance to Jesus Christ. As Gordon Fee notes, "The resurrection of Christ marked the beginning of the End, the turning of the ages." This *already-not-yet* reality means that people are both saved and being saved, with "God's final salvation of his people [having] already been accomplished by Christ" even though their "final salvation" has yet to be realized. This *already-not-yet* reality means that, as members of Christ's "end-time community" we also "live in the present as those stamped with eternity," being "empowered by the Spirit [to] now live the life of the future in the present age, the life that characterizes God himself."⁷

This is an interesting and grand story, but one that perhaps still feels a little disconnected to our lives. Why does Adam and Eve's act of disobedience matter for us? Why is God so concerned to send Jesus for us? What is God really trying to accomplish? If we leave our story here, with the outer shell, we can wonder where we fit, if at all. This is where the mandates given to human beings draw us in to the good beginning and the good ending in ways that make the *why* of God in the middle so compelling in its compassion and power. God has created us with vocational intent so we can participate in his good mission.

⁷Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Hendrickson, 1996), 51-52.

OUR MANDATES

We have just recounted the Bible through a missional hermeneutic. It is one of many ways we can approach Scripture and understand its themes and unity in diversity. It is a compelling way to engage the text because it tells us not just God's story but also our story. Through it, we come to know who we are, why we are here, how we should approach the world, how we should live, and how we should engage the world with the hope we have in God and his wonderful future.⁸ Embedded within God's story are two visions for humanity.

Identity, existence, and purpose. The first vision comes right at the beginning. It is inseparable from our formation and the breath of God that warms this molded dust into living, breathing flesh. "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us," God says. "They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground" (Gen 1:26). Patterned after God himself, enfleshed as male and female (Gen 1:27), this new creation is blessed by God with the call to "multiply. Fill the earth and govern it" (Gen 1:28). Humanity shares in the creational wonder of all God has brought into existence. Like all creation, human beings are called to blessing, flourishing, and multiplication, but unlike the rest, human beings are given the command to rule created order, caring for it, culling life from it, and finding sustenance from it. In this way, human beings are called to enter God's mission as collaborators, as vice regents, imaging God in the world and bearing witness to God's lordship by how they live in the world and care for creation. Their rule and work are to be fully representative of God's rule and presence on and over the earth.

What is unique about this first mandate is that it does not differentiate between human beings. No person or group is excluded from this call. It is something given to all humankind. Through our ancestors Adam and Eve, God creates every human being in his image and with this charge to rule and serve. This *cultural mandate* (as it is often called) establishes God's design for diversity, culture, and relationship.

⁸Wright, *Great Story and the Great Commission*, 14.

We are distinctly created male and female and called to use this diversity to multiply and fill the earth. Our outward expansion across the many terrains and frontiers will naturally diversify our skills, knowledge, and perspectives. From one shared ancestral pair comes every ethnicity and culture. Diversity is built into God's plan for the world.

So is creative culture making. God's call for human beings to rule the world in his stead and as fully representative of his reign on earth entrusts the work of creation and culture making to his people. Following God, the first gardener, we are called to "imitate him by cultivating the initial gift of a well-arranged garden, a world where intelligence, skill and imagination have already begun to make something of the world."⁹

Ultimately, we are called toward community and relationship. Our Creator experiences perfect community in the triune Godhead, and he creates us to experience relational community both vertically and horizontally. This calling to community is meant to draw out unity in difference within marriages, families, friendships, neighborhoods, cities, and governments. Relational harmony and interpersonal communion should breed societal harmony and governing communion. We belong to one another and need one another.

This tripartite calling and mandate for humankind answers the questions of identity (who we are), existence (why we are here), and purpose (what we are meant to do/be). It is important to note that this mandate precedes the fall and prevails after the fall. Adam and Eve are not cut off from this calling when they sin. God announces that these callings go on, but now with difficulty, disruption, and division. Centuries later, when God wipes the slate clean and sends a flood in judgment of all humankind, he rebuilds through Noah and reiterates this same cultural mandate with him (Gen 9:1-7). The cultural mandate is part and parcel to what it means to be human. But while the fall does not dissolve our mandate, it does fundamentally change how successful we are in this endeavor.

Our lives after the fall are a testament to how we cannot live in relational harmony, in fully beneficent cultural making, or in diversity.

⁹Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (InterVarsity Press, 2008), 108.

After the fall, we fall apart and cause the world around us to fall apart. It is not that everything we do is bad, sinful, or faulty. We do many good things in the world, but our ability to live into God's calling with untainted compassion, humility, and deference is not possible. Sin crouches at the door (Gen 4:7), and our tempter continues to lure us beyond our limits and our calling. We are driven toward power and dominance and away from diversity. We are pulled toward endless toil that serves self more than others, humanity more than creation. We rebel against submission and seek to usurp our Lord. The vast majority of the Bible recounts this conflicted existence of creation bucking against Creator. Every human, from every walk of life, from every religion and ethnicity, from every (fill in the blank), is called to good work on earth, and every human has potential to do some good things. But no human, apart from God, can overcome the sin that infects our motivations, our thoughts, our desires, or our actions. We live in a world that can only proffer "a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions" (1 Jn 2:16). The mandate goes on, even if we fail in carrying it out.

But all is not lost. All earthly existence points to a moment in time when God himself intervenes in his created world. It takes God, incarnate through the Virgin Mary as the fully God, fully human Jesus Christ, to set things right. Only through the entrance of Jesus into this earthly plane, and only by his own life, death, and resurrection, can our cultural mandate be redeemed. It is only through Christ that anyone can live into their human calling in a way that fulfills God's original design for flourishing, care, and shalom. Jesus alone makes God's calling possible. But Jesus does more than simply redeem our cultural calling. Jesus redeems our very lives as well, drawing us into a new vocational space.

God's faithfulness in history includes a people. The disobedience of Adam and Eve has devastating effects. Sin takes up residence in God's good world and manifests itself especially through the now-broken lives of Adam and Eve. But God has promised that he will redeem his people. Eve will produce an offspring who, though bruised in the process, will crush Satan's head. That offspring is a long way off. In the intervening

space, as people multiply in the earth, God continually calls them toward obedience. A pivotal moment in this wooing comes when God chooses an old childless couple to be the antidote to the ruckus at Babel that begins with boastful, arrogant grasping for God's throne and ends in division and scattering (Gen 11:1-9).

The calling of Abraham is indeed surprising, but it is a calling that, as Christopher Wright argues, "is the beginning of God's answer to the evil of human hearts, the strife of nations, and the groaning brokenness of his whole creation. It is the beginning of the mission of God and the mission of God's people."¹⁰ This calling has enormous scope because through it God promises blessing will come to all the nations of the earth (Gen 12:3). God specifically calls Abraham to *go* to a new land, to *expand* into a great nation, and ultimately to *bless all the peoples on earth* (Gen 12:2-3). In bringing about Eve's offspring, God chooses an unlikely man to birth a nation that is to grow and expand not for its own sake but for the sake of others. God keeps his promise, and within a few generations Abraham and Sarah grow from having no children to being the progenitors of the nation Israel, a nation over a million strong when they leave captivity in Egypt and move into Canaan, taking over the land God has promised as their inheritance.

God always draws back to this Abrahamic covenant as he calls each new generation of Israelites to follow him. God covenants with Israel that they should be a kingdom *of* priests. Not a kingdom *with* priests but a kingdom *of* priests.¹¹ This nation itself should be a sign and witness in the world of a holy and loving God, who blesses his people and through them blesses the world. But no matter how many judges, prophets, or priests the Lord sends, Israel can never maintain their witness or their focus. The pull of sin and idolatry, and the desire to be like their neighboring kingdoms, drags Israel down, leading to cycles of punishment and repentance until finally God can withstand them no more and sends his chosen people into exile. But even here God's mission does not end. Promises of Eve's offspring remain steady throughout Israel's history. In

¹⁰Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Zondervan, 2010), 66.

¹¹Ott and Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 8.

saving a remnant and bringing them back home from exile, God's mission is still possible, but it will be realized through a means Israel does not anticipate. The offspring of Eve enters the world as a baby, born in the small village of Bethlehem.

For thirty years Jesus' life seems unremarkable as he grows in physical stature and godly wisdom (Lk 2:52). There is nothing beautiful or majestic about Jesus' appearance, Isaiah prophecies, nothing to attract us to him (Is 53:2). And yet, Matthew (Mt 1:1) is sure to let us know that Jesus comes directly from the line of Abraham. Jesus is not there, however, to take over an earthly kingdom but rather to usher in the upside-down kingdom in which his own rejection, suffering, pain, and death will put an end to the power of sin and its ultimate propagator (Satan). Jesus is there to introduce a world in which he is King and Lord and in which people, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, can live in newness of life and participate in God's mission.

Something incredible takes place with Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Since Abraham, God has had a people, and this people was to manifest God's presence and blessing to the ends of the earth. This was not something every human on earth was called to. It was something God's people alone were called to. With their lives physically centered on the temple, in which God dwelled by his Spirit, they were to live in a way that beckoned the surrounding nations to come to the God of Israel. Sadly, they failed over and over and over again. So Jesus steps in to accomplish what they could not.

Replacing the death sentence that came with the first Adam's sin, Jesus succeeds where Adam failed, bringing righteousness to all who choose to die with Christ (Rom 5:18; 6:7-8). Jesus' death marks the end of sin and the victory over Satan. Jesus' death also ends the need for temple sacrifices and a nation physically centered on this temple. At the moment of his death, the temple curtain rips in two, from top to bottom (Mt 27:51), and Jesus himself becomes the "perfect sacrifice for our sins" (Heb 9:14), once and for all satisfying the penalty for our sins (Heb 10:12). With his death, Jesus takes care of the sin issue that has prevented his people from living into their God-given calling to be a blessing to the ends of the earth. With his resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Spirit, Jesus

does something remarkable with his temple and his people. To understand this, we will start in Ephesians and end in Matthew.

In Ephesians 1, Paul argues that God's mission for the world was always in God's mind, even before God created the world. God had predetermined to seek the flourishing of creation: that men and women and all of creation would experience God's blessing, God's shalom. God had predetermined that he would have a people who would mediate this blessing to the world (Eph 1:4-5). Paul doesn't explicitly explain the intervening space in between God's plan and its fulfillment in Christ, but I have recounted it here at some length. Everyone from Adam and Eve through the most recent member of Israel had failed. It was only through his life, death, and resurrection that Jesus got God's mission back on track, winning the decisive victory over sin and death and beginning the work of establishing God's rule and reign once and for all.

Here Paul picks up the argument in Ephesians. God's plan has always been to bring everything in creation, everything in heaven and earth, under the rule and reign of Christ Jesus (Eph 1:6-10). Just because Israel cannot accomplish God's purposes on their own does not mean that God has abandoned his promise to Abraham. Rather, Christ resolves the sin issue by his death and resurrection and then reinfuses his promise of a chosen people with new life. Instead of his chosen people being an ethnic group made up of Jews, God has now determined it will be a new people made up of Jews and Gentiles. Paul is adamant about this point. Jesus is our peace. Though Jews and Gentiles have lived in hostility with one another, Jesus' death breaks down the wall of hostility that has separated them, and his resurrection inaugurates a new kingdom in which Jews and Gentiles are now made into one people (Eph 2:14-16). Now, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:18, "All of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us."

Paul then breaks out some great imagery about what this means: For those who embrace Christ, we are now citizens of God's holy people, we are members of God's family, we are God's house, we are joined together like bricks in a building to become a holy temple for the Lord, we are now one body (Eph 2:19-22). Through Christ, Jew and Gentile are now being crafted into a new people, a holy temple for the Lord. No longer is God

found in a physical temple in the center of one ethnic group. The Spirit of God now indwells anyone who is brought into Christ such that we, both individually and collectively, are now the temple of God. This means that everywhere God's people go, we carry with us the presence and home of God, called to attract others to know God through our work and witness (1 Pet 2:9-12). This brings fresh light to God's promises to Abraham.

As I have noted, Matthew's Gospel is concerned to place Jesus squarely as a "descendant . . . of Abraham" (Mt 1:1). Matthew fills his account with Old Testament Scripture, declaring over and over how Jesus fulfills the Scripture. It is not a surprise, then, that when Matthew ends his Gospel, he brackets it again with Abraham, this time showing the expanse of what Abraham's calling entails. We find the words in Matthew 28:18-20.

Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

There are precious and powerful parallels between this Great Commission—this gospel mandate—and God's original calling of Abraham. Go . . . expand . . . bless all the nations. Jesus announces that he has God's authority and in that power calls all his followers to make disciples in all their going. They are to teach everything they have learned from Christ—his words and his works—in order to form God's new people. They are to take this blessing, this message—that Christ Jesus is Lord and victor over all things and is making all things new, abolishing our punishment and giving us his Spirit so we can live into the fullness of God's intent for our lives—to the ends of the earth in order to make disciples of all the nations. "If humanity as a whole is subject to God's curse," Wright says, "then humanity as a whole must be reached by God's blessing."¹² Through Christ, we are made "true children of Abraham," inheriting his mission and promise (Gal 3:29) to be a blessing by taking Jesus to the ends of the earth until the end of the age (Mt 28:19-20).

¹²Wright, *Mission of God's People*, 71.

This isn't a work to be done in human strength and power. Rather, the Father and Son send the Spirit into the world to empower God's followers for this task. The Holy Spirit leads into truth (Jn 16:13), reveals God's kingdom with regard to sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn 16:8), and gives each member of God's family gifts and means for growing God's church and witnessing to God's grace (1 Cor 12).

Renewed vocation in Jesus. Who is this new people, and what is their vocation? Everyone who places their faith in Christ Jesus and his death and resurrection is called to the family business of going, blessing, and working to make Jesus known to the ends of the earth, among every tribe, nation, language, and tongue (Rev 7:9). The apostles take this calling seriously, and Acts recounts the birth of the church, God's new covenant people, who, through the power of the Spirit, move out from Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). This covenant people keep expanding and growing, through the centuries and millennia, right up to the present age.

You and I are now called into this vocational space not to fulfill just our creational calling but also our gospel calling. We are, as Peter reminds us, "a chosen people . . . royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession," called out for the express purpose that we can "show others the goodness of God" (1 Pet 2:9). The picture we get in Revelation is a beautiful bookend and fulfillment of all that has come prior. When every people group is represented in a great throng around God's throne, "as redeemed humanity, together with all angels and all creatures in creation, joins to celebrate [God's] great achievement," Wright imagines that God will turn to Abraham in that moment and say, "There you are. I kept my promise. 'All nations,' I said, and all nations it is. Mission accomplished."¹³

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

God's story of creation to fall to redemption to new creation has many more layers than what I have expressed here. But what we can see so clearly is that God is a *God of love* who has created us to know him and live in his blessings. And God is a *God of love on mission* who relentlessly

¹³Wright, *Mission of God's People*, 77.

pursues the restoration of a created world that falls into utter catastrophe through sin that has tarnished every corner of creation. We know that Jesus has already won the victory, and yet we live in an age in which God's kingdom is breaking in but not fully realized. This in-between, already-not-yet space is not always easy to navigate. We know God is completing his victorious work, but we can't always see how things fit in the moment. Which leads us to ask a very important question, one that many people and families ask: Where do disabilities show up in God's story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In light of the opening anecdote, how have you tended to understand evangelism? What might it look like for every Christian to be an evangelist?
2. How does a missional reading of Scripture affect your understanding of the Bible?
3. What is the relationship between the cultural mandate and the gospel mandate? How do you find yourself participating in each?
4. Before reading on, how would you answer the closing question: Where do disabilities show up in God's story?

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